

## “Deeper Prayer”

*Reading: Psalm 77, Daniel 6:6-13, 16-23; Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-60*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

If you haven't yet caught up on last week's sermon, I'd encourage you to do so as soon as you can, because like I've been saying, that sermon will be setting the tone for us for quite a while. But here's the thing: last week's sermon was like a campaign speech. We know all too well that any joker can get up behind a podium and make campaign promises and get a crowd excited. What really counts is whether you can back up your campaign promises with action. You've heard the campaign speech. You've heard the call to be deep, beautiful, fearless people of Jesus Christ, and you've responded enthusiastically. But now we have to start exploring what to do next. The campaign is over, and now we're into the first hundred days of office. We've given the pep talk to get us fired up, so now we need to get into the nitty gritty of making it happen.

You probably could have guessed that the first step in this journey would be prayer. Preachers love talking about prayer, and this has always been a church that takes prayer seriously. But at the same time, we have to be realistic about prayer. It's kind of a silly thing, isn't it? I mutter some words, or maybe I don't even speak them out loud but just think them in my head, or maybe I don't even mutter my own words but read someone else's prayer from hundreds of years ago that I found in a book, and I expect that the almighty creator of the entire universe cares about my words, listens to them, and then literally changes the course of history based on my little muttered words. At best, it is presumptuous of me to think that *God* cares about the prayers of some young pastor of a little church in the Poconos, and at worst, it's silly or even deluded.

And even if we take prayer seriously, there are certain practical realities that just make it frustrating and difficult sometimes. I'll confess to you that I have never found prayer easy, so whatever struggles you've had in your prayer life, I've probably had them, too. Deciding to make a deeper commitment to prayer is a sure way of guaranteeing that my schedule will go haywire, so I can't find a consistent time to pray. When I was young, I tended to pray at the very end of the day before going to sleep, which meant that I always fell asleep while praying. Or if I pray during the day, almost invariably, the phone will ring, or my mind will go off in every possible direction getting distracted by anything except prayer. So surely prayer is something best left to the prayer warriors of the church, because they know how to do it well and get results, but someone like me just doesn't have the time or expertise. We use the rationale that it's not my gift, so I don't do it regularly.

But a Christian who doesn't pray is like a doctor who never prescribes antibiotics, or a lawyer who doesn't question witnesses, or a carpenter who doesn't own a hammer. Prayer is one of the most basic, most necessary, and most powerful tools we have. A skeptic might see a bunch of unimpressive Christians mumbling some ancient words into the darkness, but the devil sees mighty warriors demolishing his kingdom. In Revelation 8, John the Revelator watches as the prayers of the church rise up before God, and an angel takes those prayers, mixes them with fire from the heavenly altar before God, and hurls those prayers back to earth like a meteor, and the earth is shaken with lightning, thunder, and earthquakes. The Bible is clear about the power of prayer, because God acts on our prayer.

Prayer is absolutely critical if we are going to become deep, beautiful, fearless people. It's not accurate to say that God never works apart from the prayers of His people, but it is certainly true that it is rare to see God do something new, fresh, and powerful in a church that does not pray. It would be extremely unusual for a Christian to mature and grow if they do not pray, or at least their growth would be stunted without prayer. Prayer is the lifeblood of the Christian walk. The reason is very simple: prayer is our most basic form of communication with God. If you want to go deeper in a relationship with another human, you communicate with one another; you open your mouth and speak to them in a language you both use. If you want to go deeper in your relationship with God and let Him form you into a deep, beautiful, fearless person, you open your spirit and speak to Him using the language of prayer.

At its most basic, prayer is a cry for help in a moment of need. At its most mature, prayer is a communion with your beloved Lord that is constantly woven into your day, so that prayer characterizes your thoughts, words, and actions. Many if not most of us probably move back and forth somewhere on the continuum between those two as life gets more or less busy. And it's not necessarily the case that one is better than the other, because the truth is that God hears and answers lots of different types of prayers from lots of different types of people. There have been people living on the edge with nothing but the barest understanding of God who have cried out in desperation, "God, if you're up there, save me!" and He has saved them; but we also think of the Apostle Paul who prayed over and over again for God to relieve him of a physical affliction, and God didn't do it for him.

There is this mystery in prayer, we are engaging in something we don't completely understand, because while God acts on our prayers, He is certainly not controlled by them. We read part of the classic story of Daniel in the Lions' Den, when this great man of God was conspired against and his enemies fed him to the lions. One of the things Daniel is remembered for is that he was a man of faithful prayer, and God miraculously saved him from death by those lions. But we also read part of the story of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Stephen's fate was parallel with Daniel's in many ways: a man whose enemies saw him as a threat to their own power, so they plotted against him and sentenced him to death because of his faithfulness to God. But God did not shut the lions' mouths this time; He didn't stop the stones from hitting Stephen and breaking his bones. We have to come to grips with the fact that while God does not always perform a miraculous save in response to every prayer, that does not negate the power of prayer. In fact, if we pay attention, what Stephen actually prays is this: that Jesus would receive his spirit, and that God would forgive his killers. That's deep prayer. Prayer influences God but does not control Him.

In fact, while we use our prayer to cry out to God, God uses our prayer to influence us as well. Prayer is two-way communication. God speaks to us in our prayer, assuming we take the time to listen, and it is there that we learn to find some of the deepest power in prayer. This is why prayer is part of the deep person's life, because prayer is one of the primary ways God shapes us into the image of Christ. In order to pray well, first of all you have to cry out to God, which involves humbling yourself and admitting that you can't save yourself or others. Prayer means that you recognize the power and lordship of Christ; He is the one who saves. Prayer means trusting Him. It means putting your life on pause for long enough to devote some time to God. It means listening for what God desires of you, and letting Him shape your desires so that you come to want what He wants and love what He loves. Prayer deepens us.

If we're going to be deep, beautiful, fearless people, we need to be deep, beautiful, fearless people of prayer. Part of the challenge last Sunday was for each one of us to take responsibility for our own spiritual walk and be thinking about one or two manageable goals that we can make toward becoming deeper, more beautiful, and more fearless in Jesus Christ. As we move through the next several weeks together and learn more about ways God can make us deep, beautiful, and fearless, I hope you'll hear one or two other ideas for goals you can make to move you toward that. But today — deep, beautiful, fearless prayer — we're seeing something that we could probably all stand to go deeper into. Each one of us, no matter where we are in our walk with Christ, could probably take a step deeper into prayer.

Going deeper in prayer means moving from praying because we want things from God, or praying because we feel like it's an obligation, to praying because we simply want God. Like I said, the most basic form of prayer is crying out to God for help, whether it's help for you or for someone else; we tend to think of prayer as asking God to take care of our biggest burdens. But we go deeper into prayer by learning to make our prayer an expression of our desire for God Himself. And again, this is just like how we communicate with people we care about: in deep relationships, we don't necessarily talk about politics or the weather because we really care that much about those topics, the real goal of the conversation is to spend time with someone you care about. So one of the keys to a deeper prayer life is doing more than just unburdening yourself on God, it's learning to lean on Him through prayer. Prayer becomes a time of peace in the midst of a chaotic world, a moment of clear vision in a day filled with the fog of life.

And so in order to go deeper into prayer, you might need to try some type of prayer or routine of prayer that you haven't tried before. I know I've gone through dozens of times when I've decided that I need to pray more, so I try to copy the prayer methods of someone I look up to, but then when I inevitably fail to instantly turn into the spiritual giant that they are, I feel like a failure and give up on prayer all over again. It took me many years of experimenting before I found the right prayer life for me. The reality is that we all have different personalities and temperaments and schedules, so what works for me might not work for you. Many mature Christians would recommend a time of focused, extended prayer first thing in the morning to set the tone for your day; others pray at night. Personally, I find that I pray better when I pray for shorter periods two or three times spaced through the day, morning, noon, and evening. The point is that you need to find the right prayer life for you, and then go deeper into it.

If you're one who prays extemporaneously, making up the words as you go along, even praying conversationally with God, maybe it would be stretching for you to pray using a prayer book or devotional guide, or pray prayers written by saints and spiritual masters and psalmists through the ages and root yourself in someone else's prayers. If you're one who grew up in a more liturgical tradition, where all the words follow the script and it's been that way for hundreds of years, maybe it would stretch you to pray without a script. If you've never had any consistent prayer life before, you could certainly do worse than starting each day by simply praying the Lord's Prayer. The idea is not that we're all going to commit to becoming Mother Therasas and Billy Grahams overnight; we just want to take one step deeper in our prayer lives.

At the same time, while I'm calling us to deeper prayer that takes our eyes off of simply making requests of God, I suspect that we can all use more fearless prayer, as well. Prayer is truly powerful, but sometimes we're afraid to truly lay our burdens at God's feet because we're not sure we want to risk being disappointed. We need to be fearless in our prayer. Fearless prayer is not foolhardy prayer; don't ask God to give you a million dollars and then get mad at Him when He doesn't answer it. But we have many examples in the Bible and in history of some truly fearless pray-ers who were not afraid to ask God for the miraculous. We need fearless prayer when we're comfortable and we don't want the boat rocked, when there are strongholds of the devil around us that need to be challenged but we lack the courage to challenge them. We need fearless prayer when we're not comfortable, when we're faced with something far too big for us to handle, and we have no choice but to trust it to God. Fearless prayer is persistent prayer, because it's too big to be covered in one prayer, and therefore it also often involves the prayers of lots of people. We need to be fearless in praying for the salvation and healing of loved ones, for the revival and peace of our community, for the mission of our church. Prayer is too powerful for us to dare to hold it back.

The call to be deep, beautiful, fearless people begins with the call to prayer. We cannot become what God made us to be unless we are connected to Him, and prayer is the most basic way of connecting to God. How can you go deeper in your prayer life? How can you pray more fearlessly?

At the least, I'd like to ask each of you to add one thing to your time of prayer: ask God to make us deep, beautiful, fearless people. Ask that for yourself, and ask that for our church.



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