

On Prayer

By Alissa Tyler

What is prayer?

Prayer is communication with God. Relationships of any kind grow out of communication. We are not friends or acquaintances with another person until we say, “hello!” and begin to know them—know them by the way they put their words together and by the way they move their hands, their head, their eyes, their feet. Know them by their personality and how they see the world. On a less tangible level, we can come to know people on a deeper level. Our unseen parts begin to see their unseen parts and vice versa. It’s a vulnerable and dangerous place to be known deeply. They could break your heart, or you could break theirs. Yet, the place of the unseen is wired into the desire of our hearts. We were made to love and care for each other there. This is the intimacy of prayer.

Why should we pray?

When we were sent east of Eden, we lost our face-to-face with God. Long story short, Jesus happened, and now we have His Spirit to walk through this aching, longing, ugly, beautiful life with us. We cannot do this life *well* without Him. We must do our part to build relationship with Him. Relationships grow slowly, up and down. So we go to the place of prayer, the secret place, and we speak, listen, move, weep, shout, shake our fists, and dance with Him. One thing is certain, He will meet us there.

Why don’t we pray?

Lots of reasons, but here’s a few:

We are afraid of silence. What if when we go to pray, we find that there is actually very little between God and us? Our culture is addicted to noise, from cellphones to radio to TV. These things are by no means evil, but when we hold them between us and God we get only as much of Him as the noise allows.

Fear of selfish motives. We can often become paralyzed by trying to work out the perfect motives before asking God for things. But we are human, we will never have perfect motives. Bring your doubts and all your mixed motives to Him and ask for the things anyways. Over time you'll see shifts in yourself.

Fear of doing it wrong. To be upfront, the only thing we can do wrong is to not bring our honesty to Him. Feeling crabby? Bring it. Feeling twenty things at once? Bring it. Feeling overjoyed? Bring it. He wants all of you.

Types of Prayer

There are many ways to pray, and here are some ideas.

Lament is a prayerful response to the reality of suffering that engages God in the context of pain and trouble. Of 150 Psalms, 100 contain lament. Lament is where we express our pain and loss AND express our trust in God's character and goodness. Lament is work towards acknowledging the reality of sitting and waiting.

The insert has a step-by-step walk-through of lament.

Intercessory prayer is where we ask God for things. Like children walking into our parent's house. "Mom, I want a snack." "Dad, can you play with me?" Ask him for a dog, for rain, for the cancer to go away, for the addiction to be healed, for the baby to sleep well, for your back to heal, for the trees to grow and the sun to rise. Unanswered prayer is a problem, but unasked prayer is an even bigger problem. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13) Translation, even not-so-great parents give their kids decent gifts, how much more will the Maker of the cosmos give to you! So ask Him. He loves the sound of your voice.

Listening is where we ask God a question and listen for Him to respond. It's tricky to differentiate between my own voice in my head and the Spirit's voice. But that is why prayer is a practice. Failure is welcome. Sometimes His voice is clear, sometimes it is still and small (1 Kings 19:12). It often takes waiting, which is hard when we're all in a big hurry. But keep waiting, the mystery is there.

Imaginative prayer is when we invite Jesus into our imagination. One time my sister was driving and listening to her favorite song. She imagined Jesus in the passenger seat with her. They were singing together and to her surprise, He reached over and turned the volume up. Invite Him into your imagination and see what happens.

Song. Sing Him a song! You think your voice isn't that good? When your 3-year-old sings do you feel disappointed that they aren't Ed Sheeran? No! You revel in the goodness of their sweet little voice. You are the delight of His eyes! Sing Jesus Loves Me or an opera. Dance for Him, David did.

Contemplative prayer is a way of seeing all our experiences as shared with God. I've heard it described as laying our heads on the chest of God and listening to His heartbeat and feeling our friendship with Him, or as holy thinking on holy things. There's an ancient practice of contemplative prayer called examen, which is short for "the examination of consciousness" (not conscience).

The insert has a step-by-step walk-through of Examen.

Final thoughts. I highly suggest putting your phone away. Turn it off or on silent. For those utilizing the prayer room, there will be a basket outside of the room for people to leave their phone. Let your people know that you are putting your phone away for the allotted time. If you find this prayer time difficult, that's okay. Just notice that and be kind to yourself about it. God isn't annoyed with us when prayer is hard. He is mindful that we are "but dust" (Psalm 103:14-16) and accepts us in our humanity.

Insert Sheet

Here is a step-by-step of this practice of examen:

1. Pray for light, to be a magnifier of God's presence in the world and where you are right now. That through you God's presence is all the more clear.
2. Replay in your mind what happened today or in the last 24-72 hours? Rummage around in your experiences for God's blessing.
3. Where did you feel grace today? Where was God particularly present?
4. Where did you feel emotional pain today? Where did you sin?
5. Recall a particularly strong emotional experience, either positive or negative, lean into it, and take it to Jesus and ask Him, "Have you felt this before?" He may bring to your mind a certain story from the gospels about Jesus. Grow in closeness with Him through this.
6. Resolve to live differently tomorrow, if need be. And sleep with gratitude. Thanking God for His teaching you more of who He is.

Insert Sheet

Here is a step-by-step walk-through of the practice of lament:

1. Begin with silence
2. Then make your address to God in this way: Bring your complaint, your anger, your heartache, your sadness in its raw form to God.
3. Bring your affirmation of trust, your remembrance of God's presence in your past, what God has done in your life in your past when you have been in the pit of despair. Affirm your trust in God. Bring your petition, your request, your desire, the thing that you want deep, deep down, *unfiltered*. What is it that you are requesting of God?
4. Add any additional argument. Why should God intervene for you or for this situation, right now? Bring that "because of this-ness" to God.
5. Bring your enemies before God. *Unfiltered*, rage against your enemies. What systems are they? Bring them before God.
6. What is it that you need from God to feel heard? What is your assurance of being heard? If you were to feel heard, what would happen? "This is what I need God to feel heard..."
7. Promise to offer praise to God. "God if you do this, I will praise you. Even yet, I will praise you. I will cling to You no matter what."
8. Bring attributes of God that you are thankful for right now, bring that to Him and thank Him for who He is.
9. You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted. You encourage them and You listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror. Psalm 10:17-18