Prayer from a Psychological Perspective

Would You Still Pray Even If You Don't Get What You Want?

This week I needed to come up with a topic for a sermon. I had nothing. There were absolutely no ideas running through my mind. I did not have anything I wanted to talk about, no questions to answer and nothing I felt was important to share. For about twenty minutes I sat at my desk and stared into space. The more I considered my need for something to preach, the less creative I felt and the further I moved away from focusing on what I had to do. But then I did something that many people today mock, that is considered a psychological crutch rather than anything substantive as a way to get tasks accomplished. I prayed. I asked Jesus to show me what I needed to talk about Sunday. Within moments my brain came alive, and a flurry of ideas came to me. Suddenly I had the framework for this sermon jotted down. There came a jolt of joy as I realized I now could get started because the Lord had inspired my thinking. It all began with a little prayer filled with a certain amount of panic, a portion of begging attached to it and hope that God would come to my rescue. Very few people have never prayed before but quite a number of those who have prayed wonder if it is worth the effort and others don't have much hope praying will do them any good. Why do you pray if you do and what is your expectation of how much praying will impact your life? Our Big Idea for the day is this. Don't try to figure out how God should answer your prayers. Pray and let God work things out as He wishes.

If you have read much about Abraham, you know that he is often celebrated for his great faith in God. **Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."** (Galatians 3: 6 NIV) When God promised Abraham a son in his old age, Abraham believed God's promise. But then he made a terrible mistake often repeated by praying people. Abraham took matters into his own hands. He asked the Lord for an heir, for a child. **But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.** (Genesis 15: 2-3 NIV) Granted, that may not have been in the form of a question, but the Lord knew what he meant, and God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. That was when Abraham was seventy-five. But then he waited. And his wife Sarah waited. Where was the baby they asked to have? What was going wrong? They waited ten years, and then Sarah and Abraham came up with a plan to help God fulfil his promise. They decided Abraham would father a son through Sarah's slave, Hagar. The result was that Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Abraham's son. The birth of Ishmael was the start of tension in the family that never went away and Ishmael's descendants and those of the son Abraham and Sarah had, Isaac, have been hated rivals ever since. After this, God did not speak to Abraham for years.

Many have followed in Abraham's footsteps supplementing their praying with their own actions, so God doesn't need to work so hard. How many men and women, after praying for a spouse, marry a non-Christian because they doubt God can on His own find them someone to marry according to the standards of the Bible? A man who prays for work takes a job that requires him to lie in order to make sales quotas rather than wait for a job God gives him. A student prays for good grades but decides to help out God by using AI to write her essays. I have prayed for some matter in my family and then gotten upset with the family member rather than wait for the Lord to answer my prayer regarding it. Many times we treat God as if He is a vending machine. We say our prayer and then expect Him to give us what we want if not immediately, soon after. There is a crucial aspect to praying that is often forgotten or neglected and it needs to be addressed.

What makes praying praying? Praying is the act of engaging in a relationship with a real person. That person is supernatural, and communication with Him does not occur like it does with human beings who are not God. He rarely, if ever talks with you in an audible voice and you do not have to use physical means to say what you need to say to Him. We are not used to that. No other relationship works that way. So praying does not feel like a real relationship, like real communication and it takes faith to recognize that praying is actually being with God and having Him there with you. What this means, and it requires some effort on our part to psychologically accept it as so, is that God as a real person responds to you as He wishes and not as you wish. Marriage is such a disturbing emotional experience. It takes a while to realize in practice that you are not married to an imaginary person, someone you have concocted who acts as you see fit but rather a real person who thinks in his or her own way. Many marriages fall apart because one person thinks the other should do things the way "I think it should be done." Because my opinions are right, the other person should also see things how I do. Perhaps that happens when you are creating a character for a TV show, but it doesn't happen in real life. God has His view of things and how they should be done so His part in the praying may not

go the way you think they should go. Abraham had to wait fifteen more years before God gave Him what He promised. Why? Because the Lord, as a real person had His own timetable that clearly did not match that of either Abraham or especially Sarah.

A transformation occurred within Abraham after he made the terrible mistake of trying to help God answer his prayers by sleeping with Hagar. He learned a crucial lesson about prayer and having God in His life. When the Lord came to Abraham to announce that he and Sarah would have a son within a year, He also informed him of the judgement that would soon be brought against the corrupt city of Sodom. Abraham's nephew was living there, and it had to have been troubling or even terrifying for Abraham to find out the people of Sodom were about to be destroyed. Abraham of course asked if God would still destroy Sodom were there a large number of righteous people in the city. **What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?** (Genesis 18: 24 NIV) The Lord told Abraham if there were even ten righteous people in Sodom, He would not destroy it. So Abraham, rather than making sure his nephew Lot did not get killed by God in the destruction of Sodom, trusted the Lord with him. Abraham could have done something similar to how he reacted to his praying for a son, tried to help out God and make sure he got what he wanted. Abraham might have sent messengers to Sodom, warning Lot of what was coming. He could have himself gone to Sodom and tried to convince Lot to leave. Abraham did neither. Unlike before, he actually trusted the Lord when he prayed. Granted, Abraham knew what sort of people lived in Sodom as he had rescued many of them when they were captured in battle so he was well aware of why God would bring judgement upon them. But still, Abraham was terribly concerned about Lot and his family, not wanting them to die along with the rest. It took faith on Abraham's part to leave it all in God's hands after he prayed and that is exactly what he did.

One of the great case studies in the psychology of prayer is the fascinating description of Habakkuk after he had been praying. He looked about, watching to see what God would do. Habakkuk certainly was not feeling warm and fuzzy about what was coming because of the invading Babylonian army. He was greatly troubled. **I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.** (Habakkuk 3: 16 NIV) But he famously declared that no matter what happened, he would rejoice in God his Savior. He declared triumphantly that He trusted in what God would do after he prayed. **The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.** (Habakkuk 3: 19 NIV) It does not take a great amount of faith to pray. Even atheists have been known to pray. What takes great faith is to pray and then trust Jesus to answer your prayer as He sees fit. He may have you do something, like put together your resume or go to school or talk to someone about Christ. But it is as you watch and see what God is doing that you realize what comes next on your part, if anything. Prayer is a peaceful acceptance that the Lord loves you like a cherished child and will work things out for your good. Rather than fret about what you should do, pray and then watch to see what God does and if He shows you what to do, then do it. Here is our Big Idea. Don't try to figure out how God should answer your prayers. Pray and let God work things out as He wishes.