

Why Is Prayer So Difficult!

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[0 : 00] you will have noticed that I read in verse 26 these words, Romans chapter 8 and verse 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. So the subject this evening, the question this evening, is one that I hope resonates with all of us.

The question is, why is it so difficult to pray? Well, first of all, I want to focus on our understanding of God.

As a theologian, perhaps not a very good one, but as a keen theologian, I believe that theology has the answer to a lot of our practical questions, including this one.

Theology is not for universities. It's for churches. It's for ordinary people like you and me. It's practical. It means the knowledge of God.

[1 : 10] And it's a kind of knowledge that has to have a practical consequence in the way in which we live our lives, including this kind of question.

Why is it so difficult to pray? The answer, I believe, to a large extent, lies in our theology. So what do I mean by that?

Well, it's in our understanding of God. And the first reason why we may find it so difficult to pray is because I find it hard to believe that almighty God would listen to someone as tiny in the universe as me.

How often are you tempted to think that way? And what that boils down to is basic unbelief. When I was in school, we had a physics teacher who was a professed atheist.

He made no secret of the fact that he didn't believe in God. And he wanted to wind up the pupils in the school who did believe in God. So I remember I led the SU group at that time and I asked him to speak at the Scripture Union group.

[2 : 27] Maybe it was a kind of reckless thing to do, asking an atheist to speak. But I wanted him to tell us why he didn't believe in God. I wanted to understand the thought processes of someone who didn't believe in God.

And so along he came and I'll never forget what he said. He said, I'm not closed to the possibility of there being a God. But he said, let me tell you this. And then he described the universe in all its complexity.

And he spent ages just telling us how vast the universe was, the millions of stars. And then he talked about how the distance that we were talking about.

And then he talked about the complexity, molecular makeup and molecular structure and so on and so forth. It was brilliant. And then he said this. He said, if there is a creator, and he says, I'm not close to the possibility that all of this could have been created.

But he said, if there is, that creator would want nothing to do with anything so tiny as us.

[3 : 39] We are a speck. We're less than a speck in the universe. He said, it's so complicated. It would take a complexity that none of us can grasp to create this universe.

Don't tell me, he said, that that creator would want to take anything to do. We would not be interested in us. You know, there's a certain logic to that way of thinking, isn't there?

And it requires faith to get over that logic. It is. It's true, isn't it, that the universe is vast and we are a tiny speck in that universe.

But the wonder of the Bible is not just that God exists or that there is a God, but that God is concerned.

That's what the Bible is all about. It tells us that when God created the universe, he created one species of creation with whom to relate.

[4 : 50] And that was humankind. That's what stands men and women out from every other creature. Not only do they have a consciousness of themselves, but they have been created with a consciousness of God in order to relate and to have fellowship and communication with God.

There was a time in this world when it was the easiest thing to pray. When prayer was everything.

When it was natural. When it was easy. When it just came. And that was when the world was perfect. Before Adam and Eve fell. But it was after the fall.

When humankind rebelled against God. When humankind decided to go their own way. That a breach was made. An unbelief set in.

Not just the unbelief that chooses not to believe in God, but an unbelief that runs away from God. That chooses not to relate to him.

[6 : 05] And that, of course, is what prayer is. It's the expression of a relationship with God. And even as a Christian, I've discovered that unbelief has followed me wherever I go.

And I can't get rid of it completely. It's always going to be there lurking in the background. Nagging away and saying to me, Why do you believe that God has anything to do with you?

Who do you think you are? And every time I listen to that voice, I take a step towards unbelief.

And I have to wrestle with it. And I have to answer it by saying, Yes, but That great almighty God who created the universe and who I can't understand has chosen to create me in his image so that I can relate to him.

And in Jesus Christ, he has restored that image. He has restored me to himself and in such a way that I can relate to him again in prayer.

[7 : 25] But the question extends beyond that. The question extends to this. Here's the second reason why I find it difficult to pray.

Because as a Christian, I know that God is perfectly holy. And I keep reading in my Bible about the holiness of God, the perfect righteousness of God.

And I'm also conscious of that even as a Christian, I have failed to live up to the kind of life that God expects of me and demands of me in the gospel.

And so I'm tempted not to pray because well, why should God put up with me? Why should God continuously put up with my regular failure to live as I should, to think as I should, to act as I should, to speak as I should?

And I'm tempted to go down the road and thinking, well, yeah, I can understand how God would accept someone at the beginning, that first moment of conversion when he first, he or she first comes to Jesus and puts their trust in him and all their sins are forgiven.

[8 : 47] But what about after that? Surely there's a limit to God's tolerance. Surely there comes a point where after 10 years, for example, as a Christian, if that person is still struggling and still failing and still sinning, surely God says, well, that's it.

That's it. You've reached the limit of my tolerance. To be honest, I think you've had enough grace. You've had enough mercy. I think I've done pretty well over these last 10 years and you really haven't reached that point yet that you live the way I want you to.

And what happens when you go down that road is it's not that you stop believing in Jesus. It's that you stop relating to God.

You kind of give up. You kind of lose sight of what the gospel is all about. And you kind of take some steps back.

where you become a kind of spectator to the Christian faith, to the church, but you're not really in it. You're not really active in your own soul.

[10 : 06] And it's all because you've believed that voice that says God is so holy and you are so not holy that over the years God must have given up on you.

He must have taken a step back. He must love you less now than he did at first. You were so promising at first and you failed to live up to your potential as a Christian.

So, the voice says don't be surprised that God must have taken a step back. And what happens is that as a result of that not only do you find it difficult to pray but you kind of drop out.

Has that happened to you? Maybe you've even concluded, well, perhaps I've never been a Christian at all. My life is so full of inconsistency.

I just can't have been a Christian in the first place. Well, let's start from there. If you've concluded that you're not a Christian, then you know what to do about that. You go to Acts 16 where that man said what must I do to be saved?

[11 : 21] And the answer is believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. And I say this to those of you who aren't Christians, who don't have a faith relationship to Jesus, that God has offered you everlasting life by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection.

So come to him, come to him now and ask his forgiveness and ask him to change your life. But what about if you've done that 10, 20, 30 years ago?

What if you've professed to be a Christian and yet, you know, you've kind of dropped off, particularly in prayer because you've come to that conclusion that God must have given up or at least reduced his level of grace towards you.

He must have sort of pushed you to the periphery and he really has less to do with you now than he did before. Do you really believe that? Because if you do, then you need to go back to the Bible and I'm glad to say that you're wrong.

Let's go back to the Bible. Remember in Matthew 18 when one of the disciples came to Jesus and said, how often should I forgive my brother? Seven times?

[12 : 46] My brother comes to me and says, I've sinned. Should I forgive him seven times? Is seven the limit after seven? If he sins the eighth time against me, do I have a right to say to him, that's it, you're finished.

I'm not forgiving you again. And Jesus said to him, remember that answer. Jesus said to him, if your brother forgives, comes to you 70 times seven, having sinned against you, you forgive your brother.

Now, do you know why Jesus said that? Because that's the way God is to us. Think about that for a moment.

Next passage of the Bible is Romans 8, where Paul ends the chapter by saying, can anything separate us? Life or death or things present or things to come or height nor depth.

Can anything separate us from the love? He says, I'm persuaded that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

[13 : 57] Look at that word, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that's why he begins that chapter by saying, there is therefore no condemnation.

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, if you're trusting in Jesus alone for your salvation, you can stand, even if you've been a Christian for 30, 40 years or whatever, and you can look back over all the failures in your life, but you can say this evening as confidently as at the very beginning, there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

No condemnation. That means you are secure in Jesus Christ. Now the reason the reason why I say that is because often we think of the gospel as a message to new believers or unbelievers, but I think there is a very, very strong message in the gospel to old believers, people who have been on the road for many years and are disappointed with the way that they've lived their Christian life and maybe with good reason.

And in their disappointment, having made perhaps bad choices along the way, they've kind of written themselves off. And the result, they've stopped praying.

find it difficult to pray, find it difficult to know what to say. Let's go back to the Bible. There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

[15 : 50] Which means that as a believing child of God, you are loved with an extraordinary divine love in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's take one more passage. 1 John chapter 2 and verse 1 where John says, These things I write unto you so that you will not sin. But if we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous.

He is the propitiation. You don't know what that word propitiation is. We don't have time to look at it. Go and find out what it means. It's what we need to hear this evening. Propitiation is covering.

It's the atoning sacrifice. It's the message that Jesus died for our sin. And that same letter tells us that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

Do you know what? This is all theology. So if you're finding difficulty knowing how to pray and what to say to God, the answer is in theology. And of course theology is just the Bible explained.

[17 : 05] Third thing is, and I'm not going to spend a long time on this. We're just going to bring things to a close in a very short time. But let's keep on asking this question.

Why is it so difficult to pray? The third reason is we don't fully understand what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Let me ask you a question.

What has God done for you in Jesus? As a Christian, what has God done for you in Jesus? Your answer would probably be, well, he's forgiven my sins.

And that is a wonderful and a true answer. Our sin is forgiven. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But is that it?

Is that all you can say? If that's all, if that's the only answer that you give me, you've got a lot to discover. Wow. We're just at the beginning.

[18 : 05] How about God has justified you? You say, I don't understand that. That's a big word. Well, never mind how big it is.

Make it your ambition to find out what this means. You need to find out what this means. Because it's the most wonderful truth. You know what it means? it means that not only has God cancelled the debt of your sin, not only has he drawn a red line through the debt, through the deficit, that's the word I'm looking for, he has actually clothed you with the goodness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

So, as God the Father looks at you tonight, he has declared you not only to be forgiven, but to be righteous with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

what that means is that as you think about your own failure, your own deficiency, your own backsliding, nothing can change the fact that as you approach God tonight, that you are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

There's more than that. God has taken you and he has joined you to Jesus. He has united you to Jesus.

[19 : 42] Now, don't ask me how this works, but it's a truth, it's a fact, that God has united his people to Jesus, which means that 24-7 I am united to Jesus.

Now, what's this got to do with why, with our question, this evening? Well, let me tell you, because we don't practice our union with Jesus. We don't live up to it, and particularly in prayer.

What happens when we go in the car, for example, you're on your own. I'm speaking from my own experience, by the way, you're on your own, you're going for a two or three hour car journey, and you set off, what's the first thing you do?

Put Bluetooth on, you listen to music, and before you know it, three hours are up and you've listened to music, it's all you've done. Don't you realise this is the perfect opportunity? And the reason we don't use an opportunity like that for prayer is because we're not conscious of our union with Jesus.

Because let me tell you, if there were someone in the front seat on your two hour, three hour car, you would talk to that person, wouldn't you? You would converse, you'd have a great conversation, it would kill the time.

[21 : 01] And yet, why is it not the same with our union with Jesus? Why don't we live up to our union with Jesus? Why don't we remember that we're never alone, that we are joined to Jesus, we're Siamese twins with Jesus.

Now, if we were conscious of that, I reckon we would pray all the more and it would be so much more natural tonight, maybe we need to recalibrate, we need to reset our awareness of who we are in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then you come to, and we're talking about the Trinity here as well because our prayer is very often defective because it's not Trinitarian. we believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We need to become more aware of the Holy Spirit, as aware as Paul was when he said the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

What that means is that in every believer God has sent his Holy Spirit to dwell within us. think of your life as a vessel that is indwelt by God himself.

[22 : 34] And that is bound to have a difference, not only in our prayer life, but in our obedience, in our faithfulness, in our adoration, in our perseverance, let's remember that God has filled us with his Holy Spirit.

We are vessels that contain God himself. And then another reason I hear a lot of people giving is well I don't know what to say.

I find it difficult to know what to say to God. Well when you think of that, do you really? Is it really that difficult? Think about that for a moment.

You're united to Jesus, you're clothed with the righteousness of Christ, you're indwelt with the Holy Spirit. God is present as we're looking at this morning. God is present, not only present but he dwells within you.

Why is it so difficult to simply adore him and thank him and rest and rejoice and exult in that great truth?

[23 : 48] That he is your companion. He's in you, he's with you, he's before you, he's behind you. He is searching you. Now sometimes by the way there are times in our lives where there are no words.

There are times in our lives where our prayers are reduced to sighs. Paul says it here. There are times when we're reduced to groanings that cannot, with groans that words cannot express.

when my son-in-law Eric passed away in January, I didn't know what to say to God.

There were no words. I don't think I opened my mouth to God for days. And there are times like that when you want to say, God, what are you doing?

Why are you doing this? And there are no answers. But that doesn't mean that there's no prayer.

[25 : 11] prayer. Because God is able to interpret our sighs as perfectly articulate prayers.

Because prayer is spiritual. Now that does not mean, that does not give us an excuse to just say nothing and just go away and sort of contemplate or engage in some kind of undefined meditation.

That's not what I'm saying. The norm is to pray, to give expression to our needs and our confessions and our wants.

But there are times when there are no words. God knows that and he can interpret that. But when you say, I don't know what to say to God, well, why don't you just be honest with God?

Why don't you just start where you are, tell him what's in your heart, open up your heart, even although what's in your heart is maybe stuff that you know shouldn't be there.

[26 : 19] He knows it's there anyway. Why don't you just bring it to him? Then why don't we go to the Lord's Prayer? Not as a kind of mechanical exercise.

I'm talking about use it as a template. what do we have in the Lord's Prayer? Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Why don't you think about the holiness of God and praise him for the fact that you, as a miserable sinner, can actually approach the perfectly holy God knowing that he accepts you and loves you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why don't you just simply rest in that and praise him and thank him for that? the Lord's Prayer is a wonderful template that introduces us to issues that we ought to be praying for and it begins with an adoration of God and then it continues to that missionary zeal and desire when you ask that God's kingdom would come and that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Does that not lead us into all kinds of areas around the world where the gospel needs to be known? Do you care that there are people tonight who live in darkness and who don't know anything about Jesus?

Is that something that really bothers you? That really grieves you? I would say to anybody choose a missionary area, choose a country, choose a people group, choose a person you know who has gone out as a missionary and pray for.

[28 : 05] You don't know anybody who's gone out with the gospel? You don't know anybody? I find that difficult to believe. We do know as a congregation I know that Bonacord take an interest in mission work, maybe foreign mission work, maybe home mission work, maybe church planting.

And then there are our own needs. our own needs, daily needs, not just our food, but all kinds of needs. And then you can, of course, there are sins that we need to confess, asking God for his forgiveness and asking him for his protection against when we're going to be tempted.

Next, we are so aware of how easy we can fall into temptation, temptation. So we ask God to keep us from specific temptations and to make us strong in the Lord.

Then you can move on to your family, people you've been praying for who aren't believers. You say, I've been praying for them for years and years and nothing is happening. Why have you stopped praying for them?

Has God stopped working? Has he forgotten to be gracious? No, he hasn't. The story hasn't finished. You don't know what God is going to do to answer your prayer.

[29 : 28] Don't give up. Continue to pray for people in your family, people you know who aren't believers, the work of Bon Accord. Continue to pray that God will provide you with a minister.

Not so that you can leave everything to him, but someone who will take care of your needs and who will pastor you and who will be your friend and your guide and your counsellor and someone who will feed you.

I could go on, I could spend all night telling you what we need to be praying for. So the answer, I don't know what to say.

I think all it takes is a little bit of sitting down and thinking about what we say. Now here's where I'm going to close. I could go on all night, not because I live up to what I'm saying tonight, but because I'm just sharing my own experiences with you as much as anything else.

Here's how I'm going to close. Remember this one thing, that prayer is not a feeling. Prayer is hard work.

[30 : 39] You might be surprised, you maybe never heard anyone saying that before. You maybe think that, well, why don't I feel like praying?

Don't be surprised when you don't feel like praying. You're not alone. There are very few times I feel like praying. It's an awful thing to confess, isn't it?

But it's true. And I remember the first time I ever heard someone telling me that prayer was hard work. It was in D Street, the forerunner of Bon Accord, the predecessor of Bon Accord, and it was the minister that we had then in the 1970s, a man called Hector Cameron, some of you will remember him, one of the most respected ministers in the church.

I remember being in a prayer meeting on a Wednesday night in this tiny little pokey wee hall in D Street before we moved into Bon Accord, and that is what he said.

He said, prayer is hard work. I'd never heard anybody saying it before, and it's never left me. It's true. may God tonight prepare you, inspire you, strengthen you, encourage you, restore you, reset you, recalibrate you to be a praying people.

[32 : 02] And if the result of our reflection this evening has been a rediscovery of prayer, then we have achieved a massive amount. Let us come boldly into his presence.

Don't hold back, because you are united with the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for the privilege, what a privilege, of speaking to the God of the universe, who has rescued us and adopted us into his family, and who always has time for us.

May we live increasingly in that light. In Jesus' name, Amen.