Outline
for
A Study on Prayer

based on Paul E. Miller’s Book:

“A Praying Life -- Connecting with God in a Distracting World”

The following sessions have been based on the framework of this book. They have been designed for 30 - 45 minutes for each session. The outline can also be used as an aid when reading through this fine book on prayer.

Book Review by:
Tim Hatcher

When Associate Pastor Henry Morris recommended this reading to me, I knew if it even came close to Paul Miller's “Love Walked Among Us” I would enjoy the reading. Miller has a way of “making it real” by bringing the reader into his life with examples found in his own family. He shows that prayer is a constant conversation with a loving God who is really interested in all the details of His children’s lives. Miller “pulls back the curtain” and shows us examples of when and how he has relied upon this conversation at various times in his life. This book was the primary resource for the Fall/Winter sessions for the “Grow in Grace” and “Relationship Builders” classes. This book is recommend for any level of reader.

Dr. Steve Brown sums up Paul E. Miller’s book this way: “What a refreshing book! If you’re tired of religious prayer games and rote prayers that stop at the ceiling or if you have suspected that God was on vacation somewhere, this book will change your life.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself, Steve.

This paperback book is available in the First Presbyterian Church bookstore at a cost of $12.00 per copy.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**
1. What Good Does It Do? .................................................. 13
2. Where We Are Headed? .................................................. 19

**Part 1: Learning to Pray Like a Child**
3. Become Like A Little Child ............................................. 29
4. Learning To Talk With Your Father .................................. 37
5. Spending Time With Your Father ..................................... 43
6. Learning To Be Helpless ............................................... 53
7. Crying “Abba” – Continuously ....................................... 63
8. Bending Your Heart To Your Father ................................. 69

**Part 2: Learning to Trust Again**
9. Understanding Cynicism ............................................... 77
10. Following Jesus Out Of Cynicism .................................... 83
11. Developing An Eye For Jesus ........................................ 95

**Part 3: Learning to Ask Your Father**
12. Why Asking Is So Hard. ................................................ 103
13. Why We Can Ask. ..................................................... 113
15. What Do We Do With Jesus’ Extravagant Promises About Prayer? .................................. 129
16. What We Don’t Ask For: “Our Daily Bread” ...................... 141
17. What We Don’t Ask For: “Your Kingdom Come” ................ 149
18. Surrender Completely: “Your Will Be Done” .................... 155

**Part 4: Living In Your Father’s Story**
19. Watching A Story Unfold ............................................. 165
20. A Father’s Love ....................................................... 173
21. Unanswered Prayer: Understanding The Patterns of Story .... 179
22. How God Places Himself In The Story ............................ 189
23. Praying Without A Story ............................................. 195
24. Hope: The End of the Story .......................................... 205
25. Living In Gospel Stories ............................................. 211

**Part 5: Praying In Real Life**
26. Using Prayer Tools ................................................... 221
27. Keeping Track Of The Story: Using Prayer Cards .............. 225
28. Prayer Work ........................................................... 235
29. Listening To God ....................................................... 239
30. Prayer Journaling: Becoming Aware Of The Interior Journey .... 249
31. Real-Life Praying ..................................................... 257
32. Unfinished Stories .................................................... 263
SKIT

“A Visit to the Prayer Therapist”

Prayer Therapist: Let’s begin by looking at your relationship with your heavenly Father. In 2 Corinthians 6:18, God said, “I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me.” What does it mean that you are a son or daughter of God?

Prayer Patient: I guess it means that I have complete access to my heavenly Father through Jesus. I have true intimacy, based not on how good I am, but on the goodness of Jesus. Not only that, it also means that Jesus is my brother. I am a fellow heir with him.

Prayer Therapist: (smiling) That’s right. You’ve done a wonderful job of describing the “doctrine of Sonship.” Now tell me what it’s like to be with your Father. What is it like to talk with him?

Prayer Patient: (tentatively) Well . . . it’s difficult even to be in His presence for just a couple of minutes. My mind wanders. I’m not sure what to say. Sometimes I wonder, Does prayer make any difference? Is God even there? Then I feel guilty for my doubts and I just give up.

Prayer Therapist: I’m probably telling you something you already know. Your relationship with your heavenly Father is dysfunctional. You talk as if you have a relationship, but you don’t. In theory – it’s close. But practically – it’s distant. You need help. Fortunately, I’ve seen this condition many times before. I have just the remedy you’re looking for.
Session 1

1. Opening Skit: “A Visit to the Prayer Therapist” (Script Attached)

2. Common Frustrations with Praying
   a. The activity of praying itself
      i. Vicious cycle due to “Prayer A.D.D.”
         • Start praying
         • Mind begins to wander
         • Begin worrying
         • Start feeling guilty
   b. Confusion about what makes for a good prayer
      i. Another vicious cycle
         • Start praying by focusing on worshiping God
         • The praying starts to feel contrived
         • Start feeling guilty
            a. Did I worship enough?
            b. Did I really mean it?
            c. Now where was I?
      ii. Praying from a list
         • Begins with enthusiasm
         • Praying through the list starts to get dull
         • Begin to lose touch with many of the needs on the list
         • Start feeling guilty
   c. Our busy lifestyles
      i. Uncomfortable to “slow down” and pray
      ii. We are used to being constantly entertained and stimulated
         • TV
         • Internet
         • Video Games
         • Cell Phones
   d. (And this one is subtle, but probably the most pervasive) Our intellect, competency, and financial resources
      i. Our trust in ourselves and in our talents can make us structurally independent of God
      ii. Our money can do what prayer does, and is quicker and less time-consuming
   e. The “oddness” of praying
      i. When we are on a phone conversation, at least there is a voice on the other end so we can hear it and respond to it.
         • When we are praying, it seems we are talking to air . . . and it used to look even more odd than it does today due to the use of “blue tooth” earpieces, etc.
      ii. How do we talk with a Spirit? (with someone who doesn’t answer with an audible voice)
3. Where Do I Fit In?
   a. Can I pray for what I want?
   b. What’s the point of praying if God already knows what I need?
   c. Why bore God? It sounds like nagging.

If this has been your experience, you are not alone. Most Christians feel frustrated when it comes to prayer.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the World Teaches Us</th>
<th>What Jesus Teaches Us</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to talk to yourself.</td>
<td>How to stop talking to yourself.</td>
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<td>Change what you tell yourself, and your feelings about what happened will change.</td>
<td>How to stop making prayer into a production.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change your self-talk, and how you feel about yourself will change.</td>
<td>How to start talking to your Father. (John 20:17)</td>
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<td>Talk yourself out of getting upset about what you can’t change.</td>
<td>How to start talking with the God who rules the world, who has freely chosen to take your best interests to heart.</td>
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<td>Do something constructive about what you can change.</td>
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_Talking life over with this on-scene God is the sort of conversation worth calling “prayer.”_

5. 3 Statements About Prayer from the Bible.
   A. A Closeness With God (Deuteronomy 4:7)  
      _What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him?_
   B. An Attentive Listener (Psalm 34:15)  
      _The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry…_
   C. A Prescription for Anxiety (Philippians 4:6-7)  
      _Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus._
Session 2

Last session we looked at some of the common frustrations with praying. As we move into a more detailed study of how a praying life feels and what it looks like, let’s take a look at where we are headed. Knowing where we are headed can help us on our journey. We need a clear picture of what we are aiming for.

The Praying Life . . .
1. Feels like Dinner with Family and Good Friends
   - Good times “hanging out” after dinner
     - No particular agenda
     - Simply enjoying one another
     - Listening, talking, laughing
     - One of those “glimpses of Heaven” we get
   - Because prayer is all about RELATIONSHIP
     - It’s intimate
     - It hints at eternity
     - The focus is NOT on communication or words
     - The focus IS to whom we are talking -- The RELATIONSHIP

Prayer – the medium through which we get to know and connect to God.

A Common Struggle faced by many of us is:
- Focusing on praying – not on God
  - Like making conversation the center of a family meal time (instead of the RELATIONSHIP).
  - Example from book, A PRAYING LIFE: Like trying to drive while looking at the windshield instead of looking through it.
    - It freezes us
    - It makes us unsure of where to go

Conversation – the vehicle through which we experience one another.

So #1 . . . the focus of prayer, rather than being on the conversation (the vehicle through which we experience God), needs to be on getting to know the person, God. THE RELATIONSHIP

The Praying Life . . .
2. Is Interconnected with All of Life
   a. We don’t pray in isolation from the rest of our lives. It’s not like God isn’t already aware of everything in my life, so why try to hide it?
   b. Since prayer is all about relationship, learning to pray is like maturing over a lifetime (Paul Miller says it’s like . . . “a thousand feelings on a thousand different days.”)

So #2 . . . “A Praying Life” isn’t something we accomplish in a few months, or even over a year. It is a journey of a lifetime. It’s like a long-term friendship that continues to develop. . . Slow, steady, filled with ups & downs
So #3 . . . we don’t need to look for a feeling in prayer, even though deep down we would like to have an “experience” with God or an “experience” in prayer.
- Once we make that (the experience) our goal, we lose God.

We don’t “experience” God; we get to know Him.
- We submit to Him
- We enjoy Him (He is, after all, a person.)

The Praying Life . . .
3. Becomes Aware of the Story that has interwoven in it:
   a. A Divine Story
      i. God’s sovereignty – He is in control of all the details of my life.
      ii. God’s love – He shapes the details of my life for my good.
      iii. God’s wisdom – He doesn’t do everything I want, because I don’t always know what I need.
      iv. God’s patience – He takes His time to do all this
   b. God is the Playwright
      i. We are the actors
         1. Listening for our lines
         2. Quieting our hearts so we can hear the voice of the Playwright
      ii. God is weaving the pattern. (Tension & conflict are part of the story)

A good question to ask ourselves is: What pattern is God weaving in my life?

The Praying Life . . .
4. Gives Birth to Hope
   a. Beware of a “quiet cynicism”
      i. Leaves us unknowingly paralyzed
      ii. To ask God for change confronts us with our doubts about whether prayer makes a difference.
         1. Is change even possible?
         2. Doesn’t God control EVERYTHING?
            a. If so, what’s the point?

So #4 . . . because it’s uncomfortable to feel our unbelief (to come face-to-face with our cynicism), we dull our souls with the “narcotic of activity”.

Good News! As we learn to pray well, we discover that, as the song says, “This Is My Father’s World”. Because my Father controls everything, I can ask, and He will listen and act. Since I am His child, change is possible and hope is born.

The Praying Life . . .
5. Becomes Integrated
   a. By spending time with our Father in prayer, we integrate our lives with His (with what He is doing in us).
   b. Learning to pray doesn’t offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart. Paul Miller calls it, “An inner quiet in the midst of outer busyness”.

The Praying Life . . .
6. Reveals the Heart
   a. Getting to know your Heavenly Father allows you to get to know your own heart as well.
      i. Change is inevitable
         1. We don’t learn to love someone without it changing us.
ii. Helps us discover nests of cynicism, pride & self-will in our hearts.
   1. We become “unmasked”
   2. We become dependent (needy)

Good News: **Dependency is the heartbeat of prayer. A needy heart is a praying heart.**

**So #5. . .** when it starts getting uncomfortable, don’t pull back from God. Be patient. He is just starting to work.

**THE BIG QUESTION:** How do we develop “A PRAYING LIFE”?  (Mark 10: 13-16)

**THE ANSWER:** Become like a little child.

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**SKIT: A Child and His Father**

Father: Hi son, how’s it going?

Child: (gasping for breath and trying to gulp some water) Great Dad! We were playing in the fort... and some girls came by... and we hid from them... and Tommy got a splinter in his finger... and do you think you can help him get it out?... and when we were riding our bikes, I ran over a can and it got stuck on my tire... and do you think you can help me fix it?... and I think it’s gonna rain today... and I like to find animals in the clouds... and I saw an alligator in the pond... and we all ran real fast... and can I have some more water?!!!

Father: Wow! It sure sounds like you’re having fun. Let’s get Tommy in here and we’ll get that splinter out of his finger. After I get you some water, let’s take a look at getting that can off of your bicycle tire. And... you boys remember to keep away from that alligator pond.

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We often see examples of Jesus’ disciples behaving like little children. **Peter is known for blurting out whatever is on his mind! (Just like in the skit)**

And, just like in our skit, when we go to our Heavenly Father, there is no need for pretense. Our Father doesn’t ask us to “clean up our act” in order to become a Christian. But, too often we forget that when we go to Him in prayer. He wants us to come to him like little children... **just as we are.**

**Just as We Are... Come Messy**

- Little children never get frozen by their selfishness.
- They (like the disciples) come just as they are – totally self-absorbed.
- They seldom get it “right”
- As parents, we don’t scold them for being self-absorbed or fearful... that’s just who they are. **And we love them anyway.**
- As our Heavenly Father, God cheers when we come to Him with our wobbling, unsteady prayers.
  - We see Jesus open His arms to needy (and messy) children in Matthew 11:28 when He says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."
  - You may ask: What's it like to be WEARY and HEAVY-LADEN?
    - You have trouble concentrating
    - The problems of the day are like claws in your brain
    - You feel beaten up by life
• You have so many problems you don’t know where to start
• You can’t do life on your own anymore

But more good news . . . Our weariness drives us to our Heavenly Father.

Thought: In order to pray like a child, you might need to “unlearn” the non-personal, non-real praying that you’ve been taught.

The Real You . . . “Warts and All”
- Jesus gives us the example of little children “being real”
- Jesus also gives us the example of the Pharisees as being artificial (unreal)
  These are often juxtaposed for our benefit.

Paul Miller writes: “The only way to come to God is by taking off any spiritual mask we may have. This is where the real “you” has to meet the real God. He is a person. When you bring your real self to God, you give Him the opportunity to work on the real you, and you will slowly change. The kingdom will come. You’ll end up less selfish.”

Touching Our Father’s Heart
- The opening words of the model prayer Jesus taught us are “Our Father”
  - We are the center of our Father’s affection
  - This is where we find rest

Q.: How are we able come to God as “Our Father”?  
A.: Ephesians 1:4-6, says: “For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, He predestined us to be adopted as His sons (and daughters) through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves.”

Learn to Talk with Your Father
Q. How do we learn to talk with our Father?  
A. By asking like a child, believing like a child, and even playing like a child.

1. Asking Like a Child:
   - What do they ask for? (Everything and anything)
   - How often do they ask? (Repeatedly . . . over and over again)
   - How do little children ask? (They just say what’s on their minds)

Jesus tells us to watch little children if we want to learn how to ask in prayer.

2. Believing Like a Child:
   - Children have total confidence in their parents’ love and power. They believe their parents want to do them good.
   - If you know your parent loves and protects you, it fills you world with possibility. You just chatter away with what’s on your heart.
   - It works the same way in the world of prayer. If you learn to pray, you learn to dream again.

We see in the life of Jesus, 2 examples of where He went out of His way to point out when he noticed an adult who believed like a child.

Luke 7:7 The Roman centurion was so confident of Jesus’ ability to heal his paralyzed servant that he asks Jesus to heal him without even visiting his home. He tells Jesus, “But say the word, and let my servant be healed.”
Matthew 15:28: The Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon keeps coming back, again and again, even though she is rebuffed. Jesus declares, “Woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire.”

Thought: Now that we have seen that believing the gospel (knowing God’s acceptance for us in Jesus) helps us to come to Him messy, we are now able to see that the gospel also frees us to ask for what is on our hearts.

3. Learning to Play Again
   Q. How do little children play?
   A. It’s “all over the place”.

Thought: Our adult conversations with those close to us aren’t structured. We bounce around from topic to topic. It’s fun!

   Paul Miller says, “Prayer that lacks this play-like quality is almost autistic.” When my son, Lance, tries to have a conversation, he finds it difficult because autism gets in the way of him picking up on social cues that take place during a conversation. Those of us without autism pick up on these without even realizing it.

4. Playing and Praying (Taking the “guilt” out of the cycle.)
   When you are praying and your mind starts to wander, be like a child.
   ■ Don’t worry about being organized or “staying on task”
   ■ Remember you are in a conversation with a person.
   ■ Don’t beat yourself up – learn to play again
     i. Pray about what your mind is wandering to (remember the skit?) Maybe the Spirit is nudging you to think about something else.

5. Learning to Babble Again (Just Get the Words Out)
   ■ It’s OK if your mind wanders
   ■ It’s OK if your prayers get interrupted
   ■ Don’t be embarrassed by how needy your heart is
   ■ Just start praying

6. A New Voice
   When we stop trying to be an adult and “get it right”; we will see that prayer will just flow because God has given us a new voice. It is His own. We will begin to sense the Spirit in us praying.

GOAL: As we discover that prayer is a feast, and as we get the clutter off our hearts and minds, we will find it easy to be in God’s presence.
Session 3

As we began our study, we looked at some of the common frustrations with praying. In Session 2 we observed how a praying life feels and what it looks like, and then learned that we are to approach our Heavenly Father as children... by asking like a child, believing like a child, and even playing like a child.

Since we are adopted children of our Heavenly Father, and if we desire to have it said of us, “I can see the family resemblance,” we need to spend time with our Father so we can begin to take on His character.

Q. Who, during all the course of history, do you think would have the least need to pray because his life was so intertwined with God’s? (Jesus)

The opposite of what we would think:
We see in Jesus’ life, a need to spend time with God just as much as we do.
- It would be easy to think that the Son of God wouldn’t need to pray
- Or, at least he wouldn’t need to have a “specific” prayer time because he’d be in such a constant state of prayer
- You’d think he’d have a direct line to his Heavenly Father, something like “BROADBAND TO HEAVEN”
- You’d also think he’d be better at tuning out the noise of the world

After His very eventful first day of public ministry, Jesus did what He needed to do to have time alone with His Father
- He gets up early (before sunrise)
- He makes His way out of town to a quiet place
- He has His conversation with His Father – He prays

Why Jesus Needed to Pray – 3 Clues
1. His Identity
   Jesus is childlike with His Heavenly Father – He’s very dependent.
   - John 5:19 (The Son can do nothing of His own accord.)
   - John 5:30 (I can do nothing on my own.)
   - John 8:28 (I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.)
   - John 12:49 (The Father who has sent me has himself given me... what to say and what to speak.)

Thought: Only a child will say, “I only do what I see my Father doing.”

DISCUSSION TOPICS
Topic 1: Give reasoning to support the following statement:
Jesus is, without question, the most dependent human being who ever lived.

Questions to Address:
1. Does Jesus make any attempts (like us) to do things on His own? (No)
2. Realizing He can’t do life on His own, what does He do? (He prays, and He prays, and He prays.)

Topic 2: Compare and contrast the relationship between Jesus and His Heavenly Father to the relationship Adam and Eve had with God (A) before the Fall and (B) after the Fall.

Questions to Address:
1. How does Jesus get His identity? (His relationship with His Heavenly Father.)
2. Did Adam and Eve have a quest for self-identity before the Fall? (No – before the Fall they were like Jesus – in full fellowship with God.)
3. What caused Adam and Eve to develop a separate sense of self? (Acting independently of God.)

Conclusion: Because Jesus has no separate sense of self, He has no identity crisis. Consequently, He doesn’t try to “find Himself”. He knows Himself only in relationship with His Father. He can’t conceive of Himself outside that relationship. This is why His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane was agony for Him. He had never experienced a moment when He wasn’t in communion with His Father. Jesus’ anguish is our “normal”.

Why Jesus Needed to Pray – 3 Clues
2. His One-Person Focus
   Paul Miller’s book, “LOVE WALKED AMONG US” gives many examples of Jesus slowing down to focus on the individual.

   One example we can look at is the lame man by the pool at Bethesda. (John 5:3-6)
   Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in that condition for a long time, He asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

   The initial focus is on the multitude (great number, people). Then Jesus’ focus becomes individualized (One, him, he, him, YOU)

   Thought: When Jesus is with someone, that person is the only person in the room.

   “Love incarnates (is fleshed out) by slowing down and focusing on just the beloved. We don’t love in general; we love one person at a time.” — Paul Miller

Why Jesus Needed to Pray – 3 Clues
3. His Limited Humanity
   In choosing to take on humanity, Jesus, like us, found the need to be away from people and distractions to tune into His Heavenly Father.
   a. Could He have done it another way?
   b. Certainly. But He took on human form. He rejected the efficiency of His Godliness and chose the path of LOVE. So, as a fully human being, He needs to get away to pray.

No Substitute for Spending Time
   Jesus’ example – Prayer is about RELATIONSHIP. When He prays, He is not performing a duty; He is getting close to His Father.

   Thought: You don’t create intimacy; you make room for it. Any relationship, if it is going to grow, needs private space (time together without an agenda) where you can get to know each other. This creates an environment where closeness can happen, where we can begin to understand each other’s hearts.

   If Jesus needs to pull away from people and noise to pray, then it makes sense that we need to as well.
Praying Like Jesus Prayed

A. Morning Prayer – an ancient rhythm of the Hebrews

Several instances mentioned in the Psalms:

5:3 O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

59:16 I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.

88:13 But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

143:8 Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

Q. Do we have to pray in the morning? (No) Evening prayers of Jesus include His “High Priestly Prayer” and His prayer at Gethsemane.

Praying Like Jesus Prayed

B. Praying Out Loud

More examples from the Psalms:

5:2-3 I lift my voice . . .

17:1 I cry to you . . .

28:2 O Lord, hear my voice . . .

Jesus followed the custom of praying out loud even when He was alone. Jesus encourages us to pray in the privacy of our rooms so our “out-loud” praying doesn’t become a “verbal show”.

Thought: Praying out loud can be helpful because it keeps us from getting lost in our heads. It makes our thoughts concrete. But, it is more than technique; it is also a statement of faith. We are audibly declaring our belief in a God who is alive.

Praying out loud is not a “rule”. It’s just another way of being “real” in prayer.

Overcoming Objections

Reasons (Excuses) Why We Can’t Slow Down Enough to Have a Regular Prayer Time:

“1 pray all the time” (There is no substitute for focused time of prayer.)

Busyness (The more pressure . . . the more I need to pray.)

I can fix it myself (A quiet confidence in my own abilities, time, money, etc.)

Thought: When we, like Jesus, realize we can’t do life on our own, then no matter how busy, no matter how tired we are . . . we will find time to pray.
Take Baby Steps

Caution: Don’t set impossible goals and then collapse. It may be fine to set up a prayer time of 30 minutes at 4:00 AM for a special occasion like our Missions Conference, but it is difficult to make that your standard. It is better to start with a 5-minute dedicated prayer time and then work from there.

Seven Simple Suggestions

- **Get to bed.** What you do in the evening will shape your morning. If you want to pray in the morning, then plan your evening so you don’t stay up too late. The evening and the morning are connected.

- **Get up.** Praying in bed is wonderful. In fact, the more you pray out of bed, the more you’ll pray in bed. But you’ll never develop a morning prayer time in bed. So, get up!

- **Get awake.** Maybe you’ll need a pot of coffee or take a shower. Do whatever it takes to be sure you’re awake enough to have a conversation.

- **Get a quiet place.** Maybe a room, a chair, or a place with a view will work for you. Or maybe you do better going for a walk. Just make sure no one can interrupt you.

- **Get comfortable.** Don’t feel that you have to pray on your knees. The pain of doing so can be distracting when you are trying to have a conversation with your Heavenly Father. So, find a position that is comfortable for you.

- **Get going.** Start with just 5 minutes. Start with a small goal that you can attain rather than something heroic. You’ll quickly find that time will fly.

- **Keep going.** Consistency is more important than length. If you pray five minutes every day, then the length of time will slowly grow. You’ll look up and discover that twenty minutes have gone by. You’ll enjoy being with God.

**Thought:** Regardless of how or when you pray, if you give God the space, He will touch your soul. God knows you are exhausted, but at the same time He longs to be part of your life. A feast awaits.
Session 4

In Session 4 of our study, we will conclude Part One, “LEARNING TO PRAY LIKE A CHILD”

We begin this study by LEARNING TO BE HELPLESS

PRAYER = HELPLESSNESS
The Problem: God wants us to come to Him empty-handed, weary, and heavy-laden. But, instinctively, we want to get rid of our helplessness before we come to Him.

The Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “Prayer is an expression of who we are... We are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment.”

SIX EXAMPLES OF HELPLESSNESS FROM JOHN’S GOSPEL:
The Samaritan Woman (John 4) - has no water
The Official’s Son (John 5) - has no health
The Crippled Man by the Pool (John 5) - has no help to get into the water
The Crowd (John 6) - has no bread
The Blind Man (John 9) - has no sight
Lazarus (John 11) - has no life

Thought: We received Jesus because we were weak, and that’s how we follow Him. We forget that helplessness is how the Christian life works. In Colossians 2:6, Paul said, “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.”

A WRONG VIEW OF MATURITY
A False Assumption: We tell ourselves, “Strong Christians pray a lot. If I were a strong Christian, I would pray more.”

The Reality: Strong Christians do pray more, but they pray more because they realize how weak they are. (They don’t try to hide it from themselves. Weakness is the channel that allows them to access grace.)

A VISUAL DEPICTION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
Immature Christians
• Feel Little Need to Pray
  o When they look at their hearts (which is rarely), they seldom see jealousy.
  o They are barely aware of their impatience
  o They are quick to give advice
    ▪ No complexity in their lives
    ▪ Just do what I say and your life will be easier

PROBLEM......They = Me without Jesus

Mature Christians
• Feel a Huge Need to Pray
  o “Feel” less mature on the inside due to dependence on God
  o Agree with Jesus’ statement, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)
  o Reflect on all the things they’ve done without Jesus which have become nothing
  o Reflect on their weakness

SOLUTION..... Pray Even More
“Jesus isn’t asking us to do anything He isn’t already doing. He is inviting us into His life of helpless dependence on His Heavenly Father. To become more like Jesus is to feel increasingly unable to do life, increasingly wary of your heart. Paradoxically, you get holier while you are feeling less holy. The very thing you were trying to escape – your inability – opens the door to prayer and then to grace.”

-- Paul E. Miller

**Thought:** If we think we can do life on our own (INDEPENDENCE), we will not take prayer seriously. Our failure to pray will always feel like something else – a lack of discipline or too many obligations. But when something is important to us, we make room for it.

**CRYING “ABBA” CONTINUOUSLY**

Abba = Papa = Daddy

Galatians 4:6: “God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”

In these instances, the Spirit isn’t assisting us to pray; He is the one who is actually praying. He is the PRAY – ER.

**FATHER!**
- Jesus’ first recorded sentence as a youth (Luke 2:49) was, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”
- The first word uttered by the returning prodigal son was Abba (Father).
- The first words of the Lord’s Prayer (Our Father . . . )
- The first word Jesus utters on the cross: “Father (Abba), forgive them (Luke 23:24)
- One of the last words on the cross: “Father (Abba), into your hands I commit my spirit!”

**CONTINUOUS PRAYING WITH ONE-, TWO-, or THREE-WORD PRAYERS:**
- Abba/Father
- Teach me
- Help me
- Jesus is Lord
- Be anxious for nothing

Praying simple one-word prayers or a verse of scripture takes the pressure off because we don’t have to sort out exactly what we need . . . Often we are too weary to figure out what the problem is. We just know that life – including ours – doesn’t work. So we pray, Father, Father, Father.”

-- Paul E. Miller

**CONTINUOUS PRAYING --- What It’s Not**

Eastern mysticism – A psycho-spiritual technique that disengages from RELATIONSHIP and escapes pain by dulling self. Attempting to empty their minds and become “one” with the non-personal “all”.

**CONTINUOUS PRAYING --- What It Is**

As Christians, we realize we can’t cure ourselves, so we cry out to our Heavenly Father, our primary RELATIONSHIP.

Paul, the apostle, was constantly aware of his helplessness and the helplessness of the churches he loved – so he prayed **constantly**. Twelve examples of this are:

1. Romans 1:9-10 Without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers.
2. 1 Corinthians 1:4 I give thanks to my God **always** for you.
3. Ephesians 1:16 I **do not cease** to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.
4. Ephesians 6:18 Praying **at all times** in the Spirit.
5. Colossians 1:9 We have not ceased to pray for you.
7. Colossians 4:12 Always struggling on your behalf in his prayers.
8. 1 Thess. 1:2 Constantly mentioning you in our prayers.
9. 1 Thess. 2:13 We also thank God constantly for you.
10. 1 Thess. 3:10 As we pray most earnestly night and day.
11. 2 Thess. 1:11 We always pray for you.
12. 2 Timothy 1:3 I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

He also tells the young churches to pray in the same pattern of “constant prayer”:
1. Romans 12:12 Be constant in prayer.
2. 1 Thess. 5:17 Pray without ceasing.

Thought: A praying life isn’t simply a morning prayer time; It is about slipping into prayer at odd hours of the day, not because we are disciplined but because we are in touch with our own poverty of spirit, realizing the we can’t even walk through a mall or our neighborhood without the help of the Spirit of Jesus.

BENDING YOUR HEART TO YOUR FATHER
Anxiety – A Springboard to Bending Our Hearts to God
• The spirit of restlessness in us (not the deeper, clinical mental disorder)
• Vain attempts to suppress our spirit of restlessness
  o “Happy Pill” or “Joy Juice”
  o “Happy Thoughts” (Transcendental Meditation)
  o Smother it with pleasure/things/activity

The Best Response to Anxiety
• Turn our anxiety toward God
• Slip into continuous praying

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANXIETY AND PRAYER
A Broken “Prayer Link”
• The connection with anxiety and prayer goes back to Eden, where Adam and Eve were in unbroken fellowship with God and continuous praying was normal. When they sought independence from God (The Fall) they stopped walking with God in the cool of the day and their “prayer link” was broken.
• A broken “prayer link” looks like ANXIETY
  o Like Severed Power Lines
    ▪ Flying around wildly
    ▪ Destroying everything they touch
  o It is “Self on its Own”
    ▪ Tries to get control
    ▪ Unable to relax in the face of chaos
    ▪ A godlike stance without godlike character
    ▪ Wants to be God, but lacks God’s wisdom, power, or knowledge.

An Unbroken “Prayer Link” (Jesus’ Example)
• Oddly enough, it took God to show us how not to be godlike.
  o Jesus was the first person who didn’t seek independence
    ▪ He wanted to be in constant contact with His Heavenly Father
    ▪ He humbled Himself to death on the cross becoming anxious so we could be free from anxiety.
So, What Do We Do?

- Cling to our Father in the face of chaos by continuously praying
  - Remember, our Good Shepherd goes with us **through** the valley of the shadow of death, not **around** it.
- Cry out for grace, because we know we don’t have control
- Instead of flailing around like severed power lines, our praying spirits can bless everything we touch.

**THE CONNECTION BETWEEN A HUMBLE HEART AND A QUIET HEART**

David’s expression of this connection:

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child on its mother; like a weaned child is my soul on me.” (Psalm 131:1-2)

**Thought:** We become anxious when we take a godlike stance, occupying ourselves with things too great for us. We return to sanity by becoming like little children, resting on our mothers.

**YOUR HEART – A PRAYER FACTORY**

- Your heart can become a prayer factory because, like Jesus, you are completely dependent. You needed God 10 minutes ago; you need Him now.
  - Pray in the Chaos
    - Don’t waste your effort by hunting for the “perfect spiritual state” to lift you above the chaos.
  - Keep the Factory Going
    - As your heart or your circumstances generate problems, keep generating prayer (You’ll find that the chaos lessens.)
- A Good Verse To Live By
  - Philippians 4:6-7

  *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

If we pray, we can open the door to the peace that goes beyond human understanding.

**INVITATIONS TO PRAYER**

When we pray continuously, moments when we are prone to anxiety can become invitations to drift into prayer.

- A traffic jam
- A slight from a friend
- A pressured deadline

Other Examples: __________________________

All of these can serve as a door to God. You’ll find yourself turning off the car radio to be with your Heavenly Father. You’ll wake up at night and discover yourself praying. It will be like breathing.

**SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION TO PART 2: “LEARNING TO TRUST AGAIN”**

When we stop trying to control our lives and, instead, allow our anxieties and problems to bring us to God in prayer, we shift from worry to watching. We watch God weave his patterns in the story of our lives. Instead of trying to be out front, designing our lives, we realize we are inside God’s drama. As we wait, we begin to see him work, and our lives begin to sparkle with wonder. We are **learning to trust again**.
Session 5

This session takes a look at the first half of part 2, “LEARNING TO TRUST AGAIN”.

UNDERSTANDING CYNICISM

Cynicism – The opposite of a childlike spirit. It is increasingly the dominant spirit of our age.

• An influence, a tone that permeates our culture
• One of the master temptations of our age

Paul Miller, speaking on cynicism, says, “Personally, it is my greatest struggle in prayer. If I get an answer to prayer, sometimes I’ll think, ‘It would have happened anyway.’ Other times I’ll try to pray but wonder if it makes any difference.”

A Defeated Weariness

• Many Christians stand at the edge of cynicism
• Their spirits have begun to deaden, but unlike the cynic, they’ve not lost hope

Thought: Cynicism and defeated weariness have this in common: They both question the active goodness of God on our behalf.

The Feel of Cynicism

• Cynicism is so pervasive that, at times, it feels like a presence
  o Behind the spirit of the age lies an unseen, personal evil presence – a spirit
• If Satan can’t stop us from praying, he will try to rob us of the fruit of praying by dulling our souls.
  o Satan cannot create, but he can corrupt
• Satan is a Deceiver
  o He tells us God’s motives are cynical
    ▪ Adam & Eve (Genesis 3:5)
      • He deceives them by saying, “Here’s what’s really going on.”
        o It’s a false promise of letting them know “the inside track”
        o This is the same deadly intimacy that gossip offers
  o He sees evil everywhere – even in God, Himself
    ▪ Since the Fall, evil feels omnipresent
      • Because it falsely sees “what’s really going on” it feels authentic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CYNICISM</th>
<th>A PRAYING LIFE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Creates a numbness toward life</td>
<td>o Engages evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Always observing and critiquing, but never engaged, loving &amp; hoping</td>
<td>o Doesn’t take “no” for an answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Distant</td>
<td>o Hopes, dreams, and asks with bold confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Destroys intimacy</td>
<td>o Enjoys intimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Leads to a bitterness that can deaden and even destroy the spirit</td>
<td>o Leads to a fellowship that can build up the spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Without hope</td>
<td>o Gives hope</td>
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A Journey Into Cynicism
  - Naïve Optimism (Foolish Confidence)
    - The root of cynicism
    - The wrong kind of faith
      - On the surface appears identical to genuine faith. However, genuine faith comes from knowing our Heavenly Father loves, enjoys and cares for us.
    - Is groundless
      - It is childlike trust without the loving Father
  - A Walk with the Good Shepherd
    - Faith in God leads to a “can-do” boldness and daring action
      - I can walk through the valley of the shadow of death
      - Even in the presence of my enemies, I can enjoy a feast
  - Whistling in the Dark
    - Optimism rooted in the goodness of people collapses when it confronts the dark side of life
    - Shattered optimism sets us up for the fall into defeated weariness and, eventually, cynicism.
      - We go from seeing the bright side of everything to seeing the dark side of everything
      - We feel betrayed by life
  - Thought: In naïve optimism, we don’t need to pray because everything is under control . . . everything is possible. In cynicism we can’t pray because everything is out of control . . . little is possible.

Weariness and Fear - Leave us feeling overwhelmed, unable to move

Cynicism - Leaves us doubting, unable to dream

When these are combined, our hearts are shut down, and we just show up for life, going through the motions.

The Age of Cynicism
  - Our personal struggles with cynicism and defeated weariness are reinforced by an increasing tendency toward perfectionism in American culture (i.e.: the “perfect” relationship, “perfect” children, the “perfect” body). These set us up for a critical spirit – the breeding ground for cynicism. In the absence of perfection, we resort to “spin” – trying to make ourselves look good, unwittingly dividing ourselves into a “public” and a “private” self. We cease to be real and become the subject of cynicism.

Paul Miller says, “Cynicism is the air we breathe, and it is suffocating our hearts. Unless we become disciples of Jesus, this present evil age will first deaden and then destroy our prayer lives, not to mention our souls. Our only hope is to follow Jesus as He leads us out of cynicism.”
FOLLOWING JESUS OUT OF CYNICISM

Jesus offers 6 cures for cynicism: (Here are the first 2)

1. Be Warm But Wary
   - Matthew 10:16: “I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”
     - Jesus doesn’t ignore evil
     - He warns against the temptation to becoming wolves in the face of evil
     - He says to be warm like a dove, but wary like a serpent
     - We don’t have to shut down our hearts in the face of evil
     - We can engage evil
     - Instead of a Naïve Optimism, Have a Cautious Optimism
       - Be wary, but confident in our Heavenly Father
       - Combine a robust trust in the Good Shepherd with a vigilance about the presence of evil
         ▪ In our own hearts
         ▪ In the hearts of others
     - Caution because of the Fall
     - Optimism because of redemption

Thought: We are not called to put on rose-colored glasses and see everything in life as pretty and good and uplifting. Rather, we are called to trust that God sees what we see. In fact, He sees beyond what we see. He sees the whole story and is completely trustworthy to be at work on a grand scale, in the minute details, and even in our own lives. Our confidence in the face of evil comes directly from the spirit of Jesus and animates a praying spirit.

2. Learn to Hope Again
   - Cynicism kills hope, but Jesus is all about hope
   - Hope begins with the heart of God
     - As we grasp what our Father’s heart is like, how He loves to give, then prayer will begin to feel completely natural to us.

3 Examples of Hope — A “Before and After” Perspective:

   1. The blind man
      - Jesus knew the “after” before the “before”.
      - There was reason for hope.

   2. The widow of Nain’s son
      - Jesus gave her hope in a hopeless situation.

   3. Jairus’ daughter
      - Jesus gave him the hope that accompanies believing.

In each of these accounts, Jesus brings hope before he heals. He is not a healing machine – He touches people’s hearts, healing their souls before He heals their bodies.

Paul Miller says, “Many of us believe in the Christian hope of ultimate redemption, but we breathe the cynical spirit of our age and miss the heart of God. . . . When you pray, you are touching the hopeful heart of God. When you know that, prayer becomes an adventure.”
Session 6

Review:
As we concluded last session, we discussed the first 2 of the 6 CURES FOR CYNICISM
1. Be Warm But Wary (Warm like a dove, but wary like a serpent)
2. Learn to Hope Again (Cynicism kills hope, but Jesus is all about hope)
   a. We looked at 3 examples of hope:
      i. The blind man
      ii. The widow of Nain’s son
      iii. Jairus’ daughter
We learned that when we pray, we are touching the hopeful heart of God. When we know that. . . prayer becomes an adventure.

The last 4 Cures for Cynicism are:

3. Cultivate a Childlike Spirit
   • Hunting for Something to Doubt
     o We are cynical when we find God’s answers to our prayers “too easy”
     o Last week we prayed for the rain to hold off for our church picnic
   • Hunting for Something to Do
     o We want to play an active role in the way God answers our prayers
     o We have a hard time simply declaring “this was God’s answer of “YES” to our prayer. We need to learn to JUST DECLARE IT.
       ▪ Bottom line. . . cynicism doesn’t work
   • So, What Do We Do?
     o Cry out for grace like a hungry child
       ▪ As soon as we begin simply asking for help, we have become like a little child again

Thought: The cure for cynicism is to become like a little child again. . . to watch the story our Father is weaving instead of critiquing others’ stories.

Perspective: “Both the child and the cynic walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The cynic focuses on the darkness; the child focuses on the Shepherd.” -- Paul E. Miller

My story: (by: Tim Hatcher)
It was 4:07 AM on September 18, 2001 when it hit me like an elephant landing smack dab in the middle of my chest. (Just one week earlier, the twin towers had fallen and the Pentagon was damaged after terrorists had flown jet airliners full of passengers into them. Another airliner had crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after the passengers thwarted another terrorist attempt.) The medical personnel called it an “M.I.”, which is short for myocardial infarction – a heart attack in layman’s terms.

The attending physicians told me it was a major heart attack and I had suffered extreme cardiac muscle damage. A little more than 9 years earlier, when I was 32, I had undergone a triple coronary artery bypass graft, or as they like to call it in the hospital, a “cabbage”, which is the word that goes along with the acronym (CABG). But things were far worse this time. It was what Fred Sanford used to refer to on T.V. as “the big one”. In their initial attempt to intervene with the blockage in my heart that had caused the heart attack, the repair actually caused a second heart attack. After regrouping, the doctors were able to place enough stents in my coronary artery grafts to allow blood to
flow back to the muscle. However, the damage had been done. My ejection fraction (EF), a measure of my heart’s ability to pump, had been reduced to 17%. This is an extremely weak heart and the result is congestive heart failure (CHF) and from that, various arrhythmias resulted. I was prone to sudden cardiac death (SCD) and suffered from ischemic cardiomyopathy. (My vocabulary has grown in the area of medical terminology!)

Before I could be stabilized, I “coded” twice. The doctors called in my children so I could prepare them for the possibility that their daddy may not be around much longer. My daughter, Jordan, was 13 at the time. My son, Lance, who has dealt with pervasive developmental disorder and autism spectrum disorders, was only 9 at the time. This was not an easy thing to do. Nor was it an easy proposition for my children to face. Also during that time I had begun to get serious with Jane. I continue to be impressed by the way she stuck by me during that ordeal when I’m sure everything in her psyche was screaming “run!”

The insertion of an internal cardiac defibrillator (ICD) in my chest, along with several cardiac medications stabilized my condition. As I began to get ready for my discharge, my doctor told me there was no cure for congestive heart failure, and he gave me three transplant centers to study up on so I could select one to enter into their heart transplant screening process. When I was discharged from the hospital two weeks after my heart attack, I was extremely weak and had lost 30 pounds.

My doctor told me there were no statistics for people in my category. Because I was so young, they didn’t have a great deal of statistical data on the long-term effects of the many medications I was now on. The statistics they had were based on patients 30 to 40 years older than me. My doctor sat me down and told me to plan on living another 5 years. As a 42 year old, I began to develop my 5-year plan. As I looked at it from a practical standpoint, the “cynical” point of view, I “knew” that a future with Jane would most likely not be a part of the storyline. Why had God allowed me to open my heart up to someone so wonderful, only to have this barrier be placed in our future plans?

Knowing that it was totally beyond me to do anything for myself, and also knowing the doctors had basically done all that was medically possible at the time, I simply cried out to God for help. My prayer to him was so focused and so easy because I had exhausted all other avenues. **God was my only alternative.** So, I got “real” before God. I asked for His healing touch on my heart and for Him to make it strong enough that I wouldn’t have to undergo a transplant. I also asked Him to provide a way for me to have a future with Jane.

Now, as Paul Harvey so eloquently put it, you know “the rest of the story”. Within 6 weeks, my cardiac function had increased to more than 30%. It has continued to increase and is now at 40-45%, which is just below “normal”. My doctor was astounded, to say the least! He told me that whatever I had been doing, to keep doing. I have kept the doctor’s advice. I have continued to pray for God to strengthen my heart. Yet, He has done so much more!

So, how did He do it? I haven’t tried to figure it out. Paul Miller says, “When we try to figure out God, He disappears.” I have simply decided to declare it as God’s answer of “yes” to my prayer. Because of His providential care, I have enjoyed 7 years of marriage with Jane; I have been blessed by so many new friends in Dothan; and I have been
blessed to be able to ride a lawn mower around the church from time to time. And, by the way . . . I’m now in year 8 of my 5-year plan! God is good and God is great!

4. Cultivating a Hopeful Heart
Paul Miller, reflecting on a time of suffering in his life, writes:

Immersing myself in Psalm 23 became a habit during this period of suffering. Prayer wasn’t self-discipline; it was desperation. I began by thanking God for his touches of grace from the previous day. Either I thanked God or I gave into bitterness (the step-child of cynicism). There was no middle ground. Now, years later, I still begin my prayer times by reflecting on the Shepherd’s care. I drift through the previous day and watch God at work. Nothing undercuts cynicism more than a spirit of thankfulness. You begin to realize that your whole life is a gift.

- Thankfulness
  - It is not a matter of simply forcing ourselves to see the “happy side of life”. (That would be like returning to naïve optimism.)
  - Thanking God restores the natural order of our dependence on God. (It enables us to see life as it really is.)
  - Thankfulness draws us into the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – into their enjoyment of one another, of life, and of people.

- Cynicism vs. Thanksgiving
  - Cynicism
    - Looks reality in the face, calls it phony, and prides itself on its insight as it pulls back
  - Thanksgiving
    - Looks reality in the face, and rejoices at God’s care. It replaces a bitter spirit with a generous one.

5. Cultivating Repentance

- Cynics imagine they are “disinterested observers” on a quest for authenticity.
  - While purporting to “see through” others’ facades, cynics lack purity of heart
  - A significant source of cynicism is the fracture between our heart and our behavior.

Let’s look at this as we look in on another session with the Prayer Therapist:

Prayer Therapist: So . . . since our last session, how has your struggle with cynicism been going?

Prayer Patient: Well, it’s been a struggle for sure. I find myself letting my heart get out of tune with God, but then as life goes on, I continue to say “Christian” things, but . . . they are just words. I find myself talking about Jesus, but without the presence of Jesus.

Prayer Therapist: Mmm. It sounds like there is a disconnect between what you present and who you are.

Prayer Patient: I know. My words sound phony, so others’ words sound phony too.
Prayer Therapist: O.K. I think we’re onto something here. In short, it looks like your empty religious performance is leading you to think everyone is phony. You are transferring to others what you are doing, yourself. When you add judgment to hypocrisy, the result is the cynicism you’ve been struggling with. It looks like you have a fracture.

Prayer Patient: A fracture? But, you’re not “that” kind of doctor!

Prayer Therapist: Not “that” kind of fracture! The fracture is between your heart and your behavior. Think of it as a sort of split personality thing.

- A Split Personality
  - All sin involves a splitting of the personality – what James (4:8) calls “double-minded”
    - 3 Examples from Paul Miller’s book, “A Praying Life”
      - If we become proud, we have an inflated sense of self that has lost touch with who we really are
      - If a husband watches porn online and then warmly greets his wife, he has created two people – one public and one hidden
      - If you talk about friends disparagingly behind their backs, you’ve created two personalities – the loving friend and the gossiping friend.
        - You try to keep the personalities separate by telling those to whom you gossip, “Please keep this in confidence.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repentance</th>
<th>Cynicism</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Brings the split personality together</td>
<td>• Focuses on the other person’s split personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Restores integrity to life</td>
<td>• Lacks humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The real self is made public</td>
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Thought: By cultivating a lifestyle of repentance, the pure in heart develop integrity, and their own fractures are healed. By beginning with their own impurity, they avoid the critical, negative stance of cynicism.

6. Developing and Eye for Jesus
   “Cynicism looks in the wrong direction. It looks for cracks in Christianity instead of looking for the presence of Jesus. It is an orientation of the heart.”
   -- Paul E. Miller

So... If we can learn to develop an eye for Jesus, we will be well on our way to curing cynicism.

- Whose Kingdom?
  - A principal source of cynicism comes from “looking up at” Christian leaders who have gotten Jesus’ kingdom mixed up with their own.
  - Jesus never used his power to show off
    - He used his power for love
    - He wasn’t immediately noticeable
      - Humility makes us disappear (which is why we avoid it)
  - We need to “look lower” for Jesus
    - We need to ask ourselves, “Where did I see Jesus today?”
• We need to look where the power is not obvious
• We need to look at people simply, as a child does

When Paul Miller began to “look lower”, his eyes were opened. He writes:
“The presence of Jesus, the only truly authentic person who ever lived, would reveal itself in the restoration of authenticity in people. I’d see Christians whose inner and outer lives matched.”

• Where Do We Focus?
  o **Not on** people’s lack of integrity (on their split personalities)
  o **On** how Jesus is reshaping the church to be more like himself
    ▪ We need to view the body of Christ with grace

“Obviously, Christians are not better than non-Christians. In fact, Paul says, in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1, that the raw material of believers is worse than that of unbelievers. The Corinthians themselves prove that! Christians aren’t superior, but our Savior is. He makes the difference. He is alive and well in his church.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Summary:
The very thing we are afraid of – our brokenness – is the door to our Father’s heart. A grace-saturated vision enables us to defeat cynicism and talk with our Father, restoring a childlike simplicity and wonder.

Prayer Points:

• Help us to quit looking for something to doubt and something to do.
• Help us to cry out for grace like a hungry child.
• As we reflect, help us see, and be thankful, for the times we have enjoyed being in the Good Shepherd’s care.
• Help us to be “real” (and not double-minded).
• As we repent before You, restore integrity in our lives.
• Help us to develop and eye for Jesus and to be able to see Him at work in the “low places” of life. And as we find Him, help us see fellow believers whose inner and outer lives match. And help others see our inner and outer lives match.
• And as we interact with our Christian brothers and sisters, help us to view the body of Christ with grace.
• As we are broken before You, wrap Your loving arms around us.
Session 7

Review:
We began our study by learning the importance of **PRAYING LIKE A CHILD**. Then in **LEARNING TO TRUST AGAIN**, we moved our focus more to “interior” aspects, looking at our hearts and at heart barriers, such as cynicism, that distance us from the Father.

**Introduction:**
Now we move into a more “exterior” vision and focus on asking.

- We shift from “being” to “doing”
- From “my” needs to “your” needs

**A praying life needs both visions for balance.**

Part 3 of Paul Miller’s book, “A PRAYING LIFE” is entitled “**LEARNING TO ASK YOUR FATHER**”. We will get to see more examples of how cynicism has taken root in our larger culture and dulled our hearts to the possibility of a praying life.

**Skit:** “The Science Project” (attached at end of this lesson)

**WHY ASKING IS SO HARD** (chapter 12)

- Who are “THEY”?
  - 18th century – the Enlightenment
    - Leading thinkers decided they didn’t need God anymore
    - Kant’s theory of **FEELINGS** (things that are true only for me) and **FACTS** (things that are true for everyone)

Kant lumped prayer and religion together with other things we can’t be certain of, such as love or right and wrong. They belong to the feeling world of personal opinion reflected by the top half of the chart. In the bottom half of the chart are things we are certain of, such as trees and cars. They are public and real – true for everyone.

Author, Nancy Pearcey, summarized this split between FACTS and FEELINGS by saying, “The lower story became the realm of publicly verifiable FACTS while the upper story became the realm of socially constructed VALUES. This way of viewing the world is called SECULARISM.

- The Spread of Secularism
  - Used to be the realm of university of professors
  - T.V. and rise of pop culture
    - Now secularism has made its way into our living rooms
      - It has captured the West
      - Obscures our view of what the world is really like.

The secular view of **PRAYER** is that it is private and personal, **not** public and real. The secular world says, “If it makes you feel good, then pray for sick people or commune with God, but don’t take it seriously or make it public.

“**When you lump God together with feelings and subjective opinion, then God is marginalized. Prayer feels odd. . . The Enlightenment mind-set marginalizes prayer because it doesn’t permit God to connect with this world. You are allowed a personal, local deity as long as you keep him out of your science notes and don’t take him seriously.**”

-- Paul E. Miller
• The Power of the Enlightenment
  o Before the Enlightenment scientists in the West wrote in their notes that they prayed
    ▪ Johannes Kepler, the Danish astronomer who discovered the laws of planetary motion, wrote that he was “thinking God’s thoughts after him.”
    ▪ Newton and others regularly gave glory to God in their writings
  o The irony
    ▪ Modern science is possible because Christianity taught that God created a world separate from Himself
      ▪ If the world is separate, we can investigate it
    ▪ Ancient cultures were unable to seriously investigate the world because their gods were inseparable from it
      ▪ Caananite god, Baal (god of thunder and storm)
        o When it is thundering, you are hearing Baal
        o Nothing to investigate – your god is enmeshed in the world.
      ▪ Ancient Greeks
        o Believed physical matter was chaos
        o They lacked the Judeo-Christian view that believes God created a world separate from himself, with wisdom as his companion (Proverbs 8:22-31).

• Secularism as a Religious Belief
  o Grew out of the pride of human achievement
    ▪ Particularly scientific achievement
  o Masquerades as science or reality
    ▪ As opposed to religion (which it calls “opinion”)
  o Claims to have given us the gift of science
    ▪ Although, in fact, Christianity gave us the gift of science

Peter Jennings, the former anchorman of ABC’s Evening News, used to tell reporters, “When you ask someone, ‘What got you through this crisis?’ And they say, ‘God,’ don’t say, ‘No, really. . . what got you through?’” You see, Peter Jennings was aware that the fog of the Enlightenment tempted our cultural elites to dismiss the value of prayer. . . of God at work in this world.

• Secularism – A Cynical View of Reality
  o The tug-of-war with our teenage children
    ▪ “God-talk” is relegated to the not-real world
    ▪ Makes it easy for them to see “God-talk” as phony

“The Enlightenment doesn’t say that religion is not real. It defines it as not real. Once you’ve defined religion as not real, then it isn’t even an item for discussion. Add to the secular model of reality our inability to follow Jesus, and you’ve got phonies. First prayer is defined as phony, and then it feels phony.”

-- Paul E. Miller

So. . . 12-year old Emily Miller instinctively felt that she lived in two worlds: a God world and a real world. When those worlds touched, she tried to keep them separate. She had been breathing the air of the culture.

Paul Miller sums up his thoughts as follows: “Because this is my Father’s world, then as Emily and I kneel by a stream to do a science experiment, we should pray and ask for His help. It is a complete unity of thinking and feeling, physical and spiritual, public and personal. It is my Father’s world.”
By the way... Emily’s experiment went on to earn her 1st place in the regional science fair and finally, their state science fair!

WHY WE CAN ASK (chapter 13)
Our society has a tendency to think that prayer doesn’t make any difference. We are confident in science, but not God. The issue of power (the ability to make a difference... to change something) is at the heart of asking.

- Power in Prayer
  - Not like other realms where powerful financial advisors and doctors are better than others
  - It comes from being in touch with our weakness
    - Jesus told stories of weak people who knew they couldn’t do life on their own in order to teach us how to pray
      - The persistent widow
      - The friend at midnight

(They get access, not because they are strong but because they are desperate.)

Thought: Learned desperation is at the heart of a praying life.

- An Infinite – Personal God
  - This is such an astounding idea that we struggle to grasp it
    - Common feeling among many: An infinite God is O.K. as long as He doesn’t get “too personal”.
      - (As long as He stays out of science project notes.)
  - David’s Expression in Psalm 23
    - “The Lord (infinite) is my shepherd (personal).”
    - The words “me” or “my” ring 13 times throughout this Psalm.
  - Solomon’s Expression in his prayer of dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 6:18)
    - “Will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!”
  - Isaiah’s Expression (57:15)

“Majesty and humility are such an odd fit. This is one reason we struggle with prayer. We just don’t think God could be concerned with the puny details of our lives. We either believe that He’s too big or that we’re not that important. No wonder Jesus told us to be like little children. Little children are not daunted by the size of their parents. They come regardless.”

-- Paul E. Miller

- Hey, Not Too Close!
  - We don’t like God too close
    - Especially if He is a deity we can’t control
    - We have a primal fear of walking with God in the garden, naked, without clothing.
  - We desperately want intimacy
    - But when it comes, we pull back
    - We are fearful of a God who is too personal... too pure
    - We are much more comfortable with God at a distance

In the early 90’s there was a popular song called “From a Distance” and was sung by several well known artists, including Bette Midler and Kathy Mattea. The lyrics imagine how we look from God’s perspective, which the writer visualizes to be from somewhere out in space looking down on
this sphere we call Earth. Listen to the chorus of the song: “God is watching us. God is watching us. God is watching us, from a distance.”

It’s certainly an interesting perspective, and it was a popular and pretty song. **But it is rotten theology!** It says: “everything looks pretty good when viewed from afar” (which is, of course, often true). The theological implication, however, is that “from a distance” is precisely how God sees us. This God conjured up in the mind of the lyricist is remote, distant and most of all, obviously blind to what is really going on “down here” on earth. And, seeing nothing out of order, oblivious to the details of our lives, he simply watches. He doesn’t do anything. He just watches. He watches like we would watch a bunch of ants carrying off a moth, or like we watch a far off tornado or a hailstorm, fascinated but uninvolved since it doesn’t affect us. **Did I mention that this was a pretty song, but rotten theology?!**

**A Wonderful Reality**
- God is **not** at a distance
  - He is right here with us
  - Psalm 23:4 tells us that He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death
  - Psalm 46:1 tells us that He is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble

So... We don’t have to keep God “at a distance”. He is keenly aware of the messes we get into and is standing there... ready for us to run to Him so He can wrap His loving arms around us.

**A Praying Life. . .**
- Opens itself to an infinite, searching God
  - We can’t do that without releasing control. . . without constantly surrendering our will to God.

**Thought:** “Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10) is actually scary.

**Prayer Points:**
- As we go about our lives, help us be aware of the dangers of breathing the air of the culture
- Help us realize that this is our Father’s world and we are free to come to You about anything in it
- Help us to be in touch with our weakness, realizing that we can rely on Your strength in our times of desperation
- Thank You for being not only Infinite and Almighty, but also a personal God who doesn’t remain at a distance, but is aware of the details of our lives
- Thank You for being our refuge and strength. And thank You for being our ever-present help in times of trouble in our lives
- Help us to give up trying to have control and simply release it to You so we can constantly surrender our will to Yours.
Narrator: Paul and Jill Miller did not have a stellar history helping their children with science projects. Just last year, Emily, their youngest daughter, had barely gotten a passing grade for her 6th grade experiment on training fish to eat in response to a flashlight. (They had learned the hard way that there was a reason PAVLOV had used dogs and not fish.) And the year before that, Jill, thinking it was a bag of trash, took their son Andrew’s experiment to the thrift store the day before it was due. Jill had spent the rest of the day “dumpster diving” behind the thrift store in a vain attempt to retrieve it. Now, for her 7th grade science project, Emily had decided to measure bacteria levels along the bank of a local stream. As Paul and Emily waded into the creek, they got a water sample, and carefully tested it. They were both nervous about following the precise steps of their little bacteria testing kit.

Paul: Emily, before we do this, let’s pray.

Emily: You know, Dad, with our track record, that’s a good idea.

Paul: Father, please help us be careful about following these steps.

Emily: And please keep the alligators away too! Amen.

Narrator: After the first test was finished, Emily took out her logbook to record each step.

Emily: Dad, what was the first thing we did?

Paul: Well . . . we prayed.

Emily: I can’t write that!

Paul: Why not? We prayed.

Emily: That isn’t how it works, Dad. **They** don’t want us to say **that**.

Narrator: Emily had gone to Christian schools her whole life, starting with nursery school. She regularly attended church and Sunday school and went to a Christian Camp in the summer. All her friends were Christians, along with her brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. Frankly, she lived in a “Christian ghetto”. Yet, this mysterious “THEY” trumped this massive Christian influence in her life.
Session 8

Review:
We began our study by learning the importance of **PRAYING LIKE A CHILD**. Then in **LEARNING TO TRUST AGAIN**, we moved our focus more to “interior” aspects, looking at our hearts and at heart barriers, such as cynicism, that distance us from the Father. Last session, we began to study the idea of **LEARNING TO ASK YOUR FATHER**. We studied some examples of how cynicism has taken root in our larger culture and dulled our hearts to the possibility of a praying life.

Introduction:
This session, we ask the question: **HOW PERSONAL IS GOD?** (Chapter 14)

Praying for Parking Places  Read “A Praying Life” pp. 119-120

A View Disconnected from Real Life

- Some theologians think we shouldn’t pray for parking places because it means that someone else won’t get one
- One spiritual writer said, “If a person hears a fire truck coming down the street and prays, ‘God, may it not be my house,’ that person is uttering an immoral prayer because he or she is willing it to be someone else’s house. It would be better to pray, ‘God, may it be my house, but may no one be hurt.’”
- Praying isn’t a “zero-sum” game
  - The appearance of a fire truck doesn’t necessarily mean a house is on fire.
    - Maybe a cat is up a tree
    - Maybe it’s a medical emergency
- Don’t overspiritualize prayer
  - We don’t need to submit to God so quickly that we aren’t “real” before God
    - When Jesus prayed at Gethsemane, “take this cup from me” he is being real
  - Overspiritualizing prayer suppresses our natural desire “that our house not be burning”
  - When we stop being ourselves with God, we are no longer in real conversation with God

“Christians rush to ‘not my will, but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42, NIV) without first expressing their hearts. They submit so quickly that they disappear.” -- Paul E. Miller

- Neo-Platonism
  - Ancient Greek philosophy that de-emphasized the physical world
    - Greek stoics took pride in their ability to be unruffled by life
  - Seeped into the church, equating spirituality with a suppression of desire and emotion
    - Explains why Jesus is portrayed in so many films as a bit strange and effeminate
      - He walks slowly, talks slowly, and moves slowly
        (You want to put a pin in him!)
o Even Augustine was influenced by this philosophy
   • He wrote, “Ask nothing of God, save himself.”
     • Augustine was “half right”
       o The best gift God can give us is Himself
         • We are reminded of this by Jonathan Edwards and John Piper
     • But, “ask nothing of God” is disconnected from life

**Trying to Separate Doing from Being**
- We overspiritualize prayer when we separate our mundane needs (doing) from God's best gift, his loving presence (being)
  o Example:
    ▪ Imagine a husband who really loves his wife
      • He is attentive to her needs
      • He listens to her heart
      • He is her best earthly gift
    ▪ How would she react if he said to her, “Don't ask me for anything. I'm your best gift.”?
      • Of course this would be ridiculous
        o The husband's love for his wife is not disengaged from responding thoughtfully and generously to her requests.

So . . . The church is influenced by Neo-Platonism (the physical isn't important), and the world is shaped by the Enlightenment (the spiritual isn’t important). Both perspectives stifle honest, person-to-person praying in the church.

**Desire and Surrender – The Perfect Balance to Praying**
- Jesus was in touch with the real world
  o He prays that he will not drink the cup of his Father's wrath
  o He cries out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)
  o He is real

“It is perfectly natural to pray, 'God please help whomever’s house is on fire. Keep them safe, and help it not to be our house.' You are being honest with your desire and loving at the same time. . . Desire and surrender are the perfect balance to praying.”

-- Paul E. Miller

**The Problem with Asking**
- Our dislike of asking God is rooted in our desire for independence
- What do we lose when we have a praying life?
  o Control and independence
- What do we gain when we have a praying life?
  o Friendship with God
  o A quiet heart
  o The living work of God in the hearts of those we love
  o The ability to roll back the tide of evil
- Essentially, we lose our kingdom and get His kingdom
  o We move from being independent players to dependent lovers
  o We move from being orphans to children of God
“Suffering is God’s gift to make us aware of our contingent existence. It creates an environment where we see the true nature of our existence – dependent on the living God.”

-- Paul E. Miller

**The Mystery of Prayer**

- Looking sideways at how prayer works
  - Like an autistic child (see bottom of p. 126 and top of p. 127)
  - Too overwhelming to observe directly
- The closer something is to the character of God, the more it reflects him and the less it can be measured
  - Things like integrity, beauty, hope, and love are all in the same category as prayer
    - You can tell their presence and even describe them
    - You can’t define them – they are too close to God’s image
- Another influence of the Enlightenment
  - The teachings of the Enlightenment are behind the assumption that we can figure out how everything works because “everything” is just matter and energy
  - This definition of “everything” leaves out all the important things of life:
    - Love
    - Beauty
    - People
  - The most precious things of life can’t be proven or observed directly, but we know them as surely as we know that the sun and moon exist

“Prayer is strikingly intimate. As soon as you take a specific answer to prayer and try to figure out what caused it, you lose God.”

-- Paul E. Miller

**Still Trying to Dissect How Prayer Works?**

- Like using a magnifying glass to try to figure out why a woman is beautiful
  - If you turn God into an object, he has a way of disappearing
- The only way to know how prayer works is to have a complete knowledge and control of the past, present, and future
  - In other words . . . you can figure out how prayer works if you are God

“If you are going to enter this divine dance we call prayer, you have to surrender your desire to be in control – to figure out how prayer works. You’ve got to let God take the lead. You have to trust.”

-- Paul E. Miller
Review:
Two sessions ago, we began our study on the idea of “LEARNING TO ASK YOUR FATHER”. We studied some examples of how cynicism has taken root in our larger culture and dulled our hearts to the possibility of a praying life. Last session, we looked at the question asked in Chapter 14 of Paul E. Miller’s book, “A Praying Life”: “HOW PERSONAL IS GOD?” We learned that Desire and Surrender are “The Perfect Balance to Praying”

As Paul Miller puts it:
“If you are going to enter this divine dance we call prayer, you have to surrender your desire to be in control – to figure out how prayer works. You’ve got to let God take the lead. You have to trust.”

Introduction:
This session we take a look at the question posed in Chapter 15 of “A Praying Life”: “What Do We Do With Jesus’ Extravagant Promises About Prayer?”

Paul Miller says, “Jesus has a way of making us nervous, especially when He talks about prayer.”

Six Extravagant Promises Made By Jesus Following the Last Supper (John, chapters 14 -16)
1. “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”
2. “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”
3. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.”
4. “…so whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give it to you.”
5. “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, He will give it to you…”
6. “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

Six different times Jesus says, “Ask and I will give it to you.”

So... What do we do with Jesus’ extravagant promises about prayer?
- We try to limit the extravagance of Jesus
  - Scholars try to say that John 14:13 –14 doesn’t “really” say what it says.
    - They want us to think what Jesus “really” means is if we are going on a mission trip, God will help us, but even then we have to say, “Your will be done.”
    - They try to limit Jesus’ extravagance to overtly religious activities
      - They buy into the Enlightenment model of relegating prayer to our “private” world (true for me).
      - They “solve” the problem of Jesus’ extravagant claims by explaining them away.
      - They keep God “infinite” but lose His closeness.

Thought: Prayer is not magic or an attempt to control God. He is not our toy or personal vending machine. We have to be “in the vine” and abide in Him.
Dangerous Cliffs to Avoid

Jesus’ brother, James, balances out Jesus’ extravagant promises. He describes

2 Dangers in Asking
1. Not Asking (falling off the cliff on the left side)
2. Asking Selfishly (falling off the cliff on the right side)

We can fall off either cliff if we are not careful.

The Perfect Balance – Jesus’ Prayer at Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-36)

- Jesus’ prayer demonstrates the perfect balance, avoiding the “NOT ASKING” cliff saying, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me.”
- If we surrender to God before we are real with Him, we fall off the “NOT ASKING” cliff.
  - Sometimes we try so hard to be “good” that we aren’t “real”.
  - This results in functional deism, where we are separated from God.
    - The “real me” doesn’t encounter the real God.
- Jesus avoids the “ASKING SELFISHLY” cliff by surrendering completely. When He says, “Yet not what I will, but what You will,” He is real about His feelings, but they don’t control Him. Nor does He try to control God with His feelings.
  - He doesn’t use His ability to communicate with His Father as a means of doing His own will.
  - He submits to the story His Father is weaving in His life.

Question: Why would Jesus ask His Father for something He knows He wouldn’t do?

- It makes no sense on a purely rational level. (But “reason” is only part of who we are as image bearers of God.)
- Desire, feelings and passion are also part of who we are.

Another example from Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego (Daniel 3:17 – 18)

- Similar situation . . . Facing the heat of a blazing furnace.
  - Their response to Nebuchadnezzar’s command to bow before him was identical to the balance of Jesus.
    - They tell the king, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.” (3:17)
    - They avoid the “NOT ASKING” cliff by boldly declaring that God would rescue them.
      - Then, in the next breath, they say, “But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods.” (3:18)

Even though this sounds like a contradiction, it’s not. They are:
1. Asking boldly, and
2. Surrendering completely

They avoid functional deism or separation from God by their bold statement of God’s deliverance; then they avoid living selfishly by their complete surrender to the story God has placed them in.
Back to the Extravagant Promise of Jesus

• Now understanding one of the critical structures of prayer, we must still deal with Jesus’ promise of “Ask whatever you wish.”

Question: Why didn’t He bring balance to that statement if that is what He meant?

Answer: Because we are not balanced.

   Instinctively we are either:
   1. confident in ourselves, or
   2. despairing in ourselves

   In both cases, we are paralyzed, not moving toward God.

Paul Miller’s summation of this is:

   Like a parent whose toddler is about to wander off, Jesus is yelling, “My Father has a big heart. He loves the details of your life. Tell Him what you need and He will do it for you.” Jesus wants us to tap into the generous heart of His Father. He wants us to lose all confidence in ourselves because “apart from [Jesus] you can do nothing”; He wants us to have complete confidence in Him because “whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” (John 15:5)

Thought: All of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in the Gospels can be summarized with one word: ASK. His greatest concern is that our failure or reluctance to ask keeps us distant from God.

But... that's not the only reason He tells us to “ask anything”. God wants to give us good gifts. He loves to give.

   John 3:16 reminds us that “...God so loved the world, that He gave...”

2 Case Studies

Case Study 1:

In the parable of the persistent widow (see Luke 18:1 – 8) Jesus describes an unjust judge turning a cold shoulder on a widow. When she keeps pestering him, he finally relents, not out of concern for her, but because he takes a realistic look at his own self interest. If he doesn’t solve her problem, she will make his life miserable.

Question: What logic does Jesus give in verses 7 and 8 regarding God’s ability and desire to help us?

   (If the judge will help a widow, won’t our Father help us?) But of course!
Case Study 2:

In the parable of the friend at midnight (see Luke 11:5-8), the host bangs on his neighbor’s door at midnight to borrow 3 loaves of bread because a friend has come. The neighbor yells at the host to stop bothering him because he and his family are in bed. Finally, he realizes that since he can’t sleep with the host pounding on his door, he might as well give him the 3 loaves of bread just to shut him up.

If the 3 loaves of bread represent:

1. Physical needs of the friend
2. Relational needs of the friend (community)
3. Heart needs of the friend (to be loved)

Our God is a “3-loaf God”!

Praying in Jesus’ Name

- The name of Jesus gives our prayers “royal access”.
  - Jesus isn’t just the Savior of our souls; He’s also the Savior of our prayers.

“ Asking in Jesus’ name isn’t another thing I have to get right so my prayers are perfect. It is one more gift of God because my prayers are so imperfect.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Jane’s Story

For more than three years Jane has prayed that her sons would be reunited with her. Her prayers before God have covered the entire spectrum from “polite and quiet asking” all the way to the continuous “pounding on the door” of God’s heart.

For three years Jane has been persistent. During this time God has taught her how to lean on Him and increase her dependence on Him. She has continued to ask boldly, and at the same time, surrender completely to God. It has not always been easy for her to see the story God is weaving in her life, but she has continued to be faithful in taking her requests to Him. During this process, Jane grew even closer to her earthly father. His quiet and calm nature was always a safe and steady port in some of the rough storms of Jane’s life. He, also, was persistent in making his request known to God for Jane's relationship to be restored with her boys.

Being able to view life from our “rear view” perspective, we are able to more clearly see the past chapters of the story God is weaving in our lives. But we are not challenged with the task of having to know the future chapters . . . that’s God’s territory. We are only called to abide in Him. If Jane had been able to see the future chapters of the story God was weaving in her life, she would have found it extremely difficult to accept that the occasion upon which she would spend a brief time with both her sons would be at her own father’s funeral. Although the relationship with both boys is far from being fully restored, the door has been opened.

Jane continues to abide in Him. She has learned to surrender her will to the story in which God has placed her. The “real” Jane has met the real God. She continues to tell God what she wants and, at the same time, she surrenders to His timing and His will. Jane is an example of “a praying life”.
Learning to Abide

Thought: The praying life is the abiding life.

Abiding
- Is anything but disconnected from life.
- It’s the way life should be done – in partnership with God
- One of the best ways to learn how to abide is to “ask anything”
  - Don’t just ask for “spiritual” or “good” things
  - Tell God what you want

Paul Miller says, “Before you can abide, the real you has to meet the real God. Ask anything.”

First Things First
If we are going to take Jesus’ offer of “ask anything” seriously, the first thing we need to do is ask. And in order to ask, we must reflect on what we want.
This is where it starts getting complicated.
- It takes true reflection
- And it works best if we are “abiding” in Him, and in tune with the story God is weaving in our lives.

Prayer Points:
- Help us remember that You are not only an infinite and all-powerful God, but also that You are a personal God who is weaving a story in each of our lives.
- Help us avoid the pitfalls of NOT ASKING andASKING SELFISHLY. But let us look to Jesus’ example as we learn to ASK BOLDLY, and at the same time, SURRENDER COMPLETELY to Your will.
- We know that You love to give. Help us learn to reflect on just what it is that we want as we learn to abide in You.
Session 10

Review:
Our study on the idea of LEARNING TO ASK YOUR FATHER has focused on 2 questions thus far: How Personal is God? and What Do We Do With Jesus’ Extravagant Promises About Prayer? Last session we learned how to avoid the dangerous cliffs of NOT ASKING and ASKING SELFISHLY by learning how to ASK BOLDLY and SURRENDER COMPLETELY.

This session our study follows Chapter 16 of Paul E. Miller’s book, “A Praying Life” and continues to follow the theme of ASKING by looking at What We Don’t Ask For: “Our Daily Bread”

Introduction: In the church, most prayer requests are limited to sickness, joblessness, kids in crisis, and maybe an occasional missionary. Yet Jesus’ prayer for daily bread was an invitation to bring ALL our needs to Him.

“In the Greek, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ (Matthew 6:11) is an obscure expression that literally means “Give us tomorrow’s bread today.” It hints at the abundance God wants to bring into our lives. I suspect that your refrigerator or your checking account have “tomorrow’s bread” already there.”
--Paul E. Miller

Opening the Door
Often our need for daily bread opens the doors to deeper heart needs for real food.

- The day after Jesus fed the five thousand, the crowds met him on the beach at Capernaum hungry for breakfast.
- Jesus told them He had better food for them:
  - “The bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (John 6:33)

2 Questions to Explore: (1) What other kinds of daily bread might we not ask for? (2) How might our needs for daily bread show us our need for bread from heaven?

Material Things – Too Selfish, Too Vulnerable
We’ve already seen how we don’t like to pray for mundane things such as parking spaces, but there are whole other categories, particularly material things, where it doesn’t occur to us to ask God. Here’s an example Paul Miller used to illustrate this:

The Vacation Home:
- We balk at praying, “God I want a vacation home. Would You get me one?”
  - We don’t mind acting selfishly, but talking selfishly is embarrassing!
    - A vacation home is so beyond the purview of “daily bread” that it feels presumptuous to ask God for one.

So . . . What do we do instead of asking God for a vacation home?
- We look at our finances, talk to a REALTOR®, and go buy one – all without seriously praying about the decision.
- Vacation homes are not inherently sinful!
  - God delights in giving His children good gifts (including vacation homes).
  - But . . . He wants to be part of all the decisions we make.
    - He wants our material needs to draw us into our soul needs.
      - This is what it means to abide.
        - To include Him in every aspect of our lives.
“Abiding is a perfect way to describe a praying life.”
-- Paul E. Miller

Continuing with the Vacation Home Example:

- Many Christians who are thinking of buying a vacation home might even pray, asking God practical questions, such as:
  - Can we afford it?
  - Will it be too much work?
  - Should we make an offer on this house?

These are good questions, but we seldom ask God heart questions such as:
  - Will a second home elevate us above other people?
  - Will it isolate us?

In the first set of “practical questions” God is our financial advisor. In the second set of “heart questions”, He has become our Lord. We are abiding. We are feeding our soul with “food that lasts”.

Not Just in the Realm of Vacation Homes

- We can do the same thing with a promotion.
  - It feels selfish to pray for one, so instead, we work for one!
    - We end up separating a big part of our lives from God because we are trying to feel good about ourselves.
    - We create “two selves”:
      - A spiritual self; and
      - A material self

Keeping God at a Distance

- We shy away from “heart prayers’ because they invite God to rule our lives.
  - They make us vulnerable.
  - Like the crowds at Capernaum, we want breakfast . . . not soul food!

“When we pray the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Your Kingdom Come,’ we are saying ‘King Jesus, rule my life.’ The heart is one of God’s biggest mission fields.”
-- Paul E. Miller

Limiting Our Discussion

- We can also use prayer to keep God at a distance by only talking to God and not to mature believers.
  - For example, which is easier?
    - Confessing impure thoughts to a mature Christian friend? Or
    - Confessing impure thoughts to God?
      - The friend is tougher.
        - That feels real.

Thought: We need to ask the body of Christ (Jesus’ physical presence on earth) the same questions we ask God.

Back to the Vacation Home Example:

- If we isolate praying from the rule of Jesus by not involving other Christians, we’ll end up doing our own will.
  - Many Christians isolate their decision making from the body of Christ.
  - Then they further isolate themselves in their vacation homes.
They say something like: “Well, we prayed about it, and the Lord seemed to confirm it.”

- Perhaps God did confirm it.
- It’s also possible that we used prayer as a “spiritual cover” to “do our own thing”.
  - We can mask our desires even from ourselves!

A Hypothetical Conversation with a Mature Christian Friend:

Paul Miller gives the following example of how one side of a conversation might go when Scripture and a listening heart are woven together:

Bob, my wife and I would love to get a vacation home. You know how pressured life has been for us, and it would be great to get away to a quiet place where we can unwind. We’ve found this beautiful place up on a lake that the whole family could enjoy. At the same time, we’re concerned with what it might do to our hearts. We want to be followers of Jesus, and He warns against building bigger and better barns. Is this a bigger and better barn? Will it elevate us above people? Will it isolate us from people? Is it a wise use of our resources? Will we be limiting what we can give others? At the same time, we think we could use our house to give vacations to people who can’t afford them. Tell me what you think.

It would also be good, as we ask our mature Christian friend these questions, to give our friend enough data to make an intelligent decision:

- Be open about how much it will cost (including “hidden” costs”).
- Be open about what our income is.
- Be open about how it will impact our giving and our savings.

Wisdom – Too Unexpected

When we need advice, we find a wise person, ask him or her a question, and listen to the answer.

- It seldom occurs to us to do this with God.
  - We don’t know how God will answer.
    - We don’t hear an audible voice, so we dismiss the possibility of God speaking in our lives.
    - In effect, we are saying, “I must know how this will work ahead of time. I must be in control.”
  - We forget that in most of life, we don’t have control.

Wisdom vs. Guidance

Too often we find ourselves asking for “guidance” instead of first asking for “wisdom”. Here’s the difference:

- Guidance
  - I’m already in my car and on my way to a trip I have planned for myself.
    - Then I ask God for “guidance” on “my” journey.

- Wisdom
  - I go to God and ask if I even need to be making the trip.
    - This is a richer and more personal approach.
      - I don’t just need help with “my” plans.
      - I need help with my own heart.
Prayer Points:

- As we come to You, help us remember to ask You for our daily bread.

- Help us remember that You delight in giving Your children good gifts and that You want to be a part of all the decisions we make.

- As we learn to abide in You, help us to ask You not only the “practical” questions, but also the “heart” questions of our lives.

- Help us be willing to seek advice from our mature Christian friends in all areas of our lives.

- Help us to remember to ask for wisdom, and then as You reveal the story You are weaving in our lives, guidance in following Your lead.
Session 11

Review:
Our study on the idea of LEARNING TO ASK YOUR FATHER began by asking 2 questions:
(1) How Personal is God?
and
(2) What Do We Do With Jesus’ Extravagant Promises About Prayer?

Last session we looked at one of the things we don’t ask for: “Our Daily Bread”.
This session we will begin by looking at What We Don’t Ask For: “Your Kingdom Come” and then conclude Part III by learning how to: Surrender Completely: “Your Will Be Done”.

Introduction: Christians have done some confusing things with “your kingdom come” that keep the rule of Jesus at a distance.
• We’ve spiritualized the kingdom
  o It only has to do with “spiritual things”
  o We’ve identified the kingdom with Christian institutions

Three Kingdom Prayers We Seldom Ask:

1. Change In Others – Too Controlling, Too Hopeless

• Seldom do we pray seriously and thoughtfully for those we love as they deal with their besetting sins.
  o Many times engaging God in prayer about someone so close to us who has hurt us feels like opening up an old wound.
  o We also hesitate to pray because we’ve been told that we shouldn’t try to “control” someone else.
    1. But the point of prayer is shifting control from us to God.

• Where do we begin?
  o Like little children, we should ask God for what we want.
    1. It might help to write down in a prayer notebook or on a card what we want changed and find a scripture that describes Christ in the person.
    2. Then we could start praying that scripture for them every day and also invite God to work in our own heart.

• How do we continue?
  o Once we’ve learned God loves us, we need to extend His love to others.
    1. By extending grace to this person who has hurt us, we are drawn into the life of the Son – We become Christlike.

“A thankful heart is constantly extending grace because it has received grace. Love and grace are uneven. God poured out on His own Son the criticism I deserve. Now He invites me to pour out undeserving grace on someone who has hurt me. Grace begets grace.”

-- Paul E. Miller
2. Character Change In Me – Too Scary

Almost every Christian is confident God will answer a prayer for change in us, and it scares us to death!

- What happens if we pray for patience?
  - God permits suffering in our lives.
- What happens if we pray for humility?
  - God humbles us.
- We are scared of such prayers because we want to remain in control of our lives . . . we don’t trust God.
- We also don’t pray for a change in ourselves because we don’t want to admit that we need to change.

“But if you take Jesus’ word seriously – ‘Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do’ (John 14:13) – it opens the door to the possibility of real change and hope. No longer are you captured by the mind of culture. You’ve been invited into co-regency with Ruler of the universe. The King has come.”

-- Paul E. Miller

3. Change In Things I Don’t Like In Our Culture – Too Impossible

- Most of the time we just whine about things in our culture we don’t like
  - It never occurs to us to pray that culture itself will change.

“I don’t try to understand prayer. Prayer is deeply personal and deeply mysterious. Adults try to figure out causation. Little children don’t. They just ask.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Thought: If we slow down and reflect, we’ll begin to see whole areas of our lives where we’ve been prayerless.

Chapter 18: Surrender Completely: “Your Will Be Done”

“The great struggle of my life is not trying to discern God’s will; it is trying to discern my own. Once I see that, then prayer flows. I have to be praying because I’m no longer in charge. Either I see all of life as a gift, or I demand that life have a certain look to it.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Getting In Touch With Our Self-Will

- Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6 and 7 is a blueprint for getting in touch with our self-will and letting God take control.
  - Jesus introduces us to what it means to be a child of our Heavenly Father.
My Life – A Room With Open Doors

- To understand the Sermon on the Mount, think of your life as a room filled with open doors called:
  - Money
  - Sex
  - Power
  - Fame

- Jesus begins the sermon by telling you He is going to go through your life and close all the doors to human power and glory.
  - “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5)
    1. Give up power in relationships and I will show you an entirely different way to do life.
    2. Don’t be afraid of being a co-dependent . . . of disappearing. I will take care of you.
  - In the rest of chapter 5, Jesus closes one door after another.
    1. He tells you to empower your enemies, those who abuse you . . . to think of their needs. (5:43-47)
    2. If you suspect that someone is irritated with you, don’t wait for that person to come to you; go to him or her, even if it isn’t your fault. (5:23-24)
    3. Jesus closes the door to revenge, even emotional revenge through distance. (5:38-42)
    4. When you sell something, don’t try to get power over people by using oaths or by promising more than you can deliver. (5:33-37)
    5. He closes the door to a secret life of sexual pleasure by telling you to remove your eye if it is looking at women to use them. (5:27-30)

Thought: If you do what Jesus says in chapter 5, you start to feel spiritual.

- In chapter 6, Jesus deals with wanting to look spiritual.
  1. If you pray, do it in a private place. (6:5-8)
  2. If you fast, pretend you don’t. (6:16-18)
  3. If you give, don’t tell anyone. (6:1-4)

(Here, Jesus closes the door to getting your identity from you own righteousness.)
  4. Instead of getting your security from money, Jesus says to give your money away. (6:19-24)
  5. When you begin to panic when you’ve lost the security of your money, Jesus reminds you that your Father will take care of you, just look at the lilies of the field! (6:25-34)

(With this, Jesus has closed the door of getting our security from money, as well as the doors to human power and glory.)

- As you begin chapter 7, you have a new view of the world.
  - You’ve learned how to put God at the center.
    1. As you look around, you see that everywhere people are so caught up with “stuff”.
    - It is now that Jesus taps you on the shoulder and says, “Stop judging!”
    2. Having closed all your doors, Jesus opens the door to prayer and tells you how to get things done (7:7)
      1. He asks for help from His Father.
2. He talks to His Father and tells Him what He wants.

“Prayer is the positive side of the surrendered will. As you stop doing your own will and wait for God, you enter into His mind. You begin to remain in Him . . . to abide. This is the praying life.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Prayer Points:

- As we go through life and encounter the pain of hurt feelings from others, help us to learn to shift control from us to You by praying seriously and thoughtfully for them;

- Help us to be drawn to You by following Christ’s example of extending grace to those who harm us;

- Help us to remember we can extend grace because grace has been extended to us;

- Help us take a look at our lives through Your eyes, and in those areas where change is needed, enable us to seek Your help through prayer and learn to give up on our attempts to control our lives;

- As we meditate upon the Sermon on the Mount, help us learn what it means to be a child of our Heavenly Father;

- Close the doors of our lives that lead to personal pain and destruction and open the door to prayer so we can remain in constant conversation with You;

- We ask from our hearts that “Your Kingdom Come” and “Your Will Be Done”.
Session 12

Introduction: Chapters 19 & 20 in Paul E. Miller’s, “A Praying Life” follow the story God has been weaving in the life of his daughter, Emily Miller. This is good reading. But, because I am more familiar with another story (my life) I will use it as the framework for this session. I have already shared a little about my son, Lance’s story, along with the similarities in autism between him and Paul Miller’s other daughter, Kim. But, this session we’ll take a look at the story God has been weaving in the life of my daughter, Jordan.

Jordan had a normal childhood with plenty of friends from church and school. She prayed to receive Christ as a 4th grader. When Jordan was nearing the end of her 5th grade year, her mother and I were divorced. Having been the child of divorced parents myself, I made the conscious decision that I would keep her life as “normal” as possible. As Jordan entered her early teens, I noticed how she was increasingly centered on material things as well as on being included with the “popular” social group. Unfortunately, as many parents tend to do, her mother reinforced this aspect of her life out of her desire to be a “friend” rather than a “parent” to our daughter.

Upon turning 16, Jordan received a Lexus from her mother. When Jordan would visit Jane and me, she would go on and on about her $100 per pair designer jeans, expensive purses, and latest cell phone/ipod/etc. Jane & I became concerned at Jordan’s increasing materialism and her decreasing dependence on God. I began to pray for my daughter to become more dependent on God and less dependent on material things and less influenced by her peers. I also began to pray for God to open Jordan’s mom’s eyes to the harm her gifts were causing Jordan. My prayers were centered on how “they” needed to change, but I had not even considered the need for change in my life as well. I just wanted a “quick fix” to the situation at hand. You could say I was demanding.

Paul Miller writes about this as follows:

“God wants to do something bigger than simply answer my prayers. The act of praying draws God into my life and begins to change me, the PRAY-ER, in subtle ways.”

Our Prayers Shape Us

• When we pray for someone, we become more aware of them as a person
• When we pray for someone, it takes the steam out of our tendency to “fix” the situation

“I often find that when God doesn’t answer a prayer, he wants to expose something in me. Our prayers don’t exist in a world of their own. We are in dialogue with a personal, divine Spirit who wants to shape us as much as he wants to hear us.”

-- Paul E. Miller

When our prayers aren’t answered, we need to look at the background:

• How long did we pray?
• What did God do in our heart when we prayed?
• What is God doing in the situation?

Thought: Most of us isolate prayer from the rest of what God is doing in our lives, but God doesn’t work that way.

Continuing the Story:
By the time Jordan was 17, her material lifestyle and desire to be popular resulted in her becoming involved with a young man that was older than her. This was not a good relationship. Jane & I
only met the guy once, but that was enough for us. Unfortunately, Jordan’s mom was not as concerned until everything came crashing down between Jordan and her mom.

So here I was. What had begun with Jordan’s step into materialism and desire to be popular had resulted in her total rebellion against her mom. I remember getting a phone call from Jordan’s mom one night and having to stop her in the middle of the call because what I was learning from her was causing me to have severe chest pains. After a lengthy time of prayer and preparation, I drove to Florida to have a meeting with Jordan and her mom.

During our meeting, I learned that Jordan was in a full state of rebellion and she had no respect for her mother as a parent because the roles had not been clear. After our meeting, I knew that only God would be able to provide the help that would allow Jordan to recognize her rebellion against her mom and against God. I prayed for wisdom for Jordan’s mom and for God to reveal to her the need for her to be Jordan’s parent and not her friend. I also asked God to reveal things in my life that hindered our relationship so our daughter could be restored. Once I realized that only God had the power, and that He was in control, I prayed for Him to provide a way for Jordan’s rebellious spirit to be broken.

Parenting and Prayer

Two Attitudes That Keep Us From Entering Into the Story
God is Weaving in the Lives of Our Children

The Road of Good Asking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ditch of Despair:</th>
<th>The Road of Good Asking</th>
<th>Ditch of Demanding:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have the power.</td>
<td>God has the power.</td>
<td>I have the power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of control.</td>
<td>God in control.</td>
<td>In control.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus:
How my child can’t change.

Focus:
On God – I live in His presence with my disappointment. I begin with my own need to change.

Focus:
How my child needs to change.

Role of Prayer:
None. I’ve given up.

Role of Prayer:
Central. I pray to a personal God so I am simultaneously asking and surrendering.

Role of Prayer:
Another weapon in my battle.

“Many parents, including myself, are initially confident we can change our child. We don’t surrender to our child’s will (which is good), but we try to dominate the child with our own (which is bad). Without realizing it, we become demanding. We are driven by the hope of real change, but the change occurs because we make the right moves. Until we become convinced we can’t change our child’s heart, we will not take prayer seriously. If you are on the road of Good Asking, you have also given up – but in a good way. You’ve given up on your ability to change other people. Instead, you cling to God and watch Him weave His story.”

-- Paul E. Miller

A Parent’s Prayer Answered:
God’s answer was not an easy thing to take because, at that time, I was not fully aware of the story God was weaving. But, I had asked with faith, and now He was providing a way. What resulted was Jordan being removed from her home of comfort in Florida and being placed in a wilderness program in Northern Alabama.
Part of the program in which Jordan was placed called for a period of 30 days before she could see her parents. However, we were in constant contact with her counselors and psychologist. I was also able to write Jordan and receive letters from her. I still have them all today. My prayer life strengthened during that time. But more than that, so did Jordan’s. She had been placed in an environment that took away all material things and all pretense of popularity. So what did she do? Out of her desperation, she learned to call on God for strength.

I was able to see a short video clip of Jordan after she had been in the wilderness program for about 3 weeks. Jane and I rejoiced in how she looked like her old self again. Over the next 12 months, I was able to see how God had answered my prayer of desperation for my daughter. Money couldn’t help her. Good looks couldn’t help her. Popularity couldn’t help her. God had placed Jordan in the perfect position to allow her to learn how to depend on Him.

Also over that time, Jordan’s mom worked on becoming her mother again. And through Jane’s encouragement and support, I was able to reestablish a more constant presence in Jordan’s life. Jane and I noticed how Jordan invited prayer on her behalf. She even participated in one of our home Bible study sessions while she was with us on a home visit. She also began to reestablish a good brother-sister relationship with Lance.

Every time Jordan returned to the program after a home visit, she would initiate prayer with her mom and me. These were special times that I could see God shaping her life. God also weaved into her life a caring youth pastor at her home church when she would make home visits. His daughter and Jordan became best friends.

During her time in the wilderness, Jordan was able to complete her high school classes and even received a merit scholarship. In the three years since returning home from her wilderness time, Jordan has made great strides. She no longer drives a shiny Lexus. She has a used Toyota Camry that she is glad to have at her disposal. She has learned to live on a budget. She has chosen to major in Psychology at Florida State University and has plans of getting her doctorate in Psychology with an interest in the needs of children with autism spectrum disorders.

**Broken Images of God:**

Before things got to crisis level in Jordan’s life, I had allowed a “distance” to develop in our relationship. I had been satisfied with a “just below the surface” relationship rather than the nitty-gritty job of remaining involved in every aspect of her life. To put it simply . . . I had failed my daughter. But, as Paul Miller says, “The good news is that our Heavenly Father trumps the failures of our earthly fathers.”

A breakthrough in Jordan’s relationship with her Heavenly Father opened the door for a breakthrough in her relationship with her earthly father.

**Paul Miller puts it this way:** “Because we live in a fallen world, God has to use broken images of Himself, such as fathers.”

**Thought:** God uses the weak things of this world – **including fathers** – to weave His stories.
The Story Continues:

God continues to weave the story of Jordan’s life. Through her church youth group, she met a young man who plays football for the University of West Alabama. Jane and I have met him and his family and are pleased that God has brought this young man into Jordan’s life. We talk frequently and she is quick to ask for specific prayers on her behalf. She knows her dad is constantly praying for her.

In His divine power, God answered my desperate plea for my daughter in a way that not only restored her faith in Him as her provider, but also restored the family relationships that had been damaged. And He continues to weave His story.

Prayer Points:

- As we pray for others, help us become more aware of their needs;
- Help us refrain from looking for the “quick fix” to difficult situations and enable us to see the story You are weaving;
- Draw us to Yourself and change us as You see fit. Shape us so we can become more like Jesus;
- Help us to daily give our children over to Your care so You can mold them to be more like Jesus;
- Use us, as imperfect as we are, to work with You in bringing up our children in Your ways so that they will not depart from them;
- We also thank you for being the loving Father who allows us to return to Your open arms when we stumble and wander away from You.
Session 13

**Introduction:** Last session we looked at two attitudes that keep us from entering the story God is weaving in the lives of our children (Despair and Demanding). I used the story of Jordan’s time in the wilderness and how I was able to get back onto the “road of good asking” after sliding off into the “ditches of despair and demanding”. This session we will use Chapter 21 in Paul Miller’s book, “A Praying Life” as the framework for our lesson. We will take a look at “Unanswered Prayer: Understanding the Patterns of Story”

In his book, Paul Miller illustrates his points with examples from the story God is weaving in the life of his daughter, Kim. Paul’s wife, Jill, when she was pregnant in 1981, prayed using Psalm 121 asking God to keep her baby from all harm. I’m sure all of us who are parents prayed similar prayers upon learning God was going to place a child in our care. As I’ve shared with you, like Kim’s story, the story God is weaving in the life of my son, Lance, has many similarities.

At the time of Kim’s birth, she was given a low APGAR score due to her bluish color. Same with Lance.

Kim’s muscle tone was poor. Same with Lance.

Kim’s eyes didn’t focus. Same with Lance.

Kim suffered from multiple breathing problems. So did Lance.

Paul and Jill Miller had to wait 19 years to get a name that went along with the multitude of problems Kim had. That word, AUTISM, came into our vocabulary when Lance was 8 years old.

Like Paul and Jill Miller, Lance’s mother and I were “operating in the dark” for the first years of our child’s life. Like the Millers, we had already seen the progression of “normal” childhood through an earlier child. Like the Millers, we learned to hate those age/development progression charts at the pediatrician’s office because all they did was point out what was painfully obvious to us.

Paul Miller writes this about their experience with Kim:

> It was agony, especially for Jill. She had prayed that God would keep Kim from harm, but we were holding a harmed child. At one point I told Jill, “Why don’t you just give Kim to God?” She told me, “Paul, every day I take Kim up in my arms, walk her to the foot of the cross, and then turn my back and come down again.” It would have been easier for us if Jill had not prayed that Kim would be kept from harm. The promise of God actually made it worse. It hurt to hope.

Our experience was similar.
Four Approaches to Suffering:

- **Desert**
  - The top line in the chart represents our desire for a “normal” child. The lower line represents the reality of a harmed child. We lived in the middle, in the desert, holding onto hope that our child could be normal, yet facing the reality of his/her disabilities. It’s a difficult world in which to live.

- **Denial**
  - This chart is filled with hope, but doesn't face the reality of a child who isn’t “normal”.

- **Determination**
  - This chart represents after the initial shock of suffering, how a determination sets in to fix whatever is causing the pain. It shows our attempts to close the gap between hope and reality. But determination often just adds another layer of suffering to what we are already facing.

- **Despair**
  - The trip from determination to despair is a short one. Here we realize we aren’t going to change the situation and, because it hurts to hope in the face of continued failure, we give up on hope.
  - Despair removes the tension between hope and reality, and in its own strange way, despair can be comforting. But despair and its cousin, CYNICISM, can kill the soul.

**Thought:** Many of us can point to a particular time of suffering in our own lives (and it may still be ongoing) where we have experienced one or more of these charts.

**Biblical Examples We Can Use:**

In stark contrast, people of faith live in the desert. Like Abraham, they are aware of the reality of their circumstances but are fixed on hope.

- **Abraham’s Experience (As recounted by Paul in Romans 4:18-20)**
  - Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed . . .
  - He stakes his life on the hope line, but
  - He never takes his eye off the reality line
    - He does have his moments, though
      - Tries to get out of the desert by suggesting to God that Eliezer become his adopted son (Genesis 15)
      - Sarah tries to close the hope-reality gap by asking Abraham to sleep with her servant, Hagar (Gen. 16)
      - When God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child, she laughs behind the tent flap and gives up on hope (Gen. 17)
      - A year later, when Isaac is born, she realizes that God has transformed her cynicism into joy and she mocks her own cynical attitude by giving her son a name that means “laughter” (Gen. 18)

As Jordan could tell you from her experience in the wilderness, the hardest part of being in the desert is that there is no way out. You don’t know when it will end. There is no relief in sight.
A Desert Can be Almost Anything:
- A child who has gone astray
- A difficult boss
- Our own sin and foolishness

God Customizes Deserts for Each of Us:
- Joseph’s desert is being betrayed and forgotten in an Egyptian jail
- Moses lives in the Midian desert as an outcast for 40 years
- The Israelites live in the desert for 40 years
- David runs from Saul in the desert

All of them hold on to the hope of God’s Word, yet they face the reality of their situations.

Jesus In the Desert:
The theme of the desert is so strong in Scripture that Jesus reenacts the desert journey at the beginning of His ministry by fasting for 40 days in a desert while facing Satan’s temptation. His desert is living with the hope of the resurrection, yet facing the reality of His Father’s face turned against Him at the cross.

Thriving in the Desert:
We are not alone. We’re in good company. God takes everyone He loves through a desert. It is His cure for our wandering hearts, restlessly searching for a new Eden. Here’s how it works:
- The first thing . . . we slowly give up the fight.
  - Our wills are broken by the reality of our circumstances.
  - The things that brought us life gradually die.
    - Our idols die for lack of food.
- The still, dry air of the desert brings the sense of helplessness that is so crucial to the spirit of prayer.
  - We come face-to-face with our inability to live, to have joy, to do anything of lasting worth.
  - Life is crushing us.
  - Suffering burns away the false selves created by cynicism or pride or lust.
  - We stop caring about what people think of us.
    - The desert is God’s best hope for the creation of an authentic self.
- Desert life sanctifies us.
  - We have no idea we are changing.
    - We simply notice after we’ve been in the desert awhile that we are different.
      - Things that used to be important no longer matter.
  - After a while we notice our real thirsts.
    - While in the desert, David wrote:
      “Oh God, You are my God; earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You;
      My flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”
      (Psalm 63:1)

Thought: The desert becomes a window to the heart of God. He finally gets our attention because He’s the only game in town.
• We cry out so long and so often that a channel begins to open up between us and God.
  o When driving, we turn off the radio just to be with God.
  o At night, we find ourselves drifting in and out of prayer when we are sleeping.
  o Without realizing it, we’ve learned to pray continuously.
    ▪ The clear, fresh water of God’s presence that we discover in the desert becomes a well inside our own heart.

The Best Gift . . . The Gift of God’s Presence in the Desert  (Psalm 23)

• In the beginning of the Psalm, the shepherd is in front of us – “he leads me beside still waters” (v. 2)
• At the end, the shepherd is behind us – “goodness and love will pursue me” (v. 6)
• But in the middle, as we go through “the valley of the shadow of death,” He is next to us – “I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (v. 4)

Thought: The protective love of the Shepherd give us the courage to face the interior journey.

Looking Ahead

The next session continues to look at the story God is weaving in the life of Paul & Jill Miller and their daughter, Kim. It also highlights some of the details of the story God is weaving in Lance’s life.

Prayer Points:

• Help us as we go through life to understand the patterns of how You weave stories in our lives;

• Thank you for our children, who You entrust to us;

• Help us learn to turn to You when suffering comes into our lives;

• Help us during our times in the desert to be aware of the reality of our circumstance, but also to remain fixed on the hope of Your provision;

• Help us to be sanctified by these trials, and like David, for our souls to thirst for You;

• As we come to You in our prayers, help us sense the presence of our Good Shepherd who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.
Last session we began our look at “Unanswered Prayer: Understanding the Patterns of Story”. We looked at the story God has been weaving in the life of my son, Lance. I shared how, like Paul and Jill Miller with their daughter, Kim, Lance’s mother and I were “operating in the dark” for the first years of our child’s life as it related to Lance’s autism.

We charted Four Approaches to Suffering and looked at some Biblical Examples We Can Use to see we are in good company when we are in the “desert” of suffering. We also learned about Thriving in the Desert, and how we can be sanctified during our times in the “desert”. This session continues our discussion.

The Desert Blooms
Realization that God was trying to humble them came early on to Paul and Jill Miller. It took a different route with Lance’s mother and me. Like Jill Miller, Lance’s mother struggled with denial. After the denial came reluctant acceptance, then attempts at trying to assign blame. Like Paul Miller, I wrestled with hope. I thought I was ready to face reality, but it didn’t take long for me to see the stark realities of life and to learn that, no matter how hard I tried, or what “fixes” I came up with, Lance’s struggle was going to be a life-long journey . . . for all of us.

As Paul Miller describes in “A Praying Life”, the pressure of a child with this version of autism (pervasive-developmental disorder) is at times overwhelming. Paul used his “desert” experience to begin a journey into the life of Jesus that led to his book, “Love Walked Among Us”, The Person of Jesus” that our Wednesday evening Bible Study used as our guide in 2009.

My time in the “desert” caused me to reflect on the nature of this unseen God of ours and His gift of grace to us in Jesus. Together with Lance’s mother, I wrote a song about the faith talked about in 2 Corinthians 4:18 that says, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” The song is a play on a corny riddle that goes:

Q. What makes the wind blow?
   A. The trees moving. (You never see the trees moving without the wind blowing!)

Of course this is faulty logic, but when we look at faith, it is like being able to know the wind is blowing (unseen) without having to see the trees moving (seen). As Hebrews 11:1 puts it: “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Have you ever seen the wind?
Take my hand and we will spend time together my friend,
On this journey with the wind.
Place your faith in Jesus. See the Wind.

Faith that can move mountains.
Strength that fills within.
Joy that overfloweth.
Peace that comes from Him.
Place your faith in Jesus. See the Wind.

Butterflies in the breeze.
See the wind blow through the trees.
But blessed are those who believe, and see the wind without the trees.
Place your faith in Jesus. See the Wind.

Faith that can move mountains.
Strength that fills within.
Joy that overfloweth.
Peace that comes from Him.
Place your faith in Jesus. See the Wind.

Being able to see as “temporary” what I saw before me in Lance’s autism, even though for a lifetime here, allowed me to bloom in the desert because of the eternal nature of my unseen God.

The Patterns of Lance’s Story

- **Empty Birthday Chairs**
  Because of his social awkwardness, Lance did not enjoy the “normal” childhood friendships. After enduring several years of birthday parties where the only attendees were grandparents and cousins, Lance’s mother and I decided to change the rules. Since God was using Lance’s Sunday School class to help him grow spiritually, we enlisted the help of his Sunday School class to help Lance grow socially. So, the Sunday immediately preceding May 15th, became Lance’s birthday party during Sunday School. It was great. Now there were no empty chairs at his birthday party!

- **Childlike Nature and Simple Faith**
  Because of his childlike nature, it has been easy for Lance to accept God’s gift of grace in Jesus. He is able to grasp of the simplicity of the gospel message we all try to make more confusing than it really is. He is able to see Jesus in others around him. When Lance was with Jane and me one Sunday at church six years ago, Connor Cheshire spent some time with him. Although it was a casual social encounter, Jane and I were prepared to intervene when things got “awkward” as they usually did. I’m sure Connor picked up on Lance’s social deficits during their encounter, but unlike so many other children, Connor didn’t excuse himself to go find “anywhere else” to be. Although their visit was brief, because Lance saw the love of Jesus through Connor, for the next several visits he asked if “that nice boy” was going to be at church when we went.

- **A Father’s Broken Heart**
  When Lance joined us to watch one of Hampton’s high school baseball games four years ago, I could see him observing the interaction of the teenagers sitting behind us in the stands. Hampton’s younger brother, Hunter, was cutting up with them and having fun. Lance made a feeble attempt to join in, but his social awkwardness became immediately recognizable and the
older kids decided to relocate. Although Lance wanted to join them, I thought I could just
distract him with the baseball game. I thought all had gone well until after the game when
Lance started walking toward Hampton’s truck so he could ride with Hampton and his girlfriend.
When Jane and I told him that Hampton would not be going directly home, but to his girlfriend’s
house, that did not dissuade Lance. Then it came. When I told Lance he would have to ride
home with us, he just lost it.

It had been almost 6 years since I had seen Lance have such a public display of his emotions.
He wasn’t whimpering. He was crying out to the top of his lungs that he wanted to be “normal”
and to be able to make friends. It broke my heart to see him suffering this way. Then the
following thought came to my mind: How long had Lance been aware of his lack of friends and
how long had he been suffering in virtual silence?

• A Father’s Plea
Since I had already opened a clear channel of communication with God two months earlier
when Jordan left for her wilderness camp, I began to focus my prayer for Lance in a very
specific way. I pleaded for God to make it so that Lance could have some more social
interaction. As Lance prepared to enter High School, although most of his classes were
through a home school program, doors were opened by God to allow Lance to join his High
School’s band and J.R.O.T.C. programs.

I had the honor of seeing Lance fit in with the guys in a “stomp” percussion routine at last year’s
“end of the year concert”. Tears came to my eyes as I saw him cutting up with the guys while
they were hammering away on their 5-gallon buckets. He grinned from ear-to-ear as they
“brought the house down” with their routine. I’m also proud to say that Lance is in his senior
year of High School and has risen through the ranks in J.R.O.T.C. and is now wearing Master
Sergeant stripes on his uniform. (But for a while, he really got a kick out of being a “Lance”
Corporal.)

• Opening New Doors
As I was searching the internet a few years ago for any new developments on the “Autism”
front, I came across a site that seemed to clearly describe what Lance had been experiencing.
It was a form of higher functioning autism known as Asperger’s syndrome. I immediately sent
word to Lance’s mother to check out the ASPEN (Asperger’s Syn-drome Education Network)
website to see if anything they offered could help. We felt Lance was ready for a new door to
be opened. I began to focus my prayers for Lance in the direction of becoming more
independent.

Although Lance has been able to go on some church camps and summer choir tours, he had
never been to a “real” summer camp. But last summer, he got to experience his first summer
camp without a parent or “hired hand” overseeing his every move. It was an ASPEN affiliated
camp where every camper has some form of autism spectrum disorder. Lance’s mother,
grandparents, Jane and I all bathed him in prayer before he left on his journey. What God did
was answer our prayers more than 7-fold. He had a fantastic camp experience. Through some
of the photos that were posted on-line, I was able to see him laughing and playing . . . with
other kids his own age! He will quickly tell you . . . he is SO ready to go to camp again next
summer. To God be the glory!
Through Lance’s struggles with autism, God has molded me to become more empathetic toward others’ needs. Although I still have my “Peter” moments, God continues to work on me. My prayer life has strengthened out of both necessity and practice. The more I see Him do, the easier it is for me to go back to Him in trust.

Before Lance was born, my prayer to God for another healthy child was just one of those “checklist” things you do like going to childbirth classes and stocking up on diapers while awaiting your newborn. Did God give me what I desired? The answer is no.

Paul Miller, near the end of Chapter 21 of “A Praying Life”, offers the following words of wisdom:

When we don’t receive what we pray for or desire, it doesn’t mean that God isn’t acting on our behalf. Rather, He’s weaving His story. Paul tells us to “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). Thanksgiving helps us to be grace-centered, seeing all of life as a gift. It looks at how God’s past blessings impact our lives. Watchfulness alerts us to the unfolding drama in the present. It looks for God’s present working as it unfolds into future grace.

At this time of Thanksgiving, I can see how God’s past blessings have impacted my life. Jane has been cancer-free for almost 12 years. My heart continues to pump. Jordan is now 21 and Lance is 18. I am continually amazed at the story God is weaving in my life.

Paul Miller concludes Chapter 21 by saying:

Watch for the story God is weaving in your life. Don’t leave the desert. Corrie ten Boom’s father often reminded her, “The best is yet to come.”
Session 15

Introduction: When we are in the middle of the desert, we feel like God is absent. We long for God to show Himself clearly . . . to make sense of the mess. Like Job, we say to God, “Why do You hide Your face?” (Job 13:24). To answer, let's take a look at how Jesus positioned Himself with 3 different women, all who were suffering in what seemed like a meaningless story.

The Canaanite Woman and Her Needy Daughter (Matthew 15:21-28)

- The story
  - Gentile woman (a Canaanite)
    - Pestering Jesus and the disciples
    - Her daughter is possessed by a demon and needs help
  - Jesus’ initial response
    - Silence
    - Deliberate ambiguity
    - He just listens
  - The disciples’ response
    - They sensed the awkwardness of the situation
    - They told Jesus to send her away
    - They let their prejudices influence them
      - Another Canaanite woman (Jezebel) had introduced demon worship to the Israelites
  - Jesus’ next response
    - He ignores his disciples, BUT
    - He continues the confusion
      - He addresses the woman
      - He mentions a common social barrier (v. 24)
  - The Canaanite woman’s response (Actions vs. Words)
    - Focused on Jesus’ actions (at least He’s addressing her now)
    - Not focused on His words
  - Jesus continues the ambiguity, but also continues engaging the woman
    - Is it not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs?
  - The Canaanite woman’s final response
    - Total weakness, and just begging for “crumbs” from his table
  - Jesus’ final response
    - He recognizes her great faith
    - He heals her daughter (v. 28)

3 Thoughts from Paul Miller:
- Jesus’ ambiguity with us creates the space not only for Him to emerge, but us as well. If the miracle comes too quickly, there is no room for discovery . . . for relationship.
- The waiting that is the essence of faith provides the context for relationship.
- Everyone talks about how prayer is relationship, but often what people mean is having “warm fuzzies” with God. Nothing wrong with “warm fuzzies”, but relationships are far richer and more complex.
Another Woman and Her Needy Daughter  (A Praying Life, pp. 191-192)

- The story
  - Jesus did the same thing with Jill and Kim Miller
    - Over a 25-year period, Jill wrestled with God for Kim
    - Week after week during family prayer time Jill would pray for strength and faith
      - Strength to get from one end of the day to the other
      - Faith not to throw in the towel
    - Here’s a glimpse of what was behind Jill’s prayer for faith. She wrote this in her prayer journal right after she discovered that she was pregnant with their 6th child, Emily. Kim was 5 years old at the time:

      I’m now 32 – oh dear! I wonder what this year will bring. Maybe Kim talking? It has been very hard for me not seeing much progress in Kim. We are in the middle of her being evaluated again at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). It’s so hard to tell what she can’t do or just won’t do. All of this is so hard . . . hard to see and still believe Jesus loves her and me and hears me beg for her continual healing. It really is faith that is at stake – the suffering is really a side issue. Just to tell Jesus what I need and leave it with him is such a struggle – especially as I see Kim struggle daily. It really breaks my heart.

    - 2 days after the visit to CHOP, Jill wrote, “Give me the faith to leave this with You. Please help her to talk.”
    - Then the journal goes silent
      - It would be 10 years before Jill would have the faith and the energy to write another entry in her prayer journal.
      - It would be 20 years before Kim would begin to speak, at age 25
  - God left Jill in confusion in order to grow her faith (her ability to connect with Him)
    - To become like a child, Jill had to become weak again.
  - Jesus’ ambiguous interaction with both Jill and the Canaanite woman is a MINICOURSE ON PRAYER:
    - God permitted a difficult situation in both their lives
    - He then lingered at the edge – not in the center
      - If He were at the center, if they had regular visions of Him, they would not have developed the faith to have a real relationship with Him.
        - God would have been a magic prayer machine, not a friend and lover

    “When God seems silent and our prayers go unanswered, the overwhelming temptation is to leave the story – to walk out of the desert and attempt to create a normal life. But when we persist in a spiritual vacuum, when we hang in there during ambiguity, we get to know God. In fact, that is how intimacy grows in all close relationships.”
    -- Paul E. Miller

Mary Magdalene In a Minidesert  (John 20:1- 16)

- The story
  - Jesus treats Mary Magdalene in a similar way when He meets her on Easter morning
    - When He first greets her outside the tomb, he deliberately conceals His identity
    - Then He draws her out with a question
      - “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” (v. 15)
o Jesus stands at the edge of the story
  ▪ He is unwilling to overwhelm her so that a richer, fully Mary could emerge
  ▪ He allows her pain to continue for just a moment so Jesus the person could meet Mary the person

o Mary’s response reveals her nature
  ▪ Thinking He is the gardener, she pleads, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” (v. 15)

o Jesus’ simple answer
  ▪ “Mary”
    ▪ Jesus announces His presence by just saying her name
    ▪ In other words, “Mary, stop your rushing . . . your planning. I was always here, at the edge of the story. I am all you need.”
    ▪ He is so simple and so subtle

3 More Thoughts from Paul Miller:
  • Many of us wish God were more visible. We think that if we could see Him better or know what is going on, then faith would come more easily. But if Jesus dominated the space and overwhelmed our vision, we would not be able to relate to Him.
  • When we suffer, we long for God to speak clearly, to tell us the end of the story and, most of all, to show Himself. But if He showed Himself fully and immediately . . . if He answered all the questions . . . we’d never grow; we’d never emerge from our chrysalis because we’d be forever dependent.
  • Jill Miller was profoundly changed in her 25-year wait. If God had instantly explained everything to her and healed Kim, that change would not have taken place. No one works like Him. He is such a lover of souls.

A Quick Review From Last Week: (2 APPROACHES TO A PRAYING LIFE)

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Living in Our Father’s Story
  • Means living in tension
    ▪ After all, tension and overwhelming obstacles make for a good story!
      ▪ (Example: Hallmark Channel Christmas Movies)
    ▪ How boring life would be if prayer worked like magic
      ▪ There’d be no relationship with God
      ▪ There’d be no victory over little pockets of evil
  • To live in our Father’s story, remember these 3 things:
    ▪ Don’t demand that the story go your way (surrender completely)
Look for the Storyteller. Look for His hand, and then pray in light of what you are seeing (develop an eye for Jesus)

Stay in the story. Don't shut down when it goes the wrong way (Stay in the desert)
  - This can be particularly difficult
    - Ask: “What is God doing?”
    - Be on the lookout for strange gifts (God loves to surprise us with babies in swaddling clothes lying in mangers.)

3 More Thoughts from Paul Miller:
  - Sometimes when we say, “God is silent,” what's really going on is that He hasn't told the story the way we wanted it told. He will be silent when we want Him to fill in the blanks of the story we are creating. But with His own stories – the ones we live in – He is seldom silent.
  - To see the Storyteller we need to slow down our interior life and watch. We need to be imbedded in the Word to experience the Storyteller’s mind and pick up the cadence of His voice.
  - The story God weaves is neither weird nor floaty. It always involves bowing before His majesty with the pieces of our lives.

A Familiar Story Can Teach Us – The Story of Joseph  (Genesis 37 – 47)
  - Joseph's life was characterized by disappointment
    - His jealous brothers sell him for twenty pieces of silver
    - They strip him of his multicolored coat and use it as “evidence” that he has died
    - Just when it looks like his life is making a turn for the better, the wife of his owner tears another coat off his back and uses it as “evidence” that he has tried to rape her
    - He ends up in prison, alone and forgotten
  - But look at the story God is weaving:
    - Twice Joseph loses his coat as he is being humbled
      - Each time the coat is used as evidence for a betrayal
    - Twice, as God elevates him, he is given a new coat by Pharaoh
    - Joseph realizes God is weaving a story with coats and silver
      - When his brothers arrive, Joseph gives each of them a coat and silver!
      - He wraps up the story of his life by blessing his brothers with the very items they have stolen from him.
    - Joseph has not given into bitterness and cynicism
      - Instead, he discovers the gracious heart of God
      - He extends this grace to those who have harmed him
      - Forgiveness flowed

A Final Thought

When confronted with suffering that won’t go away or with even a minor problem, we instinctively focus on what is missing, such as the lost coats and the betrayal in Joseph’s story, not on the Master’s hand. Often when we think everything has gone wrong, it’s just that we're in the middle of the story. If we watch the stories God is weaving in our lives, we, like Joseph, will begin to see the patterns. We’ll become poets, sensitive to our Father’s voice.
Prayer Points:

- Help us as we go through life to understand the patterns of how You weave stories in our lives;

- As we learn to wait on You, increase our faith;

- Help us see that when we think everything has gone wrong, we are just in the middle of the story.
Session 16

Introduction: Last session we took a look at how Jesus positioned Himself with 3 different women in what may have appeared to them to be a meaningless story at the time. This session we’ll take a look at another story as we look at “Hope: The End of the Story” and “Living in Gospel Stories” to conclude Section 4 of Paul E. Miller’s book, “A Praying Life”.

“Hope is a new idea in history, a uniquely Christian vision. We take it for granted because the mind of Christ is so pervasive in shaping the modern mind, but it wasn’t always that way.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Hope in the Face of a Difficult Situation (Luke 1:26-38) (Matthew 1:18-25)

• The story
  o Mary, a young girl engaged to be married to a man named Joseph
    ▪ Engagement (betrothal) more involved than modern times
    ▪ Could only be broken by divorce or death
  o An angel of the Lord brings an overwhelming message to Mary
    ▪ You are highly favored
    ▪ The Lord is with you
    ▪ You will give birth to a son
    ▪ You will name him Jesus
      ▪ Jesus – the Greek form of Joshua (the Lord saves)
      ▪ He will be great and called the Son of the Most High
      ▪ The Lord will give him the throne of his Father, David
      ▪ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever
      ▪ His kingdom will never end
  o Mary’s response
    ▪ It was an “O.K., tell me more”
      ▪ Not asking in disbelief, although she felt she needed to provide the angel with a very important detail
      ▪ A virgin is going to give birth!
  o The angel gives more details of the story
    ▪ The Holy Spirit will come upon you
    ▪ The power of the Most High will overshadow you
    ▪ The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God
    ▪ Nothing is impossible with God, and here’s some proof for you:
      ▪ Even Elizabeth, an old woman, is 6 months pregnant right now!
  o Mary’s 2nd response
    ▪ Total Surrender: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be done to me as you have said.”

• Social Implications
  o Betrothal
    ▪ A pledge to be married
    ▪ No sexual relations during the time of betrothal
  o Pregnancy outside of marriage -- A death sentence
    ▪ Deut. 22:23-25 (stoning to death of the woman and man)
Joseph's initial response (Matthew 1:18-25)
- He didn’t want Mary to be publicly disgraced
- He thought about a quiet divorce to break the betrothal pledge

Another angelic visit . . . this time in a dream
Joseph’s dream
- Don’t be afraid to take Mary home as your wife
- What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit
- She will give birth to a son
- You will name him Jesus because he will save the people from their sins

Joseph’s 2nd response
- He did what the angel commanded
  - He took Mary home as his wife
  - They had no union until she gave birth to a son
  - He gave him the name, Jesus

Life in the Desert: Drifting Between Denial and Reality vs. A Sense of Wonder
Although we haven’t had the angelic visitations like Mary and Joseph, most of us have experienced times in our lives when we have been faced with what look like insurmountable odds. Yet, it is at precisely these times that we need to learn to wait and pray.

“As we wait and pray, God weaves His story and creates a wonder. Instead of drifting between denial and reality, we have a relationship with the living God who is intimately involved with the details of our worlds. We are learning to watch for the story to unfold . . . to wait for the wonder.”

-- Paul E. Miller

We’ve seen the story God has been weaving in the lives of Paul & Jill Miller and their daughter, Kim. Paul Miller writes this about their time in “the desert” as it relates to the HOPE/REALITY Chart:

“Our prayers didn’t float above life. Our family was focused on both the reality line and the hope line. Praying was inseparable from working, planning, and good old-fashioned begging.”

Gospel Stories
The gospel, the Father’s gift of His Son to die in our place, is so breathtaking that since Jesus’ death, no one else has been able to tell a better story. If you want to tell a really good story, you have to tell a gospel story.

Watching for Unseen Connections
- To see a gospel story, we need to reflect on seemingly disparate pieces are connected.
- The best place to pick up on the unseen connections of our designer, God, is in disappointment and tension.
  - Unseen
    - Means there are no visible causal links
    - As we bring God’s mind to our stories, we can see His hand crafting connections behind the scenes
Our Modern Culture – Not a Source of Encouragement

- Nothing in our modern culture encourages us to see the invisible links binding together all of life.
- We have no sense that we live in the presence of a loving Father and are accountable for all we do:
  - The “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas” mentality dominates the secular view of life.
  - It says there is no link between the “Vegases” of our lives and the rest of our lives.

Paul Miller’s response to this line of thinking: "Baloney! This is my Father’s world. Everything you do in Vegas is connected to the rest of your life. Everything you do is connected to who you are as a person and, in turn, creates the person you are becoming. Everything you do affects those you love. All of life is covenant.”

A Final Thought

Imbedded in the idea of prayer is a richly textured view of the world where all of life is organized around the invisible bonds or covenants that knit us together. Instead of a fixed world, we live in our Father’s world, a world built for divine relationships between people where, because of the Good News, tragedies become comedies and hope is born.

Prayer Points:

- We thank You, Lord, for giving us a cause for hope through the gift of Your Son, Jesus;
- As we face what appear to be insurmountable odds in our lives, help us to learn to watch for your story to unfold . . . to wait for the wonder in the desert;
- Give us eyes to see gospel stories You are weaving in our lives . . . to see Your hand crafting the connections behind the scenes;
- Help us realize that all of life is covenant and that we live in our Father’s world.
Session 17 (Outline provided by Rev. Henry Morris)
Using Prayer Tools

How do you organize your prayer life?

Consider Paul’s prayers: Eph. 1:15-19a; Phil. 1:3-5, 9-11; Col. 1:3-5, 9-12; I Thess. 1:2-3; Rom. 1:8-10, I Cor. 1:4-9

Thinking Carefully About Systems...

Keeping Track of the Story: Using Prayer Cards

Paul Miller’s Guidelines:
1. The card functions like a snapshot of the person’s life, so I use short phrases to describe what I want.
2. When praying, I usually don’t linger over a card for more than a few seconds. I just pick out one or two key areas and pray for them.
3. I put the Word to work by writing a Scripture verse on the card that expresses my desire for that particular person or situation.
4. The card doesn’t change much. Maybe once a year I will add another line. These are just the ongoing areas in a person’s life that I am praying for.
5. I usually don’t write down the answers. They are obvious to me since I see the card almost every day.
6. I will sometimes date a prayer request by putting the month and the year as in 8/07

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<td>Myopic</td>
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<td>Bits and pieces</td>
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<td>Hard to see the story unfold</td>
<td>Helps you reflect on how God is answering prayer.</td>
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<td>You see patterns and the story unfolding.</td>
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<td>Can become mechanical, burdensome</td>
<td>Freeing, brings life</td>
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Andrew’s prayer card:
- Each phrase represents some aspect of his life.
- The order is not important.
Kim’s Card:

- Shows emphasis on two kinds of prayers – big and small.
- Big prayers – dream big, open up a world of hope
- Small prayers – going to God in all things

A Prayer Card for People in Suffering:

- Allows us to persevere in prayer, rather than giving up
- Brings joy in praying for this category of persons
- Allows us to watch the story unfold over time
- Allows us to tune into their struggles

A Prayer Card for Non-Christians:

- How good will it be for us to pray for this regularly! Will move our hearts.
- Opens our eyes to people’s spiritual state.
- If we don’t as a matter of habit think of all people as being either saved or unsaved, then we are not where God wants us to be.

A Prayer Card for Friends:
Building a Sample Deck

- 4-10 family cards (one for each person, + one for extended family)
- 1-3 people-in-suffering cards
- 1 friends card
- 1 non-Christian card
- 1 church’s leadership card
- 1 small-group card
- 1 missionary, ministries card
- 1-3 world or cultural issues card
- 3 work cards
- 3-5 repentance cards
- 3-5 hope or big-dream cards

Some Hints for Getting Started Using Prayer Cards

1. “If you can’t find the time to write out these cards, then use your prayer time to write them out.”

2. Begin with partial cards.

Conclusion / Application

1. Growing in Love - “…When I regularly pray for people using some kind of written system, my heart tunes in to them. I am bolder about asking them how things are going because they are already on my heart.”

2. Getting Dirty - Prayer is asking God to get involved in our lives. Ask him, tell him what you want. Pray purposefully. Don’t mindlessly drift through life on the American narcotic of busyness.

If you try to seize the day, the day will eventually break you. Seize the corner of His garment and don’t let go until He blesses you. He will reshape the day.

Bible Study

Brad, "I'm on my way to becoming a Christian!"
Jane, Where should we go to church?

1. Jane—submit and believe that Jesus is the only way. Wisdom for me to know how and when to address it.
2. Brad & Jane—continue to believe—deepen their faith.
3. Go to a good church. Wisdom to know what to say.
4. Tom & Sandra—God’s Word would guide them.
Session 18

Introduction: Last session, the concept of **PRAYER CARDS** was introduced as a way of **KEEPING TRACK OF THE STORY**. This session we will look at the concept of **PRAYER WORK**.

Example from Paul Miller: “**CRITICAL BOB**”

- Problem: His critical nature and occasional anger toward Paul
  - Paul realized that he had tolerated, and even loved, Bob BUT he had never prayed for him
  - So he wrote up a prayer card for him
    - The key verse: 1 Peter 3:4 “…a gentle quiet spirit”
    - 2 areas of need:
      - He will know God in the face of Jesus Christ
      - Complete healing
  - Paul began to pray daily that God would gentle Bob’s spirit
  - Then Paul waited
    - Within a year, Bob went through suffering and Paul was able to serve him.
    - Several years later, Bob went through even more suffering and Paul had the opportunity to serve him again.
      - This time, Bob’s suffering was so severe that he couldn’t help but feel Paul’s love and care for him.
      - For the first time in their relationship, Bob’s attitude toward Paul softened significantly.

- When we are praying Christ into someone’s life, God often permits suffering in that person’s life.
  - Satan’s basic game plan is pride.
    - Seeking to draw us into his life of arrogance.
  - God’s basic game plan is humility.
    - Drawing us into the life of His Son.
      - The Father can’t think of anything better to give us than His Son.
  - Suffering invites us to join His Son’s life, death, and resurrection.
    - Once we see that, suffering is no longer strange.

Working Your Prayers

- A 3-fold pattern
  - Write the prayer down
  - Watch for God while we pray
  - God provides an opportunity for us to “work” our prayer request
    - God involves us in our own prayers, often in a physical and humbling way

Mark 4:26-29  “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”
Notice the 3-step pattern Jesus uses:

- Planting
- Waiting
- Working again at the harvest

“Jesus’ description of how the kingdom works is alien from how many of us pray.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Our “Alien” Way of Praying:

- It seldom occurs to us to plant the seed of thoughtful praying because we think people can’t change
  - Or we feel that prayer just “feels” too easy
  - If we pray, we don’t watch and wait
    - We want the answer now
  - We don’t recognize the harvest when it comes.
- We reverse the kingdom pattern of **asking** (seed), **waiting and watching** (growth) and **working** (harvest)
  - We attack the problem ourselves, instead of **working** in a partnership with God
  - Then we stand by **waiting and watching** the relationship disintegrate
  - Finally, when nothing is working, we **might** consider **asking** in prayer

“Secretly we want Him to answer our prayer by doing a magic trick on the other person’s soul. Our ‘prayer doesn’t work’ often means ‘You didn’t do my will, in my way, in my time.”

-- Paul E. Miller

“The Rest of the Story”

- To find out how things worked out between Bob and Paul, read “Bob Again” pp. 237–238 in “A Praying Life”.

Prayer Points:

- Help us to remember to pray first
- As we work our prayers humble us so we can be better examples of Christ
- Give us patience as we learn to wait and watch your story unfold
- And when it is time for the harvest to come, help us to be joyful laborers for You
Session 19

Introduction: Paul Miller shares an example from his life that helps us understand the concept of LISTENING TO GOD.

A Day of Retreat and Prayer
- In December to Pray Through Goals for the Coming Year
  - A good idea for us too
- To Meditate and Pray Through the Scriptures
  - Being still before God
    - Slowing down to become more aware of the direction of our lives and of our hearts
  - Asking questions
    - How is God speaking into my life?
    - What is God doing?

In Paul's case, as he thought about the coming year, he wrote: “What do you want me to focus on? How do you want me to focus?” He said the thought came to him as clear as the words on a written page: I don’t want you to have any goals this year. I’m going to work on your character. Paul relates that during his time of prayer and reflection, God revealed 7 areas of his life to help build his character.

Does God Speak? (Was it the prompting of the Spirit or intuition?)
- 3 proofs of God working “hands-on”
  - The question and the subsequent answer were immersed in reflections on God’s Word.
    - Just one stage in an unfolding biblical story of repentance
      - “The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant.” (Psalm 25:14)
    - It was the opposite of human intuition.
      - In fact, it was intuition being mastered by God
  - The answer came as a surprise.
    - We see the same level of surprise in the Bible in the story of God’s intervention on our behalf
      - Who would have ever guessed:
        - The incarnation?
        - The cross?
        - The resurrection?
    - God’s voice is distinctive
      - He writes His Word on our hearts
  - It came true.
    - God did nothing that year but work on Paul Miller’s character
      - There was no point in having goals
      - The kingdom came
      - God’s will was done

Where Christians Go Wrong
- 2 Common Ways Christians Go Wrong When It Comes to Hearing God’s Voice in Their Lives:
  - “Word Only” -- Going Wrong By Not Listening
• Focusing solely on God’s written Word without watching and praying when looking for God’s activity in our lives
  • Causes us to miss the unfolding story of His work
  • We miss the patterns of the Divine Artist etching the character of His Son on our hearts
  • Causes our lives to lack sparkle and immediacy of God’s presence

“If we believe Scripture only applies to people in general, then we can miss how God intimately personalizes His counsel to us as individuals. We can become deists, removing God from our lives. But everywhere in Scripture we see God speaking to us with a personal touch, prompting us to obey and love.”

-- Paul E. Miller

- “Spirit Only” -- Going Wrong By Elevating Human Intuition
  • When we call our own thoughts or feelings “God’s voice”, it puts us in control of God
    • This ultimately undermines God’s Word by elevating human intuition to the status of divine revelation
  • Unless Scripture guards and directs our intuitions, we can easily run amok and baptize our selfish desires with religious language (“God told me to marry her. . .”)
  • The problem is that the Holy Spirit comes in on the same channel as the world, the flesh, the Devil.
    • The Lord does lead
      o We just need to be careful that we aren’t using the Lord as a cover for our own desires

To correctly discern when God is speaking to us, we need to keep the Word and Spirit together.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD ONLY</th>
<th>WORD &amp; SPIRIT TOGETHER</th>
<th>SPIRIT ONLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God speaks only through the Word. I do God’s will, but I am narrowly focused on obedience.</td>
<td>As I saturate my life with the Word, I give the Spirit a vocabulary to personalize the Word to me.</td>
<td>God speaks through the Spirit as authoritatively as the Word. God does my will. I read my thoughts as God’s will.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sins of Omission:**
I avoid adultery but miss compassion.

**Result:**
A dull life, little sense of the Master’s hand shaping my life.

**Result:**
An integrated life full of meaning and fellowship.

**Result:**
A feeling-driven life, confusion between my will and God’s will.

**Rationalism:**
Reason and logic are the measure of truth.

**Romanticism:**
Intuition and feelings are the measure of truth.
Cultivate a Listening Heart

“There is nothing secret about communion with God. If we live a holy life before God, broken of our pride and self-will, crying out for grace, then we will be in communion with God. It is really that simple.”

-- Paul E. Miller

- Listening – A Natural Result of Our Soul Connecting with God
  - We can’t listen to God if we are isolated from a life of surrender that draws us into His story for our life.
  - It must be a gospel story:
    - Our dying and weakness
    - God’s grace and resurrection

- A Word of Caution
  - Tendency among Christians to get excited about “listening to God”
    - It's as if we are discovering “a hidden way” of communicating with God that will revolutionize our prayer lives.
    - This incorrectly places the activity of listening to God front and center.
    - It’s like looking at the windshield instead of looking through it.

“The means of communication is secondary to a surrendered heart. Our responsibility is to cultivate a listening heart in the midst of the noise from our own hearts and from the world, not to mention the Devil.”

-- Paul E. Miller

- Questions to Ask Ourselves:
  - Am I attentive to God?
  - Is my heart soft and teachable?
  - Am I remembering His ways, His commands?
  - Are my eyes ever toward the Lord? (see Psalm 25:15)

- An Example from the Bible:
  - David wrote: “I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.” (Psalm 16:7)
    - The reaction between the divine Spirit and our own spirit is mysterious.
    - In David’s case, God was giving him counsel, and at the same time, David’s own heart was talking to him.
    - The two are impossible to separate
    - The counsel God gave David is inseparable from David’s active pursuit of God:
      - “I have set the Lord always before me” (16:8)

- Tuning In To Our Father’s Voice
  - A hard-to-pin-down-but-never-the-less-real quality to it:
    - We can only experience it and observe some of its characteristics.
    - We don’t have the capacity to analyze this interaction.
  - The counsel from God doesn’t function like a fortuneteller; it is inseparable from a humble seeking after God.
Prayer Points:

- God, give us listening hearts.

- As we immerse ourselves in, and reflect on the Scriptures, let us be guided through the Holy Spirit.

- Help us as we learn to pray and watch for Your working in our lives.

- Help us, in our weakness, to die to ourselves and seek Your grace and Your resurrection in us.

- Help us to be able to quiet the world and tune in to Your voice as we humbly seek after You.
Session 20

Introduction: Last session we studied the concept of quieting the “chatter” from the world, our flesh, and the Devil so we could tune in and listen to the voice of the Spirit speaking to us. This week we will take a look at a way of becoming aware of what Paul Miller describes as “The Interior Journey” through PRAYER JOURNALING.

- We will see that the idea that we are on a spiritual journey is embedded deep in the psyche of Christianity.
- We will look at some historic and contemporary examples of how journaling has been helpful in keeping a record of what God was (and is) doing in the lives of His children.
- We will look at some questions we can ask in the midst of our communion (or conversation) with God that will help us see our true selves, and thereby lead us to repentance.
- And finally, we will learn some basics that will help us in keeping our individual prayer journals.

“The practice of journal writing and the idea that my life is a meaningful story are both rooted in Christianity.”

--- Paul E. Miller

The First Journal

- Augustine’s “Confessions”
  - Autobiography written around AD 400
  - Describes the interior journey of the soul
  - This was the first time someone recognized the inner workings of his heart and wrote about the meaning he saw laced through his life

- Hearing God’s Voice and Responding
  - After hearing the preaching of Bishop Ambrose, he came under great conviction
  - He overheard the faint voice of a neighbor’s child chanting a little tune: “Take up and read; Take up and read”
  - He responded immediately
    - He arose and opened the New Testament
    - The passage he turned to and read spoke directly to the matter on his heart
  - He journaled: “. . . instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light . . . infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.”
  - The result:
    - The Spirit, speaking through a child, brought the Word to life in Augustine’s heart.
    - When God touched Augustine’s soul, he came alive, his life rich with meaning.

“When life makes sense, it becomes a journey, a spiritual adventure. Writing down the adventure as it happens gives us a feel for our place in the story God is weaving in our lives. Journaling helps us to become aware of the journey.”

--- Paul E. Miller
An Idea Embedded Deep in the Psyche of Christianity: We Are On A Spiritual Journey

- The hints of a journey in Psalm 23
  - The Good Shepherd leads me beside still waters
  - He leads me in the paths of righteousness
  - Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . He is with me
  - Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

- Dangers lurking on the journey
  - On the outside:
    - The valley of the shadow of death
    - The presence of my enemies
  - On the inside:
    - I battle a restless soul
    - I have choices to make:
      - Run from the presence of my enemies?
      - Wait for the Lord to provide a table for me?
      - Will I try to fill it with stuff?
      - Will I let the Shepherd make me lie down in green pastures?

- Life becomes an adventure


Missing Out on Seeing the Divine Touches

- Many of us rush around without much conscious knowledge of the pilgrimage God is carving out for us.
- So, when tragedy strikes:
  - We’ve not learned the ways of God
  - We have no frame of reference from which to respond
  - So we just slog through life

The Joys of Journaling

- Journaling helps us take stock of our location on the journey
  - We can become poets . . . artists with our souls
  - We can reflect on what God is doing
    - On the patterns of our Father’s care instead of reacting to life
  - If we see our life as a pilgrimage, then it becomes an integrated whole
    - It makes sense

“When we understand the story, it quiets our souls. It’s okay to have a busy life. It’s crazy to have a busy soul.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Becoming Aware of Self on the Journey

- As we walk with the Shepherd, we become aware of our true selves.
  - Psalm 23 is personal: “me”, “my”, or “I” appear 17 times
  - When we discover the Shepherd, the self is liberated
    - David is aware of self because he is aware of God’s love
    - The light of God lets us see the interior journey
The Quest for Self Fulfillment vs. The Spiritual Pilgrimage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Fulfillment</th>
<th>Spiritual Pilgrimage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A secularized version of Christianity’s discovery of self.</td>
<td>The opposite of self-fulfillment. This is the discovery of the true self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Shepherd guiding us to see our true selves in relationship to Him.</td>
<td>The Shepherd guides us to see our true selves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We lose our way and become obsessed with self.</td>
<td>The discovery of self in relationship to God leads to a lifestyle of repentance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We fail to see our bent toward evil.</td>
<td>As we walk with the Shepherd, we begin to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We become increasingly touchy, supersensitive to self but insensitive to others.</td>
<td>His presence allows us to take an honest, interior look.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We no longer see ourselves clearly.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Communion (Conversation) with God Breaks Down Into 2 Main Questions:
  - How Am I Doing? (What is coming at me? Am I happy, sad, thankful, discouraged, angry, frustrated?)
  - What is God Saying to Me? (What does the Word say?)
- Reflecting on these 2 questions in our prayer journal allows God to remove the fog and helps us see our true selves.
  - This leads us to repentance.

Benefits of Long-Term and Short-Term Journaling
- Long-Term
  - Allows us to become aware of ourselves as we focus on the Shepherd
    - The valley of the shadow of death becomes a valley of vision.
  - Allows us to discover the story God is writing in our lives.
- Short-Term
  - Helps us articulate the state of our heart
    - We can be honest about our feelings and let Scripture speak to our heart.
    - Doing this opens the door to repentance.

The Basics of Journaling
- Writing well is not a requirement
  - This is your journal
- Being consistent is not a requirement
  - It’s just a written version of childlike praying – except more organized
- Begin with what’s on your heart
  - What’s bugging you
  - What you’re thankful for
- Be “real” before God, then everything else flows
  - The act of writing out your worries, joys, and prayers helps you focus and keeps your mind from wandering
- Over time you will begin to see patterns of what God is doing . . . to pick up the threads of the story. **This is the best part!**
Prayer Points:

- God, give us eyes to see our spiritual journey.
- Help us be comforted as You lead us beside the still waters and in the paths of righteousness.
- Help us sense Your presence as You walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death.
- As we learn to journal Your faithfulness in our lives, strengthen us in our walk with You.
- Quiet our souls as we come to understand the story You are weaving in our lives.
- As we take an honest interior look at ourselves, lead us to repentance.
**Session 21**

**Introduction:** Last session we looked at the concept of becoming aware of our individual stories through **PRAYER JOURNALING**. In this next-to-last session in our study of “A Praying Life” we will take a look at some of Paul Miller’s **REAL-LIFE PRAYING** and discuss some of our own examples.

“Prayer is where I do my best work as husband, dad, worker, and friend. I’m aware of the weeds of unbelief in me and the struggles in others’ lives. The Holy Spirit puts his finger on issues that only he can solve.”

--- Paul E. Miller

**A Praying Life: How Does it Look and Feel?**

- As we pray, we are dealing not with surface stuff, but with the state of our heart and of those for whom we are praying.
  - It’s anything but boring.
  - We are thanking, repenting, protecting, and caring.
  - Our prayer time is alive with God!
- It is both **being** and **doing**.
  - We are with God.
  - We sense His presence.
  - He is speaking into our life.
- Our relationship doesn’t float above life.
  - We aren’t hunting for an “experience” with God.
  - We are inviting Him into our life experience.
  - He is in us and we are in Him.
    - As we bring to Him our real life with real needs, He acts in amazing ways.
    - He is at work touching our life, doing what we can’t do.
- The result -- **THANKSGIVING**.
  - We don’t have to work at worship when God is so alive.
  - We realize we simply can’t do life on our own.
    - Without God’s intervention, we are completely helpless.
    - We need Jesus.

Paul Miller shares one of his morning prayer times with us so we can get a sense of how A PRAYING LIFE looks in his life. (Read “A Morning Prayer Time” pp. 256 –260.)

As he reflects on that prayer time, Paul Miller said that Kim’s interruptions give that prayer time a real-life feel. He also said that except for the yelling at Kim, that prayer time is a window into what a praying life looks like. Kim’s situation helped him realize that learned helplessness lurks just underneath the surface of that prayer time.

**Small Group Discussions:** Our Real-Life Examples of Prayer Times
(Group into 4 to 5 in each group and share some of your “real-life” prayer experiences.)

**Love and Prayer Go Together**

Paul Miller shares about a time when he woke up in the middle of the night with this rather odd question on his mind: “How would you love someone without prayer?”

- What would it look like if you loved someone but couldn’t pray for that person?
  - Puzzling, difficult to imagine
“Love without being able to pray feels depressing and frustrating, like trying to tie a knot with gloves on. I would be powerless to do the other person any real good. People are far too complicated; the world is far too evil; and my own heart is too off center to be able to love adequately without praying. I need Jesus.” -- Paul E. Miller

Things Happen Because We Pray

- Paul Miller
  - Emily's attitude dramatically changed.
  - A new clarity of their house search for Kim.
  - Not long after praying Jill would “shine as [a light] in the world,” someone came up to her at work and said, “You light up this whole place.”
  - God is touching the lives of people Paul loves with a poetry all His own.
- Tim Hatcher
  - Jordan’s wilderness experience and continued progress.
  - Lance’s camp experience and continued progress.
  - Tim’s need for a heart transplant delayed.
  - Jane’s being cancer free for 11 years.
- My Story
  - ______________________________
  - ______________________________
  - ______________________________
  - ______________________________

Being Aware of Our Place in the Story

- Paul Miller points out that God’s activity takes the familiar shape of stories.
  - His rejoicing over Emily was the climax of a ten-year story.
    - He could rejoice because he’d been so aware of the story God was weaving.
  - His thanksgiving for clarity on their search for a duplex was the middle of a story.
    - The clarity had come from Jill, who pointed out:
      - With the housing market so bad, they should sell their house first.
      - This would give them great leverage in a buyer’s market.
    - Three months after this prayer, they sold their house.
      - They were ready to buy a lot and build a house (bad idea in retrospect), but decided to wait and pray one more day.
      - The next morning a house came on the market that was perfect for turning into a duplex.
  - Some stories, such as Kim’s pacing, hadn’t even started yet.
    - It hadn’t yet occurred to Paul that his words to Kim wouldn’t work.
    - He needed to direct his words to God.

“We don’t need a praying life because that is our duty. That would wear thin quickly. We need time to be with our Father every day because every day our hearts and the hearts of those around us are overgrown with weeds. We need to reflect on our lives and engage God with the condition of our souls and the souls of those he has entrusted to our care or put in our paths. In a fallen world, these things do not come automatically.”

-- Paul E. Miller
Prayer Points:

- God, we thank You for allowing us to share our lives with You, regardless of how messy that may become at times.

- As we daily invite You into our lives, and share our real-life needs with You, open our eyes to see Your hand at work.

- Allow us, in our helplessness, to take comfort in Your strength.

- We thank You for hearing the prayers we offer for Your intervention on behalf of those we love.

- Give us a sense of awareness in the stories you are weaving in our lives.
Session 22

**Introduction:** Last session we looked at some examples of **REAL-LIFE PRAYING** and we discussed how some of us were at the end of a multi-year story, some were in the middle of a developing story, and yet others were at the beginning of a story God was weaving in our lives. In our final session on “A Praying Life”, we'll take a look at the idea of **UNFINISHED STORIES**.

“We live in many overlapping stories, most of which are larger than us. Each of us will die with unfinished stories. We can never forget that God is God. Ultimately it is His story, not ours.”

-- Paul E. Miller

Paul Miller points out that in his experience, as we abide in God, He usually shows us what He is doing. **But, sometimes He doesn’t.**

**Some Biblical Examples of Unfinished Stories** (These are the ones that are seeming tragedies... the ones with the sad endings.)

- **Job**
  - Probably the most famous example
  - He never knew why he suffered
- **The Children of Israel**
  - In Psalm 137:1, the poet writes, “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.”
    - They remembered Solomon’s great temple and how it was destroyed by the Babylonians.
    - They remembered how the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem.
    - They remembered how the Babylonians had killed the king’s son right in front of him and then blinded the king and led him away in shackles.
    - They remembered how the future of the kingdom represented by young men like Daniel and his friends, had become eunuchs in the service of the Babylonian king.
  - They wept because, for all practical purposes, Israel ceased to exist.
    - The kingdom of Israel was gone.
    - The king was gone.
    - The kingship was gone.
  - At the dedication ceremony for the makeshift temple they’d thrown together after their return from captivity in 520 BC they wept because they could remember the magnificent structure Solomon had built.
  - Haggai, the prophet, posed these questions to Zerrubbabel in Haggai 2:3:
    - Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?
    - How do you see it now?
    - Is it not as nothing in your eyes?
  - Their only hope was is a few words from the prophets. At this dedication, Haggai said (Haggai 2:6-7, 9)
    - In a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory.
    - The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former.

Every person who heard these words died without seeing anything happen. In fact, their children and grandchildren died. For 550 years, nothing happened. God was present, but silent.
Present But Silent – Weaving the Story Behind the Scenes

- Even during this time of God’s silence in their story, the children of Israel didn’t stop praying and hoping.
- The answer that came from God was difficult for them to grasp.
  - What happened to the nation of Israel?
    - God created a new Israel, one that included Gentiles as the people of God.
  - What about the temple?
    - God sent His only Son to be the temple.
- God used their captivity (a seemingly unfinished story) to prepare for the coming of His Son and the birth of the church.
  - God used the destruction of the temple and the removal of the Israelites to Babylon to create the synagogue structure – a precursor of the local church.
    - If temple worship had continued uninterrupted, the early church would not have had a model for local congregations. They learned to worship God without a temple.
  - The Old Testament canon was organized during this time.
    - Severed from their land in a virtual spiritual desert, the Israelites clung to their scrolls. That gave the early church the category of Old Testament which, in turn, created the New Testament.
  - God purified Israel of mixing with other religions.
  - The dispersion of the Jewish people provided a base from which Paul and others could easily spread the gospel.
  - Israel was forever purified of outward idolatry.
    - Never again would the Jewish people worship idols.
    - Monotheism became permanently central to Israel.
      - This is the foundation of Christian thought and Western civilization.
  - Because the Jews became devout monotheists, they got upset when Jesus claimed to be God.
    - When Jesus claimed to be the unique Son of God, the high priest tore his robe and delivered Jesus up to be crucified.

The Story Unfolded

- Without the Babylonian captivity, there would be:
  - No Israel
  - No cross
  - No Christianity
  - No Western civilization
- Haggai was right!
  - The glory of the new temple was greater than Solomon's!

“The Jewish poet who wept by the rivers of Babylon never saw the end of the story. Like all the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, he lived with the story unfinished in his lifetime. He lived by faith.” -- Paul E. Miller
A Final Visit to the Prayer Therapist

Prayer Therapist: Well, I feel we’ve really made some progress during our sessions. What discoveries have you made?

Prayer Patient: I’ve come to realize that the more distant I am from a story, the less I know what God is doing. God will help me with my story, but not someone else’s.

Prayer Therapist: And what about those times when you can see what God is doing in another person’s life, but telling them would crush their spirit?

Prayer Patient: I suspect God is at times silent about stories because we just can’t handle it.

Prayer Therapist: Are you now O.K. with the idea that some stories are never finished in our lifetime?

Prayer Patient: I’ve come to realize that some stories aren’t tied up until heaven. I also know that living in an unfinished story draws me into God’s final act . . . the return of Jesus. I know that in the desert, I can see His glory and marvel in the story He is weaving in my life.

Prayer Points:

• God, give us faith to trust You with the unfinished stories of our lives.

• Help us sense Your presence as you work Your will in our lives and in the lives of those we love.

• Allow us to be O.K. with the idea that some stories will not be finished in our lifetime.

• As we live out the unfinished stories of our lives, let us be drawn to Your final act . . . the glorious return of King Jesus.