



## Why Pray?

### Six Reasons to Awaken Ourselves to A Life of Prayer

Several years ago, I was reading a book on the topic of prayer, and the author retells a scenario when he and his wife were probably in their 40's, and they were going through some immense difficulties. The twin towers were attacked. Then his wife was struggling with the effects of Crohn's disease, and finally he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Finally, his wife came to him and asked if they could pray every night. But when she came to him and made this request, she used an illustration to help make her point. She said,

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*Imagine you were diagnosed with such a lethal condition that the doctor told you that you would die within hours unless you took a particular medicine – a pill every night before going to sleep. Imagine that you were told that you could never miss it or you would die. Would you forget? Would you not get around to it some nights? No – it would be so crucial that you wouldn't forget, you would never miss. Well, if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing. I'm certainly not. We have to pray, we can't let it just slip our minds.*

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The author goes on to write, "For both of us the penny dropped; we realized the seriousness of the issue, and we admitted that anything that was truly a nonnegotiable necessity was something we could do. That was more than twelve years ago, and Kathy and I can't remember missing a single evening of praying together, at least by phone, even when we've been apart in different hemispheres."<sup>1</sup>

How do you think regarding prayer? Over this past year of 2020, with the many discouragements, struggles, disagreements, stressors, joys, encouragements, how vital was prayer to you? How vital was it to us as a church? As elders? As individuals? This point is reiterated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, C.H. Spurgeon who wrote, "**A prayer-less church member is a hindrance. He is in the body like a rotting bone or a decayed tooth. . . . Neglect of private prayer is the locust which devours the strength of the church.**" – Spurgeon <sup>2</sup> If a singular prayer-less member is the locust that devours the strength of the church, what would it mean for a church to be prayer-less?

Now, why do I start this sermon with these quotes? As a pastor at Ventura, I have a great concern that we all *together* understand our desperate need to commune with God in prayer. I was challenged a little over a month ago to get back to the basics of prayer, and I want to extend that challenge to us over the months of January and February. And as I think about our church living in an increasingly resistant culture, I wonder, "**God, are we truly depending on you or are we trusting in the things of this world – even ourselves?**" I wonder if over the last year, for many of us, our relationship with the Lord in prayer has waned. Yet, if we're resting on Christ, we're going to grow in desperate, dependent prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. New York: Dutton. 2014. pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/545540>

Therefore, this series on prayer is a call for us all to get back to the basics in our relationship with the Lord and to seek him for his wisdom and answers together.

This morning, the sermon is called *Why Pray?* And, I want to define the word “prayer” for us as we start. I think we could boil down prayer into two kinds of definitions. One is a broad definition and another a narrow one. The broad definition is “our communication to God.” This includes supplication, thanksgiving, adoration – any communication from us directed to him. A narrower definition is “asking.” In the Scriptures, prayer seems to always (or almost always) lead towards requests because prayer is a confession of our need for God. One other thing to remember is that prayer in and of itself doesn’t matter. Prayer has power because of the God addressed in prayer. Prayer apart from God is wishful thinking. It’s no more than a lucky rabbit’s foot. But prayer to God on the basis of Jesus, has great power, according to the Bible.

My intention this morning, as we start the series, is to lay out six reasons why we ought to pray. **I hope these reasons awaken within us a drive to re-engage and/or grow in prayer.** This sermon is written to that part of our beings that raises “skeptical thoughts” to God and seeks excuses rather than seeks God. But even as we see our sinful tendency to making excuses, I want us all to be astounded by the God who overcomes pride-filled, unrelenting, prayerless people. And when he does, if you’re someone who’s entrusted yourself to Jesus and he is your Lord and Savior, you’re in a process of God strengthening your dependence on him. So this morning while we see our sin, I also pray that we see a tender, gracious God who promises to grow and heal us through the means of prayer.

Now let’s get into the six reasons why we should pray.

### 1. Jesus lived, died and rose again so we could pray.

When was the last time you’ve pondered all the rights and privileges that Jesus gave you when he saved you? And if someone were to ask you what those blessings were, have you ever included *prayer* in that list? I know for me that the first time I heard someone teach that prayer was a blessing purchased by Jesus, I thought, “What? Really? Where’s that in the Bible?” That may be what you’re thinking. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 15:16: “. . . **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.**”<sup>3</sup> He chose us to bear fruit and to have answered prayers. One person by the name of Milton Vincent, who wrote the *Gospel Primer*, wrote the following: “[God]. . .permitted the brutal rending of His Son so that I might now have a way into the Holy Place through the torn flesh of Jesus.”

This is the teaching of Scripture. Hebrews 10 says, “<sup>19</sup>**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,** <sup>20</sup>**by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh . . .** <sup>22</sup>**let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. . .**”<sup>4</sup> We have been given access to God because of the crucified Lord who drained the dregs of God’s wrath and gave us a perfect standing before God. This is what it means to pray in Jesus’ name. We pray on the basis of Jesus and for Jesus’ glory. God hears us because he accepted Jesus’ sacrifice!

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jn 15:16.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Heb 10:19–20, 22.

In 1 John 5:14, the apostle writes, **“Now this is the confidence we have before Him: Whenever we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”**<sup>5</sup> Jesus died so that we could be in the presence of God and to be able to pray with confidence. Therefore, it’s no wonder that the Bible says to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Is prayer an insignificant blessing? No! We were created for communion with God. Our very beings were made for God and to know him. And prayer is vital communication and communion with God. But we, left in our sins, we could never gain that communion back, and you know what? Left to ourselves, we don’t want communion with God. Yet, there was One who came completely on God’s terms. One who depended on the Spirit his entire life, and then One who suffered the punishment we deserved. At his death, he gave to all who would trust him forgiveness of sins, but not just forgiveness of sins. He gave us a righteous standing before God. He reconciled us to God! That’s the greatest blessing of all – to know God. Now we can grow in knowing God through his communication to us (through the Bible) and through our communication with him (through prayer). So, the first and foremost reason to pray is because our Savior died to give us this precious gift. I pray you know and trust Jesus. If you don’t, call out for forgiveness right now! If you do trust Jesus, I urge you to grow in communicating with the Lord because Jesus lived, died and rose again to give you prayer!

Now, let’s move to the second reason.

## 2. Through prayer, God increases our wisdom.

James says, **“<sup>2</sup>Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. <sup>5</sup>If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God. . . .”**<sup>6</sup>

How many of you here have gone through a significant season of many trials, pains and difficulties and you felt like if someone had a way to measure the amount of wisdom in you, the device would come back and say “100% full of wisdom?” I don’t think *anyone* can respond that way. It’s interesting, isn’t it, that James could list any number of things we could be lacking in a trial, and the things he mentions that are needful are faith, steadfastness and wisdom. *If* any of you lack wisdom? Well, we all lack wisdom! And wisdom is precisely what we need. While other things may be valuable – like money or freedom or understanding; what we need most for living life is God’s wisdom.

So, what’s the answer to that need? James says “pray.” Focus on your relationship with God. You see, in the midst of trials, we want to make deals with God. We may pray, “Ok God, I’ll submit to you, but you have to give me this or that.” Or we think, “I prayed and prayed and submitted over and over again, and God still hasn’t given me this thing.” Whoa, wait a second. Why are you praying? Are you praying for a life that glorifies God, a life that says God is the greatest blessing no matter what? A life that says, “I couldn’t live this apart from the Lord?” Or are you still brokering with God?

That’s where wisdom comes in. Wisdom is the ability to see all things in light of eternity. That’s why James says “pray.” God, the Eternal One, must give us wisdom. Therefore, prayer is our entrance into the throne room of Heaven, and in prayer, we learn to confess God’s infinite greatness and goodness even when what we see around us doesn’t make sense. As we pray, God shapes our minds to align with eternity – not merely the temporal. God grants wisdom to those who would be humble before him and trust that he’s in control. And that leads me to the third reason for praying.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version*. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2009), 1 Jn 5:14.

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jas 1:2–5.

### 3. Through prayer, God increases our reliance on Him.

James says **“the testing of your faith.”** Too often in the midst of the difficulties of life, we feel that it’s a bad thing that we’re out of control. How many times have you felt “out of control” in 2020? I know for me, I can want to buck against that because I feel comfortable when I’m in control. But James encourages us to *not* buck against that. Instead, we ought to learn from this! James says that when these difficulties come, they come as God’s messengers to remind us that we never were in control to begin with. Do you realize God has never lost control in 2020? And did you realize God has had a plan to grow us in godliness in 2020 and 2021? That’s why James says that trials test our *faith* – meaning that trials test in such a way as to increase our awareness of just how much we need God. Trials are to drive us to God’s throne-room. Therefore, as a Christian is made more aware of his lack of control (sometimes very painfully so), the Christian can either try to cling to a sense of control so they’re confident in self *or* they can begin to cling even more on God. God-dependent prayer reveals we know who’s in control. Do you run to God in prayer?

You might say, “But I have to do something!” That may be true, but we all must remember that God is resolute in causing us to see that his control is most glorious! Therefore, in prayer we confess our neediness. Jesus said, “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>7</sup> Apart from Jesus, we can do *nothing*. And in prayer, we are to joyously affirm that. Our Savior who loved us and gave himself for us wants us to know him to greater degrees. He didn’t come to give us greater self-confidence and self-reliance – and to announce to the world that we can do things ourselves! He came to increase our God-confidence and God-reliance – and to point people to their need for him!

So, every time we pray, it’s not to impress God, but we pray so that our hearts will be reminded of just how absolutely and gloriously impressive, good, holy, gracious, just, kind, infinite our God is! But, of course, you could say, “I’m not that needy. I can do some things on my own.” That leads me to the fourth point:

### 4. Through prayer, God confronts our pride.

I think of King Nebuchadnezzar who, before he went completely insane, boasts in all of his work – thinking he made his kingdom what it was. Finally, over years, Nebuchadnezzar realizes his foolishness. He comes to his senses, and then confesses the greatness of God. He admits any good that exists is from God! So he says, **“I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; <sup>35</sup> all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”<sup>8</sup>**

Like Nebuchadnezzar, we must all confess that anything we have, we’ve received from the Lord. And in being called to “pray without ceasing,” we are always humbly acknowledging that God is *God* and we are not. We need to be humble, and God-focused prayer helps to keep us humble. Listen to the Apostle Peter’s words, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” <sup>6</sup> **Humble yourselves, therefore,**

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<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jn 15:5.

<sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Da 4:34–35.

**under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, <sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”<sup>9</sup>** Look carefully at these verses. Peter is talking to Christians here, and he says that laying our anxieties, our burdens, at his feet is equivalent with humility. Our prayerlessness and our lack of laying our burdens before the Lord is directly equivalent to our pride. To put it another way, to pray without ceasing means we are humbled before the Lord. To be prayerless means we still view ourselves too highly than we ought to. You see, pride loves to creep in. And yet, when we think we’re not in control, we become anxious and try to take control. But Peter says that the solution isn’t to try to figure it out all right away. No, the first thing to do, the humble thing to do is to cast that burden at the Lord’s feet. So, what if 2021 is another 2020? I genuinely pray for all of us that we turn to prayer immediately and consistently!

And we should want to do this because Peter goes on to say, “Humble yourselves because God cares for you!” The fact is that the God of the galaxies, the God of the infinitesimally small, the God over all things unseen and seen – this God wants us to know that He’s the God who cares for *you* and provides *everything* that is for your eternal good! When we realize that all we have is a gift from him our joy should increase. Our love should flow like a river from our hearts. We rebelled against God – just like Nebuchadnezzar - yet God in his great mercy loved us. Now, he listens to us. He inclines his ear to us and hears our prayers. So, don’t act like a rebel by embracing pride again. God resists the proud. He gives grace to the humble and through prayer, we confess both and draw our hearts to greater humility.

Let’s move on to the fifth point as to why we should pray:

#### 5. Through prayer, God compels our obedience.

God isn’t interested in robots. He works in his children in such a way that our desires, our wills, our affections are changed from the inside-out! And, I would say that through prayer, God works to bring about that kind of obedience.

Do you remember when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and the disciples continued to fall asleep? Jesus said to them, **“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”<sup>10</sup>** To have a spirit that truly wants and desires to follow Jesus means that you’ve experienced a transformation. These disciples want Jesus. They trust Jesus, but they have this “flesh” that still dogs them. That flesh is so weak that it could fight against them and constrain their obedience. Have you ever felt that way? We want to follow God, but we still sin. We struggle and fight against it. It’s so frustrating, angering. How do we counter the temptations?

Jesus says to “Be on alert and pray!” In other words, recognize that temptations fly all the time from within and without. We’ll never be above temptation. Sometimes we have this faulty thinking that if we’re never tempted in an area, then we’re not victorious. What a lie! Be on alert always. Ok, be aware that we’ll always face temptations. Then what? Next step. Pray! Prepare for your day in fighting against sin through prayer. Pray “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

Prayer is an amazing grace gift of God. Think about it. God reminds us, “You can’t depend on you to do this. I will do this. Pray to me, and I’ll give it.” Isn’t that immeasurably gracious?

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<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 1 Pe 5:5–7.

<sup>10</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 26:41.

Now let's move into our sixth reason to pray:

## 6. Through prayer, God grants patient zeal.

I think through the study of the Word and through prayer, I have begun to learn the tension of zeal and patience. There's a zeal in my heart for God's glory to be known, and prayer incites that zeal. Hebrews 5:7 shows us how Jesus prayed when we read, **"who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear. . . ."**<sup>11</sup> Vehement cries. In Amos 7:2, Amos cries out "O Lord God, forgive, I beseech [you]. . . ."<sup>12</sup> The Scriptures reiterate even an idea of begging and great desperation in prayer.

If you know our world, our country, our neighbors are broken – and that many are bound for Hell – you won't turn to the news or social media first. You'll turn to the Lord in prayer – to pray zealously. Those who know the heinousness of sin, the brokenness of the world around us, and how much we *need* God, will pray with zeal because we want the *same desires* as he has for his glory.

Yet, in the midst of praying zealously, some people having a "sprinting zeal" in prayer. You think one time and done. Or, you pray for a little while and say, "I've prayed that way and God hasn't answered me." As a result, people sit back and offer what I'll call "lazy" prayers. They're heartless. They don't resonate with the desires of the Lord. They are desire-less. If God hasn't answered quickly then we simply pray out of duty, maybe even expecting he won't answer. But that's not the right response. We need zeal and patience. Psalm 130:5-6 states, **"<sup>5</sup>I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; <sup>6</sup>my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning."**<sup>13</sup> A watchman waiting in the middle of the night longed for the morning. There was a zeal for morning, but he had to wait for it. He had to work through his shift. He had to stay on alert the whole time until morning came. You see, the biblical answer to what we might think are unanswered prayers is to say, "Morning's coming! I will continue to pray." The answers may not happen immediately (or even how we want them to be answered), but not one prayer is wasted at God's feet. So weep, rejoice, yearn, praise and fall before God in zealous, patient prayer. Not one prayer of dependence is thrown out.

Do you see how personal our God is? He truly wants us to see that he is our satisfaction, our hope, our life. He wants us to know his love and how he treasures us, his children. Will you recommit to purposeful, zealous, dependent prayer? What does application look like for you? Maybe instead of running to people first, you run to God. Maybe you need to think through your daily schedule to ensure you have set aside time to pray. Maybe you involve another believer to help grow together in prayer. Either way, humility means we will pray. Why be humble? Because God resists the proud. May Ventura turn to the Lord in humility and experience God's great work in and through us.

**So, why pray? Jesus died to give us the eternally precious gift of prayer, a gift that leads to other gifts of wisdom, reliance, humility, obedience and patient zeal.**

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<sup>11</sup> *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Heb 5:7.

<sup>12</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), Am 7:2.

<sup>13</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 130:5–6.