

Message: “What to Pray”

Why do we pray? We believe Jesus makes our lives better in every way. Prayer is one of the ways Jesus uses to make our lives better. Prayer is a time of spiritual release, rest and nourishment. It’s a time when we can take our pain, hurt, suffering and broken relationships to God without fear. God isn’t going to be offended by, or afraid of, anything we say. I kid with Esperanza all the time, warning her to watch out for the lightning bolt. It hasn’t, and won’t, strike.

Prayer is a God-moment. It’s a pause in life when we’re reminded of God’s steady, life-giving love, mercy, forgiveness and grace. God’s love is so powerful it drives out fear. God’s love shines even in the darkest of times and places. When we connect to God’s Spirit, our soul is connected to the very source of life and light. By the power of love, hope takes root and grows.

How do we pray? The first step is trust. Trust God. Lean on that relationship. Seek it out. When we go to God in an attitude of openness, seeking the Lord because we know there’s no one else to turn to, we encounter God in a way that pardons and heals us. We’re refreshed and renewed. We remember what it’s like to be in relationship with a God of eternal love and grace. We can relax, share what’s on our heart and accept the favor God wants to give us. That’s God’s blessing. We have a part to play.

God’s grace is always working for the good of those who love God. When we take time to listen in prayer, we see God at work. God goes before us, preparing the way. God is for us, renewing our heart and mind each day. God is with us. When we accept Christ, the Holy Spirit lives inside of us, changing us from the inside-out. As we mature spiritually, prayer shows us how to live more like Jesus and, more important, to love like Jesus. God is always present, always waiting for us, always ready to show us the way of life. We share that by our presence with God and others.

This week we're taking one more step: What are we to pray?

Given the events of the past few years, months and days, the list is long. Let's hear from you: what do you pray for?

Hint: there's no wrong answer.

You should pray as you feel. Be specific. Name names. Ask God to help people by name, name your joys or concerns. Give it shape in your will, mind, body and soul. If the "Five Finger Prayer"¹ we taught the children helps, use it. There are other methods available. God doesn't grade your prayer, only responding to "A" students. You don't get points for grammatically correct prayers or more flowery language. Honest, simple, from-the-heart prayers are what matter to God.

There's one thing I think we need to keep in mind. Prayer isn't a head thing. It's a whole body thing. We pour ourselves out in prayer. We enter prayer and nothing else matters. Whether it's you individually, the members of your household, a group or the community who gathers, what matters is the God we worship and connect to in prayer.² When we're right with God, we can listen, question and speak with full confidence.

Scripture is helpful. It teaches us about people's experiences and prayer. Let's look at a couple of examples. Solomon was a great and wealthy king of Israel, David's son. He had all he needed to be successful. Solomon started out well but went through a long period of disillusionment. After several years, he found an answer in faith. Solomon ended up writing the book of Lamentations.

Can you hear prayer in these words? *"I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness, the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed. I remember it all - oh, how well I remember - the feeling of hitting the bottom. But there's one other thing I remember, and remembering, I keep a grip on hope: God's loyal love couldn't have run out, God's merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness! I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over). God's all I've got left"* (Lamentations 3:19-24, MSG).

¹ <https://sermons4kids.com/fivefingerprayer.html>

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/selah-life-in-a-minor-key/third-sunday-in-lent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes>

Even in the deepest darkness of depression and anxiety, God is there, ready and willing to lift us into the light. Take what you're wrestling with to God. Stick with Jesus.

On another occasion, Paul and Silas were in Philippi, which was a Roman colony in Macedonia, part of modern-day Greece (Acts 16). They heard there was going to be a prayer meeting led by some local businesswomen. On the way, they had an encounter with a psychic. To make a long story short, Paul cast out the spirit possessing the girl. This made the business owners angry. They knew a corrupt judge, who had Paul and Silas' clothes ripped off and ordered a public beating. Then they threw them in jail under heavy guard.

Do you know how Paul and Silas responded? Luke tells us in Acts 16:25-26, *"Along about midnight, Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust song to God. The other prisoners couldn't believe their ears. Then, without warning, there was a huge earthquake! The jailhouse tottered, every door flew open, all the prisoners were loose"* (MSG). They were free! They could run away and escape.

The power of prayer is amazing, amen. However, in the tradition of Paul Harvey, I'll tell you the rest of the story.

The jailer woke up and saw all the doors open. Assuming all the prisoners had escaped, he pulled out his sword and was about to kill himself, figuring he was as good as dead anyway. That's when Paul stopped him, *"Don't do that! We're all still here! Nobody's run away!"*

It was true. The jailer grabbed a torch and ran inside. All the prisoners were still there. Badly shaken, he collapsed in front of Paul and Silas.

The former jailer led them out of the jail and asked, *"Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?"* They said, *"Put your entire trust in Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live – and everyone in your house included!"* (Acts 16:27-31, MSG). Later that day, that man and all the members of his household were baptized.

No matter what your situation or circumstance, lift it to God in prayer. If you give thanks to God and give God all the credit, good things can happen. Best of all, people will take notice and be amazed at what God can do. When we seek ways to honor God with our lives and

prayers, amazing things can happen. Lives will be changed for the better. That's how we're invited into God's blessing.

What do we pray? I hear the question another way. To me, it says,
What would Jesus pray?

Let me offer two examples from Jesus' life to guide us. First is from Jesus' sermon on the mount (Matthew 6:7-15). Jesus reminds us that God knows what you need. He then teaches the disciples a prayer. We know it as the Lord's prayer. It's a good prayer for us to memorize, study and reflect on.

The second example is found in Luke 22:39-46. We read it together earlier. It's the story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal, trial and death.

Jesus had a regular practice of going to the garden to pray. That night, Jesus invited the disciples to pray saying, "*Pray so you won't give in to temptation*" (vv40,46). He said it twice. They were struggling with grief over Judas leaving, Jesus' words to Peter and the threat looming over them. Sadly, they couldn't keep their eyes open or pray.

They did see and hear Jesus pray, "*God, remove this cup from me. But please, not what I want. What do you want?*" Jesus was strengthened by angels as he prayed harder and harder. Sweat, like drops of blood, poured off his face. Jesus' prayer wasn't private, it wasn't quiet and it certainly wasn't easy. His groans were loud.

I wonder, what would happen if we prayed with the depth, intensity and connection Jesus did? We can learn to pray with passion and intensity, trusting God and relying on God's will. It won't be easy. There are times when it'll be like work. Other people may not get why we do it or be able to join us because of their own issues. But it'll teach us to look at our circumstances and situations the way Jesus did, without fear, in confidence and with full trust God will see us through, no matter what may come, even if it's death.

Julie Aageson, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, offers a deeper reflection. “Too often we turn prayer into well-intentioned patterns of our own making. Too often we assume prayer is primarily about words. Sometimes there’s an almost magical understanding that if we get the words right, if we trust and believe enough, God will answer.

But most of us know God isn’t a divine magician. We know prayer is much more than our feeble attempts to make God pay attention to what God already knows, or to make God into a puppet responding to our tugs on the strings of God’s heart. Prayer is so much more than words.

I want to experience God’s presence in more expansive and spacious ways. I want to consider prayer as a place, an attitude, a stance, a way of being in the world. I want to practice prayer in acts of attention and beauty, compassion and devotion, enthusiasm and faith. I want to know prayer as gratitude, hospitality, imagination, joy and kindness.

I want to experience prayer in listening and being mindful, in nurturing and openness, in play and questing. I want to know God’s presence in reverence, stillness and thanksgiving. I want to notice God in the unity of things, in vision and wonder and mystery. I want to be known by God and zealous to share the love and grace God is.”³

What do we pray? Lord, may it be so.

Let us pray...

³ <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/09/prayer-without-words/>

Lamentations 3:1-3,19-24 (MSG)

I'm the man who has seen trouble,
trouble coming from the lash of God's anger.
He took me by the hand and walked me
into pitch-black darkness.
Yes, he's given me the back of his hand
over and over and over again.

I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness,
the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed.
I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—
the feeling of hitting the bottom.
But there's one other thing I remember,
and remembering, I keep a grip on hope:

God's loyal love couldn't have run out,
his merciful love couldn't have dried up.

They're created new every morning.

How great your faithfulness!

I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over).

He's all I've got left.

Luke 22:39-46 (CEB)

Jesus left and made his way to the Mount of Olives, as was his custom, and the disciples followed him. When he arrived, he said to them, "Pray that you won't give in to temptation." He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed. He said, "Father, if it's your will, take this cup of suffering away from me. However, not my will but your will must be done." Then a heavenly angel appeared to him and strengthened him. He was in anguish and prayed even more earnestly. His sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground. When he got up from praying, he went to the disciples. He found them asleep, overcome by grief. He said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so that you won't give in to temptation."