

The Great Prayer Mystery  
*Are We Done Yet?*  
May 7, 2017

**PRELUDE – Sound of the Saints**  
**Congregational Songs – Sound of the Saints /**  
**Great God Who Saves**

**Drama – Prayer Group Therapy**  
**Announcements – Video**

**Feature – There is Power / Offering**

Good morning, everyone!

As Shannon said, today we're concluding our series, *The Great Prayer Mystery*, and I have to tell you that while I've been very happy about what we've looked at so far, I've also been very aware that there is *so much more* that could be said and learned on this subject.

So, I'm a little torn that this is our final week, but I keep reminding myself that there will be opportunities in the future to do another series on prayer.

Plus, our goal in this series hasn't been just to *learn* – it's also been to *do*: to put into practice some of the things we've talked about each week; *to actually pray more and better prayers.*

And I think we might have accomplished that. I think that what we've covered has at least given many of us a baseline for praying that we've never had before.

I say that because the truth is ... many of us – and I'm talking about those of us who are Christians (believers in and followers of Jesus) – simply do not pray

as much as we know we should.

And when we *do* get around to praying (if we ever do), we're not sure why or how to pray ... which is why so many of our prayers fall into the category of "trite and trivial."

As I told you last week, I don't mean that to be critical or condemning of anyone else because I struggle with all of those issues myself ... and I'm a pastor! Truth is *prayer is a mystery* for almost all of us which is why I tried to boil it down to the most common questions and struggles:

- *Why even bother to pray?* If God's going to do what God's going to do anyway then what's the point?

- *What should we ask for when we pray?* Most of us pretty much have everything we need already (materially speaking). So how can we pray meaningful prayers instead of trivial ones?

Now, in the interest of time, I don't want to spend much effort reviewing what we've talked about in those messages but I do want to encourage you that, if you were not here for either of them, to go to our website, app or podcast and watch, listen to or read them.

Not only will they help you personally (especially if you are a Christian) but when you and I get better and more consistent at praying ...

- We *bless* the people around us. We have an impact on our families and friends and co-workers.
- We *benefit* this community of faith – North Heartland Community Church – and the mission to which God has collectively called us.
- We help to *bring in* the Kingdom of God and the agenda of God.

“Your Kingdom come; Your will be done” Jesus taught us to pray.

And He would not have told us to pray that if it didn’t somehow matter and it didn’t somehow have a real impact in this world ...

**... because some things God *wants* to happen *will not* happen unless someone**

***prays for them to happen.***

Yes, God is sovereign. Yes, God is in control.

But, *in His sovereignty*, He has ordained (in some way that is not totally clear to us as humans) that at least some of *his* activity is linked to *our* activity in prayer ... which means that ...

**<diagram> Something is going on in the *spiritual* realm that somehow impacts the *human* realm: the emotional, relational, physical, financial, political, etc aspects of our lives.**

**pic> And through prayer, God is inviting us to be players in that realm.**

And that leads to what I want to talk to you about this morning but, before we get to that, I *do* think there a few things I need to address that don't really fit

under any specific topic (at least, not as I've laid out this series).

## **What About?**

And I'm calling these things – three of them, actually – the “what abouts.”

**First of all (since we just heard a really great song about it), what about praying “in Jesus name”?**

What's the deal with that? Why do Christians almost always close out a prayer with the phrase “in Jesus name, amen?”

**That practice actually comes from something Jesus himself once said, recorded by his friend, the Apostle John.**

*“I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the*

*Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” John 14:13 (NIV)*

Unfortunately, a lot of people don't realize that's where the phrase comes from so, at best, it's just a set of spiritual sounding words we say without knowing what they mean.

At worst, it's akin to a magical incantation that somehow obligates God to act: “Jesus said if I prayed in His name, I would get what I'm asking for.” But that's not what He meant because of the condition He added: “so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”

What Jesus is saying here is that if you ask for something which glorifies our

Heavenly Father in the same way that Jesus lived his life to glorify the Father, then He will do it ...

... which obviously implies that if you're asking for something that *wouldn't* have that effect – like “let me win the lottery” – then adding “in Jesus name” to your prayer won't help.

Apparently this was something that needed to be clarified even to those who believed in and followed Jesus in the first century ...

**... which is why John later wrote this:**

*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know*

*that he hears us—whatever  
we ask—we know that we  
have what we asked of him.*

*1 John 5:14-15 (NIV)*

John's point (as well as Jesus' point) is "try to pray in line with what God has already revealed as his desires for our lives and for this world" ... specifically, that His Kingdom would come and His will be done down here on earth just like it is "up there" in Heaven, which is what Jesus taught in what has come to be known as The Lord's Prayer ...

... and which leads to the second "what about" ...

**What about things that are *not* on The Lord's Prayer "list" as we defined it last Sunday?**

Some of you may have wondered, "Rick, are you saying that we shouldn't pray

anything other than those categories?”

No, I'm not. The point of working through Jesus' model prayer and developing a list of categories from it wasn't meant to be limiting.

Instead, it was a way for us to ensure that what we ask for doesn't unintentionally become overly self-focused or degenerate into trivialities.

After all, the Bible is full of prayers (and encouragements to pray) about other things that Jesus didn't mention, such as:

- Asking for direction in life's big and not-so-big decisions
- Requesting wisdom on how to handle certain people and

situations

- Expressing thankfulness for God's blessings
- Giving praise for God's character (His goodness, faithfulness, justice and unconditional love).

And it's not all sweetness and light as we're also told that prayer is about ...

- Lamenting our losses
- Crying out for justice
- Confessing our sins and failures
- *Rejoicing* that those sins and failures have been forgiven and the slate wiped clean by what Jesus did on the cross

So, feel free to pray about those kinds of things and add them to your list.

But, as you do, also try to remember (as we saw last week) that when Jesus taught “the prayer” to His disciples ...

- He began that prayer with “Your Kingdom come and Your will be done.”
- And all of the requests that follow are in the plural not singular (“*our* Father” not “*my* Father” ... lead *us*” not “lead *me*” etc)

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

... which, as we’ve seen, is also the same idea of praying in Jesus’ name.

Bottom line, Jesus is trying to show us

through various teachings that *prayer is about engaging with God in what God wants to do in this world*. It's not primarily about our wishes and our desires and our comfort.

Of course, that leads to the third and final “what about” which is ...

**What about praying just to have a conversation with God?**

With all this emphasis on the intentionality of prayer, aren't we missing something here?

Aren't we leaving out that prayer is simply us talking to “Abba” ... which is, again, the Aramaic word in Jesus' prayer that gets translated “Father” and literally means “Papa” or “Daddy”?

That's a term of endearment not a term of functionality. Shouldn't this whole endeavor of prayer be rooted in that?

*Absolutely* ... which is why, when you and I pray, we should always begin and end with expressions of relationship and endearment.

“Father, I'm so thankful I can talk to you. Lord, I'm so glad that you hear me, not because of my goodness but because of the goodness of Jesus and what He did for me on the cross.”

It always comes back to the love God has for us exemplified in Christ and love we have for Him (or, at least, *want* to have for Him).

Furthermore, you unless you truly

believe that God as your Heavenly Papa or Daddy is *for* you and *not* against you – that through your faith in Him, Jesus really has made you 100% righteous in the Father’s sight even though you are still %100 a sinner – unless you have that kind of relationship with Him, you will never be able to approach Him with the bold assurance that’s necessary to engage in the functional aspects of what it means to pray.

Relationship is at the core of *everything* when it comes to prayer.

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By the way, that’s why it’s so important that, if you have come to believe in Jesus as your savior, you have a marker in your mind that you can always come back to that says, “Yes, I *did* come to the

place where I accepted Jesus and what He did for me on the cross. And my relationship with the Father is rooted in *that*, not in how good I think I am behaving at the present moment.”

Biblically speaking, that marker isn't praying a prayer at the end of a service or raising your hand or walking an aisle – as helpful as those things might be. It's *baptism*.

So, I just want to remind you that, as part of our service next Sunday, we're going to be baptizing anyone who needs it (other than infants and small children – we do something for them in a parent-child blessing on the first Sunday in August).

So, if that's you, you need to pick up a

baptism info packet at the Welcome Center when you leave today and, obviously, arrange your schedule to be here next Sunday.

One of my prayers during this series – and this is pretty bold, I think – is that 30 people (combined in both services) will do what Jesus told us to do and respond to Him in this way.

Feel free to join me in that prayer this week.

## **Prayer as Spiritual Battle**

Ok, with all that said, let's *finally* get to the topic of the day ... which, I think you will see, actually relates to the “what abouts” we just talked about. (I kind of snuck those in there to set you all up for

this).

If we pray in Jesus' name – if we ask according to God's will – Jesus promises that we will receive what we ask for ... which raises another “what about” question: “what about those times when we ask for something we believe to be in God's will, but it doesn't happen?”

For instance:

- We pray for our kids to believe in and receive Jesus, but they don't.
- We pray for God to change hearts and save a marriage, but He doesn't.
- We pray to become more like Jesus in our character, but we still struggle and fail with the same old patterns of sin.

- We pray for a healing that will certainly glorify God, but it doesn't happen.
- We pray for God to lead us to a job or a spouse or whatever, but our situation doesn't change.

If you've ever had that experience with prayer, you know how discouraging and demoralizing it can be!

So, what's up with that? Why does prayer sometimes not "work" as we think it should?

Well, there are several possibilities.

1. Sometimes it's because we are not praying in line with God's will (even though we think we are) and God is saying "no" to our request.

That happened to the Apostle Paul who prayed three times for God to heal him and God said, “No, this is my plan: to glorify myself in your weakness.”

It also happened to Jesus who prayed on the night before his death, “If it’s possible, may this cup pass from me” and the Father said, “No, victory will come not by avoiding the cross but by triumphing through it.”

2. Sometimes it’s because we are not yet mature enough to receive what we’re asking for and God is saying “grow” to our request.

3. And sometimes it’s simply not time

for us to receive what we're asking for and God is saying "slow" to our request.

But there's one more possibility. And this is the possibility I want to focus on in the time that remains.

**Sometimes, the reason things don't happen when we pray according to God's will is that there is a spiritual battle going on.**

Remember that earlier I said that ...

**<diagram> Something is going on in the spiritual realm that somehow impacts the emotional, relational and physical realms of our lives.**

**<add pic> And through prayer, God is inviting us to be players in that realm.**

That's because prayer – in addition to being a conversation with God – is also

a battle against the forces of evil that seek to hinder God's plan for this world and for His people ...

... which is why the **Apostle Paul** wrote that  
...

*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

*Ephesians 6:12 (NIV)*

From the first pages of the Bible to the last, we are told that of a supernatural being – a fallen angel by the name of Satan – who has set himself against God and who leads a vast army of other fallen angels who are also against God.

And their goal is to kill and destroy everything God has created, but especially the crown of creation – human beings.

**That's why the Apostle Peter wrote ...**

*Your enemy the devil  
prowls around like a  
roaring lion looking for  
someone to devour.*

*1 Peter 2:8 (NIV)*

Now, with that said, it also needs to be said that Satan and his forces were defeated at the resurrection of Christ. Ultimate victory has been won.

**Or, in the words of the Apostle John:**

*The reason the Son of God  
appeared was to destroy  
the devil's work. 1 John*

### 3:8 (NIV)

And when Jesus returns, that effort will be completed. Satan and his minions will be bound and destroyed and thrown into what John calls “the Lake of Fire.”

However, until that happens, there is – and will be – a battle going on.

When the Allied Forces landed on the beaches of Normandy in World War II, even though Hitler and the Reich still existed and still had the power to do evil, for all intents and purposes the war had been won. It was only a matter of time before he and his forces of evil would be destroyed.

However, if you lived in Central Europe, you were still under oppression – there

was still a battle going on – while you awaited your deliverance.

And that's the situation you and I are in. Satan has been defeated by Jesus, but right now at this very minute, the enemy still has the power to do evil ... which means that *you and I and everyone around us are in the middle of a spiritual conflict that will last until Jesus returns.*

... which is why prayer is more than just a relational conversation with God. Prayer is also our participation with God in the battle against the forces of darkness. When we pray, we're fighting against the enemies of God and God's agenda in this world.

**As Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthian church:**

*Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 2  
Corinthians 10:3-4 (NIV)*

## **An Amazing Example**

Now, what's amazing is that there's a fascinating illustration of this spiritual reality and battle recorded in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Old Testament book of Daniel. It's like God pulls back the curtain so we can see what's really going on in that realm.<sup>i</sup>

And, to understand what we read here, it's important to know that, for the past

70 years, the majority of the Jewish nation - including Daniel - has been living in exile in Babylon. Daniel was among the first to have been captured by Nebuchadnezzar as a very young man.

But Babylon has fallen to King Cyrus of Persia. And Cyrus has issued a decree allowing the Jewish people to leave Babylon and return to their ancestral homeland and to rebuild their temple. It's a tremendous victory and a great encouragement.

Of course, Daniel cannot go as he is now pushing 90. But he begins to hear reports that things are not going well in Jerusalem.<sup>ii</sup>

- Only a small number of second and

third generation Jewish exiles have returned.

- They have made very little headway in rebuilding anything.
- And they're facing great political opposition. In fact, the Persian government has shut them down.

And at some point in all of this, Daniel has a vision of a great war that involves the nation of Israel.

He's troubled by it so, for three weeks, we read in verse two, he fasts and prays for God to give him wisdom and understanding. And an amazing thing happens in response.

**An angel appears to him and says ...**

*“Don't be afraid, Daniel.  
For from the very first day*

*... your words were heard.  
I have come in response to  
your words.”*

*Daniel 10:12 (NET)*

In other words, “God issued the answer to your prayer three weeks ago when you began praying!”

**“However,” the angel continues ...**

*“However, the prince of the kingdom of Persia was opposing me for twenty-one days. But Michael, one of the leading princes, came to help me ...”*

*Daniel 10:13 (NET)*

So, what’s this all about?

Daniel had been fasting and praying for an answer and had not received one. But it wasn’t because God was saying “no”

or “slow” or “grow.” It was because a spiritual being known as “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” was opposing the angel who had God’s response!

And that “prince” was apparently very powerful, for not only did he (and his forces) hinder the messenger from God, they were also behind the opposition to the Jews in their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple! The returnees didn’t know it and they couldn’t see it but there were powerful spiritual beings working against them – and, ultimately, *against the plan and will of God* – in the spiritual realm.<sup>iii</sup>

There was a demonic stronghold over the kingdom of Persia that had to be broken down and until it was, there was no answer for Daniel and no success for

the rebuilders.

## Getting Practical

Now, let's get practical.

What does this mean for us and our prayers? Because of this “insider knowledge,” what should we do differently when we pray?

Well, in terms of the *kinds* of things we pray about and the *words we use* when we pray, the answer is “not much.”

I say that because, when you look at the example of Daniel, two things stand out.

- First of all, he didn't pray *against* anything. He didn't try to name the territorial spirits and speak to them

and tell them to depart. He didn't mention spiritual opposition at all.<sup>iv</sup>

- Instead, he persistently fasted and prayed about *regular stuff* – “Lord, give me wisdom and understanding” – until the answer came which, in this case, was 21 days.

And that's what we should do as well. Let's not make it more complicated than it needs to be. Let's keep it simple.

**To “do battle” in prayer means *persisting* until the answer comes.**

I like how Pastor Mark Batterson, in his book, *The Circle Maker* puts it:

“Too often we pray A.S.A.P. prayers

- as soon as possible. We need to start praying A.L.A.T. prayers - as long as it takes.”<sup>v</sup>

After all, you don't push a boulder up a hill with one shove and you don't produce spiritual power and momentum with haphazard one-and-done prayers. You persist. You keep on keeping on. You keep doing it until the rock moves or the answer comes.

Now, you can also *fast* like Daniel did - which means to go without eating or some other activity for a time.

But there's no magic in fasting. Its power is that it simply *reminds you* that you're in the battle *with* God and that you need to fight by praying. Whenever you feel the hunger from not eating or

whatever else you're giving up, that urge or thought is your cue to persist in your prayers.

**For, as Jesus said:**

*“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And, to everyone who knocks the door will be opened.”*

*Matthew 7:7-8 (NLT)*

Except ... except ... when you don't receive and find, and it isn't opened ... which brings us all the way back to the initial problem:

*What if you keep on asking, knocking and seeking – what if you persist and fast, fast and persist – and still nothing happens? What if victory in the battle against the forces of evil doesn't come after 21 days or 21 years or 210 years?*

In the Gospel according to Luke chapter 18, we read that ...

*One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up.*

And I would add, “even when the answer doesn't come” because that's what this story is about.

*One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show*

*that they should always pray and never give up [even when the answer doesn't come].*

*“There was a judge in a certain city,” he said, “who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’*

*“The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, ‘I don’t fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!’”*

**Then the Lord said,**

*“Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?”*

Of course not for God’s character is infinitely better than that of a dishonest judge!

*“I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly!”*

**And then He says something that seems rather odd:**

*“However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”*

*Luke 18:1-8 (NLT)*

What Jesus is implying by that question is that *continuing to pray is the equivalent of continuing in faith.*

He's saying that persevering in prayer is the evidence that even the face of persecution, loss, and all that we want to be free of now:

- We still do believe in the promises of God and the character of God.
- We still do believe that His answer of “yes” in response to our prayers for ultimate justice, and all His other promised blessings *is coming.*
- And we believe that because of what He has already done in the

resurrection of Jesus (which is the ultimate of ultimate “yes” answers). As the Apostle Paul wrote, for no matter how many promises God has made, they are all “Yes” in Christ.

Jesus isn't saying that persistence will give us everything we seek from God; instead, He is telling us that *we must not lose heart*, that what seems wrong *now* will finally and completely be made right. Have faith and demonstrate that by persisting in prayer.<sup>vi</sup>

*So, what if you keep on asking, knocking and seeking – what if you persist and fast, fast and persist – and still nothing happens?*

You keep on keeping on. You pray

anyway. You cry out to the Father anyway ... because sometimes the greatest challenge in prayer isn't the battle against the forces of evil.

Sometimes the greatest challenge is the battle within our own hearts to remain faithful (or filled with faith) in spite of waiting for the final and total fulfilment of "Thy Kingdom come and Thy will be done."

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Now, as you can see the band is in place because they're going to do a song that encourages us to do just that: to cry out to Jesus. And so, I want to invite you to use these few moments to silently bring your prayer to Jesus whatever it is.

And then when they're finished, I'll give you the final assignment for the One-Month Prayer Experiment and then we'll be done for this morning.

Here we go.

**Feature – Cry Out to Jesus**

### **Closing Comments**

**Okay, let's talk about the final assignment in our One-Month Prayer Experiment.**

**The challenge:**

- From now through May 27<sup>th</sup>, pray for at least five minutes every day.

**Final assignment (for the next 21 days):**

- Each day, begin and your conversation with God *relationally*, by expressing things like ...

- Thankfulness for His blessings, including Christ and the forgiveness you have in Him.
  - Any “laments” you may have.
  - Your love for Him
- 
- Each day, pray for at least one “big” request arising from the list of concerns you generated in previous weeks as well as any others you may need to add.
  
  - Optional: Fast from eating (or some other activity) at least part of one day per week. Use the urge to eat (or to engage in the other activity) as a reminder to pray a brief prayer about your big request.

**And then, remember that on Sunday May 28<sup>th</sup> – 21 days from today – we’ll hear stories**

**of what has happened (or not happened) during this time.**

2. Next Sunday ... a great day:

- Baptism as I've already mentioned ...
- And Mother's Day: recognition of moms and not-moms.

## Endnotes

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i See <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/angels-and-prayer> and <http://www.robertjmorgan.com/devotional/the-role-of-prayer-in-spiritual-warfare/>

ii Ezra 1-4.

iii Revelation 16:12-14

iv John Piper @<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/angels-and-prayer>

v Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker*

vi Adapted from

[https://www.rts.edu/sharedresources/documents/global/Student\\_The ses/Julian-Prayer\\_or\\_Despair.pdf](https://www.rts.edu/sharedresources/documents/global/Student_The ses/Julian-Prayer_or_Despair.pdf)