

PURSUE

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When Delight Turns to Desire

There is a threshold in personal relationships when delight turns to desire and attraction turns to attention. Crossing that threshold marks the beginning of true affection, releasing an inner compulsion that refuses to be satisfied with anything less than intimacy.

“One night as I lay in bed, I yearned for my lover. I yearned for him, but he did not come. So I said to myself, ‘I will get up and roam the city, searching in all its streets and squares. I will search for the one I love.’” (Song of Solomon 3:1-2)

The Shulamite woman became desperate in her longing for the king, and set out to search for him until she found him. It is to this kind of longing, desperation, and searching that God invites us.

I Think of You; Do You Think of Me?

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity.” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

The first part of Jeremiah’s prophecy is familiar to many people as a promise of God’s kindness—not because we long for God, but because we long for peace and a hopeful future. And that’s okay. God uses those longings as natural bait to draw us to Himself. We won’t come to Him without them.

But when we come to Him (whatever the bait He used to attract us), we may discover that the Giver is so much greater than the gift. Or, if we are inattentive, we may just wait for the next baited circumstance. But when you seek and engage God with “all your heart” you will discover that your efforts are more than rewarded.

“I love all who love me. Those who search will surely find me.” (Proverbs 8:17)

God thinks about you. Do you think about Him?

The Lover's Way

This pattern of drawing and seeking is what I call "the lover's way." It is the path of knowing God, the path of abundant life. It is the way of prayer—not the prayers of religious rote, nor the prayers of asking for stuff we need (though both may be incorporated into this way), but the prayers of love and longing, of attentive desire, and of simply being together with the One you love.

"My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (Isaiah 56:7)

"Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

12 Reasons to pray

There are reasons to pray other than relationship building. These are the gates by which we usually enter God's Garden. I will mention them briefly, because they are meaningful, as they grasp the promises of God in Jesus Christ. But then, having acknowledged them, we may set them aside as secondary to that better way.

1. Peace

When anxiety steals your focus and productivity or your rest, pray.

"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

2. Healing

When sickness invades and obscures the light of life, pray.

"A prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:15-16)

Invite other believers to join your prayers and, when necessary, confess your sins, for God's healing touches both soul and body.

3. Understanding

We will face circumstances that are unfamiliar, for which we have no answers. Books and teachers may offer no help. What to do? Pray.

“If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking.” (James 1:5)

“Ask me and I will tell you remarkable secrets you do not know about things to come.” (Jeremiah 33:3)

Daniel once prayed earnestly for God to intervene, but weeks passed with no evident response. Then, he was visited by an angel(!), who explained the situation and encouraged his faith:

“Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven.” (Daniel 10:12)

Timing is everything! But it is out of our hands.

4. Salvation

Other needs are more “felt,” which is why I listed them first, but this one is surely the greatest of them all, for it has eternal impact. The good news is that Jesus has secured this promise for everyone who will pray.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” (Joel 2:32)

5. Presence of God

Sometimes, we just need to know that God is near, that He is aware of our circumstance, even if we must wait it out. His presence will assure us, and strengthen us for the duration.

But what if we cannot feel His presence? What if God seems distant or absent? What then? Pray.

“What great nation has a god as near to them as the LORD our God is near to us whenever we call on him?” (Deuteronomy 4:7)

“When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honor them.” (Psalm 91:15)

“The LORD is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth.” (Psalm 145:18)

6. When Persecuted

You may not have been persecuted to the extent of those whose lives are at risk, but you probably know what it is to endure hostility and ill will. How can we do that without becoming embittered and cynical? Pray.

“Pray for those who persecute you!” (Matthew 5:44)

“Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you.” (Luke 6:28)

7. Perseverance

Pressing on in life can be difficult. Circumstances may be against us. When it rains, it may pour, compounding the obstacles and depleting our energy. The way to regain and rebuild energy and hope and drive is to pray.

“People should always pray and never give up.” (Luke 18:1)

8. Overcome Temptation

Everyone faces temptation. Even the twelve, who sat at Jesus’ feet, were tempted. Temptation is not sin, but it leads to sin, if we give in to it. The way to beat temptation (and you know which ones you’re susceptible to) is to pray.

“Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!” (Matthew 26:41)

Distraction does not defeat temptation; it only delays it. If you want to defeat temptation, pray.

9. Power Over Demons

Some circumstances are more than difficult—they are demonic. Sometimes, the devil actually takes advantage to mess up peoples’ lives. There’s only one answer for that:

“Jesus replied, ‘This kind can be cast out only by prayer.’” (Mark 9:29) (Some translations add *“and fasting,”* emphasizing the intensity of prayer that is necessary.)

10. Harvest

Harvest—especially the harvest of souls for the Kingdom of Christ—cannot be met without prayer. That’s because there is a “Lord of the harvest” (and it’s not you), who is in charge of the timing and the volume of the harvest. And also because the harvest He has planned is too great for us to manage on our own—we need help! So, we must pray.

“So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.” (Luke 10:2)

11. Bold Witness

If you hope to share Christ with others with impact, you need to pray, AND you need to acquire prayer support from others. This is a family task.

“So pray that I will keep on speaking boldly for him, as I should.” (Ephesians 6:20)

12. National Recovery

The scale of need reaches national proportions. We need more than political change, more than political hope—we need societal transformation.

When people struggle economically in an advanced civilization like ours, and when corruption reaches the highest levels of authority, and when behaviors that God rebukes are respected culturally and protected legally, we need a national reformation. We need to pray.

“If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

How NOT to Pray

There are two things I must address as prayer no-nos, because Jesus addressed them.

1. To impress

For some, prayer is an activity with which to try to impress others (or even yourself) of your “spirituality.” Those who are naturally verbal and eloquent may easily fall prey to this pattern, but anyone—even the illiterate—may try it.

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6)

Jesus was very clear: *HE* is not impressed.

2. To persuade

Some people still believe God needs His arm twisted and prayer is the muscle to use. They could not be more mistaken. Prayer is not muscle; it is a tool. The muscle is *faith*. And faith is based on God’s promises, which means He’s already willing and doesn’t require arm-twisting.

“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!” (Matthew 6:7-8)

Still others think they can talk themselves into faith by repeated affirmations. Faith does come “*by hearing*” the words of God, but not simply the mechanical repetition of His words. Faith

comes with the thoughtful contemplation and embrace of God's promises. If you don't "get it" you won't "have it."

Wonderful Results

The results of faith-filled prayer are legendary. Kingdoms have been overthrown, kings have ruled justly, and people have received miracles from God (Hebrews 11:32-35).

"The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results."
(James 5:16)

But the answer that supersedes them all is the answer of God's love. The highest purpose of praying is to find and nurture a loving relationship with Almighty God, our Savior.

"Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever." (Psalm 23:6)

This speaks of an interpersonal relationship, not a business arrangement. Prayer is not shopping with scriptural coupons; it is growing a friendship with God—the answer to an inner longing that, at some point, drives every person toward Him.

We search for God because we need God to make our lives complete. We need Him because we were made to be loved by Him and to love Him. If we don't love Him, then, like a landlord, we only want to see Him if something goes wrong.

That's why we say that, for a follower of Jesus, prayer is worship, and worship is prayer. Each should be infused with the other. If it's not worshipful, it's not really prayer. And, if it's not prayerful, it's not really worship. They go together.

Come, tonight for an evening of worshipful prayer. We'll search for God together. We'll pursue the Savior. We'll fall in love with Him all over again!