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Why Don't We Pray?

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Series: Prayer: God's "Secret" Weapon



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Why Don't We Pray?

The atmosphere was typical of a Sunday morning at Brentwood Chapel. It had been a wonderful gathering of the saints. Pastor Barnes had preached a stemwinder of a message, the choir had never been better, and the audience was packed. Thirty-five visitors had raised their hands, and three families had indicated they wanted to unite with the church.

Pastor Barnes and three of the elders were standing together at the front, marvelling at the atmosphere of the day, when a lonely-looking, somewhat-harried woman approached.

“My name is Genevieve Spintz”, she began. Pastor Barnes smiled his “glad to meet you” smile, but he was not focusing on Genevieve. Elder Willington, the church’s largest contributor, was coming toward him down the other aisle.

The other elders began what might be termed a disappearing act. They all grinned, held out their hands to Genevieve and began a somewhat hasty retreat toward their families, lest this Mrs. Spintz had a problem. A problem, you see, would ruin the atmosphere of the moment. This had been a truly memorable morning. Sure enough, Genevieve did have a problem. Before any of them could leave, and before Pastor Barnes could even give his affluent elder a handshake and a smile, Genevieve began explaining her plight.

“Please pray for me”, she began. “My husband has left me. My daughter is ill, and I am about to lose my job.” Pastor Barnes, still somewhat preoccupied, heard over his left shoulder, “Pastor, that was the best message on love and compassion you have ever preached. Praise God.” He turned from the weeping woman before him and grabbed the hand of the congratulatory parishioner. “Oh, thank you,” he gushed, taking his hand out of Genevieve’s grasp, “I think we all need to think more about compassion,” he responded. “Thank

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you, and praise God.”

Genevieve tried again. “Please pray for me,” she asked once more. By now, the other elders had made their escape, and Ron Barnes was the only object of her plea. “Oh, dear woman, I will, I will,” he answered. And your name is...?”

“Genevieve,” she repeated, “Genevieve Spintz”. “Thank you for sharing your needs,” Pastor Barnes answered, finally looking her in the eye, “We will indeed be praying for you.”

Genny, as her friends knew her, left, with little encouragement, but at least confident that someone would be praying for her. And Pastor Barnes *meant* to, but he didn't have a pencil, so he forgot to write it down. And though he did remember once that week, he forgot her name, and he couldn't really remember what her problem was. “I think it was something about her husband,” he said to himself.

Besides, *he didn't really know how to pray for someone like Genny*. Do you? And if someone asks you to pray for them, do you do it? How do you do it? How often? How intensely? Do you expect results? What kind of results do you ask for? What did Genevieve really want the pastor to ask God for, anyway?

What was her husband's real problem? Was he a believer? Who was her daughter? How old was she? What kind of sickness was it? Was she a believer? Why was Genny about to lose her job? What should we ask God to do about it? And if we knew the answers to any or all of these questions, *would we really pray?*

Statistics indicate we wouldn't. Oh, we might mention her name to God along with our cousin who has the ingrown toenail and Deacon Wright who has gone wrong. But chances are, *even if we did pray, we wouldn't know what to ask for, wouldn't expect any real answers, and would only remember to pray for her once or twice and then kind of check it off as a job well done.*

The body of Christ in our generation doesn't pray much. I'm not talking about the occasional Sunday morning drop-in who only knows the Lord's prayer and how to ask God to “heal my sister”. I'm talking about the Sunday School teachers,

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the elders, the Bible-believing, witnessing evangelicals who stand as our examples of spirituality.

No, we can't generalize and categorize the whole body of Christ; but prayer, both corporate and private, have become the second-class citizens of the spiritual world in our generation. People don't pray as they ought, and those who do often admit in private they don't really know how and don't really expect answers.

What has happened? How could the body of Christ reach this point? How could we get to the place where we can spend five hours a week in committee meetings and only a few isolated minutes a week in the prayer closet seeking the face of God?

How did we reach the stage where more people will attend a seminar on responding to the latest social challenge than will have prayed over that problem in a month? Why would the calendars of our churches fill up with activities that drain us of our time, cause our families to rush to and fro without time to take a breath; and yet when people are asked to sign up for a prayer chain or commit to regular times of prayer, so few respond?

Why do the prayer requests churches receive indicate that often people don't really know what to ask for when they ask for prayer? Why is prayer only casually referred to in stirring messages and doctrinally correct Sunday School classes, but nobody teaches us *how to pray*, and nobody gives us *time to pray*?

These are some of the issues we need to address and, yes, *pray*, about for the next few weeks together. We begin with the problem. We will, hopefully, progress to the solutions. The problem is: "*Why don't we pray?*" The answers to that question may well lead us to find from God's Word some directions and some absolutes.

Once again, the purpose of this study is not simply to gain knowledge, though there is a need for that. We need to know what God says in His Word about prayer. But that will only make us more accountable. We need to be willing to apply that knowledge to our own lives and lay ourselves before God in conviction and humility. But even that won't

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do it. Then we must become a praying people. Our lives must never ever be the same again. Even those who are committed, praying believers need to seek out areas where their prayer lives can be further transformed and never look back. We must be changed, and that change must demonstrate itself in obedience. To that end, let's pray about prayer:

Dear God,

Please teach us to pray. No matter where we are in our spiritual pilgrimage, in the next few weeks and months transform our understanding of prayer and our commitment to prayer. May we become a praying people. May I become a praying saint. May the results of that transformation stretch around the world. Dear Lord, open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of Thy Word. Then, teach us, Lord,

We pray in Jesus' Name,

Amen

Let's begin by taking a look at the most crucial prayer time in all of history. Let's follow our Savior to a place called Gethsemane, where God Himself stopped His best friends and asked them specifically to pray. Let's see why He asked them to pray, how they responded, and how He responded to their response. We may find some answers to our question: "Why don't we pray?"

We will read it from a harmony of the gospels, [The Life of Christ in Stereo](#), as it blends portions of Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and John 18 into one passage. Here's how it reads:

Then came Jesus with them across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, a place called Gethsemane, into which he and his disciples entered. And when He had arrived at the place, He said to them, "Sit here, while I go yonder and pray."

And taking with Him, Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, He began to be sorrowful and amazed, and deeply distressed. Then said He to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death; remain here, and watch with me. Pray, that you enter not into temptation."

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And going forward from them a little farther, about a stone's throw, He knelt down on the ground, and fell on His face and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him, And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee; my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from Me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? So you could not watch with me one hour! Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

And again, a second time He went off and prayed, saying, "My Father, if thou art willing, take away this cup from me: nevertheless, if this cannot pass from me unless I drink it, not my will, but Thine, be done." And there appeared unto Him an angel from Heaven, strengthening Him.

And being in an agony, He prayed the more earnestly, and His sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.

And when He rose up from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping again for sorrow, for their eyes were heavy; and He said to them, "Why do you sleep? Rise up and pray, so that you may not enter into temptation!" And they knew not what to answer Him. So He left them and went off again, and prayed a third time, saying the same thing as before.

Then came He to the disciples the third time, and said to them, "Are you sleeping even now, and taking your rest? It is enough! Behold, the hour has come. And the Son of man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. Lo, my betrayer is at hand!"

And immediately, while He was yet speaking, behold, a great crowd drew near, and he who was called Judas, one of the twelve was leading them. Now Judas, who was betraying Him, also knew the place, for Jesus often had resorted there with His disciples.

Why don't we pray? I think the incident we have just witnessed may give us some insights into what prayer really is, and consequently why most of us don't take the commandments of Scripture where prayer is concerned as

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seriously as God seems to have intended. Let's look first at this passage and study the principles involved. Then, let's ask ourselves the questions: "Why don't we pray more?" and "Why don't we pray more like Jesus prayed?" Two good questions.

I think it is safe to say that no time in the history of the world has been more crucial than the incident we are about to study. Satan and all of his demonic host were poised for the kill. If ever the serpent would have an opportunity to bruise the Messiah, this was it. All of the pieces were in place. God had made Himself vulnerable by coming to earth and taking on Himself the form of a man. Now that man was about to be trapped in the corner of a garden where there was no way of escape, arrested by an angry mob, tried in a mockery of justice and led up a dusty path of horror to His death.

"That ought to take care of this Messiah," thought Satan and his host. "That ought to silence, once and for all, the religious fanatics who were claiming that this mere carpenter's son was the Son of God." This was the enemy's big chance. The game was tied and into overtime, and Satan had God backed up against the goal line. It was fourth and twenty; but this was the moment God, in eternity past, had made such rich provision for. Battles with the enemy had never been a problem for God. This one would prove to be His greatest victory of all.

Jesus, knowing the intensity of the conflict and the importance of the outcome, did what He so often did. He went to pray. And He went where He so often went (so often that Judas would have no trouble knowing where to find Him). Oh, that we were so often consistently found in the prayer closet that it would be, as it were, our home away from home.

In the case of Jesus, His prayer closet was a place called Gethsemane. The word means "oil-press" or "olive-vat". It was beyond Kidron at the foot of the Mount of Olives about three-fourths of a mile from the eastern walls of Jerusalem.

It was to be there that the greatest battle in the history of man would take place. The conflicts of World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War all rolled into one were like the sound of a cap pistol compared to this one. This

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time, all of eternity would hang in the balance. This time, everyone would win, or everyone would lose.

It would only seem, then, that God's band of faithful followers would sense the intensity of the hour, and understanding the place of prayer in these kinds of conflicts, would both support the Master in His quest to do the Father's will and stand in the gap for Him at God's throne. It would seem that way. But, knowing us, would we have done any differently than they? I'm not so sure. I'm not so sure at all.

Let's look at some key principles in this passage and try to apply those principles to our own prayer life (or lack of it). Let's journey back to that garden with Jesus and see what was taking place:

Why was Jesus there? The Scripture says He was in agony from within. He was "sorrowful, amazed, and deeply distressed". It was akin to a feeling of terror. Why was He so terrified, so disturbed in His spirit? The literal meaning of the phrase is "He was in agony from within". Fear was not the cause of His agony.

For God hath not given us a spirit of fear, but of power,
and of love, and of a sound mind.

(II Timothy 1:7)

Perhaps it was the prospect of being separated from His Father. Perhaps it was the reality of tasting sin for the first time. Perhaps it was the sheer intensity of the oppression Satan was attempting to create. Perhaps it was all of the above. He was so in agony that it never dawned on Him to do anything but what He did. What He did was to go apart to pray.

Why did He not go alone? Good question. As it turned out, He might as well have. But Jesus, who had shared the very mountaintop of His life with these same disciples, wanted them to enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, as well. They, like we, however, would rather stand around and tell war stories about our spiritual highlights than walk through valleys with the Master. Two things were certain. They did not understand the intensity of the moment, and they did not understand the importance of prayer, or the authority of God's Word. God spoke to them and told them what to do. All

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they had to do was do it. Sound familiar? It ought to.

Observe the arithmetic of the hour. God took His first string into the contest. He had twelve of them. They had experienced His undivided attention for three years. He had been their mentor, their teacher, their friend. But count heads, will you, as they enter the garden of the olive tree. There are not twelve but eleven. Where is the lost sheep? He will arrive soon enough surrounded by his henchmen, those to whom he has sold his soul for a pittance. He will arrive soon enough, but for now, he is absent without leave. He has decided to abandon God. No, more than that, He has decided to extinguish God.

So make it eleven. But wait. As they pause just inside the gate, Jesus turns to eight of the eleven and bids them remain behind. He puts them on “watch duty”, if you will. The words, “watch with me” mean to “keep awake and not fall asleep.” Their task was not spiritually momentous, but still it was a direct assignment from God. All they had to do was stay awake and watch the gate lest the intruders come and interrupt the Master. Easy enough task, wouldn't you say? Yet to God, it was crucial. Too bad they didn't understand.

So the twelve become three, but not your ordinary three. This was the “inner circle” of God's friendships: Peter, James, and John. He motioned them to come with Him, and they did. No doubt they were imagining another moment like the ones they had so recently enjoyed. These were the three who had been with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration. They had been with Him in the house of Jairus when He raised the dead. They had been by His side, close by His side, through all the thousand or so days of His sojourn. You somehow expected them to be with Him.

The Master asks only two things of these favored ones. He asks that they watch and pray. Not only does He ask them, He shares His heart with them. He becomes vulnerable. God becomes vulnerable. Listen carefully, and let it be a pattern for building relationships spiritually. He was to pray alone, but He wanted those with whom He had shared His heart to be praying as well. To be sure they understood, He opened up to them His deepest feelings. He said, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here, and watch with

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me. Pray, that you enter not into temptation.”

Think about it. How many times have people come up to you and opened up and shared their burdens. Maybe you didn't understand, but you did understand *that to them it was a matter of life or death*. And how many times have you failed to heed their call to stand with them? Don't be so hard on these three. They are but a picture of you and of me. He only asked that they watch and pray, but of course, they didn't do either. Like Pastor Barnes, in the opening illustration, they *meant to*.

But for a number of reasons, they didn't; and because they didn't, they missed out on participating in the greatest spiritual battle in history and thus missed their part in the greatest spiritual victory in history.

Had they paid attention here, would they still all have forsaken Him and fled when the fiery darts of the enemy began to swirl about their heads? Perhaps not. Had Peter prayed and paid attention here, would he still have cursed and denied that he even knew the King of Glory? Probably not. But they didn't pray. And they didn't enter into the Master's moment of trial and thus of triumph. Why not? And why don't we? Let's look at some of the reasons:

1- They didn't understand the depth of the conflict. They thought they were just on another retreat with the Master, and hopefully, they would gain some new insights that would make their lives more exciting. Another Mount of Transfiguration would be nice. Another resurrection from the dead would be good. Even a few more miracles, like curing a leper or giving sight to the blind would further enhance their spiritual lives. But it had been a long day, and they were tired. So whatever it was the Master was going to teach them, they hoped it would be soon. They couldn't handle these late church services.

They were still in another world. They wanted their religious experiences to be neatly packaged, the kind of things they could put in their memoirs that would make believers who followed after green with envy. That this was to be the moment in history when all of history would hang in the balance never entered their minds. They had been told,

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but it didn't sink in. It wasn't what they wanted to hear.

There was to be another time in history not totally unlike this moment; a time when the forces of evil would be gathering for one final thrust at the kingdom of God before that climactic trumpet sounded when the dead in Christ would rise, and they who were alive and remained would be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air. It would be a time of great tribulation on earth, of great celebration in heaven, all leading up to that moment of moments when the King of Glory would descend with all His saints to once and for all put an end to the war of wars on planet earth.

What would be the spiritual climate then? As it was in the days of Noah, so would it be in those days (or should I say in *these* days.) Sleepy saints. Spiritually hyperactive saints, busy about the peripheral work of the kingdom, seemingly unmindful of the intensity of the conflict and the lateness of the hour. Men and women seeking mounts of transfiguration to talk about rather than spending hours in the closet of prayer anticipating the thunder clouds of glory that soon will wake us from our slumber, only to remind us that, like the disciples the hour has passed, and we have slept away our moment of greatest ministry. Why don't we pray more? Beloved, we don't understand how late it is. We don't understand how critical it is. Jesus is whispering, even now, "Watch and pray." Dear God, may we listen.

2- They didn't understand the spiritual warfare involved. They thought that Jesus might have to call down fire from heaven or something, but they were sure this kingdom would be established on earth, and they would be part of His cabinet of officers once it was. They thought Judas was the enemy. Or the Pharisees. Or the Sanhedrin. Or the multitudes who had forsaken the Master when the call to discipleship got tough. It never dawned on them that the real battle was going on in the heavenlies, and the conflict was between Satan and God. I don't think it dawns on us, either.

We lose our job. So we think about praying. How? That God will find us another job. We have an accident. We pray. How? That God will cause the insurance company to fix it. We get sick. We pray. How? That God will heal us, that's how. In all of those circumstances, we pray. But our prayers are

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dealing with the *symptoms*, not with the reality. The reality is that in the heavens there is a battle going on for the control of our lives and for the resulting testimony of our lives. Satan asked God permission to take away our job. Why? To destroy our faith. God allowed it. Why? To purify our faith. The need is not the job. God can provide that in a moment. The need is for a godly response which will glorify God and a surrendered heart which will grow in grace. That's what we should pray for.

Satan approached God and asked permission to touch our bodies. He said, "God, he will panic and refuse to believe you are able to meet his needs." But God knew that once our bodies were in pain, we would begin to think in terms of that which is of the Spirit. So He granted permission, and Satan went to work. Only if you visualize that scenario, can you understand what is happening when the sky falls, and understand how to pray and why to pray. We will look at that in detail as we pursue this subject. But the key is that the disciples simply did not understand the spiritual implications of the events that were transpiring. Thus, what was happening was not important enough to interrupt their slumber. Dear God, help us to awaken from our spiritual afternoon naps and realize what is happening.

We are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers; against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.
(Ephesians 6:12)

3- They didn't understand that prayer is hard work.
I'm afraid neither do we. We think we have prayed when we pause in between listening to songs on the radio to shoot an arrow at God and ask Him to ease the traffic so we can make it home in time for Susie's birthday party. We think we've prayed when we scan a prayer list and fire off a couple of "Lord, please bless... so and so". And we have. But in a real sense, we haven't entered into what prayer really is. Prayer is entering the Holy of Holies near to the heart of God. You don't get there unless your heart is pure, your sins forgiven, your heart broken in humility, and your desire to have His will done on earth as it is in Heaven is so intense that you would give up anything, suffer anything, endure anything in order for that to happen.

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Until you are so grieved by sin, so broken by your slothfulness, so hungry for His presence that the entirety of your life becomes secondary in the light of that need, you will have prayed; but you will not have been in that Holy place where God's heart and yours beat as one. You don't get there by scooting along on life's spiritual freeway, tossing sentence prayers in times of grief and trial. You get there by living in His presence morning, noon and night. You get there by entering into the fellowship of His sufferings by traveling the back roads of pain and persecution. And that is not light duty.

In our next chapter, we will continue to look at this experience in the garden and the truths we can learn about prayer. But for now, let's remind ourselves that these disciples were not at all unlike us. They loved their Lord. They followed Him wherever He went. They intended to enter into the very heart of His ministry, storing up treasures where moth and rust cannot corrupt and thieves cannot break through and steal. They wanted to do His will, but they didn't understand the depth of the conflict. They didn't understand that the real battle was spiritual, and they didn't understand that prayer was hard work. It doesn't just happen. They didn't understand. So when the crisis of crises arrived, instead of bombarding the throne of grace with hearts torn asunder by grief and compassion, they fell asleep. Oh, dear God, they fell asleep.

TEACH US TO PRAY

Oh, dear God, they fell asleep
What more need Scripture say?
These, His very closest friends,
Were asked to watch and pray.

As wretched clouds of death and doom
Their ugly shadows cast
The next great act of God's great love
Would yet now come to pass.

But these, His loved ones, fell asleep
Devoid of spiritual power.
They heard the Master whisper,
"Could ye not watch one hour?"

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But do we have a stone to throw?
What have we to say?
Would we, in twilight's garden scene
Been more alert than they?

Do not, like Peter, James, and John
We often fail to see
The depth of Jesus' call to prayer?
Oh, God, how can that be?

Dear Jesus, as by your side
We walk from day to day
This one cry—we plead with thee,
"Teach us how to pray!"

Our Father and our God,

We come humbly into Your presence as a class, and as individuals, and we ask You to teach us—really teach us—in the days to come, how to pray.

There are many in this room who are praying saints, who spend hours on their knees. We pray that we might learn from them as well as from You. We pray that even they might gain new insights from Your Word and deepen their commitment and their encouragement.

But many of us, Father, talk more about prayer than we do really praying. Many of us know more than we do, and many of us try to do more than we know. But for the most part, Father, many of us don't fully enter into the Holy of Holies and into the center of Your heart and really have that kind of fellowship with You that prayer is all about.

So humble us, Father, and help us even this morning to humble ourselves, that we might begin to learn more, and more, and more, about what it means to pray. Why don't we pray? We're no different than the disciples were. Dear God, make us different, we pray.

In Jesus name,

Amen.

Focus on Application

Read and re-read the passage on Jesus' Gethsemane experience. Try to place yourself along with Peter, James, and John in the innermost part of the garden with Jesus. Ask yourself:

1- Why do you think Jesus is telling you about His inner struggle?

2- Based on His statement, what questions might you ask Him?

3- Based on His statement, how would you pray for Him?

4- What do you think He meant when He said, "Pray so that you enter not into temptation"?

5- Why do you think Jesus prayed the same prayer three times?

6- Why do you think the disciples fell asleep?

7- What has Jesus asked you to pray about? Think carefully before you answer.

8- Are you praying faithfully for those things? Or have you "fallen asleep"?

9- What are you going to do about it?

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