

Reaching Up –week 2: *The Desperate Need for Prayer*

Prayer is our life-line to God. Without prayer, our relationship with God suffers and with it life takes on a hard edge. Why is it, then, that prayer is so difficult for many of us? This week we will look for some answers from Scripture. My hope is that your prayer life will grow and as it does, your love for God will grow as well. –Pastor Mike

Day 1: Reaching Up through Prayer

What are some truths you learned from last Sunday's message? How can it make a difference this week?

Day 2: The Awesome Privilege of Prayer

Read Hebrews 4:15-16.

The significance of this passage is so important that for several chapters to follow, the writer of Hebrews outlines the superiority of Christ over the priesthood of the Old Testament Law of Moses. Under the old priesthood, a man (a mere man) represented the people before God, offering gifts and sacrifices for sins. Approaching the throne of God in the Holy of Holies was not an option for anyone but the high priest. The people could only watch from a distance. While forgiveness was had through the process, something was missing. Where was the relationship with God? Where was the sympathy and help in times of need? How could that be found through a mediator – a mere man who could not relate to one's struggles and pains?

That all changed with Jesus. No longer do we need to watch from a distance. No longer is approaching God an intellectual ritual. It is a relational one. There is now "grace to help us in our time of need." There is a perfect mediator who can "sympathize with our weaknesses" and temptations. And while He never sinned in the process, He still experienced the pain and temptation we all suffer.

Personal thoughts:

In many other religions a personal relationship with God is unheard of. Indeed, it is a privilege to be able to come to God with the confidence of knowing that he understands what I'm going through. It is comforting to know that He will give me grace in ways that He can relate to personally. It is not cold and calculated, but sympathetic and gracious.

To consider:

Is your relationship with God distant or close? Is coming to God more an intellectual ritual or a personal, relational encounter with Him? How often do you come to Him with your struggles? Take a moment and approach His throne with confidence, giving Him your cares that He might give you grace in your time of need.

Day 3: When God Says "No"

If you saw your prayers answered more often, would you pray more? Perhaps one of the biggest problems people have with prayer is they don't see their prayers making any difference. They struggle to see a connection between their prayers and reality. Some people give up because they think God has something else in mind. Others begin to believe God is going to do whatever He wants despite their prayers.

God answers prayers in so many different ways that it can be difficult, if not frustrating, to figure out what God is doing. Pretty soon instead of the bold confidence the Bible speaks of, our prayers are uncertain and timid. As one person I was talking with said, "our prayers become more like wishes than prayers of confident faith."

How can we develop confidence in our prayers? Perhaps looking at how God responds to our prayers can help.

Sometimes God says, “no.”

Read James 4:3. Why does God say, “No” in this instance?

If you struggle in this area, you’re not alone! Read these examples from Scripture:

- James and John (Mark 10:35-40; Luke 9:51-56)
- Jonah (Jonah 4:1-4)

While God wants to say “yes” to His children, He wants what is best for us. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of our own desires. Sometimes we are selfish and/or less concerned about God’s love of others. When God says “no”, sometimes it is because we are not seeking His glory. Our prayers can be subtly self-glorifying. A preacher wants to be popular. A musician wants to steal the show. We want to do well, but for the wrong reasons.

To consider:

Have there been times in your life when God answered “no” to a prayer? Looking back, was there a problem with your motivation? If a prayer seems to have “no” for an answer (where God shuts the door over and over again), consider your motivation. Take a deep, honest look at your prayer and ask: Why do I want this?

Day 4: When God Says “Grow”

More than what we do, more than what we attain, character stands out as most important. It is the one thing that accompanies everything we do in our life. God wants to develop our character. And when our prayers are not aligned with our spiritual maturity, God says “grow” up first. Sometimes our relationship with God is struggling – we must remember that God is more interested in our relationship with Him than giving us what we ask for. Consider the following areas where growth might be needed:

- Unconfessed sin – read Isaiah 59:12
- Unresolved conflict – read Matt. 5:23-24; 1 Peter 3:7
- Uncaring attitudes – read Prov. 21:13; Isaiah 58:3-9

God is interested in developing people who will reflect His character in this world, and His character always expresses concern and compassion for the afflicted. When God says “grow,” we have to look at our walk and ask how are things really going? James 5 says the prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much.

To consider:

Take a moment and examine your life. Is there unconfessed sin in your life? Is there a pattern of sin that needs to end? Are there unhealthy, neglected, and damaged relationships that are hindering your prayers? Are there people in your life that you have turned a blind eye to? Pray that God would soften your heart and help you grow in these areas.

Day 5: When God says “Slow”

We can be impatient people, don’t you agree? So much of life is easily and quickly accessible. From drive through coffee to next-day air to google answers, life is designed for instant gratification. That same impatience can creep into our prayers as well. In our impatience, we want God to answer our prayers “right now!”

But sometimes God is orchestrating something immeasurable more than we could ever ask or imagine. Consider Lazarus:

Read John 11:17-43. While this is a longer passage, don't let that deter you. As you read, notice what both Martha (11:21-22) and Mary (11:32) wanted from Jesus.

To consider:

Have you ever felt the same way about a situation? In hindsight, can you see how God had so much more in mind?

Two reasons for Jesus' delay surface from the reading: Jn. 11:4, 40 and 11:14, 42. The first is to reveal the glory of God; the second to help the people believe Jesus is the Son of God. Sometimes God makes us wait because He wants to reveal His goodness and power in ways that stretch our conceptions (or misconceptions) of Him. He wants to stretch our faith in Him and cause us to see Him as truly the One whom God sent (v. 42).

If your motivations are pure, your relationship with God and others is in order, consider if maybe God wants to do so much more in your life. Sometimes God says "not yet" and in those times, persist in your prayer.

Other reading:

John 9:1-5 – the man blind from birth was healed to display the glory of God. Sometimes God wants to include others in the blessing of our prayers.

1 Peter 4:12-13 – our present difficulties will only bring greater joy when Christ is revealed at His return. Sometimes God wants to remind us of that glorious day – to keep us focused on our future hope - through the trials we suffer now.

Day 6: Review

Look over your notes from the past week. What one or two things did God impress upon you this week?

Home Group Questions: Reaching Up Through Prayer

1. Opening: How have you seen God work this week?
2. One's relationship with God is often reflected in his or her prayer life. A strong relationship with God is usually seen in a strong prayer life. The opposite is true as well. Would you agree? Is that true in your life? How or when have you ever experienced that in your life?
3. Is coming to God more an intellectual, mechanical ritual or a personal, relational encounter with God? When is prayer most relational for you, and how can you keep that going?
4. Has there been a time in your life when God has said "no", "grow", or "slow" to your prayers? If so, what did God do and what was He teaching you?
5. How is your prayer life? (Optional: How often do you pray for one another in the group?)

As you go into your prayer time, consider the following questions:

- How have you struggled this week?
- How can the others in the group help you?