

Teach Me to Pray

April 2023

Christianity without prayer is not Christianity at all. Yet, how often do we forget to pray? Can we be Christians and not pray that much? What would Jesus say? Remember when Jesus rebuked his friend Martha for running around and spending too much time preparing a meal for guests rather than sitting at his feet like her sister, Mary, who was listening reverently to his teaching? (Luke 10:38-42)

For the past 30 years, I have been leading vision trips to Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America helping American Christians remember and learn how to pray. The non-Western world knows much more about prayer than we do in the Western world. Last week, I returned from taking a large group of church leaders to Egypt where once again the Egyptians taught us how to pray. They demonstrated how to sit at the feet of Jesus, stop talking, conferring, planning, discussing, and just pray instead, which is not a natural inclination for many Americans today.

One of the reasons the Egyptian Church knows how to pray so well and often is because it is a minority religion under tremendous pressure from the majority people who surround them. When you are a second-class citizen often ridiculed by a majority people, you rely more on prayer for daily courage and sustenance. Congregational meetings of minority Christians are often lively, full of joy and prayer in which bravery and faith are engendered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. However, when Christianity is the majority religion, and believers have all the freedoms in the world, that is usually when trouble begins knocking at the door. If we are not careful, because Christians often grow lazy and lax with prayer, it's easy to forget the preciousness of our faith. We can concern ourselves with petty things, differences of opinion, rather than important things such as being concerned how we can expand the Lord's kingdom and disciple his followers.



St. Samaan Cathedral in Manshiyat, outside of Cairo

During Holy Week, we take time to remember the night before Jesus was arrested. After the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus took them to the Mount of Olives to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. Whenever Jesus faced difficult choices or challenges, his first impulse was to pray. Do we do the same? When faced with difficult circumstances, do we fret and run around worrying, hand-wringing endlessly with our friends, or do we drop to our knees and pray? In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus dropped to his knees and prayed. Meanwhile, in the same garden and at the same time, the disciples also dropped to the ground, but immediately fell asleep. The Gospels tell us, "Then accompanied by the disciples, Jesus left the upstairs room and went as usual to the Mount of Olives. There he told them, 'Pray that you will not give in to temptation.' He walked away, about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.' Then an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him. He prayed more fervently, and was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood. At last he stood up again and returned to the disciples, only to find them asleep, exhausted from grief. 'Why are you sleeping?' he asked them. 'Get up and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation.'" (Luke 22:39-46)

Has the American Church fallen asleep in the garden and forgotten how to pray and pray often? Have we given into numerous temptations – some of them seemingly worthy and valuable, such as ample education, wealth, religious freedoms, and good health care; others terribly destructive such as legalized gambling, pervasive pornography, and the use of illicit drugs and over-use of medications? Anything that makes us more reliant on the world and less reliant on the Lord is against God's will for our lives. The Lord must come first above all things, even good things. We are called to be in a constant practice of prayer, like a child depending on a loving parent, regardless of whether we have a million dollars or nothing at all. We are to pray without ceasing, otherwise our souls and spiritual wells run dry and our vision becomes frighteningly narrow and harmful to ourselves and others.

Few people have ever articulated our need to pray better than the Apostle Paul. He constantly reminded people that true wisdom and peace are attainable only through a discipline of prayer. May we always treasure the words he said to believers in Ephesus when he wrote, "Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he has called – his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 1:15-20)



One of the most moving times I experienced during this last trip to Egypt was when a group of us were asked to pray over Egyptian missionaries who are laboring and sharing the Good News in other Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East. Along with a few others in my group we were assigned to a young woman who is ministering to Yazidi women in refugee camps in Iraq. Her ministry is one of the most dynamic mission efforts I have ever experienced. Tragically, not that long ago, ISIS and other violent Muslim fundamentalist groups forced many Yazidi women into unwanted marriages and sex slavery in Iraq and Syria. As a result, today there is an alarmingly high rate of suicide among Yazidi women in these refugee camps. Egyptian missionaries are organizing women empowerment camps and healing counseling centers for these Yazidi women, and the results have been phenomenal. As we prayed over this Egyptian missionary woman, many of us were brought to tears thinking about the brilliance and compassion of their ministry. Today, many lives are devastated and displaced throughout the Middle East in war-torn or severely poor countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya. However, the light of Christ is reaching many of these traumatized lives giving people new healing, hope and life. We heard about miracle after miracle and lives that have been changed. Amid tremendous suffering and trauma in the Arabic-speaking world today, the Body of Christ is

growing throughout the Middle East among people of every background imaginable. Thankfully, the tide is turning from the dangers and devastation of fundamentalist Islam in the Arab world toward a more moderate Islam with slightly greater religious freedoms. People are more open to the healing touch of Jesus in their lives than ever before.

What are the best ways for us in the West to keep from falling asleep in the garden, forgetting to pray constantly and to be vigilant along with Jesus to what he is doing in the world today? One way is to encourage our local churches to develop friendships and partnerships with congregations and believers in the non-Western world and plan regular vision trips to visit them. Christianity is growing rapidly in the non-Western world while waning in the Western world – in large measure due to the daily and even hourly belief and practice of prayer among these vibrant believing communities. Egyptians love to organize weekend prayer conferences attracting thousands of people who pray for two or three days at a time with dynamic worship. We in the West can benefit greatly by being in their midst and learning by their example. And we need to be humble enough to say to them, “Please teach me to pray. I have either forgotten or never knew how to pray.”

May we give thanks to our Lord that he is risen, risen indeed. He is alive in the hearts of believers around the world. His kingdom has come, and it is still coming, as we all look forward to that glorious day when he returns again.

During this Holy Week as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Sharon, our children, and I wish you a blessed Easter! And may we pray and celebrate the spirit of Easter every day.

