

In May 2001 journalist Giles Brandeth interviewed South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was said to be a powerful experience for Brandeth because Desmond Tutu was suffering from prostate cancer and there was a real chance this might be the last interview he would ever give. What might Tutu want to talk about? Perhaps the amazing transformation in the politics of his country, and of which he himself had a leading role. No. What Tutu told Brandeth was this: "If this is going to be my last interview, I am glad we are not going to talk about politics. Let us talk about prayer and adoration, about faith, hope and forgiveness." For Tutu these are the things that are the stuff of life.

Did you hear those words? **Faith. Hope. Forgiveness. Love. Prayer. Adoration.** When we get right down to it, Tutu is right. These are the things that are the stuff of life. And because these are the very building blocks of life, we are going to spend some good quality time over the next 20 weeks together digging further into these deeply spiritual realms. The lens in which we are going to look closer is through that of prayer.

Now, before we go too far, we should begin by defining that at the very least prayer can be defined as a conversation with God. As someone once put it "Prayer is simply sitting down and talking with God; you know, like you would talk to your friend." I will add, in another of its simplest forms, because a conversation is not simply a one-way street, prayer is also listening to God. Prayer is just that easy and as we all know too well, prayer is also just that hard.

As human beings, created, chosen, claimed, and cared for by God, we are conditioned to pray. We pray because God made us that way. We pray because God knows what we don't. Isaiah 55 makes that clear as he settles a lot of misunderstanding and mysterious doubt by declaring on behalf of God: "My thoughts are higher than your thoughts and my ways are higher than your ways." God doesn't say this so we can throw up our hands and stop trying. God says this to comfort us and to let us know we have a place, a real place to turn. Let's think about that: it is not just when life is tough that we find ourselves on our knees asking God for this or that, and it is not just when life is glorious that we find ourselves with outstretched arms in praise and thanksgiving to God. As we live in relationship with God, our entire lives become a series of prayer.

Philip Yancey, in his book "Prayer: Does it make any difference?" declares that "our deepest longing" in life (whether we know it or not) is to be close and connected with God. He goes on to state that "Prayer is universal because it speaks to some basic human need. Prayer is an expression of who we are: a living incompleteness. We are a gap: an emptiness that calls for fulfillment." By praying to God, we acknowledge the importance of our relationship with God, because without God, we would be nothing.

Not only do I think there is nothing we want, or better yet need, more than to be in communication with God, I don't think there is anything God wants more than to be in open communication with us.

Think of the relationship between any parent and child. What if neither side wanted to talk or listen to the other? What kind of relationship would there be? Think about never talking with your child. Think about your child never listening to anything you have to say. We could even go as far to ask 'what if your child only came to you when they needed something from you.' I know it does seem like that sometimes but really. Or what if your whole relationship with your child, at least from the child's perspective, was based on whether you did exactly what they asked you to do?

That is not the kind of relationship we need with one another and it is not the kind of relationship we need with God. God knows this, so God created a way for us to be in constant contact. Prayer is a conduit to build a relationship with our living and personal God. Prayer is a conduit to listen and talk and lament and sing praise.

There are many acronyms associated with PRAYER but there is one I have gone to on more than one occasion. I like how it encompasses the 'why' as well as the 'what' in prayer.

P is for **praise**: praise to God because God is worthy to be praised.

R is for **reverence**: reverence to God because God is worthy to be respected and honored.

A is for **adoration**: affection and likeness to God because of who God is and what God does.

Y is for **yielding**: humility toward God because we can't do it all and life is bigger than us.

E is for **edification**: longing and request for God to forgive, change, and redeem our sins.

R is for **results**: thanksgiving to God for deliverance and salvation through God's love.

Someone once defined prayer as "the most powerful weapon against trials, the most effective medicine against sickness, and the most valuable gift to someone you love." Yes, but let's be careful not to credit the act of prayer over the God behind the prayer.

A man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?"

"I'm the new associate at your local church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

“Oh yeah, the chair,” said the bedridden man. “Would you mind closing the door?”

Puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

“I’ve never told anyone this, not even my daughter,” said the man. “But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head.”

“I abandoned any attempt at prayer,” the old man continued, “until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, ‘Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here’s what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It’s not spooky because he promised, ‘I’ll be with you always.’ Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you’re doing with me right now.”

“So, I tried it and I’ve liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I’m careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she’d either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm.”

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon.

“Did he seem to die in peace?” he asked.

“Yes, when I left the house around two o’clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, he had passed. But there was something strange. In fact, beyond strange; kind of weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed.

In our humanity, we are conditioned to pray, but it is not just our own experiences that teaches us this. There are many stories throughout the scriptures that illumine the importance of prayer. As a matter of fact, all throughout the history of humanity as it is spelled out and retold through the bible, we read of people who implored God to intercede in their lives. Today, we are quickly going to look at a few of them. As we do, I want to challenge us to pay attention to the attitude and motives of the person who prayed and consider the power with which God answered.

Exodus 33:18 reveals Moses praying to God, asking God “Now show me your glory.” Moses, called “the friend of God” (*James 2:23*), talked to God regularly, but in this beautiful conversation, Moses asked for God’s blessing on the Israelites and for God’s presence to go with them as they traveled. Moses asks to see God’s glory—God’s very personage—up close. God reveals Godself to Moses with a radiant light and through Moses, God delivered the Israelites to the promised land.

1 Samuel 1:11 says “O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.” The woman praying here is Hannah. She is infertile, and she prays desperately to God for a son. Hannah was the unfortunate barren second wife, ridiculed and humiliated by the wife who easily bore children. So, Hannah pleaded with God for a son, promising to give him back to the Lord. God answers Hannah’s prayer with a son named Samuel, and she followed through on her word, dedicating Samuel to God’s work in the temple and eventually to God’s people as Israel’s greatest prophet. Hannah went on to have 3 more sons and 2 daughters.

In 1 Kings 19:20, a powerful Assyrian King had laid siege to Jerusalem, and King Hezekiah, who told his people to keep their faith in God, prayed for delivery from their enemy: “Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God.” God intervened by sending an angel of the Lord to defeat the Assyrian army, sending them in retreat without a fight.

In 2 Kings 20:3, when King Hezekiah became deathly ill, the prophet Isaiah came to him with a message from God that he would die. Hezekiah prayed and cried to God. “Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” Soon thereafter, Isaiah returned to Hezekiah with a new message from God; “I have heard your prayers and seen your tears; I will heal you... I will add 15 years to your life.”

In 2 Kings 6:16, when Elisha and his servant are surrounded by the enemy, Elisha prays for God to reveal His power: “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.” Elisha’s prophetic abilities were thwarting the plans of an enemy king, so the king sent a battalion to surround the city where Elisha was, to launch an attack. After praying to God to intercede, Elisha was then able to see a heavenly host encircle his enemy and blind them. Elisha was able to lead them away from the city.

In Daniel 2:17-18, when Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had a confusing dream, he ordered his counselors to describe the dream and tell him what it meant, or they would all die. “Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.” Daniel and his friends were saved, elevated to high authority, and Daniel went on to be a major spiritual influence on three powerful kings.

In Mark 5:23, Jairus, a synagogue ruler, risked his position in his faith community by making a request of Jesus, right in front of everyone: "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." God didn't just heal the girl through Jesus. God raised her back to life.

In Acts 12:5, after the Christian faith began to take root, the religious Hebrew governor, King Herod Agrippa, arrested Peter and put him in prison. "So, Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." The church banded together and prayed for his release. We then read of an angel coming to lead him out of prison, through doors and past guards.

I don't believe these stories to be just some made up fiction to help us feel better. These are true accounts of God's love and care for humanity. These are true accounts of the people of God running into the brick wall of life, praying to God to be there for them, and God, out of God's will and way, provided and delivered. This is what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do when we pray.

Now, for those of us who have come upon a bad road or series of misfortune, and we doubt this whole prayer thing because we haven't seen God working this way in our lives, maybe, just maybe, we aren't looking at it the right way.

"Once a man asked, 'what did you gain by regularly praying to God?' The man replied, 'nothing... but let me tell you what I lost: anger, ego, greed, depression, insecurity, and fear of death.' Sometimes the answer to our prayers is not gaining but losing; which ultimately is the gain.

We are conditioned to pray, and for the coming weeks, beginning with an in depth look at the Lord's Prayer, we are going to do our best to learn how to pray through our human condition. Maybe we are already a prayer warrior. Maybe we have no idea where to start. Maybe we have a lot to say. Maybe we don't have anything to say. Maybe we have all the faith in the world. Maybe we are working to grow in our faith. Maybe life has us up. Maybe life has us down. Maybe life is all over the place and we barely have enough time to breath and brush our teeth. No matter the maybe, we need to talk, ask, open ourselves up, listen, wait, and live; we need to pray. Eyes opened or closed, head bowed or tilted to the sky, holding hands or in solitude, fists clinched or palms up, in a meeting or at the bus stop, in traffic or out for a stroll, kneeling beside our bed or kneeling at the foot of the cross, we are called to pray.

The question is not whether God is there ready to listen. God is there. The question is whether we are willing to start the conversation? Are we willing to talk and listen to God? Even if it is just to say, "Hey God!"

Let all God's people say... Amen.

Prayers of the People

Hey God, this morning we want to thank you for your presence with us in this place during this time of worship. We couldn't do it without you and all you provide for us. For this gathering of people. For this space. For the music. For your Word. For your promises and our promises. For your open arms that receive us into your fold. For Jack and Margaret. For the Gilmer family. For all those who are with us through the power and presence of your Holy Spirit.

As we continue in this Easter season, a season in which we remember and are inspired by the hope of the resurrection of your son Jesus, who came to live, die, and be raised for our benefit, we lean on you for all the courage and strength we need to be your faithful disciples in this time and place. Especially God we want to ask you to work in our hearts and in our minds to open us up to you through prayer.

We do praise you God, because you are worthy in every way to be praised. Because of who you are and all you do, you are worthy to be respected, honored, and adored by us your beloved children. During our earthly lives, we acknowledge God that life is hard, sometimes it is downright cruel and unbearable, so we humbly yield to you because you are bigger than life itself. You are the creator of life and we place our trust in you alone as our creator and God. In our frailty, we quickly discover that we are broken and incomplete and therefore we need you to help melt us, mold us, and fill us, making us complete once again through your forgiveness and love. We need to turn from that which distracts us and takes us from you and your will, but we know we can't do it all on our own strength. And God, we turn to you in hope and thanksgiving, in faith and believe, in trust that you will indeed deliver according to your will. You love us and we trust that you will never leave us or forsake us; you have a way and we just ask that we can follow that way with the grace and gratitude needed to be at peace.

We lift to you now in the silence of this moment, the prayers we have individually... God, hear our prayers. In Jesus name we pray, let all God's people say... Amen.