

Your Disappointing “Prayer Life”

Ephesians 6:14-20

#41 in our series from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians

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Prayer

Lord Jesus, we ask that you would help us to preach. Father, Son, Holy Spirit in Jesus’ name help us to preach. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Message

This is our forty first sermon from Ephesians, and for the past six messages, we’ve been preaching on the armor of God. Our series got interrupted by a heart attack and Christmas, but hopefully you can remember a bit of what we’ve said.

Ephesians 6:14-20

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at **all** times in the Spirit, with **all** prayer and supplication. To that end (watching) with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.*

Paul lists six pieces of armor, and then talks about prayer. Scholars debate whether or not Paul sees prayer as the seventh piece of armor, for in scripture, seven is a hugely significant number; for in six days, God creates all things and humanity in His own image, and then rests on the seventh day, the Sabbath day.

So maybe prayer is the seventh weapon, and some say, “maybe not,” for it’s different from the other six. Yet, the seventh day is very different from the other six days, but the seventh day gives meaning and purpose to all the other days. And, in the same way, Paul seems to be saying that prayer is the purpose of all the armor. And we put on the armor with prayer. Kind of like prayer is entering God’s rest—the seventh day.

Well, no matter what, it’s clear that prayer is important. So, I want to ask you, “How’s your prayer life?”

So...how’s your prayer life?

Is it satisfying, or is it disappointing? What do you do? How do you pray, and does it work? I asked those questions of our staff this week and Frances said, “Hey, I just got a call from Bill. We had some family trauma over some lost car keys last night. Bill just told me that God woke him up and told him

where they were. This morning, he walked to that spot and found them there, lying in the street.”
That’s answered prayer!

I remember kneeling by my bed in high school and praying that Susan Coleman would go out with me. And she went way out with me...for thirty-six years now. That’s answered prayer! In college, at a healing service, I went forward because I had a sore back. I know it’s hard for some to believe, but I felt it and saw it: My leg miraculously grew! It literally shot out. That’s answered prayer!

Now, some of you may have begged God to heal you for years...and He hasn’t. Some of you are single and you’ve begged God to reveal your soul mate for years, and He hasn’t. Some of you still can’t find your car keys. So...how do these stories of answered prayer make you feel? And what do they mean?

Six years ago, I desperately prayed that God would save my church from division and destruction, and then I watched as it was torn to pieces, so when I hear stories of pastors praying and being answered by mass revivals, I get angry.

So how’s your prayer life?

Should we pray for healing, marriages, and car keys...when so often, the prayers don’t seem to work?

Maybe we need different prayers.

Maybe we should chant or light candles or something.

Maybe we need to pray in tongues.

I pray in tongues quite often. But if you ask, “Does it work?”

I don’t know...because when I pray in tongues, I don’t know what I’m saying.

Maybe we need to use King James English.

Some folks seem to think that God prefers the King James.

Maybe we need to say the word “just” a lot: “Lord, just want to say...just this...and just that...”

You know, technically, you can only say “just” once in a prayer because “just this” means “not that.” More than one “just” is bad English and illogical.

Maybe we need to pray in Jesus’ name.

I remember learning that in Jr. high. And so I prayed, “Dear Lord, for the rest of my life, whatever I ask, I hereby ask it in ‘Jesus’ name.’ In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Maybe we need to pray more prayers and better prayers.

Maybe we need to pray the Jabez prayer. Do you remember that?

Thirteen years ago everyone was praying the Jabez prayer right before 9/11.

Do you remember that...the Jabez prayer?

Well, maybe we need to “name it and claim it,” or “blab it and grab it.”

Maybe we need listening prayer because, you see, prayer is to be a conversation.

I used to go on these silent retreats...all day. And all day, I felt like I heard nothing. At times, I’ve been really regimented in my devotional life, and all my devotions were utterly boring. Then, I’d go work out, crank up the stereo, and it seemed like God wouldn’t shut up: thoughts, ideas, revelation...bouncing all around my head. Maybe I wasn’t the only one bored with my devotional life, and maybe God didn’t enjoy being one of my spiritual projects. Yet, I think it’s critical to listen, and clearly Jesus set aside time to pray.

Well, maybe we need to pray the Psalms. You know the Psalms were the song book and prayer book of ancient Israel. We should pray them. But...have you read them?

This is Psalm 44

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered...wake up, why are you sleeping, oh Yahweh?

Paul even quotes them to the Corinthians.

This is Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...

I'm telling you, the Psalms are a bit crazy to pray. Yet, in Colossians, Paul tells us that we should pray them.

The Jews in Jesus' day were like the elite athletes of prayer. Two times a day, they'd pray the *Shema* from Deuteronomy, and three times a day the eighteen benedictions, which are really long. It was in that environment that the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Teach us to pray." And Jesus said, "OK, say this: (Luke 11:2-4) *Our Father who art in heaven, holy be your name. Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*" Period. The disciples must've thought: "Golly...that's kind of anticlimactic."

So how's your prayer life?

How should we pray?

What should we pray and for how long?

Well in Ephesians, Paul tells us: "*Pray all the time and pray all prayers.*" It's like he's saying, "Yeah...sure...pray all that stuff; pray for car keys, dates in high school and definitely healings. Use candles, use spiritual gifts, use King James English, use bad English and bad logic...but never stop praying.

Go ahead, "blab some stuff," try to "grab some stuff." See what happens!

Pray Jabez's little prayer.

Pray the prayers in your devotional book.

Pray the Psalms.

Pray the *Shema*.

Pray the Lord's prayer, and pray it all in Jesus' name.

Just don't stop praying; don't stop conversing with God.

And does it work Paul? (That's what we want to know.)

It's interesting to note that Paul is in prison...chained to stone, sitting in the dark... Don't you suppose that just once he prayed, "Hey God, could we skip the prison thing?" You know, Paul had once been miraculously delivered from prison. Paul had prayed and raised people from the dead. Paul had healed people through prayer, and yet, Paul, at this point, was close to blind.

In 2 Corinthians he writes: Three times he begged the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh." Three times the Lord said, "*My grace is sufficient for you. My power is perfected in weakness.*" Paul prayed for all the churches, and at the end of his life most of them abandoned him. Yet, he did look a lot like Jesus.

So does prayer work?

How about for Jesus?

On the sixth day, in the midst of the greatest spiritual warfare imaginable, sweating great drops of blood, Jesus prayed, “*Abba Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me...*” But our Father didn’t take the cup away, and yet, Jesus had prayed, “*Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done...*” How could the will of Jesus have been different from the will of God...except that Jesus had entered into our will, and there in that dark dungeon cried, “*Abba...Father...*”

Well, anyway, How’s your prayer life?

At staff, Kimberly shared about an incident in England (when she was a missionary). She was sitting on a bench with her children by the side of a river watching some ducks. They were broke and the kids were hungry and they asked Kimberly: “Mommy can we feed the ducks?” Kimberly broke down and cried out to God, from the sanctuary of her own heart: “I don’t have enough to feed my own children, how can I feed some ducks? You say you care for the birds...but I can’t even feed my kids.” And just then...this man walked up to Kimberly, holding a loaf of bread that he’d just purchased at a nearby store. He said, “I don’t really need this, and I thought your kids might like to feed the ducks.” And so, Kimberly fed her kids and fed the ducks.

That’s kind of my experience with prayer. I pray for all sorts of things that don’t seem to happen and then, just about the time I’m ready to give up, God does something as if to say: “Peter, I’m right here; I’m listening; don’t stop. I haven’t given you that global ministry empire, and the vacation home in the Caribbean, but here’s your daily bread. Keep praying.”

Paul says, “Keep praying.” But what’s the point? God already knows what we need, what we’ll say, and what He’ll do. So what’s the point? P Well, in all our prayer and disappointment, perhaps we’re missing the point.

Not the Nail

Wife: *It’s just...there’s all this pressure...ya know?
And sometimes it feels like it’s right up on me.
And...I can just feel it, literally feel it in my head...and it’s relentless. I don’t know if it’s gonna stop.
That’s the thing that scares me the most...I don’t know if it’s ever gonna stop [The wife turns and a giant nail in the center of her forehead is revealed.]*

Husband: *Yeah....well....(hesitating)... You do have a...nail...in your head.*

Wife: *It is NOT about the nail.*

Husband: *Are you sure? Because I bet...if we got that out of there...*

Wife: *Stop trying to fix it!*

Husband: *No. I’m not trying to fix it. I’m just pointing out that maybe the nail is causi..n..g...[The wife interrupts.]*

Wife: *You always do this! You always try to FIX things when all I really need is for you to just listen!*

Husband: *See? I don’t think that is what you need. I think what you need is to get the nail out....[The wife interrupts again]*

Wife: *See you’re not even listening now.*

Not the Nail (Continued...)

Husband: *OK...fine. I will listen...FINE.*

Wife: *It's just...sometimes it's like there's this achy...I don't know what it is...and I'm not sleeping very well at all. All my sweaters are snagged. I mean all of them.*

Husband: *Yeah...ummm....that sounds really hard.*

Wife: *It is. Thank you. [The wife and husband move towards each other to hug. The nail in the wife's head hits her husband's head.]*

Wife: *OUCH!*

She doesn't want help from her helper, and maybe that's the point. I suspect that one day, we, the Bride of Christ, will look back on our prayer lives and realize they looked just like that. Jesus listens. Jesus sympathizes, and Jesus empathizes, and Jesus wants to get close, but His presence is our judgment. Because of the nail, we constantly pull away, but Jesus doesn't give up. He says, "Tell me about it. Keep talking, and just don't go away." So, what's the nail? And what's the point? Maybe our prayer lives are disappointing because we're missing the point.

So, what is the point?

Why should we pray?

Why pray?

Why Pray?

1. Prayer changes things.

Well, prayer *does* change things.

James 4:2 *"You don't have because you don't ask."*

You know when my kids were little, I could pretty much anticipate everything they'd ask, but I still wanted them to ask. I'd even arrange things so they *would* ask. When I dreamed of taking them to Disney World, I'd tempt them to ask so that, one day, I could answer. I actually didn't care about Disney World. I cared about the *asking* and *answering*. I cared about our relationship. James writes: *"You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and you don't receive because you ask wrongly to*

spend it on your hedone “your own fleshly desires,” it’s where we get the word hedonism: “*You ask to spend it on your own fleshly desires.*”

See?

Maybe we need new desires.

Maybe our desires are like that nail.

Maybe sin in the flesh is like that nail in the head.

Maybe sin in the flesh is our effort to just help ourselves.

“*You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly.*”

BUT...

That doesn’t mean you should stop asking.

Maybe just the practice of asking reveals how we’re not asking what we ought to ask.

Madeline L’engle writes:

Before I can listen to God in prayer, I must fumble through the prayers of words, of willful demands, the prayer of childish “Gimmes,” of “Help me,” of “I want...” Until I tell God what I want, I have no way of knowing whether or not I truly want it. Unless I ask God for something, I do not know whether or not it is something for which I ought to ask.

So does prayer change things?

You know, I’m not always convinced that talking to Susan changes Susan, but I do know that it changes me. And I’m not convinced that talking to God about other people always changes those people, but it always seems to change me. You know what I mean: You pray about someone: “God help Matilda to get her act together...” And, as you pray, He gets your act together...for Matilda.

So prayer changes things, but *mostly*, it changes *me*.

Why Pray?

1. Prayer changes things.
2. Prayer changes me.

Just the act of prayer makes me aware that everything is Grace, and everything that’s anything is Grace: “*Every good and perfect gift comes from my Father...*” And you see, my flesh is convinced that it all comes from me...including me...that I create me...and especially my prayers. And yet, prayer itself is necessarily passive at its core...an active passivity or a passive activity.

Prayer is acknowledging the fact that we need help. And because something in us (or about us) resents that fact, we try to turn prayer into our own accomplishment...our own activity. Then we are

disappointed, for we have entirely missed the point: We need a Helper, and we can't merit His help, for then...it's not really help; it's not Grace.

Prayer is like all the pieces of armor.

They really aren't something we *do* but something Jesus *is* and has done.

And He himself is God's Word that does everything...even prayer.

You know, if I think that prayer is like an accomplishment of my will, *my self*...that is...*my* flesh. If I think it's something I can make work...well...I really get offended when it seems to work for another and not for me. My flesh will get offended. But if I believe God is good and all is a gift, well, I'll believe that unanswered prayers are really answered prayers.

So the fact that God found Bill's car keys proves that God hears prayer and can find car keys. So, if I ask and don't find my car keys. It's because God doesn't want me to find my car keys, and that's good because God is good. Because Paul knew that God could deliver him from prison, he learned to be content in prison, for it was obviously not God's will for him to be out of prison at that time. He didn't know exactly why. We don't know exactly why. But if it weren't for prison, we wouldn't be reading Ephesians, written from prison, right now.

On the cross Jesus prayed, "*My God my God, why have you forsaken me?*" He didn't know why, but He knew God was good and God was His Helper and so He drank the cup and prayed, "*Abba...Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*" "*Yahweh-Yasha*" – "*God help!*" – "*Yehoshua*" – "*Yeshua.*" It's a name, and the name in English is Jesus.

Well, anyway, I was saying: Prayer makes me aware that everything is a gift AND that God is always talking. Scripture says that all is created and sustained by His Word. So creation is God talking, and He's talking to you. Like a Father to an infant in the mother's womb...When God talks...everything moves. And He longs for the day that you would talk back and your words would have meaning...not just babble...but meaning.

When my children were babies, I'd talk and talk and talk to them, and they'd babble, babble, babble-on. They'd babble to me. Then I'd give them my word saying, "Say Dadda...Say Dadda...Say Dadda," and then one day, in the midst of their babble, they'd fix their eyes on me and say, "Dadda?" In that instant, my word would return to me, and I can think of no greater joy for a father than that. Jesus taught us to say, "*Abba.*" It's Aramaic for "Dadda."

Jesus is the Father's Word come to us, and when we pray "*Abba,*" it's His Spirit in us, and God's Word is returning to God on our tongues as we are made in God's image—the image of Love. It is the Kingdom of Heaven, but to stop praying is to be trapped in Hell, that is the void, the pit, the outer darkness, that nothing and nowhere. You see, if everything is created and sustained with the Word, but you won't hear The Word or speak The Word, you are cut off from God's creation and trapped in outer darkness. That's why the devil's entire game is to get you to stop conversing with God the Father and make you rely on yourself, your flesh.

And that's why the seventh piece of armor, and all the armor is prayer and all the armor is Jesus, and Jesus is The Word. "*Ye-ho-shua*" – "God Save" – "God help" is our prayer. He's the prayer that sets the captives free from the deepest dungeon, which is the self: our independence, our pride, our ego, the flesh. Jesus destroys my flesh (It's literally nailed to a tree) Jesus destroys my flesh, and Jesus is my life. Life is communion with God the Father.

I don't think God cares about your prayer life.

He cares about your life, and your life is prayer.

So prayer is not just a means to an end; prayer *is* The End.

And does prayer work - or - does everything work for the sake of prayer? I mean all creation and even all desecration, even the pit?

Several years ago, I read a great book called *Racehoss Big Emma's Boy*" It's an autobiography by Albert Race Sample, the son of an abusive black prostitute named Emma and a white traveling salesman that left him behind as a child.

As a young man, he was imprisoned for assault and battery in the worst prison in Texas. After seventeen years, he was thrown into solitary confinement in an 8x14 stone dungeon devoid of light. I found a video of him telling his story online. This is his description of what happened in the pit, in that prison cell, not entirely unlike the one in which Paul wrote to the Ephesians 2000 years ago.

Clip of Albert Race Sample

[Albert is in a small prison cell sharing a life changing experience he had, while he was imprisoned.]

Albert: *It was like I thought: "God damn man, you done narrowed your world down to a match box size. Three billion people in the world and don't have no way...you at....and nobody gives a damn.....I got up off of that slab and beat the wall and I banged my head, I kick and I scream and I yell, and nobody can hear me because it's sound proof. [Albert breaks down into tears.] And as I sat there, the tears was runnin'...and I could feel 'em bouncing off the floor...on my feet and I held my face with my hands [Through sobs...] and I said: "God help me. Please help me."*

I didn't hardly get the words out of my mouth and I looked through my fingers and it was light in there. I could see everything, the softest most beautiful feeling came over me. I felt so good. I didn't see nobody, but I sure know something was in there with me. And I laid back on that bunk, on that slab. And I put my hands under my head, and I never felt so much love in my life.

And it was like in an instant, like something was playing a movie reel backwards. I could see Emma's childhood...that she'd told me about. I could see what they did to her when she was a little girl. Her daddy killed her mamma when she was four years old. And they did mistreat her, and I never felt so much forgiveness in my life, and it was like something had lifted off of me...

Twenty-eight more days, they come and let me out. I didn't walk out of there glowing like Moses, no, uh uh. But I sure did know that something had changed within me, that I wasn't the same man no more.

Did you hear what he prayed? "God help me," in Hebrew "Yahweh-Yasha" – "Ye-ho-shua" – "Yeshua," in English..."Jesus." He spoke The Word, and he meant it.

Maybe everything works for the sake of prayer. We know that everything is like the manifestation of God's Word, and maybe everything works so that we would speak that Word.

In Galatians, Paul writes, "God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying, 'Abba'." And now, Paul writes, "Pray in the spirit," that's the breath, that's the Spirit of the Son. See? Maybe none of us can truly speak and truly live until Jesus conquers the dark prison that is our old hearts and causes us to say, "Abba." Maybe everything works for that end. Maybe everything works that we would pray "Abba" and never stop praying in the Spirit of Jesus...as the image of God.

Well, we were just asking: "Why pray?"
And we noticed: 1-2. Prayer changes things and...me.

Why Pray?

1. Prayer changes things.
2. Prayer changes me.
3. Prayer destroys my flesh.
4. Prayer is my Life.

3. Prayer destroys my flesh.
4. Prayer is my life...you see?
5. Prayer is judgment.

Why Pray?

1. Prayer changes things.
2. Prayer changes me.
3. Prayer destroys my flesh.
4. Prayer is my Life.
5. Prayer is Judgment.

I hope you remember our last sermon from Ephesians...on the sixth piece of armor: The sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God.

We read Revelation 19 and saw:

The Word is The End.

The Word rides a white horse.

The Word destroys "*the flesh of all men*" (Revelation 19:18)

The Word "*makes all things new*" (Revelation 21:5).

We said,

"When we truly hear The Word and speak The Word,

Armageddon happens—The End happens—Judgment happens."

Well, when we pray, we hear The Word and speak The Word back to God our Father. We say, “Abba help,” in a word, “Jesus.” That Word destroys our flesh and gives us His life. Prayer is surrendering to God’s Judgment.

Well, if you live all your days on this earth never hearing “God is help,” or saying “God help me,” you’ll think that you have helped yourself and created yourself, and that false self, that illusion of control will be utterly annihilated by the Revelation of God’s Word at the end of time. But if you’ve learned to love God’s Word: “God is help”—Jesus, and if you’ve learned to speak His Word: “God help” —Jesus...well then, you’ve already been judged and Eternal Life already abides within you, and the devil has already lost his game.

I hope you see that by the grace of God, you don’t have to wait until you’re thrown into a dungeon to pray. You don’t have to gnash your teeth in outer darkness until the end of all time to be judged. By the Grace of God, you can pray, “God help” right now: “God help,” “God save,” “Yeshua,” “Jesus,” “Abba, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Prayer is Judgment and Judgment is Salvation

Why Pray?

1. Prayer changes things.
2. Prayer changes me.
3. Prayer destroys my flesh.
4. Prayer is my Life.
5. Prayer is Judgment.
6. Prayer is Salvation.

And I hope you know...

Salvation is not a second chance.

Salvation is not just being forgiven for past sins so you can try harder the next time around.

Salvation is not a do-over.

Salvation is an entire new state of being.

Salvation is faith in God’s Grace.

Salvation is resting in God’s Word.

Salvation is the presence of the seventh day.

Salvation is to cease from all your anxious striving.

Salvation is absolute confidence that God is your Creator and Sustainer,

and that God is Good, and that God is your Helper.

Salvation is perfect communion with God your Father.

Salvation is prayer.

Why Pray?

1. Prayer changes things.
2. Prayer changes me.
3. Prayer destroys my flesh.
4. Prayer is my Life.
5. Prayer is Judgment.
6. Prayer is Salvation.
7. Salvation is Prayer.

And I hope you see that we're all just learning to pray and that we learn to pray by praying. So Paul writes, "*Praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication.*" That's *all* prayers and requests, even bad prayers and bad requests. It's only by talking badly that we can ever learn to talk well.

Just watch little kids; they learn to talk by talking, and we learn to pray by praying so of course we pray bad. We try to turn prayer into a means of control, but prayer in itself is an act of surrender. We think it's not about the nail but keep talking, and we'll see, it's all about the nail. The nail is in our flesh, and our flesh is our love of control, and our love of control is a prison of fear, and that's the source of all our sorrow. But keep talking to your Bridegroom, and one day you'll see a nail in His flesh. It's your nail in His flesh, your sin holding Him to that cross. "*He who knew no sin became sin (our sin) that we might become the righteousness of God.*"

Keep praying and one day you'll see the point: God is your Helper, and you are not your own helper. Prayer will work, but it's not your work; it's the Word of God at work in you.

Communion

On the night that this world betrayed Him, He took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body given to you; take it; eat it; eat this prayer." And in the same way, after supper, He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins." And so, He calls you to this table to consume His Word and then speak His Word back to the Father as worship. So, let's believe the gospel and preach the gospel to God our Father: "God, you *are* good." Amen

[Worship Singing]

Close your eyes and imagine yourself standing before the very throne of God; it's Judgment day.

Now say, "God help me" – "Jesus."

Stand there and look, not with the eyes of your head but with the eyes of your heart.

Your loins are girded with truth, but you don't determine this truth; Jesus is Truth.

Your heart is covered in righteousness,

but you didn't earn this righteousness;

Jesus is your righteousness.

Your feet are covered in peace; you didn't make this peace; Jesus gave you this peace.

You're holding a shield, and the shield is faith,

it quenches the accusation of the evil one because it's Jesus' faith...given to you.

A helmet covers your head, and Jesus is your head and you are His body.

Jesus is your Salvation, and you are saved.

A sword is in your hand, and a Word is on your tongue.

You didn't create the Word, the Word created you.

See? Everything is a gift. You yourself are a gift, and you are literally covered in Jesus; you are hidden in Jesus. You have absolutely no reason to hide in shame. Now say, "*Abba*" "Daddy." Lift your head; approach the throne. Crawl up on His lap and just start talking, and never stop. Never stop conversing; never stop practicing His presence; never leave this place, your home, His Sanctuary. In Jesus' name, just start talking.

Benediction

So don't take that armor off; don't leave that place. You don't have to leave that place because that place is in your heart. Yes, one day this world will dissolve away and you'll see the Word and see the Father and realize they're more solid than anything you've ever touched in this physical body, but right now you're learning to speak. So keep speaking; keep praying; keep talking to the One who loves you with everything that He has and everything that He is. In Jesus' name, believe the gospel. Amen.