

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

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THE CHURCH PRAYING



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Contents

Editor's Note

Jonathan Leeman

Page 6

WHY PRAY IN THE CHURCH

A Call for Pastors to Pray for their People

Pastors, here are six biblical truths that I hope will jolt us out of our prayerless slumber.

By Ryan Fullerton

Page 7

Praying Together: An Invisible, Yet Vital Work

Corporate prayer isn't much to look at. But it's one of the most important things a church does.

By Megan Hill

Page 12

Corporate Prayer Is More Than Your Personal Quiet Time

We must push against the toxic effects of a privatized Christianity because we understand what it means to pray together as a church.

By Zach Schlegel

Page 14

The Holy Spirit, Prayer, and Preaching

When we genuinely embrace the conviction of our need for the Spirit, we give ourselves to the work of prayer *and* the work of preaching.

By David Helm

Page 18

WHAT TO PRAY IN THE CHURCH

Praying the "Big Four" Corporately

Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. How should we pray on Sunday morning?

By John Onwuchekwa

Page 21

Praying in Elders' Meetings

Elders so often deal with difficult cases, so shouldn't we pray for wisdom?

By Greg Spraul

Page 24

The Privilege and Power of a Praying Pastor's Wife

We might say we believe prayer is important, but are we praying regularly, specifically, and expectantly?

By Erin Wheeler

Page 27

Praying in Discipling Relationships among Sisters

When we disciple others, we have the privilege of helping them follow Jesus. Prayer is a critical tool in doing that.

By Carrie Russell

Page 30

Praying as a Church for the World and Your City

If God rules over kingdoms, then kingdoms are our concern, and we should discipline ourselves to pray both for the world in general and our cities in particular.

By Phil Ryken

Page 35

HOW TO PRAY IN THE CHURCH

Looking to the Past for Lessons about Prayer

It's hard to justify the lack of congregational prayer in many of today's churches, its relegation to an obligatory sidelight.

By Thomas S. Kidd

Page 39

Learning to Pray by Listening in Church

My every prayer of thanksgiving should properly begin with gratitude to those who took me to church as a child and who, when I was long grown, invited me back.

By Claudia Anderson

Page 42

Pastor's Forum: Stories of Answered Prayer

A few brief stories of how God has answered church-wide prayers.

By Various Authors

Page 44

4 Reasons You Should Add a Regular Prayer Service to Your Church Calendar

If you could add one thing to your church calendar, what would it be? Have you considered adding a regular prayer service?

By Brad Wheeler

Page 47

Looking to the New Testament for Models of Corporate Prayer

There is evidence in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit wills to use prayer meetings to pour out his power again and again on local churches.

By Andy Davis

Page 50

How to Keep Your Spontaneous Prayers from Sounding Aimless and Shallow

Praying without preparation should be as natural to us as sharing the gospel with someone. It's simply what we do as Christians.

By Brian Davis

Page 53

How to Keep Your Scripted Prayers from Sounding Stiff and Robotic

Watching your tone, pacing, and pauses will keep your scripted prayers from sounding robotic and stiff.

By Dave Comeau

Page 56

Learning How to Pray Fervently from Benjamin Francis

Looking to an 18th-century pastor for wisdom on what to pray for, and how to pray.

By Michael Haykin

Page 59

AUDIO

The Shocking, Abysmal, and Embarrassing Failure of Churches to Pray

Prayerlessness is a problem in so many churches. What can we do about it? Listen to the audio [here](#).

With Mark Dever & Jonathan Leeman



Jonathan Leeman

Editor's Note

Abraham prayed. Moses prayed. David prayed. The prophets prayed. The apostles prayed. Jesus himself prayed.

But do our churches pray when they gather together?

My own experience suggests, not much. There might be a few cursory upward glances through the course of a church service. But there are almost no studied, careful, extended times of prayer--little to no adoration, confession, thanksgiving, or supplication. And that lack of praying, when you think about it, is embarrassing. Do we actually think that we can change the leopard spots, or bring the dead to life? Any thing that a church does that will be eternally worthwhile must be done by the Lord, which is to say, through prayer.

Our primary hope for this Journal is that it would encourage churches to pray more together, and offer a few pointers on how. Start with Ryan Fullerton and Megan Hill's pieces. They should make you want to read the rest!

Blessings,

—Jonathan Leeman



By Ryan Fullerton

A Call for Pastors to Pray for their People

If you've been called by God to be a pastor, then I'm sure you desire to pray for your people. Sadly, desire is never enough.

When our Lord asked his faithful inner circle of disciples "to remain here, and watch with me," I'm sure they had a desire to faithfully watch and pray with the One they loved. Unfortunately, that desire was not enough. Instead, they became memorable illustrations of a painful truth every pastor has experienced when it comes to prayer: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). How many times have you made a fresh resolve to pray for your people only to find yourself fast asleep because your "eyes were heavy" (Matt. 26:43)?

The goal of this article is to fight back against our tired eyes with the prayer-invigorating truths of God's Word. I'm hoping these meditations will cause your soul to rise up with the apostolic cry, "We will devote ourselves to prayer" (Acts 6:4a).

To that end, I offer six biblical truths that I hope will jolt us out of our prayerless slumber.

1. NOT PRAYING FOR YOUR PEOPLE IS A SIN.

Prayerlessness is sin. We need to be honest about this. A pastor who fails to pray for his people is as unbiblical as a pastor who refuses to preach God's Word. One of the sweetest realities of being a Christian is that we're now "slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18). Despite "desires of the flesh" pulling us towards sin (Gal. 5:16), believers still have an unceasing desire to do what is right. Because God has written his law on our minds and in our hearts (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10), we therefore desire to love righteousness and hate wickedness (Psalm 45:7; Heb. 1:9). The Spirit never permits Christians to tolerate sin in their lives. Like the congregants they serve, pastors can never be happy tolerating prayerlessness in their lives because prayerlessness is sin.

The prophet Samuel made this abundantly clear when he promised the people of Israel that he'd pray for them saying, "far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:23). Samuel recognized that a failure to pray for God's people was a sin against God. Samuel was a leader among God's people. How could he claim to care for them when he didn't bring their needs before Jehovah-Jireh, the One who alone could care for those needs? And how could Samuel claim to lead God's people if he didn't lead them to seek the Lord in prayer? To leave God's people un-prayed for is to leave them uncared for, unprovided for, and unled, "like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). As pastors, we're called to flee sin and to pursue righteousness. We must learn to flee the sin of prayerlessness and to put on the righteous and wonderful habit of praying for our people.

2. PRAYING FOR YOUR PEOPLE GLORIFIES GOD.

One of my favorite verses on prayer is Psalm 50:15: "And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

Every day of trouble is a day we have the opportunity and privilege of glorifying God. In comforting the sick, discipling new converts, and counseling difficult situations, we can sometimes feel like we're being distracted from our true calling, but this is a mistake.

Each and every trouble that comes our way is an opportunity to honor God as we call upon him for help—and he does! When he answers our prayers and works in the lives of the people we're praying for, he gets the glory. When he comforts the sick or fixes the logistical issues we've been having, he gets the glory because he did the work.

We should follow the advice of John Newton (1725–1807) in one of his hymns:

Come, my soul, thy suit prepare:
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He himself has bid thee pray,
Therefore will not say thee nay;
Therefore will not say thee nay.

Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring;
For his grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much;
None can ever ask too much.

When we ask the Lord to work in the midst of our troubles, we give him the glory he deserves.

3. WE ARE CALLED TO IMITATE LEADERS WHO PRAY FOR THEIR PEOPLE.

Hebrews 13:7 tells us to think about our church leaders: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." If you survey great leaders of the Christian church, one thing they have in common is they were committed to prayer.

We see this in the life of the Apostle Paul who told the Colossians that he and his partners in the ministry hadn't "ceased to pray for" them since the day they heard about them (Col. 1:9).

What an example of perseverance! Non-stop prayer since the first day he knew about the Colossian sheep. Consider that, brothers, and imitate this way of life. Consider also the example of Epaphras, "who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus," and whom Paul tells us was "always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (Col. 4:12). Remember the example of godly men like Paul and Epaphras, men of prayer.

4. PRAYING FOR YOUR PEOPLE REFLECTS THE PRIORITY OF NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was an answer to prayer. The earliest Christian leaders, along with just over a 100 followers of Christ, were praying and waiting when God suddenly moved in power (Acts 1–2). The earliest Christians devoted themselves to "the prayers" (Acts 2:42), and as the church grew and the demands of leadership increased, church leaders realized they needed to reset their priorities (Acts 6). The neglect of some of the widows in the church had helped them realize they couldn't do everything.

But what *should* be their focus? Should they focus on benevolence or administration? These were good and spiritual options (Rom. 12:6–8), but the leaders of the early church knew something was better. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit they proclaimed,

It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:2–4)

Did you notice what made the apostles' list of what to they had to do? The study and teaching of Word and prayer. The corporate church couldn't leave the widows to starve, of course. But the leaders realized they would lose everything if they gave up on prayer. All the generosity required to care for the widows would have dried up if the leaders hadn't continued to dip their buckets into the well of God's mercy by praying for God's people. If we want to have New Testament ministries, then we must understand and practice New Testament prayer.

5. PRAYING FOR GOD'S PEOPLE WILL LEAD THEM TO CHANGE.

As pastors, we long to see our people grow in Christ-likeness, We prepare sermons because we believe in the life-changing power of the Bible. We set an example for the flock because we know people follow their leaders.

But do we pray? To be clear, we need counseling, preaching, and training opportunities. But all of these are useless without the power of God unleashed through prayer. The Apostle Paul saw prayer as a primary means of promoting the sanctification of God's people. This is why he prayed,

Asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit

in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience. (Col. 1:9–11)

Knowledge, wisdom, understanding, life change, fruit-bearing, strength, power, endurance, and patience—what more could you ask for! For the Apostle Paul, all of these came to God’s people by prayer. And again, in the book of Philippians, Paul prays,

That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9–11)

Love, knowledge, depth of insight, discernment, purity, blamelessness, the fruit of righteousness—to the praise and glory of God. Again, all of these blessings came through prayer. Do the congregations we serve manifest these characteristics? Perhaps they don’t because we “do not ask” (James 4:2). Oh Lord, move us to pray!

6. PRAYER IS HOW ORDINARY MEN DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS FOR GOD.

For years, the elders at my church have sought to be obedient to God’s call to pray for the sick in accordance with James 5:14. Each time we gather with one of God’s suffering saints to ask the Lord to heal them, I’m encouraged by a single verse in the book of James. James reminds us, “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years” (James 5:17). I’ve always felt that it’s a tender mercy of God to place this verse near the end of chapter 5.

Think about this. James has just told the sick to call the church elders to pray over a sick person in the hope they’ll be healed. He seems to think healing won’t come once in a blue moon, that it is something we should expect God to do in the ordinary life of the church. He writes, “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.” What a promise! The elders are asking God to do a miracle. James knows how the average pastor is going to think: “Me? I’m just an ordinary man!” James anticipates this objection by concluding the Elijah story: “Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (James 5:17).

James is saying, “Look, elders, you’re just like Elijah, the one God used to change the weather patterns for three and a half years. Surely God can use an average man like you to do extraordinary things.” What an encouragement! We don’t need to be extraordinary for God to do extraordinary things through our ministry. Instead, we should fully and joyfully embrace our ordinariness and fling ourselves onto the extraordinary promises of God.

Brothers, I hope these six reasons will shape your conscience and move your heart toward deeper passion and the resolve to pray. Give yourself to prayer for your people. Why not ask God to direct you to some fresh resolves for prayer right now? Let the fruit of obedience flow out of a mind that is transformed by God’s Word (Rom 12:1-2). Prayer gives glory to God, follows the example of great men of the past, reflects the priority of the early Church, changes our people, and is used by God to allow ordinary men to do extraordinary things. May God help us to pray!

* * * * *

Editor's note: This article is an adapted excerpt from [Pray for the Flock: Ministering God's Grace through Intercession](#) (Zondervan, 2015).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ryan Fullerton is the senior pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. You can find him on Twitter at [@RyanFullerton](#).



By Megan Hill

Praying Together: An Invisible, Yet Vital Work

I love tasks with visible results. Show me a smudged bathroom mirror, a desk piled with papers, or a weed-choked flower bed, and I'll get right to work. With 10 minutes' effort, I can turn grime into gleam and chaos into calm. It's a great feeling.

The chores I *don't* love are the recurring and nearly-invisible ones. Cooking a dinner that my three sons will gobble down without comment so they can get back to shooting hoops? Not so much. Calling the doctor's office for the fourth time this week to untangle our Gordian health insurance? No thanks.

WE LIKE THE VISIBLE

Clicking on the "Ministries" tab of many church websites reveals that we often have a similar bias when it comes to our corporate life. We highlight our discipleship groups, crisis counseling, community outreach, student ministries, Bible studies, and congregational care. Our photos show people singing and playing instruments, people holding coffee cups and open Bibles, people maneuvering wheelbarrows and chainsaws. As a church, we like what's *visible*.

Perhaps for that reason, praying together rarely headlines our calendar of events. Corporate prayer—whether in a worship service or a week-day gathering—isn't much to look at. We show up. We bow our heads. We ask God for daily needs and for gospel success. Then, we do it again. Week after week, year after year, the same people bring the same concerns in the same way to the same God. It doesn't always produce obvious results.

But it's one of the most important things the church does.

PRAYING FOR THRIVING

To stoke my enthusiasm for those mundane items on my to-do list, I have to remind myself that they are, in fact, valuable. If my children do not eat, they will not thrive. If I do not make repeated phone calls, I will

have to pay an inflated bill. Similarly, the church needs to remind herself that the difficult, invisible, and counter-cultural task of corporate prayer is the work that upholds everything else we do. If we do not pray, we will not thrive.

What's more, gathering for prayer affirms three essential things we're otherwise apt to forget about the church: we're entirely dependent on our God, we need every member of the body, and we have a spiritual mission.

First, the praying church is a church who admits her dependence on God.

In our other activities, we can be tempted to think success depends on us. If we host enough youth retreats, sing our hymns heartily enough, or cut enough of our neighbor's grass, then our church will surely grow. If we invite enough people, train enough people, mobilize enough people, then we'll surely see results in our community. These things may be good. But coming together to pray reminds us the flourishing of Christ's church does not depend ultimately on us. In prayer, we humbly extend what Thomas Manton called "the empty hand of the soul. . .[which] looketh for all from God."

We take as our example the members of the early church who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 4:42). They prayed together when they ate (Acts 2:46), and when they were fasting (Acts 13:2–3). They prayed together when they were threatened with persecution (Acts 4:23–31), and when they were appointing new elders (Acts 14:23). They prayed together in formal temple worship services (Acts 3:1), and at riverside prayer meetings (Acts 16:13, 16).

Those first Christians faced an enormous workload: gospel-proclaiming, disciple-making, church-planting, and widow-feeding. By prioritizing prayer together, they admitted their ultimate weakness and found their unfailing help in God.

Second, the praying church affirms the value of every member of the body.

Sadly, we sometimes act as if the church's MVPs are the people whose contributions are the most noticeable. Program organizers and project directors sometimes seem more important than elderly widows or children with disabilities. But in corporate prayer, there are no celebrities. In corporate prayer, we welcome the praises of children that shut the mouth of Satan (Psalm 8:2), and we honor the hard work of one member who prays for the others (Col. 4:12–13). We gather for prayer in thundering consummation of Isaiah's long-ago prophecy: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is. 56:7). We gather to add our prayers to those of all the saints in the great bowls before the heavenly throne (Rev. 5:8).

Go to any church prayer meeting on any Wednesday night and you'll find a motley group of people. There—male and female, rich and poor, old and young—all affirm their common identity (Gal. 3:28) and commune with their God. The former idolater, the former homosexual, the former thief, the former reviler (1 Cor. 6:9–11)—all who have been washed in the blood—together approach God's throne with boldness (Heb. 4:6, 10:19). The weaker and the stronger, the less honorable and the more honorable, the unpresentable and the more presentable (1 Cor. 12:22–26) help one another through prayer. None are excluded, none are overlooked, and none are deemed unnecessary.

Finally, the praying church refocuses on her central, spiritual mission.

There's a reason praying together doesn't look like much, for why we do it over and over even though we can't quite quantify the results. There's a reason we practice it with closed eyes and bowed heads.

The reason is simple: prayer is spiritual. It's the church's spiritual weapon in a spiritual war (Eph. 6:10–20). It's a spiritual tool that aids our spiritual task (2 Cor. 1:11), and it's our spiritual appeal for the Spirit himself (Luke 11:13).

A church's life and ministry doesn't exist merely at the visible level of flesh and blood, buildings and classes, events and committee meetings. The church's greatest business takes place in unseen places—and so we pray.

We pray together that the name of God would be successfully proclaimed in the world (John 17:23–26), that gospel laborers would be sent out (Matt. 9:38), that people would be saved and added to the church (Acts 2:47), that his saints would be unified (Ps. 133). We pray together that God would build his church and defeat Satan's kingdom (Matt. 16:18), set members in local churches according to his purposes (1 Cor. 12:18), give his people wisdom (Matt. 21:15, James 1:5), ensure the security of his saints (John 6:37), and ultimately bring us to live together with him (John 14:3).

Though our praying together may at times seem fruitless and insignificant, the Bible assures us the results will one day be made visible. In Revelation 8, John pulls back the curtain of heaven and we see our collected prayers mingled with the fire of God; they are thrown down on the earth with the most spectacular results: “and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (Rev. 8:5).

Brothers and sisters, let us pray together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Megan Hill is a pastor's wife and a pastor's daughter who has spent her life praying with others. She serves on the editorial board for Christianity Today and is a regular contributor to Hermeneutics and The Gospel Coalition. Her new book is *Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in Our Homes, Communities, and Churches* (Crossway, 2016).



By Zach Schlegel

Corporate Prayer Is More than Your Personal Quiet Time

Prayer is personal. Jesus tells us to “shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt. 6:6). But prayer is also corporate. The Psalms, for example, are the hymnal and prayer guide for God’s gathered people. So how should we think about corporate prayer, and why does it matter?

I recently talked with a friend who stopped coming to church because it wasn’t holding his attention. “I don’t get anything out of it, so why come? *This*,” he said pointing to the great outdoors, “is my church!”

My friend would say his Christianity is exclusively about him and Jesus. But when that’s the case, at best you have an anemic Christianity. At worst, can you be sure it’s Christianity?

The West’s tendency to idolize individuality leads theologian David Wells to lament,

We have come to believe that our top priority should be that we seek our own authenticity before all else. . . . Where these assumptions have intruded upon the Church, our spirituality has become extremely privatized, highly individualistic, inimical to commitments, and quite ethically indifferent. Because this is so, we lose our appetite for God, our taste for his Word, and our sense of dependence on Christ. Our God has become too small and is now often lost amidst our inner preoccupations.^[1]

If we’re to face the big problems of life, we need a big God. How then do we regain a vision of his greatness? One place to begin is by remembering how, as Christians, we’re all part of a family—members of the same body: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12).

So, yes, we are individuals, but in Christ, we are *more* than that; we’re one!

ACTIVE, NOT PASSIVE

To catch a baseball, you need each part of your body to do its part. If your arm doesn't show up, you may end up with a black eye.

In the same way, if the church is a body, each part must be active (Eph. 4:16). When the congregation listens to a sermon, they not being entertained, they're being equipped (Eph. 4:12; 1 Thess. 5:21, Acts 17:11). When the congregation sings, they're not just expressing themselves, they're singing to each other (Eph. 5:19). When the plate is passed, they don't just give, they give to sustain a gospel ministry that serves the whole as well as other churches (1 Cor. 9:14; 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:7). What we do as a church, we do *collectively*.

So it is when a church prays. It prays collectively. When someone leads the congregation in prayer, we don't just watch, we pray *with* them. Corporate prayer is not just 300 people having their own quiet time; it's 300 people praying *together*.

GETTING PRACTICAL

Two suggestions to help our church families in this:

First, encourage the individual praying to use the pronoun *we* instead of *I*. He is not doing spiritual show-and-tell; he is praying on behalf of the church. He is approaching God to make requests, confess sin, or give thanks on behalf of the entire family.

Second, encourage the congregation to say "amen" at the end of the prayer. In Paul's instructions for corporate worship, he asks, "How can anyone in the position of an outsider say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?" (1 Cor. 14:16b). To say "amen" is more than a formality. It is to say, "I agree with what was just prayed—that's my prayer, too." And if you don't agree, don't say amen!

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

John Stott once wrote,

I remember some years ago visiting a church incognito. I sat in the back row. . . . When we came to the pastoral prayer, it was led by a lay brother, because the pastor was on holiday. So he prayed that the pastor might have a good holiday. Well, that's fine. Pastors should have good holidays. Second, he prayed for a lady member of the church who was about to give birth to a child that she might have a safe delivery, which is fine. Third, he prayed for another lady who was sick, and then it was over. That's all there was. It took 20 seconds. I said to myself, it's a village church with a village God. They have no interest in the world outside. There was no thinking about the poor, the oppressed, the refugees, the places of violence, world evangelization.[2]

Those who lead the church in prayer are praying to God *and* teaching the congregation how to pray, for better or worse.

Pastor, what do your prayers teach your congregation about God? Is he a mere village God? Or is the the God of Scripture that leaves us in awe and encouraged at the same time? Those who lead in prayer should think carefully about their manner, topics, and content.

In your *manner*, do you reflect an appropriate awe of God, while at the same time resting in bold confidence? Are your prayers heartfelt and warm, or cold and mechanical? Are they flowery and stylish or in the vernacular of your private prayers? One of the ways we learn best to pray is by praying with others.

What about the *topics* you pray for? In other words, how do you know *what categories* to pray about? The prayers in the Bible instruct us here. Consider the topics set out in the Lord's Prayer as an example: when we pray, we ought to pray for God's name to be honored (Hallowed be your name), God's rule in our lives and those around us (your kingdom come), the grace to trust God (your will be done), our needs (give us this day our daily bread), and pardon from sin (forgive us our debts...). Two great books on praying the categories of Scripture are D. A. Carson's *Praying with Paul*, and Matthew Henry's *A Method for Prayer*. Letting Scripture set the topics pushes us out of our prayer ruts. If we have a big God; let's pray big prayers.

Finally, the *content* of our prayers. Not only should Scripture set the agenda for the topics we pray about (authorities, from 1 Tim. 2:2), it should also shape what we pray for on concerning those topics (e.g. wisdom, justice, humility – Ja. 1:5, Ps. 72:2, Mk. 10:45). When you pray about an injustice that affects the members in your church, does your public prayer model *how* to pray about the injustice? Whether there's reason to celebrate or mourn, do your prayers teach your people to pray scripturally?

We must push against the toxic effects of a privatized Christianity because we understand what it means to pray together as a church. In doing so, we find a God not whom we've domesticated, but who makes us tremble in awe and pray all the more because he both commands us to pray and is graciously willing to hear.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] David Wells

[2] John Stott (Bill Turpie, ed., *Ten Great Preachers*, p. 117).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Zach Schlegel is the senior pastor of First Baptist Church Upper Marlboro in Upper Marlboro, Maryland.



By David Helm

The Holy Spirit, Prayer, and Preaching

I have a growing conviction, and it is this: The great need of the church today is for a fresh and long-lasting work of the Holy Spirit. This conviction, for me at least, is not simply about the church's need for the Holy Spirit to come down and revive or empower us. Rather, this conviction is related to our need for him to reveal the reign of Jesus Christ both to others and for us.

If, like me, this conviction is surfacing in your heart and mind with renewed energy and force, it might be good to ask: "How will we know when the conviction has truly taken up residence within us?" That is, "What proves that we genuinely embrace it?"

A COMMITMENT TO PRAYER

Recently, I've been mulling over these kinds of questions, and think at least two signs would be observable.

First, this conviction is embraced when a commitment to prayer is present; the praying person "gets it." In fact, I'm tempted to say that only those who regularly go before God in prayer are those who really embrace the conviction. For by their prayers, they demonstrate a belief that God alone, in and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, is able to accomplish the work of regeneration. If we're a non-praying people, it indicates we still think we can get the job done.

Now, if I'm right, that is, if prayer is a manifest evidence of our conviction, then those who desire God to do a fresh gospel work in our day will be people who pray.

Interestingly, at decisive points in Luke's Gospel, this dynamic connection is made. At least four times people recognize Jesus for who he is in close proximity to someone praying:

- Right before Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus prays alone. (Luke 9:18–20)

- Peter, John, and James go up on a mountain to pray, and then the voice of God comes down from heaven to reveal not only who Jesus is, but what his followers are to do in light of this knowledge. (9:28–36)
- At his baptism, Jesus is praying when the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends, and a voice came from heaven affirms Jesus as his Son. (Luke 3:21-22)
- Aged saints, Simeon and Anna, recognize Jesus for who he is through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and in the ordinary context of offering regular prayers.

These four vignettes are important. And they are given to us, I believe, by design. They teach us that when people come to Christ and begin to follow him, they do so through the fresh and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit—and that, through prayer.

When we genuinely embrace the conviction of our need for the Spirit, we give ourselves to the work of prayer.

A COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL EXPOSITION

Second, when the conviction for a fresh and long-lasting ministry of the Holy Spirit is embraced, prayer isn't the only thing present. A commitment to biblical exposition emerges, too.

As the church recovers a sense of our great need, people and preachers alike will hunger for a simple and raw exposure to the proclamation of God's Word. Put another way, the one in prayer is the same one who will give himself to the biblical text, and this by necessity.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PREACHING WORK TOGETHER

Now I'm aware, for many readers anyway, that the relationship between our conviction on the Holy Spirit and preaching is not readily understood. After all, many of us have been led—mistakenly so—to believe we must choose between a commitment to the Holy Spirit or a commitment to the Word of God. One can seek “street cred” or “spiritual maturity,” but not both.

These same folks would have us believe that one attends a “Spirit-led church” or a “Word-centered church,” but one cannot attend both. This conventional wisdom has been ingrained in us. But it is a false notion to think one has to select between relevance in our neighborhoods, or relevance to those who already believe.

To be blunt, I am weary of it all. I am tired of those who frame the discussion along these lines, as though the Spirit and the Word were at odds with one another. The dichotomy is a false one—and it's about time we learn how to put it to rest.

What I would argue instead is that the person who recognizes the church's need for a fresh and long-lasting ministry of the Spirit will be the same one who devotes himself not only to prayer, but to biblical exposition. This is because the ministry of the Holy Spirit has always been dynamically related to the ministry of the Word.

LOOKING TO SCRIPTURE AS OUR EXAMPLE

One text, though many could have been selected, is sufficient to illustrate the point. Look at Hebrews 3, particularly verse 7, which begins this way: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says . . .”

Two wonderful surprises exist in these five words. First, notice, the writer refers to the authorship of the *Holy Spirit* when he quotes Psalm 95. This is striking, and we are meant to take notice. He didn’t say, “As the Bible says,” or, “As the Psalmist says,” or even, “As the Scriptures say.” Rather, he writes, “As the Holy Spirit says.”

The significance of this is important: If you want to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, you'll find it dynamically related to biblical texts. That is, the Holy Spirit is already present as the author, in words long ago set down in Scripture. I think it was John Piper who tweeted something like, “If you want to hear God speak to you today, go in your room, shut the door, and read the Bible out loud.” I concur. The Word of God is the voice of the Spirit. Therefore, our conviction that the great need of the church is for a fresh and long-lasting work of the Holy Spirit means, out of necessity, that an equal commitment is made to biblical exposition.

The second surprise in Hebrews 3:7 is one of grammar: the verb is in the present tense! It reads, “As the Holy Spirit says. . .” The significance of this shouldn’t be missed. Psalm 95, originally given to an ancient people who lived in a very different time, is said to be God’s present and living Word for those of a much later generation—and the same is true for us today. Hebrews 3:7 establishes an ongoing and dynamic relationship between the present-day ministry of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God expounded.

CONCLUSION

And there you have it. A conviction for a renewed work of the Holy Spirit is needed, and we’ll know that conviction is settling into our bones and marrow when the attending commitments of prayer and preaching are also present.

In recent days, this conviction has been seeping into my own soul with fresh force and vitality. I know this to be authentic because prayer and preaching are increasingly having practical effects in my life. And I want the same to be true for you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

David Helm is one of the pastors of Holy Trinity Church in Chicago and Chairman of the Charles Simeon Trust.



By John Onwuchekwa

Praying the “Big Four” Corporately

We’ve all been a part of churches where prayer is present but neither purposeful nor potent. Unfortunately, prayer in church usually feels like prayer before a meal—it’s obligatory and everyone respects your decision to do it, but no one really gets much out of it. It gets reduced to the best tool to transition from one activity to the next. Let’s have everyone close their eyes and bow their heads, so that transitioning the praise team on and off the stage isn’t as awkward.

Prayer has become the opening act to the headliner—the Sunday sermon. Yet nineteenth-century pastor E. M. Bounds reminds us, “Talking to men for God is a great thing, but talking to God for men is greater still.”

With that in mind, prayer is a big deal for us at Cornerstone, the church I pastor. We don’t want our members and visitors to only hear from God through songs and sermons delivered from the stage. If that were the case, it’d be easy for people to feel like spectators, and that’s not the goal in corporate worship. The goal is services that are both personal and participatory. We want those in attendance to have the opportunity to engage with God relationally, and we see prayer as a critical part of accomplishing that goal.

Everyone gets that we *should* pray at church. But *how* you pray makes all the difference, which is why we use corporate prayer as one way to teach our church how to engage with God.

Through this discipline, there are three things we hope take place. First, we want our prayers to address misconceptions; second, we want to pray for things many of us neglect, like praying for government authorities; and third, we want to show that substantial prayer doesn’t have to take a substantial amount of time. A lot can be accomplished in five minutes.

In a nutshell, we’ve learned not to assume that people know how to pray, which is why we specifically include the “Big Four” when we gather together.

ADORATION

Adoration sets the foundation for our time with God. We want to establish in hearts and minds that it is an absolute *honor* to speak with God. Most of us are so familiar with prayer that we approach God flippantly. From the outset of our service, we want to nip that in the bud.

Instead, we want to be reminded of God's majestic character—who he is and what he's done in Christ for the undeserving. Because of Jesus' great sacrifice, we can boldly approach God. But prayers of adoration also reminded us that we must come to him humbly.

CONFESSION

If we're doing adoration right, then confession becomes a reflex of the soul, the logical next step. As we reflect on God's holiness, our sinfulness becomes apparent, and so we are led into confession.

It's our hope that as we hear a member of our church family confess sin, we will think to ourselves, "Me too." We often minimize sin in our lives, but as we hear others confess, we're encouraged to search our hearts and uncover sins we'd overlooked. This doesn't lead us to despair, but to dependence and joy because in these moments we're especially reminded of God's faithfulness and goodness (1 John 1:9).

Confession done correctly elicits worship. However, because it challenges us to explore the darkness of our lives, we too often forsake it and miss out on experiencing the joy God provides. To be sure, any prayer of confession should be serious and remorseful, but the time should always end in rejoicing, like David in Psalm 32:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

THANKSGIVING

We all recognize God's omnipotence. But if we're not careful, this recognition can undermine our desire to worship God with our heartfelt thanksgiving.

There's a lot of stuff in this world that's broken, stuff we want God to fix. Nonetheless, as Christians we know gratitude is often the best antidote to grumbling. In our Sunday gatherings, using a specific time to thank God for who he is and what he does is vital. After all, a broken and downtrodden spirit can be a great obstacle to hearing God's gracious words to us (Exodus 6:9). So, in our prayers of thanksgiving, we want to remind one another to be grateful—and sometimes we need someone else to point us in that direction. In short, we desire to be aware of the ills of the world, yet not blinded to God's goodness—that we'd be, as Paul says, appropriately sorrowful yet always rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10).

SUPPLICATION

While church members lead us in prayers of adoration, confession, and thanksgiving, as pastors, we've decided to take the lead in our prayers of supplication. We want to broaden the horizon of what our congregation and community believe they can ask of God.

People are generally pretty narrow in how they engage with God. When they think of prayer, they usually think of just asking God for things. We hope to address that in the ways we use the aforementioned prayers.

Similarly, I've found people tend to be pretty narrow even in the things they ask of God. We want to communicate clearly that it's okay to ask God for a sick person's healing, it's okay to pray the same prayer, and it's okay to ask God for things without phrases like "if it's in your will,." Of course, following Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, we desire God's will to be done above all else.

But sadly, many of us doubt God's ability and desire to do great things in *our* lives. As a church, we want to put the greatness of Jesus on display by asking for big things in his name! The beauty in this is that sometimes God answers "NO"—and so we get to grow together as a family, trusting God along the way. On the other hand, sometimes God goes above and beyond what we could ask or imagine; he answers "YES"—and so our faith is strengthened.

As a church, we want worship to be congregational, not privatized; we want women and men to lead in our worship in ways the Bible advocates, and we want to showcase a variety of God's people speaking to God in various ways.

All of this is made possible because corporate prayer is a key aspect of our Sunday gathering. Our community and even visitors can see themselves in the person that prays while being reminded that significant prayer can happen in various forms in a short period of time. And because we include elements of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication in our gathering, we have an opportunity to show the emotional breadth that should be a part of a relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

When you're speaking to a waiter at a restaurant, you simply present requests. If you're in the presence of someone you admire, you primarily heap compliments on them. Both responses speak to a shallow relationship. But God wants a deep relationship with his people—and the deeper the relationship, the more varied the communication.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Onwuchekwa is the lead pastor of Cornerstone Church in Atlanta, Georgia. You can find him on Twitter at [@JawnO](https://twitter.com/JawnO).



By Greg Spraul

Praying in Elders' Meetings

Widows were being neglected. That is a big problem, big enough for the apostles to encourage the church to find seven men to address the matter. For themselves, however, the apostles were adamant: they would devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-6).

Assuming the apostles' example is instructive for elders, we can say that prayer is one of the main duties of an elder. Unfortunately, just like prayer is often neglected in our personal devotions, it's too often neglected in the life of an elder and in the business of elder's meetings.

When the elders gather to shepherd the church, shouldn't a major part of the meeting be spent in prayer? After all, deacons should be laboring on other matters to free the elders to pray. Certainly, elders come together to make decisions, but shouldn't those decisions be soaked in prayer? As elders often deal with difficult cases, shouldn't we pray for wisdom before acting? In short, prayer should be a primary part of any elders' meeting.

But what should we pray for, and how should we pray? Here are 7 categories to pray for at elders' meetings, accompanied by a brief description of how to pray.

1. PRAY FOR HUMILITY AND WISDOM.

Begin your meeting by praying for humility and wisdom. This will set the tone and remind every elder there that Christ is the chief shepherd, and elders are merely under shepherds (1 Peter 5:4, Acts 20:28). James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Begin meetings by obeying this command and asking God for wisdom on all the matters on your agenda.

2. PRAY THROUGH A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE.

Prayer should be biblically informed. Thankfully, we have countless examples of saints praying in the Bible. We also have lots of instructions from Paul's letters on what to pray for. And who could forget the Psalms?

We can reliably take any portion of Scripture and use it to guide our prayers. To help root the meeting in Scripture and to provide a guide for what and how to pray throughout the meeting, consider reading the Bible together as you begin, and choose a few brothers to praise God for something they see in the text.

In our meetings, we read the passage that will be preached on the following Sunday. Meditating on who God is and what he has done also helps reinforce that the meeting is about God's church, not ours.

3. PRAY FOR EACH OTHER.

In 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul tells Timothy: "Watch your life and doctrine closely." Galatians 6:9 implores us to "not grow weary of doing good." James 3:1 says, "We who teach will be judged with greater strictness." In 2 Corinthians 3:5-6, we're reminded that "we are [not] sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant."

These and many other verses remind us that elders need prayer, too, if we are going to persevere in our labors as undershepherds. Again, at the beginning of the meeting, consider having a few elders share briefly about how things are going in their life and ministry and then choosing a few others to pray for them. This practice encourages elders to care for each other by not bearing the burden of the office alone. It also helps to foster awareness, unity, and sympathy.

4. PRAY FOR DEACONS, STAFF, AND SUPPORTED WORKERS.

Recently, our elders started inviting one deacon or staff member to share about their role in the church and to request prayer. When supported workers are in town or others who have been sent out come back to visit, we often take time to hear from and pray for them during an elder's meeting.

This practice has multiple benefits. The person prayed for is encouraged, and the elders are more informed about that person's ministry. If you're systematic about it, each area of the church's life can be heard and prayed for in a year or so.

5. PRAY FOR THE SICK.

James 5:14 says, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." As the need arises, invite sick members to meetings (or go to them), lay hands on them, and pray for them. Invite and pray for those with cancer, chronic pain, and other sicknesses.

6. PRAY FOR CHURCH MEMBERS BY NAME.

Set aside a significant portion of your meeting to pray for the members of your church. We usually pray for about 30 members by name per meeting, working our way through our church's directory. We contact the individuals or couples we plan to pray for several days beforehand in an effort to solicit specific prayer requests. These requests go into a master document that the elders use as a prayer guide during our meeting. With this prayer guide in front of us, and the Scripture passage we read earlier on our minds, our elders pray through these names.

We also have a section on our agenda to pray for members who are in need of extra attention and care. We call this our "[care list](#)," which is a list of members who are going through extremely difficult circumstances or are dealing with significant sin. After reviewing and talking through the list, we usually assign a few brothers to pray for the individuals on the list—that God would allow those struggling to persevere and those in sin to repent.

7. PRAY SPONTANEOUSLY AS NEEDED.

Often, we don't know what other prayer needs may arise until we get into the throes of a meeting. So we must be willing to pray spontaneously as needed. If an unexpected decision before the board is unclear, pray for wisdom. If a contentious issue has brothers upset, pray for humility and unity. I can't think of a situation where it wouldn't be wise to just stop and ask God for help—and if we're honest, these situations occur often.

So, fellow elders, when we meet together, let us do the job the Lord has given us. Let us praise God, seek wisdom, ask for help, and intercede for others in prayer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Greg Spraul lives in the D. C. area and works for the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), where he works on water pollution issues. He is also an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church.



By Erin Wheeler

The Privilege and Power of a Praying Pastor's Wife

On any given Saturday, you can be sure at least two things are going on at our house: my husband will be working on his sermon, and I will be praying for him. It sounds rather straightforward, but it hasn't happened without a lot of—shall we say—*practice*.

When Brad first began the arduous and daunting task of preaching, we had a lot to learn together as a team in ministry—and we weren't a very well-oiled machine. There were creaks and moans, often quite literally, as we went about juggling ministry life and what became coined as “sermon-prep.” Instead of being a helpmate suitable to him, I found I was acting more like a dead-weight distracting him.

There certainly are sacrifices for a ministry wife, but there are also tremendous blessings. Learning how to pray for my husband and the ministry we were giving our lives to took time; God first had to wean my heart from my own personal desires and beckoned me instead to come to him. I had to learn to pray, “In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch” (Psalm 5:3). My heavenly Father was inviting me to bring my requests and desires and wait with expectant faith for him to answer me according to his good plan and purpose.

THERE'S POWER IN PRAYER, SO BE ON GUARD

Don't buy the lie that prayer doesn't do much. You might think you believe prayer is important, but are you praying regularly, specifically, and expectantly?

Sadly, our answer is often, “Not enough.” Prayer is hard work and the deceiver will do anything to keep us from it. Sure, we can recite James 5:17, spouting the promise that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective, but then we rarely do the hard work of actually praying.

Elisabeth Elliot said it well,

Prayer isn't a sport. It's work. Prayer is work because a Christian simply can't "make a living" without it. The apostle Paul said we "wrestle" in prayer. In the wrestling of a Christian in prayer, "our fight is not against any physical enemy; it is against organizations and powers that are spiritual. We are up against the unseen powers that control this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil."
(Ephesians 6:12)

The work is hard because so much of it is unseen. There are joy-robbers all about us. The deceiver will attempt to make as much noise as he can to distract us from our calling to be that helpmate to our pastor-husbands. And if he can take us down, sadly, then our husband and the ministry soon often follow. Sadly, I've seen this happen to some dear friends in ministry. By not prioritizing time with the Lord, they drifted away other church members and became disillusioned by all the struggles and hardships of ministry life. Sisters, pray for God to protect you and your husband as you labor for Him.

As pastors' wives, there are many things we know, hear, see, and feel about the kingdom work our husbands are giving themselves to with all their heart and soul. In the midst of all this, we must not give in to fear or worry. We shouldn't take charge and force our immediate fix-it plan for the church. But we also shouldn't sit back in blissful ignorance of the many needs of our husband and our churches.

Sisters, we should be praying—and because prayer takes hard work, we need to make it a priority. As the Puritan saying goes, you need to learn how to "pray until you pray." Labor in prayer for your husband as he labors for the sheep entrusted to him. As a helpmate suitable to him, you're able to encourage him in a very practical way by praying regularly, specifically, and expectantly both for him and often *with* him.

THE PRIVILEGE: THE BEST GOOD WE CAN DO

"She does him good and not harm all her days." Proverbs 31:12

Just think about it for a minute. Who else knows your husband like you do? Any number of people in your church may be praying for him. He may have accountability partners and prayer partners and perhaps elders who pray with and for him. But no one can pray with the specificity and tenderness of a spouse.

After all, you know if sleep has evaded him for days due to chronic pain or sick children. You know the doubts that may be plaguing his mind, whispering lies of rejection and discouragement. You know the hours often spent in solitude, poured out over God's Word as he wrestles with a text. You can read that slumping of his shoulders when he walks in the door, feeling kicked and beaten-down by life. You know he feels inadequate for the task, yet called to keep moving forward in faith. What better good can we do for our pastor-husbands than to pray for them?

There's much strength in the stillness of prayer. For out of that stillness, God's power is manifested. As pastors' wives we are often given the privilege to see God's faithfulness work itself out in many ways. Sure, we're privy to lots of hard things, too, but we've got front row seats to God's faithfulness.

We see restored relationships, powerful sermons preached on little-to-no sleep, budgets crunched during the final hours, friends growing in their hatred of sin and love for Jesus—and on and on it goes. I often tell friends my unique perspective makes me feel like Mary, who “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” as she watched God’s plan unfold through her son Jesus. My heart sings with the ways I’ve watched God work, not only in our lives, but in the lives of the congregations we’ve been a part of over the years. It’s a hard calling, but it’s always a privileged one.

There’s something special about sitting in a pew at the end of a long week, watching the person you love most in this world preach to those entrusted to his care, giving himself to God’s Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As wives of pastors, we have a unique privilege. So much happens from one Sunday to another, and our heavenly Father knows it all, far more than us. Yet he still calls us to come to him, to bring all our “insider knowledge” to him, all the stuff that stirs up worry or anger, gratitude or joy.

Dear sisters, is God not the one who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us (Eph. 3:20)? Then why, oh why, wouldn’t we park ourselves at his feet?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Erin Wheeler lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas, with her husband Brad and their four children. She attends University Baptist Church, where Brad serves as Senior Pastor.



By Carrie Russell

Praying in Discipling Relationships among Sisters

“I’ll pray for you!”

We often throw out this platitude to friends, but how often do we follow through with praying for them? As I consider my relationships in the church, I long to be a sister in Christ who is committed to prayer. If we define [Discipling](#) as “deliberately doing spiritual good to someone so that he or she will be more like Christ,” then certainly prayer plays a critical role in our discipling relationships. So, as we influence and disciple women, we would be wise to consider how to incorporate prayer in our daily interactions.

COMMIT TO PRAYING IN YOUR DISCIPLING RELATIONSHIPS

What sets your Christian relationships apart from other friendships? I have plenty of non-Christian friends who are “thinking of me” and “sending good vibes my way,” but what’s most valuable in my life are those women whom I know are committed to praying for me. I long to be that type of friend in my own discipling relationships within the church.

In our church covenant, every member of my church makes a commitment to “walk together in Christian love, exercising an affectionate care for and watchfulness over one another . . . praying for one another.” This means that, before the Lord, it’s our duty to pray for one another, especially for those we’re discipling.

Christian fellowship isn’t simply “hanging out with other Christians”—and discipling isn’t just talking and listening. When we disciple others, we have the privilege of helping them follow Jesus, and two critical tools in doing that are God’s Word and prayer. Without this powerful pair, I’m no more than a listening ear, and any spiritual influence I have will be minimal. In fact, I’ve left many meetings wondering if anything I’d said was helpful. But I have never questioned that when our meeting involved prayer and

studying the Scriptures. My words and advice may at times be insufficient, but approaching the throne of God on behalf of one another will always be a success.

PRAY THE BIBLE

Praying God's Word is a powerful tool in our fight for holiness. When our hearts are prone to wander, and we're tempted to follow our emotions, it's a gift to have a fellow Christian willing to pray Scripture with you. There have been plenty of times when I don't know exactly how to pray for someone, but thankfully Scripture is sufficient. Sometimes, the best way to begin is to cry out "*We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you!*" (2 Chronicles 20:12)

HELPFUL REMINDERS

As we pray for sisters in Christ, here are some helpful reminders:

1. Pray God's attributes.

Remind one another often of who God is; Praise him for being sovereign, unchanging, holy, all-knowing, etc.

2. Pray the promises of the gospel.

Remember God's precious gift of salvation through Christ. We have an incorruptible inheritance kept in heaven for us, and God remembers our transgressions no more. He has given us everything we need for life and godliness.

3. As you pray, keep in mind who God has called us to be in Christ.

We are prone to forget that we are children, chosen, redeemed, and forgiven.

4. Pray through specific passages for that person.

Open that concordance and let God's living and active Word speak! The epistles are a great place to turn to pray for one another.

In discipling others, I might call someone to turn from sin, but greater brokenness comes when we pray Colossians 3 together. I can speak words of comfort to someone struggling with anxiety, but praying 1 Peter 5:6-7 usually brings more comfort. When a friend is questioning if God's plan for her life is good, Romans 8 speaks an invaluable word.

As we pray prayers of praise and thankfulness, as we cry out for provision and mercy, filling our words with Scripture grounds our hearts in truth and draws us to deeper faith in Christ.

PRAY FOR UNITY AND FOR LOVE

It's no surprise that we grow in Christian love for those we pray for. Even in the closest of Christian communities, we can find ourselves dealing with comparison and envy. It's easy to walk into church, look around at other women, and believe the lies we tell ourselves—their lives must be free from struggle, their marriages and families must be perfect, they surely can't relate to me.

But as we disciple and are disciplined by others, we're reminded we're not the only ones who struggle with fear and anxiety, get impatient with our children, or doubt the goodness of God.

When we invest in the lives of fellow church members and commit to pray for them, we'll grow in our unity. Prayer breaks down the walls of insecurity and fear and allows us to link arms with fellow Christians as we strive together to follow Jesus.

A few years back, a woman I'd just met shared about a situation where she was struggling to trust God's plan for her. Her willingness to share openly helped me to pray for her, and praying for her caused me to love her, even though I didn't really know her!

While it's true you pray for those you love, it's also true you grow in love for those you pray for.

PRAY WHEN IT'S INCONVENIENT

Prayer doesn't have to be long or perfectly planned. It can be noisy, interrupted, with children all around. I'll never forget meeting with a mentor years ago when I had no children and she had three. I'd just gone to run errands with her and chat about life. As we pulled into her driveway she said, "Let's just pray here in the car before we go in to all the chaos."

As we began to pray, a basketball bounced against her window. She rolled down the window and informed the ball-bouncer: "I am praying and will be finished in just a minute." Then she rolled the window right back up as we finished praying.

Her example has stuck with me. I often wrongly think discipling has to take place with Bibles open and lots of quiet time committed to prayer. But this isn't most people's reality.

Here are some practical suggestions to incorporate prayer in your discipling relationships:

- Pray while walking
- Pray in the car after lunch or coffee
- Pray on the phone as they drive home
- Make sure to ask how you can be praying for them throughout the week
- Be vulnerable enough to ask for prayer for yourself
- Text a friend to let them know how you are praying for them

JUST PRAY!

I so often leave my time with sisters in Christ wishing I'd prayed with or for them. Praying is not always easy, and it's not always convenient or practical. It is, however, *always* good, and we'll always be blessed by doing it.

So, as we meet together as women—sharing about our marriages, our parenting, and our spiritual struggles—let’s commit to praying for one another. Let’s leave our time together, confident we’ve done intentional spiritual good to one another.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Carrie Russell lives in Charlotte, North Carolina with her husband, Dave, and four children. She is a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church, where Dave serves as pastor.

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By Phil Ryken

Praying as a Church for the World and Your City

If God rules over kingdoms, then kingdoms are our concern; this is true for our immediate kingdoms—our nation, state, and city—as well as kingdoms all across the globe.

This truth should color our prayer lives, such that we offer requests to God for things both near and far. We should discipline ourselves to pray both for the world in general and our city in particular. What follows are a few reflections on how to do just that.

PRAYING AS A “WORLD CHRISTIAN”

Many years ago Daniel Fleming wrote a book called *Marks of a World Christian*. By “world Christian,” Fleming meant someone who recognizes that God rules the kingdoms of the world. A world Christian is someone who takes a vital interest in the worldwide work of God and prays for the unbroken advance of God’s kingdom. To put it another way, “World Christians are day-to-day disciples for whom Christ’s global cause has become the integrating, overriding priority.”

Throughout the history of the church, biblical Christians have always been world Christians. Their ministries have been like Jeremiah’s ministry, which spanned the globe. He was appointed “over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10).

John Chrysostom (347-407 a.d.) was also a world Christian. The great preacher of Constantinople long prayed for the conversion of the Barbarians in the Balkans. When he sent missionaries to evangelize that region he said, “We have a whole Christ for our salvation; a whole Bible for our staff; a whole Church for our fellowship; and a whole world for our parish.”

MY OWN EXPERIENCE WITH “WORLD CHRISTIANS”

Personally, I lived among world Christians during my internship at Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, where Reverend William Still served as minister for over half a century (1945–1997). For two

hours every Saturday night, 60 or 70 Christians gathered at Gilcomston to pray for the worldwide progress of the gospel. They began by praying all the way around Scotland, then through the British Isles, and then off to some other continent. Even after two hours of prayer, Mr. Still often closed the meeting lamenting that some continent or another had been left unprayed for.

Back in 1992 it was typical for a member of that church to thank God for the way he had brought down the Iron Curtain of communism in eastern Europe. From the way they prayed, it was clear they believed their prayers had something to do with the collapse of the Soviet Empire. I was tempted to pull one of them aside and say, “You know, it was a little more complicated than that. The global economy had something to do with it, not to mention the arms race and the spiritual bankruptcy of communism. It took more than your prayers to pull down the Berlin Wall.”

I was tempted to say such things, but I knew better. Who is to say what part a praying church actually plays in world affairs? To go to Gilcomston on a Saturday night was to know what was going on in the world. The prayers of God’s people really are at the heart of what God is doing, and when the true history of the world is finally written, we’ll almost certainly discover that Christians like the ones in Aberdeen had a profound influence on world events.

GOD’S PURPOSE FOR ALL HISTORY & ALL PEOPLES

The missionary statesman David Bryant defines a world Christian as someone who believes that “God has a worldwide purpose in Christ that encompasses all history, all creation, and all peoples everywhere, especially those yet to be reached by the gospel.” Do you believe that? Do you believe God has a global purpose for all history and all peoples in Christ?

If you’re not a world Christian, you need to become one. Start by choosing a missionary or a part of the world to pray for in your family or Bible study. Obtain a copy of Patrick Johnstone’s [Operation World](#) to help you know what to pray for. Teach children how to traverse the globe in prayer. Take a vital interest in world news. Read the newspaper and listen to the nightly news with an eye and an ear for the church. Pay special attention to news from countries where missionaries you know are serving. You may not have the time to master global politics, but you can still become a world Christian.

Remember the bold claim of our Lord Jesus Christ: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18–19a).

Jesus Christ is Lord of Afghanistan and Albania. He is King of Zaire and Zimbabwe. There is no place in this world where Christ is not King; therefore, his people must be globally-minded people.

PRAYING FOR YOUR CITY . . . EVEN WHEN IT’S BABYLON

But we confess we’re globally-minded people who live in particular places of varying religious hostility. This situation may *feel* new, but it’s not.

For example, when the Jews were exiles in Babylon, they were at a loss as to how to pray for their new home. Yet one psalm should have immediately come to their minds:

Pray for peace in Jerusalem:

'Prosperity to your houses! Peace inside your city walls!
Prosperity to your palaces!' Since all are my brothers and friends,
I say, 'Peace be with you!' Since Yahweh our God lives here,
I pray for your happiness. (Psalm 122:6–9)

The language of this psalm echoes the language of Jeremiah 29:7, where Jeremiah tells the exiled Jews: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

The people of God had long prayed for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem. But when they went into exile, shockingly, Jeremiah commanded them to use the same liturgy for Babylon.

PRAYING FOR THE POST-CHRISTIAN CITY

The same prayer should be offered for any post-Christian city. Notice four things about it.

First, pray for the economy of the city ("Prosperity to your houses!"). Pray for the "common wealth" of city, asking God to bring justice to the poor and prosperity for everyone within the economic systems of the city.

Second, pray for the safety of the city ("Peace inside your city walls!"). Pray that citizens will be kept safe from harm and violence on the street. And pray that criminals themselves will be transformed by the love of Christ.

Third, pray for the politics of the city ("Prosperity to your palaces!"). Ask the Lord to grant wisdom and integrity to the authorities who govern the city. Pray for the restoration of virtue to public office.

Fourth, pray for the people of the city ("Peace be with you!"). Pray for the Lord's blessing on all people and all people groups. Pray neighborhood by neighborhood, church by church, business by business, and house by house for the welfare of the city.

When I was a pastor in Philadelphia, three times a year Christians would gather in Center City to take a "Prayer Walk" in the neighborhood near our church, Tenth Presbyterian. We'd walk the streets and ask the Holy Spirit to guide our prayers. We'd stop at apartment buildings and pray for the salvation of those who live in them. We'd stop at schools and pray for the teachers. We'd stop at businesses to pray for their owners. We'd stop at churches to pray for their ministers. We'd stop at the street corners and pray for the prostitutes. And we'd stop at the homes of Christians and pray for their ministry in the city.

Prayer shouldn't be kept within the four walls of the church or the home. Instead, get out into the streets to pray for the peace of your neighborhood because the prosperity of any city comes through prayer.

* * * * *

Editor's note: *This article has been adapted from Phil Ryken's [commentary on Jeremiah](#) (Crossway, 2012).*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Phil Ryken is the eighth president of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.



By Thomas S. Kidd

Looking to the Past for Lessons about Prayer

We often think of the Reformation as inspired by the layman's access to the vernacular Bible, and the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Those were preeminent concerns, of course, but the Reformers and their successors also fought to return the practice of prayer to a firmly biblical basis.

PURITANS AND PRAYER

A host of issues related to prayer concerned Reformed Protestants. They wanted to move away from liturgical prayers, like those in the Book of Common Prayer, and toward non-scripted, heartfelt ones. They also wanted to remove all the Catholic vestiges from prayer, such as the invocation of saints, a practice that some Church of England ministers still endorsed in the early 1600s.

Strange as it might seem, the Reformers also wanted to *reduce* the percentage of prayer time in the Sunday gathering, especially the liturgical readings. In its place they increased the amount of time for exegetical teaching and preaching. This was a delicate balance. Puritans in particular sought to put the Word at the center of church services, while also rekindling extemporaneous public prayer.

Whatever balance and order of service they instituted, all Puritan church gatherings had one thing in common: they were long. Churches typically met twice on Sundays, in addition to weekday meetings and home-based fellowships and prayer gatherings. It wasn't unusual for the Sunday morning meeting to last three hours, or even more.

The meeting would typically open with a pastoral prayer that might last around 15 minutes. Then they would read passages of Scripture, which the pastor often explicated. The congregation would sing psalms (non-psalm hymns came in slowly during the eighteenth century), and only then would the church hear a sermon . . . that might last for an hour or two. Finally the pastor would say a prayer or benediction. On occasional Sundays, the church would observe the Lord's Supper or baptisms (most Puritans practiced paedobaptism).

SERIOUS COMMITMENT

These folks were serious, one might say! True enough, but we also have to imagine a world in which Sunday gatherings were a welcome break for most regular folks in attendance. Most congregants worked on farms the other six days a week. Not only did Puritans have a high view of the Sabbath, but early New England governments cracked down on Sabbath-breakers. Also, their world had few distractions competing with church attendance: no sports leagues, no NFL, virtually no restaurants. I suspect that for most people, especially those serious about their faith, a three-hour service with fervent prayer and faithful preaching was a delight.

Historians of religion find it strangely difficult to discover what non-liturgical services throughout the history of Christianity actually looked like in practice. Beyond a general framework outlined above, and the text of surviving sermons, details of the services often went unrecorded. So while we have a general idea that prayer was a regular part of Puritan meetings, and prayers went longer than in most evangelical churches today, we're left to guess at the ways in which pastors and elders prayed.

EVIDENCE IN EDWARDS

One surprising trove of evidence comes from a collection of prayer “bids” that survived in the papers of the great New England pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards. As historian Stephen Stein has shown, congregants would give small slips of paper to Edwards during the week, and he would refer to them during his congregational prayers the next Sunday. Many of the requests would sound familiar to us today, as they commonly dealt with sickness, injury, and death. But the prayer bids also showed an internalizing of Reformed beliefs about God’s sovereign will, and their dependence upon him.

Typical was the request of one Benjamin Bartlet, for his youngest child who was “Daingerously Sick.” He asked that the child would be restored to health, if it be God’s will. But even if it was not, Bartlet prayed he and the child be “fitted for God’s holy will and pleasure.” Edwards presumably led the church in prayer for the child along these lines.

GREAT AWAKENING PRAYERS

Over the half-century before the Great Awakening of the 1730s and ‘40s, however, the prayers of New Englanders seem to have undergone an important shift. Prayers for healing and other everyday cares no doubt continued. But other pastoral prayers shifted from a focus on moral reform to revival.

In the early 1700s, there was a growing sense that efforts to change the society’s declining morality had failed. Puritan pastors long lamented New England’s decline from its founding generation’s spiritual mission. But scolding and trying harder did not effect change.

In the 1720s and ‘30s, pastors began to emphasize that reform was hopeless without revival—and revival depended not on more human effort, but on an outpouring of God the Holy Spirit. God did not *need* the church to pray in order to send revival, but fervent prayer for God’s rescuing power was often the first sign of revival. These early evangelical pastors often prayed in accord with Isaiah 44:3, “I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring.” This shift toward prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit was a critical development that prepared the way for the Great Awakening.

WHAT WE SHOULD LEARN FROM THEM

What we know about prayer in Puritan and early evangelical churches should instruct us today. Although people in early America enjoyed an excellent sermon and beautiful singing, church meetings were hardly the orchestrated performances many evangelical churches put on today. In particular, extemporaneous prayer remained a vital, and often lengthy, aspect of those early American meetings. Pastors and elders responded to the prayer requests of their people, but they also guided prayer so that petitions took a wider view than just the congregation's physical needs.

With all due regard to churches' individual circumstances, it's hard to justify the lack of congregational prayer in many of today's churches, or the relegation of prayer to an obligatory sidelight. People need pastoral and congregational prayer for the burdens they bring into church. And whatever a church's brilliant programming, the power of God alone will fulfill a church's mission and foster revival. No element of worship better signals Christians' dependence upon God than prayer. Pastors who put prayer front-and-center each week are demonstrating that dependence in a practical, biblical way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Thomas S. Kidd is professor of history at Baylor University, and Associate Director of Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion. He is a member of Highland Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. You can find him on Twitter at [@ThomasSKidd](https://twitter.com/ThomasSKidd).



By Claudia Anderson

Learning to Pray by Listening in Church

During one of the periods of my childhood when neighbors took me to Sunday School, I learned the Lord's Prayer. Half a lifetime later, middle aged and searching, I recalled that the Lord's Prayer was often prefaced with the words, "He taught them to pray saying" I started to say the Lord's Prayer every night, hoping that he would teach me.

Eventually, he did. By the grace of God, I was converted and was baptized at the age of 49, and once I joined Capitol Hill Baptist Church, I found myself awash in unscripted prayer, along with so much else that was new and strange. In the Sunday morning service, miscellaneous pastors prayed from the pulpit, long beautiful prayers. It was months, if not years, before I noticed any order in this parade: first a prayer of praise; later a prayer of confession, followed by a "scriptural assurance of pardon"; last, a prayer of petition, this one almost always led by the senior pastor. This differentiation was reinforced when I helped in children's ministry and found that we guide the children's prayers with the mnemonic device ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. A child in the faith, I clung to it too.

In our Sunday evening service, after hymns, the pastor took a dozen or more prayer requests and asked a member of the congregation to pray briefly for each. We would bow our heads and hear a long string of individual voices pray in different styles. I came to appreciate directness, audibility, and the special loveliness produced, it turned out, by reliance on biblical phrases. We were bringing our cares to "the throne of grace," where we were promised "help in time of need." We were "entering his courts with praise."

Early on, some specific experiences at church impressed upon me the power of corporate prayer. I'll mention two.

When it transpired that I was to be gone for three months in another state, doing unfamiliar work, the pastor put me on the list for evening prayer. I was helping in the nursery that night, but someone was sent up to get me and usher me into the gathering (in those days, probably no more than 100 people, though we've grown since). I was led to the front, and several brothers and sisters placed their hands on

my shoulders and back while the pastor prayed for me. I am at a loss for words to describe the effect this had on one long divorced and living alone. It opened up to me a dimension of love that I'd never dreamed existed. Only later would I register its name — Christian fellowship — and read, in the last book of the Bible, “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

Just about five years later the same pastor married me and my husband, Bill. In his wedding sermon he urges: “Pray every day that you will love your spouse better that day than you did the day before. Pray this however unnecessary or impossible it may seem.” I took that to heart, and I pray it still: a prayer taught at church that has helped me learn to be a wife.

Experiences like these burned away the early embarrassment attached to praying in front of others and helped build an understanding of how we work as the body of Christ. As the years have gone by, though, the main instrument of spiritual growth, in prayer as in all else, has been knowledge of the Bible. It is the patient piling of sermon upon sermon over soon two decades that has laid the groundwork for my own study at home and in small groups, all of which has opened to me the riches of biblical prayer.

If Paul hadn't shown me, in his letter to the Philippians, would it ever have occurred to me to ask for a love that “abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight” — think of that: intelligent love, insightful love — so that I might “be able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”? Through his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul led me to pray for “endurance and patience with joy,” remembering that it is “the Father who has qualified [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” I take comfort from relying on his “glorious might.”

To study the Bible is to learn to pray from the masters. I've come just far enough to be captivated by what I expect to be a lifelong undertaking — and to espy on a distant horizon what I gather is the really big project, “praying the psalms.”

Despite all the splendid teaching I've had, I am not especially proficient at prayer, nor have I laid to rest once and for all what one of C.S. Lewis's interlocutors in *Letters to Malcolm* called the “irksomeness” of prayer. Still, I'm on my way. I actually lead a praying life. Every day, I lay before God in faith my serious concerns and daily business of all descriptions. And when my mind is blank, my default setting remains the Lord's Prayer. I feel blessed to be able to fall back on its familiar words without fear of exhausting its profundities: “Deliver us from evil.” “Thy will be done.”

Writing this, I realize that my every prayer of thanksgiving should properly begin with gratitude to those who took me to church as a child and who, when I was long grown, invited me back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Claudia Anderson is a retired editor in Washington, D. C.

Pastor's Forum: Stories of Answered Prayer

By Various Authors

Editor's note: We asked several pastors to briefly recount one story in which God answered a request that was being regularly prayed for by the whole church. Below are a few answers.

* * * * *

La Plata Baptist Church is a small rural church in Southern Maryland. Our history was not marked by ethnic diversity in attendance or in membership. But few years ago, during our Sunday evening service, we began asking God to grow us in ethnic diversity, for his glory. In the last 6 months, our church has grown exponentially in this way. God has transformed our congregation into a place where people of all backgrounds feel loved and welcome, and we are thrilled at the growth God has given us because only he could do this work. I know this will cause our church to pursue humility and unity even more. We pray our community will take notice at this love in our congregation so that people will come to Christ for salvation.

—Garrett Connor | La Plata Baptist Church | La Plata, MD

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After nearly three years of suffering from Eosinophilic Gastritis, my wife Marcia was near death. She had lost a significant amount of her body weight and doctors could find no medical solution. They had only succeeded at finding medication that help some but worsened her condition.

Finally, after exhausting all local options, we made an appointment for her to be seen at Mayo Clinic, Rochester. I explained the problem to the church as we set off for Minnesota. They prayed corporately for her and in many small groups.

Something strange occurred the night before her first appointment; she awakened and said she was in absolutely no pain, for the first time in three years. She ate a little breakfast without pain. The doctors performed extensive tests and proved the disease that was destroying her life was healed. They had no explanation other than it was a miracle.

—Dennis Newkirk | Henderson Hill Baptist Church | Edmond, OK

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A father of two young children tragically lost his wife, and our congregation walked through that with him. One night the father, John, swept up his little boy and girl into his arms as they sat weeping on the bathroom floor, longing for their wife and mommy. After years of juggling a difficult schedule on his own, Jon stood up at one of our monthly congregational prayer meetings with tears in his eyes and hope in his heart and asked us to please pray that God would provide him a wife and his children a mom. One month later, he met Claudia, a godly widow who came to our church with children of her own. Six months later, I was closing a series on Ruth, when God provides a husband for Ruth amidst her suffering. I closed the sermon by asking Jon to share a testimony of crying out to God with us at that prayer meeting for a wife, and he closed by dropping to a knee and asking her to be his wife. They've been happily married for three years and continue to rejoice in God's provision.

—Josh Vincent | Trinity Bible Church | Phoenix, AZ

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With thousands of students, scholars, and city-dwellers around us, the members of Evanston Baptist Church—right next to Northwestern University—have been gathering and praying Matthew 28:18–20 together, asking God to use our church to make disciples of all nations. Our congregation has become noticeably international and multi-ethnic in recent years. It's not uncommon for Christians from more than 10 nations to be found in our worship gatherings, even though the average attendance is less than 50 each Lord's Day.

We're learning to love our neighbors and clearly communicate the gospel to them. And our members keep being sent out from our church as missionaries (short and long term, vocational and marketplace) to nations like China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Germany, Japan, Turkey, Israel, and Nigeria. Others are being sent to start new churches in Evanston and Chicagoland. We rejoice in these answered prayers and ask God to keep using us to make disciples of all nations for his glory and our joy.

—Scott Kelly | Evanston Baptist Church | Evanston, IL

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A couple years ago we decided to pray on Sunday evenings not merely for boldness in evangelism, but fruit from evangelism. We knew many from our body had been sharing the gospel faithfully, we trusted that pleased God, but we longed to see conversions. On Easter Sunday 2015, God brought a single man to our church. He visited for a season seven years prior, but this time he stuck around. The Word drew him and the hospitality surprised him. God saved him about nine months later, and he's now a baptized member of the body.

Around this time, a young Chinese woman working in Atlanta began to attend. She tolerated the preaching, but the book of Romans being taught in Sunday school captivated her. At different times and in different ways, members of the church called her to repent and believe. She finally did and we baptized her, too. Answered prayers.

—Aaron Menikoff | Mt. Vernon Baptist Church | Sandy Springs, GA

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A number of months ago a couple in our church discovered their unborn child had a rare birth defect that threatened the child's life. They humbly asked the church to pray for the baby's healing, but more importantly for them to trust God in whatever path he called them to walk through. We prayed, both publicly and privately, for the Lord to show his mercy.

The Lord allowed the child to live seven days, and then took him to be with himself. The family grieved, and the church grieved, but the Lord's present help in such a time of trouble has been evident. The Lord does not always answer in the ways we desire, but he remains faithful and our church has seen that, even in this valley of the shadow of death. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

—Garrett Kell | Del Ray Baptist Church | Alexandria, VA



By Brad Wheeler

4 Reasons You Should Add a Regular Prayer Service to Your Church Calendar

If you could add one thing to your church calendar, what would it be? A women's retreat or men's breakfast? An evangelism seminar? Community groups? A Saturday evening service for the morning-challenged? A mid-week Bible study?

That's the question I've asked myself time and time again since arriving at my new church last fall. Though many of those suggestions are laudable, I have, alongside our elders, led our body to begin a regular Sunday-evening prayer service.

Seriously, *a prayer service*? That sounds old-fashioned and quaint, the kind of thing Christians did before the advent of electricity, when life was simpler, churches were smaller, and our children's recreational activities didn't consume our calendars.

And it's been met with at least some opposition. I had one member tell me we already pray *too much*. He felt our prayer times in the morning service were already long. They detract from the music team's ability to get into a rhythm, and disrupt the worship experience. I've had others suggest it may foster legalism, by giving people something else they feel they must do. Others voiced concern that it may hinder community, for some individuals may drop out of their small group in order to attend the corporate prayer meeting.

FOUR REASONS WHY

So, why a gathering largely dedicated to corporate prayer? Let me suggest four reasons.

1. It reminds our people of the importance of prayer.

It's not difficult to get our people to sign up for an event, or plugged-into a small group. Hundreds came to our recent women's retreat. Scores came to the men's breakfast and [Secret Church](#). So why the reluctance of many to corporately gather to pray? Why has the prayer service in many churches gone the way of the rotary phone?

Simply put, prayer isn't sexy. It's not entertaining. It's often not easy or convenient; it requires effort and work. It's why Jesus gave us the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18, so that we "ought always to pray and not lose heart." We're accustomed to being spoon-fed with music and media, podcasts and preaching. But prayer requires us to turn the world off while we turn our minds on.

And this is what we must do—not just individually, but corporately, together. In Matthew 21, Jesus chides the people for turning the temple into something like the trading floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. He says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer" (Matt 21:13). According to the New Testament, the church is the temple of God's Spirit (1 Cor 3:16). Are our churches then the house of prayer God intends? Do we set aside the time? Do we prioritize the commitment to pray together? Or is our corporate prayer merely the filler between music sets?

Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously said, "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more." What if we applied that same measure to our churches? What would it say about us? Corporate prayer impresses upon our people prayer's importance, indeed, its absolute necessity. For our fight is against spiritual forces, and thus requires spiritual weapons—and what greater weapon is there than the prayers of not just one, but dozens, hundreds, even thousands?

2. It models for our people how to pray.

I remember the first time I prayed publicly. I was a new believer, both paranoid and perplexed over what to say. So what did I do? I copied what I heard others do.

Apart from studying the prayers of Daniel or Paul or Hannah or Mary, nothing teaches us our people how to pray more than the prayers they hear from the faithful at church. If we want our people to pray biblically and thoughtfully, if we want them to pray with reverent awe and personal affection, then we must model it for them corporately. As D. A. Carson aptly notes, "Choose models, but choose them well. Study their content, their breadth, their passion, their unction—but do not ape their idiom."

3. It unites our people around God's purposes.

We're naturally narcissistic people. We have no problem praying for our individual needs, wants, and desires. And it's not wrong to do such things. We ought to. Yet how deplorable when our prayer life, especially our corporate prayer life, is dominated by such concerns. After all, we aren't the meaning of human history. Our health and happiness isn't the meaning of human history. The *church* and *her prosperity* is the meaning of human history (Eph 3:1-13).

When we gather to emphasize the spiritual over the physical, the corporate over the individual, we unite our people around God's purposes for his church. Corporate prayer builds concern for our corporate unity, and our corporate witness.

4. It prepares our people for God to act.

The church corporately praying marked many of the great movements in the book of Acts. It defined their life at Pentecost (2:42). It equipped the believers with the Spirit to speak the Word of God boldly (4:31). Prayer marked the commissioning of the first deacons (6:6), the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans (8:15), and even Peter's vision to spread the gospel to the Gentiles (10:9). In fact, it was the church praying that led to Peter's release from prison (12:5)!

Friends, prayer changes things! It's why Paul *assumes* the church will be praying together, both men and women (1 Cor 11, 14). Prayer is God's ordained means to accomplish his supernatural ends. It is both personal and powerful. As Jesus reminded his disciples, there are some obstacles that cannot be conquered by anything but prayer (Mk 9:29).

Friends, as Jamie Dunlop notes in *The Compelling Community*, "God loves to defend his reputation. When we pray together, our needs become public. When he answers, his glory becomes public. " Praying prepares our people for God to act.

OUR FIRST PRAYER SERVICE

Last month, we hosted our first Sunday evening prayer service, at least in recent memory. And with it came plenty of awkward moments and blunders as we stumbled through the service. It didn't go exactly as I planned, and for much of that I am to blame!

But that's okay. For we, the people of God, by the power of God, prayed. We did what no other people or institution on earth are privileged to do. And we'll do it again. And we'll watch, and wait, and anticipate what God will do on his behalf.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Brad Wheeler is the senior pastor of University Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas.



By Andy Davis

Looking to the New Testament for Models of Corporate Prayer

Scripture records some astonishing moments when God’s power was put on display, and I would like to have seen every one of them with my own eyes. Of course, for sheer power, nothing compares with the six days of creation in which God spoke the universe into existence.

But what would it have been like to see the worldwide flood of Noah?

Or the Red Sea crossing, when the water of the sea walled up to the left and the right, and the pillar of fire led over two million Jews through the darkened corridor on dry land?

Best of all, maybe, would be to have seen the angel roll back the stone and sit on it, beckoning us to inspect the recently emptied tomb of Jesus. Just to have been there and seen these displays of power would have energized my soul.

Now when it comes to prayer meetings in church history, I wish I’d been there when the Spirit’s power was poured out in Acts 4:31: “When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God’s message with boldness.”

LOOKING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

There is evidence in Acts as well as in church history that the Holy Spirit wills to use such prayer meetings to pour out his power again and again on local churches:

1) Power to preach the gospel (Acts 2): The church was assembled continuously for prayer, waiting for the gift the Father and Son had promised. On the Day of Pentecost, that power was poured out on the

church, and they poured out into the streets of Jerusalem to change the world. That offer something of a paradigm for all local churches, although the Day of Pentecost itself was unique in redemptive history.

2) Courage and boldness to face persecution (Acts 4:23–31): Generally, the bolder and more faithful a local church is in witnessing for Christ, the greater the Satanic opposition. This should cause the church to meet again and again for ongoing power and boldness in witnessing.

3) Deliverance in suffering (Acts 12:1–17): The grieving church (bereaved of James) assembled to pray for Peter’s release, and the Lord supernaturally answered their prayers. This provides a paradigm for a church gathering to pray for suffering or afflicted church members: terminal illness, the imprisonment of a pastor, perhaps a critical court case that will affect all Christians in that nation, etc.

4) Wisdom for ministry (Acts 13:1–4): The church at Antioch gathered for prayer, and by the power of the Spirit, the Lord called Barnabas and Saul to their first missionary journey. So also today, a local church can call a prayer meeting for wisdom and guidance in specific paths of ministry.

5) Launching new churches (Acts 16:13–15): Paul and Silas met some women at a prayer meeting by a river in Philippi, and that was the start of that local church. God uses specially-called prayer meetings to birth new churches.

6) Shared sorrow (Acts 20:36–38): Paul’s wrenching goodbye from the elders of Ephesus shows how local churches can gather to derive mutual comfort in times of sorrow and great distress. Corporate prayer meetings are good places for many to “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom 12:14).

7) Intimate unity (Acts 21:1–6): The church at Tyre assembled on the beach to see Paul off the Jerusalem, warning him not to go. Free-flowing corporate prayer in which many feel free to pray is a great way to build strong community, especially through small groups that meet weekly.

8) Church revitalization (Revelation 2:5, 3:2): The Spirit is speaking to every local church in Revelation 2–3, and the call is for church revitalization. Local churches that are dying can call out the remnant that is left by means of prayer meetings.

9) Repentance for sin (James 4:1–10): Churches should occasionally have times of corporate confession, fasting, and repentance from sin. This can be done during the worship service, but there is another kind of power when confession is done for longer times with only believers present.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

There are many ways to see these kinds of prayer meetings flourish in a local church today. Among the most common are small groups where members meet together week after week for Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. These prayer times can be rich because the people have grown in their knowledge of and commitment to one another. In our small group, often the men and women break up to pray separately, because sometimes men and women open up and little more when that happens.

We’ve also periodically held (maybe two to three times a year) “concerts of prayer” in which the whole church comes for dedicated prayer at the church building. The elders organize the time, breaking the

evening into small time segments to pray for specific issues in the church, and for missions. We find it very helpful to break the large group up into smaller groups so people will feel more comfortable to pray. We also have a leader open and close the subsections of the evening to structure the time.

Just recently, we began a “prayer supper” once a year in which we serve a simple meal, and then people break up into smaller groups after the meal to pray. Again, it’s helpful if leaders prepare topics and guide the evening so people’s minds are not empty but engaged. However, I know of other churches that advocate a freer flow with little preparation.

At the beginning of this year, I called on the church to join me in focused prayer for local evangelistic fruit. The clearly defined time frame—eight weeks, one hour per week on Wednesday mornings—motivated upwards of 30 people to make the sacrifice. It was a really rich time of sacrificial and earnest prayer, and we’ve seen some answers to those prayers already.

These times of informal group prayer are amazing avenues of blessing for the church, supplementing the powerful prayer ministry of the elders from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. May the Lord richly bless your church as you seek the power of the Spirit for the advance of Christ’s kingdom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Andy Davis is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina.



By Brian Davis

How to Keep Your Spontaneous Prayers from Sounding Aimless and Shallow

The author would first like to publicly distance himself from the title. I have no doubt that I have at times been heard and evaluated as aimless and shallow! So rather than regarding this article as coming from a self-professed teacher, consider it as counsel from a friend who is himself eager to flee shallowness in order to be more useful for others' edification.

There seems to be two extremes as we consider preparedness in prayer. On the one hand, some seem so tethered to their manuscript that you aren't sure if they are making a petition or giving a presentation. You admire the rhetoric, but you don't necessarily "amen" the requests.

On the other hand, some prayers are so riddled with "uhs" and "ums"—as the person searches for things to say—you wonder if they know what they're trying to pray for. Richard Sibbes may be correct: "God can pick sense out of a confused prayer." But God may not have shared that ability with the majority of the people present in a corporate gathering. We would benefit from a little more sense!

It is that second group I seek to encourage with this article. We want to keep our spontaneous prayers from sounding "aimless" and "shallow."

1. PRAY THE BIBLE.

If we're found silent and sloppy at times of spontaneous prayer, it's often because we have been seldom prostrated before the Word of God. This is especially true for those of us who preach. If we can talk to a

congregation for an hour on a single verse—and sometimes a single phrase!—then we should be able to talk for 10 minutes to God about what we’re reading in his Word.

We should never be left without thoughts to bring before God because he has given us a book loaded with worthy words to have on our lips. Consider Psalm 119: “With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth” (119:13). A man who does not know his Bible cannot pray well because he does not know his God.

But if the words of Christ are dwelling in us richly, if his testimonies are our delight, if we meditate on his precepts and fix our eyes on his ways, then it is his Word that should flow from us in prayer. For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

2. PRAY LIKE JESUS.

Sometimes, our lack of ability to pray spontaneously is just an evidence for our lack of consistency in prayer. We can’t converse with God easily if we don’t converse with God regularly.

Consider a few aspects of Jesus’ example in this. He prayed regularly. He spoke to His Father regularly. People would look for Jesus, but couldn’t find him because he was off praying (Mark 1:35–37). He even repeated his requests. Jesus didn’t always feel the need to ask for new things; sometimes he sought the same things over and over again. Modeling what he described in the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–18), Jesus was found praying—and even praying the same thing again!

One of the prayers Scripture records for us is Jesus praying, with sorrowful soul, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

But if you keep reading, you’ll get to Mark 14:39: “And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.” Sometimes we act as if each time of prayer is supposed to be a fresh request, as if Jesus hasn’t taught *and* modeled that we should pray the right things over and over again. In fact, he’s even provided a prayer for us to use in Matthew 6:9–13.

Isn’t it wonderful that we don’t have to wonder what Jesus would say if we asked him how we should pray? We would do well to take our Lord’s advice more frequently, especially when operating spontaneously.

3. LASTLY, PRAY TO GOD.

Jesus has told us we’re not heard for our many words, yet we frequently test the truthfulness of this instruction. Too often, we’re like the hypocrites who were more mindful of the ears and eyes of sinners, than the ears and eyes of God. In our corporate prayers, we should make it crystal clear we’re not praying to the congregation—we’re praying *for* them.

We do not pray to man, we pray to our Father in heaven. Be it seven people or 7,000, our congregation’s accumulative ear is far inferior and infinitely less special than the excellent ear of our Father in heaven.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ hear our prayers and say “amen” with us, but it is our Father in heaven who hears our prayers and answers.

Many would do well, and would pray more comfortably in spontaneous prayer, if they were solely concerned with their Father in heaven. We should be confident with the Psalmist who says, “Truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer” (Psalm 66:19).

If someone thinks that fruitfulness in spontaneous speaking is an incubator for laziness of the soul, then they’d have an entirely different understanding of spontaneous, faith-filled activity than I do. And if there is such a reader, allow me to direct your attention to Charles Spurgeon and his comments on “The Faculty of Impromptu Speech.” I trust you will heartily agree with him:

If a man would speak without any present study, he must usually study much. This is a paradox perhaps, but its explanation lies upon the surface. If I am a miller, and I have a sack brought to my door, and am asked to fill that sack with good fine flour within the next five minutes, the only way in which I can do it, is by keeping the flour bin of my mill always full, so that I can at once open the mouth of the sack, fill it, and deliver it. I do not happen to be grinding at that time, and so far the delivery is extemporaneous; but I have been grinding before, and so have the flour to serve out to the customer. So, brethren, you must have been grinding, or you will not have the flour. You will not be able to extemporize good thinking unless you have been in the habit of thinking and feeding your mind with abundant and nourishing food. Work hard at every available moment. Store your minds very richly, and then, like merchants with crowded warehouses, you will have goods ready for your customers, and having arranged your good things upon the shelves of your mind, you will be able to hand them down at any time without the laborious process of going to market, sorting, folding, and preparing. I do not believe that any man can be successful in continuously maintaining the gift of extemporaneous speech, except by ordinarily using far more labor than is usual with those who write and commit their discourses to memory. Take it as a rule without exception, that to be able to overflow spontaneously you must be full.

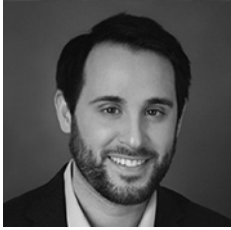
Praying without preparation should be as natural to us as sharing the gospel with someone. It is simply what we do as Christians. No Christian should need a manuscript to share the gospel, and no Christian should need a manuscript to pray!

To be sure, it takes constant labor and diligence to be filled with his Word, and careful intentionality to be led by his Spirit. But our confidence in prayer is not in the presentation of our prayers, but the promises of God Jesus has secured for us in the gospel. Listen to his words to us: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7).

May we, with faith in Christ and minds filled with his words, ask whatever we wish...even without a script.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Brian Davis lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Sonia, and their two sons, Spurgeon and Sibbes. He is part of the church planting team for Risen Christ Fellowship. You can find him on Twitter at [@theservantfella](https://twitter.com/theservantfella).



By Dave Comeau

How to Keep Your Scripted Prayers from Sounding Stiff and Robotic

Some people say you should *never* write out the prayers you pray to lead the church corporately beforehand. It's stifling the Spirit, they say. I disagree. The Spirit can work through my preparation on Saturday as much as he can work through my spontaneity on Sunday.

Still, no one wants to listen to a dry, dull speaker. The Lord will still listen but few others. We want our congregation to listen to congregational prayers. We want our people focused on God and praying with us. We want our prayers to build up the broken, wake up the unrepentant, and point to our hope in the gospel.

But we can't expect this to occur if we're doing our best Ben Stein impression during public prayer. Listening to the pastor's prayer shouldn't take more effort than rounding up the kids into the minivan before church. In fact, you can write them beforehand *and* read them in such a way that your congregation's heart is warmed by your love for God's name and pastoral concern for them.

BEFORE YOU WRITE THE PRAYER

Before you start typing away, pray for your church spontaneously. Pour out your heart before the Lord for the people he's called you to shepherd. Do not stop to write anything down. Pray as you do every morning for the church. Celebrate God's grace in the body. Thank God for answered prayers and pleasant surprises. Mourn sin. Empathize with their loss. Plead for grace. Feel for your people—their joys, their sorrows, their needs. If you want your scripted prayers to have heart, then you must first engage your own in the presence of God.

If you read Scripture in your service before the prayer, mediate and pray through that passage before you write your prayer. Let this passage influence the words you use and even the tone you might take. This will be instructive for the church. You're teaching them to connect the passage they just read with the prayer that follows.

Think back over the past month. What was prayed for recently? Is there a population in the church that hasn't been prayed for in a while—children, the elderly, stay-at-home moms, public school teachers?

Also consider different angles on issues. Are there perspectives you haven't considered lately? For example, we often—and should—pray for the healing of sick members. Perhaps this week, though, you can pray for perseverance amidst physical trial. Or, if you typically pray for jobs for the unemployed, perhaps this week pray for contentment.

Praying for different populations and considering different angles will keep your scripted prayers from becoming tedious and repetitive. It will also minister to the body in fresh ways.

WHEN YOU WRITE THE PRAYER

As you begin writing your prayer, bring the pastoral heart and passion from your spontaneous prayers to the Word doc.

A man in my church came up to me one Sunday and said, "I can tell you aren't writing your prayers anymore. This Sunday sounded like you." He was wrong; I was still writing out my prayers, but I'd finally started to write for the ear. There's no shame in reading scripted prayers, but generally speaking the congregation shouldn't be able to tell. So be sure to write for the ear, not the eye. After all, they're listening, not reading. Don't worry about perfect grammar. Write in everyday English. Don't be afraid of the occasional idiom. Drop the excessive use of conjunctions. How do you normally sound when you pray for them? Write with that voice.

Here are a few other pointers:

Write also for the heart, not only for the head.

I'm not advocating emotional manipulation, but we should use language that communicates passion and tenderness. When you read Paul's prayers, notice how they drip with affection for Christ and his church. He says to the Philippians, "I hold you in my heart" and "I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:7-8). He says to the Thessalonians, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly" (2 Thess. 1:3). Genuine affection in your prayer will make it easier to listen and harder to be distracted.

Remember you're in a church and not a seminary classroom.

This is not the time to impress with four-syllable words or theological jargon. Save your discussion on penal substitutionary atonement for the sermon.

Be sure to name names.

Pray for Sister Johnson as she grieves the loss of her husband. Pray for Brother Phillip's Bible study at the local sober house. The more personal the communication, the more people tend to listen.

Keep it current and make it global.

What's going on around the world? We don't want to unintentionally turn the God of the universe into a tiny village God who's only aware of and concerned for our tiny pocket of the globe. I write my prayer on Saturday evening so that I can keep it current. I check local, national, and global news for disaster and tragedy. I don't pray for something each time, but if there's something significant I want to know about it. Also, what's going on around your church? It's rather embarrassing and unkind when you forget to pray for the family who just lost someone yesterday.

As you write your prayer, remember you're modeling for your congregation both how to pray and what to pray for. Whether you use the Lord's Prayer as a model or your favorite prayer acronym, model rich, coherent prayers that are saturated with God's Word and informed by God's purposes. Put some thought into the flow of the prayer. Dad is always more methodical and careful when Junior is watching—because he wants to instruct him.

WHEN YOU READ THE PRAYER

When you read the prayer, be mindful of three things: tone, pacing, and pauses. You might be tempted to check out mentally and simply read the words on the page. However, remember you're not merely reading. You're praying. If you simply go through the motions, your tone will not match what you're praying for. I find that if I try to match my tone with the topic, I'm more engaged and don't come off disconnected.

Make sure to also watch your pacing. People typically read faster than they speak. You have to slow down in order for people to follow what you're saying. And take time to pause, especially after you've prayed for something significant.

Watching your tone, pacing, and pauses will keep you from sounding robotic and stiff.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dave Comeau is the associate pastor at South Shore Baptist Church in Hingham, Massachusetts.



By Michael A. G. Haykin

Learning How to Pray Fervently from Benjamin Francis

In the keeping of Leominster Baptist Church, Herefordshire, there's an unpublished manuscript that records a precious friendship of two men: Joshua Thomas (1719-1797), who for 43 years was the pastor of this church; and his fellow Welshman, Benjamin Francis (1734-1799), the pastor of 42 years at the Baptist work in Horsley, Gloucestershire. The manuscript is actually a transcript, drawn up by Thomas, of letters that passed between the men from 1758 to 1770.

Francis and Thomas would mail two or three questions periodically to the other. Then, some months later, the recipient would mail back his answers, together with fresh questions of his own. These answers were commented on, new questions were answered, and both the comments and answers were mailed back along with new queries—so on and so forth. All in all, there remain 68 questions and answers in two volumes. The manuscript is entitled “Queries and Solutions of Joshua Thomas and Benjamin Francis of Horsley 1758-70, being the answers of one to questions posed by the other on matters of theology, church government, preaching.”

The questions and answers are extremely instructive as to the areas of personal theological interest among these mid-eighteenth century Calvinists. In fact, a good number of the queries relate to what we would call “spirituality” and some to prayer, which I will focus on below.

LORD, TEACH ME TO PRAY!

“How often should a Christian pray?” To this vital question posed by Francis, Thomas has an extensive answer. He considers prayers that arise spontaneously during the course of a day's activities—and then “closet prayers” offered during times set apart, what our later generation of evangelicals often calls “the quiet time.” In response to Thomas, Francis confesses to his friend:

I am too barren in all my prayers, but I think mostly so in closet prayer (except at some seasons) which tempts me in some measure to prefer a more constant spontaneous prayer above a more stately closet prayer, though I am persuaded neither should be neglected. Spontaneous prayer is generally warm, free, and pure, tho' short: but I find closet prayer to be often cold, stiff, or artificial, as it were, and mixed with strange impertinences & wanderings of heart. Lord teach me to pray! O that I could perform the duty always, as a duty and a privilege & not as a task and a burden!

In another of Francis' comments we find the same honesty and humility: "How languid my faith, my hope, my love! how cold and formal am I in secret devotions!" These remarks surely stem from deep-seated convictions that both of these men had about the vital importance of prayer. As Thomas remarked: "[The] great and chief delight, his meat & drink, the life of his life" is his "closet prayer and communion with God."

Francis' frank remarks also have their root in the belief that because the Lord had led him to seek Christ at a very young age he should be more eager to pray out of a sense of gratitude. But he confessed:

The more spiritual, divine & disinterested any duty is, the more opposition there is in sinful nature to it. I have sometimes wondered at the opposition, or at least disinclination I find in my wicked heart too often unto prayer, as if it were to perform some very painful service, and also at the vile excuses that offer me their enchanting couch to rest myself upon. I can follow you and even outstrip you in all your complaints; only that my negligence in this solemn duty may be much more appreciated than any in you, since the Lord, I hope at least, inclined me to seek him very young, & overwhelmed me with Joy by a sense of his Love. . . . It is but comparatively seldom that I am enabled to pour forth my whole soul to God in prayer according to my desire. A stupid, indolent, sensual or legal temper sadly clogs the wings of my prayers. . . . True prayer has humility, faith and love for its ingredients, and it is for want of having these graces in their lively exercises that I pray not more frequently, more fervently.

Thomas sought to encourage Francis by reminding him that

closet prayer [is like] the smoke on a windy day. When it is very calm the smoke will ascend and resemble an erect pillar, but when windy, as soon as it is out it is scattered to and fro, sometimes 'tis beaten down the chimney again and fills the house. Shall I not thus give over? Satan would have it so, and flesh would have it so, but I should be more earnest in it.

Francis sought to pray to God twice daily, but he confessed that his difficulties with following a discipline of a set time for prayer stemmed from his being away from his home on itinerant preaching journeys. He also admitted that he had taken up "an unhappy habit of sleeping in the morning much longer" than he should have. And this cut into valuable time for prayer. He did not try to excuse such failings.

How much has changed since Francis' day—and yet how much remains the same: the same struggle with sin and poor habits that hinder our praying and devotion!

ANSWERED PRAYERS

In 1767, Thomas asked of his friend, “How may one know whether his Prayers are answered or not?” Francis has six brief answers:

1. By the removal of the evil prayed against, or the reception and enjoyment of the good prayed for.
2. By the peculiar and extraordinary circumstances that may attend the removal of the evil or the reception of the good: as the success of Abraham’s servant etc.
3. When one does not receive the blessing prayed for, but receives another, perhaps not thought of by him, yet more seasonable, needful & useful.
4. When he is assisted by the Spirit to pray, to pray in faith, and to wrestle with God. His prayer will then be answered, whether he perceives it or not, or whether he lives to see it or not, yea though he does not receive the particular good he prays for.
5. When God meets, that is, revives and relieves him in prayer, that is a speedy way in which God answers the prayer of his people. “I will not remove thy sore affliction, Paul, though thou hast entreated me thrice; but my grace shall be sufficient for thee to bear it.” Thus God sometimes answers a prayer with a promise, but not the immediate blessing.
6. In general one may conclude that God answers his prayers, when he is made more holy and resigned to the will of God, and enabled to persevere in all the duties of religion, and to rejoice in the God of his salvation.

The last of these six answers is especially important. It displays the mature realization that four of the most important things for which we could pray are: (1) growth in holiness; (2) unreserved commitment to God’s sovereign will over one’s life; (3) perseverance; and (4) a heart of joy in God.

When Francis died in 1799, it is noteworthy that what was remembered by his close friends in regard to his devotion were his “fervent prayers.” He would have been surprised!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michael A. G. Haykin is Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

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