

A Better Way to Pray

by Jonathan Graf

For the past decade, I have been an aficionado of prayer. I am interested in it, study and analyze it, and try to practice it in longer and more powerful ways. But it has not always been that way.

Though I grew up in the church, came to saving faith in Christ as a six-year-old, had a wonderful Christian upbringing and discipleship, I was not devoted much to prayer until my early 30s. Oh, I knew how to pray, but it was never a part of my daily walk with God. It was never a passion. It wasn't until 1989-90 that I began moving from being a crisis pray-er (able to only pray much if there was something significant in my life to pray about) to having a passion for prayer.

That year, three things happened, which caused me to move forward in the area of prayer: I had an experience that many would call a filling of the Holy Spirit; I received an assignment to write a study guide to A.W. Tozer's classic book *The Pursuit of God*; and the responsibility of my new position at Christian Publications, the publishing house I worked for, scared me so much, I needed to pray.

My experience with the Holy Spirit forever changed my relationship with God; something within me was continually drawing me to God, desiring to commune with Him. Working on *The Pursuit of God* increased my hunger for God tenfold. And the fear I had in taking over a department that published books on the deeper spiritual life, simply drove me to God in desperation. I hadn't come up through the ranks in publishing. God had just plopped me into the middle of an expanding company through an unusual set of circumstances. Though I had authority, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't want to make mistakes in selecting books.

But even though I was growing in my prayer life—I was praying each day, I was pouring my heart out to God, and connecting with Him—I would certainly not say I was a "good" pray-er. When it came to praying for anything other than my own situations, I was weak. I tried to intercede for friends and family, but struggled. I valiantly tried keeping lists, and praying for what I had been asked to pray for. But it was dull and lifeless. Why? Because I was praying the only way I knew how, based on what I had seen growing up in church.

For much of my life I attended prayer meetings, where I, like everyone there, would dutifully remember all those who gave requests. Often I would write out a list and stick it in my Bible—where it would stay (along with other collected prayer lists for other prayer meetings) until my quarterly, old-bulletin, prayer-list cleaning and I would throw it (them) away. Usually the things on these lists were very uninspiring—someone’s third cousin who was laid off from work; another’s kid who had a math test the next day; maybe a missionary or two whom the church supported. There was nothing there I could pray passionately about. If I ever prayed for something from that prayer meeting list during the week, all I ever prayed was for the obvious, what I specifically had been asked to pray. Passion only came when I really cared about what (or whom) I was praying for.

The Change

In December of 1994, I married JoLyn, a single mom, who had an eight-year-old daughter, Amy. Suddenly I had two more people in my life, whom I loved, who were very important to me. They easily became a part of my regular prayer life. But over the years, as I have prayed for them, I noticed something: I have sustained a greater level of prayer for them—in length of time, but also in intensity and passion—when I have prayed for character qualities, rather than when I prayed for a specific concrete thing.

I did pray for specific things—school issues with Amy, new friends for Jo, who had been uprooted from her life in Pennsylvania. But it was my praying for these character qualities that filled me with passion, and I believe made the most difference in their lives. And let me be clear, I was not praying for character traits because I thought they were seriously lacking in their lives, but because I felt God leading me to do so.

For my wife, I started regularly praying for joy. It wasn’t that she was depressed. I just knew that she had gone through incredible pain in the circumstances of her first marriage ending. I just had a sense that she needed to experience a deeper level of joy. For Amy, I prayed that God would develop her wonderful sensitive spirit. He had an ultimate purpose for it; I wanted to see it fully used by Him. A few years later, when Amy felt a call to be a missionary, I started praying in a new vein. I pictured her as a strong woman of God. What would she need to be used of God on the mission field? I began to pray—and still do—for those characteristics as they would come to mind.

A few years later, I became an elder and a prayer leader at my church. There, instead of focusing my prayers back on those everyday needs, I began trying to pray bigger things for the people under my care. I wanted to see God do great things in the life of our church and the lives of our people. Transforming things! Instead of focusing prayers on the everyday “God, please let their life be normal again” prayers we usually voice, I tried to pray prayers that sought God’s purposes for their lives. Prayers that asked God to bring glory to His

Son through these situations and lives.

I began being struck more and more by the prayers of Paul (which we'll look at in the remainder of this book). Paul had people with huge problems under his care, people who were facing life and death situations. Yet in all his recorded prayers, nowhere do I see that he prayed for specific answers to everyday situations. (Yes, he prayed for himself, that his "thorn in the flesh" would be removed. But remember, God said "no," so he stopped praying about that.) Don't get me wrong. I would be surprised if Paul didn't pray for some specific things for people he knew, so I am not saying that we should never pray for specific answers. But, since all of Paul's recorded prayers were in a different vein, I wonder if a majority of our prayers for ourselves and people shouldn't be in the same vein.

Most of us pray for those little answerables for each other. Sometimes we see some answer, but most of the time not. Over time, many stop praying because they do not see enough things answered. Often they even fail to see God move in a situation because they are so focused on what they want to see happen. We keep trying to bolster faith, and claim those promises in Scripture which tell us we can ask for anything and it will happen. But often, more and more, our prayers resemble fate rather than faith and hope rather than belief.

Our weak, "I hope God will do this" prayers take their toll. Most of us have very weak prayer lives. We don't get excited about praying with others. Our churches corporate prayer experiences are anemic and dull. And yet God says that He wants to do immeasurably more than we can ask or think (Ephesians 3:21). Most don't think to even ask—and if we do ask, we only ask for the little answerables: "make my life normal again."

A few years ago, a pastor friend—we'll call him Bill—revealed something very interesting about his ministry—something that I think is equally true in churches all across the Western world. Even though at the time, on the outside he had a nice, stable—and to most eyes—effective ministry, he told me something shocking. He said that in his fifteen plus years of ministry, he could only point to one person who was a believer when he first came into Bill's church (not counting people who came to Christ in his ministry) who clearly grew in his relationship with God while under Bill's ministry. Oh, Bill had many deeply spiritual people in his congregation. But he couldn't obviously see growth in them year to year. He meant that over a period of time, the evidence showed that this person clearly went deeper in his walk with God; it was obvious. Bill is not alone. Many churches do not see spiritual growth in their people. People may gain spiritual knowledge, but don't really grow deeper spiritually. (Whatever level of spiritual depth they have when they join a church, is the same level they are at years later.)

Like Bill, that realization should radically change both the way we do discipleship, and, more importantly, the way we pray for fellow believers. We need to pray more for spiritual development and less for comfort and ease. We need to pray more for the Holy Spirit to transform and less for normal lives for those we love. That's radical.

Instead of seeking God for the little answerables, seek Him for eternal things: God's glory, kingdom expansion, and God's will. Then teach that principle to those you lead. May your prayer life—and the spiritual lives of those for whom you are praying—never be the same!

--Jonathan Graf is the president of the Church Prayer Leaders Network. His book [The Power of Personal Prayer](#) expands on this idea of kingdom prayer. Click on the title for information.