

Stop Pretending When You Pray

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Date: 15 February 2026

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[0:00] Prayer is the act in which we approach God as a living person. A Tao to whom we speak, not an it that we talk about.

! Prayer is the attention we give to the one who attends to us. It is the decision to approach God as the personal center, as our Lord and Savior, our entire lives gathered up and expressed in this approach.

My name is Antonio Ingram, and this morning I want to talk about prayer. As Peterson describes, prayer is about giving attention to God and letting God attend to us in return.

Prayer is not the Christian version of casting spells. It is not us giving a wish list to some cosmic genie. Prayer is communion.

Prayer is encounter. Prayer is about connecting with a living God who wants intimacy with us. In addition to serving on the preaching team, I also serve as the director of prayer and liturgy here at the table.

[1:11] In some ways, prayer is in my DNA. I grew up in a home with a grandma who loved to pray. As a child, I would remember her taking me to all-night prayer meetings at our church called shut-ins.

The black people know. We would literally pray from around 9 p.m. until the next morning. To be honest, I probably spent most of that time asleep, but it was the atmosphere that was important. But my grandma did not just pray at church. I remember we would also pray at home. I remember when I would go on flights, she would have our entire family hold hands and pray. She would pray, Jesus, keep the plane in the air, which was both comforting but also stressful, because I was like, what's the alternative?

For many of us who grew up in Christian homes, prayer has a nostalgia. Some of us have fond memories of prayer. Yet as a church of people seeking to live out a more beautiful gospel, many of us have a more complicated relationship with prayer.

[2:26] We have seen prayer used to dehumanize us. We have seen prayer used to shame us. We have seen prayer used to judge us.

We have been disappointed by unanswered prayers. We have grieved the loss of a loved one after we prayed for their healing. As a queer person, I deeply understand how harmful prayer can be. I have had people pray for God to change my sexual orientation. I have had people pray that I would marry a woman. I understand the deep harm that prayer can do to our hearts, our souls, and our minds.

And yet, I'm the director of prayer here at the table. Why, you may ask. Well, I've also seen the goodness of God in prayer. I've seen the power of prayer to heal, deliver, and set free. I have had someone lay hands on me, and I felt the liquid love of God rush through my body. I have prayed in tongues and felt the presence of God come into the room.

[3:34] I have seen God fulfill improbable prophetic words that people have spoken over my life. I have felt the hand of God touch me and comfort me as I experienced the loss of a loved one.

Yes, prayer can harm. But prayer can also heal. I have seen the power of prayer. I have seen the counterfeit, but I have also felt the real thing.

I have encountered the living God through prayer. And today, I want to talk about the importance of finding a real thing, especially in this moment.

We are currently in a sermon series called Surviving Saturday, flourishing in seasons of exile. Both corporately and individually, so many of us are experiencing feelings of exile.

So many of us are feeling uncertainty, confusion, pain, and fear. Prayer is a tool to help us flourish during these seasons of exile in our lives.

[4:37] My prayer today is that we as a church can begin to reclaim prayer. For some of us, it might mean praying again for the first time in a long time.

For some of us, it may be coming out of the prayer closet literally. As someone who prays. For some of us, it may mean offering to pray for friends and family and coworkers again.

And I want to be clear. We are not reclaiming prayer because we want to use God as a magic genie. We are not reclaiming prayer because we want to ignore painful emotions and use God as a tool for avoidance.

To the contrary, we are reclaiming prayer because prayer makes us more fully human. Eugene Peterson says this, Prayer is the secret work that develops a life that is thoroughly authentic and deeply human.

Through looking at the life of Jeremiah today, we have a model for how to pursue a thoroughly authentic and human life centered on pursuing the voice of God.

[5:44] Today's scripture comes from Jeremiah 15, 15 through 21. Before we turn to today's scripture, I want to provide some context. Jeremiah is going through it.

Jeremiah was prophesying to a nation who did not like his message. Jeremiah called his people out for idolatry. Jeremiah called out his people for deceitful business practices.

Jeremiah called out his people for not defending the rights of the poor and the orphaned. Jeremiah was prophesying.

Today's passage gives us a glimpse into Jeremiah's relationship with God in the midst of crisis. Today's passage is about what it looks like to commune with God through prayer in a time of turmoil.

Jeremiah 15 and 15 reads, When you speak, I devour every word.

[7:25] Your word brings me such boundless joy. The endless delight of my heart is in knowing that your beautiful name is attached to me. Oh, Yahweh, commander of angel armies.

I haven't joined the crowd at their merry celebrations just to have a good time. I've kept to myself because your strong hand upon my life sets me apart. And your anger over what they have done fills me.

Why must my pain be endless? Why are my wounds incurable? Why won't they heal? You've been to me like a deceitful spring that stops flowing, like a brook that goes dry.

Here is what Yahweh said to me. If you give up your hopeless tone of despair and return to me, I will restore you as my spokesman, and you will stand before me and enjoy my favor.

If you separate the precious from the worthless, you will be my mouthpiece. They will turn to you, but you are not to turn to them. They will fight and attack you, but I will make you as strong and secure as a fortified wall of bronze.

[8:40] They will not conquer you, for I already have. I am with you to deliver and rescue you, declares Yahweh. I will save you from the power of the wicked and rescue you from the clutches of ruthless men.

As we look at today's passage and what we can learn, it's important to think about what prayer is to Jeremiah. Biblical scholars describe today's passage as one of Jeremiah's confessions.

However, these are not confessions in the Roman Catholic or usher sense of the word. There is an honesty, but it isn't about Jeremiah's sins.

Instead, there is an honesty about Jeremiah's emotions. In Jeremiah's confessions, he shows up as someone who is authentically emotional and open to God.

He doesn't hide his negative feelings about God. He lays his heart and his community's heart bare before the Lord. Kathleen O'Connor talks about the importance of this honest communication for Jeremiah and his community.

[9:48] And she talks about confessions as a way to provide a way to pray that gathers in the afflicted, draws them back from social isolation, articulates doubt, and shows how it is possible to cling relentlessly to God in the wreckage of their world.

Jeremiah's prayer life demonstrates the power of prayer to usher us into a self-reflective authenticity that acknowledges real emotions. Jeremiah represents what it looks like to invite God into all the places of exile that we find ourselves in.

For Jeremiah, prayer was not asking God to grant wishes or give him all of his heart's desires. Prayer was about showing up to the creator of the universe, open and honest, and in pursuit of a connection like we would do in any healthy relationship.

In today's passage, we see this relational honesty as Jeremiah confesses fear, loneliness, pain, and anger. First, we'll look at fear.

In Jeremiah 15 and 16, it says, Then I said, Yahweh, you understand everything perfectly.

Remember me and act on my behalf. Pay back all those who persecute me.

[11:08] Do not be so patient with my enemies. Take revenge on them before they kill me. It is for your sake that I suffer insult after insult. Here we have Jeremiah asking God to act on his behalf.

We see Jeremiah talking to God about getting revenge on his enemies before they kill him. This is a fearful prayer. Jeremiah does not try to put up a false confidence.

He is honest with God about feeling afraid. It is through prayer that Jeremiah conveys to God his fears. We can learn a lot from Jeremiah. It is okay to tell Jesus that we are afraid for the future of our nation.

It is okay to tell Jesus that we're scared as our civil rights are under attack. It is okay to tell Jesus that we're worried about our safety and our job security. Jeremiah demonstrates that God is big enough to handle our fears.

We do not have to put on a brave face before him. Prayer helps us acknowledge to God fears that we may even have difficulty admitting to ourselves.

[12:17] The next subject of Jeremiah's confession is loneliness. In Jeremiah 15 and 17, it reads, Jeremiah talks about how he's isolated himself for the sake of God's message.

He hasn't joined the crowd. He has kept to himself. Jeremiah is honest with God about how following God's message can be lonely. I know I can relate to Jeremiah.

Like so many of us, choosing a more beautiful gospel has caused me to lose certain relationships. I remember a friend I had in my old church. I attended his wedding.

We would text every day. I attended a barbecue at his parents' house. And yet, as I became more vocal about God-given dignity for queer people and black people, he stopped being my friend.

Following the gospel can lead to a loss of relationships. And yes, God has brought me new and wonderful friendships. But it's okay to grieve what is lost. More importantly, Jeremiah shows that it is okay to bring those feelings of loneliness, of loss, to God.

[13:46] This is especially true when the loneliness comes from choosing God and a more beautiful gospel. God knows how you feel. We don't have to put on false pretenses for God.

The next subject of Jeremiah's confessional prayer is pain. Jeremiah tells God, Why must my pain be endless?

Why are my wounds incurable? Why won't they heal? Jeremiah spoke honestly to Jehovah Rapha, the God whose very nature is healing, about having an incurable wound.

Think about that. A wound that won't heal. So many of us can relate. Some of us have incurable wounds from family members who can only love parts of us.

Some of us have incurable wounds from broken trust from close friends or romantic partners.

Some of us have incurable wounds from living in a country who elected president to a second term who is openly xenophobic, racist, and transphobic.

[14:51] Confessions of that pain is worship. Having pain from incurable wounds to God is an important part of faith.

It is not unbelief. It is being transparent with God about the pain, a pain that he already feels you are carrying, even if you can't fully admit it to yourself.

It is in these moments that prayer makes us more human. Prayer is how we acknowledge our pain with honesty and transparency before the Lord. This is so important.

There is so much pain. We cannot carry it. It will destroy us. Confession is how we give it to God.

The last subject of Jeremiah's confession is anger.

He says to God, You've been to me like a deceitful spring that stops flowing, like a brook that goes dry. This is very esoteric, but luckily we have a commentary.

[15:53] So O'Connor provides commentary on verse 18 and says that Jeremiah is talking about, God is a false traitor and a false friend who has forsaken him.

The deceitful spring and failing waters may refer to a riverbed in the desert that evaporates in torrid heat and then floods in drowning torrents during the rainy seasons, sweeping away everything in its path.

A God who is like a dried-up spring is worse than an enemy because divine pretenses disguise divine infidelity. A dried-up riverbed of a God is dangerous to life and not a fountain of living waters. An evaporated life source of a God is a deceit, treachery, and a death blow. Jeremiah is expressing how angry and disappointed he is with God. Young Antonio could learn a lot from Jeremiah.

When I was younger, I would oftentimes give someone the silent treatment if I was angry. It is a natural impulse for so many of us. How many of us are giving God the silent treatment right now because we're angry?

[17:03] How many of us don't invite God into places of incurable wounds? Jeremiah models a different approach. His anger did not lead to silence.

His anger motivated communication. We can do the same. We all have had things that haven't worked out in our lives that make us feel anger. Relationships, jobs, health issues, times when God didn't show up the way we wanted.

Jeremiah shows us it's okay to be angry with God about disappointments that feel like broken promises. I think about the quote from Eli Wiesel where he says, the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

If you're feeling upset with God because of experiences with fear or loneliness or pain or anger that makes it hard to pray, you're actually in good company. These are the very emotions that are the gateway to encounter.

These feelings are fuel for faith, not unbelief. If you believe in someone, they can disappoint you. If you don't, there's no disappointment.

[18:13] Now I want to turn to my favorite portion of today's passage. Verse 15 and 19, where we hear God reply.

Here is what Yahweh said to me. If you give up your hopeless tone of despair or return to me, I will restore you as my spokesman, and you will stand before me and enjoy my favor.

If you separate the precious from the worthless, you will be my mouthpiece. They will turn to you, but you are not to turn to them. As you can see in verse 19, Jeremiah stops speaking.

Peterson explains, Jeremiah stops speaking, but the prayer continues. For prayer does not end when we end. In prayer, God is not merely audience.

He is partner. Jeremiah has spoken honestly. Now he listens expectantly. Verse 19 reminds me of one of the most important parts of prayer, listening.

[19:19] After we are honest with God about our feelings, we need encounter. We need to hear his voice. I want to be clear. Prayer is not just a tool for self-reflection, though it is helpful to reveal our hearts.

The key to prayer is trusting God will speak after we've been honest. Peterson explains, Jeremiah's part in the prayer was to be honest and personal.

It is God with whom he has to do. The first requirement in a personal relationship is to be ourselves. Off with the mask. Off with the pretense.

Jeremiah's prayer is not pious, not nice, not proper. He speaks what he feels. And he feels scared, lonely, hurt, and angry.

Well enough. God's part in the prayer is to restore and save. Before God in prayer, we do not remain the same. The fright and loneliness and pain and accusation are all there, but they do not stay there.

[20:27] The power of prayer is not about outcomes. The power of prayer is that God is our partner. God invites us into a dynamic relationship.

This is not a one-sided conversation. This is not a monologue. We are not talking to ourselves. We are not talking to the sky. God is always speaking back. Prayer helps us open our ears to hear what

God is saying.

As we continue to the end of today's passage, we see something amazing. God does not just reply. He shares the vantage point of heaven with Jeremiah and gives a promise of renewal for the future. God says, They will fight and attack you, but I will make you as strong and secure as a fortified wall of bronze. They will not conquer you, for I already have.

I am with you to deliver and rescue you, declares Yahweh. I will save you from the power of the wicked and rescue you from the clutches of ruthless men. God hears Jeremiah's confessions of fear and promises rescue.

[21:35] God hears Jeremiah's confession of loneliness and promises his comfort and security. God hears Jeremiah's confessions of pain and anger and promises his deliverance and salvation.

Today's passage reminds us that when we are honest with God, he will not leave us where he finds us. We are not merely venting about what is wrong in our lives.

We are letting honesty become the open door for God to walk into the places of fear and loneliness and pain and anger in our lives. God will restore. God will save.

God will answer. It is hearing God's voice in prayer as Jeremiah did, which is the key to finding renewal, even in the midst of exile. As Peterson says, it is not enough to remember.

We must hear it again. Prayer is the act in which we hear it again. It is not enough to carry memory verses around with us. We need daily encounter with the resonant voice of God.

[22:38] Prayer is that encounter. And that is why I love partnering with our community for one-on-one prayers at the altar after church.

One-on-one prayer is not something to do for emergencies or when you're in crisis.

One-on-one prayer is what you do when you want to encounter. And there's always room for encounter. Sometimes it's hard to encounter God on our own. When I go to Christian conferences, I'm always the first one in line for prayer.

Sometimes we need people to remind us what the voice of God sounds like for us. Yes, we know God loves us. Yes, we know God is for us and not against us.

But sometimes it's helpful to hear in a fresh way. I remember in 2020, one of my old church friends prayed for me. And he saw an image. And in the image, I was in the middle of a windstorm.

Everything was shaking. Everything was unstable. But he saw me dancing in the middle. And I was holding a flower. And I was looking at the flower.

[23:40] And he felt like the flower represented the beauty of God. And though there are winds of change, I was safe and protected because I was focusing on the beauty of the Lord. To me, his prophetic word represents the goal of prayer.

It is to receive comfort in the midst of the storm. It is to lock eyes on Jesus, even in the midst of feelings of anger or disappointment or exile. It is to tap into the renewal that Jesus has waiting for us if we only ask.

Peterson reminds us, in prayer, God provides renewal. Prayer is not so much the place where we learn something new, but where God confirms anew, the faith to which we are committed.

Before my friend prayed for me, I knew God was my hiding place. I knew God was my safe space. These are not new concepts. But through his prayer, I felt renewal of the promises of God over my life.

So practically, how do we pray now in a way that is open, honest, and authentic? How do we practice offering prayer to friends or coworkers or loved ones again?

[24:52] There's an old gospel song that my grandma used to sing that I think gives us some insight. It says, Now let us have a little talk with Jesus. Let us tell him all about our troubles.

He will hear our faintest cry, and he will answer by and by. And when you feel a little prayer wheel turning, and you know a little fire is burning, you will find a little talk with Jesus makes it right.

When I hear this song, I think about three themes which are key to reclaiming prayer. Time,

honesty, and seeking. First, we have to set aside time to be with the Lord, even if it's five minutes.

As Peterson says, prayer is a desire to listen to God firsthand. To speak to God firsthand, and then setting aside the time and making the arrangements to do it.

It issues from the conviction that the living God is immensely important to me, and that what goes on between us demands my exclusive attention. Any habit takes time.

[26:01] We have to dedicate time to being alone with God. The same is true for offering prayer to loved ones and coworkers. You have to take time to connect and really bring people's concerns to God.

The second piece of advice I would have is honesty. We have to show up to God honest in our prayers. It's funny. I go to therapy, right?

And people always say, there's no need to lie to your therapist. The same is true for God. O'Connor says, and I love this, cling to God even when God has slipped away.

Yell at the top of your collective lungs. Hold tightly, mercilessly, and with every ounce of strength. Shout and scream at the deity. Tell the truth.

Voice rage and despair right to the face of the just judge. Hold nothing back. Complain, protest, resist. Reclaim the experiences of misery and pain.

[27:03] See them and name them before God. We have all seen prayers where people pretend to be brave or pretend to not be sad. Those are not the prayers God is inviting us into.

He is inviting us into radical honesty, an honesty that lets us encounter him. O'Connor talks about this radical honesty and implores that we communicate all that is shattered.

Despair creating and spirit defeating. Lay it all out so you can see it yourselves and can see each other in this deep unending wound.

God is hidden in that space. And finally, we have to seek. We have to search out God through prayer. I'm reminded of Proverbs 25 and 2.

God conceals the revelation of his word in the hiding place of his glory. But the honor of kings is revealed by how they thoroughly search out the deeper meaning of all that God says.

[28:03] As we search for God, we will find new dimensions of our own humanity through communion with God. Through seeking, we are finding parts of ourselves that God has placed in us.

A way to make us fully human. And I want to be clear. When I say seeking, I do not mean striving. I think about Hebrews 11 and 6, which says, And without faith living within us, it will be impossible to please God.

But we come to God in faith knowing that he is real and that he rewards the faith of those who passionately seek him. We can trust that God will show up when we search for him.

God will not hide himself from us. I know that some people in this room may say, I have prayed before and nothing happened. I have prayed before and I felt like I didn't meet God.

Or I have prayed before and it caused me pain. Or I have prayed before and God did not come through. I think of a story from the book of Luke as a word to our community.

[29:09] It reads, Jesus sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished, he said to Peter, Now row out to the deep water to cast your nets and you will have a great catch.

Master, Peter replied, We've just come back from fishing all night and didn't catch a thing. But if you insist, we'll go out again and let down our nets because of your word.

When they pulled up their nets, they were shocked to see a huge catch of fish and their nets were ready to burst. They waved to their business partners in the other boat for help.

They ended up completely filling both boats with fish until they began to sink. When I read this passage, I hear Jesus saying to our community, Cast your nets again.

Try praying again. Try praying for yourself again. Try praying for your loved ones again. Try praying for your country again.

[30:16] I hear Jesus saying, I know you have tried before and nothing happened. I know you have prayed before and you did not hear my voice answer you.

I know you have cast your nets into the sea full of hope and the only thing you caught was disappointment. But I also hear Jesus saying, Will you cast your nets one more time?

Will you trust me one more time? Will you try me one more time? I hear Jesus saying, Your fears are not too big for my love.

Your loneliness does not intimidate me. Your pain does not overwhelm me. Your anger does not scare me. I hear Jesus saying, I promise I will meet you.

I promise that I will reinvigorate you. I promise that I will exceed your expectations. I will provide abundance even in the seasons of exile.

[31:17] Show up honest and open. That's all I'm asking. That's all you have to do. And watch me show up. As we approach Ash Wednesday this week and the beginning of Lent, my prayer is that prayer itself becomes one of the places of repentance for our community.

Repentance merely means changing one's mind. I pray that we begin to think about prayer as a place of intimate encounter. I pray that we begin to think about prayer as a tool to help us flourish despite disaster being all around.

I pray that we experience prayer as a place of finding intimacy with God. I pray that we can show up in prayer honest with God and with ourselves.

I pray that we find deliverance and healing in prayer. As O'Connor explains, Jeremiah teaches us through his confessions that prayer keeps his relationship with God alive and teaches readers, that's us, to move through the frightening spiritual wreckage left by disaster.

I pray that we emulate his example in this next season. Let us pray. Jesus, your people seek your voice. Help us hear the faintest whisper of your goodness and your kindness.

[32:42] God, I pray that any calluses we have on our hearts that you take away. That there are places that we have become desensitized to your touch from a place of protection.

But God, help us let love in. Help us break down the walls that we have put up to protect ourselves from pain, but also keep you out.

God, help us feel your love in the places of exile in our lives. And God, help us show up before you. God, we have seen prayer abused.

We have seen prayer weaponized. We have seen prayer harm. Would you say that prayer is communion? You say that prayer brings vitality.

You say that prayer brings freedom. Prayer brings deliverance. And God, we will agree with what you say. There have been so many lies that the enemy has tried to put over our community.

[33:45] Lies that we cannot hear your voice. Lies that you're not speaking. Lies that we are alone. But we say that you are here. That your presence is chasing us.

That you have pursued us all the days of our lives. And that you will never leave us and you will never forsake us. In this next season, God, I pray for open ears. I pray for open mouths and open hearts.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen. So come, move. Let justice roll on like a river. Let worship turn into revival.

Let us back to you. King of all generations.

Let every time and day... Let every time and day... Thank you.