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Prayer That Transforms Us

We have been in the series titled: Connecting with God in Prayer. Through this series we have seen different aspects of prayer. It has been such an awesome series, if you've missed a week I want to encourage you to go to our website and listen to them.

Today we are going to see an aspect that is very dear to my heart. I would even say it has saved my life. Just to give you background, I consider myself an extrovert. I hate being by myself; if I'm driving alone I'm on the phone. If I don't have anything to do, I will find something to do and people to connect with.

I was also born into a Pentecostal Hispanic home, where community and experiencing the Holy Spirit with others have always been important. A lot of the contemplative prayer models were foreign to me, but God has recently allowed these things to bless my life. Pastor Brad asked me to share a bit of my story and how growing in prayer has changed me.

Since I am geared to being around people and ministry, I have always found myself busy. The truth is that the majority of us would say that we feel busy. Between school, jobs, spouses, church, friends, kids, financial responsibilities and chores we can find ourselves overwhelmed. There is so much going on! So...

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1. We need to learn to disconnect from the busyness and the noise of life, which disorients our soul.

Many of us can find ourselves busy, tired, burned out or even disappointed with life. When we feel this way, the first thing that we usually neglect is our prayer life and our time alone with God. If we were honest with ourselves we would recognize that many times we are too busy for God or we have allowed other imposter voices to lead our hearts. Some of us have been filled with disappointment, even though externally things seem to be fine, internally we've been disconnected from God.

My wife and I have been married for almost 16 years this May and through half of our married life we went through five devastating miscarriages before having any children. These dark times definitely affected our lives, marriage and relationship with God. Even after the miscarriages were over and we were able to enjoy the birth of two of our kids, the loss, disappointment, and lack of trust in God lingered. Although things on the outside seemed fine, my heart was affected. Being a pastor, I was able to just get busier and I didn't take the time to bring my pain to God. I share this with you because loss, disappointment, busyness, and sin can all affect our soul and we can find ourselves disconnected from the source of life.

There is always so much going on...

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George Barna surveyed Christians about prayer and spiritual growth and this is what he found:

- 60% of those surveyed expressed a desire to grow spiritually.
- 75% of those surveyed said they had no plan or process for growing spiritually.
- 66% (2/3) said they were too busy to give the time that was required for the process of spiritual growth.

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We are so busy and now technology has invaded every space of solitude in our lives. Think about it, for many of us, the first thing we do when we wake up is look at our phones, the last thing we do at night is check our email, nowadays some people can't even go to the toilet without their phone (I'm not going to ask people who do that to raise their hands). Think about phones in the bathroom next time you are swiping someone else's phone to see their pictures. The only place that is still left without phones is probably the shower since we can't get our gadgets wet.

We are all saturated with images, voices, media, and advertisement, we just keep going and going like the Energizer bunny. This reminds me of the famous story of the Tortoise and the Hare. Currently my wife and I are taking Financial Peace University and Dave Ramsey shared about a mentor of his telling him the secret of success. Dave Ramsey was waiting for amazing advice, but simply received a copy of this book. The point of the story is that Hare is so much faster than the tortoise but when they raced, the one who won was the slower tortoise. Dave Ramsey uses this as an illustration for people to take small baby steps so they can accomplish great things financially. I think this applies to our spiritual life as well. In our culture people are like the hare always busy, running from place to place, unfocused. The ones that learn to slow down like the tortoise and take small consistent spiritual steps will find an energized, transformed and successful spiritual life.

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Psalm 46:10 (NIV)
Be still, and know that I am God

This verse is one of my favorite Bible verses. It is so short yet you can almost take each word and teach weekly on each one.

As I read this verse a lot of times I imagine a field of grass next to a gentle stream where I can just relax, take a nap and connect with God, but as you read the whole chapter you find that this verse was written in the midst of war and chaos. I think God is reminding us today that in the midst of the trials and busyness of life we can be still and know that he is our God.

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**So we need to learn to disconnect from the busyness and the noise of life and...
2. ~~We need to~~ learn to connect and abide in the life-giving presence of God.**

It doesn't involve just disconnecting but also connecting to the source of life. We need to create space in our lives to be able connect with God.

We see this through the life of Jesus. He practiced times of solitude so that he could connect with the Father.

I found at least 6 instances when Jesus withdrew from others. The first time was after he was baptized he was led to the desert for 40 days of fasting and solitude. He also withdrew right before he had to make a big decision in choosing the twelve apostles. The other times he withdrew in the midst of the busyness of ministry even though everyone's needs hadn't been met.

Since we are in the season of lent, I want to concentrate on the last occasion the Bible shares of Jesus withdrawing to be with his Father. It was right before he was captured and crucified.

7-8

Matthew 26:36-46 (NIV)

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.⁴¹ "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Here we find Jesus totally connected with the Father. You see even in his darkest times he was seeking to engage the Father. He was totally vulnerable and real as he thought about what was coming in the cross. He said: Father can you take this cup away? He was being genuine and honest.

Now if Jesus the Son of God, connected with the Father, don't you think we need to connect as well.

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Dallas Willard said: "People want to be like Jesus, to do the things he did, but they do not want to do the things he did that helped enable him to live as he did."

10

So we also need to engage...

- The Practice of Solitude/Silence

It is in this place of solitude where we can experience God and come to terms about who we are without him and who we are in Him. Like I mentioned earlier, I am an extrovert, but it took going through a hard season for me to understand the importance of disconnecting from other things (even good things) to connect with the Father.

In this place of solitude and at times silence I discovered how much pain there was in my life because of the losses. I was able to come to him and express how unfair I felt things have been. I was able to cry and not feel like I had to perform or do anything but just be before Him.

I started studying about certain spiritual disciplines and started getting help from a spiritual director whom I've been seeing monthly.

In the garden of Gethsemane we see that Jesus took a few disciples to be close to him, but they kept falling asleep. Jesus said the flesh is weak. It is so true. Our flesh does not want to connect with God. It takes energy and focus.

So it is important that...

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3. We ~~need to~~ learn to establish a consistent daily *rhythm* of prayer, which will help us grow and give fruit.

Even in the Gethsemane experience we see that Jesus withdrew three times to be with the Father. Like I also mentioned, through the Gospels we see that Jesus had a prayer rhythm in his life.

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So we are asked to do the same. To connect at all times...

John 15:4 (NIV)

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

We are the branches and to grow and give fruit we need to abide, remain in Him. It is not a once in while experience, or a weekly Sunday experience. We are called to remain daily, to be connected to the vine.

13

Many times we are told by Scripture to pray without ceasing...

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

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Colossians 4:2 (NIV)

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

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As I mentioned earlier I was born into a Pentecostal home. I cherish the moments when I feel the power of the Holy Spirit come over my life, but in our spiritual walk that does not always happen. I never understood the contemplative stream, but when I started developing a routine in my life, Honestly I didn't really feel a spiritual high, but I kept going. It has been over two years that I started this rhythm and I can honestly say I am a

better person. I have been following Christ for almost 35 years but these last two years I have experienced deep transformation in my life. I can't tell you when exactly things happened or changed, but along the way, my mind has been transformed and renewed.

Many times we look at our lives and we see the sin. Too often we focus on our sin and the areas that are weak. If we do that, we are focusing on our sin, that is the wrong focus. We read in John 15 that it says remain in me and you will give good fruit. See our focus should be Jesus. We need to abide in Him, the changes will come... the fruit will come in His time.

So we all need to develop a routine, a rhythm that works for us to connect with our Father. There are different seasons in life, the disciplines can change depending on what is going on, but we need to be intentional. There are many different spiritual disciplines; I am going to share a few of the ones I have implemented in my life that pertain to prayer. This doesn't mean you have to do them all, but I just want to give you a little taste of different options so that you can then develop a routine that can work for your lifestyle. All that is required is that you take a few baby steps, little by little like the tortoise.

I'm also not an expert on the subject and I'm still pretty much in process. All I'm doing today is sharing something that has been very helpful in my life and I want others to experience it as well.

There are many more spiritual disciplines; one that has been very helpful to me that I won't be sharing on is Lectio Divina. It is a way of allowing God to speak to us through Scripture. I encourage you if you are interested to look it up or ask me about it later...

But I want to finish sharing on three spiritual disciplines that have to do with prayer...

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Fixed Hour Prayers:

- Designate 2-4 regular daily times to pray.

Some monks pray up to 8x a day...

Take 5-20 min.

My rhythm has been to pray 4 times a day... in the morning, noon, evening (after work) and then at bedtime.

Some of the benefits gained through the practice of Fixed-Hour Prayer.

- It interjects set prayer times into the everyday routine of our lives.
- It calls us to turn our hearts and minds back to God throughout the day.
- It interrupts our daily routine and calls us to remember that all of our life is lived before God.
- It connects us with the people of God around the earth who are entering into the rhythm of praying the Hours.

I usually look at my calendar for the next day and schedule the fixed hour prayers as meetings on my calendar so I can arrange them depending on what other things I have to do. This routine changes something in you because then you start seeing how many times God is not in the picture. Of course he is always there, but many times we are not aware. We make decisions and react certain ways and have not acknowledged him all day or for hours. This practice invites him to be a part of our day.

Go to
webpage

A great website...

<http://annarborvineyard.org/tdh/tdh.cfm>

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The next spiritual discipline to consider is... **Centering Prayer:**

Centering prayer is a popular method of contemplative prayer or Christian meditation, placing a strong emphasis on interior silence. Its intention is not to use words, but to just “be” in God’s loving presence.

Centering prayer is not a new form of prayer. It also is not a New Age practice. Centering prayer is an updated form of prayer that was taught in the 14th century, and before that in the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

- Set aside 5-20 min. and sit comfortably with your eyes closed as you quiet your heart and mind.
- Choose a “sacred word,” which is a symbol of your intention to be in God’s presence. Repeat the word as you quiet yourself and focus on God.
- Any word that brings your attention to God can be used: Jesus, Father, Abba, Love, Peace, Rest, Grace, etc. This is not a mantra, just a device to refocus ones attention when distractions come... and they will come!
- The intention in Centering prayer is not to use words but to just “be” in God’s loving presence.
- When distracting thoughts come to mind, return again to the sacred word, which indicates your intention to rest in God’s presence. As your thoughts dissipate and you again rest in God’s presence, you can let go of the sacred word and just rest in the stillness. When thoughts surface again, return to your sacred word.

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The last spiritual discipline that I’m going to share on and then have time for us to practice together is the... **Prayer of Examen:** (Set aside 10-20 min.)

The Prayer of Examen (i.e., of examination) is a way of assessing one’s life before God on a regular basis. This prayer was first developed by Ignatius of Loyola in The Spiritual Exercises... Ignatius took for granted that God is always present and at work.

The spiritual challenge, according to him, is to recognize how God is working and to respond in gratitude and openness. The purpose of this prayer is to help us to process each day before God.

- Stillness-
Become aware of the Presence of God. Quiet your heart, and listen. In this moment, become present to Jesus.
- Gratitude-
Review ~~your day~~ (last night and this morning) with gratitude. Seeing through a lens of thanks, appreciate God's gifts in each event of the day.
- Reflection-
Become aware of your emotions. Review your positive and negative feelings. Did you choose Jesus' way in each situation?
- Joy & Sorrow-
Choose one feature of the day, and pray. Rejoice in a success, or ask forgiveness for sin. If necessary, plan to make amends.
- Hope-
Look toward (the rest of the day) and tomorrow. Move toward expectation. Ask God to shine light on ~~tomorrow's~~ your path. Resolve to grow.

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Let's pray and then end with a time of worship...

Prayer That Transforms Us

Series: Connecting with God in Prayer

March 13, 2016 – Jimmy Reyes

We have been in the series titled: Connecting with God in Prayer. Through this series we have explored different aspects of prayer.

In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers - To His Last Breath*

The brethren asked Abba Agathon: "Amongst all our different activities, father, which is the virtue that requires the greatest effort?" He answered: "Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than praying to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies the demons try to prevent him; for they know that nothing obstructs them so much as prayer to God. In everything else that a man undertakes, if he perseveres, he will attain rest, but in order to pray a man must struggle to his last breath."

1. How have you felt the busyness of life affect your soul?
2. What are some of the ways you try to disconnect from the busyness of life?

Read Psalm 46:10 (NIV) "Be still, and know that I am God."

3. What comes to mind when you hear this verse?

How does the fact that this verse was written in times of war and chaos affect your thoughts?

Dallas Willard said: "People want to be like Jesus, to do the things he did, but they do not want to do the things he did that helped enable him to live as he did."

4. What are some of the things that Jesus did regularly that enabled him to live a transforming life?
5. In Scripture we see at least six examples of Jesus withdrawing to be with the Father. What does this speak to you about the importance of withdrawing?

Read Matthew 26:36-46 (NIV)

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.⁴¹ "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed

the third time, saying the same thing. ⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

6. What are some of the things we learn from this example of Jesus withdrawing to be with the Father in his darkest moments?

7. Why is this a struggle between with the Spirit and the flesh?

8. What experiences in your religious background, your personality, and/or season in life help or hinder or help you in developing a rhythm of prayer in your life?

Read John 15:4 (NIV)

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

We are the branches and to grow and bear fruit we need to abide, remain in Him. It is not a once in while experience, or a weekly Sunday experience. We are called to remain daily, to be connected to the vine.

9. What does that look like for you?

10. What are some of the spiritual disciplines that you have experienced or practiced in the past? What have you found to be helpful?

11. Why is it important to adopt a “turtle” mentality instead of living as a “hare” in our spirituality?

With the remaining time, close in a time of Practicing the Prayer of Examen together:

- Stillness- Become aware of the Presence of God. Quiet your heart, and listen. In this moment, become present to Jesus.
- Gratitude- Review your day with gratitude. Seeing through a lens of thanks, appreciate God's gifts in each event of the day.
- Reflection- Become aware of your emotions. Review your positive and negative feelings. Did you choose Jesus' way in each situation?
- Joy & Sorrow- Choose one feature of the day, and pray. Rejoice in a success, or ask forgiveness for sin. If necessary, plan to make amends.
- Hope- Look toward tomorrow. Move toward expectation. Ask God to shine light on tomorrow's path. Resolve to grow.

Pray for each other to learn to abide in God continually through some sort of consistent spiritual rhythm.