

# My Tumultuous Relationship with Prayer

## Prayer, Week 1

### I. Intro

- A. I have a bit of a tumultuous relationship with prayer
- B. I am willing to bet that many of you do as well
- C. Prayer is how we talk to God, and this is true enough and simple
- D. But the reality of life has a way of making you jaded, calloused
  - 1. Why does God answer some prayers and not others?
  - 2. Why bother to pray if God is just going to do whatever he wants anyway?
  - 3. What do our prayers even do?
  - 4. How do you learn to trust God when deep down he's the one that you blame for what happened?
  - 5. Does God answer bad prayers, flippant prayers, off the cuff requests?
- E. If you've ever thought about these things, you are not alone. Consider Matthew 11:2-6 as just one example
  - 1. *[2] Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples [3] and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" [4] And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: [5] the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. [6] And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*
  - 2. Here is John, the cousin of Jesus, the forerunner of the kingdom
  - 3. And he is filled with doubts
    - a) Jesus is out performing miracles
    - b) John is in prison
    - c) John lived a life of self-denial, eating locusts and honey; he did "all the right things" and HE is in prison
    - d) Jesus is accused of being a drunk who hangs out with prostitutes, but he's not in prison (yet)
    - e) John wonders: Did I get it wrong? Is he NOT the one? If he's the savior, why am I still here?
  - 4. It's not a leap to realize John feels hurt. He needs a comforting word from Christ, reassurance that he is doing the right thing. What does Jesus say:
    - a) The blind receive what they've been waiting for, John
    - b) The lame receive what they've been waiting for, John
    - c) The lepers and deaf do as well, John
    - d) Even the dead are raise. They too receive what their loved ones hope for, my cousin
    - e) But as for you? Blessed are those who are not offended by me
      - (1) Jesus gives John a mild rebuke;

(2) John, you are a key part of Jesus' plan, but it is HIS plan; not yours

- f) Well, John is beheaded in prison never seeing Jesus come to his full revelation as the messiah
- 5. Doesn't seem fair. Doesn't seem right. What about all John's prayers? I mean if Jesus won't answer John the Baptist's prayers for release, what about me?
- 6. The Scriptures aren't always easy; they aren't shallow; they are raw and real.
  - a) God isn't a genie. He isn't a formula.
  - b) Here is a hard reality:
  - c) Your wounds, my wounds - they are not unique
  - d) Do you not think that there were parents who carried their sick children to be healed by Jesus only to have missed his departure by an hour or two?
  - e) But the wounds and doubts that we receive shape us.
    - (1) Submitted to Christ's, they can mold us positively
    - (2) Divorced from his reign, they can destroy us w/ lies

II. So, what's my story? What are my wounds?

- A. High School BF / TCNJ together
- B. Freshmen year I surrendered to Jesus
- C. I grew in leaps and bounds, kept praying for Scott
- D. Scott was an Agnostic, Physics major, skeptical yet curious
- E. I prayed, witnessed, prayed, and witnessed
- F. He was hesitantly curious, but reserved - sneaking out at end
- G. Brought him to a concert / responded to invitation (kind of)
- H. Following weeks I prayed and prayed for him to approach me
- I. First week of December, I had a conversation w/ a friend...
- J. I lay in bed and asked God, "Have him talk to me or remove this friendship from my life. It's an idol."
- K. Next day was Sunday. I came back from church and invited Scott to grab some food with us. He said his head hurt
- L. I came back and he was still complaining about his head. He felt like he was going to throw up but he could barely move so I dragged him into the bathroom
- M. As he started to black out, he told me he was scared
- N. I said to Scott, "Scott, you better know where you are going if you're serious." / half in frustration and half in compassion
- O. Scott passed out and I ran to get help
- P. In the ambulance, Scott flatlined
- Q. They resuscitated him and got him stable enough
- R. He had a severe brain aneurysm. They were able to repair it, but they didn't know what would happen
  - 1. He could be a vegetable
  - 2. He could lose the ability to play guitar

3. Nobody knew
- S. So we prayed. We had prayer meetings every night for 30 minutes, for an hour
- T. After a few days, I got a phone call from Scott's mom: while we were praying Scott woke up!
  1. It was a miracle from God. We all were rejoicing
  2. Now we were on to praying about his fine motor skills - in the clear!
- U. The next day Scott came down with bacterial meningitis in the hospital
  1. He was brain dead in hours
- V. The next few months were intense.
  1. Gina and I had been dating for 2 weeks at the time of Scott's death. That put our relationship immediately into serious mode
  2. The whole campus was hurting
    - a) My friends. His friends. His family. My family.
  3. I felt like a zombie, going through the motions
- W. And then it hit me. One day I realized it.
  1. Scott was dead because of me.
  2. I prayed that God would take him out of my life b/c he was a distraction, and God had answered my prayers - by killing him
    - a) *NOTE: I am not saying this is true. I now know that God doesn't answer flippant prayers. I am saying this is what I believed at the time, but couldn't tell anyone.*
  3. I found myself slipping into a mentality that "God's goal is my growth, to make me like Christ (which is true) and he will do whatever is necessary to get me there (even if it is with absolute pain and suffering)."
    - a) Is that true? Maybe? Yes? No?
  4. Scott's death began to rewrite my theology, shaping it around an experience that I lacked the Biblical knowledge to understand
    - a) And I had no one to walk beside me
    - b) No pastor who reached out
    - c) No disciple-maker who consistently engaged beyond, "How are you doing, Bill?"
    - d) I had a sympathetic girlfriend, who was trying to figure it out with me the best she could (praise God)
- X. Something else happened.
  1. It was almost three years later when I realized it. I was no longer praying.
  2. Yes, I prayed at prayer meetings, and at church
  3. But I no longer had a prayer relationship with God
  4. I had become entirely **fatalistic** - if God is going to do whatever he wants to do, if my prayers do not change things, why pray at all?
  5. In a strange way, this made me grow in my trust b/c I "received" whatever happened in life.
    - a) I knew Jesus was the greater portion
    - b) I knew the gospel was my only hope; no where else to turn
  6. But was I understanding the goodness of God? No.

7. Instead, I was becoming religious
  - a) Doing the right things. Saying the right things. Dutiful. Disciplined.
  - b) But inside it's like I was dead.
- Y. After God brought these realities to my attention, I began a massive journey to rediscover God and determine who he was
  1. Not on the basis of my experiences
  2. Not on the basis of a textbook from seminary (of which I was now in)
  3. But on the basis of the Word of God
- Z. In those early days, often the only way I could pray was to listen to music
  1. I remember driving home the 120 miles from seminary and listening to certain songs on repeat for 2 hours
- AA. Slowly, I rebuilt my intimacy with God, but it was difficult - and still is work
  1. Scott died December 10, 2001, and it destroyed my prayer life... as the death of dreams and loved ones can do
  2. And friends, this was only the first of many, many life-altering, gut-wrenching scenarios from being branded a traitor by our organization when we left the mission field for leaving early to being wounded by friends most dear as a young pastor
  3. Every wound was like a test. I gave you my <insert>, God
  4. And it felt like almost every time whatever I gave God was destroyed
  5. And what Scott's death taught me was that in those moments of hardship you hit a crossroads with how you are going to respond
- III. So, when I tell you that I understand your tumultuous relationship with prayer... I know what I am talking about.
  - A. But I am here to warn you. This world will beat you up and spit you out, and if you are not careful the trials and temptations of this life will plunder your joy and your intimacy with God.
  - B. So I summarize by warning you of **Three Enemies of Intimacy w/ God**
    1. Not dealing with wounds that were allowed by God
      - a) Your heart grows calloused...
      - b) Consider the Cross: The wounds of our savior were allowed by God, but given b/c of sinful man
    2. Fatalism from not seeing God give you what you want
      - a) You stop caring and just turn God into a calculated machine, an image of YOUR frozen heart...
      - b) Consider the Cross: Jesus is not fatalistic in his firm gaze towards the crucifixion, but he is surrendered to it despite his own will
    3. Prayerlessness from stuffing these things down rather than dealing with them
      - a) You give in to the despondent place of prayerlessness, having abandoned hope that your Creator is truly GOOD & POWERFUL
        - (1) B/C in pain we always doubt one of those...
      - b) Consider the Cross: The pain and suffering doesn't drive Jesus away from prayer, but to it - even to his final breath of surrender

### C. Solution

1. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you
2. But the hardest part is... what if God's the one that you blame?
3. Draw near. Be honest. Be real. Be raw. Ask to be changed. Be ready to listen and to hear. Be patient in the process.
4. Realize that Jesus was separated from his Father on that cross that you might be brought near
5. Now, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (Heb 10:22)

### IV. Conclusion

#### A. Summary: Prayer is about intimacy.

1. The enemy will try every tactic (as predictable as they may be) to attack your intimacy with God
  - a) He will wound your heart
  - b) He will twist those wounds into unbelief
  - c) He will make you think your prayers don't matter and the Word isn't helpful
2. And your intimacy will slip into familiarity and then, over time, you will become (with God) like an old roommate.
3. Eventually you may just tolerate him, even resent him
4. But you were made for intimacy with your Creator, and that's what prayerlessness misses more than anything else

#### B. Series: This is the first sermon in a series about prayer and intimacy with God

1. My plan is to look at vignettes of Jesus' life to teach us rich truths about prayer, intimacy, and how to hear from the Lord
2. I want to do my best to answer your toughest questions and so I ask you to submit them to me via text, email, anonymous note in the offering box

#### C. You: Imagine the life of joy that you could experience if you could learn to surrender these hurts to the Lord

1. Imagine if fatalism could be replaced with hope; despondence with joy; an unhealthy view of God to one that is beautiful and accurate

#### D. This is what awaits God's people if we would only work through our wounds instead of ignoring them

1. We worship the wounded God. He is wounded too. We come to him with our wounds. He can handle it
2. He wants us to learn to pray despite our tumultuous past

#### E. So this is what we ask God, "Lord, teach us to pray."