

## Christian Growth

### Week 9: Prayer as a Means of Grace

#### Introduction

Briefly review the role of the MOG in walking by the Spirit, and the four MOG.

The New Testament teaches that praying is one of the MOG.

**John 15:7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. Notice how Jesus connects praying to bearing fruit, which in this passage represents spiritual growth.

**Col. 4:2\*** Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. Paul emphasizes the importance of consistent (“devote” - *proskartereo*: “continue steadfastly”) prayer in his explanation of spiritual growth (Col. 3:1-4:6).

Biblical prayer is not an impersonal religious duty that earns favor with God or makes Him more inclined to bless us. Rather, prayer is personal communication with God, and it is a gift of God's grace.

- We deserve to be banished forever from God's presence because of our ongoing sinfulness. But because of Jesus' death on the cross, we can be confident that we are always welcome in God's presence.

**Ephesians 3:12** In (Christ) and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

- We have no power in ourselves, but as we learn to pray in Jesus' name, we unleash His power to change lives and the course of history. Six times in Jn. 14-16, Jesus reminds us that if we ask anything in His name, he will do it.

**John 14:13** And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. <sup>14</sup> You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (See also Jn. 15:7,16; 16:24,26.)

Yet prayer is difficult—most of us (myself included) struggle recurrently with dissatisfaction concerning our prayer lives. Why is this (DISCUSS)?

- One reason is that of all the MOG, prayer is the least tangible. We can see the Bible and other Christians—but we can't see God. We can see we are accomplishing something when we share our faith or lead a Bible study or encourage a brother—but we can't immediately see what we're accomplishing by praying.
- Another reason is that our sinful natures are highly allergic to God's presence, and Satan (knowing how powerful prayer is) expends extraordinary effort to discourage us from praying.
- Another reason is that God often does not answer our prayers, at least in the way and/or timing that we expect. So we get discouraged because we feel like prayer “doesn't work.”

We will discuss these difficulties later, but first let's consider some general biblical principles on prayer as a MOG.

## General principles

Think of the following four principles as a description of optimal prayer health. Which extreme do you tend toward in these four areas?

*Prayer should be both spontaneous and planned.*

On the one hand, never underestimate the value and benefit of short, spontaneous prayers to God as thoughts or situations arise. These spontaneous prayers of thanks, petition, intercession, etc. keep you in touch with God throughout the day, and they make it easier to keep praying. The more you pray spontaneously, the better you will like planned praying.

See examples of Nehemiah's spontaneous prayers in Neh. 1:5-11; 2:4b; 4:4,5,9; 5:19; 6:9,14; 13:14,22,29,31.

On the other hand, planned prayer (both private and corporate) tends to help you pray more spontaneous prayers. It also makes it more difficult to drift away from prayer for long periods of time.

See Daniel's example of planned private prayer (Dan. 6:10). Acts 2:42 (literally: "the prayers") may refer to planned corporate prayer.

*Prayer should be both private and corporate.*

On the one hand, we should pray lots (daily) with other Christians. Christians commonly make the prime index of their prayer lives how much extended time they pray privately. But this is often the most difficult/advanced way to pray! Meanwhile, most of us can pray longer and stay better focused if we pray with some other brothers and sisters.

See Luke's record of the early church's corporate prayer in Acts 1:14,24; 2:42; 4:24-30; 12:12; 13:2; 16:25; 20:36. Probably many of the New Testament letters' exhortations to pray mean corporate as well as private prayer.

**1 Cor. 14:16** **If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?** Paul's instructions here assume that the early Christians commonly prayed aloud together and "Amened" one another's prayers.

On the other hand, we need to keep cultivating regular quality times of private prayer. This is where we can be utterly honest with God. And this is where we know we are praying to commune with God, and not to impress others.

**Matt. 6:1** **"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven . . ."**<sup>5</sup> **"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."**<sup>6</sup> **But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your**

**Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**

*Prayer should involve both receiving God's love and giving God's love to others.*

On the one hand, we should spend much of our time in prayer reflecting on God's grace and praising and thanking him for his love. This is what Paul calls "rejoicing in the Lord"—and he emphasizes that we should do this "always." Without this emphasis, petition and intercession tend to dominate our prayer—and may make us more selfish and/or anxious.

**Phil. 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**

On the other hand, one of the most important ways that we sacrificially serve people is by praying for them. By praying for non-Christians and Christians, we love them. Such prayers *will* unleash God's influence on them. They will also warm our hearts to love them more, and give us insight into how to love them more effectively.

**Col. 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. <sup>13</sup> I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.**

*Prayer should involve both talking and listening to God.*

On the one hand, we should pour our hearts out to our Father in praise, thanksgiving, supplication, petition, and intercession. The Holy Spirit will help us to talk to God in this way.

**Rom. 8:15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."**

**Rom. 8:26\* In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.**

On the other hand, God often speaks to us as we pray. The Holy Spirit may assure us of God's love. He may remind us of a Scripture that we need. He may lead us in how to pray. He may grant us insight into many matters—sometimes related to our prayers, but sometimes unrelated. So we should be alert for whatever God may want to say to us, always testing our impressions by the Scriptures.

## **Prayer and God's Word**

There is a very important connection between prayer and God's Word. Much of what is said above presumes this. But there is more to be said.

The indicatives and promises of scripture provide the main basis of our praise and thanksgiving. God does not command us to praise and thank Him because He needs this; He commands it because we need it to remember how good and generous He is.

- Rejoice in the Lord by personalizing passages that focus on God’s provisions and promises (e.g., Eph. 1,2; Rom. 8; 2 Cor. 4; many Psalms).
- Utilize scriptural songs for the same purpose. This helps us memorize scripture, and is personally edifying. Use songs both with other Christians, and alone.

**Ephesians 5:18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, <sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

The indicatives and promises of scripture also provide the main basis of our prayer against Satan and his demons. In prayer, we put on the “full armor of God” by affirming who we are in Christ against the lies and accusations of Satan. In prayer, we take up our authority in Christ to bind Satan’s influence in concrete situations and call on God to advance His kingdom.

**Ephesians 6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. <sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms . . . <sup>18</sup> And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.**

The imperatives and prayer priorities of the Bible help us to strategically focus our petitions and intercession.<sup>1</sup>

- The more we pray with the motive of glorifying God (rather than merely our convenience or advantage), the more we will see God answer our prayers. Conversely, the more we pray from selfish motives, the more vulnerable we will be to discouragement when few of our prayers are answered.

**John 14:13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.**

**Jas. 4:2 You do not have, because you do not ask God. <sup>3</sup> When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.**

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<sup>1</sup> “Most of us . . . get bogged down with trivia: Jane’s sinus trouble, Ben’s discouragement, Mary’s problem with her mother-in-law . . . All of these may be important, but prayer, like warfare, calls for strategy. It is said of Napoleon that he would watch the development of his battles from a vantage, quietly analyzing the situation while he watched. His key general would watch him. ‘That farm,’ he once said to Marshall Ney, ‘That farm that you can see on the ridge there. Take it . . . Hold it. For if you can, the battle is won.’ In praying for the Ephesians, Paul was aware that if the key to the whole battle was won, lesser skirmishes would sort themselves out rather easily. Smaller problems are so often symptomatic of larger issues . . . Prayer must be directed at that which is the key. It concerns itself with strategy, not with tactics . . . If therefore one thinks that Paul’s prayer is spiritual and not practical, it is a sign of how blind he is to what life is all about . . .” John White, *Daring To Draw Near* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 137.

- The more we petition and intercede in accordance with God’s Word and will, the more we will see answers to our prayers for ourselves and for others.

**Jn. 15:7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

**1 Jn. 5:14,15\*** This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.<sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

Key scriptural priorities include:

Better understanding and appreciation of what God has given us through Christ

**Eph. 1:18** I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, **19** and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

Greater love for other people

**1 Thess. 3:12** May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people . . .

Better discernment on how to love people effectively

**Phil. 1:9** this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment . . .

Opportunities to share Christ and courage and wisdom to make the most of these opportunities

**Col. 4:3** Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.<sup>4</sup> Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

**Eph. 6:19** Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel,<sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Conviction of non-Christians concerning their sin, God’s righteousness, and God’s judgment

**Jn. 16:8** “And He (the Holy Spirit), when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment . . .

Spiritual empowering and encouragement and protection for ministry

**2 Thess. 1:11** We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.

**2 Thess. 2:16** May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,<sup>17</sup> encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

**2 Thess. 3:1 Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; 2 and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.**

Exposure of sinful and/or idolatrous attitudes that are hidden from ourselves  
**Ps. 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.**

Wisdom to understand what God is trying to teach us through the sufferings in your life

**Jas. 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (the context is about trials and suffering)**

More workers raised up

**Matt. 9:36 When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”**

## **Practical advice for common prayer problems**

There are certain problems associated with prayer that most Christians battle recurrently. Here are four common problems, along with some advice and encouragement.

*“I feel bad about how much I neglect prayer.”* Most of us battle with accusation and discouragement concerning our aversion to and/or weakness in prayer. In spite of our best efforts and resolutions, we drift into periods of prayerlessness. How common it is to think: “I should pray”—only to be beset with thoughts like: “It’s been so long since I last prayed” or “I feel so distant from God” or “I have been in the flesh for a long time” or “I haven’t been serving God lately,” etc.

- Remember that the fact that you are distressed about your prayerlessness is itself evidence that you are regenerate and spiritually sensitive. Thank God for this proof of His presence in your life instead of listening to Satan’s accusations!
- Remember that it is the blood of Christ *alone* that makes you worthy to talk to God (see Eph. 3:12 above)—never your recent moral obedience, never your recent ministry performance, never your feelings of closeness with God. Like the prodigal son’s father (Lk. 15:20), God welcomes you into His presence without one word of rebuke, and He is delighted to commune with you. Rather than waste time or emotional energy on self-recriminating thoughts or explanations, trust the grace of God by simply thanking Him for His amazing love and resume communion with Him.
- Pray with your Christian friends when you are with them.

*“I get so distracted during private prayer.”* Satan and our sin-nature will try to distract us, often by reminding us of “good” things to be done. Additionally, the inability to be

mentally quiet and focused is one of the main negative effects of our fast-paced culture and excessive Information Technology usage. So we should expect this to be a battle. At the same time, we should take practical steps to help us to stay focused. We must each find our own way in this—but here is some helpful advice:

- Prioritize quality over quantity. Start with short periods of private prayer, and seek to gradually lengthen them.
- Consider walking and praying out loud, or writing your prayers out in a journal—whatever helps you stay mentally focused.
- Pick a time of day and a place that is most conducive to focused prayer, and try to stick to it so that this “situation” actually makes you more inclined to pray.
- Have some means of taking notes. If some urgent task or thought comes to mind that threatens to distract you, write it down—and then go back to praying. Also, record any insights God may give you while you pray: expect God to speak to you in prayer.
- When you realize that your mind has wandered, don’t waste time beating yourself up for it. God is not as concerned about this as you are! Thank Him for his grace, and plunge forward.
- Manage your expectations on what you experience during these prayer times. Occasionally you will experience wonderful delight in communion with God. But usually this time will be more subtly stabilizing than dramatic, and sometimes it will be agonizing work. Also, you will often experience the benefit of this prayer time more *later* during the day—more peace, clearer spiritual insight, more perseverance, less controlled by your sin-nature, etc.
- Expect this part of your prayer life to be an ongoing battle, with periods of sweet communion, regression, etc.—but gradual progress over many years.

*“I don’t know where to begin in praying for myself and/or for others.”* What should we ask for? In a very subtle way, most of us feel like we need to counsel God on how best to meet this need in order for him to answer!

- On the one hand, ask for whatever you want. It is far better to take all of your desires and requests to God than it is to hold back until you feel like you can ask for the right thing in the right way! And remember His promise to help you as you ask (see Rom. 8:26,27 above).
- On the other hand, learning to pray according to God’s priorities is important and helpful (see above). It can sometimes be helpful to use a scriptural prayer as a “template” for your prayers for people and/or situations. For example:

Pray along the lines of Matt. 6:9-13 to present yourself to God.

Pray along the lines of Lk. 22:31,32 for a Christian friend who is under temptation.

Pray along the lines of Eph. 1:17-20 for those who seem to be stuck in their growth.

*“Why doesn’t God answer my prayers according to my expectations?”* This is a complicated issue because there are many reasons why a specific request may not be answered:

- Your request may simply be contrary to God’s revealed will. As we saw earlier, God will not grant us requests that contradict what He has said in the Bible about His will. EXAMPLES:

“God, make Bill repent and receive Christ.” The Bible says that God gives people freedom to receive or reject His offer of salvation. It would be better to pray for Bill to be convicted, or for the opportunity to witness to him.

Positive Confessionalism (“Health & Wealth”) promises that God will answer our requests for physical healing when they are prayed “in faith.” While faith is important in prayer, our faith will not make God heal unless God knows this is best. See God’s denial of Paul’s request for healing in 2 Cor. 12:7-19.

- Your request was answered, but not in the way you expected. Especially if we don’t know God’s Word very well, we may be surprised when he answers biblical requests in ways we had not anticipated. EXAMPLES:

Sometimes we pray for symptom issues (“Take away my anger toward my spouse”), and then God answers by revealing and working on more root issues (“You are demanding a security from your spouse that you need to trust Me for”).

Sometimes we pray for good root issues (“Increase my trust in You for security”), but don’t realize that God answers this through other means (e.g., breaking; setting your mind on identity truths; etc.).

- God will answer your request, but not according to your timing. God often answers far later than we wish, because He understands His perfect plan while we do not. EXAMPLES:

Sometimes God delays His answer to our prayer for a spouse because He is working on character growth that will be necessary in our marriage. (Similar reasons for delaying request for a child or for more ministry responsibility)

- Your request was legitimate, but you asked with wrong motives.

**Jas. 4:2 You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.**

God may not answer biblically sound prayers because He knows that this would harm us or His purpose for us by reinforcing our fleshly attitude.

EXAMPLES:

“God, make my wayward child repent now so that I won’t have to feel any more of this pain.”

“God, increase my ministry fruit so that I can feel more significant, more important in others’ eyes, etc.”

NOTE: We may realize only later that we have wrong motives.

- Your request was legitimate, but you have a controversy with God. God may not answer biblically sound prayers because He is trying to get our attention concerning a rebellious attitude.

**Ps. 66:18 If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.**

**1 Pet. 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.**

Sometimes God wants us to understand why He is not answering, but at others times He just wants you to trust Him without knowing. Ask God to reveal the reason to you if you need to know it—and then try to leave it in His hands instead of obsessing over “the reason why.” Remember that God is loving and wise. His “no,” His “not yet,” and his temporary silence are motivated every bit as much by His love as His “yes.” Many of these questions get answered over time rather than immediately.<sup>2</sup> And as you see more and more of God’s loving wisdom in the way He responds to our prayers, it gets easier to trust him in this area.

### **Additional insights**

Extraordinary, fervent, corporate prayer is strongly connected to revival/renewal (see Acts 1:14 and other Old Testament and Acts passages). Especially during times of spiritual declension, we should give ourselves to prayer, asking God to renew us and our church for His glory—so that we may boldly tell others about Jesus, and so that God may draw others to His church. PRAYER CONCERTS; PRAYER GROUPS, PRAYER & FASTING DAYS, etc.

Some people have spiritual gifts related to prayer. These “prayer warriors” are often behind-the-scenes workers that we may overlook. Look for them, give them more prayer work to do, and esteem them. Are you one of them? How could you expand your intercessory ministry? Ask your home group and sphere leaders how you can pray for them, ask to be included in your home group’s or sphere’s prayer team, etc.

Key ingredients of a healthy prayer meeting:

- Most prayer groups require leadership—one or two people who really believe that all spiritual work is birthed and bathed in prayer, and who will continue to rally people to pray and drive the actual meeting (not by dominating, but by praying for the prayer meeting, being in the Spirit, modeling thankfulness, urgency, faith, etc.).

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<sup>2</sup> “Send your applications for help by the wireless telegraphy of prayer. On high they will be carefully noted and tabulated, and in God’s own time the answers will come back to you. The more completely you cease being concerned about the time in which your prayers are to be answered, the more freedom you will enjoy in your prayer life . . . The longer you live a life of this kind, the more answers to prayer you will experience. As white snowflakes fall quietly and thickly on a winter day, answers to prayer will settle down upon you at every step you take, even to your dying day. The story of your life will be the story of prayer and answers to prayer.” O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), p. 173.

- They also require “praying until you pray.” It takes time for people to quiet their hearts and get in the Spirit. Like starting a car on a cold morning, you may have to “keep turning the key” for some time for you get “ignition.”
- Prayer meetings should be a mixture of praise and thanks, intercession for non-Christians (locally and extra-locally), and confession and prayer for one another. Without praise and thanksgiving, our prayers become a wish list. Without real confession of sins and fears, our prayers become fake. Without intercession (especially for lost people by name), they become ingrown. You can break up the prayer into three intervals of focus. Or do can do this more informally, interjecting the kind of prayer that is lacking and asking others to pray this way.
- Don’t spend much time talking about what you’re going to pray about—just start praying. Someone may keep and report on a prayer list, but discussing what you’re going to pray for wastes time and energy better expended in actual prayer.
- Encourage people to pray several times with shorter prayers, and discourage long-winded prayers. You may even need to privately correct a long-winded pray-er, because this habit can really hurt a prayer meeting.

### **Memory verses**

Col. 4:2\* - We should pray regularly, alertly, and thankfully.

1 Jn. 5:14,15\* - We can be confident that God will answer prayers that are according to His revealed will.

Rom. 8:26\* - The Holy Spirit will help us to pray.

### **Assignment**