



# What Are We Doing Here?

*Week 3: Help, Thanks*

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This is our third week of exploring prayer during this season of Lent. The first week, we started with the assumption that maybe we don't really know or understand just what exactly is happening when we pray. We admitted that there is complexity and nuance in our understanding of prayer, the specific words we pray, when we pray, and how we pray. Then we started building back our understanding of prayer by using our most famous model—the one Jesus taught—the Lord's Prayer.

Last week, we explored what it looks like to have honest conversations with God. Life is full of ups and downs. God knows that. Jesus experienced that. Why, then, should we pray with watered down words? The experiences of the human condition cause us to express ourselves with a wide range of emotions. These are captured so well in the Psalms. They are our models for dialog with God. From the depths of despair, to the mindless mundane, and even the heights of our joy. God wants it all because God is in all those places. God can handle our doubts, fears, failures, excitement, and anger. So take those emotions, those charged words, and lift them up in prayer as we go through life in constant conversation with God.

Today we are going to look at the words we direct towards God on our own behalf. Our begging, bartering, pleading prayers for God to help us or deliver us or provide miracles to sustain us. Some of them can feel a little selfish, a

lot lazy, and a bit sacrilegious, but we say them quite often. There's no avoiding it. We all say these prayers. Some come from desperate situations of our own making. Others come at the dead-ends of life, and we can't see anything else except this one thing directly in front of us. But maybe when we say these prayers, we can go further. We can pair our requests with a wider perspective.

So what do these prayers sound like? I'm slightly embarrassed to admit this, but I'm sure you will relate. I remember one late night in college I was studying for a test. What class was it? I have no recollection. I don't even remember the outcome of the exam. I just remember the night before reading textbooks and going over notes in a desperate last-ditch effort to catch up on a month's worth of not paying attention in class. And my mind started to wander. I needed to get a decent grade on the test to keep a decent grade in the class, so I turned to God in prayer. A desperate hail mary in my hour of need. Of course I don't remember the exact words I used, but, in effect, it sounded like this.

*God, I know I didn't try very hard during this last unit, but I need your help. Those days I spent playing disc golf could've been more wisely spent. That is true. And those nights playing Super Smash Brothers with my roommates happened too often. I see that now. Buuuut... if you could grant me a good grade on the test tomorrow, I'd really appreciate it. I'll try harder during the next month, I promise. I just need this one thing. Amen.*

There's always a very big BUUUUT in these kinds of prayers. Somehow I bartered with God to overlook my chronic procrastination and deliver me a passing grade. Like I could gloss over my shortcomings, my responsibilities, and time mismanagement for the sake of God's dutiful servant, 20-year-old Brian. And the finishing touch to this moment of self-unawareness was I then proceeded to convince myself that a better use of time would be to get a good night's rest rather than continue studying. I suppose if you are going to ask for a ridiculous miracle, you might as well give it your all.

There are lots of prayers like these that we say everyday. When we're running late, we pray for green lights only. When we are at the DMV, we pray for people to have all their paperwork ready. During sporting events featuring our favorite teams, we pray for victory in the face of our rivals, holding out hope that there are more faithful on our side praying than there are for the competing team. These are not the type of honest prayers the psalmist means when it was written:

**Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.**

**- Psalms 37:4**

I'll be honest, I've prayed really hard during Mizzou games, Chiefs football, and Royals baseball. To win those games was the absolute desire of my heart at that exact moment in time. Sometimes my teams won, and sometimes they lost, regardless of how much delight I was taking in the LORD.

But prayer is not a bartering system or some sort of transaction. There is no quid pro quo with God. *Dear God, please let my team win this game. If you do that, I will pray everyday this week and start going to church every Sunday.*

The opposite of these superficial, frivolous prayers, are the ones that are truly near and dear to us. Those prayers we say, not when we are angry or upset with God or the world, but when our hearts truly yearn for something. Those prayers that come from the core of our being. Honest requests that come with earnest intentions.

They are often very particular requests. Prayers for good results from medical tests that weigh heavy on our minds. Prayers for relief from financial stress or workplace anxiety. Prayers for direction or hope when we feel lost and alone. The specificity of these prayers is born out of a deep desire for help, or an outcome that we can't quite imagine from our current circumstances. I have prayed these prayers, and part of me felt like I was being too direct. My mind could only focus on one distinct problem I was

facing, sometimes forgetting that there were people in the rest of the world who had problems much larger than mine. But this was *my* problem, and at that point it was taking up my entire world. These types of prayers are welcomed as we talk to God, too. Specific, unique, and individual prayers that take up an outsized amount of our headspace. Jesus prayed these prayers and recommended them to us as well.

Two weeks ago, we talked about the Lord's Prayer from the Sermon on the Mount. The centrality of communing with God in prayer is one of the key things for people who yearn to live in the Kingdom of God. And near the end of the sermon, Jesus gives some practical advice about our prayers.

**Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?**

**- Matthew 7:7-11 MSG**

Does that mean God will answer our prayers? Does God provide an answer to everyone's prayers? Some people say God answers all prayers, it's just not always the answer you were looking for. It could be *yes*, it could be *no*, it could be *maybe later*. All of those are answers, I suppose, but sometimes when we don't get any response, it just feels like God is not there, or at least not listening.

It's comforting to know we are in good company when we don't get all our prayers answered. Two famous examples of this come from two of the most prominent figures in the New Testament—Paul and Jesus. The scriptures capture both of these men pleading for something specific, something

weighing on their minds. The answers they were wanting, hoping for, never materialized. Paul shares his account in 2 Corinthians.

**So I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness."**

**- 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 MSG**

And the Son of God himself prayed for deliverance before his crucifixion from a place of fear and trembling.

**Then Jesus went with them to a garden called Gethsemane and told his disciples, "Stay here while I go over there and pray." Taking along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he plunged into an agonizing sorrow. Then he said, "This sorrow is crushing my life out. Stay here and keep vigil with me." Going a little ahead, he fell on his face, praying, "My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But please, not what I want. You, what do you want?"**

**- Matthew 26:36-38 MSG**

If Paul and Jesus didn't get all their prayers answered, who am I to think all of mine will get answered? That doesn't mean we quit praying though. Perhaps it means the act of praying for ourselves, and the answers we are searching for, are different than we imagine. This is hard to accept. It's hard because we believe God can do anything. We read that God does the impossible. So we want the impossible to happen to us. It doesn't help that Jesus says things like this:

**Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but**

**even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."**

**- Matthew 21:21-22**

If we read that passage literally, one could think that anything can and will happen, no matter the laws of physics or time continuums. And in fact, if the answer you are praying for doesn't materialize, it just means you don't have faith, or at least enough faith, to cause a miracle. But this is hyperbolic speech from Jesus. We aren't Jedi's moving mountains around with our minds. We are people walking through life praying to God for help.

William Barclay offers three ways to understand what Jesus is trying to impart to the disciples, and us today, in this passage:

**1. Prayer offers us the ability to do.**

Prayer is not the easy way out. It's not convincing God to do something for us. Prayer is power. It is the ability to tackle the mountains of life with the help of God. This goes back to the ancient Benedictine monastic idea of *ora et labora*. Pray and work. We don't just pray and stand still.

**2. Prayer offers us the ability to accept and transform.**

Our situations aren't always solved and our questions aren't always answered. Life still moves on. Through prayer, God offers us the ability to accept that truth and be changed. This is the example of Paul and Jesus. They both concluded their thoughts with healthier perspectives. Paul realized God's grace was sufficient and God's power was made clear in his weakness. And Jesus referenced his own prayer from the Sermon on the Mount—not my will, but yours be done.

**3. Prayer offers us the ability to endure.**

Part of the human condition is to feel like things can be too much for us to bear. Whether something tragic has happened or something is approaching with grim inevitability. **Prayer does not remove the tragedy; it does not give us escape from the situation; it does not give us exemption from the task; but it does make us able to bear the unbearable, to face the unfaceable, to pass the breaking point and not to break.**

I say all this while still holding fast to the belief that miracles happen. I hope and pray that miracles can and will happen. But I don't expect miracles to be the ordinary way God works in the world. I believe that humans, you and me, are God's most common way of working in the day-to-day.

In the movie *Evan Almighty*, there's a great scene where God, played by Morgan Freeman, has a conversation with a woman who is struggling with her life and marriage. She's wondering why her prayers have been unanswered. God says to her, "Let me ask you something: If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience, or does he give them the opportunity to be patient? If they prayed for courage, does God give them courage, or does he give them opportunities to be courageous? If someone prayed for family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm, fuzzy feelings, or does he give them opportunities to love each other?"

Author Anne Lamott offers a simple prayer that may help change our perspectives about asking God for things. Rather than seeing our times of prayer as a transactional request, we can see our prayers as an opportunity to partner with God in transformation. It's actually two prayers, but each is just one word—"Help" and "Thanks."

If we learn to say these two prayers, perhaps our understanding of God can shift. We won't hear silence. We will see opportunities. We won't be stuck in a rut. We will think creatively about how to partner with God or other people to

accomplish God's will. With God's help, those impossible things in our life become possible.

And when we say thanks, we remember to look back on the times in our lives when prayers have been answered. We affirm our gratefulness for each holy breath we take, while not fully knowing where our life's path will lead. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "I am willing to thank God for my life even before I know how it turns out."

Linking these prayers—*Help* and *Thanks*—helps develop a healthier prayer life than the this-for-that mentality. It creates the environment for me to see my part in joining with God to change this world. And as these simple words and simple prayers become routine, we just might see how active God really is. How often God hears us, but the answers—or rather, the people—aren't what we expected.

So if you are wondering why God isn't answering your prayers or making your life better, try changing your prayers. Start with *Help* and *Thanks*. It might just change your perspective. Because the God we believe in and proclaim is the God who is in all things and works through all things. And you are one of those instruments that help to accomplish God's plans. May we all be more and more aware of opportunities to serve.

Hear these words from James 1:5-6, not as promises for some specific answer, but as a partnership in making heaven on earth. "If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be looked down on when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought."

And as you take those words in, keep your eyes and ears open. You just might have a part in answering prayer.