

What every Christian needs to grow: Prayer can change your life

Message for Sunday, April 10, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Galatians 4:4-6; Philippians 4:6-7 and others

Children's Message: Matthew 14:22-23.

Jesus had had a long day. It began when he heard news that one of his closest friends, John the Baptist, was murdered. He took his group of followers by boat to a place where they could have some privacy. But the crowds of people on shore saw him, and followed along the shore. When he landed, they were already there. So he spent the day looking after their needs. When it was evening, he sent the crowd home, and sent his followers to their home in the boat. Jesus climbed up the hill to a place where he would be all alone, so he could pray and not be interrupted.

He must have been exhausted and ready for bed. But first he took time to be with God, his heavenly Father.

Sit in a rocking chair to demonstrate the importance of spending time with God. Invite one of the children to sit in the small rocking chair beside me.

You and I also need to take time to be with God. We all need to take time to read the Bible, to think, to pray, to just be together with God.

[The idea for this is from Philip Johnson's *And More Celebrating the Seasons with Children*.]

Message "What every Christian needs to grow: Prayer can change your life"

Let's take a little survey here: how many of you wish you were in better shape? (most people will put up their hands, myself included). Prayer is like that: we want it, but it's hard to discipline ourselves to do it. The purpose of this message is to encourage you, and to give you some ideas on how to do it.

This series of messages is about helping us grow in our faith. I need that; but it's *especially* true about today's theme: "Prayer can change your life." I have said it before, I make no secret about it: prayer is something with which I have real difficulty. It's

not that I don't want to pray, or that I don't want to have a closer relationship with God. I do! Here are my two main problems in prayer. Some of you have told me you have the same difficulty.

- a) **I find myself easily distracted from prayer.**
To be more honest, it's often hard to get motivated to start praying in the first place; so the least little distraction can easily get in the way.
- b) **I don't understand prayer.** I mean, God has promised to look after our needs. So why should I pray about them? Or when people are ill: when I *don't* pray for them, some of them get better, and some don't. When I *do* pray for them, some of them get better, and some don't. **It's hard to see that my prayer makes any difference.**

As I did some Bible study on prayer, I found that most of my problems were based on a misunderstanding of what prayer is all about.

1) Prayer is being with God

What is prayer?

Well, on the surface, prayer is talking with God. Actually, for most of us, it's talking *to* God (I'll come back to "with" later). Our prayers are mostly a bunch of words strung together. Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer, a collection of words.

Sometimes, however, I find that words are not enough. When I'm praying about something or someone that I feel deeply about, I stop talking and just sigh. It might come out like, "Oh God, oh... oh... please help." This prayer is coming straight from the heart, and doesn't need to go through the vocal cords. As Paul puts it in Romans 8, this is a form of praying in the Holy Spirit:

Romans 8:26, New Living Translation:

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.

Another example of this is people who have the gift of speaking in tongues: they are not aware of the meaning of the words they are uttering, but it is a way of communicating with God just the same.

In all this, prayer goes further than communication. More than anything, prayer is about having a

relationship with God. It's about simply *being* with God.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that we can have an intimate, personal relationship with God.

Galatians 4:4-6, New Living Translation:

When the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because you Gentiles have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father.

John 14:23

"All those who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them."

Incredible! God wants to come and live with me, to live in me by the Holy Spirit. God wants to hang out with me! When I pray, I'm saying in effect, "You're important to me, Lord. I want to build our relationship. I want to get to know you better."

2) Prayer changes people

I mentioned that one of my problems is that I often can't see what difference prayer makes. I found that I may have been looking in the wrong place.

Philippians 4:6-7, New Living Translation:

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

What does this passage tell us? That God will give us everything we want? No, I don't see that in there. What I do see is a promise that God will give his peace to us when we pray. Prayer *does* change people — particularly the person who is doing the praying!

A writer by the name of Hannah Hurnard put it this way:

It is not that prayer changes God, or awakens in him purposes of love and compassion that he has not already felt. No, prayer changes us, and therein lies its glory and its purpose.

3) Prayer opens the door

Now does all this mean that we shouldn't bother praying for help, for healing, for miracles, or for everyday little things? No, it doesn't. Jesus was clear that our heavenly Father *wants* to give us gifts and help.

Matthew 7:7-11, New Century Version:

[Jesus said,] "Ask, and God will give to you. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will open for you. Yes, everyone who asks will receive. Everyone who searches will find. And everyone who knocks will have the door opened.

"If your children ask for bread, which of you would give them a stone? Or if your children ask for a fish, would you give them a snake? Even though you are bad, you know how to give good gifts to your children. How much more your heavenly Father will give good things to those who ask him!"

Friends, I'll be totally open with you. This is the part of prayer that I still don't understand. This passage seems to say that God loves his children, yet waits to give them things until they ask for them. But other passages in the Bible tell that God promises to supply our needs. And then there's my own experience of prayer sometimes being granted, and sometimes not.

So what do I do? Stop praying? Give up on God? Assume that I'll have to do it myself (like the old proverb, "God helps those who help themselves" — which, by the way, is not from the Bible at all). No!

Do I understand God's love? No, it's way beyond me. But I believe it and accept it and rejoice in it. Do I understand how Jesus' death on the cross affects my salvation? No, it's something of a mystery. But I sure am glad for it.

Prayer is like that. I may not get it; but I'd be a fool to let that stop me from trusting the many, many promises in the Bible about prayer. I mean, which is more important: what I know, or what God says? I'll choose to be on God's team any day.

4) A pattern for prayer

Enough talking; it's time for doing! Some people have never been taught how to pray. I'm going to show you a method of prayer that has been used by

Christians for many, many years. It's certainly not the only way to pray, but it's at least a place to start.

It's called the "ACTS prayer." Each letter in ACTS stands for a different part of the prayer.

A: begin with **adoration**. Look up to God and worship and adore him. Think of what God is like — mighty, loving, merciful, all-knowing, compassionate — and then worship him for who he is.

C: come clean with **confession**. God already knows what you've done wrong, so don't pretend or play games with him. Be open and honest with God. And don't just lump the wrongs in a pile: "Forgive me for anything I've done wrong today." Stop and take an honest look at yourself, listing how you've hurt others, how you disobeyed God, and so on. When you do that, two wonderful things happen. (a) You experience God's amazing love and forgiveness. (b) You say, "I don't want to be that kind of person. Please help me change."

T: **thanksgiving** is more than being polite. It means heartfelt gratitude for all that God has done. Some people find it helpful to write down their prayers; then they can look back over them and check off all the answered prayers.

S: **supplication** comes from the word "supply," and it means our requests. Requests for ourselves and for others. Requests for material things, for spiritual needs, for relationships, for *anything*: if it's important to you, it's important to God.

Place the situation into God's hands, and trust that he will look after it in the best possible way.

I played an excerpt from a talk by Bill Hybels called "Coffee with God." If you have internet, you can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xU9GR4H0WQ.

Next Steps:

- Commit to a regular time of prayer (perhaps as an experiment).
- Carve out a time, and find a place, for regular prayer.
- Do it! The method is unimportant; doing it is.

At the beginning of this message, I said that our prayers are usually talking *to* God, instead of talking *with* God. I'm going to come to this in next week's message: learning to listen to God.