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PRAY

pray confidently & consistently

ALLY

finally let go of the things
holding you back from your
most important conversation

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APPROACH

approach

throwing off the weights that keep us
from coming to God with confidence

1

Where's My Genie in a Bottle?

Understanding Who I'm Praying To

I WASN'T QUITE OLD ENOUGH to drive yet, but I had one thing on my mind: a hunter-green Saturn. It was my dream car, and I wanted one so bad that I could smell the gasoline and toxin-laden air fresheners.

How did I land on a Saturn? After surveying the showroom that was the car pickup line at school, I set my sights on the Saturn my friend Tiffany's mom drove. It felt so put-together with its sleek hood and tidy doors. I'd checked out the menu and had my order ready to beam up to the Big Guy in the sky: one hunter-green Saturn, please. No substitutions.

At thirteen, I thought I had a deep understanding of prayer and a faith that could move mountains—or at the very least, a faith that I hoped would move a Saturn into my family's driveway. I must have recently heard John 15:7, “Ask

whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” I glossed over that whole “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you” part in the first part of the verse, but how important could that be? God was telling me to *ask for anything!* The way I interpreted it was, if you have enough faith, *your prayer will come true*. That should have been my first clue how off I was. “Will come true”? I’m pretty sure I only remember that line from magic-filled fairy tales.

Regardless, I was ready for my green Saturn. And let me ease all your minds as you think, *Uh . . . you were only thirteen*. Relax. I had an airtight plan. My dad had a machine shop with the perfect air-conditioned spot to store my new Saturn till I could actually drive it. Everything was falling into place. *The stars were aligning*. Maybe that should have been my second clue as to how I viewed God. I had a plan, and now, if God would just do what I’d read he could do, we’d be great.

That was when it happened. I remember being in the upstairs bedroom I shared with my twin sister. Our white wicker daybeds faced each other, and right at the top of the walls was the most mature trellis border of maroon, navy, and hunter green you had ever seen grace a thirteen-year-old’s walls. I sat on my bed and prayed. And I believed with all my heart that God *could* give me the hunter-green Saturn of my dreams. I really believed he was powerful enough to do it. So when I said, “Amen,” I ran downstairs with the gusto of the disciples running to the empty tomb and opened the door to go test-drive (or sit in) my new Saturn.

And would you believe it? It wasn’t there!

At this point, I had some ideas to wrestle with. Why, despite my big, faith-filled prayers, did God not give me my

Saturn? And how was I supposed to keep praying when it looked like the genie had run out of magic?

This is the weight of expectations.

We miss out on fostering our most important relationship when we start with inaccurate assumptions.

This experience could have shaken me or even turned me off to prayer completely. I mean, *God didn't even answer me like he promised he would!* But I had a praying momma, and I think the way she kept going to God helped me keep going to him too. Regardless of the fact that *he totally ignored me even when I believed him most.*

Notice it? Go back and read the italicized phrases. Did anything make you wince as you read my story? Or did it go undetected because these are weights you carry too?

I had expectations of God that were in no way based on reality. They were things I made up or assumed from an isolated verse in Scripture. I convinced myself that if God didn't answer my specific request, he either didn't care or didn't hear. Neither was a great quality for the God of the universe, in my humble opinion.

At the ripe old age of thirteen, I still had a lot to learn about God. I'm thirty-six, and that's still true! But in those early years, I prayed to a one-dimensional God who I thought was there to give me anything I asked for.

What we subconsciously believe to be true about God determines whether we will view prayer as essential and fulfilling or worthless and dull.

What we subconsciously believe to be true about God determines whether we will view prayer as essential and fulfilling or worthless and dull. When we have accurate expectations of who we're praying to (as much as is humanly possible), we

will pray differently. When I don't understand who I'm praying to, I ask for a hunter-green Saturn and then assume that if I don't get it, God's ears were clogged, he fell asleep during the conversation, or he didn't really mean what he said in the first place when he told me to ask.

I miss out on who God really is when I bury him in my own unrealistic expectations.

So who is he really? And what makes him worthy of my prayers in the first place? Let's talk about six prime characteristics of God that will affect how we pray.

1. God Is the Creator and Savior

We're getting back to basics, which may feel like overkill, but it will lay a solid foundation for our prayers. Genesis 1:27 (yep, all the way back) says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." We weren't accidentally created by some unknown force. We were intentionally formed and created for relationship with God.

Sin messed up that relationship, and the reality is that we've all sinned (see Romans 3:23). Because sin leads to death and separation from him (see Romans 6:23), God sent his Son to pay the price for our sins (see Romans 5:8) so that if we confess our faith in him (Romans 10:9-10), we will be saved (see Romans 10:13). Friend, without salvation in Jesus Christ alone, we can't experience a restored relationship with God. That means salvation is essential to an actual prayer relationship with God.*

So not only did God create us, but he also sent his Son to

*We just mall-walked through a quick telling of the gospel, known as the Romans Road. If you're not a Christian and want to know more, ask a friend or pastor to share with you. It is the most important decision you will ever make.

die so that the relationship our sin broke could be restored. Can we take a second to reflect on that? We'll talk more about God's love for us later, but if this doesn't reveal the heart of God for us, I don't know what does. I want a relationship with this guy. I'm honestly amazed it's even available to me, and I never again want to see him as just a genie who grants wishes.

2. God Hears Us

The God of the universe, creator of all things, longs to sit in the quiet moments with you and me. And because he's God, he can do that for every single one of his kids. We'll never get a busy signal or an "out to lunch" sign. He is always ready to spend time with us when we choose to.

God hears

Take a gander at several biblical examples of God hearing people's prayers and responding. His kindness is overwhelming, no? We get to pray to the same God—the one who hears.

Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

GENESIS 25:21

Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD. And the LORD did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained.

EXODUS 8:30-31

As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

EXODUS 19:19

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David built there an altar to the LORD and presented burnt offerings and peace offerings and called on the LORD, and the LORD answered him with fire from heaven upon the altar of burnt offering.

1 CHRONICLES 21:26

So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him.

1 SAMUEL 7:9

[David said,] In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I called. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry came to his ears. . . . He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me.

2 SAMUEL 22:7, 20

[The Lord says,] “Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”

JEREMIAH 29:12-13

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, “I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.”

JONAH 2:1-2

Psalm 34:15 says, “The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.” (Good news, friend: *Righteous* does not mean perfect but, rather, those who are seeking God.) As you search Scripture, make a note each time you see wording such as “God hears” or “God listened” or a reference to God’s “ears.” Noticing these as I study the Bible has shown me just how much God is inviting us into conversation.

This is both heartwarming and heartbreaking because I

know my devotion to God isn't nearly as . . . well, devoted as his is to me. If you're reading this book, I bet you feel the same. Hold tight. Our next point brings lots of freedom.

3. God Loves Us Unconditionally

We get to pray to a God to whom we cannot say anything so audacious that he'll take his ball and go home. I have two little girls—Vivi, seven, and Vana, four—and at bedtime when I say goodnight, I tell them, “You'll never lose my love.” We've gotten silly with it and started to say, “You'll never lose my lllll . . . unch” or “my . . . socks” just to be funny, but it never fails to put them at ease to know they can never mess up so badly that I won't love them. One day, they will mess up royally, and I don't want them to be tempted to try to handle it on their own because they're afraid it will change my love. Instead, my hope is that they will have grown up knowing no mistake will drive me away and that they will always remember it's safe to return to me.

Even more than we need to know a parent's love is unconditional, we need to know that God's love is. Have you ever felt that you can't go to God until you clean yourself up, or that it's been such a long time since you prayed that you'd feel embarrassed coming to him now? Or maybe you feel like you hate to come to him only when you're in a crisis, so you try to face the hard stuff alone.

If that's you right now, stop here. Don't read another sentence before you close your eyes and ask God to draw you near. Your Father's love was never built on your performance in the first place. What great news! Dive into Scripture and get to know how deep and wide the Father's love is for us. Ephesians 3:14-19 is a great place to start.

4. God Is All Knowing

I like to think I'm pretty discerning and can come up with some top-notch plans. I make assumptions about what needs to happen in my life and then bring requests based on a thought-out blueprint that I'm sure will impress the pants off God. (That was highly inappropriate, but it reveals just how cavalier I can be sometimes with God.)

This controlling nature leads me to get upset when the answer to my prayers is no. *Surely* if God had all the facts, he'd see things differently. I'd never say this out loud, of course, but subconsciously, I must assume it if I question an all-knowing God's plans, right?

The reality is that not a moment of our lives is hidden from God. He's witness to it all.

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light about me be night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

PSALM 139:5-16

That passage is long, but soak it in. We are known by God. We’re living in a time when people are desperate to be known and longing to be seen. It’s why social media apps have “like” buttons and hearts. And it’s why we incessantly check to see how people are responding to what we share. Are people seeing me? How many people are seeing me? What do they think when they see me? That desire is part of our human nature. Unfortunately, we look for it in all the wrong places and accept a shallow version of being known because we forget that we are already so intimately known by our almighty God.

5. God Is Capable

When we pray, we aren't just talking to a nice guy who cares about us and knows us well. We're praying to an almighty God who has the power to drop hailstones from heaven. You weren't expecting *that* for my example, were you? In the book

You aren't praying to a statue or a lifeless, mythical God. You're praying to a God who acts throughout Scripture on his people's behalf.

of Joshua, the Israelites were starting to move into the land God had promised them, and some of the Canaanite nations banded together to attack them. The Israelites defeated them, and Joshua 10:11 says, "As [the enemy armies] fled before Israel, while they were going down the ascent of Beth-horon, the LORD threw down large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died. There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed with the sword."

The passage goes on:

At that time Joshua spoke to the LORD in the day when the LORD gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel,

"Sun, stand still at Gibeon,
and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon."
And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped,
until the nation took vengeance on their enemies.

Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to

set for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, *when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel.*

JOSHUA 10:12-14, EMPHASIS ADDED

God follows up the first miracle by having the sun stand still until the battle is over. Can you even imagine? How many visuals do we need to convince us that God is capable of coming to our aid? But here's the kicker: This was a response to prayer. The Lord heeded Joshua and fought for Israel.

You aren't praying to a statue or a lifeless, mythical God. You're praying to a God who acts throughout Scripture on his people's behalf. In those moments when you can't help but feel you're praying to the ceiling or talking to yourself, draw close to this image of a God who fought for Israel. I know he's fighting for us, too.

6. God Is Unchangeable

The God who healed your momma's best friend, Monica; Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus; and Moses' sister, Miriam, is the same God you lift your requests to. This is just one more reason it's important to study the Word—so we know the stories of God's work in the past and remember that God is still with us.

He's never changing. He is the solid rock on which we stand. As I write this book during the COVID-19 shelter-at-home orders, I cannot tell you how many times I've broken into the old hymn

*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand.¹*

Let's pause

There will be many moments throughout this book when I'll invite us to pause, and they aren't for dramatic effect. I know the place we will truly learn to pray is in prayer, and so I want us to wrestle with these truths in God's presence.

One day I was looking through a set of flashcards I'd bought to teach my girls Greek and Hebrew. (That probably sounds more impressive than it is. The Tiny Theologians company makes this easy to do!) One card said that "Selah," which is a Hebrew word referenced in the Psalms, is a command meaning *to pause and reflect or pause and consider*.² It is used at important places in the Psalms where readers should stop and think about what they are reading. When I read the Psalms after learning this, I started noticing "Selah" everywhere. (Depending on your Bible translation, you might also see the word "Interlude.") I imagined what David and the other psalmists were thinking as they jotted down that word and the thoughts that followed.

Psalms 32:7 says, "You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah*." Did David need a moment to really let that sink in? In this psalm of forgiveness, maybe he spoke words he knew were true but still needed to let his heart catch up to what his mind knew.

So as you're reading these chapters, if you see "Selah," that's your cue to pause, reflect, and even pray about what's being shared.

When so much has shifted, bringing changes I never knew were even possible (like ending a school year two months early and becoming a teacher overnight), I am finding my foothold on the unchangeable Rock.

People, even faithful believers, will fail us. And maybe we give God a bad rap because we've experienced hard things in community with his kids, but God is our solid Rock. We can trust him. And that alters not only our prayers but also our response to the results of our prayers. "No" answers don't have to make us doubt his existence. We don't have to question whether the God who redeemed us has suddenly decided to put some conditions on his great love. He hasn't. He's the same.

And, friend, this is who we get to pray to.

He invites us to commune with him on a constant, daily basis. He encourages us to pray at all times and without ceasing (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

Can we just take another minute to relish that and thank him profusely for it?

Selah.

What a mighty God we get to pray to.

Back when I was thirteen and treated him like a genie, he was compassionate to listen to my prayer, no matter how ridiculous, and was unconditional in his love. He knew vastly more than I did. He is still the same God I read about in the Bible, and the fact that he is capable of causing the sun to stand still yet *still* didn't give me that car lets me know it wasn't that he couldn't do it. It just wasn't part of his plan. I now understand better why.

Remembering these truths about God will radically shift our prayers. There will be no room for pride and accusations

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when we don't get the result we want. No reason to hold back. No fear of uncertainty. And no wimpy prayers.

Even the demons believe in God (see James 2:19). But us? We don't just believe in him. We know who he is. We trust that he is worthy of our prayers and know that we're pretty blessed to even have the opportunity to talk to him!

The genie whose lamp I rubbed, believing I'd get a Saturn, turns out to not be a genie at all. He's an all-knowing, all-loving, fully capable, unchanging God. When we throw off the weight of our inaccurate assumptions about God, we'll know without a doubt that he's worthy of all our prayers.

reflect _____

Which quality of God has gone unnoticed in your life? How has that affected your prayers?

When have you prayed for something and gotten a "no"?

How do the following characteristics of God help remove the weight of expectations?

- *God is the Creator and Savior*
- *God hears us*
- *God loves us unconditionally*
- *God is all-knowing*
- *God is capable*
- *God is unchangeable*

read _____

- Psalm 147:5
- Zephaniah 3:17
- Romans 5:8

- Romans 8:1-17
- 1 John 3:20

2

Am I Doing This Right?

Discovering a Right Posture for Prayer

BACK WHEN I KNEW EVERYTHING, around the age of eighteen, my prayer formula was basic but neatly written out in chalk each morning in homeroom. In my Christian high school, the day began with a call for prayer requests. The teacher would ask for a volunteer to pray, and I was the annoying girl who loved to do it because it came with perks like writing on the chalkboard, which still held some magic even in high school. I'd write the requests on the board as they came in and then pray out loud for all of them. I had a formula: Offer a quick thank you, use the term "Father God" as needed throughout the prayer, and hit all the requests with appropriate tone. Sick Aunt Mabel gets slightly more somberness and time than the Johnsons heading on vacation and for sure more than pets. I knew the pattern and was confident it qualified me to pray.

I think that's why my hand shot up to pray more often

than most of my classmates'. I thought I had it down perfectly. What I didn't realize, though, was that my motives were reminiscent of the Pharisees. Thinking I was perfect sabotaged my prayers. I had no room to learn anything and absolutely zero amount of the much-needed ingredient for prayer, humility. On the other side of the coin, though, is the paralysis some people feel when they think they're supposed to come to God in just the right way.

This is the weight of perfectionism.

We miss out on a right heart posture when we think we can—and should—come to God perfectly.

The weight of perfectionism convinces us that we need to find the right words before we come to God in prayer.

The weight of perfectionism tells us it's better to stay quiet till we figure things out on our own.

The weight of perfectionism silences us because we assume we *can* clean ourselves enough to approach God.

What should I say when I pray? What if I say the wrong thing or use the wrong format? Why even try if there's a good chance I'll mess it all up anyway and actually make things worse? And how do I move past the paralyzing feeling that I don't know what I'm doing?

We can talk a lot about the outer distractions that keep us from praying, but our internal dialogue can be paralyzing to our prayers too. Over the past few years, as I've been studying prayer, I've had countless conversations with friends, family members, and blog readers about what holds them back most when they pray. One of the most common responses is never knowing what to say and being afraid of messing up.

What gave us this idea that we need to attain perfection in our prayers in the first place? What made us think that the

God of the universe is expecting us to hold our own in this conversation and to have a greeting card–worthy response?

Here’s my theory: We read Jesus’ instructions on prayer in the New Testament, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, and see some pretty serious “do not’s.” But we forget to read these in the context of the entire Bible. Okay, “read something in light of all of Scripture” is a pretty tall order, but I think when we step back and read all of Jesus’ instructions together, we get the full intended picture. It’s not the methods that God prescribes as much as the heart behind them.

- When Jesus tells us to pray privately rather than publicly (see Matthew 6:5-6), he’s not telling us to avoid praying corporately. He’s saying to avoid performance-driven prayers.
- When Jesus tells us to avoid vain repetition (see Matthew 6:7), he’s not warning us against praying again and again about the same concerns. He’s telling us not to think we can make God hear us by praying repetitively.
- When Jesus tells us not to go public with our fasting (see Matthew 6:16-18), he’s not saying we can’t talk about the impact fasting has on our lives. He’s saying we shouldn’t fast to look good to the crowds.

This seemingly specific formula for prayer that we see Jesus share in the Gospels—both in the Sermon on the Mount and in his model prayer for his disciples, which we call the Lord’s Prayer—should encourage us the way we felt encouraged as children when a parent taught us how to ride

a bike or crack an egg. Mom or Dad laid out careful instructions designed to help us do something we previously didn't know how to do *and* then walked us through it. How special is that? My guess is, as a parent, if your kids come ready to learn the art of egg-cracking and their attempt results in spilling a little shell in the batter, you don't fly off the handle. You're teaching them how to do something new, not waiting to see them fail.

God isn't waiting for us to fail either. He created us. He could have told us to figure prayer out for ourselves if he didn't care about us, but he's rooting for us. Part of removing the weight of perfectionism is tuning in more to who God is than who we are. It's so simple. It's not about following a bunch of rules but about looking at someone besides ourselves: God.

If you feel paralyzed in prayer, stop asking, "How am I doing?" and start asking, "God, who are you?" The more we know about him, the more I think we can approach him like children who audaciously run to their father because they aren't worried about impressing him with their perfection. They know full well that that's a completely silly thing to do with this father who loves them unconditionally.

**If you feel paralyzed
in prayer, stop asking,
"How am I doing?" and
start asking, "God,
who are you?"**

I believe the "right" or "perfect" way to pray is far less logistical than we'd assume and has more to do with our heart posture than our specific words or methods. I think a few things are key: We come humbly, we confess often, and we have faith. If we can do these three things, we can pray without paralysis.

1. Come Humbly

Last year, I read a tiny book on humility by Andrew Murray. If I can be perfectly honest, I never would have picked up a two-hundred-page book on humility because the topic didn't seem as important as some others. This book was pamphlet-sized and was staring me in the face at my parents' house one Sunday.

Thankfully, the road to picking up that book was easy. As I started reading, it didn't take me long to be convinced that humility is the basis of our faith and life.

Trusty old Wikipedia says, "Dictionary definitions accentuate humility as a low self-regard and sense of unworthiness. In a religious context humility can mean a recognition of self in relation to a deity (i.e. God) or deities, and subsequent submission to said deity as a member of that religion."¹ I could not love this any more. The world sees humility as a sense of unworthiness, while in a "religious" context, it means seeing ourselves in relation to God and submitting.

That's pretty profound, Wiki. At the same time, it's so simple. Humility means having an accurate picture of reality. The reality is that God is all-powerful and I am limited. I choose to admit that fact and make the obvious choice to follow the one who reigns supreme.

Imagine what it means to come to prayer with humility. To approach the throne of God without worrying if your doubts

tip

If you find it hard to get into a mindset of humility, read and pray through some verses that highlight God's majesty compared to our smallness. Psalm 8 is a great option!

are disrespectful because you know you have a genuine desire to pursue the Lord. To be less concerned with yourself in prayer and completely consumed with the God in front of you. To stop trying to win God over with perfect words because you fully understand you couldn't possibly earn his grace.

Humility is a cure-all. Start a prayer with it, and watch what happens.

I'm convinced that humility is essential to praying without fear of messing it all up. Humility is the first step we take that ensures whatever comes next is pleasing to the Lord. I may not know exactly what to say, but if I can come humbly, I don't have to agonize about it. I don't need to micromanage making sure I'm coming with pure motives (see James 4:3). I don't need to make sure I'm not just praying for show (see Matthew 6:5). Since these are the antithesis of humility, we start by coming humbly and then we don't worry about over-analyzing the rest.

In George Mueller's book *Answers to Prayer*, he says, "I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter."² Yowza. That is solid. Can you imagine praying consistently like that? Without telling God what we think he should do, but trusting that he is in charge and will do what is right? I long for this type of humility in my own prayers.

Moses is my Bible crush. How could I not love a guy who got face-to-face time with God? How could I not love a guy who prayed and saw God respond? Moses was a crier, and I am one too, but I like Moses' version better. I cry when life gets hard—usually to the ceiling or with chocolate or something carb-filled in hand. Moses cried out to God. In fact, when I searched my Bible for all the times Moses prayed, I

was startled to not find the phrase. Was my online search broken? No, Moses just “cried out” instead of “prayed.”

What’s the difference? Desperation, maybe. The root word of many of Moses’ prayers to the Lord means “to cry, cry out, call, cry for help.”³ I want to cry out in prayer like I absolutely need God and am lost without him. It’s true, so why wouldn’t I want to pray like that?

Numbers 12:3 says that “Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth” (NLT). The most humble guy got the most face-to-face time with God. Could this be a coincidence? I don’t think so. Humility and desperation are requirements for prayer.

Moses gets me excited to come humbly to this conversation. He helps me recognize that coming laid bare, with nothing to offer besides myself, is where I want to be. Why? Because when we come humbly, we leave more room for God. And I know for a fact that more of God is better than more of me in any equation.

Andrew Murray wrote that man’s “chief care . . . is to present [himself] an empty vessel, in which God can dwell and manifest His power and goodness.”⁴ A few pages later, he continues the vessel metaphor: “Just as water ever seeks and fills the lowest place, so the moment God finds [men] abased and empty, His glory and power flow in to exalt and to bless. He that humbleth himself—that must be our one care—shall be exalted; that is God’s care.”⁵

Most humans see humility as such a weakness, but as believers, we see something different. Humility comes when I know that I should make room for God. Strength comes when I let him in and get to experience his goodness as a result.

My family has a picture-book version of Psalm 23, and

on the last page, paired with the words “and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever,” is a picture of a little lamb perched on one of those gates where the top swings open. Behind him is a watercolor torso—a man whose hands are placed on either side of the lamb. I wish you could visualize it with me now. That little lamb looks so at peace with his big God behind him. The lamb is small and quiet and not too powerful on his own, but he’s got the equivalent of a superhero with him, so he’s confident and content. That lamb had little to offer, much like Moses, yet he’s dwelling in the house of the Lord and experiencing the Lord’s abundance because he first decided to follow his shepherd and let him be Lord.

If you want to pray consistently, if you want to shake the weight of perfectionism and come to God with the right heart posture, get desperate. Scratch that. We don’t need to *get* desperate; we already are. We just need to walk each day in the realization of who we are in relation to who God is.

2. Confess Often

The second necessary ingredient for praying with the right posture is confession. I skipped confession for much of my life, much like I did with studying humility. I was trying to get to the requests portion of the prayer conversation because I didn’t want to run out of time for what I considered most important. And here’s the thing: I was rushing to those requests only to have them not actually be heard.

I wonder how weary we’ve grown, lifting up the same requests to ears that aren’t hearing them. Not because God ignores us but because of our willful choices to foster sin in our hearts. Psalm 66:18 tells us, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (KJV).

These are strong words. Are we hearing right? Maybe this is out of context?

Nope.

“Regard” (translated as *cherished* in the ESV) means “to see, look at, inspect, perceive, consider.”⁶ Those sins we see and continue, the willful choices we make—the ones we consider and decide to do anyway? These “cherished” sins create a distance in our prayer lives, and God will not hear our prayers. Evelyn Christenson, author of *What Happens When Women Pray*, defines “regard” and its effects like this: “If we are living in sin and liking it, if we are keeping it there, finding that it feels kind of good, if we’re regarding—nurturing, patting that little sin along—God does not hear us.”⁷

This idea feels so wrong coming from a loving God. We interpret it to mean that he has stepped away because he can’t handle our sin—like we’re too disgusting or something. But let’s keep digging into Scripture. The New Testament has some words on confession that we cannot miss.

Take James 4:8. We love to quote the first part of the verse, which says, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” I’ve done it myself. But here’s what the second part says: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” If we long to draw near to God, we absolutely need to be cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts before him. This doesn’t mean *we* actually do the cleaning. It means we acknowledge our mess before the Lord and give him access to it so we can be reconciled to him.

While unconfessed sin is clearly going to hinder a deep prayer life with the Lord, it’s also going to wreak havoc on our hearts. David writes, “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and

night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:3-4). Holding on to unconfessed sin as a believer is living an oxymoronic life. Of course there will be turmoil in our very beings.

Why would we desire to spend time with a wholly good God (and even get annoyed when he seems unresponsive) when we’re purposely acting against what he stands for? If we are cherishing sin in our hearts and willfully disobeying God, even simple logic tells us our conversations with him will be strained.

As I’ve begun to value confession, I’ve noticed it’s created a more humble spirit in me. It’s always weird to call yourself humble, no? But really, when I’ve found myself judging someone in my thoughts, before I even finish, I notice and say, “Lord, forgive me! I shouldn’t have thought that!” Understanding how sin hinders my conversation with the Lord is activating in me a posture of confession that I walk in throughout my day, not just during a ten-minute segment of my morning prayer time.

tip

Not sure how to start with confession? Take a few minutes to examine your day and ask the Lord to reveal your thoughts, words, attitudes, and actions that did not honor him. Express your sorrow over your sin and ask for his forgiveness. Try praying through Psalm 139:23-24:

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

NIV

If confession still leaves you feeling more paralyzed than excited, I get it. Who wants to draw attention to his or her flaws? Doesn't that bring some amazing prayers down a few pegs? The reality is that confession brings God glory because it reveals truth and becomes an opportunity for him to forgive. Hidden sin doesn't bring glory to God. We might believe having it exposed makes us dirty or less worthy to speak to the Lord, but confessing our sin actually draws us closer to God.

We don't have to overcomplicate this. As we sit down to talk with the Lord, we can take a few minutes to humble ourselves, see what sins we've committed, and confess them to God. You want to talk about a humble heart posture? What do you think it says to the Lord when you come to him without fear, openly admitting the things you'd gladly keep hidden from the world? What do you think it says when you don't pridefully attempt your own cleansing but bring it before the one and only Redeemer?

Blessed by Brokenness

I'm stunned by a question pastor Ronnie Floyd asked: "When was the last time we were broken with grief over our own sins and alienation from our heavenly Father?"⁸ Grieve over them? Most days I barely notice them.

Confession leads me to brokenness, and this brokenness snaps me back to eternal reality. It humbles me and reminds me who I am without God. This brokenness prepares my heart for absolute surrender.

What freedom we find when we come to terms with the sins we've ignored or tried to downplay for so long. We don't do ourselves or God any favors by rationalizing what we have done.

Do you feel bound up? Wound up? Angsty just talking about sin? Freedom awaits.

Selah.

As I've made confession a more consistent part of my prayer life, I now find myself sighing as I sit down to confess. It's not a Charlie Brown sigh but one of sheer relief that I no longer have to carry these weights on my own.

The enemy will attempt to make confession feel too heavy to even be worth it. Don't listen. God's mercies are fresh every morning. Keep confessing because until we get to heaven, we will sin. Our times of confession don't surprise God.

We will mess up in all aspects of life—including prayer.

We will choose the most ridiculous, should-be-an-easy-*no* distraction instead of time in prayer. We will stop praying because we had to Google what the weather would be that day . . . three feet from the front door. We will stop praying because we overslept after a late night of doing . . . absolutely nothing. We will stop praying because our friend said prayer didn't work for her and we thought, *Who am I to figure this out, then?* We will pray selfishly for all our pain to go away no matter who else it hurts. We will pray for hunter-green Saturns.

We aren't going to shock God. He knows our going and our coming.

We will fail. But if we can operate with humility and confession, we can keep returning to the Father in love. When we keep pride on retainer, it destroys our intimacy with the Lord. It's impossible to be intimate with him when we let linger any belief that we can win God over with just our performance and none of that demeaning grace. We'll save God the trouble and just power through in our own strength.

Besides that being theologically impossible, we will mess up and be left feeling like we can't go to God. We assumed he wanted us clean, which was great when we kept it together, but now we can't possibly come to him.

Psalm 139 comes to mind again. (I know what you're thinking: *This psalm? Twice in two chapters? C'mon!*) It's true. Because the Word is alive and active:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.
 You search out my path and my lying down
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.

PSALM 139:1-5

This time, it's what David says next in verse 6 that blows me away: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it."

You know why I think David considered it so hard to grasp all that God knew about him? It certainly wasn't because he was perfect. You remember the infidelity with Bathsheba and calling the hit job on her husband, right? No, I think David found it wonderful to be fully seen by God and still be wholly loved. It wasn't just the being known but the being loved in spite of what God knew.

God knows everything about you, every bit of information you'd like to sweep under the rug and keep hidden. He

knows it and still loves you. Why would we ever need to fear confessing to such a God?

Romans 5:8 says, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” If we worry about how we’re coming off to God, spoiler alert—things aren’t looking good for us. But if we get to see the reality of who God is—that his love for us isn’t based on our flawless performance and that he knows vastly more about us than we’d ever share on a résumé or dating profile—we get to ease into his presence unencumbered by how we will look to him.

The Lord knows the posture of our hearts (see Jeremiah 17:10) and invites us to come near him anyway. That just might be all the reason we need to keep coming back to him in prayer.

3. Have Faith

James 1:6-7 says this about those who ask the Lord for wisdom: “Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”

I have been tossed by that wind before. At one point in my life, I was saying all the right things, but I didn’t believe them. They were empty words that could have been coming out of any old ventriloquist dummy. No heart at all. Just hollowness.

If you’d asked me whether I believed, I would have told you yes. If you’d heard me pray, you would have assumed I believed too. But somehow, while I was saying all the right things, I was fixing my eyes on the circumstances. I put more belief in what I saw than in what I could not see: God.

I still see this creep up in the things that trigger my anxiety most. What's that fear that rattles your bones? The one that swirls your thoughts and makes it hard to remember truth? Mine always seems to relate to my health. A chest pain that's a result of heartburn attempts to tower over God in my mind when I start playing the game of "what ifs." *What if this time it's not heartburn but a heart attack? My family does have a history of it. I don't work out like I probably should. Yep, it's definitely a heart attack.* And just like that, I've put all my faith in circumstances I can touch and see instead of in God.

I've been working on capturing these thoughts and quickly reminding myself of a God who is very much alive. And, friend, it's working! When I stop to really think about God's power, ability, and desire to see me experience his peace, I am able to pray with conviction and faith.

We can talk about removing weights and learning new habits for prayer, but our methods don't matter one lick if we do not believe God is who he says he is.

Do we even believe God can do what he says he can do?

Do we even believe our prayers make any difference to the God of the universe?

Do we even believe our circumstances can change by simply speaking words in the air?

A handful of words in Mark 6 speak profoundly to this. Jesus went back to his hometown, and as he taught in the synagogue, people were essentially in disbelief that he had any authority to teach. *Oh, that's just Mary and Joseph's boy!* They only believed in what they saw. Mark tells us, "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them" (Mark 6:5, NIV).

The Amplified Version explicitly says, “He could not do a miracle there at all [because of their unbelief] except that He laid hands on a few sick people and healed them.” There’s no beating around that bush. The people’s lack of faith stopped miracles from happening.

**What are we missing
out on simply because
we don’t believe God
can do it?**

What are we missing out on simply because we don’t believe God can do it? If healings were minimized as a small footnote of what God had planned in Nazareth, holy cow! What level of miracles has unbelief kept from us today?

I love that mustering up more faith isn’t all on us. Of course we will have doubts that we need to address with the Father, but for now, know this: If we want more faith, our first prayer should echo the disciples’ words to the Lord in Luke 17:5: “Increase our faith!” And then we must believe he can do it!

When we throw off the weight of perfectionism, we can experience a deeper prayer life that’s no longer paralyzed by coming “the wrong way” to prayer. We can come humbly, allowing our eyes to rest on the Lord instead of being consumed with what we bring to prayer. We can confess the real things that separate us from God—the big boulders of pride and other sin—and stop being tripped up by the pebble in the road—the specifics of how we pray—that seems to get most of our attention. We can spend more time falling in love with who God is and how worthy he is of our faith than being distracted by our doubts and secret attempts to solve problems on our own.

If we truly have a wrong heart posture, we won't "fix" it on our own. Coming to God in prayer knowing that he's the only one who can do something is humble and faith filled. If we can keep going to God, giving him access to our mess, we can experience prayer that leads to deep intimacy with our Creator.

reflect _____

What fears do you have about how you pray? Have you tried to solve them on your own?

How have these fears held you back in your prayer life?

How do you think you're supposed to pray? Does that align with what God tells us in his Word?

read _____

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 2 Corinthians 12:9 | <input type="radio"/> Titus 3:5 |
| <input type="radio"/> Psalm 23 | <input type="radio"/> Hebrews 11:6 |
| <input type="radio"/> Hebrews 4:16 | <input type="radio"/> Romans 10:17 |

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