

Why Pray? Pray Anyway

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We continue this morning with our series of messages entitled “Why Pray?” Last week we looked at some of the common problems and questions we share about prayer. We wonder if prayer makes any difference. Would the things we pray for happen whether we prayed or not? We struggle with unanswered prayers—especially when we pray for healing or protection and it does not happen. Several people in the LIFE group Margaret and I attend shared about their experiences of dealing with unanswered prayer.

As we go through those experiences, we discover a new understanding of the purpose of prayer. Prayer is not so much about getting answers. It is about gaining a new perspective—God’s perspective of our situation. Prayer is about experiencing an authentic relationship with God expressing our doubts, questions and feelings (even of anger) to God. Prayer is about connecting with God. I am using as a resource for this series a book by Steve Harper entitled *Talking in the Dark*. I encourage you to get this book if you would like to deepen your experience of prayer.

The Apostle Paul said a very powerful and comforting thing about prayer. Even when we can’t pray, someone is praying for us.

Romans 8:26-27

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

What do you do when you have an unanswered prayer? God has disappointed you. He did not come through the way you hoped he would. After a few of those experiences some people quit praying—what’s the use? Others keep praying but with lower expectations and enthusiasm. Some decide they need to learn more about prayer. One disciple asked Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11:1) Now this disciple knew how to pray. He had learned all the forms of prayer in the Jewish synagogue school. When he asked this question, he had just observed Jesus praying. He heard Jesus talking with his Father in an authentic way that enabled him to connect with God. He asked Jesus to help him learn how to pray like that.

Prayer is a lifetime journey. Jesus teaches us how to pray in ways that help us get beyond looking for answers and experience an authentic relationship with God. We learn to listen to God and to yield ourselves to God in total trust.

We learn to pray like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus became aware that the religious leaders were seeking to kill him by crucifixion, he went to his Father in prayer. He asked God to “Let this cup pass from me.” He did not want to go through the agonizing pain of a crucifixion. Even more he did not want to experience the greater pain of absorbing into himself the evil of the whole world so that it could be put to death with him. Jesus asked the Father to deliver him from this evil. But he continued his prayer with these words: “nevertheless, not what I want but what you want.”

“Nevertheless” is a powerful word. “Nevertheless” means that at that moment Jesus had options. He could have gone several different directions. He could have simply walked away in the night and lost himself in the wilderness. If he walked away and quit preaching, the religious leaders would probably let him live. But he chose his path when he said “Nevertheless.” Jesus taught us a powerful lesson in prayer with this powerful word.

“Nevertheless” enables us to pray authentically. “Nevertheless” prayers take reality fully into account. They do not ignore the feelings, sidestep the questions, or gloss over the circumstances. Jesus shared honestly with his Father his desires and concerns. But he did not allow those things to have the last word. When we pray “nevertheless” prayers we affirm that God has the final word.

It has been my privilege as a pastor to talk with persons who are dealing with a terminal illness. The doctors have said: “There is nothing else we can do.” I have been with them when they cried out to God and expressed their anger: “God this is not fair.” I have been with them when they prayed for a miracle only to watch their health deteriorate each

day. On this side of “nevertheless” they have been totally honest with God about their desires and their feelings. That is authentic prayer. And I have been with them when they begin to pray “nevertheless” prayers. They never give up hope for a miracle, but they begin to accept that God may have a different plan. When they begin to genuinely pray “nevertheless not my will but Thine be done” something happens inside them. These persons bear tremendous pain and suffering with incredible grace. They release their fears about the families they will leave behind and experience a peace that passes all understanding. When I talk with them, I often begin the conversation thinking that I need to offer some words of hope and comfort. But soon I discover they are offering those words to me. I leave uplifted and encouraged by their “nevertheless” faith.

When we pray “nevertheless” prayers, we do not ignore reality or minimize our condition. Instead, we declare that we will not be defined by evil, but by God. Jesus trusted that God would have the final word no matter what he experienced. Jesus would endure the extreme agony of a cross with its physical pain and its emotional shame. He would experience the full reality of separation from his Father as he absorbed into his body the sins of the world. In every way, on Friday when Jesus was placed in a tomb it appeared that evil had won. The evil forces of this world killed the Son of God and the Father stood by and let it happen. But God had a bigger plan. In order to redeem the world, God himself had to take the consequences of our sin into himself and die in our place. But his death would not be the final word. On Easter Sunday morning, the Father had the last word. He raised Jesus to life with a resurrection body that would never die again. He defeated evil once and for all because Jesus was willing to pray “nevertheless.”

There are situations that will not change on this earth. There are diseases and physical conditions that will not be eliminated even by the most fervent intercession. Even

when miracles occur, a larger reality looms. Some persons who experience instantaneous, miraculous healing die a short time later. Some people are delivered from one problem and while they are rejoicing an even worse problem comes into their lives. We live in a fallen world and until Jesus returns and establishes a new heaven and a new earth—tragedies and death will occur in our lives. But Jesus gave us hope. Because of his resurrection we know that the devil does not have the final word. Therefore he can teach us to pray, “Nevertheless.”

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, our prayers always have the hope of heaven. Death itself is the final healing. Any other healing is only temporary. Believing in heaven is not an escape from reality. It is the place where evil no longer exists. Heaven means that God has accomplished his plan to redeem the world. In heaven God restores creation to what he intended to be—a place of harmony with him. A place where there is no more suffering and no more tears. Disease, destruction, deformity and destitution do not have the final word. God has the last word. “Nevertheless” prayers affirm that truth.

“Nevertheless” prayers can be difficult for us at times. I find comfort in our scripture reading this morning, that even before we are able to say a “nevertheless” prayer the Holy Spirit is praying it for us. Listen again to Paul’s words:

Romans 8:26-27

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

Isn’t it comforting to know the Holy Spirit is already praying for us before we begin to pray? It is his prayer that prepares us to pray “nevertheless.” As we get in touch with the Holy Spirit through our own struggling, authentic prayers we begin to release ourselves to his Spirit. We begin to pray what the Spirit is praying for us. We pray with the Spirit and in

the Spirit. And by his power we begin to pray: “Nevertheless not what I want but what you want.” Nevertheless prayers enable us to trust in God at such a deep level that we experience his love, presence and peace in ways we never knew before.

Paul learned to pray nevertheless prayers which gave him such a deep abiding trust in God he was able to say with total confidence:

Romans 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we learn to pray “nevertheless” prayers, our prayer life goes to a much deeper experience of connecting with God. Many times our prayers are contained, comfortable, and controlled. They are fairly predictable. We spend the majority of our time in prayer giving God a “To Do” list. “God here is what I want you to do for me today.” I’ve found that most prayer requests are for three things: healing from illness, safety when traveling, and success at work—perhaps to find a job or get a promotion or to make a business successful. Now there is nothing wrong with those prayer requests. However, if that is the extent of our prayer life, we are missing out on some of the greater privileges and experiences of prayer.

Under the leadership of Mary Kay McCauley and others in our prayer ministry our church has moved toward becoming a house of prayer. One day Jesus entered the Temple courtyard where he saw money changers and merchants cheating the people. He drove out the money changers and merchants saying they had converted the Temple into a market place of thieves. He reminded them that the Temple was intended to be a house of prayer. (Matthew 21:13) A house is a place where people live--where they eat, they sleep, they work, they talk. A house represents the totality of life. Jesus wants the church to be more than a place where we have a prayer room and prayer groups and prayers to begin our

meetings. He wants prayer to saturate the totality of everything our church does. Prayer is more a way of life than something we do at specific times. I have a group of folks who pray for me every week. One of the things I regularly ask them to pray for is that LakeRidge will become a House of Prayer where prayer initiates, directs and sustains all that we do. Prayer enables us to discover what God is doing in the world and where we need to join with him. Prayer enables us to go with the flow of God's Spirit. Much of the stress I experience as a pastor comes from either trying to get ahead of God or lagging behind him or thinking I have a better plan. A lot of my stress is reduced when I finally trust God and go along with the flow of His spirit rather than trying to force things to happen the way I want them to. Jesus is eager to mold us into a House of Prayer individually and together. He desires for us to live in an atmosphere of prayer. There are times we set aside for intentional conversations with God. But God desires to have ongoing conversations with us in all experiences of our lives wherever we are. He wants us to be continuously connected to him letting him guide us and empower us. He wants us to be totally honest with him about our fears, doubts and struggles in all of life. Then he wants us to continue praying until we come to the point of utter trust where we say "nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want." Is there some place in your life where you need to pray a "nevertheless" prayer this morning?