

The Struggle of Prayer



Prayer

INTEGRATED BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

The Struggle of Prayer

Overview:

This is not so much a series on struggling **to** pray, as the actual struggle **in** prayer. Many handy hints have been made from the pulpit over the years about how to make prayer easier, how to arrange prayer points, best times of the day or settings to pray. In Colossians, Paul commends Apaporis for *wrestling in prayer* for that church. Overwhelmingly, the Bible, both New and Old Testaments, present prayer as a struggle, a labour and a wrestling. Each message draws on a mixture of prayers prayed in the Bible as well as teaching on prayer itself in a desire to understand that labour in Biblical prayer. The talks alternate between the personal and private world of prayer and the corporate and public one. This series is not so much about overcoming the inertia to pray as seeing the very real and disciplined struggle of prayer in our Christian discipleship.

Aims:

1. *To acknowledge that overwhelmingly the Bible presents prayer as sheer labour-some thing most of us find hard.*
2. *To learn from the prayers recorded in the Bible.*
3. *To value prayer as a very real cultivation of their relationship with God.*
4. *To examine honestly the difficulties of prayer.*
5. *To acknowledge prayer as active rather than passive ministry.*
6. *To encourage individuals to reduce the gap between their public and private prayer life*

Summary of Accompanying Sermons

Talk 1. The struggle of prayer

(Luke 11:1-11, Colossians 4:10-13 & Matthew 6:5-13)

An overall introduction to the notion of the struggle of prayer. This talk examines how intriguing the disciples found Jesus' prayer life. They desired to be able to prayer like Jesus. It will explore what prayer is and isn't, including some common misunderstandings of prayer. This talk coincides with commissioning Sunday and so it is the perfect opportunity to commission people, both leaders and led, to be people of prayer in the coming year. (This is only for the 5pm Gathering/ 7pm will receive a summarised introduction the following week)

Talk 2. The struggle of prayer over sin

(Hebrews 10:19-25, Psalm 32 & Daniel 9)

Often our own sinful life drives us away from prayer. This message will exhort people to draw near and not stay away from God's throne. It will emphasise the need for regular and consistent confession of sin

I suspect that if people understood the value of prayer in this area, it would decrease the pastoral load of a gathering as people freely talked with God about their struggles, not just other people.

Talk 3. The struggle of payer over evangelism

(Genesis 18:1-5,20-33, Colossians 4:2-6 & Psalm 67)

A daunting privilege is to realise that prayer changes things and, in particular, people. In an age of activism it is easy to think of prayer as the decorative icing on the cake, rather than the substance of evangelism. In this message we will see that prayer is a work of evangelism and dispel the myth that some are pray-ers and others are producers.

Talk 4. The struggle of Prayer in private

(Luke 22:39-46, 2 Kings 20:1-11, Romans 8:22-27)

Unfortunately, in recent times, there is a general paucity of private prayer in the life of evangelicals who can become artful dodgers of the disciplined prayer life. It is easy for us at Trinity to spend 6 hours preparing a Bible Study and 6 seconds in prayer over it. It is one thing to pray with the best of them when surrounded by other Christians. It can be another thing altogether to withdraw and pray in solitude behind a closed door. This message is aimed at getting a better balance between our public and private prayer world.

Talk 5. The struggle of prayer for God's people

(Ephesians 1: 11-23, 3:14-21)

In this talk we examine the priorities Paul the apostle had in his prayers for God's church. It is astounding to see how Paul's prayers lift us beyond what is in front of our face to greater petitions. We will think through how this could shape the content of our prayers when praying for our gathering, other Christians and ourselves.

Note for Bible Study leaders:

It is hard not to prepare a series of talks on prayer without having your own prayer life radically disturbed. In fact, in preparing these talks and Bible studies I am discovering afresh what it means to strive in prayer. This series lends itself to hearing from people about how they pray and particularly how God has been at work as a result of prayer. You will need to consciously look out for this happening in your home group and draw attention to it in some way each week. Obviously your prayer time as a group needs some careful investment over this series so you don't end up spending 2 hours in Bible study and 2 minutes in prayer. That will send all the wrong messages about prayer to your group. A confession would work well for Bible Study 2 on the struggle in prayer over sin. Praise and thanksgiving would be appropriate in the last study in Ephesians. Keep thinking about how your group can talk more about their prayer lives together please learn how to labour in prayer yourself as you prepare each week and be encouraged at what God may do with your group...to quote the Psalmist:

In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation!" Psalm 5:3

Study! **The struggle of prayer**

Appetisers:

1. In what particular ways do you find prayer difficult?

2. Read the following statements. Which, if any, resonate with the state of your own prayer life?
 - *I don't seem to get anywhere when I pray. I am constantly distracted, my thoughts wander and my heart does not seem to be in it....”*
 - *Sometimes when I get myself into a sinful mess the last thing I want to do is pray... it would be so hypocritical!*
 - *It all seems rather pointless telling God about things or asking Him to change things when he knows it anyway.*
 - *There has to be something more to prayer than presenting God with glorified shopping lists. How can prayer develop my relationship with God?*
 - *I know prayer is important but I seem to be able to get on without it. No great disasters have happened because I've missed my prayers.*

Main Course:

3. Glance through chapters 1-10 of Luke's gospel noting the number of times and occasions that speak of Jesus' prayer life. What do you discover about Jesus' prayer life?

4. Read Luke 11:1 and discuss together the possible motivations that prompted the disciple's request to be taught how to pray. Who taught you how to pray?

5. Using your own words and not the passage, summarise the content of prayer in v 2-4. Compare this with the content that dominates your own prayers.

6. Now read the story Jesus tells in v 5-8. Why do you think boldness is an important part of dialogue with God? Can you recall examples of this in the prayers of God's people in scripture?

7. Read v 9-10. How does this help us to understand the nature of persistence in prayer?

8. In v11-13 what, according to Jesus, is the fundamental problem in prayer when it comes to our perceptions of God?

9. In Luke 18, Jesus reminds the disciples to always pray and not give up. What stops you praying? How can you develop more of a striving in your own prayer life?

Doggy bag:

10. Try to give a pastoral response to the following statement:
I know prayer is important but I seem to be able to get on without it. No great disasters have happened because I've missed my prayers.

Study2 **The struggle of prayer over sin**

Appetisers:

1. Confess your sins together in the words of a corporate confession. (Maybe one person could prepare this for others to say)

Main Course:

Daniel 9:1-19

2. Read Daniel 9:1-19 Track where this prayer begins and where it finishes. Try and identify the structure of this prayer.
3. Look closely again at v2. What is the catalyst for Daniel to launch into prayer?
4. Like so many prayers of the Bible, this one is based on the revelation of God in history. How is Daniel's knowledge of God grounded in how God has revealed himself in the past?

5. Discuss this statement:
To truly confess our sins, we need first to fully appreciate what God is like and then secondly fully appreciate what we are like. Only when we place the two side by side will we admit our need for a holy God.

6. What indications are given that Daniel identifies with the sins of his people? What hinders you from praying ...“Lord forgive us. Have mercy on us.”?

7. On what basis does Daniel appeal to God to change things in his final petitions of v 17-19?

Hebrews 10:19-25

8. In what situations do you exude confidence? What can crush your confidence?

9. Read Hebrews 10: 19-25. We enter into an argument that has been building through chapters 7-10. The turning point begins with the phrase ‘therefore’. On what basis do we have confidence to draw near to God?

10. What things affect your approach or access to God in prayer? What 2 things do we have according to the writer in v19-21.

11. Talk through how you would pastorally apply this passage (Hebrews 10) for someone who is either racked by guilt from past sins, or is denying their sins by trading on their good deeds? How is confession healthy for both?

12. What usually motivates you to pray? What have you learned today that may change that motivation?

Doggy bag:

13. Think of something you are currently praying about. How could you appeal to God's revealed character in history to sharpen your own prayers?

14. Try to give a pastoral response to the following statement:
Sometimes when I get myself into a sinful mess the last thing I want to do is prayer...it would be so hypocritical.

Study 3 **The struggle of prayer over evangelism**

Appetisers:

1. Read 2 Peter 3:9 & Ephesians 6:19-20. Use this as a catalyst for an opening prayer time to begin the study.

Main Course:

2. From reading Gen 18: 16-33, describe the relationship that exists between Abraham and God
3. What we pray about usually reflects our motives for praying. From these verses, what do you think Abraham is most concerned about?
4. In verses 16-17 God appears to initiate a conversation with Abraham and in verse 33 he ends it. How is this different to your own prayer experience?
5. From this passage, what are the distinctive characteristics of a person interceding in prayer?
6. God does not appear to be angry with Abraham's pushing of the boundaries in this holy dialogue. How might this influence the way we could pray?

7. God still went on to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gen 19). What do you think Abraham learned about God and about himself?

8. In what way did Abraham wrestle in prayer with God over the fate of Sodom? How could your prayers for non-Christians become more of a labour?

Doggy bag:

9. Try to give a pastoral response to the following statement:
There is so much to be done. It all seems rather pointless telling God about it or asking Him to change people. He knows the elect anyway, doesn't he?

10. In what way could your praying for not-yet Christian friends be different as a result of this study?

Study 4 The struggle of prayer in private

Appetisers:

1. If you had to picture your present prayer life as one of the four seasons, what would it be? Why?

Main Course:

Luke 22:39-46

Jesus adopted the garden of Gethsemane as his place of prayer. It was a shady retreat on the top of Mt Olivet. Luke tells us in 21:37 that each day Jesus was teaching in the temple and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives. In chapter 22 on this particular night it became not a garden of rest, but of great agony and struggle.

2. Read through this passage in v 39-46. What are the indicators that this night is charged with tension?

The word for agony here is used only once in the New Testament and signifies an athlete's state of mind before he begins a harrowing contest. Try and describe in your own words the nature of this struggle in prayer? Have you ever found yourself praying like this?

3. Look closely at Jesus' words that were overheard by his disciples as they drifted in and out of sleep. V42. Although a short prayer, it was no doubt murmured, repeated and agonised over through the hours of that night. What can you learn about prayer from that prayer?

4. What is the cup Jesus refers to? See Ps 75:8, Ezekiel 32:32, Jeremiah 25:15

5. How is the prayer in the garden linked to the prayer on the cross...see Matt27:46?

6. Christ struggled over the prospect of being utterly cut off from his Father by taking on himself human sin. In what ways do we see clearly his humanity and his divinity?

7. We will never have to go through the struggle of Gethsemane because Christ has done this for us. But reflect on points in your own life where prayer has been both a lonely and an isolating experience. How does Christ's prayer serve as an encouragement?

Romans 8:22-27

8. Christian prayer has its basis in understanding how the Trinity works in helping us to pray. Briefly read Rom 8: 15/16 & Mark 14:35/36 What are some of the radical implications of addressing God as 'daddy' in our prayers?

9. Read Romans 8: 33-34. What does this tell us about Christ the Son's role in our praying?

10. Discuss this quote of John Calvin:
"He (Jesus Christ) is our mouth through which we speak to the Father; he is our eye through which we see the Father; he is our right hand through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless he intercedes there is no intercourse with God either for us or for all saints"

11. Read through Romans 8: 26-28 and list all the ways in which the Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers.

12. Consider the context of the encouragement found in Romans 8:26-28 (i.e. Romans 8:18ff - living in a world waiting to be fully redeemed). How do these verses give you confidence when praying on your own?

Doggy bag:

13. Discuss this statement:

If people were prepared to lay before God what is going on in their lives as readily as they might to a minister or counsellor we may actually lower the pastoral load for a congregation as they discover the intimacy of their prayer life.

14. Try to give a pastoral response to the following statement:

"I don't seem to get anywhere when I pray. I am constantly distracted, my thoughts wander and my heart does not seem to be in it...."

Study 5 **The struggle of prayer for God's people**

Appetisers:

1. Share with the group someone whom you have known to be a person of prayer. How have they influenced the way you pray?

2. How do you decide what to pray for another person?

Main Course:

3. Read Ephesians 1:15-23 & 3:14-21. What seems to be Paul's motive in praying for those to whom he is writing?

4. Ephesians 1: 15-23 refers back to 1:3-14, (thus the expression 'for this reason' in v 15). Look briefly at that section to see what it tells you about the source of Paul's prayer requests.

5. Look closely at v17-19. Describe the effects that you think Paul's prayers might have brought about in the lives of believers? If Paul had been praying for non-Christians, in what ways would the prayer be different?

6. Underline the parts of these prayers, which show Paul clearly longed for these Christians to grow in their relationship with God

7. In Ephesians 3: 17-19, Paul prays 'big picture prayers' for people to grasp God's love. Think for a moment about someone you are praying for. How could praying this 'big picture prayer' make a world of difference for them? Be specific.

8. Ephesians 3:20 reminds us of God's power and supremacy. How should our understanding of God's ability to change people and circumstances affect the way we pray?

9. As a group, spend some time praying for each other, or other Christians that you know of, using the central themes of Paul's prayer.

Doggy bag:

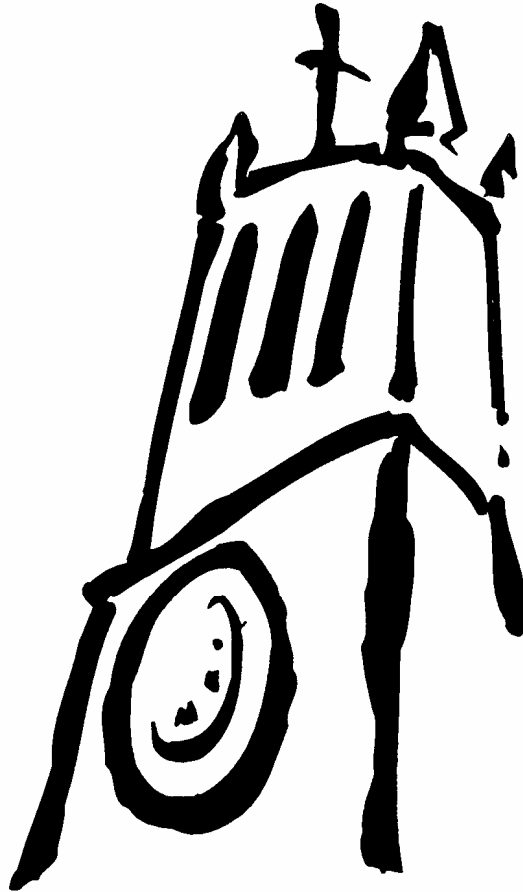
10. What usually motivates you to pray? What have you learned today that may change that motivation?

11. Try to give a pastoral response to the following statement:

There has to be something more to prayer than presenting God with glorified shopping lists. How can prayer develop my relationship with God?

It is important that if God has shown you an area where your prayer life needs to change that you tell Him and your group what those changes might be. Keep each other accountable for this by revisiting the subject briefly in a month's time.

Notes



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