



SEVEN REASONS TO PRAY

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SOME OBVIOUS, SOME NOT SO OBVIOUS!

This article is an unapologetic attempt to motivate... ME! Yes, me. Because if anybody needs help in getting motivated to pray, it's yours truly. I mean, I know prayer is important. There's sure enough of it in the Bible, and you can find tons of books on prayer. Not only that, all the godly people I've ever met testify to the crucial nature of prayer in their lives. So I understand I should pray, but...

Well, let me be honest. Sometimes (often?) prayer is hard and even confusing for me. As Tim Downs asks, "Is it hard to pray to an unseen, infinite, omniscient being? You bet!" And, living in this world so bathed in materialism, about the only reason even Christians give me for praying is "to get answers." So when I don't get the answers I want (and sometimes not even any answers), I don't know why I should keep praying. So...

"What's that," you say? "You feel that way, too?" You think everybody feels that way? You just gave up praying three weeks ago because you didn't have any more motivation either? "Can you look over my shoulder at what I'm writing and maybe get motivated, too?" Absolutely!

Any of the rest of you out there trying not to look interested can follow along, too. The more, the merrier.

Why Pray?

Well, as I said, sometimes you get the impression that prayer is a grocery list: "Our Father, who art in heaven... Gimme, gimme, gimme! And, by the way, my name is Jimmy!" This is sort of a, "shop 'til you drop"

way of praying. But somehow I cannot see that as the prime and certainly not the most satisfying reason.

So I began to study how and why Jesus prayed. After all, He got more answers than anyone else and He always prayed for the right reasons. I was amazed! First, because He prayed all the time. The Bible says that "He would often withdraw to the wilderness and pray." Often is right. He prayed just about every chance He got. He was perfect; so it wasn't like He was praying for forgiveness of sin or anything like that. Why?

Well, that's the second reason I was amazed. The more I study, the more good motivating reasons I find to pray. I find they're basically the ones Jesus Himself had. And since, as I said earlier, I'm often flummoxed about prayer and get discouraged, these reasons almost always give me a lift -and sometimes even a jolt.

I. BUILDS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

I am first called to prayer because it is a key vehicle to building my love relationship with Jesus Christ. Hear me now this is important. Christianity is not primarily rules. It is a relationship.

Aren't you sick (I think everybody is) of "rules" Christianity? Every day somebody's got another rule for us to follow to be "good" Christians. Don't get me wrong. Certainly there are commands in God's Word and promises. Certainly Christ has standards, but we don't become Christians because we "receive standards." We become Christians because we receive Christ, who loves us, died for us, lives in us daily.



What I need, then, is to build my love-grace relationship with Him. And I, like most of us, know so little about love-grace relationships. I have to learn to allow Him to embrace me, to care for me, to point out my needs to me (and how He fills them). I need to listen to Him, and I desperately need to talk to Him.

Where and how is all this done? In prayer. In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul prays, “that you may be able to comprehend... what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...”

“Know” in this passage is the same word used for the intimate closeness of a husband and wife in sexual embrace. “Whoa -too early for that, Dan.” Well, the Bible doesn’t think so. Paul is praying that you and I will experience that kind of love with Christ -not sexual, but intimate, deep, close, unfettered. It is so deep that Paul later says it “surpasses knowledge.” Imagine -he wants us to know what is too deep ever to be known!

Where do we experience this? One place we can learn to do so is in prayer. Even Paul’s desire for us to experience this life is voiced in a prayer (Eph. 3:14). When we “get down and get honest” before God, we are on His turf in a unique way. Seldom do we get closer to Him than in prayer.

One girl from a Jewish background wrote the following: “I now know Christ is here all around me, just waiting for me to reach out, to let Him love me...” When we pray, we can pray to experience this love, to be bathed in it, to learn how to give it back, to learn how to let it seep into the dry cracks and crevices of our lives.

In fact, the longer I love, the more I think that the chief reason for the gift of prayer is that we learn to receive, experience, and return His love in genuine relationship. Prayer is one place when God can get at us (and we think prayer is for getting at Him!) and speak to and minister to us. It is for this reason first that we can learn to rush to prayer.

2. HELPS US OVERCOME TEMPTATION

Second in our list of reasons is that prayer is an important instrument in our overcoming sin and temptation. Perhaps no experience in the earthly life of Christ is more instructive on prayer than Jesus’ teaching and subsequent modeling in the twenty-

second chapter of Luke. The fact that his disciples were patently oblivious only shows us our same frailty today.

In verse 39, Luke sets the scene. Jesus and His apostles (now eleven) have left the upper room on the night before His death. They have navigated the winding path they knew well up the Mount of Olives to the olive grove called Gethsemane. The eleven are troubled and confused about all they have seen and heard so far, yet Jesus knows that the great temptations are soon to be before them -His capture, His trials, His scourging, His mockery, the lure of their denial, His Crucifixion.

In verse 40, mindful of their need for fortitude, He addresses them: “He says, “[in order] that you may not enter into temptation.” What did He mean? Simply that their antidote to yielding to the temptations that fear, discouragement, and horror would soon present them was fervent, heartfelt prayer. This would fortify their trembling faith and courage. How could He know this? Because He, too, faced His own darkness. Looming in the next few hours was the eternity of death and hell for the combined sins of humanity. He now came to the culmination of His purpose on the earth, and the terror of the pit must have clutched at this throat. Even more subtle, perhaps, were the whispers of rationalization which rose venomously from the tempter.

“Certainly they won’t appreciate what I am doing for them. They will cast it away. Many will ridicule Me and trample My Father’s salvation underfoot. How can I bear the sins of Sodom, of the butchers of babies in Bethlehem. How can I stand to be clothed in the sins of all the child molesters and mass murderers and the Adolph Hitlers of all the ages? How can I bear the devil’s glee as he turns the screws of my agony?”

“Perhaps there is another cup. Yes, perhaps I can let this one pass, return to My gracious Father from whom I have never in all eternity been separated. Yes, that possibility exists. I can go to Him now, avoid the dread cross, discuss it further, find an alternative plan...”

We are naive if we think these thoughts and these temptations to abort His mission in the eleventh hour did not occur to the man, Jesus. Far greater than the disciples’ temptation was the temptation He faced and how infinitely more cosmic in its ramifications. One sees the shadowing figure of Lucifer himself



hurling these twisted ideas at Christ.

So what did He do? He modeled exactly what He had told His struggling band: He prayed so that He could defeat (not “enter in”) temptation. We are told by Luke that His prayers were so heartfelt, His struggles so intense, that His sweat was bloody, pre-figuring the flow that would come tomorrow. He was in such agony that, in answer, an angel became visible to help Him bear up under the strain.

And bear up He did! For triumphantly, at the end of that hour, He could rise for prayer, having settled with His Father, “not My will but Thine be done.” Prayer had been the means of His victory. He returned to His men to find them... asleep! He had told them to pray. Instead, they followed the college students’ motto: “When in doubt; sack out!”

He roused them (maybe none too gently). Perhaps He dodged Peter, who grabbed his sword, looking for an ear to cut off. He confronts their tiredness, their crankiness at being awakened, and says again (verse 46), “pray that you may not enter into temptation.”

Notice that He commanded this in the beginning of this passage, then He demonstrated it in the body of this passage, and He reiterated it at the end of this passage. When you face temptation, PRAY, PRAY, PRAY! That is what will see you through. That is what He is trying to teach.

Well, how about you? How about me? Usually we pray only after we have yielded. What about seeing prayer as our first (not last) option: the fortifying of our courage and strength prior to our temptations? If we would pray more, we would yield less!

3. HELPS US DETERMINE GOD'S WILL

Third in our series of reasons to pray is the following: we pray because prayer is crucial in determining God’s will.

“Now you’re talking,” you say. “I always use prayer when I want to know God’s will. I pray about my choices, and when I have ‘peace’ about one of the options, then I go with it.”

How many times have these words been uttered? -“I did it because I had peace about it?” Yet, how askew is that from God’s Word. Prayer certainly is vital in determining His will, but not because it gives us

peace. Let me show you how faulty such thinking is (and I had it for a long time). How many of you have ever shared your faith, witnessed to another person?

Well, right before you shared your faith, which was almost certainly God’s Will, how many of you felt this warm, calm sense of ‘peace?’ Hold up your hands. Hmmm. No hands! Weren’t you rather scared, nervous. Perhaps your Adam’s Apple turned to applesauce and the butterflies in your stomach turned to helicopters! Your palms sweated. Shoot, your hair sweated. No great feeling of peace there, but you did it anyway because it was God’s will, right?

You see, you knew it was God’s will in other ways besides a subjective emotion and contrary to it. You used God’s Word, the volitional promptings of the Holy Spirit, and maybe some training you had received. Peace is often only a synonym for “comfort,” behind which people hide so they won’t have to find God’s real will. God’s real will often produced scary feelings, not warm fuzzy ones.

So wait. How does prayer help determine His will then? Jesus again gives us a demonstration in Luke’s gospel. Read the sixth chapter, the twelfth through the sixteenth verse. Here, He prays all night about what seemed at the time an insignificant issue in history: the choosing from the crowd which followed Him a special group of disciples which we now know as the Apostles.

Who could have cared what group of men an obscure rabbi in an obscure province of an obscure corner of the Roman Empire chose for leadership. No major newspaper or television station covered the story of that all-night prayer vigil. Yet, because of those prayers, through the influence of men, today (2000 years later), 1.3 billion people around the world call themselves by this “obscure” Rabbi’s name.

Obviously, He needed to know which of His several hundred followers were chosen by His Father to be Apostles. How did prayer help? It helped in the way John Wesley described. “I find,” he said, “that the chief purpose of prayer in seeking God’s will is that prayer gets my will into an unbiased state. Once my will is unprejudiced about the matter, I find God suggests reasons to my mind why I should or should not pursue a course.”

The chief purpose of prayer, then, is to get our wills unbiased! The purpose is not to give us an ethereal



sense of comfort. Thus, we pray to God about His will in some area, knowing (usually) that we are already leaning in a certain direction. We implore Him first to help our wills to move back to the center -that is, willing to do whatever is His will. Once we arrive there (and it may take some time), He shows us through our minds why one alternative is better than another and therefore is His will for us.

Thus it must have been on that night for our Savior. As He prayed, He must have had preferences for His followers. He probably had a list -at least a mental one. Perhaps Peter was already on it, but perhaps Andrew was not. Thomas certainly wouldn't have been on mine, and neither would Simon the Zealot. Maybe they weren't at the top of Jesus', either. Yet, through the work of His Father and His own yielded nature in intercession, the reasons came clear to Him why all three of these men plus nine others should be tapped.

Our searching out of God's will can be the same. We pray so that our wills (not our emotions) can be yielded to the Divine "whatever." Then II Timothy 1:7 becomes alive: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and sound judgement." May the tribe of "unprejudiced wills" and "sound judgement" increase!

Well, are you with me so far? I'm with me so far. Remember, this is for me; and, I have to say, it's helping some.

4. PRAYER ACCOMPLISHES GOD'S WORK

We come now to the fourth of our obvious (or not-so-obvious) reasons to pray. It is this: prayer is a major way we accomplish God's work in the world.

Here is a major accelerator to my motivation to pray, and it stems from one of the most unbelievable (literally) statements Jesus ever made. It is found in John 14:12-14. It would be good to turn there because you've got to see it to believe it.

We have come back to the night of the Last Supper. Judas has left to betray Jesus. His leaving allows Christ to pass on some of the most sublime of His earthly teachings to the remaining faithful. In the context, He is discussing His deity, His union with the Father, and the works of God in the world. Suddenly, He makes this statement: "Truly, truly . . . he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and

greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father."

Look at that statement. Savor it. Regard it. Peruse it. Study it. Imbibe it. If it is true!!

"He shall do." Jesus did not say, "they shall do." He did not say, "the corporate body all combined together will do." He used a singular pronoun meaning one person. "The very works that I do and greater than these" is His statement.

What works did our Lord do on earth? Oh, just a few simple ones: cleansed the lepers, healed the sick, proclaimed release to the captives, taught tens of thousands, led thousands to salvation, raised the dead, healed those born blind. Piece of cake! We might say that one Christian in a hundred thousand or a million could do those things. Perhaps a Billy Graham, a Bill Bright, one gifted in healing, a Chuck Swindoll, a James Dobson could do at least some of those works; but not me -not Joe or Betty "ordinary" Christian. And even then, how will the Grahams, Swindolls, Dobsons, and Brights do greater works than our Lord? Yet the plain fact of Jesus' statement is that the only qualifier to doing such works is "[the one] who believes in ME." How?

That brings us to verses 13 and 14. These are often misplaced in the context, yet they obviously relate directly to verse 12. "And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." And, since He knew they wouldn't get it the first time (and neither would we), He repeats it: "If you ask Me anything in My Name, I will do it."

Shout it from the housetops! Prayer is the way His greater works get done! True, most of us will not be worldwide evangelists, though a few will be. Most of us will not be gifted in healing, though some will be. Most of us will not be great preachers and teachers, though some reading this will be. But every one of us can kneel down and pray. Every one of us can touch the lost masses of earth and help snatch them from eternal darkness to eternal life. Every one of us can participate in Christ's healing power spreading both medically and miraculously across the earth. Every one of us can put up our hands and stop the forces of moral degeneracy that threatens to engulf the depth of the human spirit. Every one of us can do these things through our prayers!

Today, if I will, I can spend 15 minutes behind the



Kremlin walls with the Supreme Soviet, influencing them for God and for good. Today, I can spend 20 minutes touching the entrenched Muslim minds of the Mullah's of Saudia Arabia or the ascetic Bhuddist Monks of Nepal. Today, I can stand against pornography and rape and incest and child abuse in the far-flung towns of this country. Because, when I talk to God in my living room, or office, or church, He is the same God who reaches into families, into Nepal, into Arabia, into the Kremlin, into homes. I participate with Him, not only through my efforts and works in my geographic location, but also throughout the world in accomplishing His works through my prayers. It matters not what type of gifts, talent, or personality I have; it matters only that I take this time to cooperate with Him in my prayers. And that is all that matters for you, too. May we "get it" before much more time passes.

5. A WEAPON OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Fifth in our series of reasons to pray is that prayer is a major weapon in fighting the spiritual battle. Ephesians six, verses ten to twenty, outlines some of the armaments in the arsenal of God. We are reminded that ultimately our struggles are not against humans, but against powerful spiritual beings and forces in the "heavenly places" (the spiritual realm which directly influences the natural, material realm).

The picture here is that of a war. Life as a Christian is not a playground; it's a battlefield. While there is much beauty and love in the world, it is often bent and twisted by our Fall and Satan's machinations. Thus, the war for souls between God and Satan is fought with Christian co-combatants with Him.

We are instructed by Paul, an experienced soldier in this combat, to be appropriately clad and armed for our struggle. In this passage, he uses some of the most vivid imagery in the New Testament. Modeling a Roman Legionnaire, we put on the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, loins girded with truth, feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel, shield of faith, sword of the Spirit (the Word of God).

Now, it seems we have a complete set of armor and weaponry. And if I were writing this passage, I would say, "Now get out there and fight the battle!"

But interestingly, Paul does not say that. In fact, he waits until verse eighteen to get to the heavy artillery

of this arsenal of God -persistent prayer. Notice what he says: "With all prayer and petition pray... with all perseverance and prayer... and pray..."

In two verses, we are commanded to pray five different times. Do you think he (and God) are trying to make a point? He is attempting to seize our attention concerning prayer's power in the defeat of Satan and his minions. Parallel to this text is II Corinthians 10:3,4: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses."

The weapon of prayer softens up Satan's fortress. Hell's gates cannot prevail. It is the cannon, reducing the wall to rubble so that the troops can go through. Too often, the gospel moves slowly because the softening-up process of prayer has been neglected. When practiced, however, prayer "puts the wind at the back" of Christ's soldiers.

A few years ago, at a prestigious American University, one powerful administrator was blocking the placement of additional full-time Christian workers on campus because of his own disbelief in the gospel. The Christian students on campus resorted first to prayer. Feeling that no one had the right to keep students from hearing about Christ, they prayed that God would either change this man's heart or remove him from his position. For six months they prayed faithfully.

Suddenly, for no "apparent" reason, he was transferred to a powerless position and a replacement named. Among the first questions the replacement asked was this: "Why aren't there more Christian workers?" The workers came, and the gospel flourished. Prayer is key to fighting this spiritual battle.

6. A PREREQUISITE TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

You are probably beginning to get the message (I'm sure getting it!) that prayer might be the most multi-faceted gift of devotion which the Lord has bestowed on humanity. This sixth reason underlines that truth: prayer is the necessary pre-requisite to sweeping spiritual awakening.

We are indebted to Him for providing in two freighted verses (II Chronicles 7:13,14) a précis of all God says on this subject in the entire Word of God: "If I shut



up the heavens so there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My Name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

As I say, this is a précis, a summary of the rest of God’s teaching on the subject of spiritual awakenings or revivals -those times when God enters time and space in such obvious ways that masses of believers became stalwart and committed, and multitudes of unbelievers crowd into the Kingdom of God.

Such manifestations have occurred numerous times in Biblical and post-biblical history. Yet every time they occur, one clear progenitor has existed. Somewhere, there has always been a group, or many groups, who have given themselves to fervent, consistent, persistent prayer for the very purpose of cleansing from sin and the reviving of the Body of believers and the conversion of the lost. J. Edwin Orr once said that “every revival in history could be traced to find at its source a group of people gathered for prayer.”

Something about such group prayer breeds honesty, openness, and humility. Usually this group is the first to be struck by God’s awesome, yet gracious presence. Then revival spreads through and beyond them to the reaches of the church, community, or campus. Examples abound.

At Yale University in 1905, prayer meetings began to multiply. A faculty member was so impressed that he sent John R. Mott a letter in which he wrote: “We want you to come to Yale for a series of meetings... The Spirit of God is here with us in power... I have never known a time when there were so many inquirers.” The result of those meetings was an awakening in which one third of the Yale student body were involved in small group Bible Studies. K. S. Latourette goes on to write that the class of 1909, who were freshmen in 1905, produced more missionaries than any other class in the history of Yale.

The key? Humility, repentance, and persistence in prayer. These are what we need today to lay the foundations through which God can manifest His Person in powerful ways. As we pray, we experience change which revives us. Then we become the seeds of revival to change those around us. As the concentric circle enlarges, awakening spreads more

broadly and quickly. And all of this is the fruit of prayer. What a wonderful reason to pray -to see the resultant awakened church, campus, city, or country. May we be driven to our knees to pray for such a reality of His presence.

7. PRAYER IS VALUABLE TO GOD

We come now to the last of our seven reasons. In many ways it is the most compelling if only because it is not linked to any sort of earthly result. It is this: prayer itself is inherently valuable to God. In other words, whether we ever see any answers (and we will) and whether we ever derive any personal benefit (and we will), God views prayer standing alone with an incomprehensible value.

Two wonderful demonstrations of this are found in Hebrews 7:25 and Revelation 5:8. In the first passage the writer informs us of the occupation and passion of the Lord Jesus since His ascension: “...Since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

Think of it: “He always lives to make *Intercession*.” S.D. Gordon, amazed, put it this way in summing up the life of Christ: “Thirty years of living, thirty years of serving, one tremendous act of dying, and two thousand years of prayer. What an emphasis on prayer!” Prayer, then, is so important to the Lord that it has been perhaps the chief activity of Christ since He bodily left our planet. God obviously values it in a way we usually do not.

The second passage is equally strong. In Revelation 5, we are admitted to a rare view of heaven’s throne room. We do not have many illustrative descriptions of heaven, but this is one of the most vivid. In the tableau, we see the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, the Lamb (Christ), and God the Father. The book of the Judgement of God is being given to the Lamb, and the verse reads: “And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints [Ital. added].”

In heaven, incense is prayer. What is incense used for? It is used for fragrance, for the beauty of perfume. Two of the gifts from the Magi at Christ’s birth were incense. The thrust of this verse is, when God chooses the fragrance -the perfume, the perfect aroma of His heaven -it is the fragrance of prayer.



Consider that there were other choices He could have made. He could have used the perfume of service, or of Bible Study, or of witnessing, or of hard work, or of tithing, or of church attendance, or any one of a number of wonderful Christian activities. Yet, in His perfect wisdom He chose prayer.

Perhaps He chose it because in virtually all of the other disciplines there are so many differences among humans in gifting, strengths, energy, etc. But in prayer, we all, regardless of our differences, have equal access to Him and equal love and grace and power from Him at our disposal.

In any case, when we enter heaven for the first time and (no doubt) fall on our faces before Him, the aroma we will notice will be that of intercession. All of which makes us ask: "If God values prayer that much, how much do I value it?" Certainly, I should place it at a more central point in my life than I usually do.

There they are. Seven (of many) reasons for us to give much more thought and attention to prayer than is common among Christians. Even in this writing, I found myself pausing often to take prayer action based upon these motivations. I hope the reading affected you in a similar way.

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