

**The Great Prayer Mystery**  
***What Should We Ask For?***  
**April 30, 2017**

**Congregational Songs – Livin’ On a Prayer**  
**Announcements – Video**

**Worship Song – Promises / 10,000 Reasons**

**Video – “Divine Spark”**

Ah ... one of the best movies ever made ... *Bruce Almighty*.

Good morning, everyone!

Today we’re continuing in our series *The Great Prayer Mystery*. And the reason I’ve called this series *The Great Prayer Mystery* is because, for many people – including many of us who are Christians (believers in and followers of Jesus) – prayer is a mystery.

- We don't do it as often as we know we should.
- And then, even when we *do* pray, we don't feel like we do it very well.

In fact, in all of my years as a pastor, I don't think I've ever met more than a handful of people who felt really good about their experience with prayer. And that includes me.

So, we're doing this three-week series to try and clear up some of the confusion; to hopefully simplify things just a bit. But my purpose is not just that we'll all have a better *understanding* of prayer. What I *really* want for you (and for myself) is that you and I will actually *pray* more and better prayers.

That's the win: to pray more and better prayers ... which is why, last Sunday, in addition to beginning this series ...

**We also kicked off the *One-Month Prayer***

## ***Experiment ...***

... which is an opportunity for all of us – regardless of our previous experience or skill level in praying – to take what we learn each Sunday and put it into practice by *praying for at least five minutes every day through May 27<sup>th</sup> ...* and see what happens.

And I told you that each week I would give you an assignment – a focus of what to pray about – since, again, for a lot of us, prayer is a mystery and we need some direction.

**And last week's assignment was pretty simple: let's just pray about praying.**

Let's spend a few minutes each day talking to God about the issue of prayer in our lives.

- Confessing our doubts about whether or not it works or is necessary
- Confessing our lack of motivation and discipline
- Then asking God to help us develop both of

those qualities as well as knowledge and skill.

Since prayer is a mystery and since we don't do it very well, we said this was a good place to begin.

Now, if you weren't here last Sunday or you didn't do or finish the assignment you can still get in on it this week. So don't let that stop you or discourage you. But if you *did* do the assignment, hopefully, you've seen some benefit from it.

For me personally, one of the benefits of the intentional "praying about prayer" experience every day was that I found myself *actually praying* a LOT more throughout the day. I was much more aware that, "oh, this is something I should probably talk to God about. This is something I could pray about ..."

... which is what we're going to look at today: what *should* we be praying about? What kinds of things should we ask for when we pray?

## A Quick Review

But, before we get to that we need to take a few minutes to review some of what we've learned already because we're going to build on it today.

We began last week by listing five of the most common problems Christians have when it comes to prayer.

**1. First is the knowledge problem which says "I don't know how to pray or what to pray for."**

And then there's ...

**2. The comfort problem which says "I already have everything I need, so it seems somewhat pointless to ask God for something."**

Then, there's what I'm calling ...

**3. The measurement problem which says "I**

**keep praying about it, but I'm not sure my prayers are accomplishing anything."**

Then there's ...

**4. The competency problem which says "God helps those who help themselves and I *can* help myself. I can take action to bring about change, so no need to bother praying."**

Finally, there's what I call the ...

**5. The omnipotence problem which says "Since God is ultimately in control (which is what we mean by 'omnipotence'), my prayers don't really matter. God's going to do what God's going to do."**

And last Sunday we looked at those last two – the competency problem and the omnipotence problem – and discovered how they can combine to make us think that it's not all that important to pray.

After all, if we can take action ourselves or if God will do it Himself, why bother to pray? *What*

*difference does it make?*

**<diagram> However, we saw that this kind of thinking is not helpful because you and I can never determine where the line is between God's action and human action.**

In any given circumstance or event, we cannot know how much was God's effort and how much was ours. So, to focus on that issue and to draw any implications about the necessity or effectiveness of prayer is unwise.

Instead, a better approach is to simply trust what God tells us: that our prayers *do* matter and they *do* make a difference ... ALWAYS ... in two very specific ways.

**1. First, when we pray, we deepen our relationship with God.**

As the Apostle James puts it:

*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. James 4:8 (ESV)*

You pray ... and you will become closer to God. It's that simple.

And this is so important to understand because, as I said last week, some of us are in a spiritual rut right now. And we're thinking that maybe if we do something like changing churches, that will get us out of it. And maybe it will.

But more than likely, what we really need to change is our relationship with God ... which, for most of us, means praying more regularly and consistently. *Draw near to Him and He will draw near to you.* Prayer deepens your relationship with God. It ALWAYS makes a difference in that way. That's why we should bother to pray.

The second thing that ALWAYS happens when we pray is that ...

**2. God uses our prayers to impact spiritual, emotional and physical reality – we just don't know how or how much.**



We don't know where human activity stops and Divine activity begins, but *we do know* that somehow, someway, *our prayers influence God's activity* in the spiritual, emotional and physical realms of our lives and the lives of others.

In fact, God has *ordained* that His sovereign omnipotent activity is linked to our prayers. *Some things God wants to happen will only happen because someone prays.*

And there are lots of biblical and philosophical ways to illustrate why that's true but I think the best "proof" (if we can call it that) comes from what Jesus taught His disciples when they came to Him and said, "Jesus, we're just going to be honest with you. We're not very good at this prayer thing" ...

... which, by the way, is why you shouldn't beat yourself up too much if you're a Christian (a believer in and follower of Jesus) and *you're not*

very good at prayer. The very first guys and gals to follow Jesus weren't very good at it either ... but ... *they got good.*

And through their prayers and the prayers of the millions of other believers who followed them throughout the centuries, God changed the world. And God *can* and *will* keep doing that through you and me and our prayers.

So ... the disciples come to Jesus (*we* come to Jesus) and say, "Lord, would you teach us to pray?"

And in response He gives them – and us – what has come to be known as *The Lord's Prayer* which is recorded in the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

**"This, then, is how you should pray," He says.**

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in*

heaven.”  
(NIV)

Matthew 6:9-10

... which is a very curious prayer if you stop and think about it.

For if God is all-powerful and sovereign – if God is going to do whatever God is going to do – then why doesn’t He just snap his Divine fingers (so to speak) and *make* people honor and respect his name (which is what “hallowed” means)? Why doesn’t He just *make* His Kingdom and His will established among humans? Why does Jesus tell us to *pray* for it?

Furthermore, since Jesus repeatedly told his disciples (you and me, if we’re Christians) to go and *do something* so that His name is hallowed, the Kingdom shines and His will is done ... for example:

- Spread the Gospel.
- Form little communities of faith (called

churches) so that it sticks with people.

- And heal the sick. Serve the poor. Care for the least.

Since Jesus told us to *do* those kinds of things, why does He also tell us to *pray* to that end?

The only reason I can think of that makes any sense is that *it must really matter that we do*. The only reason that makes sense is that God has ordained that, in addition to His divine activity and our human activity, *our prayers* are part of what it takes for His will to be accomplished.

*Some things God wants to happen will only happen because someone prays.*

## **From Trivial to Meaningful**

So, with all of that as the backdrop, we can now look at part two of the great prayer mystery: *what should we ask for when we pray?*

And I think this is such an important question because what passes for prayer these days (especially among people like you and me who live in the safe and prosperous Western world) is becoming more and more trite and trivial.

And I don't say that to be critical or condemning – because this is the natural consequence of the first two problems on our list: the *knowledge* problem and the *comfort* problem.

- If I don't know what to pray for (the knowledge problem)
- and if I already have pretty much everything I need (the comfort problem)

... then it's no surprise that when I *do* finally get around to praying, what I pray is going to be trite and trivial (like the “Miss America prayer” in the clip we just saw).

**<pics> For instance, one of the things I've seen a lot of in recent years (and I'm sure**

**you've seen it, too) ...**

... is whenever something bad happens to someone “out there” – like in Internet land or Facebook land – you see a lot of well-intentioned people responding with the phrase “prayers to.”

And I always wonder what exactly people mean by that. I don't think anyone means they're literally praying to the person or family. But I also don't think they mean, “I just got down on my knees and I said a prayer for you (or them).” I think when most people say or post “prayers to” it's a more spiritual way to say “best wishes” or “get well soon.”

And there's nothing wrong with that. It's kind. It's compassionate. But it's not prayer. It's not the same thing as intentionally drawing near to God to speak to Him on someone else's behalf.

Another thing I've observed – and I do this myself – is that there seems to be a whole lot of prayer

for *safety*.

- “Lord, give him safe travels.”
- “Father, help her make it through the surgery safely.”
- “God, bring us all back safely next week.”

Now, I don’t want to demean that because I *do* think God hears those prayers. And safety is an important issue.

But I wonder if sometimes God isn’t thinking, “You know, if you’d just stop texting while you drive, you’d go a long way towards answering that prayer.”

On a more serious note, whenever I hear that kind of a prayer (or pray it myself), I sometimes wonder if the only people who really ought to be praying for that ...

**<pic> ... are the Christians in Egypt or Syria and Iraq ...**

... where ISIS is blowing up their churches in the middle of services and where they are hounded and persecuted – sometimes to the point of death. Those people *literally do need* God’s protection in order for them to “come back next week.”

But you and me? I’m not so sure. I think there are things that might be more meaningful for us to pray. (For one thing, we could pray for *their* safety and *their* protection as well as their ability to stay strong in the face of persecution).

In fact, why don’t we do that right now? <prayer>

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So, how do we move beyond the trite and trivial to the kinds of prayers that are more meaningful and impactful?

Well, since we started out with what Jesus taught His disciples, maybe we should look at that again



and see what else we can discover.

In fact, why don't we just say the whole thing aloud together as a group?

**The words are coming up on the screen now. Ready? Here we go ...**

*Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come, your will be  
done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
As we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.*

*Matthew 6:6-13 (NIV)*

For Yours is the Kingdom and the power and  
the glory  
Forever and ever.  
Amen.

Now, there are two very significant things to

notice about this prayer that Jesus is modeling for us.

**1. First of all, the prayer begins with God's agenda, not ours.**

In fact, almost *half of the prayer* is devoted to it. Jesus begins with 22 words about God's name, Kingdom and will. And then the next 29 words are about us and our concerns.

God first, "us" second: that's the pattern ... which, by the way, is right in line with what Jesus said immediately after teaching this prayer.

*"Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.*

*"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

*Matthew 6:31-33 (NIV)*

So, the first thing to notice is that the prayer Jesus taught begins with God's agenda, not ours.

**2. The second is that all of the requests in the prayer are phrased in terms of “we” not “me.”**

Notice that Jesus doesn't say to pray ...

- Give *me* my daily bread.
- Forgive *me* my debts.
- Lead *me*.
- Deliver *me*.

Instead, His prayer is about “us.” There is no “I” in the prayer.

Now, from other teachings of Jesus, I don't think He was intending to say “never pray for yourself and your own needs.” But I do think the implication of how this prayer begins ... plus the “we-not-me” nature of it is pretty clear.

**...which is that prayer is not primarily intended to be about *you* and your benefit (and me and mine). It's to be about God and the community of which you (and I) are a part.**

That shouldn't be too surprising given that Jesus said the two greatest commandments are "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40).

And if you want to pray prayers that are meaningful instead of trivial this is the key. *Pray for God and pray for the community of which you are a part* – which would include yourself, your family, your city, your nation but especially – don't miss this – especially your community of faith (the other believers in and followers of Jesus with whom you have connected yourself, which He called "the church").

When Jesus tells us as His followers to pray "*our* Father" instead of "*my* Father" it's a reminder

that we are not just individual sons and daughters of the Father. We are also brothers and sisters to each other. There is no such thing as a “lone ranger Christian.” We’re meant to be in this together.

So, pray for God, pray for your community – that’s the clear implication of what Jesus is teaching.

Well, what should we pray for God? Jesus gave us two things.

- First, that His reputation will be so great that people will be drawn to Him, which is what is meant by “Hallowed be your name.”
- Second, that “up there” will come “down here”; that Heaven’s agenda will become Earth’s agenda; that things will begin to work “down here” the way they work “up there” ... which is what is meant by “your Kingdom come and your will be done.”

And we've talked about this many times ... the fact that most people think God's intention is to get us out of Earth and into Heaven but, really, it's just the opposite!

If you're a Christian and you die, you *will* go to be with God in Heaven. But that's not His final plan for you. One day, according to the book of Revelation, God's going to bring Heaven to Earth. But *before* then – in the here and now – God wants to do that in each person and each community. He wants Heaven and its values and way of life to come “down here” *now* in us and through us.

So, if you want to pray meaningful prayers instead of trivial prayers, pray for God's reputation (or His glory if you prefer that language) and God's agenda: the very first thing on Jesus' list.

And then, also pray for your community (which, again, includes yourself and, especially, the church you are part of) in three broad categories:

- The needs of the *body* ... which is what is alluded to by “give us today our daily bread.”
- The needs of the *heart and soul* ... including forgiveness for sin (which is the greatest spiritual need of humanity) and the ability to forgive others (which is our greatest emotional and relational need).
- The needs of the *mind and will* ... the internal strength to withstand the trials and temptations through which the evil one would love to destroy us (which is what is meant by “lead us not into temptation – or the trial – but deliver us from evil.”)

## **Getting Practical**

And I know that I’ve greatly oversimplified those categories. But, in the interest of time, let’s try to figure out how all of this might guide us in what

we should ask for in our prayers.

More specifically, what would it look like to develop a prayer life according to the truth that prayer is primarily not about me; that it's about God and the community of which I am only a part?

For one thing, it would obviously take some time and effort to think through the intersection of my community and the things Jesus said to pray about.

It would take looking at myself, the people in my family, the people in my church, the people in my relational circle, the people in my community and so on and so forth and then asking, as I look at all of those folks ...

1. Who needs to think more highly of God and drawn to Him (to “hallow His name”)?
2. Through whom does God's glory need to shine more brightly? How might that happen?



3. Who needs a taste of “up there” “down here”? Who needs to experience the goodness of God’s kingdom in their life?
4. Through whom does more of “up there” need to come “down here”? How might that happen?

### **And then ...**

5. Who has needs of the body? To have enough food, health and safety?
6. Who has needs of the heart and soul? To experience, for instance, forgiveness and forgiving?
7. Who has needs of the mind and the will? To stand strong in trials and temptations that could break them?

If I can generate that list, I can come up with a pretty meaningful and impactful set of things to pray for ... which, brings us back to our Great One-Month Prayer Experiment ... because, remember,

the goal here isn't just to understand and to learn or hypothesize. It's to *do* something – to pray more and better prayers.

**So, here's the assignment for this week – three things you will need to do every day.**

And this will all be posted online at our Facebook page and our website (plus I'll send an email tomorrow to everyone who has given us their address), so don't freak out that I'm going through it quickly.

- Define your “our.”
- Based on the Lord's Prayer, generate a list of requests for those individuals and groups.
- Pray for at least one “big” request each day.

Define your “our” ... who makes up the community for whom God wants you to pray?

Be sure to include yourself and your church – whether it's NHCC or another community of faith.

(And if you're a Christian and not committed to a specific church, one of your requests this week ought to be "*Our Father*, lead me to the church you want me to be part of.")

Then go through the questions I just laid out – maybe pick one per day as there are seven of them – and try to apply them to those folks. And that will generate a list of meaningful things to pray about.

Then pray about at least one of those items.

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Now, very quickly, I want to give you two pieces of advice about how to do this (in addition to the advice I gave last week which was to set a regular time each day and write your prayers – which you will obviously need to do this week).

**Here they are:**

- Be bold.
- Ask for more than you can imagine.

Hebrews 4:16 tells us to “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Jesus gave his life to atone for all the ways in which you fall short (your sin), so you do not need to fear asking for the wrong thing or in the wrong way. Just lay it out there. Be bold.

And the Apostle Paul tells us that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us ... “ so, don’t be afraid to ask for something big, hairy and audacious!

**I like how Mark Batterson, in his book, *The Circle Maker* talks about this. He writes:**

“There is a pattern repeated in Scripture: crazy miracles are the offspring of crazy faith. Normal begets normal. Crazy begets

crazy. If we want to see God do crazy miracles, sometimes we need to pray crazy prayers.”<sup>i</sup>

Now, obviously, this week’s assignment is more challenging than last week’s. And I suspect at least some of us are thinking, “This might take more than five minutes each day this week, especially at first. So, Rick, nice idea on the experiment but, honestly, I don’t have the time for this.”

- But you *do* have time to binge watch whatever.
- And you *do* have time to surf the net and think about what you’re going to buy on Amazon.
- And you *do* have the mental capacity to organize your meal plan or your travel plan.

In the end, it’s all a choice about what you want to invest in. And I believe this experiment is a worthy investment because ...

- You will have a focus like never before when you pray.
- And there will be meaning in what you pray.
- And I think it might even lead our Father in Heaven to say, “Now, *that’s* a prayer. I’ll get right on it.”

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Ok, as you can see, the band is up because they’re going to do a song for us which is a very good example of the kind of praying we’re talking about this morning.

As you listen, I’m sure that someone in your life will come to mind and when that happens, use what they are singing as *your* prayer. So, please, don’t anyone leave during this time unless absolutely necessary.

And then when they’re done, we have one more thing we need to talk about before we leave – a very special opportunity – that you need to know

about.

## **Feature – Prayer for a Friend**

# **Closing Comments**

## **Baptism**

I hope you have someone on your list for whom you are praying like that. The single most important reason we exist as a church is to see people become believers in and followers of Jesus.

Along those lines ... some of you have recently made that decision. And it's time for you to make that public. The way we invite people to do that here at NHCC is by doing what Jesus asked us to do and what churches have done for 2,000 years: *baptism*.

And in two weeks we're going to do baptism as part of our service and I want to encourage you to be part of it. Information and signup is available

at the Welcome Center. (We don't baptize infants or small children – instead we offer a parent-child blessing at a service in the first part of August.).

## **World Vision Presentation**

Now, a few minutes ago, I said that we had some information about a special opportunity you need to know about, so ...

**<Pic of child and horse in stream> I want to introduce to you Kris Hansel from Team World Vision to tell you about it.**

<Kris quickly shares the Team World Vision story and the reality of the global water crisis today. At some point, he says something to the effect of ...>

**<Pic of Kris and family> “Fatherhood inspired me to get my health under control.”**

<Kris talks about how folks can join the team this year to run / jog / run-walk in the KC Marathon>

## **Video – Team World Vision Promo**



## Final comments (Rick)

1. Great way to connect with others, get disciplined ... meet down front (stage right) to get more info right now. If you're a couple w/kids in AL ... one go get the kids, one come to the meeting.
2. Offering at the door
3. See you all next week!

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker*