

*A PRAYER PRIMER:  
MEDITATIONS ON ROMANS 8:26-27*

As Henry is driving through the winding roads of his city's streets, his car breaks down. It's a Sunday morning, so the streets are relatively empty. There is a building about a half a block away that has cars all around it. This building stands out from all of the rest of the buildings. A spire twists into the sky, drawing his gaze upwards. Bells ring, extending a warm welcome, even a bidding, to come inside.

He needs help. This is the only place that seems to have warm bodies in it. So, he heads toward the building. He is overwhelmed by his smallness in the shadow of this great work of art as he approaches the big, red wooden doors.

Something is going on inside. Henry isn't a religious man. Sure, he's heard of church, but he's never been. His parents weren't church-going folks, so he never bothered.

He's just looking for help.

When he steps through the doors, people are doing strange things. A man up front is dressed in colorful clothes and, in a sing-songy voice he is doing something like singing from this book. Then, the hundreds of people who are sitting in these benches answer with one voice, singing back to him. He's never heard anything like this. What are they doing?

Sometimes the man up front stops the whole dialogue and looks up, hands raised, and starts talking. At the end of his little talk, he mentions something about a name ... Jesus, Henry thinks. Then he says, "Amen" with the entire group of people.

This all looks weird. Attractive, but weird.

A man sees Henry at the entrance and approaches him. Henry, forgetting about his car for a moment, asks, "What's going on here?"

The man responds, "This is our worship service. We are praying."

Praying. What is that? It looks like spoken and sung words are going up into the air, dissipating as quickly as they are spoken. Is this some magic ritual? How does it work? What is happening when God's people are praying?

Most of us are probably more familiar with prayer than Henry. But do you know what is happening when God's people pray?

Prayer is one of the basic practices of the Christian faith. It is so simple that our smallest children learn to pray in their earliest years. However, prayer is so profound that we can never plumb all of its mysteries.

Prayer is not merely an activity for Christians. It is who we are. YHWH speaks through Isaiah telling him that his house will be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa 56.7). This house

of prayer is the Temple. We, Christians, are the Temple of God. We *are* a house of prayer (1Cor 3.16-17). Prayer characterizes our individual lives and our lives together as Christians. To be Christians without prayer would be like saying that you can be a bodiless human. To be human is to have a body. The existence of the Christian church is the existence of prayer.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul gives us a small but amazing look into prayer. This little booklet is a collection of meditations on prayer focused on what Paul says in Romans 8.26-27:

*Likewise also the Spirit aids us in our weakness. For we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with wordless groanings. and the one who searches the heart knows the mind of the Spirit, because he intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God.*

### **PRAYING IN THE SPIRIT**

What is prayer?

As Christians, we all instinctively know what prayer is. The youngest of our children pray, and it is an aspect of the Christian life we never grow out of but grow into more and more. Prayer is like the ocean. Small children can appreciate and enjoy it, sitting on the beach, watching the waves, splashing in the water. But there is more there than even the most seasoned marine biologist can explore and comprehend. His appreciation for the ocean deepens with knowledge and being in it day after day, but he's still enjoying the same ocean as the child. Prayer is basic to the Christian life. It matters not your maturity level or your level of knowledge. We all enjoy the privilege of it knowing that God meets us in the shallow waters of the beach or the deepest parts of the ocean.

We are going to wade out in to the water and understand just a bit better what this is that defines our lives and what is going on in prayer.

We discover in our passage that there is a Trinitarian shape to prayer, which Paul introduces to us through an emphasis on the Spirit's work in prayer. As throughout all of Romans 8, the Spirit is prominent in this passage. Paul seems to be describing here what he mentions elsewhere in something of a shorthand as praying "in the Spirit." He speaks of it to the Ephesians when he concludes his exhortation to take the whole armor of God. With all of the armor they are putting on, they are also to be "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph 6.18). Jude speaks about it also in Jude 20: "But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit...."

Praying "in the Spirit" isn't judged solely or even primarily upon emotional experience. There are many people who have emotional experiences in prayers to false gods or who think they are praying to the true God but are living contrary to the Spirit.

This is not to say that emotion is uninvolved in prayer. We can't read this passage and think that. We are groaning with the creation and the Spirit is groaning with us. This groaning is emotional. But this groaning is not raw, uninformed or misinformed emotion. It is the groaning of those who know and desire God's purpose for the entirety of creation and are longing for it. It

is emotion in line with God's own revealed desires.

While we're here, I will answer another question that comes up in this passage and is related to praying in the Spirit? Are these "wordless groanings" or "inexpressible groanings" some type of tongues; a Spirit prayer language? The short answer is, "No." Even if you were to believe that the Spirit gives some type of prayer language that is some expression of the gift of tongues (and I don't believe he does), it would be a language. Paul's words here are literally "wordless groanings." There are no words expressed.

I believe Paul is speaking about those desires that are wrapped up in pain, longing, and anticipation that cannot be put into words. They are ours and the Spirit's deepest heart desires for liberation from corruption and for all things to be put right. They are wordless prayers.

Have you ever been in a situation in which the pain was so deep and your longing for God to change things was so acute, however, you just didn't know what exactly what changes needed to be made? You didn't know what to pray. It was just a cloud of inarticulate sorrow and longing flooding your soul. When you tried to pray, nothing came out. I believe that is more of what Paul is saying, though he is referring to a more common experience than we may even realize.

So praying in the Spirit is *not* judged solely by emotion, and it is *not* praying with some special gift of a tongues prayer language. Now let's turn to what it is.

*Praying in the Spirit is fellowship in Trinitarian life.*

Within the life of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit has a special role. He creates and sustains bonds or relationships between people. He has been doing this forever. This is his activity in the life of the Trinity in eternity. He is the Spirit of God the Father (Gen 1.2; Rom 8.9, 14; 15.19) as well as the Spirit of the Son/Christ (Gal 4.6; Rom 8.9). The Spirit "belongs" to both the Father and the Son.

Our early church fathers described the Spirit as the "bond of love" between the Father and the Son. In the Trinitarian relationship described in terms of love, the Father is the Lover, the Son the beloved, and the Spirit is the bond of love between them.

We understand his eternal ministry in the Trinity because we hear of his work with us. His work with us images his eternal ministry. He creates bonds between us and God as well as one another. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 4 that we are to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The Spirit creates the bond with the body of Christ through baptism according to 1 Corinthians 12.13: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." The Spirit is the one who puts the body of Christ together; whether you are talking about the Person of Christ in the womb of Mary (Lk 1.35) or the body of Christ, the church (1Cor 12.11). The Spirit puts things and people in relationship with one another.

The Spirit creates a relationship between us and the Father in the Son. Praying in the Spirit has a definite Trinitarian shape to it. In Ephesians 2.18 Paul describes prayer in this way: “For through him [Christ] we both [Jews & Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father.” While we may pray to the Son or Spirit, the biblical model of prayer is that we pray to the Father in the Son and by the Spirit.

The Spirit creates a relationship between us and the Son. Having the Spirit of the Son, we then can call God, “Father” (Rom 8.15). It is only because we are “in Christ” or “in the Son” that we have the privilege of calling God Father. However, because we are in the Son, we are joining with Jesus in calling God, “Father.” God is our Father and Jesus is our older brother. We share sonship with Jesus. (This is why Paul can say that we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” in Romans 8.17)

This is a privilege that we have only because of our union with Christ Jesus. The Spirit who creates this relationship between us and the Father in the Son is the one who causes us to cry out, “Abba Father” (Rom 8.15). He is the “Spirit of sonship.” This is echoed in Gal 4.6: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” By the Spirit we pray in Jesus and with Jesus. We share Jesus’ own life with the Father and the Spirit.

Jesus is praying to the Father like he did while he was on earth. He ever lives now in his resurrected existence to make intercession for us, Hebrews 7.25 says. He joins his family in the church, singing psalms, hymns, and songs of the Spirit, praising the name of his Father. So says the Psalm that the writer of Hebrews puts on the lips of the Son: “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” (Heb 2.12; quoting Ps 22:22). Our worship as the church, which is nothing more than a prayer service, is participation in the divine conversation. We are joining with Jesus by the Spirit to praise the Father, and the Father is speaking to us by the Spirit through his Son, sharing his gifts with us.

To pray in the Spirit, then, is entering into fellowship with the Trinity. The Spirit brings us into a divine conversation that has been going on forever. The Father, Son, and Spirit have been talking with one another forever. The fact that the second member of the Godhead is “the Word” who eternally dwells face-to-face with the Father (John 1.1) speaks of this divine conversation. In Jesus’ own praying, for example, in John 17, we get a glimpse into this ongoing conversation between the Father and the Son.

As we have been given the Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8.9), to pray in the Spirit is to share in this conversation.

Prayer is not simply talking to God, as if he is some distant, possibly aloof, deity. This is the way pagans view their gods. They are gods who are far off. The relationship is distant at best. The gods have their life, and we have ours. At points our lives intersect over a great span connected by words and sacrifices of some sort. This is not the biblical picture of prayer in our relationship with God. We do talk to God, but we are within the divine family as we do so. We are “in Christ.” Being in Christ by the Spirit means that prayer is sharing life with God.

Paul reflects this richness of prayer as he speaks of the Spirit's groans in taking up our wordless prayers and interceding for us, literally, "according to God." We don't know what to pray for as we ought. This is not the same as saying, "You don't know how to pray." Jesus taught us how to pray. Paul is saying that we don't know what to pray for exactly in the various situations of suffering that we experience as we groan with the creation waiting for our redemption. We don't understand how all of these things are working together for good (Rom 8.28). We can only trust God that they do.

As the disciples' understanding concerning Jesus' prophecies of his death, we don't understand when we are in the situation how God can possibly bring good out of this. What do you pray for? Generally, we resort to praying for immediate deliverance out of the situation. There is nothing wrong with that. Jesus himself did it in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We don't know what to pray. But we are not alone in our praying. The Triune God is not watching us to see if we get the petitions right. He is participating with us through the Spirit. The Spirit takes up our groans, joining us in them, and the Father, the "searcher of hearts," understands the Spirit because he prays "according to God."

This is usually translated "according to the will of God." However, if Paul had wanted to say that, he would have. This is a much richer phrase. N. T. Wright explains:

This hints at something deeper than merely praying in the way God wants or approves; God's own life, love, and energy are involved in the process. The Christian, precisely at the point of weakness and uncertainty, of inability and struggle, becomes the place at which the triune God is revealed in person. (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X, Nashville: Abington Press, 2002, 600)

The Spirit has created this relationship with the Father in the Son, joining us to the divine family, giving us a seat at the feasting table, and calls us to join in the family conversation about what is going on in the world.

Praying in the Spirit is praying in relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But praying in the Spirit also means praying with all of those who share this relationship. The Spirit creates a bond between us and the Father in the Son *and with all those who call God Father in the Son*. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Matthew 6, he taught them to pray "Our Father," not "my Father" (although the latter is perfectly legitimate). Whenever we pray, we must understand ourselves in union with the rest of the church, the body of Christ.

Praying in the Spirit is reflected this way in the opening words of Revelation. The apostle John says that he was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev 1.10). Does that mean that John was having an ecstatic experience? No. It means that he was in a worship service. What the rest of Revelation reveals is the reality that is happening when we gather as the people of God; or what it means to be "in the Spirit."

The Spirit unites us with one another on earth and with God and the saints in heaven. Praying in the Spirit includes being where God called us to be as the people of God to pray. The

Spirit dwells in the Temple of God. The Temple is the dwelling place of the Spirit. The Temple of God is never more present on earth than when saints are gathered together to pray. We are, as Paul says in Ephesians 2.22, a “house of the Spirit.”

This doesn't mean that we can't pray in the Spirit apart from the gathered worship of God's people. But our individual and family praying is always to be understood in context of the larger life of the church. Prayer concerns relationships; relationships with God, the church, and the world around us. All of our prayers are ministries of, to, and for the church. The Spirit is concerned about fitting our lives in the larger plan of God, making us agents of his in creating good, peaceful, righteous relationships in the world. Praying in the Spirit is praying with the rest of the church whether gathered together or separated.

Because the Spirit creates these bonds of peace between us, when we refuse to live at peace with one another through bitterness and unforgiveness, our prayers will not be heard. This is why Jesus says in Matthew 6.14-15 that if you don't forgive others your heavenly Father won't forgive you. We are “grieving the Spirit” (Eph 4.30). We are not praying in the Spirit if we are holding bitterness or unforgiveness because that is contrary to the life of the family of God. God doesn't live that way, so our prayers are not a part of his divine conversation. They bring ugliness and disharmony. That is walking contrary to the Spirit. It is not praying in the Spirit.

Prayer, therefore, is not an attempt to try to coax God down here to do something as if he is some distant deity who only interacts with us and the world from afar. Prayer is a deep participation in the life of God himself: Father, Son, and Spirit. This participation requires that we be in harmony with God and in harmony with everyone with whom God is in harmony; that is, his faithful family.

Praying in the Spirit means that we fellowship in the life of the Triune God. Fellowshiping with the Triune God, participating in his life has deep implications that are evidenced in our prayer life. This brings us to the second aspect of praying in the Spirit.

*Praying in the Spirit is sharing the desires of the Spirit.*

Participation in the life of our Triune God goes to the matters of our hearts. What do we desire?

In our Romans passage we hear Paul talking about our groans and the groans of the Spirit. There is a harmony between these groans. In other words, the Spirit is taking up our groans because they are consistent somehow with his own desires. Because he creates the relationship with the Father in the Son, they are actually his desires being revealed in us and for us.

Love for God is poured out in our hearts by the Spirit (Rom 5.5). He is the one who makes us yearn for the Father, crying out, “Abba, Father.” Our love for the Father and his purposes are generated by the Spirit. Therefore, our groans are a reflection of what the Spirit himself wants.

When you are loving what God loves and praying to that end, you are praying in the Spirit, for without the Spirit you wouldn't love what God loves.

What we are groaning for, what the creation is groaning for, and what the Spirit is groaning with both of us for, is our hope of glory. We have been promised and we desire the world to be set right. This means that God's Son/sons are ruling the creation and everything is operating according to the righteousness of God. The bondage of corruption of sin is gone because our bodies have been redeemed in resurrection. The creation is ordered in relationships of peace between God and man, man and man, man and animals, and man with non-animated creation. Heaven and earth are in harmony as God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Praying in the Spirit means that we share the desire for the will of God done on earth as it is in heaven. We want to see the world put right, and our groans, our deepest longings for it are expressed in prayer.

The Spirit desires that the Father and the Son be glorified. When pray for this, we are praying in the Spirit. The Spirit desires that relationships be made right. When we pray for this, we are praying in the Spirit.

How do we know when we are sharing the desires of the Spirit in prayer? When our prayers line up with what the Spirit has revealed to us in Christ through the Scriptures. We do not know how God is working in every situation in life. This is why we don't know what to pray exactly in every situation as mentioned earlier. But we know, for instance, that ultimately God's plan is to eliminate suffering. When we pray for people to be freed from suffering, we are praying in line with the Spirit's desires. God may work it out in a totally unexpected way, but we are praying in line with the Spirit.

When we pray that sin and sinners be cut off from working their evil ends, we are praying in the Spirit. Sometimes God allows sin to take its course. He allowed it in the death of his own Son. He is working through those situations to be sure, but we are perfectly in line with the Spirit when we pray that sin and sinners be cut off.

The Spirit doesn't speak with two contradictory voices, one through the Scriptures and one that you hear in your heart. You need to be leery of this "hearing from God" business. "I prayed about it" in the church is sometimes the trump card to shut down conversation about your unwise or sinful choices.

It is amazing how many times God "confirms" our stupid, stubborn choices in prayer. Did God say something to you? Did he write something in the sky? Your "praying about it" doesn't mean that you have the right answer and may now speak with absolute authority about what ought to be done. God's Spirit works through the Scriptures and through the godly counsel of others to teach you his will. Our hearts and minds are clouded with our own sins and weaknesses. We will deceive ourselves into believing that we "heard from God" on a matter that is contrary to his word.

Through the thirty years of ministering in the church, I have watched people rationalizing all sorts of sins and unwise decisions by "praying about it."

Imagine your child coming to you, parents, and saying, "I know you told me to clean my

room, but I've prayed about it and concluded that this is not God's will for my life." Well, the same things happen with church members in relationship to pastor and elders all the time. No matter what God has revealed about "obeying those who have rule over you," someone has "prayed about it" and decided the Scriptures don't apply to them.

You ought to pray about it. But praying in the Spirit means that you pray in harmony with the Spirit-inspired Scriptures as well as in harmony with the counsel of Spirit-filled people.

Praying in the Spirit doesn't mean that the Spirit is somehow giving you new revelation or even giving you specific direction in prayer. In fact, this passage in Romans practically says that he doesn't work that way. The Spirit doesn't give you words where you don't have any so you'll know exactly what to pray. The Spirit takes your wordless prayers and translates them to the Father who knows how to interpret them.

So, be careful of thinking that the Spirit is talking to you in prayer. And be especially careful if you are trying to use that to shut down wise counsel from your brothers and sisters, or worse, disobey a direct command of Scripture. Praying in the Spirit means that your will is lined up with his. You love what he loves and, consequently, you pray and work for what he wants. It means that you will listen to him through others who also have the Spirit.

The Spirit's presence in our prayers creates a relationship with the Triune God and all of his people in which we share common loves.

*Praying in the Spirit is praying with the power of the Spirit*

When the Bible speaks of "the Spirit," the emphasis is not so much on the immaterial nature of the Spirit, but rather the power. As Sinclair Ferguson puts it, the Hebrew word could almost be translated "the violence of God." (Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Downers Grove: IL, InterVarsity Press, 1996, 17). To pray in the Spirit means that the power of the Spirit is joining us in prayer. The Spirit of God that hovered over the face of the original creation, energizing the Word of God to form and fill the creation, the Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead, is the same Spirit in whom we pray and who is praying with and for us.

The fact that the Spirit is present in our prayers, even our wordless groanings, means that the power of God is working in and through our prayers to change things in the world. Prayer that is in concert with the word of God in our lives—that is, praying in Jesus' name—is energized by the Spirit to make effective the purposes of God in the world.

We don't have this wispy hope in prayer. Because we have the Spirit present and praying with us, we can be confident that the power of God is operating at that point. We will not always see how he operates. But we can be assured that he is.

This doesn't mean that he can be manipulated as if he is some kind of genie who must give us three wishes in prayer; that his power is at our unqualified disposal. It isn't. The divine family doesn't operate in a way that uses the other members to create some kind of personal comfort without regard for others. Attempting to use the power of the Spirit in this way is not prayer in the Spirit.



Praying in the Spirit means that, in line with the Spirit's desires, you want to see his power used to set things right; to vindicate the righteous and condemn the wicked.

When we pray as the church in the Spirit, things are happening that we can't see. But just because we can't see them now doesn't mean that they aren't happening. God has already shown us the power that comes and is exercised through prayer in the Spirit in the book of Revelation. We see it through John's eyes in Revelation 8.1-5:

*When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.*

Our prayer in the Spirit is shaking up the world. God uses our prayers to effect change in the world, moving his purposes forward.

Brothers and sisters, you have the Spirit of Christ, and having the Spirit you are urged and empowered by him to pray. *Each person baptized into the Triune name is called to a life of prayer.*

God has called you, in concert with all of his saints, to join him in his life; to share his joys, his sorrows, his loves, his hatred, his anger, his purpose. Your God brought you into his family because he loves you and desires for you to share life with him. And he really loves it when all of his family gathers together to share this life with him and with one another. Psalm 87.2 says that YHWH loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. That is, he loves it when his people are gathered as his family more than he loves it when we are scattered in our individual homes.

Even though we must discipline ourselves to pray both individually and corporately, prayer should not be approached as bald duty to some distant God. When you love someone, when there is a deep bond between you and your lives are wrapped up with one another, you want to be with that person. You want share conversation. You may even comfortably sit in silence when there are no words.

The call to prayer is a call to a life of love with the Father in the Son through the power of the Spirit. The evidence of his activity in your life is that you yearn for this. Prayer is not something that you do merely when you get in trouble and need to be bailed out. It is this ceaseless exchange of love between you and your Father.

If you are not wanting to pray or asking, "Is that really necessary? What is the minimal amount I need to do stay in good with God?" then you need to examine yourself as to what or who has the affection of your heart above our God.

Do you long to pray? Do you long like the Psalmists to be with the people of God to pray? If so, persevere in your disciplines of prayer. If not, if other affections have your heart, you need to pray and begin to discipline yourself to cultivate that kind of love for God.

### WEAKLY PRAYER

Have you ever been in a situation in which words were inadequate and did not come? You are sitting with a friend who has lost a parent or a child. What do you say? There are no words. You sit in mournful silence with him, both of you feeling the deep pain but unable to relieve the immediate tension through getting a handle on it through words.

This is what prayer is like many times; in fact, it is like this for the most part, even more than we realize. We are weak, Paul says. This weakness is shown in the fact that we don't know what to pray for as we ought. This revelation about our weakness is couched in the context of encouragement. However, recognizing our weakness is necessary to understanding the encouragement that he gives.

#### *Our Limitations*

The Spirit helps our weakness because we don't know what to pray for as we ought. Some might want to fudge this translation a bit and say something to the effect of, "for we don't know *how* to pray as we ought." That muddies the waters just a bit because we have been taught how to pray by Jesus himself as well as all of the other prayers in the Scripture.

Paul is saying that we don't know exactly what to pray in a world that is groaning in the pains of childbirth (Rom 8.22). There are certain things that we don't know and, therefore, we can't give expression to them in words.

At first blush it may not seem extremely encouraging to hear the apostle say, "You don't know what to pray for as you ought." However, the statement is the truth, and it is ultimately liberating.

There are certain things that we and the world need. When Paul says we don't know what to pray for as we *ought*, he is saying that there are necessities for the world that we don't understand or even know about. There are things that must be done, and we don't know what to pray for in those situations. These things are *musts*. We and the world can't do without them.

This word used here is the same word that Jesus used when he taught his disciples that he *must* go to Jerusalem to suffer and die (cf. e.g., Matt 16.21). This is a great example of not knowing what we ought to pray.

For the disciples at that time, this was a category mistake. The Messiah doesn't die. He's the conqueror. Did they believe Jesus would be victorious? Yes. Did they pray to that end? I'm sure they did. In their weakness what they couldn't get their minds wrapped around was how victory was going to be accomplished. This was so much the case that at one time Peter rebuked Jesus for talking like this (Mark 8.31-33). The disciples believed in Jesus and trusted that he was

the one to bring in the kingdom of God, but they didn't understand what *must* or what *ought* to be done to do that. It was only after the fact that they grasped what had happened and that God had answered their prayers in a surprising way.

So it is with us. While some of us may look down on the disciples for their lack of understanding, we all still do the same things.

Do I *need* suffering? Yes. If it was *necessary* that Jesus, who was without sin, learn obedience through the things that he suffered (Heb 5.8), then it is certainly *necessary* that I, who am a sinner, learn obedience through suffering. Do I know how to pray to ask God just what kind of suffering I need; its intensity and duration? No. Do I know what to pray concerning suffering so that it will effect blessing for the lives around me? No.

These are deep mysteries reserved for the wisdom of God; mysteries we only figure out to some degree after the fact (and maybe not even then. Understanding may wait until our resurrection.) We never get to the point that we know exactly what to pray in a given situation. We just don't know what God is doing.

As we mature and, in the practice of prayer, having our hearts' desires molded by God's own desires, we will become better at seeing how we can pray in this or that situation as well as how God might work here or there. However, God has not given us the perspective to pray for all the things that are necessary in the world.

With our limited perspectives we can't see how one person's suffering over here is helping all of these people over there, or how this suffering is helping the person suffering. There are some things that we can't know.

Do you know what to pray for an election? Who is supposed to be in office? We know how to pray in those situations. We want righteousness to rule our land; for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We pray for the best candidate who will come closest to helping the government make and enforce righteous laws.

But what if the country or the world needs a Pharaoh who will oppress the people of God because of their sin? What if the culture needs to be destroyed? We learn in Romans 9 that God raised up Pharaoh to demonstrate his power. His people needed Pharaoh. The world needed Pharaoh. But who would pray for such a thing?

We are weak in our limitations. The good news is that God doesn't expect more of you than he has provided you. God is not waiting on you to get all the information just right before he acts on your behalf or the behalf of the world.

Being a Christian, even being a mature Christian, doesn't turn you into God or even a super-human. In fact, it seems that the more one matures the more he recognizes his weakness; just how much he doesn't know.

This is what we hear at the end of Solomon's life as he reflects on it in Ecclesiastes. In Proverbs he is giving his son wisdom about how things generally operate in the world. But the

gaining of wisdom through Proverbs (or any of the other Wisdom books) is not to be taken as, “If I get all of this wisdom stuff down, then I will be able to gain leverage in the world to make it operate the way I want it to. I will have a complete handle on life.” Wisdom, many times, does just the opposite. We know how things ought to be. But we can’t make straight what God has made crooked, and that can be very frustrating if we ourselves don’t have the right perspective.

Wisdom knows generally how things in the world *ought* to be. But wisdom knows that the world is arranged under the mysterious wisdom of God himself. True wisdom is not the ability to figure everything out and, in our case, know exactly what to pray, fixing everything. Rather, true wisdom submits to the wisdom of God who has the perspective that we don’t have. True wisdom trusts the wisdom of God that he is working all things together for good (Rom 8.28).

We hear in Ecclesiastes 3.11 that God has made everything “fitting” (“beautiful” is not the best translation here) for its time. He’s got a plan for everything. He’s the only one who knows how all the suffering, all the Pharaohs, all the good things, all the sin, and whatever else fits together.

Why is that God’s people keep suffering at the hands of the Muslims? Why is it that abortion still plagues our land? Why is it that we suffer agony as God’s faithful people while we see God-haters prospering? Why isn’t God answering our prayers *in the way we think he ought to*? Because we don’t know *what* to pray in these situations.

We know generally how to pray. We may pray specifically with the general in mind, but we must always submit our requests to the ultimate wisdom of God, trusting that he is our loving heavenly Father who will do what is best for us.

This is all very liberating even if, at times, it may be frustrating. But we only become frustrated in prayer and things not going the way we’ve prayed when we approach prayer in the wrong way: Thinking that we know what’s ultimately best for the situation and expecting God to do what we said do.

The posture of prayer is one of humble submission to the will of the Father, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” It is the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego who, in the face of being thrown into a fiery furnace says, “... our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold image that you have set up” (Dan 3.17-18).

Praying with this kind of faith sees my life completely at the disposal of God’s great purposes for the world. My life is not about personal comfort first and foremost. My life is for the kingdom. In whatever way God wants to dispose of my life for his kingdom purposes, and, consequently, however he answers my prayers to do so, is what is best for me because it is best for his kingdom.

“If by my life or by my death, if by my suffering or by my health, I may serve your

kingdom, Lord make it so.” *That* is a prayer of faith.

Strong faith is not “claiming” deliverance from sickness, suffering, or believing that God will do what you want him to do. It is knowing that God can do it but may not choose to do so. Praying in faith means saying, “I would like to be delivered from this situation. I ask you to do this for me. But if this is the way I must go, give me the grace to persevere in faith, never forsaking you.” This is how Jesus lived and prayed. That’s how we are to live and pray.

In the end, I know that whatever happens, it will turn out good for me; that somehow God is using all of this for my good in the greater context of accomplishing his good purposes for the entire created order that he loves. I want what he wants. However he wants me to serve that purpose, that’s what I want, even if I don’t understand what he is doing. I don’t have to know everything. All I have to know is the One who does know everything.

God doesn’t expect me to know everything and have all the answers so that I may pray with precision. We pursue knowledge and wisdom because it is good for us and our mission in the world, but we are not expected to attain the knowledge and wisdom of God himself. To think that we can is a fool’s errand. It may be wrapped in pious clothes, but it pride pure and simple.

I pray with the knowledge I have of the general purpose and plan of God. Then I need not worry. God will answer in his own time and his own way.

Keep your weakness in mind when you pray. You are limited because you are a creature. These are non-sinful limitations. God hasn’t given us, his creatures, the ability to be him. We are limited by time, space, and knowledge. And that’s okay. Recognize it.

We have the added limitation of being sinful creatures. Sin tricks our hearts and minds. Our thinking is clouded. Our desires are stained. Recognize this when you pray. We are weak, and because of it, we don’t know what to pray as we ought.

If we don’t know what to pray as we ought, why bother? There are a number of reasons why we should pray.

*a) Because God has commanded it*

Faith does what God commands even before it understands (or if it never understands). Faith relies upon a loving heavenly Father who will never give us purposeless activities, but who tells us what to do and not to do for our good.

One reason that God has commanded it is that as his sons, rulers of this created order, we have a calling to present ourselves and the world over which we are taking dominion to him. We do that in prayer, whatever form it may take.

*b) Because it is a family privilege*

God has welcomed us into the divine conversation ... even with all of our weaknesses.

Prayer is an expression of love for our God. Somehow and in some way our part of the conversation has a purpose. In prayer is one way in which we join with God as co-laborers with him in his creation project.

*c) Because it is an expression of our need and limitations*

The act of prayer itself is the expression that we stand as needy creatures, dependent upon our God. This recognition is good for us. It keeps us in a position of humility and is one weapon against the enemy of pride.

*d) Because God changes us through prayer*

As we seek God in prayer in the way that we are taught to pray in the Scriptures, our hearts are changed. We begin to see more clearly the needs around us and we learn how to “groan with the Spirit.”

*e) Because God answers prayer*

God hears us and he answers prayer always; not always in the way that we have prayed specifically or what we have particularly desired, but he always answers prayer. (More on this in a moment.)

Prayer participates with the activity of God in managing the world. Prayer is indispensable in our dominion mandate because God is ultimately the one who changes everything. God works through prayer to change the world. Earlier I referred to Revelation 8.1-5 as an example of what God does through prayer: our prayers ascend and God uses them to shake up the world. God is answering prayer.

*Our Help*

We have limitations. We are weak and don't know what to pray for as we ought. However, we are not left alone in our weakness. We have a Helper.

Paul assumes our weakness. But he encourages us by telling us that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” He helps us by interceding for us with wordless groanings.

Please note something that Paul does *not* say. He does not say, “Because you don't know what to pray, the Spirit will come along side you and give you the right words so that you will know exactly how to pray.” That is not the kind of relief that he gives in prayer.

There is an interesting dynamic going on here. It is as if for the present time, along with the rest of creation, groaning in this way is our calling and words would give us a relief that we are not afforded at this present time. This is part of our suffering with Christ, it seems to me. N. T. Wright is helpful here. When describing our groaning he says, “It is, rather, an agony that would come into speech if only it could, part of whose agony indeed is that to bring it to speech, to name the problem and hence to envisage its solution, would be to attain some measure of relief.” (*Interpreter's*, 606)

Prayer not only expresses our deep suffering, but prayer, in one of its dimensions, is a conscious entering into that place of suffering. (Maybe this is one reason why we don't discipline ourselves to pray more.) Prayer is that place in which we join the Spirit and the creation in groaning.

The Spirit doesn't relieve that groaning. That is not the kind of help that we receive. While he does strengthen us as we take on a position of humble trust in our heavenly Father, the Spirit groans with us. He is not revealing God's specific plan to us, giving us the inside scoop on what he is doing in all of this. Help doesn't come in the form of information but intercession. The Spirit meets us and the creation at the point of our pain and joins us in our wordless groanings.

I don't completely understand what these "wordless groanings" are, but let me give you something that might help you understand better what is going on. These groanings, whether ours or the Spirit's, are something like wordless music. Some music doesn't need words. In fact, words would limit the music too much. They don't fit.

Music of this sort is articulate in one way. We can generally understand the sadness or joys that are being expressed in the music, but it is difficult to nail down its meaning precisely and, therefore, understand its goal. One of Chopin's most well-known works, his Sonata no. 2 for piano in B flat minor, is like this. There is a section in the Sonata that is called "The Funeral March." The wordless music itself joins in and gives expression to the sadness of a funeral, moving us along to the grave, with the brightness of hope entering at times. The music is enough. It gives expression that words can't give. Words can't do what the groaning of this music does. The music expresses our groaning. We participate in it. But we can't articulate it in words.

These groanings, it seems to me, are something like that. They are the wordless music of creation along with us taken up by the Spirit. The Spirit tunes them up, putting the right fundamental notes so that our groanings harmonize with his, and he "performs" the music before the Father on our behalf. That is his intercession.

Intercession is simply praying on the behalf of another. That is what the Spirit is doing for us. He takes our deepest desires that we don't understand and "plays" them before the Father. The "Searcher of hearts" knows the mind of the Spirit," he knows how to interpret the music so to speak, even though it doesn't have words from us. The Spirit is in perfect harmony with the Father and the Father with the Spirit. They are on the same sheet of music. They both know what the music means and what it is to accomplish. Even though we don't know exacting where are part of the music fits and to what end it is being played, we are in the Trinitarian symphony.

### *Our Assurance*

Paul's words of encouragement are words of assurance for us in prayer. Our weakness is not the last word concerning our prayer. If the Spirit is praying with us and for us, and the Father knows the mind of the Spirit, we have assurance that our prayers are not only being heard but will be answered.

This is confirmed in what Jesus taught us on prayer as we hear in Luke 13.1-13. Our Father always answers our prayers and he will always do what is best.

Jesus has just taught them to pray, giving them what we know as "the Lord's Prayer." In it we are taught to address God as "Father." We can call God, "Father" because we have been united to his Son, Jesus. In union with him we have the same privilege of relationship as Jesus himself. What belongs to him belongs to us. He is an heir of the Father, and we are co-heirs with him of the Father (Rom 8.17). He is the recipient of the Father's love, and in him we are the recipient of the Father's love.

It is within this context that Jesus teaches us what to expect in prayer, and, therefore, how to approach the Father in prayer.

Some pretty bold statements are made that we, generally, want to tone down through theological maneuvering. Jesus says, "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Lk 11.9-10).

Jesus then gives the reason why your prayers will be answered: you have a loving



heavenly Father. Jesus draws the analogy between us earthly fathers and our relationship with our children and our heavenly Father's relationship with us.

If any of your children asked for a fish, would you give him a serpent? If any of your children asked for an egg, would you give him a scorpion? The answer is an understood, repulsive, "No!" You are evil and you know how to give good gifts to your children. How much more will your heavenly Father, who is pure, unadulterated goodness, give the Holy Spirit to those who ask; that is, his good gifts?

Because I cannot improve on the way Peter Leithart says this in his exhortation, *Repent of Your Piety*, I quote him at length.

Pray and live remembering Jesus' promise: Everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds, and the one who knocks will get an open door. God does not give snakes when we ask for fish; He doesn't give scorpions instead of eggs. He doesn't give stones for bread. He doesn't do that. He never gives evil things to His children. Ever. Never, ever, ever. He always gives good things to His children. Always, always, always.

Here's the promise in a nutshell: God always gives you what you ask, or something better.

You'll say: I've prayed for a lot of things that I never got. You may really want something, pray diligently, and be disappointed. You may want something now, and it doesn't show up. You pray years, and it doesn't happen. Good things; unselfish things. You'll say: I've prayed for God to do good things and all I get is suffering and frustration and failure. I've prayed for relief from suffering and trial, but it keeps coming and it keeps getting worse.

What's happening? Have Jesus' promises been nullified? Do we have to qualify after all? Is there fine print after all? No. What's happening when our prayers aren't answered?

It's possible that you were asking for a snake or a scorpion? Were the things we asked for really good for us, the best for us? He may say No because No is the best answer. It's possible that He is giving us good things that don't appear good to us, not at first. If you ask for relief from suffering, and get more suffering, that means that God has given you the gift of tribulation.

He may want to purge away sin. He may put you on the cross to strengthen your faith. Whatever tribulation He brings, you can rejoice; you can be triumphant because "we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

When you suffer, you're on the cross – where Jesus was, and that's where the living Jesus will meet you. You ask for relief, and He gives you more suffering, not only to work these virtues into you, but to make you a living witness to your crucified Lord. By your patient, joyful, persevering, honest suffering God demonstrates in your life that His power is made perfect in weakness. He makes your life a living witness to the power of

the gospel. He proves in your life that the gospel is real.

What's going on when we don't get what we ask? It may be many things, but Jesus makes it clear that one thing is definitely not going on: This is not God giving you stones for bread, a snake or scorpion instead of a fish. This is not God giving you the short end of the stick. This is not God keeping the door locked. He doesn't do that. Ever, ever, ever. He gives good gifts to His children. Always, always, always. Nothing but good.

God always gives you what you ask, or something even better.

(<https://theopolisinstitute.com/repent-of-your-piety/>)

Pray then, not primarily focused on your weakness, but upon the strength of the promise of God. Pray submitting to the wisdom of God. It might even lessen your frustration. Your heavenly Father loves you. He is giving you what is best for you. It is not always pleasant, but it is best.

Dear saints, pray. Pray with the full recognition of your weakness, but pray with the assurance that the Spirit is helping your weakness. He is harmonizing your prayers with his own desires and the desires of the Father. As he answers, your life is being more and more tuned to the music of God himself, shaping you and the world around you into fuller expressions of the kingdom of God.

### THE WORK OF PRAYER

Prayer is participation in the life of communication of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Joined to Christ Jesus by the Spirit, we share the desires, aims, loves, hates, and other aspects of the divine life, and we take up conversation with the Father in the Son and through the Spirit.

Sharing this life doesn't mean that we have become God. We are weak, limited by our creaturliness as well as our sinfulness. We don't know what to pray for as we ought. We along with the rest of the world need things that we don't know about. We see the way things ought to be. We pray for that. But we don't know what God must do to get us and the world to that place. At this point of our groaning in prayer, the Spirit takes up our groans and intercedes on our behalf to the Father. The Father hears our prayers through the Spirit and gives us and the world what we need.

Now there are two more questions I want to answer: *How does prayer work?* and *How do we do the work of prayer?*

*How does prayer work?*

One question that might arise concerns the relationship of God's sovereignty to prayer. If God is in control of all things so that they will, most certainly, come to their intended end, why pray?

Some might find the sovereignty of God a discouragement from prayer. "My prayers don't matter," might be the sentiment. Others may find the sovereignty of God as an excuse not to pray. "Since prayer doesn't really change anything, it is really not all that important," might be

an excuse not to discipline oneself to pray. Doesn't Paul say in Romans 8.28 that God is working all things together for good to those who love him? If so, then I can just sit and float down the river of God's sovereignty.

This is a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching of God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty—his independent, absolute reign over all things—is a comfort that strengthens us in our work, not an excuse to avoid work. God's sovereignty is the assurance that what he has commanded us to do will ultimately be fruitful.

In God's eternal, fixed plan, he uses what we do to accomplish his plan. God has not only ordained what will be, he has ordained the means to the end. Not praying because God is sovereign is like not eating because God already has our days numbered. It is like letting go of the steering wheel and texting, asking Jesus to take the wheel, because what will be will be.

This is not what the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty. It is mysterious to us how God can be controlling all things and yet use activities like eating, holding on to the steering wheel, and prayer to accomplish his eternal purpose. But that's exactly what he does.

The prayers of his people are one of the means God uses to move the world to his intended purpose for it. This all fits in with the nature of prayer itself as being participation in the life of God. God has united us to himself to join in his life, which means that we participate with him in his creation project. Our being a part of the family of God means that we participate in the family mission: to see the creation come to that place that God intended it from the beginning. Remember, the creation is groaning for this and waiting for the sons of God to be revealed for this to happen. Creation's purpose is all tied up with us.

So, how does prayer fit into this creation project? What affect does prayer have on the situation? Let's think about this in terms of how God first reveals himself to us in the creation. We learn from Genesis 1 that God creates the world by his Word through his Spirit. The apostle John emphasizes this in the opening of his Gospel (John 1.1ff.). The Father speaks the Word, and the breath that carries that Word to make it effective in the creation is the Spirit. So, the Spirit is the power in union with the Word that creates and arranges the creation into the order that the Father wants it.

God created man to be a part of his family, to participate with him in this creation project, ordering the created world and creating new things from what God provided. This is what Genesis calls *dominion*. One of the tools of dominion—a principal tool of dominion—is prayer. Praying in the Spirit—with articulate words or groans—praying in the Spirit re-creates and rearranges the world.

How? God has united us with his eternal Word—his Son, Jesus. We are “words of God” united to the Word of God. And we have the same Spirit that carried God's Word into the nothingness and created the world. Our words are united with the Word by the Spirit, and the Spirit carries those words to rearrange the world. When we speak or pray “in Jesus' name,” we are “words of God” being carried along by the Spirit who is empowering our weakness.

“In Jesus' name” is not merely a little tag we put on the end of our prayers. We are confessing that we are praying in union with Jesus; through his mediation, according to his

kingdom purposes, and, as far as we know, in line with his will.

Just as in original creation when the Spirit carried the Word into the world to form and fill the creation, so now he takes our words in union with the eternal Word into the world to re-arrange the world according to the kingdom purposes of God.

When we think of dominion activities, we tend to think implements we can put in our hands to change things relatively quickly. If I have an axe or chainsaw, I use that to cut down a tree. We send it to the mill to be milled into planks in order to build a house. That is dominion.

Yes it is. But prayer is a more vital, fundamental aspect of our dominion taking than even the axe or chainsaw because it gives us our foundations for why we are building houses. In prayer we realize that unless YHWH build the house, those who build it labor in vain. He is the one who is ultimately building the house.

Prayer works, not because we have all the mechanics down, we say the right words, have the right groanings, or go through certain motions. Prayer works because it is joining with God in his work, participating in his power through the Spirit.

In no way should we discount the way our prayers affect the world. We need to be careful about theologizing our way out of seeing how God uses prayer to change the world.

We hear in Genesis 18 how Abraham went back and forth with YHWH, and YHWH listened to Abraham's prayer. James tells us that the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (Jms 5.16). He goes on to give us the example of Elijah praying that it would not rain, and it didn't rain for three and a half years. Then he prayed again that it would rain, and it rained (Jms 5.17f.).

God is not amusing us by making us think that we are participating when we really aren't. He has genuinely called us to participate with him in making a new creation. Prayer is fundamental to that. God really does work with our prayers. It's not a shell game.

*How do we do the work of prayer?*

*Learning how to pray*

God does indeed work through prayer. He changes the world when the church prays. But how do we do the work of prayer?

The work of prayer. That phrase may seem a little odd to some of us. But look again at what Paul writes concerning what is going on. He speaks about the groans and pains of childbirth of the creation and how we join in with it. The creation is in "labor pains," and we join with the creation, taking up those labor pains in prayer.

Prayer is work, work that takes us to some uncomfortable places at times. Because it is a part of our working with God, prayer requires effort and discipline. Some Christians will tell you that prayer should be like breath to the Christian. That may be true. Prayer is like breath in the fact that is necessary to the life of the Christian. We need it because it is vital to our communion with God. However, it is not something that is involuntary, going on in the background while I'm doing other things. Unlike breathing, prayer requires conscious discipline and effort.

In order to mature in doing the work of prayer, there are a few disciplines we need to learn. First, we need to learn *how* to pray.

Some will say, "I know how to pray. I just talk to God." Others might even add (rightly) that I also listen to God through the Scriptures. This is right as far as it goes. But there is more to learning how to pray than just doing what may seem to come naturally. Remember, we are sinners and our minds and hearts are bent toward certain directions that may not pray in line with God's will.

I'm not saying that prayer is complicated like calculus. But God has give us commands, precepts, principles, and patterns of prayer in Scripture that ought to shape the way we think, what we love/desire, and how we pray. As we learned earlier, prayer has to be "in tune" with the desires and purposes of the Triune God. We are participating in God's conversation.

We have inspired conversation that we need to learn so that our prayers aren't dissonant in the divine conversation. This begins by learning the prayers God has given us *first*; the Psalms, Lord's Prayer, as well as various other prayers prayed by the saints recorded in Scripture.

People will give you all sorts of outlines to pray. It is popular to teach people to pray with the ACTS outline (something I've even given my children in the past): Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. There is no problem with that, but how do I adore, what do I confess, for what should I give thanks, and for what should I be supplicating?

The Psalms are inspired prayers, God's prayer book for his people right at the heart of the Bible. Meditate and pray (whether speaking or singing) through them; one a day; or when you reach Psalm 119, a portion or two each day. Sing them in your family worship. (I hope that you are singing them in your church's worship!) You know that you are praying in tune with the Spirit when you pray the Psalms because the Psalms are God-breathed, Spirit-inspired. Find the church and yourself within the church in the rejoicing, suffering, thanksgiving, lamenting, and rebukes in the Psalms as you pray them.

We have also been taught how to pray by our Lord in what we call The Lord's Prayer. You may recite it, or you may pray through it line by line as you meditate and expand on what each line means.

What is it that you are praying when you pray, "Our Father?" Is there reason to give thanks here? How is it that you can call him "Father," and how should that affect the way and for what you are praying?

What are you praying for when you pray "Hallowed be your name?" This is a petition

more than it is a statement. How should God's name be sanctified or made holy in the world? How is God's name to be sanctified in your life? How are you to participate in the answer to this prayer?

On and on we could go.

What you will find is that you will be praying for things and in ways that aren't too common in the church today. While in the Psalms you'll be rejoicing in God's goodness, you'll also be questioning where he is in fulfilling his promises. On the one hand you will be praying for others' well-being, and on the other hand you'll be praying for their destruction and their babies to be dashed up against the Rock.

Consider Psalm 58 for example.

<sup>1</sup>*Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?*

*Do you judge the children of man uprightly?*

<sup>2</sup>*No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;  
your hands deal out violence on earth.*

<sup>3</sup>*The wicked are estranged from the womb;  
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.*

<sup>4</sup>*They have venom like the venom of a serpent,  
like the deaf adder that stops its ear,*

<sup>5</sup>*so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter.*

<sup>6</sup>*O God, break the teeth in their mouths;  
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O YHWH!*

<sup>7</sup>*Let them vanish like water that runs away;  
when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted.*

<sup>8</sup>*Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime,  
like the stillborn child who never sees the sun.*

<sup>9</sup>*Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,  
whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!*

<sup>10</sup>*The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;  
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.*

<sup>11</sup>*Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;  
surely there is a God who judges on earth."*

How many times have you heard a prayer prayed like this in the church? To many of our ears speaking about God "breaking the teeth in their mouths," dissolving them into slime like a snail, being like a stillborn child, and the righteous bathing our feet in the blood of the wicked doesn't seem very ... well ... nice. Many in the average American Christian church mistakenly think that this sounds more like a Muslim prayer than it does a Christian prayer. But it is in the Psalms that we are commanded by the apostles to sing (Eph 6.19; Col 3.16). These aren't relegated to the trash heap of history because Christ has come. The Psalms are Spirit-inspired prayers that we are to pray *and* that shape the way we pray when we are not praying them word-for-word. We might not normally be praying like this. This is why we need to be guided in prayer by the Spirit through those prayers he has inspired, having our thoughts, desires, and petitions shaped by the way God taught us to pray.

We also learn to pray through the prayers of the church that don't come straight from Scripture. Through the centuries the church has developed prayers that are in tune with the Scriptural way to pray. You have to be more careful here because these prayers aren't inspired, but we can learn from faithful fathers and mothers how to pray. There are good *old* Presbyterian, Anglican, and Lutheran prayer books that are very helpful in this regard. (I use stuff from the Book of Common Prayer 1662 for my own prayer time.)

One of the benefits of having a well-ordered, Scripture-packed, historically-rooted liturgy in our prayer services on Sunday or other days of the week, is that we are not only praying, but we are being instructed how to pray apart from our gathered worship. As we take our cues from Scripture and how the church, under the guidance of the Spirit, has prayed through the millennia, we learn how to pray.

### *Disciplining ourselves to pray*

Developing disciplined prayer lives in this way is difficult. There are times that we find ourselves fighting ourselves to pray. We have other things to do, and we really don't want to take the time to pray whether individually, with the family, or with the church.

There are times when prayer isn't difficult. In fact, there are times when it is reflex response: in times of tragedy. Let someone you love become ill or lose a job, and the first thing just about anybody will do is pray and ask others to join him. Friends and family who aren't loyal to Christ, who are nominal Christians at best, will all of the sudden become "prayer warriors" when something bad happens. They will try to recruit you to pray with them about the situation. Let there be a national or local tragedy, and people will fill the churches to pray.

There are difficulties that provoke prayer because in those times we recognize just how needy we are. But when the tragedies pass into relatively distant memory, we don't feel the urgency to pray as much anymore. We've got this now.

Praying in these rough and tragic times is certainly the right response to the situations. I encourage it. But just imagine that you had a child who never wanted to talk to you or spend time with you. He was always too busy and just couldn't fit you into his schedule ... until he got into a bind and needed money. Then, when you helped him, he went back to ignoring you until he needed help again.

Do you think that is a good relationship? You might even begin to think that your child really doesn't want a relationship with you. He just wants what you can do for him when he wants it, but otherwise he could do without the relationship.

But isn't that the way many people treat our heavenly Father? We don't care enough about our relationship with him to cultivate that relationship in prayer, which means that we come into his presence alone and with his people in order to talk about the things that we love and want to see done.

Times of great distress are good times to pray, but they should also be reminders of what we need all the time. We need time with our God to cultivate love for him and his desires and purposes for us and the world.

There are a number of reasons why prayer is so difficult for us. I will mention a few.

*a) We don't love God and his purposes the way we ought.*

We don't share his desires. Let's just get right down to the nub of the matter. We care more about what we want to do than about cultivating this relationship and giving ourselves in prayer for the sake of others and the world. Other things are more important to us.

Sure, we'll say a little prayer here and there to salve our consciences that we have prayed, but to take time out to spend alone, with our families, and/or with the church to pray doesn't deserve our time and effort. This is a revelation of our loves. We love sports, movies, hunting, or something else more. Just be honest with yourself. I make the things I love priorities in my life.

Prayerlessness is the revelation that I don't love God and his purposes above all things; I may be seeking the kingdom of God in some way, but I am not seeking *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6.33).

*b) Sloth/Lack of discipline*

We are a busy people; some because the culture and society in which we live and some because of our doing. We think that because we are busy, there is no possible way we could be considered slothful. But slothfulness is not merely laying around on the couch playing video games all day. Slothfulness is the refusal to discipline myself to fulfill my responsibilities. It is prioritizing the things *I'd rather be doing over doing the things I'm supposed to be doing*.

There is nothing wrong with having fun. But have you ditched your responsibilities to do so? There is nothing wrong with working hard. But have you neglected your responsibilities to your family to do so?

Prayer is work. Many times prayer isn't fun; especially when it is in union with the church and I am not able to pray just anything that comes to my mind. Within the church I must submit to and join with others to pray together. If we're going to pray, we would rather go it alone.

As Americans we may also think, "Okay, I'll pray, but I need to be doing something else while I'm praying so that I'm actually getting something accomplished." It is as if time dedicated to prayer alone is a waste of time. There is nothing wrong with praying while you're doing other things. That, in fact, is to be encouraged. But there also need to be times set aside for prayer, whether it is in family worship or worship with the church.

Prayer is one area of the Christian life that, for many, is the greatest battle. Satan wants nothing more than a prayerless Christian or Christian church. He doesn't mind having churches that are huge and very active, as long as they don't make prayer central. Sinclair Ferguson comments on this:

Again there is the lack of prayer and of the Church praying. This is to me the most



alarming, for this reason: we have built apparently strong, large, successful, active churches. But many of our churches never meet as a congregation for prayer. I mean never! What does that indicate we are saying about the life of the Church as a fellowship? By contrast, the mark of a truly apostolic spirit in the church is that that [*sic*] we give ourselves to prayer and the Word together (Acts 6:4). No wonder “the Word of God continued to increase and the number of the disciples multiplied” (Acts 6:7). If this is so, it should not surprise us that while many churches see growth, it is often simply reconfiguration of numbers, not of conversion. I greatly wish that our churches would learn to keep the main things central, that we would learn to be true Churches, vibrant fellowships of prayer, Gospel ministry and teaching, genuine mutual love. At the end of the day, such a Church simply needs to “be” for visitors who come to sense that this is a new order of reality altogether and are drawn to Christ.  
(<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-concerns-you-about-modern-day-protestant-christianity/>. accessed August 15, 2017)

Prayer doesn't draw in the crowds. But it is central to who we are as the people of God. We are a house of prayer, the Temple of God (cf. Isa 56.7). Without prayer being central to our existence, we are nothing but a civic organization with a Christian label slapped on us. We are the YMCA, the Salvation Army, or a country club for Christians, but we aren't the church.

*c) We don't see immediate results*

Prayer is difficult because we generally don't see the results of our prayers immediately. There is all of this groaning but no relief in sight for the near future.

The air we breathe in our American society is pragmatism. Is it getting results? If we don't see results in a short time, then we ditch it. That's why we have pills and drinks to help us lose weight fast. Disciplining ourselves for the long haul to promote health just isn't fast enough. We are a microwave generation; an instant connection, don't-keep-me-waiting society.

Prayer is a discipline of constant plodding in faith with results that may not be seen in the short run or ever in this life. It is a discipline of faith that God has told us is good for us, and we have to trust him. The changes that come to our lives and situations happen slowly many times. Prayer requires patient perseverance in faith, trusting that what God has said is good for us really is.

We'd rather be doing something that makes changes we can see; something we think we have control of. We will go to decision-making meetings, work-days, volunteer our time for this or that project in the church. But when a prayer meeting is called, we tend to think that it is not really all that important. It's just a prayer meeting. The church isn't really *doing* anything.

One of the issues here, it seems to me, is that in all of these other areas, we feel in control. We believe we are actually doing something, making changes we can see. Prayer puts us in the position of the reality that we ultimately have control of nothing. We live our lives by faith, not by sight. Prayer is necessary for our humility.

*d) We don't think it is really all that important*

Though the whole of Scripture speaks to the importance of the disciplines of prayer, we don't think it is all that important. It is important, but it is not more important than other things ... which means that it is really not all that important.

We are to be characterized by prayer as God's people. So, how do we develop the disciplines of prayer? How do you develop the discipline of going to a job? You get up and go to the job when you are supposed to go to your job every day whether you feel like going to the job that day or not. There is no magic formula. How do you develop good eating habits? You stop eating things that are hurting you and start eating things that will help you, developing a taste for them along the way.

If you know something is good for you, and you desire that above other things, you will discipline yourself to do it. Contrary to what some people think, just because you love something doesn't mean that it won't be work. There will be times when you won't want to do what you are supposed to do. That's why you make commitments and follow through.

A funny thing happens as you continue to follow through consistently: your desires begin to change. You begin to want to do the discipline more so that it doesn't seem as arduous as it was when you began. If for some reason you have to forego a practice of discipline for a day because of some uncontrollable situation, you miss it.

In order to have a heart for prayer, you are going to have to begin to take time to pray, and you'll have to stick with it. It is only as you stop at times, individually, as a family, and with the church, to think about what is going on in light of the Scriptures that your mind and heart will be shaped to be a pray-er and to pray in tune with the Spirit.

You ought to make a priority to gather with the church any time we are called together to pray if at all possible. This is a discipline. Yes, it will mean saying, "No" to other things; things that you just know that you or your children just can't live without. I encourage you not to be short-sighted about what your present schedules are producing long-term. What is the long-term fruit of what you are doing in the place of gathering with God's people to pray? Are you sacrificing the best for the acceptable?

When we get outside the church gathering together, different people have different ways of disciplining themselves and/or their households to pray. Mothers with small children will not be able to spend a "sweet hour of prayer that calls them from a world of care" ... at least not alone. Leaving children for five minutes alone, depending on their ages, could be disastrous. It is daddy's job to provide a time of prayer for the family. He disciplines the household, working with mom, to get everyone together at a certain time of day to spend some time in prayer. (And this may be the only time mom gets of sit-down, concentrated prayer). If you are in that situation, then work with the situation God has given you.

Your family prayer time doesn't have to be an hour. There may be times when it is no more than five to ten minutes. If you have some sort of liturgy, you can get some good prayer in in five to ten minutes.

If you have time to "steal away to pray," by all means, do so. If you are unmarried, then there is little to no excuse not to spend time in prayer each day. If you are a single parent, you

may not have the time to spend alone in prayer as you would like. Do what you can daily, and meet with the church as often as possible.

No matter your situation, the discipline of prayer will never just happen. It will take effort. There will be many times you have to wrestle through many distractions. If you believe that you and your family are “too busy” to pray, it may be that you need to check your priorities. Why do you love other things more than prayer?

Prayer won't just happen when you can fit it in. It will take work. But the work is well worth it; not because if you pray everything will be great and you will be prosperous and life will be easy. It is well worth it because you are cultivating a love for God and God is working with you in prayer to change you and the world around you. Your faith may not be immediately rewarded, but it will be rewarded. Keep your eye on the prize. Keep praying.