

“Fuel—Why Pray?”

As we wrap up this “Fuel” series today I hope this has been a really rich journey for you. I pray that your heart and your mind have been stretched and expanded and that the Word of God really has become fuel for your soul, and you are committed now to drinking it in on a daily basis and living it out on a daily basis.

And today as we finish our look at the book of James we’re asking the questions: Why pray? What’s the use anyway, right? I mean, if God already knows everything, then what’s the point of prayer? Can we really change the mind of God? Does he care in the first place? And can you even get through to him?

Is prayer like email? Email has become a way of life for most of us. But have you ever sent some really important stuff to somebody, and it mysteriously gets vaporized somewhere out there in cyberspace. Sometimes prayer feels like that, doesn’t it?

George Buttrick said one time, “Prayer seems a spasm of words lost in a cosmic indifference.” He wrote that back in 1942 long before email, texting, instant messaging and BlackBerrys and iPhones.

I think the speed of technology is leaving us with this constant pressure that there’s just not enough time to do all that we have to do. We’re moving faster than ever before; we’re jumpy; we’re frazzled; we’re anxious; we’re tired; we’re running short on time. So into a life that seems already way behind, how in the world do you fit in talking to God?

And if you are even able to, would he listen? Is prayer just a spasm of words cast out in the cosmic somewhere? Do our requests even get heard? Do they seem trivial to a very busy God? Why pray?

First I want to make an observation. It seems like we can’t help it. A *Newsweek* report said, “This week, if you believe in all the opinion surveys, more of us will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations.” One study found that 78% of all Americans pray at least once a week, 57% report praying at least once a day. And get this: one in five atheists and agnostics say they pray daily.

Every religious faith has some form of prayer. It seems like we pray because it’s hard-wired within us; that every single one of our souls longs to connect with the one who made us. Even if we’re not sure about his identity, even if we don’t really believe in him, even when he seems distant, we long to connect.

Why do we pray? We pray because we’re empty. We pray because we’re grateful. We pray because we’re scared. We pray because we feel helpless. We pray for answers on a test. We pray for test results from a lab. We pray for a deal to go through at work. We pray for our dad to be healed. We pray for forgiveness. We pray for strength. We pray for peace. We pray for assurance that we’re not alone. Hit some unexpected turbulence on an airplane—everybody’s praying! We can’t help it!

Search the pages of Scripture and you’ll see that people prayed. You’ll see that Jesus modeled prayer for us. He showed us that **prayer is simply detaching and keeping company with God.**

In fact, do you know the only thing that the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them? I mean, they didn’t say: “Can you show us that little water-into-wine trick? Could you teach us that multiply the bread thing? How about that wave-walking? We’d like to learn that one.” No, they didn’t ask any of that. They said, *Lord, teach us to pray* (Luke 11:1). They knew that that connection to God was life-giving so they asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

James, who we have learned was the brother of Jesus, also recognized the life-giving connection that prayer gives to a person. Look what he writes in James 5:16. I want all of us to read it out loud together. This is the memorization verse for this week. **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16, TNIV).**

So why pray? Because it’s powerful and effective. The prayer of a righteous person—that doesn’t mean the prayer of a perfect person. It doesn’t mean when we have righteousness of our own. He’s talking about a person that humbly acknowledges the only way they’re ever going to be considered right and good is through Jesus Christ. He’s talking about somebody that humbles himself before God. When you do that, he says that’s powerful and that’s effective. How is it powerful and effective?

I've had several friends who've had Lasik vision correction. They say it's amazing. You walk in with bad vision, some of them having worn glasses all their lives. They sit down, and like 15 seconds on each eye, and they stand up and they can see. Amazing!

I haven't had Lasik yet, but listen, prayer does that for me. It corrects my vision. Every time I get up out of my chair, whether it's in my office or the front porch, or the back deck, or a beach chair or a rock in a forest—wherever I've been praying—when I get up, I can always see better. It gives me proper focus. It gives me a fresh perspective.

Our culture really tries every single minute of every single day to distort the picture, to blur our vision, to throw a cloud over what's true and what's not, what's right and what's not, what's worthy of our affection and what's not.

When I pray, it brings all of that into reality—that there's a better way to live, that there are better things to live for than just money and possessions, that there are better ways to define success, that there are much more noble passions out there that I ought to be pursuing. There's so much wisdom in the little phrase from Psalm 46:10 where God just says, *Be still, and know that I am God*. Prayer corrects my vision. And that's one of the reasons that I pray.

How else is prayer powerful and effective? Look at what James writes 5:13-15: **“Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them...And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven” (James 5:13-15, TNIV).**

James mentions the healing that prayer brings. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail about healing today except to say that, I have witnessed the miracle of prayer. I've seen miracles happen in people's lives. I have prayed for a lot of people, and many have experienced healing. I have prayed with many others who were not totally healed at the moment, but there was hope, and there was peace, and there was a comfort you could see and they could feel. In that moment, they were raised up by God.

But here's my warning to you. There is a dangerous theology out there that says if you have enough faith, you will always be immediately healed. In fact, if you're not healed, it's your fault—your faith is too small. Listen carefully; I just want to go on record as saying I don't buy that at all. The apostle Paul was a giant of faith. We see in scripture that Paul had the power to actually heal a man who'd been crippled from birth, and another time he had the power to raise somebody back to life.

But three times he mentions close friends who suffer from serious ongoing illnesses, and he talks about his own physical struggles. He prayed for healing for them; he prayed for healing for himself. He did it persistently. But they weren't healed. Was it because he had a lack of faith? No! He had a strong faith, a complete trust in God. And for some reason it just wasn't meant to be. But Paul continued to trust in God.

Every night at our house, we pray with Zoe our 8 year old. And every night she has her prayer list. She prays for people we are deeply concerned about. Some of them very close to us. And we pray boldly for healing in their bodies, and comfort for their hearts. But we also know that life goes beyond this life, and sometimes ultimate healing happens on the other side of death. Sometimes death is a form of healing. God knows what real healing is.

So let's go back to that memory verse and let's read it one more time. James 5:16, **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16, TNIV).** Commit that to memory so that every day you get up, you can say you're going to pray because it's powerful and it's effective.

So we're asking: Why pray? Another reason I do is because I need someplace where I can be completely honest with the stuff inside me. And I can always be honest with God. I can truly be myself with him. I don't have to pretend in any way. I don't have to do any image management. I don't have to talk formally. I have a problem with that, lots of people do. I don't know how to speak Elizabethan English and if that's what God speaks, I'm in trouble, and so are you

If prayer is just keeping company with God, then be personal with God. Talk normally to God. Now, you come to him with respect and honor and awe; but you come to him, the Bible says, with confidence because he loves you. I don't have to conceal the truth. I don't have to be on my best behavior, because he is the One I can actually be myself around.

Prayer is that place where you can say, like David said in Psalm 139:23: **“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts” (Psalm 139:23, TNIV)**. In other words, prayer is like popping the hood and going: “God, I need you hook me up to your diagnostic machine like Mr. Goodwrench. I know that you can tell me why I'm not running like I should because I can't figure why.” *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.* “God, I need to ask you: What's contributing to all the noise in my life? God, why am I so afraid? Where does all this anger come from? Why can't I let go of it? What am I chasing? What am I running from? Is all this extra stuff I'm accumulating really making my life any better?

“Why is my mind constantly racing? Why does my soul feel so empty? How come I'm not growing? Why can't I sleep? Why can't I say no? Why am I addicted to approval? What's fueling this competitive drive in me to always be first? Why do I work so hard to be accepted when I already am? Why do I run so fast to be somebody when I already am?

“Why do I say the things I do? Why do I make fun of people at school? God, why am I so selfish? Why do I feel so distant from you, God? When Jesus says ‘come to me,’ how come I don't?” See, prayer is a way to pop the hood, get completely honest with God, and take a look inside. *Search me, O God; diagnose my anxious thoughts.*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 in *The Message*, kind of keeping this theme James carries all the way through the book, says, **“Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live” (1 Thessalonians 5:16, MSG)**.

Pray all the time? I was thinking, like, five minutes in the morning. Pray all the time? What's that mean? It just means you keep your mind open all day long. You've got this constant conversation going on with God. I think you'll want to carve out time to be still and talk and listen to God. Maybe it's early in the morning; maybe it's middle afternoon; maybe it's late at night. But I think prayer is also this ongoing conversation between two people who love each other.

Praying kind of works like this for me. You're sitting in your office. “Okay, God, I've got this big meeting coming up at two o'clock. I want you to know I'm going to commit this meeting to you. I'm going to give it to you. I need you to give me wisdom. I need you to give me discernment. I need you to give me patience. Help me to be kind. Help me to be respectful. Keep me sharp. Keep me focused. And keep me aware that you're going to walk through that door with me.”

And then during the meeting you're going: “Okay, God, help me not to get defensive right now. They're picking apart my proposal.”

Or maybe you're getting ready for a date. You're cleaning up and primping and preening. And while you do all that you say, “God, I've got this date coming up at seven-thirty and I want to tell you right now, I'm just committing it to you. And as I wash the outside, I want you to wash the inside, so I can bring the best person I can be tonight. Whatever's in your heart for this relationship, God, that's really all I want.”

Or maybe you're in your car and you go: “God, I'm about two minutes away from the driveway, driving home to my family. God, I've got to be honest with you. I am just exhausted; I am really, really tired. But God, I don't want to be selfish tonight. I know everybody on the inside of those doors is tired, too. I'm just committing these moments to you, God. Give me the energy. Give me the creativity. Give me the joy to be the kind of dad and husband my family needs tonight.”

Or you're saying: “God, I'm going to have this surgery coming up. And I want you to know that whatever happens in there—my life, my future, my eternity, is in your hands. And I'm going to rest in the peace that comes from knowing you.”

Or I say: “God, it's Sunday, and I've got to get up there and speak to a whole bunch of people about prayer. And in these moments, God, I want to just disappear, so that people hear from you, not me. Guide my speaking, my thoughts, my sense of humor, my motives—they're all in your hands at this moment.” When you do that all day every day, it's effective. It's powerful. It's honest. It's personal. It's keeping company with

God. Prayer is a time to say thank you for the blessings. Prayer is a way to express joy. It's a way to persistently lay out your needs. Prayer is a place to honestly lay out life's rawness, life's angst, to God.

I read this past week about a young couple who are missionaries in Thailand. They've got a 6-year-old and 3-year-old, Gracie, and one on the way. They've moved to another culture. They're learning a brand new language so they can reach people in a place where there are not many Christians. They've had quite a ride since they left.

Not long after they arrived in Thailand their 6 year old was diagnosed with M.S. And then just a few months later their 3-year-old daughter, Gracie, got a high fever that just wouldn't go away. They rushed her to a hospital in Bangkok and found she's got an aggressive form of leukemia. You talk about the rawness and realness of two 27-year-olds, just crying out to God. Here is one of the letters they sent to friends:

"Sweet brothers and sisters, Thanks for walking with us through the valley of Jamie's diagnosis. Now in Gracie's diagnosis of leukemia, we look upon and are overcome by great darkness once more. We cried out to God: 'Haven't we sacrificed enough? We're serving you in Thailand.' The Lord began speaking to my heart. The work in Thailand is anything but a sacrifice. It brings our family complete joy. We could not love any place, any people, or any culture more than we love the Isan of northeast Thailand.

"I've been fooling myself and so many others that this is a sacrifice, but we've never known real sacrifice until February 14, 2007 when God asked us to surrender our daughter's life into his perfect love and care. Though I was sure I'd done so a thousand times in bedtime prayers with her, I realized that on that fateful day, my heart had never relinquished her truly into his arms. I also realized that releasing Gracie or any of my family members is not a one-time event, but sometimes daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute, particularly during these long days when a simple fever can turn fatal and each report brings new anxieties.

"I never imagined the Lord revealing to us in this valley his unfailing joy, but he's been so faithful to do so. Many times when there seems to be a critical decision to make or a procedure goes wrong, we just go sit alone in the quiet of the bathroom, away from the doctors, just for a few minutes to cry out to our Abba, to our 'daddy,' to come and rescue us.

"And these are the sweetest times I've ever spent in the Savior's arms. We have never known the love of the Father more deeply than these days in our deepest grief and sorrow. Never have we seen the face of God more intimately, because we've never sought him so desperately. We can't doubt that he's with us for we feel the breath of the Father as he surrounds us in this anguish, and he holds our heads up when we can't. He daily restores our souls as they're torn from our flesh each hour that we live through this nightmare. And he's drawn us so close.

"Gracie's still strong after three chemo treatments. Her hair is nearly gone. Her little body is bruised and worn. But her joyful spirit remains with her, a sign that she is comforted not just by the hands of physicians, but by the gentle touch of her Shepherd. She often talks about Jesus and prays fervently to him for all of her loved ones. Her faith is great. And we pray for her courage. She's a testimony to us all and God has brought us great peace.

"We love you and we ask God now to turn his ears to our cries. Above all else, please, pray without ceasing and join us on our faces in the valley for Gracie. Unto Him, Jamie and Christina"

Why pray? Ask them.

Prayer comes in a lot of different ways, but sometimes it's just raw. Prayer is primarily a love song. Prayer is about his faithfulness and his goodness and his righteousness, his perfection, and, yes, his insatiable desire to connect with you, to talk with you, to be with you, to embrace you, to comfort you, to hold you, to breathe on you.

To pray is to stay connected with the Lover of your soul. Don't stop praying. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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