

Prayer as Joy, Prayer as Struggle

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*In gratitude to God
for blessing me far beyond anything I could ever deserve,
desire, or dream.*

*In love to Karen,
who in a love beyond my understanding journeys with me
through all of life.
I am truly blessed!*

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Preface

This book is written for those who struggle to pray. It is written by one who shares that struggle. I know that prayer is important. I've been taught that; I've experienced that. I know the joy and wonder of prayer. And yet I also know that prayer is a struggle for me. I'm never quite as good at praying as I would like to be. I often have to force myself to pray, and I struggle to know how to pray. Prayer is a struggle.

It is a fascinating paradox to me—prayer is such a joy and yet also so much work. This book is written for those who share this experience. My hope is to help you understand more of what prayer is, and to help you onward as you grow in your ability to pray. I hope that you discover more of the joy of prayer.

I should also be honest and point out that this book is not written by an expert. Many books are written by people who are highly qualified in their fields, people with great expertise and ability. I can't make that claim. I would rather say that this book is written by a fellow struggler. I have spent a lifetime struggling in prayer, seeking in prayer, growing in prayer. I'm hoping that my struggles and reflections can help you along on your way. I make no claim to be an expert. But I am a Christian who has experienced the sheer joy and wonder of prayer. I know that God's Word can direct us deeper into that joy and wonder. May God lead us onward in the gift of prayer!

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Thank you to Max and Marilyn Pirner and Paul Hadland for proofreading this manuscript. Your insights and suggestions have been so helpful, and have allowed me a fresh look at this material. Paul, after I struggled for weeks, your insights finally pulled the opening chapter together for me. Thank you to Toby Fite, whose computer expertise saved this manuscript a number of times! Thanks to Mom and Dad, Lucille and LaVerne Braaten, for providing a cabin in the north woods of Minnesota where I could write and reflect. Even more, thank you, Mom and Dad, for all the years of support and love, and for sharing with me the wonder of faith and a lifelong love of learning.

Thank you to my children, Amber, Christopher, and Cassandra. The three of you have such an implicit joy of life that you continually help me to see the wonder that God is about. Through your faith I've been able to see much more of the grace of God. And most of all, thank you to Karen. Your suggestions for the manuscript were wonderful. But even more, thank you for sharing my life, for encouraging me, and for taking care of our family as I pursue these projects. I couldn't do it without you!

May God lead us onward in his grace and newness!

Chapter 1

Prayer as Joy and Struggle

Well, let's now at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome.

C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*

I have often naively assumed that prayer would be easy to do. My thought was that my prayer life would quite naturally be simple and profitable. What, I've thought, could be simpler than talking with God? In fact many people tell me that. "Just pray," they say, "and everything will come together." But it is never that simple for me.

Prayer is a struggle. I have all sorts of things that I struggle with as I seek to pray. My first struggle is to take the time. I'm very good at coming up with all sorts of reasons not to make time for prayer. "I'm too busy" is my favorite excuse.

I struggle when I do pray. I find that my mind is easily distracted. I try to focus on God, but my mind quickly jumps to wondering about people and activities and things to do. My mind seems drawn to everything but God. Even more, I struggle as I pray with questions and doubts. I wonder if God is really listening to me. Are my prayers making a difference? My faith and my focus wander.

Perhaps most worrisome, I struggle as I look to God. I pray for God to lead me, and yet there is part of me that doesn't want to turn my life over to him. If I turn my life over to God, he might

just lead me somewhere I don't want to go. This thing called prayer can be downright frightening.

Now let me be very clear. I value prayer. One of my deepest desires is to grow in my ability to pray. That is incredibly important to me. And yet I struggle.

In my experience, prayer is both a joy and a struggle. Again, let me underscore that prayer is a thing of joy. There are times in prayer when I experience myself to be in the presence of God. There are times in prayer when I know God's grace, and I realize that I am close to my Lord. That is the greatest joy that I know. Yet still I struggle, and I'm never quite as good at praying as I'd like to be.

This book is written for people who struggle to pray. It is written in the conviction that prayer is an incredible joy. It is written in the awareness of the struggles that are involved. My hope is to help you to grow in your praying. We will look at the joys and the struggles. I'll share things that I've learned on my journey. My hope is to help you onward as you grow in prayer.

Our main resource for this will be the Bible. I'm convinced that the greatest resource for learning to pray is God's own Word in the Scripture. We will draw from that Word as we learn more about prayer.

Let's explore this marvelous thing we call prayer. Be aware that work awaits us. But even more, know that there is joy, incredible joy, waiting for us too.

Let's begin our journey by looking at another person who had some struggles in prayer, that is, the Apostle Peter. I suspect that for Peter prayer was also a joy and a struggle. Looking at Peter's experience can help us to understand our own and grow in our ability to pray. Acts 10:1-17 tells us one of Peter's experiences in prayer:

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about

three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared.

This is a key story in the New Testament. This story is about a sequence of events through which Peter is led to understand that the ministry of Jesus Christ is for all people. But coming to that understanding causes confusion and struggle for Peter.

Let's take a close look at this story and what it can teach us about prayer. By way of background, we need to recognize that the early Christians were really a Jewish group. In fact one of the first questions the young church faced was whether or not Gentiles (non-Jews) could be included in the church. Traditionally Jews had avoided reaching out to Gentiles, and so the Jewish Christians assumed they should do the same. Peter was a good Jew, which meant that he obeyed Jewish laws, including laws about food and avoiding contact with Gentiles.

But God had other plans. God intended the ministry of the Gospel to be for all people. So God introduces Peter to a Gentile, a Roman soldier named Cornelius. God's intent is to show Peter that the church is to be for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Peter, the story from Acts tells us, is spending time in prayer. God gives him a vision. In the vision God says that Peter should eat some animals that he was prohibited from eating by Jewish law. Peter refuses, saying he has never done such a thing. But God repeatedly tells Peter, "What God has made clean you must not call profane." Poor Peter is confused by it all. None of this makes any sense; his prayer time is leaving him with more questions than answers. Peter is struggling as he prays. In fact, notice please, the more Peter prays, the more confused he gets!

But shortly after this, Peter meets some men that have been sent by Cornelius. Peter comes to realize that Cornelius is to be welcomed into the Christian faith. In fact, Peter comes to the incredible realization that Gentiles are going to be invited into the young church. Peter realizes that God's point in the vision about unclean animals was ultimately not about food but about people! God leads Peter to the incredible realization that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people.

It is a great and significant story in the New Testament. But notice how prayer functions for Peter in this story. It begins as a struggle. The story tells us that Peter's prayer leads him to confusion. Peter is "greatly puzzled by it all" as he hears God telling him to break laws that he has lived with all his life. Prayer, rather than being a time of comfort and support, is a time of challenge and confusion and unrest.

There are times for me when prayer leaves me feeling "greatly puzzled by it all." I pray, as I know that it is important. Yet sometimes, like Peter, my prayer time leaves me wondering. I pray to God seeking answers about issues in my life, and I'm not sure about the answers. I wonder if God is trying to lead me in new directions that I don't want to go or if I'm simply not listening. Rather than being comforted, I'm confused.

There are many things about prayer with which I struggle. As I mentioned earlier, I struggle with myself as I know I should pray but don't want to take the time. Or I try to pray but find myself distracted. My mind wants to focus on everything but God. Or I do focus on God, and God seems to be nowhere around. I cry out in emptiness and hear no answer. Or like Peter, I suspect that God is leading me in a new direction, and I'm not sure I really want to go there. Do I dare let God lead me? Just like Peter, my prayers can be a struggle.

But notice also in the Peter and Cornelius story how prayer is a thing of joy. As the story in Acts unfolds, Peter learns that God is directing him to Cornelius and through Cornelius to all the world. Peter learns that God was not just out to declare new foods clean but to declare new people clean. Gentiles are now invited into the new life of Jesus Christ! Peter experiences one of those incredible "aha" moments where he sees the grace of God unfold in his midst. Peter catches a glimpse of the sheer grace and magnitude of God, and his struggle is replaced by the joy of what God is about.

We too will struggle in prayer. But we do so with the assurance that God is involved in our praying, and he will lead us to his joy. Yes, prayer can be confusing and a battle and seem empty and everything else. But pray nonetheless, for in prayer God leads us to himself! In our prayer life we will be touched by God, and we will catch glimpses of the magnificence that God is about. There is nothing more spectacular! We will see more of how God is involved in our lives and the life of the world, and there is joy there beyond anything else that we can know.

Prayer is the gift of knowing God in our lives. We are given the gift of seeing our lives in the hand of God, of talking with God, and listening to God. We will experience ourselves to be shaped and renewed. There is nothing more powerful or joyful.

I found a beautiful prayer by Henri Nouwen that captures this sense that prayer is both struggle and joy. Let me share it with you:

Why, O Lord, is it so hard for me to keep my heart directed toward you? Why do the many little things I want to do, and the many people I know, keep crossing into my mind, even during the hours that I am totally free to be with you and you alone? Why does my mind wander off in so many directions, and why does my heart desire the things that lead me astray? Are you not enough for me? Do I keep doubting your love and care, your mercy and grace? Do I keep wondering, in the center of my being, whether you will give me all I need if I just keep my eyes on you?

Please accept my distractions, my fatigue, my irritations, and my faithless wanderings. You know me more deeply and fully than I know myself. You love me with a greater love than I can love myself. You even offer me more than I can desire. Look at me, see me in all my misery and inner confusion, and let me sense your presence in the midst of my turmoil. All I can do is show myself to you. Yet, I am afraid to do so. I am afraid that you will reject me. But I know—with the knowledge of faith—that you desire to give me your love. The only thing you ask of me is not to hide from you, not to run away in despair, not to act as if you were a relentless despot.

Take my tired body, my confused mind, and my restless soul into your arms and give me rest, simple quiet rest. Do I ask too much too soon? I should not worry about that. You will let me know. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.¹

Nouwen understands, as Peter understood, that prayer is both struggle and joy. It is struggle, as so many forces within us and outside of us direct us away from prayer. We want to grow closer to God, and yet something deep in our being holds us back. It is work, and sometimes a battle, to pray. But even more, we also know that prayer is joy. It is joy as we locate ourselves in the grace of God and experience the care of our Lord. It is the wonder of being cared for and nourished by our Savior. Prayer is both joy and struggle, and the joy is more than worth the struggle.

I find a good analogy for all this in my attempts at physical exercise. I know I need to do physical exercise, and I keep trying to do so. There are times when my workouts are a real burden. (In fact as I age I have more and more of these times!) I struggle to

get through them. I feel lousy, every ounce of my body says stop, and I hurt. Workouts are a struggle. But there are also those times when my workouts are a joy. I go for a run and catch a second wind. I play basketball with my teenage son and find myself able to keep up for a longer period than before. It's exhilarating.

I've learned in my physical workouts that I need to go through the struggle to find the joy. I've learned to discipline myself to keep at it, to keep exercising even when I don't seem to be getting anywhere, for as I do, I get in better shape. I do grow, I get better at it, and I enjoy it more. The growth and the rewards are worth the struggle.

There are some insights here for prayer. We will struggle in prayer. It's not always easy; sometimes we won't seem to be making any progress. But if we stick with it we will grow, and yes, we will get better at it. We can learn how to pray in new ways, and we can expand our prayer life. We will get in better shape if you will. As we commit ourselves to pray, we increase in our ability to do so, and we grow.

Having said this, let me also point out one thing about physical exercise that is not true for prayer. In physical exercise, it all depends on us. The more we work, the better shape we are in. It is totally up to us. In prayer it is never just up to us. Oh, our commitment is important, of course. It is vital that we discipline ourselves and work at our prayer life. Our commitment to God demands the best we can offer.

But even more, prayer is about God's commitment to us. God will be at work in our prayer life to lead us onward and to deepen us. God's own Spirit will teach us and fill us and lead us into deeper prayer. That is the incredible gift. God so wants us to experience the joy of prayer that he will help us to pray!

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:26-27. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

What a promise! We don't pray on our own. God rather values our prayers so much that God's Spirit will pray in us and through us! We come to God in the power of the Holy Spirit, who will teach us and lead us deeper into the grace of God. The struggles will be there, yes. But God's Spirit will work in us as we grow in the joy of our Lord.

That is prayer. We need to know that prayer is not an easy thing. It demands our dedication and work. But even more, we need to know the joy and the wonder that awaits us. In prayer we share in our Lord.

One of the great experiences of being a pastor is that I've met many profound people of faith. Sometimes these people have been church leaders and theology professors. More often they have been people in ordinary walks of life. In every congregation I've served, I've been privileged to know wonderful people of faith.

I remember in my first church, in rural Kentucky, I was just out of seminary and served some marvelous people. I suspect that I learned more from them than they did from me! There was an elderly lady in the congregation who taught me about prayer. Her name was Ann, and she was a grandmother and great-grandmother. She wasn't well educated; she had been on the farm all her life. But she knew her Lord in a profound way. And because of that there was a graciousness and joy about her.

I spent a lot of time with her, for I sensed I needed to learn from her. She described for me her morning routine. Each day she got up early, read her Bible, and then spent a half hour in prayer. She prayed for her family and her church. She assured me she was praying for me. She prayed about all of life, the good and the bad, her joys and her sorrows. She had followed this routine for over fifty years! And because of that, she knew her Lord in a close and wonderful way. I came to realize that as a student of theology, I knew about God. But Ann knew God with a faith that was far deeper than mine. She knew God in a way that led her in a life of graciousness and care.

I learned from Ann the importance of regular prayer time. I learned through her how an ongoing life of prayer leads one into

a deeper relationship with Jesus. Oh, I knew that Ann had her struggles in prayer. She told me so. She said many a morning she was tempted to skip her prayer time. But she stuck with it. And because of it she knew the joy of her Lord. Ann showed me that prayer leads deeply into Jesus, and that our lives can reflect the joyful wonder of that.

That's the promise of prayer. It is a promise for you and me. Prayer takes work and commitment, of course. But ultimately prayer is joy. God in his mercy calls us to new life. Prayer is a place to share in that and experience that. Prayer is the gift of being in the presence of God, of sharing with God, and of being renewed by God. Prayer is the joy of recognizing that our lives are held in the very hand and grace of our loving Lord.

I am more and more aware of what a wonder it is to pray. The Lord of heaven and earth, the Savior of all the world, has covenanted to spent time with me! Can you imagine something so incredible? I am invited, in fact encouraged, to come into the presence of my Lord. In the midst of my feeble attempts at prayer, with all my mistakes and distractions and confusions, God still comes to me and shapes me. It is gift, sheer gift, as God renews my life.

You are invited by this same Lord into this same joy. That's the promise of prayer. All that our Lord has done is meant for you. You are the one that God invites to share in prayer. With that assurance, let's journey onward. Let's learn; let's practice. I pray that together we will grow in the wonder of prayer!



O most merciful redeemer, friend, and brother, may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, for thine own sake. Amen.

Richard of Chichester²

10 *Prayer as Joy, Prayer as Struggle*

*O Lord, hear our prayers,
not according to the poverty of our asking
but according to the richness of your grace,
so that our lives may conform to those desires
which accord with your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Reinhold Niebuhr³