

# What Good is Prayer?

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is the eighth and final sermon in our 2025 Faith Questions sermon series.

I again want to thank you for your very good questions. It's been another year where we've explored a wide range of questions that occur to us in the life of faith, as we seek not only to understand some of the complexities of God and the world, but also to live faithfully in obedience to Jesus.

I want to repeat something I said at the beginning of this series—something I probably say in some form or another at the beginning of every Faith Questions sermon series.

I am aware that I will not have addressed every question to everyone's satisfaction.

I have no illusions that I have tied up every loose end perfectly, or that every aspect of the life of faith now makes perfect rational sense, or that all doubts have now been finally and decisively vanquished.

There is a level of mystery inherent in Christian faith and each one of us will have to make peace with this (this will be quite evident in today's question on prayer, one of the deepest mysteries of all!).

I should add that I do not think this is unique to Christian faith. Every single belief system, ideology, worldview, whatever you want to call it relies, on some level, upon what cannot be proved.

Even the most committed atheist steps out into the unknown on *some* level, whether it is in grounding moral claims or in wrestling with the mystery of human consciousness and where it comes from, or whatever.

Nobody lives in some kind of airtight, perfectly logical system where everything about life is explained perfectly (even if they think they do).

This is the human condition. We must live our lives based on more than we can prove, particularly when it comes to the things that matter most.

I don't think this is some kind of bug in the system, either. I think this is how God made us, so that we would learn to reach out beyond ourselves and what we can manage and contain and explain... and to him.

At best, I hope to achieve two things in these series:

1. To remind us that questions are important and welcome in church.
2. To hopefully provide some helpful ways of approaching these questions.

So, with that, let's move on to our final question.

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On this last Sunday of our series, we have a big one: Why do we pray when we seem to get no answer? When bad things still happen? What good is prayer?

I know that every faith question I receive is personal, at least on some level. This last one feels particularly so. This is a question I suspect most of us have asked, are currently asking or will ask at some point in our lives.

Quite often it seems that prayer simply doesn't work. We pray privately and we pray publicly, we pray for small things and large things and the world seems to just roll along pretty much unchanged.

We pray for peace yet wars rage on. We pray for health yet all around us those we care for get sick and die. We pray that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven, yet so many places in our world seem like a living hell.

So, what do we do? How do we pray?

What do we pray *for*? Peace? Healing? Comfort? Strength to endure? “Thy will be done” (those four words we pray when we run out of ideas, the last best expression of hope and resignation whereby we collapse into the words of Christ himself)?

And what are we even *doing* when we pray? Are we trying to convince God to get busy with what he would otherwise be disinclined to do without our entreaties?

Does God require arm-twisting? Is there a critical mass of prayer required to move the divine needle?

When it comes to the nature of prayer, it doesn’t take too long before we’re in head-scratching territory.

“I pray because Jesus prayed and because he told his followers to pray” can sound like a cop-out. Or it can sound like the deepest, truest thing one could say. The older I get, the more it seems like the latter.

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I think that whatever else we might say about prayer, we must say that a genuinely Christian view of prayer is quite a bit bigger and broader and deeper than a technique to get what we want.

Prayer is far more about bending our wills to God’s than God’s to ours.

It is a spiritual discipline whereby we train (and retrain) our appetites, where we worship the God who is wholly other, where we learn submission (there’s an unpopular word!) to the will of God, and where we enter into the suffering of others.

Yes, we ask for stuff. It’s right there in the Lord’s Prayer, after all. *Give us this day our daily bread...*

Yes, the Bible does contain some statements about prayer, sometimes from Jesus himself, that seem to say quite straightforwardly, “Pray for what you want, and God will grant it.”

Scripture certainly doesn’t tell us *not* to ask for what we want. But we do so, at our best, acknowledging that the stuff we want might not be good for us or might not be what God

wants for us or that there may be other factors at work that we cannot see and may *never* see.

And even though Jesus does say things like, “whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24), in Gethsemane, we also see this same Jesus asking for something in prayer and not receiving it.

*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me...* (Mat. 26:39).

We also see this in today’s Scripture reading from 2 Corinthians. Paul pleaded with God to remove what he refers to as “a thorn in my flesh.” We don’t know exactly what this “thorn” was. Perhaps a physical malady of some kind? Perhaps some kind of mental or spiritual torment? We don’t know.

What we do know is that it was something bad enough for Paul to describe as “a messenger from Satan.”

(So, probably not a sore knee, to pick a random, non-personal example.)

And that Paul desperately prayed that this burden be taken from him. Three times.

Yet this request was never granted. Instead, Paul says, the Lord said to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

It was through unanswered prayer, that Paul was led into a more profound understanding and experience of one of the deepest of Christian truths.

Strength is revealed in weakness. Victory comes through apparent defeat. Life comes out of death.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup>That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties [like unanswered prayers]. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Could Paul have arrived at this deeply Christian insight if his thorn had been removed just as he asked?

Well, we obviously can't say for certain. But we can say that God used Paul's weaknesses and difficulties in ways that have changed the world.

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I don't have the answers to all the questions about prayer, about how it works, about the whens and the hows and they whys.

The question of how God interacts with the world and the role our prayers may or may not play in the unfolding of God's plan will remain a deep mystery.

But I continue to pray. And not just because it's part of my job!

I pray because the alternative seems a more hopeless option. I pray because I believe God *has* answered my prayers in the past and continues, however mysteriously, to answer my own and those of others in the present.

I pray because brothers and sisters through the ages have prayed better and more frequently than I and have testified to God's enduring presence and action in their lives.

I pray because God asks his children to pray. Because Jesus himself prayed.

Perhaps prayer is, in some ways, an act of defiance—a daring declaration of hope in the promise of God, and a “reminder” of sorts: Do not forget us! For your name's sake, rescue us! We need you!

I echo the words of Giles Fraser, a journalist and an Anglican priest:

Prayer is my category for the most important of things that I cannot and do not know how to solve. **Like tears, it is a bubbling up of something impossible to silence.** It's not a way of getting something done in the world; I'm not escalating stuff to the almighty... But neither can I get through all of this without Him.

Prayer is ultimately based upon the conviction that God does stand over the events of our world, that God does have a purpose and a plan in allowing the many things that we cannot understand.

And prayer is, of course, also about changing you and me.

If God's perceived inactivity makes me angry or confused does this lead me to a deeper commitment to bring light and life to places of darkness and death, or does it make me jaded and cynical?

Does it make me love life and love others more, or does it make me bitter and complacent?

Ultimately, I am not responsible for how God acts in the world. I am, however, responsible for how I act in the world. That often seems like more than enough to worry (and pray) about for me.

A few comments as I begin to draw this to a close.

First, keep praying. Persevere.

Like the persistent widow in Luke 18. Like Simeon, who had spent his whole life waiting and longing for God's Messiah. Like Job who, even in the midst of all his unbearable suffering, could say, "I know my redeemer lives and, in the end, he will stand upon the earth."

We keep praying, even if the answer doesn't seem to be coming. We believe that our prayers are part of how God is making all things new.

We may not understand the timing. We may not understand the pain and frustration that come along the way.

But we believe that our hunger for things to be other than they are—in the world, in our lives, in the lives of those we love—is a hunger that has been given to us by God.

Second, check your motives. This one is perhaps a bit harder to hear but the Bible occasionally says hard things.

James 4 says,

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.

We must acknowledge that at least *some* of the time, we don't get what we pray for because we're asking for the wrong things or because God knows that what we're asking

for wouldn't be good for us or wouldn't serve the purposes he has for our lives (which may be different from our own at any given moment!).

Sometimes, just getting what we want wouldn't be good for us or wouldn't be as good for us as something else that we can't yet see.

The easy analogy here is that of a parent and a child. Children who are given everything they want all the time turn into monsters! Our desires are not always good.

This week, I listened to a sermon by the late Tim Keller on prayer and something he said lodged itself in my brain:

God always gives you everything that you would have asked for if you knew everything that God knows.

Maybe that still sounds trite to you, I don't know. Maybe it sounds like a cop-out or a way of trying to get around those verses in the bible where Jesus (and others) make prayer seem like a formula.

But to me, they sounded hopeful and true. They were a simple acknowledgment of how profoundly limited we are as human beings, and how this shapes our desires and what we pray for.

God is interested in the long game. Much more than we often are.

We're not as interested in how we might be shaped by hard roads. We live in a culture where we have been conditioned to expect everything on demand, and we want the quick fix.

But sometimes, God has plans for us that may take a long time to unfold. Sometimes, God has things to teach us, ways to shape us that can only be learned by going through things we would prefer to avoid.

As some of you know, I'm planning on going on a very long walk later this spring, so I've been reading articles about pilgrimages. One writer I came across this week said,

We make pilgrimage in uncertainty and mystery, not knowing exactly what lies ahead or what the things around us mean. **But as we make progress, we see that**

**all which once puzzled us is now lit by the golden light of love, and that all these things are held in God's timeless providence.<sup>1</sup>**

I like that idea of the golden light of love radiating back on all that we've been through, all the hard things, all the unanswered or differently answered prayers and revealing to us that God holds it all.

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In John 10:10, Jesus says "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full."

In John 16:33, Jesus says, "In this world, you will have trouble."

Not *might* have trouble. Will. Trouble will find you.

**We live our lives in between these two statements.**

Jesus says one more thing: "But take heart, I have overcome the world."

Take heart. Keep praying. Keep faithing and hoping and loving.

And do all this knowing that we pray to is the One who loves us, the One who smiles upon us, the One who knows us better than we know ourselves, who sees more than we do, and who can be trusted.

I want to end with a lyric from a song that was introduced to us a few weeks ago. You may recall Greg and Joani singing it to us first in Arabic.

Between darkness and light I will always walk; and everywhere I will go, I will open a window of light, and plant the seeds of love.

Darkness and light will be a part of each one of our journeys. This is non-negotiable.

Prayer, I think, is one of the ways in which we open windows of light and plant seeds of love along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://comment.org/following-no-other-way/>



So, may God help us to not lose heart. May God continue to teach us to pray. And to shape us through our prayers to be openers of windows and planters of seeds.

Amen.

