

The Prayer Project

A personal devotional by Heather Sorenson

I.

~The Struggle of Prayer~

The irony of The Prayer Project is that for the few months I worked on this album, I struggled with prayer more than any other time in my life. Maybe this really was irony. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was Satan. Maybe it was God. My vote is for the last one, and the following paragraphs will explain more. But this struggle shook me to the core of my faith. (Now there's a humbling statement.)

In my younger years (I still like to think that I'm youngish!), I had the notion that faith with questions = weak faith. Or even worse, faith with questions = no faith. And that the strongest people of faith were those who questioned nothing; they took everything at "faith value." (See what I did there?)

I don't think I think that anymore. That's like saying the strongest marriages never have to work through any issues. Or that the deepest friendships never weather any storms. In my experience, the friendships that have never been tested are fairly shallow; and the spouses who have never had to work through an issue have only been married for a week. Or a day. I need my faith to run deeper than that. I use this analogy of faith and relationships because I have learned that **faith IS a relationship**. God is not surprised at the storms and struggles of our faith – in fact, He predicted it a long time ago. Scripture teaches that our faith will be tested and put to the fire. The refining process is painful. Faith will take a beating, but it can handle the storm - if it's built on the Rock. Remember the Sunday school song "The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock"? Questions and struggles promote heavier digging. Digging uncovers truth. Never fear the digging.

I found that one of my biggest struggles with prayer was that I **expected it to operate in a way it was not intended to operate**. Here's a lame example: no matter how much you spend on your dream car (a white Tesla, of course), it's still not going to do the menial task of folding the towels from the dryer for you. That's not what it was designed to do. Get you from point A to B quickly, yes. Make you the envy of your friends, yes. Class up your garage, definitely. Fold the towels, not a chance. I realize that comparing a car to prayer is not a perfect

illustration. It loosely makes my point, though. Especially if I take my Tesla back to the dealer, and because of the towel-folding fiasco, I exclaim in frustration: "This car just doesn't work!" Of course it works. It works beautifully. Perfect, in fact. It just was never designed to do my laundry.

I wanted to isolate certain verses, such as "ask and you shall receive" and make them serve me. I would ask, and then I should receive. I was the master, and prayer was my servant – or rather, God was my servant. See the problem? This was not what prayer was intended to be. **Prayer was never intended to make me God's master.**

Such spiritual immaturity sounds appalling, doesn't it? I recognize that now. Even in the middle of my struggling and digging, I understood how ridiculous it sounded when spelled out like that. But it was weightier than that in real life: my requests were not trivial, materialistic, or even selfish. When I repeatedly carried soul-crushing burdens to God, and asked Him to either solve the problem (first choice) or to help carry my burden (a less desirable second choice in my opinion, but still an improvement) – it seemed that nothing was solved. The burden never felt lighter, and the soul crushing continued to squeeze almost the last bit of faith from my spirit. Something inside me would say "Prayer doesn't work!" - much like my Tesla laundry experience.

So, I would run back to my verses, and see if there was a condition or qualification attached that I had missed the first time around. And to some there were:

- "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4)
- "The fervent prayer of a righteous person is powerful and avails much." (James 5:16)
- "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (James 4:3)

I'm Type A. Give me a formula, and I'll deliver success! And so I delighted to the best of my ability. I tried to be as righteous and pleasing to God as I knew how. And God knows that my requests were fervent – and not sent from a selfish, materialistic heart.

And yet there was still silence. There were many days where I begged God to just acknowledge my grief, to say SOMETHING, even if He wouldn't ease the burden. What kind of God/Father/Friend would refuse to offer words of comfort?

Even human “fringe” friends will voice kind words of encouragement to a wounded heart. What about the passage in Matthew 7:9-11 that says “Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” I have quoted this passage to God many times over the years, wondering why the loaf of bread He gave me looked and felt so much like a rock.

So, again I would look for more verses. I knew that God sees the bigger picture, but I also remembered the passage about the persistent widow who wore the king down with her incessant request. (Luke 18) “Just keep praying!” is the Christianese mantra in times like this. But for how many years, I wondered? What if I daily carried this burden to my heavenly Father for the rest of my life, just to find out He was never going to answer or acknowledge my hurt? Wouldn’t it have been better to have not gone through this emotional daily ritual, which kept me raw every time I went to God? Why would God string me on like that?

And so you see a small glimpse into my struggle. My struggle moved beyond prayer, to faith, and eventually to the nature of God.

II. ~*The Mystery of Prayer*~

Prayer is still a mystery to me sometimes. Especially when I read Romans 8:26 – 27, where Scripture tells me that the Holy Spirit makes intercessions on my behalf to the Father. The way I interpret that is “God prays to God for me.” I love that. It also makes no sense to me. Don’t get me wrong: it moves me deeply that God prays for me. But it blows my mind. I don’t understand why God prays. I’m glad that when He does, it’s for me, though. He must love us so much.

Another mystery to me: Which events in life have the possibility of being brought about/altered because of prayer? And which events has God already set in stone, no matter how many prayers are offered? As mentioned before, the New Testament supports the idea of persistent prayer to move God’s hand. And yet, that seems to put the outcome in human hands, at least to some degree – making prayer serve me.

These are question I ponder often.

III.

~The Purpose of Prayer

In my struggling with prayer and its mysteries, a conclusion needed to be reached in all of this digging for truth. My conclusion came down to faith. Would I continue to pray, even though I could see no evidence of God's acknowledgement or answers during this time of testing?

I chose "yes." I know that you can't see my heart - or hear the tone of my answer on this page, but my conclusive response was not the decisive, confident answer you see above in black and white. It was a broken, humbled choice. It was not a blind blanket statement of faith; it was a decision made by someone who spiritually wrestled with this during very dark days. Here's why I choose to pray:

- **When I pray, I am in the presence of God.** I could list that reason alone, and it would be enough. How amazing that I have been given the familial right to boldly walk into the throne room and have an audience with God. I am so undeserving of this. But I'm the adopted daughter of the King, and I have God's ear. This is why I often cry when I pray. God loves me, and He is listening to me.
- **Prayer is communicating with God.** The purpose of prayer isn't necessarily to have access to Heaven's Vending Machine. The purpose of prayer lies in communication with God. And, as in all relationships, continuous communication is the key builder of my relationship with God. That is why we are commanded to "pray without ceasing." There is so much more to relational communication than asking for favors. Good communication involves good discussion, apologies when needed (on my part), sharing light-hearted moments together, and discussing deep issues. This kind of communication leads to "living life together" on our journey. The older generation beautifully calls this "walking with God." Remember Enoch in the Old Testament? He and God had such good fellowship in their evening walk, that God walked him straight up to heaven. I've always been a little envious that Enoch's friendship was so enjoyed by God. I wanted to be that friend! (There's my competitive Type A showing up.) How awesome that God wants this kind of friendship from me, too.

This is why I pray.

IV. ~Helpful Quotes on Prayer~

I believe that everything God intends for us to know on prayer can be found in Scripture. This is why most of my prayer "digging" was done in the Bible. But here are some of my favorite prayer quotes that helped me remember the purpose of prayer. Maybe they will help you, too.

- *"Prayer is not conquering God's reluctance, but taking hold of God's willingness." - Phillips Brooks*
- *"Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer **is** the greater work." - Oswald Chambers*
- *"Prayer at its highest is a two-way conversation -- and for me the most important part is listening to God's replies." - Frank C. Laubach*
- *"Good morning, Lord! What are You up to today? Can I be a part of it? Thank You. Amen." - Norman Grubb*
- *"Prayer is not a check request asking for things from God. It is a deposit slip – a way of depositing God's character into our bankrupt souls." - Dutch Sheets*
- *"Prayer is not a means by which I seek to control God; it is a means of putting myself in a position where God can control me." - Charles L. Allen*
- *"Don't pray when you feel like it. Have an appointment with the Lord and keep it. A man is powerful on his knees." - Corrie ten Boom*
- *"Like all good things, prayer requires some discipline. Yet I believe that life with God should seem more like friendship than duty. Prayer includes moments of ecstasy and also dullness, mindless distraction and acute concentration, flashes of joy and bouts of irritation. In other words, prayer has features in common with all relationships that matter." - Philip Yancey*