“The Trickiness of Prayer”

Romans 8:26-39

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I confess I get a bit frustrated when reading Paul’s letters to these churches. I don’t really like listening in to one side of the conversation. It’s like hearing someone talk on the phone but not knowing what the person on the other end of the line is saying. My mom and I experienced this is a store just the other day. A woman talking very loudly, grabbing my curiosity. I wondered what the other person was saying and feeling. In these letters from Paul, we only catch one side of the story. We don’t get the church’s side of this correspondence, so we don’t know what their question was exactly. We don’t get to hear the full conversation. It is unclear what the Roman church had contacted Paul about, exactly.

But we get clues. Paul’s letter alludes to what the church in Rome was struggling with. And what they asked Paul for help with. This letter to the Romans has addressed a plethora of topics. Law vs. grace. Salvation. Justification. Paul gracefully broaches each topic, trying to sooth the worried minds of the Roman Christians.

No doubt one of their concerns was over the matter of prayer. What is it? They wondered. How do we do it? Will God really listen to us? These early Christians didn’t have shelves full of theological books to help them sort this out. They only have their experience to go on. For the Jewish converts, they look to their tradition. They looked to how their ancestors prayed throughout history. There are striking moments in the Old Testament when we see God’s people praying.

There’s the barren woman Hannah, sitting silently but with her lips moving, praying that God will bless her with a child. Promising to return that child to God for service.[[1]](#footnote-1) To her husband she appeared intoxicated, but her heart was in tune with God.

The prophet Jeremiah, cries out to God: “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!”[[2]](#footnote-2) Jeremiah pleads for the restoration of Israel. That they may be taken out of exile and allowed to return home.

Another prophet, Daniel, offers confession on behalf of his people. Fasting and holding vigil, crying out to God saying “we have rebelled, O God. We have lived in shame and we seek forgiveness.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

These are just a few of the great prayers, the Jewish people can turn to for inspiration. But now they wonder if their prayers should be different, now that they follow Christ.

And for the Gentile converts. Those who may have some sort of religious background, but not likely. They are at a complete loss for how to pray. Their pagan influences didn’t offer instruction on prayer.

Both groups struggle with this spiritual practice.

Whether we come from a religious upbringing, or are new to the faith, prayer can be tricky. It can be hard to know how to pray. How does this mysterious communication work? What are the right words? Should we kneel? Should we close our eyes? Is there some way that we can make our prayers better received by God?

Growing up, I wrestled with these questions. Anytime I encountered a different method of prayer, I was intrigued.

Like when I would spend the night at my best friend’s house. At age 8, I was brave enough to spend the night away from home. That is until I heard their bedtime prayer and was launched into a panic over my own mortality.

She and her mom would bow their heads and say together: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” The first time I heard this, my eyes widened in fear. If I die before I wake? Is that a thing that can happen, my childish mind wondered. It had never occurred to me that I might not wake up from a night of sleep. Rather than offer comfort, their prayer scared me!

When my friend gave in to sleep, I still lay there awake, with this newfound anxiety flooding back in. I’d never heard a prayer about death before. It had my mind aflutter. I willed myself not to fall asleep, suddenly afraid of death. What should have been a precious prayer shared between my friend and her mother, turned into a nightmare inducing, death-fearing phase for me. For a small portion of my childhood, I wondered if my prayers should focus on death more than I was accustomed to. I was unsure of how my prayers should go.

In college, I was exposed a variety of Christian traditions. Like most freshman, I was ready to experience new things. My Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship group lent itself well for this hope. During my dip in the Evangelical pool, I experienced a variety of prayer styles. One time we danced around the room as music played, in the fashion of King David. Another time we sat in a circle praying out loud at once, creating a cacophonous rupture in the room. Everyone loudly lifting up their voices in one weird cloud of prayers.

I walked away from these experiences, wondering if my heart should be more stirred by them. Should I be praying in these ways more often even though they seem so strange to me? Even though they didn’t make me feel connected to God? Are they the correct way to pray? My young adult mind was unsure. So I turned to my local Christian bookstore for insight.

There seems to be endless resources from so called “experts” on how to pray. Scores of books have been written on the matter. Some of them are quite specific. They read like Ikea furniture assembly instructions. Little diagrams showing the correct position. Offering prompts to get your words to flow.

Yet, according to Paul, all of these resources and experts seem to be missing the point.

In response to the Roman Church’s inquiry on prayer, Paul says, “well, we don’t know how to pray as we ought to.” Even Paul admits, he doesn’t know how to pray. He himself can’t even find the right words. Limited by the human condition, he and the early Christians and all of us can’t really pray properly. There’s no such thing as a person who is fluent in the language of prayer. It is impossible for us lowly creatures to speak to God in a direct way. It just doesn’t work.

If there were a competition for excellent praying, no one would be named champion. We, on our own, just aren’t capable of it. We’re too broken. We’re too far removed from God.

We might be disheartened by this notion. We might just give up, or use it as an excuse not to attempt to pray.

But Paul won’t let us off the hook that easily. He says, yes, it is impossible for us pray properly. But that’s where the Holy Spirit enters in. Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. That the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. [[4]](#footnote-4)

It seems to me, that the Spirit is the third voice in the crying out we talked about last week. Paul spoke about creation groaning for restoration, and we the created ones crying out as well. Here Paul brings in the Holy Spirit and declares that she is the third voice in this three part harmony. That the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf and stands in the gap between us and God.

When we can’t find the words to speak to God, we call on the Holy Spirit for help. She lets out a sigh deeper than words can express.

Perhaps prayer isn’t so much about the words we say. After all, Psalm 139 reminds us that even before the words are on our tongues, God already hears us.[[5]](#footnote-5) God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows our thoughts from afar. We don’t even need to vocalize them in order to be heard.

Perhaps prayer is not about the words, rather it is about being open to God’s presence in the Spirit. Perhaps all we have to do when trying to pray is invite the Spirit along and revel in her presence.

Thomas Merton once wrote that “Prayer is not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart – it is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration. Good, meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self over to God.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Merton suggests that prayer is an act of laying our lives in God’s hands and trusting in our Lord’s presence.

This opens up prayer in new and creative ways. If words aren’t necessary, what if we saw prayer through a different lens? How about gardening? Getting our hands in the soil and helping foster new life. Using our work in the earth as prayer. Connecting to God through plants and soil.

What if we used exercise as prayer? Feel the movement of our bodies as we walk or swim or bike. Giving thanks for our physical creation. I recall a quote from the movie *Chariots of Fire*, when one runner declared that when he runs, he feels God’s pleasure. Surely prayer can work through physical activity.

What if we understood conversation with others as prayer? As we lovingly listen to our neighbor speak and hear their words, might the Holy Spirit be at work in that moment of care for one another? Have you ever experienced a moment when the person you were talking to was completely focused on what you were saying? Like they made you feel as though you were the only person in the world? That connection between us as humans can be a mode of prayer as God works through our relationships.

Maybe prayer isn’t so tricky. Maybe it will get easier if we try to strip away our preconceived notions of it. Stop trying to find just the right words that will make God listen. Maybe if we just try to be open to God’s presence in all that we do. Striving to be fully alert to the task or the person in front of us. Being mindful of the way that God and the Holy Spirit are at work. Prayer will just happen.

Maybe prayer is something that does just happen. Without us having to do anything? Simply acknowledging that God in our midst. Recognizing that the Holy Spirit bridges that widened gap between us and God.

Thanks to that Spirit, nothing, not death or life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else, even our lack of words in prayer, can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! Let us pray…

1. 1 Samuel 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jeremiah 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Daniel 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Romans 8:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Psalm 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Merton, Thomas. ***Thoughts In Solitude***.  Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1993.  (originally published 1958). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)