

emmanuelchurch



Defining Prayer

Prayer is one of the most important aspects of the Christian life, and yet it is also one of the most misunderstood. While there are plenty of excellent books on the topic, this paper hopes to offer a brief glimpse on important aspects of prayer for us to grab a hold of as we try to grow in our connection with God.

Prayer is Expected

It is taken for granted by the authors of the New Testament that the Christian will take part in prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly engaged in the assumptions about prayer and fasting by using the phrase “when you pray” or “when you fast” (Matthew 6:5–7, 16). Notice the when, not if. He even then gave us the template by which we are expected to pray (Matthew 6:9–13).

After Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit, the Apostles were devoted to prayer and study of the Scriptures (Acts 2:42; Acts 6:4). The early church was devoted to prayer and the Apostle’s teaching (Acts 1:14; Acts 2:42). On top of that, Paul enjoins the Church to devote themselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2), and to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Prayer is not optional. It is essential. Prayer is not a suggestion. It is expected.

Prayer is Communion with God

As we come to God in prayer, we are invited to participate in the Trinitarian community that has been in conversation and communion since before the

formation of the universe (John 17:5; John 17:21–24). In prayer, the Spirit translates for us (Romans 8:26), and the Son intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). In prayer, we see the God of Creation as our Father (Matthew 6:9; Romans 8:15).

In prayer, the words of Scripture come to life as we engage with the Eternal God (Hebrews 4:12–16). Our spirit communes with the One who is Spirit (John 4:24) and the reality of who we are is laid bare before the One who is Truth (John 14:6; Psalm 139:1–4).

Just as communion with humans can take on a variety of forms and functions, there is not a single way to pray. Communion with God can be short and just in the mind, like Nehemiah before the King (Nehemiah 2:4), long and private like Daniel in his room (Daniel 6:10), or communal and public like the early church coming together to seek God's will about a new apostle (Acts 1:24–26). The key is not to be afraid or indifferent, but rather to be engaged and ever learning to go deeper and broader in our prayer lives so that we may better know the Triune One (Philippians 3:10).

Prayer is Transformative

Richard Foster once wrote, "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ...In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God's thoughts after him: to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves, to will the things he wills."

To engage in prayer is to engage in the reality that the Christian is "in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20). We seek the face of the Father (Psalm 27:8), long to hear the voice of the Son (John 10:27), and burn with the fire of the Spirit (Acts 2:3–4; Romans 5:5). In prayer we seek to have His Kingdom come, and His will be done (Matthew 6:10), here in our own lives and in the world at large. We follow the example of our Lord and cry out "not my will but yours" (Luke 22:42).

Without prayer, our attempts to live out the life of Christ fall flat and are performative (John 15:5). In His earthly ministry, Jesus devoted Himself to prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke

5:16; Luke 6:12). And now in His heavenly ministry, He is devoted to the work of intercession (Hebrews 7:25). No wonder then the goal of the Christian life is one in which we are “praying without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Prayer is Warfare

If prayer is the means by which we connect with God, then it is also the key manifestation of spiritual warfare we can engage in (Ephesians 6:10–18). When the desert father Agathon was asked which good work requires the greatest effort, he said, “Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath.”

In prayer, we engage with God’s mission in the world (Matthew 6:10; Revelation 11:15). We long for His kingdom to come, for His will to be done on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10). We long to see the Enemy defeated under Christ’s authority and his works undone (1 John 3:8), to see our enemies turned to Christ (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:20–21), and to see the glory of Christ fill the whole earth (Habakkuk 2:14; Philippians 2:9–11). We remember that our enemies are not flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12), but the unseen powers, and we know that our weapons are not those of this world but are mighty through God (2 Corinthians 10:3–4).

Prayer is the Work

Prayer is the work of God’s people (Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). It is not reserved for the spiritual elite (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 4:16). It is the daily breath of every believer (Psalm 5:3; Daniel 6:10). As we learn to pray, we are drawn deeper into the love of God (Ephesians 3:17–19), equipped to live out His call (Ephesians 2:10; John 15:5), and empowered to do the work of ministry that He has given us (Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 3:5–6). Let us step together into this work for the glory of God and the sake of others (1 Corinthians 10:31; Philippians 2:3–4)!