



Psalm 66:16-20
Believe
Pray

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Today we come to a facet of our faith that is one of the most mysterious and most misunderstood aspects of the Christian faith, and that is prayer. We pray, at least in part, because we believe that God is good and cares about us. That's the belief we looked at back on the second Sunday of Part 1 of this series titled, "Believe." So if God is good, and if God cares about us, then it stands to reason that we would be in relationship with God. And one way we maintain that relationship is through prayer. That's what we'll be looking at today as we continue Part 2 of "Believe."

Because of who God is and what He's done for us, we can say this about prayer: **"I pray to God to know Him, to find direction in my life and to lay my requests before Him."** If you were to ask people what they think prayer is, most people would probably focus on the last phrase of this statement of belief: to lay my requests before him. Jesus tells us to cast our burdens upon him, and boy, do we love to do that. We're very good at praying prayers where we want God to do something for us, where we lay our requests before Him. Like bedtime prayers. It's where we (or our kids, especially when they're little) oftentimes pray for our selves or other people: that God would watch over us, protect us, heal others, take away our own ailments, and so forth. Maybe, for instance, you've prayed a prayer like this one:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my shape to keep. Please no wrinkles, Please no bags; And please lift my backside before it sags. Please no age spots; Please no gray. And as for my belly, please take it away. Please keep me healthy; Please keep me young; And thank you Dear Lord for all that You've done. And all the church said in Jesus' name: Amen.¹ ☺

But really, prayer is mostly about our relationship with God: such as God deepening our trust in Him, and learning to see the world as God sees it – including our own lives...it's listening to God, letting Him take the lead. **Prayer is where the groundwork is laid for stepping out in faith.** There is so much more to prayer than just making requests – though it does include

that as well. **God wants us to be open and honest with Him in our praying, and we need to be open and honest with ourselves in our praying, too.** Prayer is not the time to hide behind the rose-colored lenses through which we tend to view ourselves. Prayer is the time to take them off and be honest.

I think this story about a little boy who prayed at dinner one night actually kind of sums it up pretty well: A 4-year-old boy was asked to give the blessing before dinner. The family members bowed their heads in expectation. He began his prayer, thanking God for all his friends, naming them one by one. Then he thanked God for Mommy, Daddy, brother, sister, Grandma, Grandpa, and all his aunts and uncles. Then he began to thank God for the food. He gave thanks for the turkey, the dressing, the fruit salad, the cranberry sauce, the pies, the cakes, even the Cool Whip. Then he paused, and everyone waited, and waited, and waited. After a long silence, the little 4-year old looked up at his mother and asked, “If I thank God for the broccoli, won't he know that I'm lying?”ⁱⁱ See, he knew it was about having an honest relationship with God, and being honest about himself, too. No viewing broccoli through rose colored lenses. God knows him. God knows his heart. And God wants to have an honest relationship with Him.

So I want to cover four things about prayer that the Bible teaches us, because: **We see prayer throughout the Bible.** We see examples of people praying, we see actual prayers of a lot of different people, we see encouragement about prayer like in this morning's Psalm, we see teaching on prayer, and more...I mean, you can't read very much of the Bible without coming to the conclusion that prayer is important.

And maybe the most important facet of prayer that the Bible teaches us has nothing to do with our mouths – whether that's literally or figuratively – and what we say, but has to do with our ears and our hearts. **Prayer is first and foremost about listening to God and being sensitive to what God is impressing upon us.** And the Old Testament gives us a great reminder of this. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 are verses that every Jewish person in Jesus' day, and for centuries prior, and for centuries later...even still today for those who actively practice their faith...these verses became part of a prayer that they

would pray every day in the morning and the evening. Originally, they started by praying just these few verses, and then it grew to be a three-part prayer that included some other verses from the Old Testament in addition to these. So these verses from Deuteronomy were the original verses that they would pray at least twice a day. The prayer is called the Shema:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”
(Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

As I said, the name of the prayer is “The Shema.” Just as we have a prayer that most Christians know by heart called “The Lord’s Prayer,” they knew this one by heart as well. And the Shema prayer gets its name from the very first Hebrew word of that passage, shema, and it means “hear” or “listen.” What a great reminder of what prayer is first about: to listen to God...to listen to His voice coming to us through Scripture or through the people in our lives, through the Holy Spirit, and so forth!

So these theologically rich words are what they would pray every morning when they woke up, and every evening when they went to bed. Contrast that with what an awful lot of Christians today pray every day: Dear Lord, So far today, I have done all right. I haven’t gossiped, haven’t been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or over-indulgent. I’m very thankful for that. However, in just a few minutes, I’m going to get out of bed. From then on, I’m going to need a lot more help. Amen.ⁱⁱⁱ Nothing wrong with expressing gratitude for living a godly life 2 minutes into the day...and nothing wrong with asking for God’s help for the day...**But the Shema is a packed prayer: Listen to God first, then teach the next generation about God, talk of God in your house...talk of God when you’re out and about. Bind God’s word to your very self, write His word down in places where you’ll see it and be reminded of it along with those who enter your home and enter your city**

gates. What a great prayer.

Jesus almost certainly prayed this prayer. The Gospels don't record him actually doing that, but we can surmise with 99.99% certainty that He did based on what we know about Judaism in that time. Additionally, within the Gospels, we get hints that Jesus probably prayed this prayer like his contemporaries would have. For instance, in Mark 1:35 we see Jesus getting up early to pray...there are many other instances where Jesus spends time in prayer as well, and we get the words of his prayers on occasion...but in Mark 1:35 it tells us explicitly that Jesus got up early and spent some time in prayer. There's a really good chance that the Shema is what he prayed, because that's when people of his day would have prayed it.

And when a guy asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is, Jesus quoted from this prayer as his answer: **“Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Luke 10:27 and parallel passages in Matthew and Mark).** That's right from the Shema. Jesus knew these words by heart, probably because he prayed them every day. Maybe each of us ought to begin our days with this prayer. Tape it to the ceiling above your bed (large font!), or your bathroom mirror, or the wall opposite the toilet, or the door trim of your bedroom door. Somewhere, where you will see it every morning and be reminded to pray these words. And just as they emphasized the first word, let's remember to “listen” to “hear the Lord” in our praying and in all of life.

A second thing the Bible teaches us about prayer comes in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where Paul writes that we should “pray without ceasing.” Clearly, prayer is important. *Adialeiptōs* is the Greek word for “without ceasing” and it doesn't really mean, “without ever stopping.” In other words, it's not a literal “don't cease praying.” God wants us to communicate with him through prayer, but it's ok to talk to your neighbors and your family members, and think about work projects and driving safely. Well, maybe when you're driving you should also be praying...But the point Paul is making is that prayer is important. Don't let it slide. Don't let it become something you only do occasionally. If you're married, and you only talk to your spouse occasionally, the relationship suffers. You have to communicate, from talking about the family calendar to what's weighing you

down to what's energizing you to what your devotional life has been like lately, and so forth. Similarly, we spend time in prayer with God and it's one way we communicate with him, and maintain our relationship.

Third, the Bible teaches us how to pray, including Jesus' very specific teaching on this topic. In Luke 11:1, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus teaches them what you and I know as The Lord's Prayer. I've told you before that I've always kind of thought this was a mis-named prayer. It's not named anything in the Bible, so it's ok to say it's mis-named. I think it should be the Disciples' Prayer. This is how you and I are to pray. We're certainly not limited to it, and I'm not sure that Jesus necessarily intended this to be prayed by Christians for all time. Their question was "how" do we pray, not "what" do we pray. So this prayer is his teaching on how to pray. It's a model for prayer, so that the Disciples can pray how Jesus does. So you and I can pray how Jesus does.

Jesus' own prayer, what we might more rightly call "The Lord's Prayer" is found in John 17, where he prays for the disciples who are with him there and all the disciples who will follow afterwards – including you and me. Jesus prays for you. And then Jesus also prays for the world. That should probably be "The Lord's Prayer," but I think at this point we're not likely to change 2,000 years of history, and that's fine. But Jesus teaches us how to pray, and we get all kinds of other examples of prayer elsewhere in Scripture, too. There's a lot that can guide and inspire us in our own praying.

Fourth, the Bible teaches us that God answers prayer. This does not mean the answer is always what we want. Sometimes the answer is "yes" ... Sometimes the answer is "no" ... sometimes the answer is "not right now." I know this frustrates some people. I get frustrated sometimes. We want God to be a little more controllable, and to always answer right away, and as we want. When Gwen moved to Sun Valley a year after graduating from college, she quickly realized that there really weren't any ladies about her age who were Christians. She didn't have any women who were going through similar things as her that she could confide in and relate to on a spiritual level. So she prayed that God would bring a gal into her life who was a Christian, and about her age. God answered her prayer by sending me to her.

But when we want God to only answer how we want our prayers answered, that's not trusting God or keeping him first above all other gods. It's not listening to Him and knowing Him, and trusting Him. In fact, when we want *our* will to be done, and prayer answered the way *we* want it, then we're putting ourselves above God. That's called idolatry. Let God be God. Turn to him in prayer to know him and to find direction in your life, and to cast your burdens upon him.

So to recap those four points: **Listen, pray frequently (continually), Use your Bible in prayer, be ready for God's answers.** So prayer is a lot of listening. It's not just talking to God. "Shema Yahweh": Hear the Lord. Pray frequently: God wants us to keep up the communication with Him. Use the prayers of the Bible as your own prayers or use other verses to inspire you in your praying or to receive them as God speaking to you in your praying...look to Scripture for examples and reminders that prayer is also listening. And then be prepared for God's answers to your prayers, recognizing that the answer you get may not be what you want, which oftentimes makes it harder to hear it or see it, because it's not what we're biased toward.

And then lastly, I want to close with a couple separate points as a word of encouragement about your prayer life. First: **Prayer does need not to be complicated.** I think some people are intimidated by prayer, but prayer is not rocket science. You don't have to have a theological degree or use big words or make more of it than it is. God wants you to look to him and turn to him in prayer. We don't want to make more of it than it is, and be intimidated by it.

It's like the substitute Sunday School teacher who was struggling to open a combination lock on a supply cabinet. She had been told the combination, but couldn't quite remember it. Finally she went to the pastor's office and asked for help. The pastor came into the room and began to turn the dial. After the first two numbers he paused and stared blankly for a moment. Finally he looked serenely toward heaven and his lips moved silently. Then he looked back at the lock, and quickly turned to the final number, and opened the lock. The teacher was amazed. "I'm in awe at your faith, pastor," she said. "It's

really nothing,” he answered. “The numbers are on a piece of tape on the ceiling.”^{iv} *You can pray. You can stay connected to God through your prayers. You can know him, his plans for you, and you can lay your requests at his feet, too. It’s not rocket science.*

And then second of all: **Prayer doesn’t have to be done the same way every time – sitting still, eyes closed, head bowed.** And it’s a good thing, because I oftentimes pray while I’m driving – like right before I veer off the side of the road into a light pole. ☺ Just kidding. I do pray when I’m driving, and I’ve never gotten in an accident when doing so. Prayer can take place when we’re doing a lot of different things, and those activities can even be expressions of our prayer. So, you can do stuff while praying. A lot of people pray while watching football. Granted, they’re pretty specific prayers...it’s been said that our largest houses of prayer are filled to capacity on Sunday afternoons.

You can also pray while you’re exercising – like out for a walk or a run; while painting or sewing or crocheting; while you’re in the shower or brushing your teeth; while reading your Bible – using some passage you read as inspiration for your prayer, or listening to God’s voice coming to you through the Bible...you can pray on your own, or with others – like at the dinner table after you’ve finished eating your family (or whoever you might have eaten with – neighbor, etc.) can spend time in prayer (maybe praying about some of the things that have been shared or discussed during the meal), or while you’re traveling somewhere, and so forth. There are a ton of things you can do and settings you can be in while praying.

So prayer is a big part of how we stay connected to God; it’s not the only way, but it’s a big piece of that relationship, and I hope and pray you will spend time in prayer regularly, so you would be in close relationship with your heavenly Father.

As we close out this morning’s message, I invite you to join with me in this statement of belief on prayer: **“I pray to God to know Him, to find direction in my life and to lay my requests before Him.”** Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.beliefnet.com/prayables/joke-galleries/prayer-parodies.aspx?p=5#Fwk56HWvQRoFyU8B.99>

ⁱⁱ http://jokes.ochristian.com/Prayer/Saying_Grace.shtml

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.beliefnet.com/prayables/joke-galleries/prayer-parodies.aspx?p=5>

^{iv} <http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Prayer/>