

Message: “Why Pray?”

Why do we pray? That question lies at the heart of our time together. Prayer is more than crying out when we’re suffering. Prayer is more than silence from God. Prayer is more than looking for a divine handout. Yes, prayer can be all those things and more. We may have doubts about whether prayer really matters and whether God really cares. These are very real, critical questions, real doubts. We deserve more than simple, Sunday school answers.

Fair enough. Over the next five weeks we’re going to wrestle with the Why-How-What of prayer, talk about God’s absence and spend a few minutes considering whether prayer does any good.

Let’s start with the most fundamental question, “Why pray?”

We pray for different reasons. Let’s hear some: why do you pray? Those are all good reasons. They reflect the different ways we’re in relationship with God. They’re meaningful.

Is there a deeper reason leading us to seek an encounter with God?

Hear these words from Israel’s king-in-exile, David, as he wandered in the desert: *“O 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”* (Psalm 63:1, NRSV).

David was lost, alone and looking for answers. The only place he knew to go was to God.

Maybe that reference is too old and outdated. Using Scriptures from the Bible to justify spiritual practices can seem self-serving. Here’s a perspective from Richard Rohr, “Our suffering in developed countries is primarily psychological, relational and addictive: the suffering of people who are comfortable on the outside but oppressed and empty within. It is a crisis of meaninglessness, which leads us to find meaning in possession, perks, prestige, and power, which are always outside of the self. It doesn’t finally work.”¹ Does anyone resonate with this?

I know I do. Twenty years ago, I found myself at the end of that rope. I had accomplishments, reputation, opportunity, all you could want.

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 1

Yet I found myself on a downward spiral mentally, emotionally and spiritually. At 4:30 am on a Saturday morning, I screamed out to God “Show me you exist, that it matters!” I felt a calm come over me and a voice saying, “*Be still*” (Psalm 46:10). I fell asleep and woke up 30 minutes later, feeling like I’d slept for a week. That God-moment changed my life. It wasn’t an external change. It was an internal change. I stopped hurting myself and began to let God heal me.

Rev. Rohr is saying that our suffering is self-inflicted. Rather than looking for cures and recipes that come from the outside, we need to look inside ourselves to find answers and meaning. This comes with a set of questions: how do we do that? How will it help with suffering? How is God present? When am I going to have time for yet another thing? I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted just thinking about that list of things.

Pastor John Ortberg has a term for this state: soul-fatigue.²

That’s when the weariness of our body, mind and will combine. When that happens, the difficulty of life overwhelms us. We feel distant: separated from God, separated from others and separated from ourselves. We feel like the things we love most about life are at a distance. Reconnecting to God or connecting for the first time doesn’t seem important, but it is. Only God can save us from our inner demons.

When we feel isolated, the idea of spending time in prayer is unappealing. Rather than spending 1-on-1 time with the God who made you and loves you, we feel distracted and lonely. Rather than finding answers, we feel like we come away with more questions. Rather than knowing how God is present with us to help us through our suffering, we see God as the cause or enabler. That’s how we can feel. It’s certainly how some people feel. Maybe we’re coming to it in the wrong way.

I invite you to see prayer as a time of rest rather than another item on your “to do” list. I know it isn’t easy. Rest is hard for some of us. We want to be in control. We want to set the agenda. It’s hard to let go. You may have heard the expression “let go and let God.” There are

² John Ortberg, *Soulkeeping*, Zondervan, 2014

times when we have to trust God and give up control. It's okay to be vulnerable with God; you're in safe hands. You can let go of the fears, worries and anxiousness you feel. That's what it means to be connected to God.

I believe prayer is a time of spiritual rest. It's when God's grace comes in. Grace restores our soul and gives us rest. Divine energy renews our body, mind and will. We find this kind of rest when we regularly connect to God. When we connect to God's Spirit, our soul is connected to the source of life. That's how our physical batteries are recharged. Our minds are refreshed. Our will finds rest.

A common problem is that we can make prayer an obligation. What we need are spiritual practices that connect us to God's grace, energy and joy. Nowhere in the ten commandments does it say, "Thou shalt pray." Prayer is not a rule or requirement. It's an encounter with God.

I don't think all our prayer moments are the same. It may not be the best illustration, but I think of whale watching. The trip is always a good one. Whether you encounter dolphins, a whale or a pod of whales depends on the circumstances. When we pray, we may encounter God in a simple way, a hopeful way or a truly life-changing way. No matter what, the spiritual connection – the trip, is good.

I believe prayer is meant to be natural, organic and flowing. Prayer is encountering the God-who-can-do-impossible-things where we are. Prayer is loving, giving, pardoning and healing. Being right with God is more about attitude than posture or action. Whenever you feel open to prayer, God is there. God is present for you in that moment, and the moment after that, and the moment after that, and

What do God-moments look like for you? It could be while you're sitting here (grin), at the beach, listening to great music, being with life-giving friends, taking a long walk, or caring for someone close to you, at a wedding, spending time with children ... the list goes on. All that matters is spending time with God.

I think the test of a good, invigorating prayer is this: does it fill you with grace for life? There are a lot of ways to pray, which is good because we're gifted in different ways, given different personalities. We

have different skills and interests. Spend time with God in the way that best suits you, not anyone else.

Prayer is meant to revitalize us. That's good, because the challenges of life are hard. Working with other people and those in need is stressful at times. The joy of being in the presence of the Lord gives life and fills us with joy and peace, no matter how difficult the situation or circumstance may be. We find a way to be less anxious, more confident and more trusting when we know God is present. Prayer flows from our faith in God. When we believe Jesus makes our lives better, we see spiritual fruit coming out of prayer.

As we begin this spiritual journey together, I hope you discover something that helps restore your soul. God is present in every moment of every day. We usually aren't paying attention to how God is present. And, even if we are, we often aren't ready to accept and receive God's grace. Don't worry, that will come with time. God loves you, just the way you are. You can rest knowing that God wants to hold you close.

Peace, joy and contentment flow from those moments when we seek God's presence, connecting our soul to God. We'll find answers. We'll understand that God weeps with us in our suffering. God isn't distant or uncaring. Learning to live and pray this way has a great impact on who we become and how we're in relationship with others.

I want you to know you're in a safe place. I'm not just talking about this gathering, but anywhere you're in God's presence. Your soul is in safekeeping when you accept that you're in God's hands. Believe in God. Trust Jesus. Embrace the Holy Spirit. Accept God's grace. And be patient as you wait for God in prayer.

Let us pray...

Psalm 90:1-2,113-17 (CEB)

Lord, you have been our help,
generation after generation.

Before the mountains were born,
before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world -
from forever in the past
to forever in the future, you are God.

Come back to us, Lord!

Please, quick!

Have some compassion for your servants!

Fill us full every morning with your faithful love
so we can rejoice and celebrate our whole life long.

Make us happy for the same amount of time that you afflicted us—
for the same number of years that we saw only trouble.

Let your acts be seen by your servants;
let your glory be seen by their children.

Let the kindness of the Lord our God be over us.

Make the work of our hands last.

Make the work of our hands last!

Mark 11:12-25 (CEB)

The next day, after leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. From far away, he noticed a fig tree in leaf, so he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing except leaves, since it wasn't the season for figs. So he said to it, "No one will ever again eat your fruit!" His disciples heard this.

They came into Jerusalem. After entering the temple, he threw out those who were selling and buying there. He pushed over the tables used for currency exchange and the chairs of those who sold doves. He didn't allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He taught them, "Hasn't it been written, *My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?* But you've turned it into *a hideout for crooks.*" The chief priests and legal experts heard this and tried to find a way to destroy him. They regarded him as dangerous because the whole crowd was enthralled at his teaching. When it was evening, Jesus and his disciples went outside the city.

Early in the morning, as Jesus and his disciples were walking along, they saw the fig tree withered from the root up. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look how the fig tree you cursed has dried up."

Jesus responded to them, "Have faith in God! I assure you that whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea' - and doesn't waver but believes that what is said will really happen - it will happen. Therefore I say to you, whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you will receive it, and it will be so for you. And whenever you stand up to pray, if you have something against anyone, forgive so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your wrongdoings."