

If there's a more complex and confusing practice than prayer, I'm not sure what it is. Just about everyone prays at some point in our lives. It's a natural human response - especially in times of crisis - to reach out for someone bigger than we are.

But at the same time, so many of us feel that our prayers are ineffective. How many of us in here could admit that prayer has been something that frustrates us? That we can't focus, or we feel ineffective? How many of us feel like praying is about as effective as calling customer service somewhere?

[\[Prayer Phone Hotline\]](#)

None of us wants to pray cheap, ineffective prayers. We want to participate in prayer that works. That's the bottom line. We don't want to feel like we're just talking to the ceiling.

Much of the problem is our assumptions about prayer. Our culture reserves prayer for times of crisis - who can forget that in the wake of 9/11 even secular businesses hung signs that read "Pray for America"? When loved ones are sick, even more mundane scenarios - praying when we need a job or promotion, before a sports game, when we didn't study for a test.

Some of us don't pray because we think we're not spiritual enough. When my grandpa was on his deathbed, one of my uncles called me and asked me to pray for a quick death. He was asking because - in his words - You're closer to the big guy than I am. Again, more mundane, maybe you don't pray because you don't think you sound spiritual enough when you pray. You don't say "Thee" and "thou" enough, or you don't think you can meet the quota of "Father God"s when you pray.

Have you ever felt like that - your prayers would be a waste because God won't come to help you because you're not spiritual enough? You're not good enough for God to waste his time on. Your prayers aren't worthy of God's attention.

All of these reasons we don't pray share a common faulty assumption: that God is out there, up there somewhere doing something else, and we have to get his attention. We tend to treat prayer like a magic spell: if we say the right combination of words while assuming a proper posture, then God will hear us, notice us and come down to us.

We're not the first to have this misunderstanding of prayer. In fact, our crisis-prayers share much in common with the shortest prayer in the Bible.

Prayed by no less a spiritual giant than Peter the disciple. If you have a Bible with you, turn to Matthew 14. Jesus has just learned that his cousin John the Baptizer has been executed, and he's trying to get away to pray. He's spent all day teaching and feeding people, and he finally sends his disciples off while he gets some 1-on-1 time with God. Our story picks up in verse 22:

"Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone. Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!" Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

"Yes, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted." -- Matthew 14:22-30 (NLT)

There's that prayer - "Save me Lord!" You recognize it, don't you? At their core, that's what most of our prayers look like, from "save me I didn't study" to "save our country, we're terrified right now". It's the "God, you're out there somewhere. I'm drowning here! Won't you please come and pull me out of the water?"

Save me, Lord!

Peter's in trouble and he's looking for a lifeline. And he's not alone; so are the rest of the disciples: *The disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified.*

They were just as scared - probably more scared than Peter. (Which is what I love about Peter - he's the guy who would die first in the horror movie. He's the one who see the ghost out on the water and says, "You guys stay in the boat; I'll be right back!" Which we all know isn't true, right? You never come back!)

But this isn't a horror film. It's real life. Jesus does save Peter. But listen:

Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?" When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed. After they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. -- Matthew 14:31-34 (NLT)

Jesus chastises Peter for his lack of faith. There's an odd implication that Peter didn't *need* to pray. Which really isn't all that odd if we take a couple of steps back from the story. Do we honestly think Jesus would just let Peter drown?

And, beyond that, why were the Disciples afraid in the first place? Because Jesus had sent them out on the boat. He'd *told* them to go across to Gennesaret. In getting in the boat and crossing the sea, they were literally and clearly doing God's will.

They were distracted from the clarion call of God's will by their immediate circumstances. Let's sit on that for a minute: Jesus chastises Peter - and by extension all the disciples for their lack of faith. Because they let their immediate circumstances distract them from what they knew God's will to be.

And when that happened, they got scared. And their fear, their confusion, their stress and struggle erupted in Peter's Crisis prayer - Lord, Save Me! Throw me a lifeline!

We get that. How many of us feel like our lives are a constant struggle against our schedules? In fact, isn't that where our crisis prayers come from - the circumstances we find ourselves in from moment-to-moment, day-to-day?

A little over fifty years ago, an author named Charles E. Hummel wrote that "We live in a constant tension between the urgent and the important." He called his essay "The Tyranny of the Urgent", a profound and poetic phrase that really encapsulates our constant struggle.

We are called to be a part of God's rescue mission, to bring hope to a dying world. But our everyday problems press in around us, demanding our attention, demanding to be noticed and noticed *now*.

If we're not careful - and we're mostly not - we end up living life from one crisis to the next. One urgent task to the next.

Like the disciples on that boat, we are distracted from our mission by the storm that's popped up. Our boat's rocking, the winds are against us. So we take our eyes off the goal. We forget our calling.

Our lives are pulled off course, trapped in the quicksand of the immediate. And we are ruled not by Jesus our King, but by the tyranny of the urgent.

If that's where you are, first hear this: I don't mean to trivialize your circumstances. I'm not telling you that your storm is just a shower and you should quit your whining. Storms are real. They're a part of life. We get sick. We die. We lose jobs. We worry about our futures. We worry about our kids, the economy, the upcoming elections. These are real concerns. The unexpected happens.

Anyone want to admit that they feel like a slave to their schedule? That when you heard the phrase "Tyranny of the Urgent", something in your soul resonated with that and you both affirmed that you knew just what I meant *and* that you long for freedom? Anyone want to say you can kind of relate to what Peter and the disciples felt? That it's hard to remember what God has called you to, hard to keep your eyes on the shores because of

the storm you're navigating? That frankly you can't think of anything else to pray other than "Lord, Save Me!"?

Storms happen. They're real. And Jesus doesn't get in the boat and call the disciples a bunch of sissies and cowards. He doesn't scoff at them because they blew their troubles out of proportion.

He asks, "Why did you doubt?"

It's not that our storms aren't real. But Jesus is more powerful than the storms.

It's not that our circumstances don't matter. But Jesus is bigger than our circumstances.

It's not that the future isn't scary. Like maybe if we were only a bit smarter or holier or something then we could see what's going to happen. It's not that. But God is faithful. And God's not going to let us drown.

It's not that we don't die, and grief and loss aren't supposed to hurt. But God resurrects.

And we forget that, in the midst of our storms. We start out on the shore, with such a clear picture of what God wants for us, of the kind of lives we are to lead. But then, on the boat, when the storms come, when the Tyranny of the Urgent consumes us, we forget. We get distracted. We lose the big picture because of all that's right in front of us, clamoring for our attention.

What we need is a way to center ourselves, even in the midst of storms. A way to remind ourselves that God is in control. A way to reorient ourselves every day around the truth that Jesus is King over even our tyrannical urgencies.

And that, believe it or not, is where prayer comes in. The scriptures are full of people who use prayer to cling to the Truth of who God is. People who use prayer to seize control of their circumstances and surrender them to God. And it looks very different from Peter's crisis prayer:

A man named Nehemiah began his prayer like this: **O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel -- Nehemiah 1:5-6 (NLT)**

Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica: **Night and day we pray earnestly for you. -- 1 Thessalonians 3:10 (NLT)**

Later in the same letter, Paul encourages them to imitate him: **Never stop praying. -- 1 Thessalonians 5:17.**

In the book of Daniel, a foreign king outlaws praying. Here's how Daniel responds: **When Daniel learned that the law had been signed, he went home and knelt down as usual in his upstairs room, with its windows open toward Jerusalem. He prayed three times a day, just as he had always done, giving thanks to his God. -- Daniel 6:10 (NLT)**

These are not crisis prayers. They're not prayers thrown up in the middle of the storm. They're not cries for a lifeline when everything else has failed. They don't assume that God is out there somewhere, not paying attention.

These prayers all assume that God is already working around us. Already in the middle of our circumstances. They assume that God has a plan and a call for us. In each of these Scriptures, we see consistent, intentional pauses during our days. Times when we stop all the hustle and bustle, when we step outside of the daily grind.

For thousands of years, God's people have found three times per day to be very effective - At morning, before we start our days. In the middle of the day, maybe around our lunchtime, and at the end of the day before we go to bed.

Three times we step out of our schedules, when we put the urgent on hold, and we recenter ourselves on God. When we remember that Jesus is the King, and that everything we do today should reverberate with that single truth.

When we talked about worship last week, we described it as a holy pause in our week - a chance for us as a whole community to call Time Out and reorient our lives around Jesus. To remind ourselves and each other that God is on the throne.

Prayer is our daily opportunity to do the same thing on an individual level. Instead of waiting until we're in the storm and calling for a lifeline, prayer is constantly checking our charts, remembering the course God laid out for us, and trusting that God is faithful to us.

There's no "right way" to pray. In fact, Christians throughout history have used many different "methods" of prayer. Some use the Lord's Prayer/Our Father as a model. Others pray through various Scriptures - especially the Psalms, letting the flow of a particular passage guide their prayers. I personally really like to journal my prayers (because I tend to get distracted when I pray).

Some people find various postures really helpful to focus - hands up in surrender, hands open to receive. Kneeling, even lying prostrate on the ground.

Some more athletic people find prayer while running or working out to be really helpful - the exercise helps focus your mind.

In all of these prayer practices, the purpose is to silence yourself, to center yourself. To pause and remember that God is King, that God has called us, and that God is faithful.

This sort of prayer has a very different effect on us. In Crisis Prayer mode, we're asking God to change things. But often when we order our days around God through prayer, we ourselves are changed. We see our whole world differently.

The summer before my senior year of college, I worked for the grounds crew at my university. It was a pretty miserable job – minimum wage to work outside all summer. Our supervisor divided us into two teams, and the other team didn't do any work. They would park their truck outside one of the campus buildings and sit in the air conditioning until the next break. Our supervisor knew what they did, but instead of disciplining them, he assigned them to jobs that didn't matter, which meant that my team got all the hardest jobs.

Over the summer, I grew to really hate my supervisor. I imagined myself to have a sort of righteous anger over his passivity. But at some point during the summer, I began to feel conviction about my attitude towards him. I knew that I wasn't respecting him, even though he was my boss.

So I started praying for him before I left for work and at night. I asked God to teach me to see my supervisor the way God sees him.

And it wasn't long before *I* started to change. Nothing in my job changed at all. The other team was still a bunch of slackers. My supervisor was still passive. But I developed a compassion for him that I'd never had. I learned some stuff about him that helped me understand why he might not stand up for himself. In short, I began to have compassion instead of anger.

Let me reiterate: my circumstances did not change. The so-called storm of lazy coworkers and a passive supervisor stayed with me all summer. But I learned through the discipline of prayer to see my world not from my perspective but from God's.

That's the first, most basic thing prayer does: Make us aware of God. That's why Psalm 46:10 tells us to **Be still and know that I am God.** -- Psalm 46:10

Be still. Seriously contemplate your day. Remember who God is, what God has called you to. Take time to listen to God as you think through your day.

This isn't self-help. It's not 5 steps to taking charge of your day or something like that. This is a conscious, consistent acknowledgment that God is King.

That as God's faithful servants, we don't go about our day surrendering to the tyranny of the urgent. Instead, we take control of our schedules, of our days, and we submit them to our King.

Not because storms don't matter. They do. Storms are real, and they're scary. But our God is bigger than the storms. And our God is faithful through the storms.

God told the disciples they would get across the lake, and they crossed, storm and all.

What call has God placed on your life? What kind of person is God calling you to become? That is the goal of your life. Let God's call rule you, not the urgent.

Close with Examine

We often do a prayer of examine to close out our time together. It's a wonderful opportunity to respond prayerfully to the worship today. It's an opportunity to silence yourself and reflect both on the week you've just lived and the one laid out before you. The Examine is a prayer exercise that you can use at the beginning and end of each day, if you are looking for somewhere to start.

So today, at the close of our time, please find a comfortable position. Some prefer to kneel, others to stand. You can keep your eyes open or close them. What's important is that you are comfortable and can think clearly.

Now, consider the landscape of the past week. Were you in control of your week? Did you carefully and intentionally order events? Or were you at the mercy of the storms of your circumstances?

When during the past week did you feel furthest from God?

When during the past week did you feel closest to God?

Now think ahead on the week before you. Of course none of us here knows what surprises are in store for us this week. But we do know a lot of what is ahead of us.

When this week will you be threatened by the Tyranny of the Urgent?

How can you choose God's way over your busyness?