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The Lonely Place

BUT JESUS OFTEN WITHDREW TO LONELY PLACES AND PRAYED.

—LUKE 5:16

Perhaps nothing is more difficult than prayer.
For followers of Jesus, we describe efforts to pray with phrases like

*I wrestle with prayer
I struggle to pray
My prayer life is weak
All my prayers sound the same
I know I should pray more
I don't pray enough
I don't know how to pray
I fall asleep when I pray
Praying is boring
I tried but I just can't pray
I used to pray, but it did not work*



Dr. Howard G. Hendricks, distinguished professor for over fifty years, editorialized, “Hold a conference on

prophecy and people come out by droves. Hold a conference on prayer and people stay away by the thousands.”

On another occasion, Dr. Hendricks queried, “Did it ever occur to you that there is only one thing the gospels record, when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them something? They asked Jesus to *teach* them to pray. What does this reveal of the disciples’ struggle?”

Over the years, many have tried to help us, teach us, and encourage us to pray. Devotionals, daily readings, prayer books, journals, entries from saints of other generations, mystical intrigue, and studies have been produced to cheer us on to pray. Call it a discipline, devotion, duty, or even religion—it seems that only silver-haired widows know the richness and joy of prayer.

My journey with prayer may be like yours. On rare occasions, I think I am praying well. Most of the time, I know I do not have a clue about prayer. I can quickly feel guilty about not praying. I can muster up a good habit for a while, but praying for lists of sick people does not keep me motivated. This may say more about my personal issues, but I find many believers pale to prayer. So, perhaps like you, I have read books on prayer, kept prayer lists, studied prayer in the Bible, and kept prayer journals. (The quirkiest attempt was to record prayer requests and answers in an unused checkbook register, dating the request and answer like a deposit and withdrawal.)

So maybe we visit a prayer meeting or a prayer service. As a pastor, it is a horrible admission to make, but I hate prayer meetings. Think about the last prayer meeting you attended:

- We spend more time talking about requests than praying
- We share concerns (code language for “gossip” and “worry”)
- We pray about generic items: travel safety, health, upcoming surgeries, jobs
- We pray through a list of unknown people (the hallowed “unspoken requests”)
- If we pray about other things, it is about someone else’s prodigal son, a friend of a friend’s marriage, a distant relative’s problems
- Maybe we pray for things like church leaders, unity, people coming to Christ, and missions
- And we lament with the prophets of old, and pray that other people would be more committed and come to our prayer meeting

All of these are fine concerns. I do not mean to demean. We are instructed to pray for all things. And very committed believers faithfully come to prayer meetings and are serious and devout in their prayers. Yet if this is supposed to be vital, crucial, essential, the warp and woof of a believer’s
 s o u l ,
 why does it still fall flat for the great majority of believers?

Prayer can feel like a wedding reception of people you do not know very well but among whom you have to be on your best behavior. It seems more like a tedious gathering than Gethsemane, more like coffee and fellowship than Paul’s prayer for enlightenment.

I hold several convictions about prayer. You may not agree with all of these, and if not, I hope you will develop your own. But these are mine:

- A personal prayer life is more important than group or public prayer
- The discipline or development of prayer is an indicator of growth, maturity, and intimacy with Christ
- Prayer is a relationship, not a task
- Prayer is recognition that my dependence is not partial but total
- Our prayer “life” will wax and wane
- Pain, suffering, and problems may well be God’s motivators for us to pray
- Eloquence in prayer is not important
- Prayer is communication with the Creator of the universe. As a result, why use repetitious, dull, canned language to talk with God?
- Choosing good words, expressions, phrases that clearly articulate prayer is important
- Keeping a journal or writing prayers helps us see, over time, more about ourselves than whether God “answers” prayer
- If prayer is important to Christ, would He leave His followers in a fog for all time?

As the Mennonites urged, *pray until you have prayed.*

—MICHAEL J. EASLEY

*~ Again ~**Lord Who sustains*

Again I come to You for grace
Grace that kept me overnight
Grace that keeps me this moment
Grace that will keep me tomorrow

Again I move “in but not of”
where my affections will be tempted
My head will be turned
My heart will be deceived
My motives twisted
My will overused

Again, I need You, every moment, every step, every glance
I offer nothing good apart from You
I only harm others and myself
I always rebel

Again, I need
Your Spirit’s control
Your power to resist
Your Word to guide

~ *Everyday* ~

Great Provider and only Creator,

Help us every day to know that You
Gave to us in our sleep
Renewed our weary frames in the night
Presented us with a new start—every morning

Help us every day to remember You
Provide a roof
Supply us with nourishment
Protect us with clothing
All of which—to our shame—we take for granted

Remind us when we forget that You
Heal us when we are sick
Nourish us when we (greedily) consume
Supply us when we freely spend
Use us—even though we sin—for Your glory

Forgive us every day when we

Hurry into busyness

Disregard appointments with You

Rush past You with self-importance

Think our lives are more important than You

Help us have a constant awareness

That Jesus has covered all our sins

That as unlovely as we may feel, Jesus loves us

That forgiveness cost immeasurably

That our lives can be more about Jesus and less
about us

That our lives can be an ongoing “Thank You” for
Your grace, righteousness, mercy, and love.

~ Those Who Followed ~

Your disciples followed
They saw Your power
They witnessed You
Yet they were afraid

They saw You
Face to face
Sweat to sweat
Land to water
Death to life
Yet doubted

They heard You
Touched You
Knew You
Were Your friends
Yet vacillated

May we follow well
Not turning to the side
Walking the path straight
Keeping the narrow way
With an eye to the light

Hold my hand to Your plow
Keep my back to the sun
My face like flint
Directing my heart to serve You, and You alone.

So when I am weighed in the balance
I will have been a good and faithful follower
Of my Lord, my Jesus, my Christ.

~ *You/We* ~

Eternal Father, Three-in-One:

You have existed from and in all eternity
We exist only in Your choice (before the foundation
of the world)

You have created and sustain Your creation
We can only live within Your creation

You have always been the Father to the Son
We are only sons because You are the adopting Father

You have designed space, time, life, and death
We only inch near knowledge

You have been enthroned for all time
We watch one generation erase another

You order unbendable laws of this realm
We play with and pretend we understand Your ways

You have not changed
We bend with winds of fashion

You are always with us
We are great risks of flight

You love the unlovely
We, the unlovely, seldom love

Your holiness and glory set You apart
We smudge and smear all that is good

You give, bless, forgive, and hear
We take, demand, blame, and forget

Your Son has made the way
We require Your Spirit to compass our hearts

Your Son has obeyed in every and all ways
We need Your Spirit to obey at all

Holy Father, Three-in-One, according to the kind intention of Your will, help us be Your faithful children, heirs to an indescribable eternity with You. For apart from You, we can do nothing.

WE HONOR GOD WHEN WE

ASK FOR GREAT THINGS.

IT IS A HUMILIATING THING

TO THINK WE ARE SATISFIED

WITH VERY SMALL RESULTS.

—D. L. MOODY