

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **My story about coming to faith.** Praying sincerely for the first time regularly, “God, if you exist, show me where to go to school.” Feeling like when I toured Northwestern for the first time I had a spiritual experience. Saw myself there. Felt chills, a remarkable peace. Like God was telling me to go to school there.
- B. So what exactly was happening there?
 - 1. One interpretation: **I was looking for God. I was open. I was reaching out.** And God was eager to connect with me and reach back.
 - 2. Another interpretation: **The whole experience was in my head.** The “revelation” was some sort of mental hallucination or a projection from my overactive imagination, perhaps along with personal desperation at work.
 - 3. **Are these two interpretations mutually exclusive, or could the truth actually be some of both:** that in some mysterious way I was connecting with the God of the universe and that had much to do with the the activity of my mind, primed by months of praying over this question. Could both of these be true?
- C. I start with this story and these questions because today in our Back to Basics series, we’re asking the question, “**What happens when we pray?**” Why spend our time on it?
- D. Prayer seems to be a pretty fundamental practice for people of many faiths, the Christian faith included, but how does it actually work? Is it really important or is it just a way we make ourselves feel more spiritual? Does anything actually happen when we pray?

II. A few places we could look to answer that question.

A. The Bible.

- 1. **Prayer is an assumed practice.** Lots of stories from beginning to end of folks connecting to God through prayer. **Book of Psalms** is a prayer book. Collection of 150 prayers that show real variety from thanksgiving and praise to lament and complaint, to prayers of intercession, asking God to move on behalf of an individual or community. Shows a lot of diversity for what prayer can look like.
- 2. Furthermore, the **Gospels seem to show us a Jesus who thinks prayer is a big deal.** He often took time to himself to pray. And his followers clearly got that he was into it and asked him for guidance which is where we get what has often been called by the church, “the Lord’s prayer”. (Luke 11: 1-13)
- 3. **One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”**
2 He said to them, “When you pray, say:
“‘Father, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
3 Give us each day our daily bread.
4 Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.”’
5 Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ 7 And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless

audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

9 "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

11 "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

4. In this very brief sample prayer Jesus himself covers a number of genres of prayer:
 - a) Praise and worship, "Father, hallowed be your name"
 - b) Connection to God's activity in the world, "Your kingdom come"
 - c) Practical needs, "give us each our daily bread"
 - d) confession and need for forgiveness, "forgive us our sins"
 - e) guidance for following God, "lead us not into temptation."
5. All of them could maybe be summed up as:
 - a) **We connect with God in the midst of the realities of everyday life.**
 - b) **God wants to use those conversations to give us more of God's self (the Holy Spirit).**

(1) Maybe this is what I was experiencing in my starting story.

B. But what if you're not sold on the Bible as a trusty source of information? Is there other evidence that prayer makes an impact on the world?

1. Mike McHargue (aka "Science Mike" in podcast land) recently wrote a book where he talks about his own skepticism after losing evangelical faith, becoming an atheist masquerading as a Christian, and eventually rediscovering faith in some way
 - a) He points out that **often Christians try to testify to the existence of God by pointing to the effects of prayer**, sharing stories they've had of praying for something and then seeing it happening, and that Richard Dawkins and other atheists have an experiment to counter that.
 - (1) Dawkins ask you to pray to a milk jug for 2 weeks. Pray for 2 weeks to milk jug before applying for promotion. If it happens, is milk jug responsible? Most people would say no.
 - (a) 3 responses to prayer, "yes, no, wait". Cover all possible outcomes.
 - (b) **"How can you be confident that prayer works if there's, literally, no scenario that could prove it to be false?"**
 - (c) for a while, this dilemma was part of the unraveling of faith for Mike; something that even though he considers himself to have faith now, he still hasn't really resolved. Why does God answer some prayers and not others? Why pray for our relatively minor concerns when there are much bigger issues in the world? How can we know that anything that happens is connected to direct activity from God?
2. **Perhaps there's scientific evidence that prayer changes things.**
 - a) Not really. Scientific inquiry reveals that prayer has only a modest benefit in helping heal illness. More commonly, studies show no benefit at all, or even a slight detrimental effect on people who know they are being prayed for. Scientists theorize "performance anxiety".
3. **So what can we know about the effects of prayer?**

- a) **It's all about the brain.** Science Mike spends quite a bit of time examining the part of our brain that experiences connection and relationships. Talk about how people of faith have a God network of neurological connections that are built up over time, the people who've never spent much time trying to connect spiritually just don't have.

(1) Matters what kind of image of God you have

(a) Angry God - *creates brain under stress, angers more easily, becomes difficult for you to forgive yourself or others, and you become fearful or angry toward those who don't think, look, or act like you.*

(b) Loving God - *opposite effects: develop areas of the brain that bring better focus, concentration, compassion, and empathy; lower stress levels and blood pressure, easier for them to forgive themselves and others*

(2) Positive effects can help counteract stress and distraction of modern world.

4. The best practice for cultivating this positive image of God is prayer and meditation.

- a) Neurologically speaking, prayer is a type of meditation, because it produces remarkably similar brain activity and long-term effects.
- b) both Buddhist monks and Christian nuns showed same effect in brain scans while praying or meditating - decreased parietal lobe activity - more attached to immediate surroundings and circumstances. Folks who prayed and meditated regularly learned to shut down this part of the brain when they did so they could experience sensation of leaving this reality and connection with something more transcendent.
- c) *"But the study's main finding was that prayer and meditation are so similar in the brain that we can describe prayer as a type of meditation. And this should be encouraging, because research shows that meditation is one of the best things you can do for your brain— right up there with reading and physical exercise....*

Meditation lowers your blood pressure and helps you feel less stressed. It fosters emotional healing, and it has even been found to help the body cope with disease. These effects are so pronounced, some studies have found meditation to have a therapeutic effect on people suffering from dementia.

In the case of people who meditate on a loving God, the idea of God becomes part of how they process reality— and this has profound effects on their behavior. When you believe God loves you and loves others, it's easier to take risks and to forgive people. It's not enough to simply believe in God, because only prayer and meditation will turn that belief into a neural network that changes your outlook and behavior. Even when the news cycle is depressing or a situation in your life seems hopeless, you can hold on to the knowledge that God is with you and that the overall arc of life will work out for good.

Most remarkable to me is the fact that regular prayer can work for anyone, regardless of their religious background. Even people who self-identify as atheists are likely to report feeling close to God if they pray or meditate consistently for six weeks."

5. Another thing science points to: more prayer correlates with more experiences of God.

- a) work of Tanya Lurhman, anthropologist studying Christians who believe God can talk with them
- b) after practicing the prayer practices, began to experiences mystical experiences, even without faith
 - (1) Our brains are being developed in prayer to have these kinds of experiences. The stronger the neurological networks are for these, the more likely they are to be experienced. Hearing voice of God, seeing visions etc.

- c) when you think of it, **maybe this is why Jesus encourages his followers to pray, and also notes that the thing the Father is eager to give isn't actually stuff.** In the story Jesus tells - God's not a genie in the sky; you rub the bottle the right way, pray the right prayer and get what you want. For him it's not ultimately about pray for this job enough, or give enough tithes and offerings, or follow the rules well enough and you'll get it. What Jesus says the Father is eager is eager to give the children who ask is **the spirit**. It's the **presence of God**. That does seem to be the ultimate gift in and of itself. Maybe this lines up with what we've been talking about thus far in the series, that ultimately faith comes down to relationship. And both what Jesus seems to promise in the gospels and what science seems to verify cohere. **If you spend time in prayer, you are likely to experience more spiritual connection to God.**

III. In Summary.

- A. Back to my initial story: when I experienced something touring Northwestern: yes, **in a sense my experience was in my mind**. It was internally that I sensed the movement of God. Perhaps all my praying over months had cued my mind up for that, as some of the research now suggests. **But that doesn't mean it wasn't real**. Just as Jesus wanted his followers to pray to get more of His Spirit, I believe I was getting my first taste of it that day, connected to a season of seeking in prayer.
- B. **What happens when we pray?** *We connect with God. We relate to God.* We experience God's presence in the world. We at times may even receive insight or clarity or direction as part of that presence. And even when there is suffering and disappointment, often experiencing it with God brings redemption, comfort, and hope.

So what about you? What role has prayer played in your life? Has it been challenging? Has it been helpful in developing your own capacity for spiritual experience? How might our values of being Jesus-centered, safe, and diverse impact our approach to prayer at Haven?