

Help for a sick prayer life

Diagnosing
the problem

Back to basics
in prayer

Praying in
small groups

**Includes
discussion
guide**





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From the editor

HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR PRAYER LIFE?

Most Christians would answer: “Oh, not nearly as good as it should be”. But that raises the potentially disturbing question: “Well, how good should it be?”

Should prayer flow out naturally from us, like fragrance from a flower? Should we be leaping out of bed in the morning, and positively sprinting to our chosen place for prayer, eager not to waste a second?

Well, one day we will speak to God like that (it’s called ‘heaven’), but in the meantime prayer will be a battle. We are still weighed down by sin and weakness, and like the disciples we find ourselves falling asleep on the job. We should expect, in other words, to struggle in prayer.

This is why the Bible is so full of exhortations to keep praying, and not to give up. “Continue steadfastly in prayer”, Paul urges the Colossians, “being watchful in it with thanksgiving”.

So perhaps a better question would be: *How is your prayer battle going?* Are you continuing to fight? Or have you laid down your weapons and surrendered? This is what many Christians mean when they say their prayer life is “not nearly as good as it should be”. They have largely given up praying because it is too hard, and they are too busy, and life is pressing in, and things seem to go on by themselves anyway, and ... you know the rest of the excuses by heart.

The three articles in this MiniZine are designed to get you back on track. The first looks more closely at the reasons we don’t pray; the second gives us a refresher in the basics of prayer to help us get started (or re-started); and the third discusses how our small groups can be a very significant encouragement and help to prayer.

I pray that the result will not just be guilt, but a rejuvenated enthusiasm to rejoin the battle of prayer.

TONY PAYNE

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Diagnosing a sick prayer life

AUTHOR  TONY PAYNE



Do you ever wonder whether you really are a Christian? In those moments when you can't go to sleep at night, and your mind has time to roam over the events of the day and the week, do you ever find yourself thinking, "Am I just kidding myself that all this is true and that it's really changed my life?"

Am I really any different from how I was last year or the year before that? If God's Spirit is in me, why does my old nature keep showing its ugly head? If other people knew what I was really like, they'd be horrified. I feel like such a phoney sometimes."

In my experience, both personally and in talking with friends, nothing evokes these sorts of feelings more strongly than our struggles with prayer. We know prayer is good, and a privilege, and a blessing. We know that the Bible calls us and commands us to pray. There is every reason to pray—

but we don't. Or if we do, it tends to be short, perfunctory, irregular.

"Why?!" we find ourselves asking in the middle of the night. "I love the Lord. I love being a Christian. I have no desire to be anything else. So why do I find prayer such a struggle? Why is my Christian life blooming in knowledge and in ministry to others, but quietly dying in prayer?"

A DIAGNOSIS

At one level, a diagnosis for our problems in prayer is very easy to arrive at, if rather depressing: we are sinful, stubborn fools. That's why we fail to pray. In fact, that's why we fail to love people, tell the truth, be patient, and a thousand other patently good things that we want to do but fail to do.

Sin is a chronic disease that will never be cured this side of glory. And although the constant presence of God's Spirit in our lives alleviates the symptoms, and may even improve our quality of life (as it were), the disease will always be with us. The treatment is a lifetime of repentance and faith. And because of the death and resurrection of Christ, the outcome is not terminal.

All the same, as true as this simple diagnosis is, we need to probe a little deeper. We need to ask: What form does our sinful, stubborn foolishness take with respect to prayer? What kind of spiritual malady overtakes us such that we fail to pray? Armed with a more detailed diagnosis, we might be in a position to apply the treatment more effectively.

In the remainder of this article, we'll look at *three spiritual viruses* that infect our brains and lay low our prayer lives. We catch

these viruses from the world around us, from our friends, from our upbringing, and from false teaching we might have received. Regardless of how we pick them up, these viruses distort our view of God and prayer, and make our prayer lives sick.

No doubt these are not the only three, but they are very common and they infect the heart of prayer—that is, our understanding of who God is, and how we relate to him.

VIRUS 1: WE DOUBT THAT GOD IS ABLE

Christian prayer is based on who God is. We can only go to God and ask him for things if he is the kind of God who is willing to accept us into his presence and to listen to us. And there would be no point approaching this God and making requests of him if he wasn't able to do something in response to our requests.

This seems obvious enough, and indeed it is written all over the Bible. God is supremely powerful and able. Jeremiah begins a famous prayer by exclaiming: “Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you” (Jer 32:17).

This refrain—‘nothing is impossible for God’—runs throughout the Scriptures. It reflects the Bible’s view that everything is under God’s control: he created all things; he sustains all things by his powerful word. He’s the supreme lord of everything.

However, surely if we believed this, we would go to this all-powerful God at every possible opportunity to ask him to intervene in the events of our world—to do things, to change things, to act.

Our lack of prayer suggests that perhaps we don’t really believe God is so powerful after all. We’re infected with an unbelief in the power of God to work in our lives. This unbelief comes in two forms.

Type A: Misunderstanding nature and super-nature

As modern people, we have been taught to divide everything that happens into two categories: natural and supernatural. There are the natural, ordinary, scientifically provable things that happen; and then there

are the inexplicable, weird, ‘supernatural’ things that you just shrug your shoulders about.

This is not a biblical way of thinking at all. God can use natural means to achieve natural results, such as simply sending the rain to water the earth and produce crops. But he can also use natural means to achieve extraordinary results—such as sending a strong east wind to drive back the Red Sea and allow the Israelites to cross on dry land (Exod 14:21). Or God can suspend the normal, natural pattern of his creation by making a man dead for four days come back to life (John 11:38-44). All of these are equally the work of the powerful, sovereign God of all the world.

If we are infected with the modern view—and all of us have been taught it explicitly and implicitly since we were kids—God gets parked off into the world of weird phenomena and unexplained events. He becomes a last resort when all ‘natural’ means have failed; or perhaps a supplier of psychological strength and calm to deal with the ups and downs of daily life.

Christians who are infected with this way of thinking about God and the world can end up virtually prayerless. If, deep down, we don’t think that God is actually able to act or intervene to change anything in the course of our daily lives, but is only going to give us a bit of fortitude to put up with things as they are, then prayer doesn’t seem so urgent or necessary. We can just get on with managing things ourselves, firing off the occasional brief request for some extra patience and perseverance.

This is a grave danger for modern Christians, especially those living in the prosperous West. We live in a technological society, where most diseases seem easily curable and where life is, for the most part, secure, comfortable and healthy. If we don’t take active steps to the contrary, our default way of thinking about the world will be that life goes on very normally without God—that

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