

Pray

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a nine-part series

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Psalm 34:4-8 (NRSV)

⁴I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.

⁵Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.

⁶This poor soul cried, and was heard by
the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.

⁷The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and
delivers them.

⁸O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in
him.

Psalm 63:1-8 (NRSV)

¹O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where
there is no water.

²So I have looked upon you in the
sanctuary,

beholding your power and glory.

³Because your steadfast love is better than
life,
my lips will praise you.

⁴So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on
your name.

⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful
lips

⁶when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of
the night;

⁷for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I
sing for joy.

⁸My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.

³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NRSV)

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

James 5:13-16

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

It is both a simple and a profound gift, prayer.

In this series, *Words*, we turn to the word "pray" this week, a word and a practice found throughout the Bible. Prayer should shape our lives but, too often, we find ourselves spiritually stuck, squeezing prayer out of our daily routines. (Note: At the end of the study, you will find a portion of the Lexham Theological Wordbook entry for "prayer" by Daniel Dewitt Lowery.)

So let's begin:

Why Pray?

Why pray? The reason is simple. We pray because our heart seeks its true home, and its true home is the heart of God.¹ God longs for our presence. After Adam and Eve made their fateful decision to turn away from God, God came to the garden, calling for Adam, seeking him. In much the same way, God invites each of us to come to him, to come home, to return to the way of life for which we were made. Our hearts hear God's call, but we've turned so far away from God that the call is somehow muffled. It is a little like hearing a phone ring, but being unsure where the ring is coming from, much less who is on the other end of the line. We might search all over the house and yet never look in the right place.

A deep human truth is that we have restless, yearning hearts that seek peace and joy. We spend much of our life looking one place after another for something that will make us happy or joyful or content. But, in truth, our restless hearts will only find their rest in God.

Coming home

Writing thousands of years ago, the psalmists expressed our hearts' seeking after God, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . My soul clings to you . . . happy are those who take refuge in him. . . in the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy" (from today's psalms). The heart of the psalmists' prayer, indeed all prayer, is a loving relationship . . . between God and me . . . between God and you . . . between God and all those who seek their "heart's true home."

Foster uses familiar, yet powerful, imagery to describe this home. "We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity . . . he invites us into the bedroom of his rest . . . where we are known and are known to the fullest. . . . The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer."²

You might find it easier to see the psalms as prayers, even to pray them yourself, if you read them in a paraphrase such as Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. He has scrubbed away some of the polish and politeness that characterizes translations like the NRSV, enabling us to feel the emotion and the honesty of the psalmists. There is nothing "fancy" about the Hebrew language of the psalms and there need be nothing "fancy" about the language of our prayers. There is no secret to prayer; there is no insider vocabulary. We don't have to dress up our words. All God asks is that we be honest with him, as honest as we possibly can be. We ask no less of every important relationship we have in life.

What is prayer?

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at

¹This beautiful phrase, "the heart's true home," is from Richard Foster's book, *Prayer*. This book is a touching and challenging presentation of prayer and will be my book recommendation for February. It is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

²from the introduction to Foster's book, *Prayer*, p. 1-2.

the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God. Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: “And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don’t even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God’s own will” (Romans 8:26-27, NLT).

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) was a humble German shoemaker whose writings influenced Christians across Europe. Seeking to live a life of prayer, Boehme composed a set of simple, direct prayers to be used through the day. Here are some samples. There is something to learn here about a life of ‘unceasing’ prayer.

‘On Dressing’

Merciful God, you clothed your Word with the pure and perfect body of our Lord Jesus. Clothe my soul with that same purity, that I may share his perfection . . . Dear God, destroy my sins, and so make me ready to put on the cloak of eternal life.

‘On Going to Work’

Give me, dear Lord, a pure heart and a wise mind, that I may carry out my work according to your will. Save me from all false desires, from pride, greed, envy and anger, and let me accept joyfully every task you set before me. . . . Above all, remind me constantly that I have nothing except what you give me, and can do nothing except what you enable me to do.

‘At Noon’

O God, source of eternal light, you provide temporal light for all the earth . . . The warmth and brightness of the sun makes the flowers bloom and the crops grow. . . . And may your eternal light shine in the darkest corners of my soul.

‘At Evening’

I thank you, O God, for your care and protection this day, keeping me from physical harm and spiritual corruption . . . Let my mind, which through the day has been directed to my work, through the evening be wholly directed to you.

‘At Bed-time’

As I take off my dirty, dusty clothes, let me also be stripped of the sins I have committed this day . . . Now I come before you, naked in body and care in soul, to be washed clean. Let me rest tonight in your arms, and so may the dreams that pass through my mind be holy. And let me awake tomorrow, strong and eager to serve you.

Keep at it!

Even if we’ve learned to pray, even if we earnestly pray daily, most of us will, at one time or another, be tempted to lose heart. For example, we might pray day after day, month after month, that an important relationship would be healed . . . but then it’s not. How long do we go on praying a prayer that seems futile? But, of course, God answers prayers; a loving father would do no less. Still, it is not always easy to persist. Our passage from Luke is one of Jesus’ parables about prayer. It is a parable about persistence. As is true for all the parables, a little background will help to make it more meaningful. The key to this story is appreciating the roles of the judge and the widow.

In ancient Israel, there were no juries and no prosecutors, only judges. A judge in the Jewish law court was to listen to the evidence offered by the plaintiff (the accuser) and the defendant (the accused). The judge was to apply the law to the case, stay impartial, punish wrongs as deserved, and protect the powerless, such as widows and orphans. In

the end, the judge was to render a just verdict that vindicated the aggrieved party. If a judge did all these things, the judge was considered a good and righteous judge.³

In Jesus' parable, the judge has done none of this! He doesn't obey God and he disrespects the people who come into his courtroom. To make it worse, a widow has come to him seeking justice. Widows were among the poorest, most marginalized people in all ancient cultures, including Israel. Nonetheless, rather than protecting the interests of the widow, the judge has ignored her. Yet, through her persistence, her relentless pursuit of the judge, the widow is finally granted justice. She is vindicated, powerless though she may be.

Jesus' point is clear. If persistence pays off with a cruel and unjust judge, how much more will God, our loving father, the good and righteous judge, hear the pleas and prayer of his children. Our prayers are never futile. We ask, we seek, we knock, we wait, we trust, we get emotional, we get frustrated . . . but we continue praying. Our persistence grows out of our confidence that God loves us.

A final word from Jesus' brother, James

The book of James was written by Jesus' half-brother, who was not a follower of Jesus until after Jesus' death and resurrection. James went on to be the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem. Perhaps because he was Jesus' brother, James' letter sounds much like we might imagine Jesus would sound. James gives straight-forward, practical instruction on what it truly means to be a disciple, hearing and doing the word of God.

Toward the end of his letter, James turns to prayer that is embedded deeply into the lives of his fellow Christians. Are you suffering? *Pray*. Are you cheerful? *Pray*. Are you sick? *Pray*. Have you sinned? *Pray*. All of this is part of community life. The sick are to "summon" (yes, a strong word) the leaders. All are to gather to pray over the sick. They are to anoint with oil.⁴ Any discomforts they might have with the sick (or with hospital rooms!) are to be set aside. Prayers to heal the sick and prayers to heal sinners are all woven together. For James, there is simply no place in the Christian community for isolation and loneliness. To use Dallas Willard's phrase, we are to be "a community of prayerful love."

In all this, we are to grasp that building a life of prayer is far more than carving out a few minutes each day to say a prayer. Rather, it is living a life in unceasing, persistent conversation with God.

Prayer (from the Lexham Theological Wordbook)

DANIEL DEWITT LOWERY⁵

Prayer is intentional communication with God and can be spoken or written. It is often petitionary in nature, though it may take many other forms, as well. Both the OT and the NT assume that God hears and responds to the prayers of his people.

Concept Summary

The OT uses four main words to refer to prayer and praying: פָּלַל (*pālal*, "to pray"), תְּפִלָּה (*tēpillā*, "prayer"), אָתַר (*atar*, "to supplicate"), and תְּהִנָּה (*tēhinnā*, "plea"). Other

³In his letters, Paul often uses the metaphor of the Jewish law court to describe what it means when we speak of God as judge and of our own righteousness before God. "Righteousness" is another way of talking about our status when the court (God is the good judge!) finds in our favor because we have trusted in Jesus and his faithfulness to God's covenant on our behalf. In effect, Jesus takes our place in the docket.

⁴Anointing the sick with oil was a common medicinal practice in ancient cultures. Because oil was used to anoint (consecrate) kings and priests in Israel, James may mean for us to connect the medicinal power of the oil with a symbolic handing over of the illness to God, thus holding together the spiritual and the physical.

⁵Daniel DeWitt Lowery, "Prayer," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

verbs for asking and pleading are used to express praying, including צָעַק (*zā'aq*, “to cry out”), קָרָא (*qārā'*, “to call”), and שָׁאַל (*šā'al*, “to ask”).

The Septuagint primarily translates *pālal* with προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*, “to pray”); it also uses δέομαι (*deomai*, “to beg”) and εὐχομαι (*euchomai*, “to pray”) to translate both *pālal* and *‘atar*. The NT uses four main families of words to refer to prayer, *proseuchomai*, which is related to εὐχομαι (*euchomai*, “to pray”), and three common verbs to denote asking: *deomai*, αἰτέω (*aiteō*, “to ask for”), and ἐρωτάω (*erōtaō*, “to ask”).

Theological Overview

Prayer in the OT is intentional communication with God. This is the NT conception of prayer, as well, which develops naturally out of an OT understanding of the concept. All through Scripture, one may intercede either on behalf of another party or oneself. Although there are words in both Hebrew and Greek that refer specifically to prayer—פָּלַל (*pālal*, “to pray”), תְּפִלָּה (*tēpillā*, “prayer”), and עָתַר (*‘atar*, “to supplicate”) in the OT, and προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*, “to pray”) and εὐχομαι (*euchomai*, “to pray”) in the NT—many other words for asking or entreating are also frequently employed, including: תְּהִינָּה (*tēhinnā*, “plea”) in the OT, and δέομαι (*deomai*, “to beg”), αἰτέω (*aiteō*, “to ask for”), and ἐρωτάω (*erōtaō*, “to ask”) in the NT. Further, verbs of blessing or worship can express uttering a particular type of prayer. This wide range of possible terms for “pray” and “prayer” reflects the variety, richness, and importance of the activity throughout the Bible.

Prayer is regarded throughout Scripture as a fundamental means of religious expression. This is because praying to God assumes in faith that he is powerfully willing and also graciously able to hear and respond to the prayers of his people—and further, that he chooses to work in and through these prayers. Thus, prayer is seen all through Scripture as both a wonderful privilege and also a solemn responsibility for God’s people. It follows, then, that prayer is utterly dependent on the revealed relational character of the God of the Bible, demonstrated most fully in the person of Jesus Christ in the NT. Jesus models in his earthly ministry the appropriate way to pray (Matt 6:9–13), and he assumes a mediatorial role in prayer (i.e., he teaches that the proper way to pray is “in my name”; John 14:13–14). Supplicants can become confident that God will hear their prayers because of what Jesus teaches his followers (Mark 11:24).

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Current series: *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

This week – Exodus 33:12 – 34:9

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page.
Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.