

Prayer is painful!

What is it that we are trying to accomplish when we pray? When you pray, are you asking for God to help you? For Him to take away a burden from you or to make your life better or more comfortable? What is the purpose of your prayer? Why do you pray?

Typically, when we pray, we are praying in a self-centered way. We really are mostly concerned about what we are going through and we want God to take care of this for us. I was reading a website that had hundreds of prayers on it, and they all asked for God to take care of a specific problem they had. Many of them asked for these things to be done in God's will, but most of them sounded desperately of pleading with God to do their will. It was very much like "God take away all the bad things in my life and give me everything I want. Oh, and also, your will be done." I didn't get the feeling that they really were praying for God's will to be done.

Praying should not be about getting things we want. Too many people think that the reason we pray to God is to get something. That is really not biblical. We ask for God's guidance and protection, sure. But we really need to be praying for God's will, not our own. In that respect, when we pray, our purpose needs to be recognized.

When you get something to do from your boss, typically you are told to do something and you understand what the result is supposed to be. For instance, "David, type up a report." Or "David, mail out these envelopes." Whatever the task is, I know and my boss knows what the goal is and when I have accomplished the goal. When we pray, we need to have a good handle on what our goal is. Are we asking for our will to be done or for God's will? Assuming the answer is "God's will", the next question is, "How do I know what God's will is?" and the answer is – Prayer! And in a nutshell, that is the real purpose of prayer – to know God's will for us so we can do God's will for Him. Prayer is about finding out what God's will is.

We see this in the prayer that Jesus taught us. In the "Our Father", Jesus tells us to pray "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". What's the point? To simply state the fact that we would like God's will to be done? If that was the point, it would be a pretty lame prayer. We see that God shows us in several places of the Bible that words without action is pretty lame and not exactly pleasing to Him. In the same way, He gave us that prayer, not just so we can state the obvious, but to know what God's will is and to do it! So when Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will be done" what he is saying is, "Help me to know and do Your will."

Matthew 26: ³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

⁴⁰Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. ⁴¹"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

⁴²He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

⁴³When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.
⁴⁴So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

We see this again in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knows what is about to happen – he is about to be arrested, tortured and sacrificed on the cross. He will be brutally abused, physically and mentally and the sins of the world will be placed upon his shoulders. So he prays that if there is another way, that God allows him to take it, but “not as I will but as you will.” He never puts his own will ahead of God's. He asks for an option, but states emphatically that whichever option it is that God wants him to take, that is what he will do.

Our problem is that we too often want to pray, “not Your will but mine be done.” We think we know what's better for us than God does. This is why we struggle with prayer. We don't want to do the difficult things that are required of us. The Father gave Jesus the only option that could work and Jesus was obedient and that obedience cost him dearly. We don't want to pay that kind of price, so we push back, ignore, or don't even try to find out.

But in Matthew 6:33 ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. If we paid as much attention to this verse as we did to some of the other verses such as “Ask and you shall receive.” Or “with faith as small as a mustard seed, you can tell the mountain to move”, we would find ourselves in a much better relationship with God. Whatever it is that we think we need, God already knows. And whatever God has planned for us is better than anything we can come up with ourselves.

But giving up our will is not easy. The way we see it, our will is to make our lives simpler, easier, less painful. If that is God's will also, then we're all for it. We would do God's will every time if it meant taking away some of the hardships. Unfortunately, God's will is not always a pleasant thing for us, at least not as we define pleasant in this world. That's one of the things that need to change about the way we think – we need to stop viewing things the way the world views things and not define things like ‘good for us’, ‘reward’ and ‘answer to prayer’ the same way that the world does. God has a very different definition of these phrases than the world and we need to begin to learn God's vocabulary rather than our neighbors’.

The reality is, giving up our will will be hard and difficult and even painful. In Luke 9, Jesus says, ²³Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." Jesus tells us we need to lose our lives. That doesn't mean committing suicide or becoming a martyr. It means giving up our lives as we know it, not having the things we think we want and need and changing those priorities that we have and strive for so much. We need to give up those things that make up our lives, give up those things that we hold in such high regards. Anything we hold in such priority over God is an idol and causes us to break the first and

second commandments – You shall have no other God before me and You shall not worship false idols. Giving up our lives is going to be hard and painful. That’s why Jesus calls it “bearing our cross”. And if anyone had a good concept of what it would mean to carry your cross, it’s Jesus.

Again, in Jesus’ prayer in John 17, called the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus intercedes for us and the disciples but he prays the whole prayer in recognition that he is going to die before he sees another sunset. He does not shy away from God’s will, but prays in God’s will. He does not ask for a miracle, but that God’s glory is shown through whatever happens (which of course is exactly what happens when he is not only crucified for the forgiveness of our sins, but then resurrected in his new resurrection body). The point is that Jesus knew that he could pray whatever he wanted, but it was going to be painful to have his prayer answered.

Often when we pray, we are praying for pain and suffering to be removed. But we need to look closer at Jesus’ prayers. He recognizes that in order for his prayers to be answered, there is going to be pain involved, obedience needed and a removal of his own desires. We need to pray the same way. We need to recognize that sometimes, we are going to need to go through the pain and struggle in order to move to the next step, in order to give God glory, in order to do God’s work. We need to be obedient as we move through the situations that God places us, doing those things that we really don’t want to do but know that God is calling us to do. We need to remove our own desires, remove our own wishes and recognize that God knows much better than we do what is good for us.

Many times, God will put us through something to grow us. Like exercising our bodies would be useless if we never pushed past our comfort zone, God knows that if we are not stretched, we will never grow. Other images that the Bible uses is that of purification. We get burned up, which is of course painful, but it leaves that which is good while removing that which made us less pure. Now imagine that God is burning off the bad stuff, causing us pain as we struggle and grow, and we are meanwhile asking Him to take that away so we can go back to feeling comfortable. Is that really what we want to pray for? Or should we instead be praying that God will take us through our difficulties and help us to learn what we need to know, help us to understand what we need to do and how we need to act. Help us to recognize the parts of our lives that we need to change. And when we go through that, we glorify God!

So now imagine that we are struggling with something in our lives. Maybe it’s patience or anger. Then we ask God to take that away from us. How do we suppose God is going to do that? Is he going to just change our personalities and voila! We’re changed!?! No! He is going to place us in situations that will allow us to learn patience or anger management! Do you understand that? In other words, if we pray for patience, we better watch out, because God is going to put us in situation that will try our patience! How else are we going to learn patience than by using it? If we ask for God to take away our anger, He is going to place us in situations that will cause us to get angry! How else are we going to learn how to control our anger? In Psalm 139:23 ²³ Search me, O God, and

know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. David asks for God to test him! Wow! What a powerful prayer! Be careful what you ask for, you will get it! David's heart was that of God's, and he was ready to be used by God. When we ask God to do something for us, we will recognize that many times the answer comes in an unrecognizable package and we think God hasn't heard our prayer or that He has decided not to answer our prayer, but it's really that we don't recognize the answer because we are expecting something the way we want it. But we need to remember that prayer is painful and that we need to be ready to do what Jesus did and what he asked us to do – carry our cross.