

# Prayer Life Refresh

**January 2/3, 2021 | Daniel 10:12-14; Mark 14:32-42**

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## MOTIVATION

I was thrilled when Valley invited me to preach here again. How is everybody? Christine and I love this church. Some of you know I have been a volunteer assistant pastor at Valley Simsbury since May. I also continue to work as Global Ambassador for MedSend, an agency that pays the educational loans of health-care professionals serving in missions. My MedSend role was diminished when COVID prevented travel, making time available to serve at the Simsbury Campus.

I knew I wanted to preach today on prayer. After all, a 21-Day prayer emphasis starts at Valley next week. But what fresh approach could I take to this very familiar subject? Many of us need to refresh our prayer lives. Holidays aren't kind to our waistlines or to our prayer habits. For many of us, prayer is a discipline and discipline is difficult during holidays, when the pressure of other demands like work and school are reduced.

Years of ministry have led me to conclude there are two great obstacles to prayer. The first is that we don't see the answers to prayer that we are hoping for, or that the answers take much longer than our patience will tolerate. In our human frailty, not seeing expected answers undermines our motivation to pray.

The second obstacle is that while praying we have a tough time focusing on God and paying attention. Distracted prayer times have been a challenge since long before cell phones brought constant interruptions into our lives. When I surveyed leaders at Black Rock Church in Fairfield, where I worked 25 years ago, they said prayer distractions were a big issue then. When we lose prayer focus, we tend to give up on regular personal prayer. Prayer is relegated to those situations when we're desperate for God to intervene. Our prayers become short and insistent. We demand that God meet our need. "Help me make this sale!" "Help me keep my cool with my kids." The idea of prayerfully worshipping God through adoration, confession, and thanksgiving is completely lost.

At the same time, the Christian life is impossible without prayer. You might say we can't live with prayer the way God wants us to pray, but we sure can't live without prayer because we need it so often. I hope today both inspires and informs your desire to refresh your prayer life in these early days of 2021.

## WHY ARE PRAYERS NOT “ANSWERED”?

Please don't be insulted by this oft-repeated question. I start here because I have two answers that may be new to you. Here's the first:

### **Spiritual warfare may delay answers to prayer.**

Without sounding too far out on the lunatic fringe, let me read a passage from the book of Daniel that might be new to some of you. When we think about Daniel, we remember this Godly young man and his deliverance from the lion's den. That story occurs in the first half of Daniel, but the book has six additional chapters. There's a strange story about prayer in Chapter 10. Daniel is being spoken to by an angel sent by God about a prayer Daniel had made three weeks before. Nothing was happening. Daniel wondered what was going on with his prayer, just like we would. The angel explains...

*(Daniel 10:12-14) Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.*

Daniel had prayed to ask God to explain a vision. God sent his answer with an angel right away. But for three weeks the spirit of Persia blocked the progress of the prayer-answering angel on his way to Daniel. The divine messenger needed the help of the archangel Michael to escape the battle. Only then was he able to reach Daniel with the answer to his prayer.

Believe me, I'm not sensationalistic about Satan. Certainly, I know he exists, but I don't believe that every time you miss a green light and you're late to work, it's an act of the Devil. If you cheat on your taxes in the coming season, it's not the Devil who makes you do it. It's your own fleshly desire for money. However, this passage clearly illustrates that prayer can involve spiritual warfare, and that at least one nation has spirits that battle God's communication on behalf of the Evil One. If you're inclined to dismiss the idea that there is a literal Devil, remember that numerous passages in the Old and New Testament testify to his existence, including the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 13:36-43.

Here are two prayer points from Daniel 10 that Chuck Swindoll identifies:

### **Prayers of a believer are immediately heard by God.**

Verse 12 says that from the first day your words have been heard. I know it sometimes feels like our prayers are not heard. This passage clearly tells Daniel that though the answer to his prayers was delayed, it wasn't because God didn't hear them immediately. Christine and I have battled in prayer for our children for decades, especially our two sons. Sometimes it feels like our prayers stop at our bedroom ceiling. This passage makes it clear that is just not true. God does hear your prayers! Believe that as you pray, whether it feels that way or not. Secondly...

### **Battling demonic forces is not a unique occurrence.**

Daniel 10:20 says, quoting the same angel that spoke in the verses I just read: "Now I return to fight against the Prince of Persia." The spiritual battle continues. Somehow in the west we tend to dismiss such statements because of our faith in man's ever-growing intelligence and the scientific method. But there's no question that Daniel 10 is an account of a spiritual battle. We need to accept it by faith even though we can't feel it or authenticate it by modern means of proof. The New Testament in Ephesians 6:12 reflects this idea in a more general way when it says: "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."

Now, let's move from the spirit world to the practical world. Here's another rarely considered explanation of why God doesn't always answer prayer to our liking.

### **Our human perspective blinds us to God's perspective.**

Pastor Tim Keller, paraphrasing a portion of Romans 8, said that in prayer God will always give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything He knows. So many times, we ask for what we believe is the will of God, but with the additional insight of time we realize we were asking for the wrong thing. Example: Being sure it was God's will for me to become missions pastor at Church of the Savior, being rejected, then seeing a church split and my colleague suffer for several years thereafter.

Now, let's move on to the challenge of...

## **PAYING ATTENTION WHILE PRAYING**

I'm convinced Christians want to pray. Conversation with God is a privilege, don't you agree? So, what's our problem? We don't keep our mind on praying and we lose motivation as a result. I know that I have the full attention of the God of the universe in prayer, but I can't pay full attention to Him in return. I hate it when that happens! My mind wanders. I think about my plan for the day. I think about everything, it seems, except the very thing I have sat down to do: prayerfully communicate with God. Worse yet, sometimes I fall asleep. Do you think God notices? How embarrassing! How embarrassing to admit it to all of you! But, this confession will benefit those of you who may consider me a paragon of self-discipline. Be comforted by knowing if you also fall asleep while trying to pray, you're not alone.

In fact, you have far more distinguished company than me in distracted prayer. Peter, James, and John, the three most trusted disciples, the virtual rock stars of the twelve men who followed Jesus, had a terrible time keeping their prayer focus just when Jesus needed them the most. Remember the story read earlier from Mark 14:32-43?

### **Jesus Asked for Prayer (v. 33-34)**

Jesus wants Peter, James, and John to support him spiritually as he anticipated the ordeal of the cross.

He confesses to these three trusted friends: My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch. Jesus was in extreme anguish. Surely, His closest disciples could not have missed the agitated

state of their leader. Maybe they were horrified that their spiritual role model, the man who could heal the sick and stand up to the attacks of the religious leaders of the day, was now vulnerable and dependent on their spiritual support.

Jesus falls to the ground, calls his father Abba ("daddy"), and asks that the cup be passed from him: the agony of spiritual separation from His heavenly father ... bearing the sins of many. It was all coming down on Jesus. He was fully God and fully man, but here we see Jesus as a man, acting like anyone else facing the ordeal of a lifetime. Take comfort from observing that in this moment of truth, Jesus wasn't much different than the rest of us ... except, of course, that He obeyed His father in every respect regardless of the horrible pain of dying on a cross and bearing the sins of all mankind.

### **How do these three most trusted disciples respond? (v. 37, 40, 41)**

Jesus returns to his disciples after an hour or so and finds them sleeping! Jesus questions them: Are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? I love this painting, entitled "Here I Stand," which captures this moment. Jesus reminds them that praying will prevent them from falling to temptation. He seems to understand what they are experiencing when he says, "The spirit, indeed, is willing but the flesh is weak." (Psalm 51:12) Jesus shows compassion for his sleeping friends even when His own problems are the greatest He has ever faced! What an encouragement for us to refresh our prayer lives no matter how weak and undisciplined we may feel in this area.

### **Why is "the flesh weak" for Peter, James, and John? (v. 40)**

Mark's text says, "Because their eyes were heavy," meaning they were tired. Luke 22:45: "Exhausted from sorrow." Did the disciples know that Jesus desperately needed their support? Of course they did. They had been with him for three years, but they were discouraged and exhausted. 2 Corinthians 5:4 (NLT): "While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh." That describes the disciples in this moment, and may be the way we feel sometimes when we know we should pray.

### **How do the disciples feel about their prayer failure?**

They were embarrassed. "They did not know what to say to him." (NIV) That's how I feel when I want to pray but then lose concentration or perhaps even lose consciousness! Maybe you can identify. Well, enough negativity. Let's talk about the prayer comeback of Peter, James, and John!

## **PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN BECAME PRAYER LEADERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

### **How do I know? The early church was known for prayer.**

( Acts 2:42) *They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

James was the pastor of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:13) spoken of in this early chapter of Acts. This shows that James must have made a prayer comeback as he led his congregation to make prayer a priority. Peter and John were also church leaders in these early days. Somehow, they were all transformed from sleeping oafs who couldn't focus on prayer when their Savior's life depended on it, to leading a large group of believers characterized by prayer.

**Prayer tip: Pray with others.**

Praying with other believers is encouraging. It's also easier to pay attention when you are praying with others. Now, I know that praying with other people implies that you pray out loud.

You don't like to pray out loud? I suggest trying to pray one sentence out loud in a small group. Start small and see what happens. I guarantee that people won't giggle, and they won't ridicule you behind your back. I've been in church work for years and I've never seen that happen. You may have to endure your own self-criticism. But that will probably move you towards greater proficiency - not less - in praying out loud.

A friend of mine at Valley who went from being petrified to pray out loud to being comfortable in doing so told me how she made this big change. Essentially, she had to get over herself! At work, she regularly gave presentations to groups, but she always knew her topic and was well prepared. Praying out loud just didn't come as easily for her. It was unfamiliar territory and she feared verbal miscues would make her look bad. Then one day she saw an outline in the Lord's prayer that she began to implement when praying out loud. Instead of dreading public prayer she now was eager to do so. I'd be most happy to interact with you further if praying out loud is an issue. It doesn't have to be! I can help.

Perhaps Peter had the most to prove of these three, given his outspoken assurances to Jesus that he would never fail him.

As a church leader, Peter lived a risk-filled life that required dependence on prayer. In Acts 12, Peter was miraculously released from prison through the all-night prayers of his church friends, skeptical though they were. Remember, Peter knocked on the door of the house where the people were praying for his release. Those inside were sure it wasn't Peter at the door, so they sent a humble servant named Rhoda to open it. Peter's persistence and boldness in prayer rose as a result, I'm sure.

**Prayer tip: Take risks that demand prayer**

When you pray in desperation and see God at work, believe it, rejoice in it, perhaps even record it. We taught our kids to write down God's answers to their prayers shortly after they learned to write. I wrote down 50 indicators of God's prayerful provision on my 3,000-mile cross-country bike trip 40 years ago. I've hung on to them ever since.

Now let's consider John: He wrote the book of Revelation, whose main message is to praise God. Through this book John led the church in praising and adoring the Lord, an area of prayer in which many of us struggle.

**Prayer tip: Write your prayers down**

Write them down like John did in Revelation or like David did in the Psalms. Writing prayers and writing prayer lists have been helpful in my prayer life for decades.

**Prayer tip: Read prayers from God's Word**

I spent one full year reading the Psalms daily and reading a brief devotional about them. I did this 20 years ago for the first time and have read various Psalms since, as an entry point to some of my prayer times. If you find yourself losing focus, read the Psalms out loud and you'll be much more inclined to stay awake. Try Psalm 13 if you're kind of down:

*(Psalm 13): How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ...But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

See, that wasn't so hard, was it? And I'll bet you paid attention for the full 20 seconds it took to read this Psalm.

## CONCLUSION

You can refresh your prayer life! Past failures are irrelevant, as Peter, James and John illustrate. Comebacks are possible, especially in a church like Valley where prayer is a core value. Let me close with the story of William Carey, the Father of Modern Missions, who I learned about in the "Perspectives" Course:

Carey persistently took bold initiative in prayer. You might need to do the same, like asking God's help to pray out loud. Carey said: "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." If you need a comeback, remember this quote from Carey: "I can plod. I can persevere in any pursuit. To this I owe everything."

Carey was a plodder, not a perfectionist. He persevered when he had good reason to call it quits. Fellow pastors told Carey that if God wanted to save the "heathen" of India, as they were called in that day, He would do it without Carey's help. Carey's wife at first refused to go with him from England to India. After taking the five-month journey by ship to India, Carey didn't see a convert for the first seven years. There were many flaws in his mission work, but he lived forty years in India in the early 1800s without coming back to England even once.

Can you plod in your prayer life? Refresh your prayers today with renewed inspiration and resolve.