

## Anatomy of Powerful Prayer

*Introduction:* Prayer is a struggle for us.

Acknowledge the challenges to prayer.

1. Prayer is hard work!
  - Falling asleep during Mission Prayer Band at Northland
  - But then, I suppose I'm in good company: Moments before Jesus was arrested and led away to be crucified, Jesus' disciples fell asleep while praying!
    - o When we design a worship service, we recognize there are elements of the service that are really easy to stay engaged in, and there are some that require a lot of effort, and we try to balance those out.
      - Singing, videos, special things like lighting candles or an interesting meditation captivate our attention, and energize us
      - Scripture reading and prayer require a certain amount of energy to keep our minds engaged.
      - The guy who slept through my sermons, but would wake up whenever I told a story, then fall back asleep!

2. Prayer is mysterious

On the one hand, prayer is very simple: it's just talking to God. On the other hand, we don't have to think very hard or very long about prayer to begin to wonder things like:

- If God already knows what we need, then why bother asking for it?

Matthew 6:8

*your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Whatever prayer does, it doesn't inform God of things he didn't know!

- If God already knows the future, and it won't change, then why pray about it? Isaiah 46:9-10

*I am God, and there is none like me,  
declaring the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done,  
saying, My counsel shall stand,  
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'*

- If God never changes his mind, what use is prayer?

*God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Numbers 23:19*

It's very possible to get hung up on these things, and think to ourselves, "Why bother?"

Warren Wiersbe wrote,

*"The more you think about prayer and try to explain it, the more baffling it becomes. It*

*reminds me of the fable of the centipede and the beetle. The beetle asked the centipede, 'How do you know which legs to move next?' The centipede replied, 'To tell you the truth, I've never thought much about it.' And the more the centipede pondered the question, the more confused it became, until finally it was so bewildered that it became paralyzed.*" Prayer 101, loc. 95

It's not my purpose to try to unravel these mysteries with you, but really all we need to say about them is simply this: The Bible tells us that we must pray, and it encourages us that if we pray as we should, God will hear, and act.

Jesus was no doubt well aware of all these mysteries, yet he prayed constantly. Paul had a profound understanding of the sovereignty of God, and he prayed constantly, and told us to pray constantly as well.

Wiersbe again said, *"It hasn't been granted to us to understand fully the mysterious relationship between the eternal counsels of God, the promises of God, and the cries of his people, nor is it necessary that we understand."* Prayer 101, loc.130

### 3. Prayer can feel unproductive

Maybe there's nothing more frustrating than wasted effort, wouldn't you agree? A big part of the curse of sin on the world is wasted work. Planting a garden, and weeds come up. Building something, then it gets burned down.

Men generally don't mind hard work, so long as it accomplishes something. I recently finished listening to George Orwell's book *The Road to Wigan Pier* where he described the conditions in the coal mines in England in the 1930's. Workers took an elevator a thousand feet or so straight down into the ground, then walked between 1 and 5 miles hunched over through a tunnel anywhere between 3 and 5 feet tall. They would scrape their back on the timbers so often they called the scabs and scars down their spines their "buttons." But they did it, and even though they didn't make a lot of money and life was pretty miserable, they managed to provide for their families, and they performed a really important service for England.

On the other hand, I've heard that one of the dreadful tortures the Nazi's inflicted on the Jews in the concentration camps was to make a man carry a hundred pound bag of salt from one end of the camp to the other, then bring it right back to where he started. That's torture – working like an animal, for nothing.

Prayer is work, we've talked about that. And if you're not hearing from God, it can feel like a whole lot of wasted effort, doesn't it?

Job felt that way for a while. He was suffering miserably, and like all of us do when we're suffering, he cried out to God for relief, and you can almost feel the frustration when he says,

*My face is red with weeping,*

*and on my eyelids is deep darkness,  
although there is no violence in my hands,  
and my prayer is pure. Job 16:16-17*

So these are some of the challenges to prayer, and it's okay to acknowledge them. But we can't let these challenges become excuses not to pray. Instead, we need to learn how to pray in a way that pleases God, and how to pray prayers God answers.

What we can say about prayer is that if there's a problem with our prayer life, if prayer is difficult, or frustrating, or ineffective, the problem is on our end, not on God's end, right?

As Jesus was preparing to leave his disciples, he seemed very excited to tell them that when he returned to the Father, they were going to be able to pray and ask for anything, and God would give it to them.

For instance, he said things like,

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. John 15:16*

We know the disciples took this very seriously, and were committed to prayer. They even refused to be involved in serving the widows in the early church, not because they had anything against serving widows, they saw it as a crucial ministry of the church, but they said,

*"we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:4)*

What I want to do then is try to help us see the kind of person we need to be in order for our prayers to be effective. Because there is a kind of person and a kind of prayer God won't hear.

Jesus said,

*"When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them..." Matthew 6:7-8a*

What is the kind of person God hears? Let's look at four critical parts of the anatomy of powerful prayer.

#### I. Faithful Heart

The heart of our relationship with God is faith. We are saved by faith. Our faith is counted to us as righteousness. Without faith, it is impossible to please God.

And this is true for prayer as well. Prayer requires a heart of faith.

Faith that God will hear our prayers and do what we ask, but it also requires a more fundamental kind of faith. Here are some things we must believe if we would have God hear

our prayers:

A. Faith that God is who he says he is.

This is where we have to begin. When we pray, we have to know to whom it is we're praying. Everyone has some idea of who God is, and what God is like, and we relate to God on that basis.

For instance, some people think God exists, but he is very distant and doesn't really care much about what's going on in the world. We call that Deism, and many of the Founding Fathers of our nation were Deists.

Well, if you don't think God really cares about the day to day of your life, and is sort of detached from the world, that's going to affect how you pray to him, if you even bother to pray.

Some people think of God as a kindly old man, with the best of intentions and a heart of gold, but maybe a little bit out of touch, so they talk to God maybe like you'd talk to Grampa down at the nursing home – God, you might not realize what's happening out here in my life, so I'll fill you in, and here's what you need to do!

There's a pretty popular theology that says God has been locked out of the world, and the only way he can operate is if people allow him to work, so God really wants to do things, but he can only do what we ask him to do. And that'll affect how a person prays, too. Among other things, it means anything bad that happens in your life, God didn't want it to happen but it did because you failed to give him permission to stop it.

But none of those descriptions of God are who God says He is. God says he's the Creator, the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise Sovereign of the universe. He has no rivals, he has no limitations, nothing stands in his way, nothing escapes his gaze, nothing is beyond his total control.

God is holy, and hates evil, even though he allows so much evil to exist. God has bigger plans for the world than simply making our lives comfortable and trouble-free this very moment.

This is the God the Bible portrays, and this is the God to whom we pray, with hearts full of faith informed by His Word.

B. Faith that God loves us, and wants what's best for us.

When we pray, we are approaching a God who loves us. He reveals himself to us as a loving, even doting Father.

God so loved us that he gave his only begotten Son to suffer and die that we might live for all eternity.

God's love is an interested love. Here's what I mean by that: God knows what's happening in your life, and he cares about it. He's interested in your life.

I love the line from Psalm 139:17-18,

*How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.*

When we come to God in prayer, we are coming to a God who is constantly thinking about us. There's never a millisecond when you are not on the mind of God. You never slip his attention, for even a moment.

And if you're a child of God, he looks on you with love and kindness. He wants what's best for you.

So when we go to him in prayer, we don't have to try to get his attention, we don't have to convince him to be nice, we don't have to try to make him like us. We go to him with hearts full of faith that he loves us, and wants what's best for us.

That leads us naturally to a heart full of

- C. Faith that whatever God does – or doesn't do, is best.  
Almost always when we go to prayer, we're asking God to do something. To fix something that's broken, to keep something bad from happening, to make someone's pain go away.

And we know that God can do those things. But we also know that he doesn't always do what we ask.

Paul prayed three times that the Lord would remove some kind of demoniacal misery in his life, and God wouldn't do it. Do you know why?

Because God knew that it would be better for Paul to suffer a lot of pain and heartache. As godly as Paul was, God knew that he stood under a great temptation to pride, and if it overcame him, he'd be ruined.

God doesn't always tell us why he does or doesn't do the things he does, or why he allows some of the evil he allows. But he doesn't have to.

When we bring our requests to God, we come with hearts full of faith that whatever God does, or doesn't do, is best. And when we come with that spirit, laying our burdens before him, we find a kind of peace knowing that whatever crisis is heavy on our hearts, however it works out will be best, even if it doesn't make any sense to us.

And that's really the heart of prayer. Our prayers are naturally very short-sighted. We can't see the future, only the present. We can't see how present troubles are working future glory. So it's natural that we simply go to God and ask him to fix all the troubles we have now.

But you know, a heart of faith helps us also pray, "Father, not my will, but yours be done," because we know that God's will is better than ours.

So that's the first piece of the anatomy of prayer – a faithful heart. The second is closely related, and it's a Bible-soaked mind.

## II. Bible-soaked Mind

Prayer is much more than emoting. It's more than coming to God with a basket of emotions and hoping he sorts it all out. Prayer is a mental exercise. Prayer is wrestling. It's wrestling to understand our present situation in light of Biblical truth.

Here's a couple things a Bible-soaked mind will help us understand:

### A. God's plans and purposes

Do you know what God's plans and purposes are for this world? Do you know what he's doing?

Sometimes God lets individuals suffer terrible things because he's doing big things.

When you read the book of Joshua, and God commands his people to wipe out certain towns and villages, exterminating every man, woman, and child, it's hard to make sense of that on an individual level. It's hard to think of an Israelite army wiping out a Hittite kindergarten class.

But when you understand that as a society, these cities were given over to abject wickedness for generation after generation, compounding evil upon evil, sacrificing their own children to appease false gods, you begin to understand why God demanded these civilizations come to an end.

The God to whom we pray is not simply our personal God. He is the creator of all things, the God of the universe. He is in control of nations, and he is working all things together for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what God's about – the glory of Christ. All our problems, all our struggles, all our fears, God cares about those things, but that's not first and foremost on God's priorities.

First and foremost God is interested in the glorification of Christ. God wants the world to see how incredible Jesus is.

So God might allow Job to lose ten children and a lifetime of accumulated wealth, just to prove that Job loves God for God's sake, not for the sake of God's blessings.

God might allow a man to be born blind and live as a beggar for almost 40 years just so one day Jesus can come along and give him sight.

And who knows what sort of discomfort and trials God might allow you or me or our church to endure to show the world that we really believe so long as we have Jesus, we have enough.

This is the message of the Bible: Jesus is glorious, and nothing is more important than that.

And when we get that kind of perspective, it'll affect how we pray.

B. Ourselves, our purpose for life, our future.

But we also want to have a biblical understanding of ourselves.

Why do we exist? Why did God make you? What are you here for?

Do you know?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by asking the simple question,

What is the chief end of man? What is the highest purpose a man can live for?

The chief end of man is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.

Here's an interesting little question for you. Fill in the blank:

My life will be a smashing success if \_\_\_\_\_.

What would make your life a success? If you live for a long time? If you make a lot of money? If you have a good time? If you have a lot of friends? If you love and are loved?

All those things are fine. But none of them are nearly lofty enough for a human being made in the image of God. If you have a lot of friends, but you die, then what? If you love well, and then you die, or the person you love dies, then what?

Maybe ask it this way: My life will be wasted unless I \_\_\_\_\_?

The only place you're going to find a purpose for life big enough to satisfy you is in the Word of God.

And I don't mean that you need to become a minister or a missionary. Plenty of ministers waste their lives, and ruin the lives of their people.

A child can die at birth and have a successful life, I believe that.

A man can die at a hundred years old in luxury and his life be a total waste, I believe that too.

A man can be worked to death in a Communist labor camp and his body be dumped in a mass grave, and his life be a complete success, I believe that.

Why? Because true success in life is not defined by how much life we lived, by the pleasures we experienced, by the money we made, by the fame we achieved, or any of those things that are so important to most people.

Here's what God says:

*"Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD..." Jeremiah 9:23-24*

True success in life is defined by whether we knew the Lord and served him, wherever he put us, and whatever he asked us to do. That's it. The rest is temporary, short-lived, and most of it will disappear before our bodies reach room temperature.

God's assessment of our lives is the only one that counts, in the final analysis. He gets to say whether we were successful or not.

When we pray, we must have hearts of faith, and a mind saturated in the Word of God, so we know who we are, and what we're about.

### III. Clean Hands

Listen to Psalm 24:3-5

*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?*

*And who shall stand in his holy place?*

*He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to what is false  
and does not swear deceitfully.*

*He will receive blessing from the LORD  
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*

If we're going to come into the presence of the Lord to make our requests, we must come with clean hands and a pure heart.

There are certain people God simply refuses to hear when they pray.

People who willfully, deliberately, stubbornly ignore God's Word, who live in sin and refuse to turn away from it should not expect God to hear their prayer.



Proverbs 28:9 says,  
*If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,  
even his prayer is an abomination.*

Isn't that striking? God is repulsed by the prayers of the man who deliberately lives in sin. His prayers are an abomination – God hates them.

Psalm 66:18 says,  
*If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,  
the Lord would not have listened.*

The only prayer a sinner can hope God will hear is this one: Forgive me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.

Let me give you three Characteristics of People God won't answer:

### **Filthy Hands**

1 Timothy 2:8

*I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling*

What does it mean to lift up holy hands?

You can often tell what a person has been doing by looking at their hands. When Michele makes pizza dough, her hands are covered in it. When Violet is into the chocolate chip cookies, you can see it on her hands. Our hands show our actions.

So to lift up, or to show someone your hands is to show them what you've been doing. Paul is telling Timothy that the men need to pray, and when they pray, they need to lift up holy hands. They need to show God, "Look, Lord, my hands are clean. There's no anger, there's no quarreling, there's no deceit here."

By the way, I encourage especially you men, try this. In private before you do it in public. Go away by yourself, and lift up your hands to the Lord, and say, "Look at my hands Lord." Because you know he sees them. And you know he sees what you've been doing. You know he sees your faults. And you remember that the only way you can lift up holy hands is through the forgiveness that comes through the blood of Christ.

*1 Peter 3:12 (quoting Psalm 34)  
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their prayer.  
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."*

Another person the Lord won't hear is the man with uncontrolled passions

### **Uncontrolled Passions**

*James 4:2-4*

*You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people!*

Here's the picture, it's quite graphic: A married woman has a boyfriend on the side, and she's got a date with him. She really wants this guy to like her, so she wants to look her best on this date. She goes to her husband and says, "Honey, I really want to look good for him tonight, could you give me some money so I can buy a really nice dress and some new earrings?"

That's crazy, right? What does she think he's going to say?

No! He's not going to be any part of this.

What is James' point? His point is that all too often, we go to God asking for things that we think will make us happier than he will.

God, please just give me this thing, then I'll be happy! And God is saying, "I love you with an everlasting love, don't *I* make you happy?"

Oh God, please just give me other thing, then my life will be complete!

We should never expect God to answer prayers that come from uncontrolled passions.

When our passions for the things of this earth are so strong we only go to God to ask him for stuff to take his place in our heart – we've crossed a terrible line. We've become adulteresses.

Our passions for the things of this world are very natural – everyone has them. Our passions are tainted by sin, and they must be controlled.

The Bible repeatedly tells us we must control our passions.

1 Pet 4:7

*The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.*

God will not hear the prayer of a person whose passions are out of control. We must keep our hands clean.

Thirdly, God will not hear the prayer coming from a disrespectful heart

### **Disrespectful Hearts**

This is particularly for you, guys, though there's application for women too:

1 Peter 3:7

*7 Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.*

Gentlemen, your wife is not a dude. And aren't you glad about that?

But here's what you have to remember: A wife is what the Bible calls 'a weaker vessel.' What does that mean?

Guys, in the kitchen, she's the beautiful vase on the table, and you're the cast iron skillet on the stove. And that means there's going to be times you need to protect her, cover her, to take shots for her. It means a woman breaks more easily than a man. It means, men, that things that don't hurt you in the least can hurt her.

There's two ditches here. One is to treat your wife like just another one of the guys. To expect her to make as much money as you do, to stand up under just as much pressure as you do, to think you can push and push and push her.

You'll destroy her. Peter reminds you, *She's a weaker vessel*. You've got to honor her by protecting her.

The other ditch is to treat your wife like she's inferior. Like she's less important. Like her opinion doesn't matter. Like she's all emotion and no logic. Like you can ignore her.

Peter reminds you, "*She's an heir with you of the grace of life.*" She belongs to the Lord too. Jesus died for her, too. She possesses every ounce of human dignity that you do.

And here's the thing: Guys, if you disrespect your wife, your prayers won't clear the ceiling. They're not going anywhere. Your hands are dirty.

If we're going to pray prayers God will hear and answer, we must have a heart of faith, we must have a mind soaked in the Word, we must have clean hands.

And finally, we must have clear eyes.

#### IV. Clear Eyes

By "clear eyes" I simply mean learning to see our world, our lives, and our problems from the proper perspective, and praying from that perspective. No one prayed with more clear eyes than the Lord Jesus, and it's instructive for us to see

##### A. God's Perspective John 12:27

One day a group of Greeks asked to see Jesus. When Jesus heard it, he knew that the time for his death had come.

I don't know how you'd feel if you knew that in a matter of days, you'd be cruelly and viciously executed. I wonder how we'd pray?

Here's what Jesus said in

John 12:27-28

*"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."*

That's a great question Jesus asks – 'what shall I say?' What do you say when your soul is troubled? Instinctively we say, "Father, save me from this hour!" But Jesus wouldn't pray that. Why not?

Jesus knew that his death was part of the Father's plan, and he trusted the Father. Jesus knew that the reason he was born was to die.

Of course, we don't always know the Father's plan. But I do know there are times when I'm coming up to a most difficult time in life, and I have no peace in my soul asking God to make the troubles go away.

Sometimes our troubles come from God's hand, and serve a greater purpose. We just have to go through them. And you'll know that in your soul, God will help you. And we have to see clearly that God's plans and God's ways are always best, and trust him.

#### B. Heaven's Perspective Hebrews 5:7

Finally, pray with eyes that see with heaven's perspective.

Here's a most fascinating verse, Hebrews 5:7

*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*

Jesus prayed to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

But Jesus wasn't saved from death, was he? God didn't save him, the angels didn't come, and he did die. So why does the writer say 'he was heard'?

Jesus wasn't saved from dying. But he was saved from death. He was raised from the dead. His prayer was answered. And no doubt Jesus knew it would be.

There's more to life than this life, isn't there? The vast majority of our life is on the other side of the grave. And when we pray, we come to God as present citizens of this world, and future citizens of the heavenly city.