

# Prayer

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[ 0 : 00 ] I want you to use your imaginations for a second. Imagine if you would, in my mind, it's a four-year-old girl. I have a daughter, Audrey, who's four years old.

But imagine a young child, maybe yourself as a three-, four-, five-year-old. And it's the middle of the night, and she wakes up from a nightmare, a scary dream. Monsters, dragons, bad guys, all of it.

And she leaps out of bed, and she goes running towards mom and dad's room, the parents' room, grandparents' room, the guardian's room, the caretaker's room. And she's just about to open the door, but she hesitates.

She's not sure what kind of parent is going to be on the other side of that door. Sometimes when she opens the door, she gets a parent that accepts her with love and care and tells her that it's going to be okay, that the nightmares aren't going to come true.

And sometimes when she opens the door, she gets a parent that's angry, and mean and yelling and saying, get back to bed, why are you waking me up?

[ 1 : 08 ] We have been talking for the past few weeks about a broken faith, and how we rebuild it, how we put it back together. Because many of us, lots of us, have experienced some form of brokenness in what we believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church.

The church, this thing that we get so angry at, yet we can't quite seem to quit. And so we've talked about baptism, and how at its worst, baptism becomes this thick, black dividing line between them and us, and they're out, but we're in.

But at its best, it's about a wide, open invitation to becoming a part of a new kind of family, and everyone's invited. We've talked about scripture. Pastor Angela talked about how we look back at our family stories, not to like exegete them and figure out, you know, all of these legal, moral ways that we're supposed to respond, but rather to know this is how they responded to God, this is how they reacted to God, and what we can learn from it, and how we can move forward.

Pastor Richard talked about Eucharist, this big, old family reunion with a table that stretches out for miles, where there is room for all, and we keep opening up the invitation.

And today, I want to talk about prayer. Because sometimes I feel like prayer is often feeling like that little child knocking on the door, not knowing what kind of parent we're going to get.

[ 2 : 34 ] We've prayed prayers for healing and received sickness and death. We've prayed prayers for reconciliation. We've had doors slammed in our face.

We've prayed prayers to feel comfort. And we have felt anger and shame and rejection. So how do we talk about prayer?

So I'm going to spend some time in the scriptures tonight, kind of giving us a history of how folks approach God throughout time, and then what happened with Jesus, and how that might change our approach to God.

So I want to begin in the book of Exodus, chapter 26. And if you've ever, you know, started to read through the Bible, people often joke that, you know, they'll start their year reading plan for the Bible, and then they'll get to, like, Davidicus, and they quit because it's boring.

But I actually think the boring parts start earlier than that in the book of Exodus. The book of Exodus is famous for, like, red seas and plagues and all of these wonderful things. But you get past that. Moses climbs up on Mount Sinai, and then you get a bunch of, like, very detailed instructions as to how to build a very elaborate tent.

[ 3 : 44 ] And unless you're, like, super duper into camping, it's probably not for you. And so we're in the thick of it in Exodus, chapter 26, about the kind of tent that God wants the Israelites to build for their worship services to happen in.

And worship services back then look a lot different than they do now because there's a lot of animals and knives and blood. So we're getting the instructions for the tabernacle, and we're getting instructions about the inner sanctum of this tent.

There's a courtyard, and then there's, like, a big tent, and then inside the big tent there's a little tent where we have to put up a curtain. It says this, Exodus 26, verse 31, Make a curtain of blue, purple, scarlet yarn, finely twisted linen, with cherubim, which is a kind of angel-like creature, roven into it by a skilled worker.

Hang it with gold hooks and four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the Ark of the Covenant, which has a whole other set of very elaborate instructions, but basically imagine, you know, if you've seen Indiana Jones, you can picture it, like, this kind of very nice-looking box with angels on top of it, the Ark of the Covenant behind the curtain.

And the curtain is going to separate the holy place, which is where the sacrifices happened, from the most holy place. Put the atonement cover on the Ark of the Covenant into the most holy place, place the table outside the curtain on the north side of the tabernacle, and put the lampstand opposite on the south side.

[ 5 : 15 ] Very elaborate instructions about tents and where to put things inside of it. But the main thing to understand is that you have the holy place where the priests could go and do their sacrifices, and then the most holy place where only one man, once a year, could go and enter and offer a sacrifice at the Ark of the Covenant.

And the Ark was understood, if you read throughout the Old Testament, understood to be the place where God was enthroned. If we go to the book of Psalms, chapter 80, we get this passage about, hear us, shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth, awaken your might, come and save us.

So we get this image of the holy of holies. This is the place where the Ark of the Covenant is, and where the Ark of the Covenant is, there's these two cherubim, and they have their wings outstretched. Between those wings, there is the very throne of Yahweh God.

This was the understanding of the ancient Israelites and Jews. So once a year, a priest, one high priest was allowed to enter into this room and offer up a sacrifice.

Later, this actually isn't in Scripture, but there's a later rabbinical tradition that said that they tied a rope around the high priest so if the high priest was somehow deficient and was killed in the presence of God, that they could drag him, they would tie a rope around him so they could drag him out, and nobody else would have to go into the room because if other people would enter in, then they would die, and then they would die.

[ 6 : 54 ] It would just be this domino effect of horror and terror that nobody wanted. So that's what being in God's presence was understood to be like.

Now, it's more complicated than that. We also understand from the Old Testament that nothing could contain God's presence, that the temple, Solomon says this when he dedicates the temple in 2 Chronicles, that the temple cannot contain the presence of the Lord, and so don't kind of think that the Israelites or the Jews as these very simple-minded people who thought that God lived in this one single place.

They were smarter than that. And yet, at the same time, they had this very specific idea that this one specific place was unique and special and a nexus of God's presence, and it had to be treated in a very, very precious way.

And we could also have a whole other discussion of like, was God actually specifically there in a way that he was in other places? Or was God using the culture and the understanding of an ancient people to the best of God's ability?

That's a whole other discussion for another time. But what you need to understand is that there is a Holy of Holies, one person once a year, better be clean or else they die.

[ 8 : 15 ] Now, skip forward like 1,400 years, and you get to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was born, and he lived, and he taught, and he preached, and he healed, and he fed.

And then, our creed says, he suffered under Pontius Pilate and died and was buried. And when we get to that death scene, there's a lot of things that we could say about the death of Jesus that happens to be a very important part of the Christian faith.

But there's this one moment that we have to pay attention to. This is the book of Matthew, chapter 27, verse 51. At that moment that Jesus dies, the curtain, which we read about in Exodus, of the temple was torn into from top to bottom.

So this is interesting. We get these very specific, particular instructions in the book of Exodus about the curtain and the rod that separates the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.

We get very particular instructions, and then God incarnate, Jesus Christ, dies on a cross, and it appears supernaturally the curtain is torn from top to bottom.

[ 9 : 31 ] Now, the early Christians had to wrestle with this. What did this mean? What did it mean that there was an earthquake and that the temple curtain was torn in two? How do we understand all of this?

And that's when we get to the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews, and I'm going to read a couple passages from here. Hebrews chapter 4. So the early Christians wrestled with what was happening.

What did Jesus' death mean? Why did God incarnate need to die? Why was the curtain in the temple torn? And we get a passage like this. This is Hebrews chapter 4, verse 14.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest, talking about Jesus, who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one that has been tempted or tested in every way, just as we were, yet he did not sin. And this is the therefore statement.

[ 10 : 32 ] Let us then therefore approach God's throne, keyword there, throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

So the book of Hebrews is all about what was that Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, temple, tabernacle, sacrificial system all about? How do we make sense of that in light of who God is and what Jesus did?

And what the author of Hebrews suggests is, okay, imagine that Jesus is the high priest now, not just a person, but a God-man named Jesus. Jesus is the high priest.

Jesus is the one who dies. And now we can approach this throne of grace with, love this word, confidence. Now, it's interesting, because just a few verses above, it says that we need to take into consideration, this is verse 13, nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.

Everything in God's sight is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account, which I don't know about you, I grew up in a church in a faith tradition that used a verse like this, everything is uncovered and laid bare before him, the eyes of whom we must all give account, of like, you better watch what you're doing, you better watch out, because God's watching every single thing you do.

[ 11 : 53 ] He's like Santa Claus bought on steroids, and his list keeping is way better than Santa Claus's, so whatever you're doing in bed at night with the door closed, God knows what, he does know what, watch out. But like, you gotta keep reading.

Yes, God is the one to whom we must give account. Everything is uncovered, laid bare. One translation says naked. We're all naked before God, like these clothes, God doesn't give two hoots about.

And then, the author keeps going, let us therefore approach God's throne of grace with confidence. It doesn't matter how naked you are, it doesn't matter what you're doing, you have a great high priest who has ascended to the throne of God, and because of that, you can approach this throne of grace with confidence.

Another passage, Hebrews chapter 10, same book, a few chapters later, the author says something very similar. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence, boldness, chutzpah, to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, so now the author is using that explicit most holy place language.

Because we have that confidence, that boldness, that the kahunas, to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, open to us through the curtain, that is his body.

[ 13 : 07 ] So the author is saying, because of Jesus' death, we can do this, by a new and living way. And since we have a great priest over the house of God, verse 22, chapter 10, verse 22, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, with a full assurance that faith brings.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And so now the image has changed. It is not a most holy place that one man once a year can go into trembling, hoping he doesn't die in God's presence.

It is now the curtain-torn, wide-open place that we enter into. Might as well be naked, boldly, with confidence, because it's a throne of grace.

It's a throne of mercy. We can draw near to God because God is faithful. And so back to our image of the four-year-old girl knocking on the door.

You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to be afraid of who's going to answer. When we pray, we don't need to worry about what kind of God is answering the door.

[ 14 : 15 ] This is the throne of grace. This is the throne of mercy. This is the throne that says, come on in, the water's fine. Now, let's keep going.

If this is what prayer is meant to be like, a place that we enter into with confidence, with boldness, a might as well be naked sense of, here I am, how then should we pray?

And I think we need to get rid of some of our superstitions about prayer. I've got this in my notes and I want to get this right, so I'm going to look at this. We want to get rid of our superstitions about prayer.

God is not a magic incantation away. That if we say the right words in the right order, the right number of times, spinning a circle behind like a willow tree or something like that, God will do whatever we ask him to do.

That's superstitious thinking. That's magical thinking. God is a God of relationship. Prayer is talking to God, talking to a God who, when the door opens, is happy to see you.

[ 15 : 26 ] The other kind of superstition I think we have about prayer is that, I mean, I know when I close my eyes, I'm just like super practically, when I close my eyes and I begin to pray to God, most naturally, my mind goes, pictures, imagines God somewhere else, out there, above, beyond.

And that's pagan thinking about God. It's superstitious thinking about God. That God is not here or here, but somewhere else.

And I'm trying to get God's attention. What scripture is like explicit about is that God absolutely transcends, but also is deeply imminent, present, indwelling, with us, Emmanuel.

And so when I pray, I am trying to train myself now to like, not just imagine God somewhere else, but here, with me, closer than my breath.

And don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I'm praying to myself. God is distinct from me. I am distinct from God. And yet I also believe that it is, according to the words of Colossians, it's through Christ that all things hold together.

[ 16 : 50 ] We are, Colossians chapter 3, my life is hidden in Christ with God. It doesn't get closer than that. God is not angry to see you.

God is overjoyed to see you. God, when God responds, when God answers, when we start paying attention to the God who is present with us, we don't need to be worried about the kind of God who is answering.

This is the God of joy, the throne of grace, which Hebrews chapter 4, throne of grace, it's the only time that phrase is used in Scripture. In the Old Testament, it was often the throne of power, the throne of God's almightiness.

But now, in light of Jesus, we see it's the throne of grace, of God's acceptance, of God inviting us in, inviting us closer. Now, I want to take a turn here.

So, I still want to talk about prayer, and I still want to talk about prayer as an open door, but I want to say one more thing. Religious professionals, people like me, cannot keep you away from God's presence.

[ 18 : 07 ] But we often try. Religious professionals, pastors, priests, rabbis, cannot keep you away from the presence of God. But we often try. Let me bring us back to this illustration.

Imagine the four-year-old is now grown up. She's moved out of the house, and she's returned home for a family reunion. And when she shows up, she shows up on the porch, she knocks on the door, and the door is locked.

And she can kind of see through the window. There's people inside, there's a party going on, she can hear laughing, and she sees the food, the spread, and she calls someone on her phone, she calls someone inside, and says, hey, can you let me in?

And they say, no, we don't trust you. Please stay outside, it's for the best. This is best for you and best for us. And this happens.

This happens a lot in faith communities, churches or otherwise, who they want to sew back up the curtain, the curtain that was ripped apart by the death of Jesus, the atoning death of Jesus, that says, you're in, you're welcome, climb on up this throne of grace.

[ 19 : 29 ] Religious professionals, religious communities, faith communities say, ah, but not you, no thanks, you're too much for us. And many times, this is what causes a broken faith.

Most of the people I have known, met, pastored, and befriended, they have a broken faith, sometimes because of life experiences, because of grief, death, an incompatibility of belief and their experiences, but most of the time, at least the people I know, their faith is broken because of the church, because of people, because of relationships that break.

And rightly so, I think, when they say, well, if the church is going to treat me like this, I want nothing to do with God, they walk away. and the faith is shattered.

What do we do with that? We, as a church community, have to start making commitments to not sew up the curtain that God has torn apart.

and as your pastor, I have to make some commitments to not do that, which is hard because, let's be honest, we live in the real world where there are jerks who we want to kick out of our faith community, where there are lines that we want to draw.

[ 21 : 08 ] If you're going to treat people like that, please leave. If you're going to act and behave this way, please get out of here, I know that. I'm not naive. I'm not stupid.

And yet, we also want to create places of belonging and faith and learning about Christ, about God's love, where even those that we want to despise can know what God's love is all about.

love. That's hard work. It's not something that we figure out in a day or even 2,000 years apparently. So these are my commitments that I want to commit to you, promise to you.

I want you to hold me accountable to them. And I want the option, the ability, I want the permission to hold you accountable as well. These are the commitments.

Number one, I want to value inclusion over exclusion. Again, this is a spectrum. Like, it's not just an either-or kind of thing.

[ 22 : 17 ] But when given the choice, if you have to twist my arm, I want to say that this is a church, this is a faith community, that's about including people, not excluding people. That we don't make it about who is out, but we rather try to make the circle, the table, as wide and as long as we possibly can.

When you twist my arm, I want to value mercy over judgment. The book of James says that mercy triumphs over judgment. And so I want this to be a faith community where mercy triumphs over judgment.

And again, we live in the world where we want to draw lines, where we need to draw lines, where we say, no, not here, you won't. But we do that out of a place of abundant mercy.

Where our first instinct is not to draw the line, but to find understanding. Where our first instinct is not to push out the door, but to discover what led you to think and believe this way, can we talk?

If you twist my arm, I want to value moving into the future rather than trying to reclaim a past that doesn't exist anymore. Oftentimes Christians use the word revival, and I feel like revival is just a spiritual way of saying that we're nostalgic for what has been.

[ 23 : 40 ] And I'm not sure that the Holy Spirit is really in that business. I feel like the Holy Spirit is much more about moving us into the future, about moving us into what God is already up to, about moving us into something that is brand new and breaking ground and breaking earth.

And that's the kind of church I want to be about, about learning from our past, about learning from what has happened before, so that we can move into a future that God has already prepared for us.

I want us to be a community that isn't about drawing a line, drawing a circle, and getting inside of it, and declaring, you're out, we're in, you're out, we're in.

Because that's just the same old ES that we've been up to for so long. Rather, I want us to be a church community that defines a center, the person of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of the kingdom.

And then we decide, are we going to be moving towards that or away from that? And when we move away from that, we hold each other accountable. We give each other consensual correction.

[ 24 : 51 ] Think back to the sermons on invitation and challenge. When we start moving away from the center, we have to be the kinds of people that say, whoa, whoa, whoa, where are you going? But we still are defined by our center, not by who's out and who's in, but are we moving closer to the gospel, the person of Jesus, of God incarnate.

So when we talk about prayer, we're talking about our relationship with God. And when we gather together, we're doing that in community, so hopefully we can get better at it, so we can learn about God together from how God has created you and created me.

And I want prayer to be an open door, a place where the four-year-old girl, the grown-up child can come, and the doors are already unlocked, the door is open, and we know the kind, generous, grace-filled, loving God that is waiting to welcome us in.

Thank you.