

Philippians 4:6-7

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What Really Drives Us to Pray?

So we're halfway through this eight-week worship series on Dimensions of Prayer, and our focus verse has been, "Be still, and know that I am God." Why is that so difficult for us? Why can we not commit a half hour each day to prayer or an hour each week to worshipping God? Because our lives are consumed by so many other things – not just business and worries – like going to work and cooking our meals and paying our bills and fixing our cars - but they're consumed by leisure and entertainment as well – like watching television and going to concerts and parties, and taking trips to amusement parks and beaches. We can come up with hundreds of activities that we consider either more important or more enjoyable than prayer or worship.

So all the logic in the world that I can give you about why prayer and worship are important for your own soul, for your spiritual health, will not lead you to pray and worship God. I've presented some of that logic just to soften your resistance to prayer and worship; I've spoken of our egocentric goals – to secure creature comfort and wealth (often at the expense of other people or the welfare of the planet) – I've spoken of the illusion that the things we possess actually belong to us when in fact the universe obviously belongs to the One who created it. I've spoken of God's loving nature that forgives and repairs our broken souls if we only come to him and trust him with our lives.

But there is a force, a power, a being that would keep us from ever finding true joy and true peace in our lives and keep us constantly filling that spiritual void with non-spiritual junk. I have a rather scientific mind, and so I don't usually talk about Satan or Lucifer or the Devil or demons, but I must admit that it often seems that there is someone inside of us who is out to destroy us and keep us from living a full life, and keep us from ever knowing God. There is someone or something inside us that wants us to be in a constant state of war with God or with anyone who threatens our false sense of security or prosperity. It's a force that says, "I'm in charge; NOT GOD. And I refuse to surrender my authority."

And as a pastor I'm concerned that simply proclaiming God's unending love and forgiveness is not enough to save people from the destructive power of that entity that resides within us. Sure, God will save you in the end, but don't you see the harm that is being done to you now? Don't you see how demonic forces are active even within the church, causing different churches to slander and condemn one another in the name of Jesus? Can't you see that as long as you insist on running your own life irrespective of God's perfect will your life will be full of disappointments and frustration and fear? I've laid down a pretty good case for why and how you should pray and worship, but I truly wonder who among us will change their ways and grow in Spirit, because there is a strong wind blowing us in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately all the logical arguments I can muster will not lead you to pray, but real-life disasters might. We should thank God for disasters. We may actually thank God for crises and calamities. Why? Because those disasters actually lead people to pray. It's no surprise that disasters like 9-11 result in more people attending church or temple or mosque. In times of great fear and uncertainty, the devil may lead our conscious mind to declare, "Where is God?" but deep inside of us our fears draw us to God. And so it is with our personal disasters, our domestic calamities; these draw us to God in prayer, despite our egocentric goals and our pride, our bigotry and our indifference, OUR FEARS DRAW US TO GOD. I can't tell you how many times someone in church approaches me, prays with me, cries with me over a personal disaster that is going on in their lives – a marriage that is failing, a relationship gone sour, a business that is about to fold, an addiction that is consuming their lives, and once that person's life seems back in order – the marriage preserved or the business saved or the addiction is broken – that person stops coming to church, probably stops praying, and moves on feeling "cured." That person is usually a walking time bomb. It's only a matter of time before another crisis occurs because that conditions that led to the outward crisis have not gone away. You may have seen the movie "Analyze This" with Robert DeNiro and Billy Crystal. The mob boss Paul Vitti starts having panic attacks and organizes a meeting with a psychiatrist Ben Sobel to get cured, but he's looking for an instant fix, and there is no instant fix. A serious psychological condition can never be "cured" if a person is unwilling to go deep, if he's unwilling to explore all the factors have led them into their current crisis. In the same way, if we come to God in a state of crisis there are probably a lot of issues that have brought us to the point of crisis. Marriages don't just fall apart in a day, and so they are not fixed in a day either. And God wants to offer us therapy, not a pill that's going to temporarily alleviate the symptoms of our illness but a CURE. And in order for us to be cured, we need to spend some time in therapy with God.

And so I do thank God for those disasters that draw us to him. Because God welcomes us when we come to him. We can still be egocentric and bigoted and selfish and indifferent to others' suffering, but God takes us as we are. Douglas Steere compares our prayers to the list that a child prepares for Santa Claus. Children as we know are often very selfish and materialistic, but that doesn't stop Santa Claus from bringing them presents. Santa doesn't leave them a note saying, "Dear Sarah, At this point in your spiritual development you are still very self-centered, and the doll that you requested will only inhibit an authentic relationship with your peers, your parents, and me. Therefore I have brought you nothing but the wisdom contained in this note. MERRY CHRISTMAS! Santa Claus. P.S. HO HO HO!" Santa doesn't act that way. Parents don't act that way. And God doesn't act that way. God doesn't always wait to answer our prayer until we get it right. God may preserve your marriage even though your selfishness will continue to bring tension to the relationship. God may keep you out of prison even though you may continue to look for ways to skirt the law in order to make money. God may restore you to health even though you continue to avoid exercise and a good diet. God does not ignore the misguided prayer, because God is glad to have you in his presence and God does not want you to suffer.

But I think we should be thankful to God when we DON'T get an instant solution to our problems, because unanswered prayer may keep us praying, and continued prayer deepens our relationship with God, and that transforms our lives, particularly if you are Christian. I believe that Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus all pray to the same God that Christians pray to, but I am very thankful for Jesus.

Because when I pray “in Jesus” I become aware of his presence, and in his presence I commune with a God who loves and gives his all for us. When I say “In Jesus’ name,” I’m not expecting God to give me what I want because I’ve dropped the right name; when I say, “In Jesus’ name” I am praying in Jesus’ own frame of mind, a frame of mind that gave everything he had toward advancing God’s kingdom, and so my prayer is sanctified in his own body and blood that was shed for all of us. Remaining in prayer inevitably brings us into Christ’s presence, and therefore we have to examine our petitions and our requests in the light of that presence. As Steere writes:

“In Christ’s presence you can plead your case with the most measured eloquence, until finally he listens you into silence, into humiliation, into humility, and at last you come into some faint splash of the deep sanity that recalls you to what you are on earth for...”

IT’S IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRIST’S PRESENCE THAT WE LOOK AT OUR PETITIONS IN A NEW LIGHT. AND IT’S IN THAT CONTEXT THAT WE ARE REMINDED OF THE FIRST PETITION OF OUR LORD’S PRAYER: “THY KINGDOM COME; THY WILL BE DONE.” Jesus does not shame us. Jesus does not dismiss us when we come before him with our personal needs. He doesn’t trivialize our petitions. But when bring our petitions into his presence we are reminded of God’s perfect will and God’s perfect plan for creation, and our personal will and our personal plans can be seen in a new light. And there they can be reshaped so that what we end up asking of God may be quite different from what we started to ask of God.

We’ll speak more next week about the intentions of our prayers, but I’d like to leave you with a question to consider:

Remembering that I come into Jesus’ presence when I pray, how does that change my prayer?

And may God abundantly bless you with his love, his grace, and his presence throughout the week.
Amen.