
The Problem with Prayer

BOB HEERSPINK

Prayer. It is a standard Christian practice. Sometimes, though, it is an all too easy answer to difficult times in life. Oh, just pray about it, people say; and yet, so many of us struggle with prayer. How does prayer really work? Does it make a difference? This week, author William Brownson joins our discussion about the struggles with and the value of prayer. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, most people, I find, pray; in fact, I looked on the Web and I found out that 2/3 of North Americans pray daily; and yet it seems a lot of people struggle with the question of what difference does prayer really make?

DAVE BAST

Well, we have this series of programs that are addressing questions 8th graders raised in their Bible class at a local Christian school, and they are great questions. Here is the question we are going to talk about today. One of the students asks: How does prayer work? Does it make a difference? Why should we pray for things to happen if God has already known everything that is going to happen? You know, frankly that is a question that I have struggled with, and still do sometimes. It is easy to pray in a superficial way. It is hard to develop a genuine prayer life.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I think of that 8th grader saying: Hey, I prayed that the bully would just ignore me today, but I still got crammed into the locker.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it didn't happen.

BOB HEERSPINK

It didn't happen. I prayed to pass that science test and I got a D. How does this work, and does it really make a difference that I prayed?

DAVE BAST

Well, and we have all experienced that, surely, in more serious ways. We have prayed for people that we loved who were ill with cancer perhaps, and prayed long and hard, and they died. So, then we are tempted to ask: Well, so what difference? You know, why bother if God is going to do what he is going to do anyway?

BOB HEERSPINK

And you've got that tension, actually, in scripture itself, because Jesus talks about prayer, and he says in a passage like Mark Chapter 11, he says:

²³I say to you, if anyone says to this mountain, “Go and throw yourself into the sea,” and does not doubt in your heart, but believes what they say will happen, it will be done for them. So, he is talking about prayer as able to literally move mountains.

DAVE BAST

Well, and he goes on to say: ²⁴Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. And of course, that verse has given rise to all sorts of struggles because people have asked for something and believed real hard, and then if they didn’t receive it, they think: Well maybe I didn’t believe hard enough, or... it’s all up to...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; name it and claim it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, all kinds of difficulties with that; and yet, on the other hand, we see Jesus himself in the most famous example of prayer probably of all, in the Garden of Gethsemane, falling down and saying: Father, if it is your will, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not what I will but what you will. Your will be done, in other words; and the cup was not taken away from him. The Father said no.

BOB HEERSPINK

Jesus prayed for the cup to pass, and you cannot question that Jesus was a person of ultimate faith; and yet, the cup still needed to be drunk.

DAVE BAST

So, which is it? Do we boldly claim by faith the things that God lays on our heart, or do we always say: Not my will but your will be done, if it is your will. This is a problem with prayer. In fact, C. S. Lewis pointed out that that is *the* problem with prayer – a problem that really doesn’t have an answer.

Nevertheless, we are going to explore it, and to do that with us, we have invited today onto the program a dear friend, a beloved mentor for me, Dr. Bill Brownson, who was for many, many years the president of Words of Hope; a great man of prayer himself, and also, he has written a book called *Courage to Pray*, a very fine book that has helped many people. So stay tuned. After the break Bill will join our conversation.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Bill, we are very happy that you are joining us on *Groundwork* today. Welcome to the program.

BILL BROWNSON

Thank you. Good to be here.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, Dave and I have been talking just a little bit about kind of a theological or theoretical approach to prayer; but really, to understand prayer, I think we have to get inside it and practice it; and one of the questions I think of is your own experience with prayer. How has prayer gone for you in your discipleship?

BILL BROWNSON

When I was 16 a friend of mine under a street light led me to faith in Christ. He told me who Jesus is and what he has done for us, and how he has risen from the dead. He is able to come into our lives as we invite him and be our savior and give us great hope. And my friend, who introduced me to the Gospel, told me that night: Bill, if you want to live a healthy, happy, fruitful Christian life, you are going to need to spend time each day in prayer, and in listening to God and his word. Well, as I went along through my life, I proved the truth of that by neglecting it; and I found out that when I did forget to pray, my spiritual life, my relationship

to God, my life in general sort of went downhill; and when I came back to prayer and back to the word, there was a kind of rejuvenation. I would say the reason I prayed, I learned early about Jesus' words: Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you; and I think, first of all, praying is a matter of obedience to the call of God; and Jesus especially teaches us in the Lord's Prayer what our major focus is to be. Sometimes we think only in terms of what we are going to get if we pray, and why didn't we get it if it doesn't happen. Jesus teaches us in the Lord's Prayer what our major focus is to be, that God's name being honored in the world, and his kingdom coming, and his will being done is what we ought to want most and pray for most ardently and regularly, and then all our concerns for our own personal needs kind of grow out of that.

DAVE BAST

So, maybe we over-think this too much, and we are too much on a theoretical plane with struggling with how does God determine what to do, and all that. Your experience was, just pray, and as you do it you find that it is true that the things you ask for God somehow supplies those deepest needs.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes; and I found that prayer is so much related to the word that we pray on the basis of the promise of God. We don't ask for anything like a million dollars tomorrow and expect God to send it; but whatever God has promised to do, we pray for with confidence. He has promised to forgive us when we confess our sins.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is something he will always give us when we ask for it.

BILL BROWNSON

And he promises wisdom to those who ask and believe that he will give us; and many of us have experienced again and again that when we pray for forgiveness and we pray for wisdom and we pray for help in times of need, that it is given and our faith is strengthened, that God really does hear.

BOB HEERSPINK

What I hear you saying, Bill, is that a lot of people have a very anemic view of prayer. They just think of prayer as basically asking God for what they want.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

But that if you don't connect prayer to the character of God – if you don't connect prayer to scripture – prayer is just going to veer off into some strange direction that is not going to have real meaning.

BILL BROWNSON

Exactly; you have a promise from God, and as David said when he had a great promise from God about a dynasty, he said: Lord, do as you have said; and in a sense, every time we take a promise of God we come before God and say: Lord, this is your word. I am calling on you to fulfill your word.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned the Lord's Prayer. That is found, of course, in all of the first three Gospels, but in Luke it comes in Chapter 11, and the opening verse of Luke 11 shows the disciples coming to Jesus and saying: Lord, teach us to pray. So his giving them of that model prayer was in respond to their question. We don't know how to pray. Lord, teach us to pray. I think there is a story, a great Scottish preacher of one hundred years ago, Alexander White, once preached for a whole season on that one verse because he said there is nothing we need to learn more than to pray. We need instruction in that. It isn't just off the top of our head.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes, the promises that the Holy Spirit, who lives within us, is the one who guides us and helps us in prayer, and even intercedes deep within us; and one of the things I feel strongly about is that whenever we pray, as whenever we open the scriptures, we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us, and he does that in a wonderful way. I think what God is looking for in us is a sense of dependence.

DAVE BAST

So, teach us or guide us in even what to ask for?

BILL BROWNSON

Yes.

DAVE BAST

We don't just sort of rattle off the top of our heads...you know, Bob, you mentioned a great majority of people say they pray, and pray every day...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

But I think... I suspect if they are like me, for most of that it is a prayer that is a quick sort of tossed off, give me this, give me that, help me here, do this for me, protect my family, etc, etc.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think we are often so much better at talking than listening, and what I am hearing you say, Bill, is that we really have to be listeners to God; whether it is by the Spirit or whether it is in the word; but really, typically prayer just becomes offering our wish list to God and leaving it there, and that is not enough.

DAVE BAST

Right; so start with listening so that you can find out what you should ask for...

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And then ask for what is promised and you know you are asking in the center of God's will.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes, that seems to be what God honors, because what we want most of all is for God's will to be done, for his name to be honored, for his kingdom to come, and our praying really fits into the framework. If it doesn't belong there, it doesn't belong in prayer because the aim of prayer is not to get what I want, but to bring myself into line with what God wants; and in his marvelous grace, he seems to have left a place in the outworking of his purpose for our prayers, so that he does things when we pray that he wouldn't do otherwise when we don't pray.

DAVE BAST

Which is a bit of a mystery, you have to say, because that then sort of raises the question that our youthful student was wondering about: Hasn't God already determined what he is going to do ahead of time?

BILL BROWNSON

But in his wisdom he has urged us to pray and promised us that our asking and seeking and knocking will never be in vain.

BOB HEERSPINK

What prayer is is a relationship with God. It is not the kind of thing where we say this is what we simply want from someone who can give us anything because he is all powerful, but it is really cultivating a relationship, isn't it?

BILL BROWNSON

Yes, and it always ought to accompany praise and thanksgiving and worship of God, and our asking is only one aspect of what you are talking about. It is a vital, personal relationship with God that is nurtured by the word and prayer.

BOB HEERSPINK

Probably most of our prayers are really anemic in the area of adoration and thanksgiving.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is the old acronym that we are sometimes taught, right? A-C-T-S like the book of Acts, start with adoration and then confession of sin and thanksgiving for what God has given, and then finally supplication, or as the Apostle says: Let your requests be made known to God, but with thanksgiving.

BILL BROWNSON

And I think that all of us experience the fact that it is actually praying that helps us to know how to pray, and the more we do... I think of this wonderful verse: I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my supplications because he has inclined his ear to me; therefore, I will call on him as long as I live. Because we know he hears us, we keep on praying.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is not enough just to read books about prayer; at some point it is a matter of saying: Just pray.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Do it.

DAVE BAST

Well, speaking of books on prayer, you have written one, and we want to talk about that and some of the practical lessons on how to pray, and we will do that after this short break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. This is Bob Heerspink, and joining me is my co-host, Dave Bast; and with us today is Dr. Bill Brownson. He is an author on prayer, and he is helping us to unpack the implications of a vibrant prayer life.

DAVE BAST

Bill, you wrote a book some years back called *Courage to Pray*, which is in itself the title is interesting. What motivated you to do that?

BILL BROWNSON

Well, there is a phrase in 2 Samuel 7 where David has received this great promise from God that he won't build a house for God, but God will build a house for him, meaning a dynasty.

DAVE BAST

He wanted to build the Temple in Jerusalem; God said: No, your son can do that, but here is what I am going to do for you.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes, I am going to build you a house; and when David receives this promise he goes into the presence of God and he says: Now you have made this great promise to your servant and therefore I have found courage to pray this prayer. So now he prays: Fulfill what you have promised and do as you have said; and that is the thrust behind the *Courage to Pray*. We find courage to pray because God calls us to pray, and God makes wonderful promises to invite us to pray, and then fulfills them in a way that fills our hearts with joy and thankfulness.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, that is very interesting, because we ask questions on Facebook about various topics that we are discussing, and one of the comments that we got from Facebook was a person who said: I just don't feel worthy to pray. Why don't I pray? I don't feel worthy. And what you are saying is the impetus for prayer – the courage to pray that gets us over that, is the promises of God.

BILL BROWNSON

Exactly. We know God wants us to come. I think one of the things that transformed my prayer life... I think I thought at first it was kind of a spiritual survival kit. I had to keep doing this or I would fall apart. There is some truth in that; but when I came to understand that God wants this from us, it made me feel like I had a kind of appointment with God, and he would miss it if I wasn't there; and it transformed my whole way of approaching prayer. I thought, God invites me and I want to be there; so prayer became something that I wanted to do, not simply that I did because I was afraid I'd fail if I didn't.

DAVE BAST

I just wonder if we could talk, or you could maybe respond a little bit to some of the obstacles or difficulties that we confront in prayer; and certainly one of the biggest ones is when God says, "No." We pray and we pray and it doesn't happen, and then the temptation is to say: Well, I give up.

BILL BROWNSON

Ultimately what we are concerned about is God's will being done; and when we pray on the basis of his promises we know we are appealing to something that he said he would do; but there come moments that we don't fully understand when God's purpose may be otherwise, as it was in the case of Jesus. Jesus had to bear this cup; he had to drink this cup; he had to die for our sins; and Jesus was willing for that to be. And Paul, when he wanted his thorn in the flesh to be removed and was told, "No, my grace is sufficient for you," then he said: I will glory in my infirmities. So we pray on the basis of God's promise and we pray for things we deeply want, but when in God's providence there seems to be a no, we know that there is some gracious purpose behind the no.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I wonder, could that be part of what it means to pray in Jesus' name? That we are praying along the lines of how Jesus prayed, and that is Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

BILL BROWNSON

In a sense, isn't that always what ought to be in the prayer? Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done. This is what it is all about.

DAVE BAST

Right; I think J. I. Packer said somewhere that praying to get God to do our will is magic, but praying to align our will with his is the true spirit of Christ-likeness.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I find often that an obstacle for me is just sheer laziness or worldliness – call it that maybe; you know, I have a tendency to go out and do before praying maybe, or instead of praying. How can you overcome that, or cultivate more of a spirit of prayer?

BILL BROWNSON

I guess the sense of its tremendous importance is a big factor. We all take care to see that we get enough food every day; that is good; but our prayer life, our listening to God, our communion with God, is the most important reality in our lives. If we see that, if we know that for me to be in touch with God, to be listening to his voice, to be responding to his will, that is what life is all about, then I know that only in fellowship with God in prayer, and in listening to his word can that really happen. So I have a sense of the absolute importance of this and I feel in my own life I never want to spend another day in my life without significant time communing with God in prayer and listening to his word.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, Bill, you said something earlier about how eager God is to hear our prayers, and I thought that is a very interesting thought because so often we think we have to be going up to God and kind of pulling on the shirtsleeve and saying: Hey, I am here. Can I get your attention? The thought that if we don't pray, we are disappointing God – that God misses it, not just us.

BILL BROWNSON

George MacDonald has a great phrase: God withholds sometimes to bring us to his knee; and that is what he is concerned about. The Father wants the child to trust him and to draw near to him and to place confidence in him; and when that confidence fills us, then with joy and freedom we keep coming to the throne of grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes; none of us finds it difficult to pray when we are in a real crisis – when we are desperate – when we are absolutely brought to the end of our own strength or resources – but to be able to cultivate that when things are going well and when everything is lovely, that is what the Lord really wants from us, I think.

BILL BROWNSON

Yes, it is, and the more we do this... I hope people will be encouraged to know this. The more you persist in prayer, the more you sense that you are being helped by God to do it. I remember a Puritan saying when he starts praying it is like his heart is a heavy boulder, but as he prays suddenly it gets lighter and then it rises like a bird; and that is the dynamism of prayer; the more you draw near to God, the more you honor him in your prayers, the more you feel your heart lifting with joy.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, one of the things that we want to do on *Groundwork* is actually encourage people to pray – not just teach them about prayer, but encourage prayer; and for those who are listening to this program, they can actually leave prayer requests at our website, at our Facebook site; what we are finding is actually people are joining together to share those prayer requests with each other and become a praying community.

DAVE BAST

Right; not just leave their requests, but look at the requests of others and pray for those. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this very program led some of us to pray more fervently, faithfully, and comprehensively for others? Actually, if you are interested in that, you could also get a copy of the book we have been talking about with Dr. Bill Brownson, *Courage to Pray*: all you have to do is contact us through our website at groundworkonline.com.

BOB HEERSPINK

We would be happy to send you a copy; and Bill, as we wrap up this program, I don't think there would be a more appropriate thing to do than to pray. Could you lead us in a word of prayer?

BILL BROWNSON

I would be happy to. Father, we thank you for this opportunity to talk about this gift and privilege you have given to us to draw near to you in our prayers. We pray, Father, guide us by your Holy Spirit. Let your word kindle in us a desire and heart to pray, and then help us to develop the disciplines to keep it up and to honor you by being praying people our whole life long. In the name of Jesus, amen.

DAVE BAST

Amen. Thank you so much, Bill; and thank you too for joining us today on our *Groundwork* program. Remember, it is listeners like you joining in the conversation that helps us keep our topics relevant to your life. So visit us online. It is easy; just go to [groundworkonline](http://groundworkonline.com) (all one word) .com, and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-problem-with-prayer>

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