

Prayer
Digging Deeper Guide
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An atheist was walking through the woods when all of a sudden he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. He turned to look and saw a 7-foot grizzly bear charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path but tripped and fell to the ground. As he rolled over to pick himself up, he saw the bear standing over him with his right paw raised and ready to strike. At that instant the Atheist cried out in prayer "Dear God! Help me!". Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. Then a bright light beamed down from heaven and a booming voice from above said "You deny my existence for all these years and now you expect me to help you? Are you really a believer?" The atheist looked into the light and said "It would be hypocritical of me to say I am or I want to be, but perhaps you could make the BEAR a Christian?" "Very well," the voice said. The light went out. The sounds of the forest resumed. And the bear dropped his right paw, brought both paws together, bowed his head and said: "Lord bless this food which I am about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen."

One of the biggest obstacles to having an intimate prayer life is unanswered prayers, or prayers that are answered in unexpected and unpleasant ways for reasons we don't always understand. I've been thinking a lot about that over the past few years and have a few thoughts I'd like to share with you. But first, let me quickly summarize last Sunday's message.

The message was an important one. We need to have an intimate prayer life, one where we communicate with God from the heart. Our prayers must also be passionate, born out of a deep felt need to go running to Him because He's a good and awesome God (Psalm 73:28). That's really a big deal.

God wants to speak with us. He welcomes us to come to Him boldly and without hesitation. He sacrificed His son Jesus so that our sins would be forgiven, giving us direct access to Him with nothing standing in our way (Heb 10:19-22). But how do we do that? How do we build that intimate and passionate prayer life that binds us so tightly to God? Here are some ideas.

We must find time to be alone with Him, as Jesus did, because prayer is personal and we need to eliminate the distractions (Luke 5:16, Matt. 6:6).

We must put a stop to the busyness and the striving and make time to talk with Him (Psalm 46:10).

And we absolutely must be honest and vulnerable with Him. Why wouldn't we? He already knows what we're struggling with and is ready to forgive. Well, for me, that comes down to one thing. PRIDE. There have been many times in my life when I've had to put my pride aside and remind myself that I need rescuing and that God is my hero and my Savior (Psalm 3:7-8).

But getting back to the atheist and the bear, it can be awfully hard to do all of that when prayers go unanswered. Unanswered prayers are something we all need to deal with to have an intimate prayer life with God. And we're not alone. David, one of the great prayer warriors of all time, often cried out "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Psalm 22:2).

There's really no one right answer to the question "Why aren't my prayers being answered?". And sometimes, like when we pray for health and safety for our family and a loved one dies tragically and unexpectedly, there's no answer at all and we need to turn to God for comfort and relief from the pain.

But there are many times when the "Why?" question really does have an answer, and that answer can eliminate the obstacles that keep us from growing closer to God in prayer. Let me offer you a few things to consider.

First and foremost, when we pray, we don't always get what we want, but we do get what we need. We pray for strength and get pain that makes us strong. We pray for courage and get fear to overcome. We pray for faith and our empty heart brings us to our knees. Yes, we don't always get what we want, but we get what we need. That's the message in music this week.

Here's another thing to think about. Sometimes we need to thank God for unanswered prayers. We pray to be in a relationship or a job that's just not right for us and God says no. Has that ever happened to you? Our Father really does know best. We need to be grateful for that.

And how about this? God also knows that we need to grow closer to Him even if we don't and sometimes leaves us in a difficult situation we're praying to escape until we do. I've been there. My relationship with God was an intellectual one and my prayer life was almost nonexistent and largely focused on getting my needs met for a long time. God let me struggle with cancer a few years ago just long enough to change all of that. I'm thankful He did.

We also need to remember those times when God did answer our prayers. Doesn't that count for something?

And then there's the issue of patiently waiting for our prayers to be answered instead of giving up and wondering why they're not being heard. Oh yeah, about that. It's something we all need to be better at.

Finally, here's one answer to the "Why?" question that none of us wants to hear but needs to be said. Sometimes our prayers aren't answered because they don't reflect an understanding of who God is and what our own responsibilities are. Like when we pray for someone else to change instead of asking God where we need to grow. Ouch.

These are things we all need to think about and reflect on the next time the "Why" question keeps us from drawing closer to God in prayer just when we really need to. I suspect we'll all be glad we did.

Key Verse: O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.
Psalm 22:2

Key Message: Unanswered prayers are something we all need to deal with to have an intimate prayer life with God.

Message in Music:

I Get What I Need, by Collin Raye

<https://youtu.be/kOJXWYS5FAU>

Question for Understanding:

What is keeping you from being alone with God, making time to be with Him or being honest with Him? What are you going to do about it?

Thought Provoking Question:

Do you have an unanswered prayer that you're glad was never answered? A relationship or a job that you wanted but God knew wasn't right for you perhaps? Or a struggle in your life that you prayed to escape from but taught you a lot?

Question for Sharing:

Is real emotional and spiritual intimacy in your relationships with others as much a struggle for you as it is for me? If it is, growing closer to God in prayer will help. Please tell us if you struggle with intimacy and where that comes from so we will know how to pray for you.