

August 11, 2019

# The Prayers of an Experimental Christian

Psalm 119:33-40

## The diary of a Christian

If you are just stepping into this series on Psalm 119, you have to know a couple things. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in Scripture. It is utterly unique. Its supreme focus is the Word of God. Out of the 176 verse, only 4 verses don't mention God's Word in one way or another. On a theological level, Psalm 119 is the ultimate prophecy about Jesus Christ—He is *the Word* made flesh (**John 1:14**). On an experiential level, Psalm 119 shows us what the Christian life looks like. Each section of Psalm 119 represents one letter from the Hebrew alphabet. This is literally the A-Z of the Christian life, which is why Charles Spurgeon called it *The Golden Alphabet*.<sup>1</sup> Each section shows us a different snapshot of the Christian experience. In other words, if you're a Christian, this is the diary of your life. And just like we would find in diary, we find three important components in Psalm 119.<sup>2</sup> **First**, when a person writes in their diary, they write about how they think things *ought* to go. They have an ideal—an ought-ness to life. In Psalm 119, we see this ought-ness to the Christian life. **v.139** for example says “My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words.” Christians *ought* always to be filled with a jealous zeal for God and His Word. **Secondly**, a person records in their diary how things *actually* do go. Often times our actual experience doesn't line up with our ideal. We saw this last week in **v.25** “My soul clings to the dust; give me life according to your word!” Christians still fight and often lose in their struggle with sin. **Thirdly**, a person records in their diary their end goal. That is, they record their

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet: An Exposition of Psalm 119*, Abbotsford, WI.,: Aneko Press, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Joel Beeke's, *Reformed Preaching*, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2018), pg. 55

hopes and dreams for their life. In Psalm 119, we see the end goal of the Christian life. v.164 “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules.” That’s what Heaven will be like, perfect, endless, untiring praise to God the Three-in-One. Those three components are running through Psalm 119. These are the three parts of what we would call experimental Christianity. 1) How things ought to go; 2) How things do go; and 3) What is the end goal?

### The prayers of an experimental Christian

In this morning’s passage, the Psalmist is showing us that first component: how things *ought* to go. So let’s review where we’ve been. Remember that v.1-3 are the preface to this whole Psalm. They describe the blessedness of the man who is *blameless*. In other words, the man who has been forgiven by Sovereign grace of all his sins. That’s the beginning of the Christian life. Then in v.4-16, we saw that the way we enjoy this blessedness, is through being “conformed to the likeness of God *through His word*.”<sup>3</sup> The Psalmist then showed us who the enemies of this blessedness are. First, we are strangers in this world (v.17-24) and therefore are subject to the evil around us; and secondly we still sinners (v. 25-32) and therefore are subject to the evil within us.

So now the Psalmist shows us the most vital weapon in our arsenal against these enemies: prayer. There is no other section in Psalm 119 that is like this one. It’s true that every other section contains prayers, *but* all eight verses in this section are prayers. It’s one continuous prayer. But it is also a progressive prayer. Each request builds on the previous request. “Lord you must teach me. But Lord not only must you teach me, you must give me insight so that I can understand what you’ve taught me. But Lord not only do I require insight, I need the will to obey you and the affections to love you. But Lord not only do I need the will and affections, I also need you to subdue my flesh so that I can resist sin.” I need. I need. I need. The gut-punching implication of every verses is “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. You must. You must. You must.”

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<sup>3</sup> J. Stephen Yuille, *The Path of Life: Blessedness in Seasons of Lament*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pg. 57

Dear congregation, that is why prayer is so hard. Because you and I still have that deadly poison of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and self-confidence running through our veins. Why is prayer hard? It's *not* because we are *too* busy. It's because we are *too* proud, too strong, too wise, too competent, too prosperous, too satisfied, too able. Your prayer life is directly proportionate to how you view yourself. If you think highly of yourself, you will pray very little, if at all. If you think lowly of yourself, you will regularly bring your petitions to the throne of grace. So how do you view yourself? What does your prayer life say? I don't ask these questions to condemn you. But rather to convince you that the greatest danger you face is your own heart that says: "I'm well. Thank you Lord for your kind offer of assistance, but I can do this on my own." No. No you can't. Jesus said "Apart from me you can do nothing" (**John 15:5**). "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (**John 3:27**). That is what the Psalmist is teaching us this morning.

### *The Big Idea...*

Prayer is coming into the presence of God and discovering that all that you need for this life is found in Him alone

- ☆What Is Prayer?
- ☆Why Don't We Pray?
- ☆How Do We Recover Prayer?

## I. What Is Prayer?

### What prayer is not...

Before we get to the specific prayers of this text, we need to understand what prayer is and what prayer is not. Let's start with the negative. **First**, prayer *never* teaches God anything. God cannot learn. **Psalm 147:5** "His

understanding is beyond measure.” Paul cries out in **Romans 11:33-34** “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” If God learns something when we pray, then He is not God.<sup>4</sup>

**Second**, prayer *never* reminds God of anything. Monica or the kids will often remind me of things that I already know—things that I have forgotten that need to get done. God doesn’t need to be reminded of anything! “**Matthew 6:8** “...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” God never forgets anything. **Isaiah 49:15** says “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

**Thirdly**, prayer *never* changes God’s mind on anything. We don’t pray in order to change God’s mind. “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind” (**Numbers 23:19**). God has one eternal, unchangeable, all-encompassing decree. All things happen according to the counsel of his will (**Ephesians 1:11**). Just think about the implications of thinking that we could change God’s mind in prayer. Am I wiser than God, that I could have a better plan than He? Am I kinder than God, that I would show more compassion than He? No. As Jonathan Edwards says

“It is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing *by our prayers*; for it is no more possible that there should be any new inclination or will in God, than new knowledge. The mercy of God is not moved or drawn by anything in the creature ; but the spring of God’s beneficence is within himself only; he is self-moved; and whatsoever mercy he bestows, the reason and ground of it is not to be sought for in the creature, *but in God’s own good pleasure.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> **Psalm 139:4** “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.”

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 115-116

No prayer cannot change anything in God. Prayer absolutely changes us. But it cannot change God. God is infinitely excellent. “What God is great like our God?” (**Psalm 77:13**) “There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours” (**Psalm 86:8**). To suggest that He could change is to suggest a deficiency in Him. Immutability is a necessary attribute of perfection.

So that is what prayer is not for. Prayer never teaches God anything. It never reminds Him of anything. And He is never changed by it.

### What prayer is...

So then what *is* prayer? Prayer is coming into the presence of God. That is why the Father sent Jesus into the world, *so that* we would be brought to Him. **1 Peter 3:18** “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God...*” So many of us suffer from this wrong-headed idea that God is standing between us and what we *really* want. So we treat prayer like that—as a means to an end. Prayer becomes simply the currency we must cough up to purchase the goods we desire. But that’s all wrong.

Don’t you know, loved one, that since God has already given you the best gift in giving you His Son, He most certainly will give you all other things? **Romans 8:32** “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” The Father delights in blessing you. He is much more ready to give than you are ready to receive.<sup>6</sup> **Ephesians 3:20** says that God “...is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” In other words, “He desires to bless us very much more than we desire to be blessed.”<sup>7</sup> D.L. Moody once remarked that if God were to begin to pour out all blessing upon us, it would be so overwhelming that it would be more than our physical frames could bear and we would cry out “Stop, God.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976) pg. 309

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, pg. 308

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, pg. 309

And the stunning reality is that what God gives us in prayer far exceeds anything that we can gain in this world. In prayer we gain God. We come into His very presence. As a loving father loves personal contact with his child, so our Father in Heaven loves us when we come into His presence. **Zephaniah 3:17** says “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”

Beloved, that’s what prayer is. It’s not bargaining with God, it’s not twisting His arm to get Him to do what we want. It’s coming into His presence, and finding everything your heart truly wants. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (**Psalm 73:25-26**)

## II. Why Don’t We Pray?

### **Are we too busy to pray?**

If prayer is all that, if prayer is as the Puritan Thomas Brooks calls it “the secret key to Heaven,”<sup>9</sup> then why don’t we pray? I think that perhaps the number one reason modern Christians would say that they don’t pray is because they feel they are too busy. No doubt, busyness is a real problem in our day. Kevin DeYoung recently wrote a book entitled *Crazy Busy: A (Mercifully) Short Book About A (Really) Big Problem*. Is that why we fail to pray as we ought? Because we are too busy? No. The problem is much deeper than that. Consider carefully, would a man who is dying of thirst ever say that he’s *too busy* to drink water? Would a cancer patient ever say that she’s *too busy* to get chemo? Would a person who is bankrupt say that he’s *too busy* to pick up a one hundred dollar bill off the sidewalk?

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Brooks, *The Secret Key to Heaven: The Vital Importance of Private Prayer*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009)

No. But that is *precisely* the problem. We don't see ourselves as dying of thirst. We don't see ourselves as having a deadly disease or as completely bankrupt. We fail to pray precisely because we forget our true need.

The Psalmist shows us our true need. He prays primarily for three things. He prays for 1) instruction; 2) illumination and 3) inclination.<sup>10</sup>

### 1. We need to pray for instruction

Please look with me at **v.33** “Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.” Teach me Lord. To *teach* is to impart knowledge to someone, to give them intelligence. There is a cause and effect relationship in this verse. When God teaches you His Word (cause) then you will persevere in it (effect). The clear implication is that you and I are ignorant. But it's deeper than that. Please turn with me to Romans 8. Our souls are naturally attracted to sin. Remember the story of Odysseus last week, how he wanted more than anything to succumb to the songs of the Sirens? He would have run his ship into the rocks if his men would have let him. Paul pulls back the veil of the human heart and says it like this in **Romans 8:5** “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” What does it mean to have *your mind set* on the things of the flesh? This is where we radically under-define what sin *is*. If we “think of sin only in terms of things actually done (I stole this thing...you lied about that thing), we fail to understand it. The essence of the biblical teaching on sin is that it is essentially a disposition.”<sup>11</sup> Paul says that sin is having *your mind set* on something. What does it mean to have your

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<sup>10</sup> J. Stephen Yuille, *The Path of Life: Blessedness in Seasons of Lament*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pg. 58-62

<sup>11</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976) pg. 301

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I was reflecting on this point with Monica and I said to her that in our marriage, our main problem is not that I spoke that harsh word to her, or that she didn't show me the respect I needed. The main problem is that both of us have a mind set of self-worship. Our default position is “how can I serve myself and make myself happy?”

*mind set* on something? It means that you are devoted to something—that you live for it. It is something that controls your whole life. During the last summer Olympics, one of the women from the US swim team “...trained for ten hours a day, six days a week, for fifteen years...She had her mind set on winning gold at the Olympics and here goal dictated here life.”<sup>12</sup> What does Paul say that our minds are naturally set on? *On the things of the flesh*. Meaning, sin is ultimately self-worship. Your problem is not that you do this or that wrong. Your problem is your whole mind set. You wake up every morning with your concerns, your desires, and your plans seated on the throne of your heart.

The only way to de-throne the worship of yourself is to have the Holy Spirit *teach you*. That’s why Paul says here “but those who live *according to the Spirit*—meaning the Spirit is *teaching* them—set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” That’s our first need in prayer. We must pray for the Holy Spirit to teach us His Word. **v.33** “Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.”

## 2. We need to pray for illumination

Please look with me at **v.34** “Give me *understanding*, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.” Notice the progression. In the last verse, the Psalmist was pleading for knowledge. Now he’s pleading for insight, that is, the ability to understand that knowledge. Do you see how humbling this is? Not only are we ignorant on spiritual matters, but even when the Spirit gives us the knowledge of them, we are too stupid to be able to understand them on our own. That’s why in the overwhelming majority of Paul’s supplications for the church, he is always praying that the church would be able to understand more deeply the things of God.

**Ephesians 1:16-19** “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, *that* the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give

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<sup>12</sup> J. Stephen Yuille, *The Path of Life: Blessedness in Seasons of Lament*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pg. 59

you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, *that you may know* what is the hope to which he has called you...”

Isn't that amazing? He's asking God that Christians—Christians who already know the Lord Jesus Christ—would be given true spiritual understanding to be able to see with the eyes of their heart the hope to which they have been called to.<sup>13</sup> Is it not possible dear saint that you regularly feel defeated because you don't ask God the Holy Spirit to give you an understanding to see the hope to which you have been called to? Yes you know factually that you have been called to a great hope. But you lack the understanding to value it properly. You and I are like little infants who have been given a deed to a great mansion. We fail to understand that that piece of paper gives us rights and resources and riches. It just looks like every other piece of paper to our infantile minds. So we treat it of no value whatsoever. Don't you know that the sentences in Scripture are like deeds to great mansions, containing endless wealth. Why is it that we often don't value them rightly? Because we fail to pray. This is our second need in prayer. We must pray for the Holy Spirit to give us a proper understanding of His Word.

### 3. We need to pray for inclination

Please look with me at **v.35-37** “Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. [36] Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! [37] Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.” Again we see a progression. In **v.33** the Psalmist asked for knowledge, in **v.34** he prayed for insight to understand that knowledge, and now in these three verses he prays for a heart that will follow. **v.36** is really the

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<sup>13</sup> Just two chapters later, he prays again. This time he shows what the result of this understanding will lead to. Ephesians 3:14 “For this reason I *bow my knees* before the Father, [v.18—that you] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Did you hear it? When the Holy Spirit grants you a true understanding of the love of Christ, it will lead you to being filled with all the fullness of God.

central verse. He prays “*Incline* my heart...” *Incline* means to bend. He’s saying “God *bend* my heart to Your Word...give me an *appetite* for your Word...make me desire it.” Now I know you feel this. Every Christian has struggled with the *desire* to want to read God’s Word. “I just don’t want to read it...I know it’s good for me. I know it’s true. I know that it contains universe altering truth. I just don’t care right now.”

We need to think very carefully here. Remember, as we said last week, the problem is that we have two hearts. Christians have a heart that loves God, and loves His Word. And Christians have a heart that is as black as the devil himself. **v. 35** gives us a glimpse of our true heart “Lead me in the path of your commandments, *for I delight in it.*” Very clearly the Psalmist is saying “I love your Word.” He’s speaking for all Christians everywhere. All Christians, *because* of the new birth, *because* of the indwelling Holy Spirit, *because* God has written his law on our hearts (**Hebrews 10:16**)—we do love God’s Word. In fact, so often we experience a quickening that takes place when we hear it—**Jeremiah 15:16** “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart...” That heart—our true heart—loves God’s Word. We delight in it. Dear Christian, regardless of your struggles and your sin this week, regardless if you have neglected to pick up God’s Word as you ought, you can honestly say “I love God’s Word.”

But’s it’s this other heart, this false heart that hates God’s Word. Look again at **v.36** and **v.37**. Your false heart longs selfish gain. Your false heart longs for worthless things. And you have this great war within you. It’s a constant war. Paul says it like this **Galatians 5:17** says “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”

So then what do you do? The Psalmist tells us. You plead with God that He would give your true heart the appetite and longing for His Word. “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name” (**Psalm 86:11**). This is our third need in prayer. We must pray for the Holy Spirit to bend our heart to walk in His Word.

### **The fight to recapture Mansoul**

In addition to writing *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan wrote another allegory of the Christian life called *The Holy War*: The great King Shaddai created the city of Mansoul. All was beautiful and full of splendor under His rule. But Diabolus rebelled against the King and ruined city bringing all it's inhabitants under his dark rule. The first part of the book is the story of redemption. The great prince Emmanuel—who is Christ—breaks into the city liberating the prisoners freeing them from their rebellion and misery.

The second part of the book is the story of how the Christian—represented by Mansoul—lives out under the great Prince. After a time of peace, one of Diabolus' agents—Mr. Carnal-Security—sneaks into the town unawares. Now at this point in our tale, the city of Mansoul was fortified against every external attack. There was no way that Diabolus could regain the city by sheer force. So this is what Mr. Carnal-Security did. He went to the people of the city and boasted about how powerful and strong and impregnable their city was. He magnified the strength of their captains, their slings, their rams. He talked up their fortifications, their strongholds, and lastly he reminded them of the assurance that their Prince had given them that they should be happy forever. What happened? The city of Mansoul was taken off their dependence upon their great Prince. They rejoiced in their own strength. They quit visiting Him in His royal palace. Their love toward Him became chilled. They no longer listened to His counsels but they became headstrong and confident in themselves. In the end the Prince withdrew Himself from their midst. He was nowhere to be found. Mr. Carnal-Security had defeated the city from within. He convinced them that they were safe and secure without the constant fellowship and oversight of the Prince.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan Vol. 3*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 324ff

## Failure to pray

Dear congregation, this is why I stressed that it is not busyness that keeps us from praying. It is not our schedules that keep us from visiting the Great Prince in His royal palace. We fail to pray because we are carnal. We fail to pray because we make prosperity our strength. This was God's indictment against Israel. **Hosea 13:4-6** "I am the LORD your God...it was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought; but when [you] had grazed, [you] became full, [you] were filled, and [your] heart was lifted up; therefore [you] forgot me."<sup>15</sup> Just take a step back and ask yourself what is being repeated in every verse in this section? Our inability. In each of these verses, the Psalmist is calling on God to make something happen. Essentially he's praying "All this is on Your back... "these things You have to do, because I cannot."<sup>16</sup>

**John 6:63** "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all."

**Philippians 2:13** "...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

A failure to pray is saying that 'God I can help myself. I can work the will and the work in myself.' A failure to pray means that we are trusting in other counterfeit gods to rescue us. If that is you, then do the only sensible thing: confess your self-dependence to the Lord. "Lord I've grown self-reliant, I've grown carnal, I'm depending on myself and not on You. Please forgive me" Look to this section in the Psalm and pray these petitions. They are simultaneously confession and pleas for help. That's our **second point**. Why do we fail to pray? Because we have forgotten "...a person cannot even receive one thing unless it is given to him from heaven" (**John 3:27**).

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<sup>15</sup> cf. Mark 4:18ff; Rev. 3:15ff

<sup>16</sup> Gene Cunningham, *Psalm 119: The Diary of a Captive*, (USA.: Basic Training Bible Ministries, 2009), pg. 35

### III. How Do We Recover Prayer?

#### Praying in the Spirit

There is one more obstacle to recovering our prayer. We just saw the reason why we fail to come to prayer. But what about when we *do* pray? Are there reasons why our prayers fail when we do pray?

After Prince Emmanuel withdrew from Mansoul the townspeople quickly became desperate because Diabolus and his Diabolonians invaded the city and took over everything except the castle. The men of the city fortified themselves there and start sending petitions to Prince Emmanuel to return. But He doesn't answer. Petition after petition goes answered. Finally one of the townsmen Mr. Godly-Fear tells them why the Prince wouldn't answer their petitions. He says "[My] Lord the Prince never did, nor ever would receive a petition from the hand of any whoever, unless the Lord Secretary's hand was to it."<sup>17</sup> Who is this Lord Secretary? The Holy Spirit. Our prayers must be Holy Spirit wrought prayers. We must pray in the power of the Holy Spirit as Paul says in **Ephesians 6:18** " [pray] at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication."

Unfortunately there is so much confusion on this issue today on what it means to pray in the Spirit. To pray in the Spirit *certainly* does not mean praying in tongues. How can I say that? Because the command to pray in the Spirit is a command to every Christian. But not every Christian has the gift of tongues. Paul asks rhetorically in **1 Corinthians 12:30** "Do all speak with tongues?" The answer is obviously no, just like the answer is no the question "Are all apostles?" Now God willing we'll look at that passage more in depth next year when we tackle 1 Corinthians. The point here is that to pray in the Spirit is something real. It is something powerful. It is something that will help you recover your prayer life.

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<sup>17</sup> John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan Vol. 3*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 351

Let's look how the Psalmist prays in the Spirit.<sup>18</sup> He gives us three clear petitions of what this looks like.

**First petition: He only prays that God's will would be done<sup>19</sup>**

He prays in **v.38** "Confirm to your servant *your* promise, that you may be feared." Do you see what the Psalmist is most concerned about? Confirm to your servant *your* promise. 'God it's imperative that *Your* promise be fulfilled. It's imperative that *Your* Word be accomplished. It's imperative that *Your* will be done.'<sup>20</sup> The emphasis is entirely on God's plan and purpose being realized. This is precisely how Jesus taught us to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (**Matthew 6:10**). True prayer isn't coming to God and saying "God I know this probably isn't your plan, but can You make this happen for me anyway?" James condemns that kind of prayer. **James 4:3** says "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." No true prayer is 'Lord whatever *You* desire, whatever *You* want, confirm all *Your* promises in my life, in the church, in the world, and in the heavenly places. Though you slay me, yet will I trust you.' Brothers and sisters, when we pray like this, we are praying in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit prays that God's will be done. **Romans 8:27** "He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

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<sup>18</sup> This message could have been called "The Holy Spirit of the Experimental Christian"

<sup>19</sup> SCQ. 98. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

<sup>20</sup> "For we perceive the prophet allows not himself to petition or wish anything but what God hath condescended to promise." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. VI*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 428

## **Second petition: He prays with God's glory as his chief concern**

He prays in **v.39** "Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good." This is kind of a puzzling phrase—*the reproach I dread*. What is this *reproach* that the Christian *dreads*? A reproach is a shameful, disgraceful thing.

Does the Christian dread the reproach of persecution? No. Jesus said persecution is a blessing. **Matthew 5:10** "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Does the Christian dread the reproach of suffering? No. Jesus said that we have been granted to suffer for His name's sake—**Philippians 1:29**.

Does the Christian dread the reproach of death? No. Paul said in **Philippians 1:21** "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Does the Christian dread the reproach of losing their salvation? No. **Romans 8:39** says that Nothing "...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

No. The Christian's greatest dread is that he will bring dishonor upon the Name of the King. "Against you, and you only, have I sinned" (**Psalms 51:4**). The Psalmist is praying "Lord turn away this reproach—that I would bring shame to You." That is how we recover our prayer. To be God-centered in our all concerns. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name (**Matthew 6:9**)" When we pray like this, we are praying in the Holy Spirit. Jesus said "When the Spirit of truth comes...He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (**John 16:13-14**).

### Third petition: He rests all His prayers on the promise of the Gospel

He prays in v.40 “Behold, I long for your precepts; *in your righteousness give me life!*” Do you hear what the Psalmist is hanging his whole life on? God’s righteousness: “...*in your righteousness give me life!*” He realizes his effectiveness in prayer, in his devotions, in his religious life doesn’t depend on his performance. This is how the world absolutely gets prayer wrong. They think that prayer is effective because of the specific form it takes, or because of the length of the prayer, or because of the ritualistic nature of it. The Buddhists have their prayer wheels. The Roman Catholics count their beads and repeat the hail Marys. The Muslims fall down on their knees at specific times of the day facing a particular direction. Prayer becomes a *means* to make one right with God.<sup>21</sup>

That’s *not* how the Christian prays. Dear believer, some of you are burdened and condemned in your prayer life because you have adopted the world’s position on prayer. Prayer is not a *means* that you are made right with God. The Psalmist is not depending on his own prayers or on his own righteousness to be made right with God. He’s depending on the righteousness of Another. He prays “...*in your righteousness give me life.*” Don’t you see beloved? He’s pleading the righteousness of Another. This entire prayer is a prophecy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus perfectly prayed all these petitions that we have seen. **Hebrews 5:7** “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up *prayers and supplications* with loud cries and tears...”

Jesus is *the promise* of v.38 “Confirm to your servant your *promise.*” He is the *promise* of all the Scripture. **Galatians 3:22** “But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the *promise* by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

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<sup>21</sup> “While the divine viewpoint says, “Turn to Me and I will forgive you; I will purify you; I will wash you and you will be whiter than snow,” human viewpoint says, “It cannot be that easy; surely there is something I have to do to win back God’s love and favor.” Gene Cunningham, *Psalm 119: The Diary of a Captive*, (USA.,: Basic Training Bible Ministries, 2009), pg. 38

Jesus turned away the reproach of **v.39** that you so dread. **Romans 15:3** “For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

Dear believer your failures in prayer are a reproach to God. You and I have dishonored Him by resting in so many other things. We have bought into the lie of Mr. Carnal-Security, and for that we ought to be condemned to hell forever. But Jesus Christ the Son of God bore your reproach and my reproach. Our blessed Savior “...himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin” (1 **Peter 2:24**). And then He was raised again on the third day for our justification. **Romans 4:25** says that He “...was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” That’s your righteousness. Jesus Christ. He lived for you, He died for you, and He was raised from the dead for you.

That is *why* you can pray to God the Father. That is *how* you recover your prayer, not only today, but tomorrow and everyday for the rest of your life. It’s how you recover your prayer whenever you find yourself in the clutches of a self-reliant carnal spirit. “Lord in your righteousness, give me life. Lord be merciful me a sinner. Lord though I have sinned against Thee, Thou loves me still. Not for my sake, but for the sake of your Son. He is my righteousness, because I was His reproach.”

## Application

### 1. What kind of a Word has God given us?

God has given us a Word that helps us to pray. The Bible assumes that you don’t know how to pray. Three reasons I know this. First God has given us 150 chapters of prayer in the Psalms. Why would He give these two us if we were so naturally gifted at prayer? Second, the disciples—those men closest to Jesus in His earthly ministry said “Lord, teach us to pray” (**Luke 11:1**). The disciples didn’t know how to pray. Third, the Scripture specifically says “...the

Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought” (**Romans 8:26**). So what should you do? Plagiarize your prayers. Steal your prayers from the Bible. Pray the actual Scripture. I’m not good at praying. I run out of ideas. I’m not very creative. But when I pray the Scripture, I find myself entering into the gates of thanksgiving and the courts of praise. I would lay down this challenge. Next time you open your Bible, don’t open it to read. Open it to pray. Pray through a passage. Pray through a Psalm. Pray through an epistle. Pray through the petitions that we saw in our text this morning. If you find yourself weak and inadequate and a failure, that’s perfect. You’ve discovered who you really are. That’s the perfect position to pray from.

## 2. What kind of a world do we live in?

We live in a world of prayerlessness. The one true mark of a reprobate person, one who is cut off from God is prayerlessness. David says in **Psalm 14:4** that the enemies of God are those who “do not call upon the LORD” Perhaps you are here this morning and you have never called upon the LORD. How tragic that is—that you have never spoken to the God who created you, who formed you in the womb. The Bible is so clear that because of your sins, you stand under the condemnation and wrath of God. There is nothing more terrifying than that. The prophet says “Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him” (**Nahum 1:6**). There is only one way to escape. Flee to the LORD Jesus Christ. Call on Him. Let your first prayer be something like this: “Lord Jesus, I know that you would be just to damn me and condemn me to hell, but I beg that you would have mercy on a sinner like me.” And then trust Him. Jesus loves to save sinners. He promised that “Everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him [will] have eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day” (**John 6:40**).

### 3. What kind of a church should we want?

We should want a praying church. The historical church is a church that prays together. Just look at the books of Acts. Before Pentecost, Jesus instructed all the disciples to pray together (**Acts 1:4**). After Pentecost, all the new believers gathered to pray together (**Acts 2:42ff**). When Peter and John had their first encounter with the enemies of the gospel, they gathered with all their friends and prayed together (**Acts 4:23ff**). When Peter was in prison, the church gathered and prayed together (**Acts 12:5**). Before Paul and Barnabas went on their missionary journey, they church prayed together (**Acts 13:2**). The historical church of Jesus Christ is a praying church. Dear congregation, the strength of this church does not reside in our money, it doesn't reside in our marketing, it doesn't reside in our wit or wisdom or anything else. Our strength as a local church comes from Spirit-wrought prayer. Please start scheduling our corporate prayer meetings into your schedule. If we need to do it a different time so that more people can come, please tell us. The truth is that we are entering a very dark time in our culture. Society is falling apart. Now more than ever, we need to be a praying church.

### 4. What kind of Savior do we need?<sup>22</sup>

We need a Savior who meets us in prayer. We have a Savior who "... desires to bless us very more more than we desire to be blessed...[We have a Savior who] is much more ready to given and [we] are to receive."<sup>23</sup> Jesus invites us to prayer in order to give us "...exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (**Eph. 3:20**). Jesus invites us into the inner chamber of prayer in order so that we would sup with Him, and he with us (**Rev. 3:20**).

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<sup>22</sup> With the exception of the first question, the last three are from Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross, Preaching the Word Series*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2014), pg. 17-23

<sup>23</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976) pg. 308-308