

# Honest-to-God prayer

Eph. 3:14-21, 2 Tim. 3:1-5, Ps. 63:1-8

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**Introduction:** Last Sunday we started by asking if you ever talked to yourself, and I mentioned how our inner monologue makes more sense as a dialogue: let *God* in on what you're discussing with yourself! So today I'd like to start off with another hard question: **How would you describe your prayer life?** Growing? Enjoyable? Struggling? Off and on? Non-existent? ... The deeper your sense of God's personhood (what we talked about last week: compassionate, gracious, etc.), the more you'll want to talk to Him! But the fact is, not many people these days confess to having a really meaningful and satisfying prayer life. Popular ideas about God and spirituality often influence us more than Scripture! Maybe it's also because we're all in too big of a hurry; our agendas are too full, with too many online distractions; we are too oriented to activism – prayer seems too passive; we fall into the trap of substituting religious practices for real communion with God. And most people's approach to prayer is honestly based on whether they see results: does it really work? In other words, "do I get what I need out of this? Does God ever do what I'm asking for? And if what I ask for actually happens, how do I know it's not just a coincidence?!" Very pragmatic!

But what a huge misunderstanding of prayer! It's painful ... as if people had never read the Psalms (the Jews' book of prayer as well as their hymnbook). The Psalms are full of prayers: prayers of worship and praise, of lament, righteous indignation and anger, deliverance and salvation, prayers of brokenness and for healing, prayers of repentance and confession, perplexity seeking clarification, thanksgiving and rejoicing, prayers of faith, hope and supplication, even prayers of doubt and despair. So there are prayers that run the whole gamut of human emotions! The psalmists were pouring out their souls before the One who they knew understood them, because that's the essence of prayer! To open our hearts to our Maker and spend time with Him, becoming vulnerable to His truth and grace. Of course, this requires some knowledge of Him as "***the One who hears prayer***" (Ps. 65:2).

Can we be really honest about prayer for a moment? Just saying pious words doesn't make genuine prayer, and it's very unsatisfying (except maybe to someone who's on an ego trip). If we could indeed become more honest in our attempts at prayer, more transparent like the psalmists (or like children), we would sooner learn to pray and discover the joy and comfort in it. But it's not simply a projection of how you feel or how you would like the world around you to be – that will too often focus only on our own comfort and sense of well-being (another ego trip). Real prayer does involve a reflection of your inner state, but it's about

**exposing your inner thoughts, desires, and concerns to God's truth**, making ourselves vulnerable to His good will in our fallen world. The more you let biblical truth (God's point of view) penetrate your inner world, the more you will see life from His perspective and the more committed you'll become to prayer. Also your inner life will come to be illuminated by a running conversation with God. On the other hand, the less you are tuned in to Scripture, the less prayer will interest you; it simply won't be a vital part of your mental processes, and your practice of prayer (if you resort to it) will be more of a superstitious vestige from your childhood.

So let's look at one of the strongest "pray-ers" in the New Testament and see what we can learn from one of his prayers. Our context is Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a circular letter to the churches of Asia Minor; Paul is writing from a prison in Rome, and the focus of his letter is the glory of Christ in the church, that community based on God's grace manifested at the cross, which produces the miracle of Jews and Gentiles coming together in one Body. So Paul isn't responding to any certain theological or moral problem per se among these churches, but he wants to protect them against *future problems* by encouraging them to mature in their faith. So we should hear him praying here for our **growth in maturity!**

**1) Vv. 14-15: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named..."** What's implied in this confession that every family and nation come from one Father? If we're all from the same Father, then aren't we all brothers and sisters? In fact, our genes, our DNA, and our blood all bear witness to it. So we should act like it – instead of always speaking in "us vs. them" categories! Did you think the only children of God are believers? Certainly all God's children need to be "born again," but being born of the Spirit is about regaining our family likeness! And **prayer is about rehearsing truth!** This is how we resist the growing paganism of the society around us, the "liquid modernity" as well as the cleverness of our enemy, the father of lies. A strong prayer life of regularly rehearsing God's truth is our only refuge against the storms that are brewing on the horizon. (If you thought the war in the Ukraine was bad news, just wait till you see the recession that's coming, and the imposition of Irene Montero's agenda on the Spanish educational system!)

**2) V. 16: "that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power in your 'inner humanity' by the Holy Spirit."** In Paul's anthropology, we possess an inner humanity and an outer humanity, and what should concern us most is the inner one. The kind of power we need is a spiritual power that comes from the cross of Jesus and the presence of His Spirit, enabling us to resist that "liquid modernity" that washes over us constantly. Every category you ever held sacred is being challenged today: from sexuality and marriage, to God and religion, to human identity and purpose of life, the afterlife, good and evil, always seeking to wear us down, dilute our beliefs, undermine our convictions, because our humanity is under attack. Every day it's getting pushed and shoved, challenged, violated, torn in opposite directions, deceived and belittled. What are you doing to recharge your humanity? **Prayer is about RECHARGING OUR HUMANITY! Connect to the Source – get rehumanized!** (That's the restoration of Jesus' image in us.) Getting plugged in to that Source is about calling on the name of Jesus, which represents His Personhood. He gives us power to resist the temptation to relax and go with the flow.

3) V. 17: **“that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.”** The Greek term is *katoikéo*, meaning to settle down permanently (in contrast to *oikéo* = to live, and *paroikéo* = to live as a foreigner). We need Christ to settle in our hearts and make Himself at home; we need to be ruled *by Him* rather than by our appetites or by the world. Our inner life is like a house with many rooms, closets, and hallways, and Jesus wants access to all. Your true owner should not be stress or anxiety; those are personal realities we all have to deal with at some point, and if not checked, they will push us in the wrong direction! Such struggles urge us to grow in our conversation with God. As finite creatures, we push against our limits, because we feel the unique potential inside of us, which actually reflects the One who made us, but that potential cannot be fully realized without connecting deeply with our Redeemer ... **Prayer is about RECLAIMING GOD AS OUR TRUE OWNER, opening up to Him, giving Him all the keys to all the rooms.**

4) Vv. 17-18: **“so that as you become rooted and established in love [agape], you may then be able to comprehend, together with all the saints ...”** In other words, we don't learn this in isolation, but only together with others. To understand this reality you must be in a committed fellowship of believers doing life together with some degree of intimacy. And what you're trying to comprehend are these “dimensions”: “breadth, length, height, and depth.” But Paul doesn't say of what! Is this mathematics, geometry, outer space? Paul is stretching his vocabulary to express this, because it's really about **mind expansion!** And he clarifies in the next phrase that what we're trying to *understand* here is **LOVE**, the essence of life, from the macro to the micro: the goal is to **know** the love of Christ that surpasses **knowledge!** To know something that's beyond knowing? This must be about emotional intelligence – exactly what we see in its maximum expression at the cross! But I can't learn about it fully without other people; I can't grow in this love without investing in others. I can't experience the depths of this life offered for us without making myself vulnerable to others just as God made Himself vulnerable to us, which means love is sometimes very painful, often involves sacrifice, always requires effort and growth, and sometimes brings you to a dead-end. But if its Source is God, then it remains loyal, even to the end (Ps. 48:14, **“this God is our God forever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end”**). **Prayer is about MIND and HEART EXPANSION: growing in God's LOVE = emotional intelligence.**

5) V. 19: **“so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”** = the fullness of Christ! That's the real goal! **Prayer is about EXPERIENCING THE DEEP CURRENT OF GOD'S LIFE in us**, thanks to Christ. We were never meant to have to live life without God! He always intended to be the Source of Life flowing in us – but we cut Him off with our rebellion, insisting on having things our own way! That's what the Eden story is all about. That's what the history of Israel is all about, the incarnation and the cross and the Gospel: the “metanarrative” of Christianity, which today postmoderns want to replace with the “anything-goes” metanarrative, the “everything's-valid, no-boundaries, no-rules” metanarrative. But it's such a lie! If you want to be filled with all the fullness of God, get to know the only One who ever lived life that way: **“in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”** (*katoikéo*, Col. 1:19); “in Him the whole fullness of deity *dwells* bodily” (*katoikéo*, Col. 2:9).

6) Vv. 20-21: Now we better understand why Paul ends this prayer with such a powerful doxology: **“to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.”** And that includes *this* generation too! Amen!