

20260802 Prayer: A Two-Way Conversation

—— Vital Pathway for Spiritual Growth (Luke 9:28-36, NIV)

Over the past few weeks, our church has been encouraging everyone to pray more. Today's topic is also about prayer. We will look more closely at the nature of prayer. Prayer is a two-way conversation with God. Through conversing with the Lord, we come to know God more deeply, understand ourselves more clearly, and experience more fully the abundant life He gives us. This is a vital pathway for spiritual growth.

Clement, an early Church Father, said, "Prayer is keeping company with God." Keeping company with God is relational, and the depth of that relationship depends on how well we know him. Our knowledge of God and our relationship with him are revealed in our prayers. It's like a conversation between two people that shows the nature of their relationship.

I have a friend named Jimmy whom I have known for more than thirty years. In 1990, he and his wife, Yannie, had a lovely son named Jeff. However, Jimmy was extremely busy with work in Beijing, and Yannie was sent overseas by her company. As a result, little Jeff had to be sent to Jimmy's parents in their hometown. Those days, there were no smartphones or video chat. Jimmy and Yannie could only see their son for a few days each year when they traveled back to their hometown.

Once, Jimmy told me about what happened when he went to see his three-year-old son. When little Jeff saw his dad—little Jeff felt that Jimmy was like a stranger to him— so little Jeff hid behind his grandpa and refused to come near. Jimmy took out a piece of candy and tried to coax him over. Little Jeff quickly ran up to his dad, grabbed the candy, and then hurried back behind grandpa. As soon as he put the candy in his mouth, a smile spread across his face, and he looked at his father. Seeing that, Jimmy was so happy, but this was a very short-lived happiness. He opened his arms and said, "Come on. Come to Daddy." Still hiding behind grandpa, little Jeff replied, "Thank you, but no. Just give me another candy."

Our conversations reveal the nature of our relationships. Sometimes, when we come before our heavenly Father, we are very much like three-year-old Jeff. God feels like a stranger to us, and our prayers sound like that "candy prayer." Not that our heavenly Father is too busy to see us, but we run away and don't talk to Him much.

That is why God continually draws us into conversation with Him. Through prayer, He deepens our relationship with Him, helping us to know Him and His saving grace more fully and to live more deeply in the new life we have received in Christ. Prayer brings us into God's presence, but what truly transforms us is not merely what we say to God; it is seeing Christ afresh in prayer, listening to him, and allowing him to correct our thoughts and to redirect our path.

Today, we will reflect together on the theme, "Prayer Is a Two-Way Conversation with God."

The four Gospels record many conversations between Jesus and his disciples that we can learn from. I would argue that the conversations surrounding Jesus' transfiguration are among the most significant, because they reconfirm the core messages of the Gospel – Jesus' identity and mission, and how to enter salvation. Significantly, Luke 9:28–36 places the transfiguration within the context of prayer. This invites us to view the transfiguration through the lens of prayer as a two-way conversation with God.

We will look at four stages in the conversation with God: 1) God Initiates Prayers (vv. 28–31); 2) Our Speaking in Prayer (vv. 32–33); 3) Listening to God in Prayer (vv. 34–36a); 4) Submitting in Prayer (v. 36b).

I. God Initiates Prayers (v28-31);

Paul says, “It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:13) So we know that all conversations with God are initiated by God Himself. Prayer is God’s gracious invitation for us to enter into a relationship with him, in which he continually shapes and renews us.

“²⁸About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.”

The opening of this passage points us back to Jesus’ preceding words. In Luke 9:18–27, Luke presents three truths that lie at the heart of the Christian faith. First, Peter confesses that Jesus is “God’s Messiah.” Second, Jesus tells his disciples that “the Son of Man must suffer many things, ...be killed, and on the third day be raised to life”. Third, Jesus explains what it means to follow him: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.” The disciples didn’t quite understand all of this at that time.

That is why Jesus brought the “core three” of his disciples to the mountain to pray. Jesus’ transfiguration and the conversation around it were intended to correct their misunderstanding.

“²⁹As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹They spoke about his departure (Greek: Exodus), which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”

Jesus invited the disciples to join him in prayer. In that moment of prayer, Jesus pulled back the curtain and allowed them to glimpse the glory of God’s salvation plan. Jesus revealed his divine glory as the Son of God. Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the Prophets, appeared with Him in glory—a glory they received from God. They spoke with Jesus about his coming death in Jerusalem. Luke uses the Greek word “exodus” to describe what Jesus was about to accomplish. This shows us that the salvation Jesus brings about is a new exodus: through his sacrificial death as the lamb of God, God will deliver His people from the bondage of sin, establish the covenantal relationship with them, and lead them toward the promised inheritance. The vision was so dramatic that Peter started to talk to Jesus.

Jesus initiated the conversation by inviting the disciples to join Him in prayer, by placing them in a situation that prompted their response, and by giving them access to God through His sacrificial death.

Prayer always begins with God’s initiative. This remains true for us today. Through the Bible, God calls us to pray. God also leads us into situations, prompting us to respond to Him. And through Jesus, we can come to the presence of the Triune God to pray. Later, I will share with you my testimony on this.

II. We Speak Honestly to God (v32-33)

“³²Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what he was saying.”

The three disciples were much like us: they were not very good at praying. They became very sleepy, but when they awoke, they saw Jesus in glory with Moses and Elijah. From Luke’s Book of Acts, we know that Peter and the disciples held a strong Jewish nationalist mindset. Facing the glorious scene, Peter must have recognized that this was a moment of immense significance—the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes and the Old Testament promise. He misunderstood Jesus’ identity as equal to the other two great people of Israel. He also misunderstood Jesus’ mission as restoring an earthly kingdom for Israel. He addressed Jesus as “Master”

rather than “Lord” and proposed, “Let us put up three shelters—one for each of you.” He totally forgot about Jesus’ coming death and resurrection.

God wants us to speak honestly with Him about what we desire and how we feel. He does not expect us to come to Him with perfect words or perfect understanding. When we open our hearts to Him, He begins to work within us, correcting, shaping, and drawing us into a deeper relationship through this two-way conversation. It was true for Peter; it is true for us today.

Let me share a personal testimony. In 1992, not long after I became a Christian, I began to experience God’s blessing in my life. God blessed my work, and I found favor in the sight of my boss and co-workers. I believed that doing my job well and making a lot of money would bring glory to God. I wanted to make more money. Two years later, an American software company decided to establish a new joint venture in China and began looking for suitable people. At the time, several colleagues and I were unhappy with our boss because we felt that our bonuses and compensation were too low. We confronted him in anger, then left together to join the new joint venture. I didn’t know that God didn’t want believers to harbor grudges and act in anger. I just prayed the prayer that is like “Jeff’s candy prayer”. I said to God, “Please help me in the new venture. Make things smooth for me.” That was my honest understanding of God’s blessing. When I opened up and talked to God, He started working on me through the two-way conversation. He started speaking to me and put me into listening mode. Now, let’s look at the next point, “We Listen”, and I will continue my story.

III. We Listen to God (v34-36a)

³⁴*While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.* ³⁵*A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”*

^{36a}*When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone.* ”

In the Bible, a cloud coming down often represents the presence of God. God covered and surrounded the disciples with the cloud, drawing them into his presence. Then came the most important moment: God spoke to them, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

Luke’s account emphasizes that Jesus is God’s Son, the chosen One. That language not only distinguishes Jesus from Moses and Elijah; in the context, it also points to God’s salvation plan. God corrected Peter’s misunderstanding of Jesus’ identity and pointed him to God’s salvation plan. In prayer, God helps us to know Jesus and salvation better. He helps us to center our hearts and minds on the salvation prepared for us.

The voice also said, “Listen to Him.” God commands us to listen to Jesus, to seek guidance and to obey Him. Prayer is a two-way conversation. As we listen and obey, God speaks to us and transforms our lives and our prayers, aligning them with his will.

For us, today’s believers, God gives us His words in the Bible, and puts us in church, which is Jesus’ body. The Holy Spirit speaks to us primarily through the Bible and through sharing between believers.

Let me continue my testimony. After I joined the new joint venture, I faced many challenges. That opened me up to God and made me cry out for help. I prayed more “candy prayers”.

One evening, in the small life group, we studied Jesus’ seed and soil parable. The words about the seed being choked by thorns struck me. During the discussion and group prayer that night, the message struck me again and again. I knew the Holy Spirit was speaking to me—not merely through a feeling, but through a conviction firmly confirmed by Scripture. The Scripture points to Jesus and His cross.

One of the best ways to learn both to listen to God and to speak with him is to pray with the Bible. Slowly read one verse or a short passage, then quieten your heart and reflect on it. Ask God, “What does this mean,

and how does it apply to my life?” As you focus on the verses, listen for the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit. Then respond to God in a sentence or two, and continue in this way until you finish the passage.

In the Bible, the Book of Psalms is especially helpful in teaching us how to pray with Scripture. The Psalms model a two-way conversation with God. The psalmists use God-inspired words to pray to God. These words act as a guardrail, keeping our prayers aligned with his will rather than governed by our own desires.

Once we have listened to God and known His will, the next step is to obey and follow.

IV. We Follow (v36b)

“^{36b}The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.”

The disciples had just witnessed Jesus’ glorious transfiguration. I guess they wanted to talk to people about it, but they kept it to themselves. Why? Matthew and Mark record that Jesus told the disciples not to tell others until after his resurrection. Although they did not understand what He meant, they obeyed.

Continuing with my story. That night, the Holy Spirit prompted me and I followed. I prayed aloud in the group, “Lord, please remove the thorn from my life.”

Then God began to work—but not in the way I expected. The chairman of the joint venture, a Chinese government official, pressured me to carry out a suspicious transaction. I knew it was not right. I delayed it and prayed for help. Then, a major dispute broke out between the American partner and the chairman, and they decided to close the joint venture. I put in so much effort, and it was gone. I cried, “Lord, why? Please save it.”

God’s answer came a month later. I learned that the chairman had been arrested for corruption and was later sentenced to prison. I could say nothing but, “Thank you, Lord.” Then I prayed again, “Please give me a new job with a Christian boss.” One month later, God made it all happen!

God spoke to me through the Bible and life group. I followed and prayed. Through that experience, He corrected my distorted view of money. I began to understand that following Jesus means denying myself and putting my old value system to death on the cross.

Summary

God’s salvation in Jesus not only delivers us from sin but also brings us into the covenant relationship with God. God desires us to know Him and His salvation more. Prayer deepens our relationship with God. We should not treat praying to the Lord as a form of 'candy prayers' where all that we do is take from the Lord. Neither is prayer a 'to-do' list that we give to the Lord. Prayer is a two-way conversation that changes us and helps us to better follow Jesus on the journey of faith.

We have seen the four stages of the two-way conversation:

- 1) God initiates our prayer. He calls us to pray. He gives us access to His presence through Jesus. He arranges circumstances that stir us to respond and speak to Him.
- 2) We come before God honestly and tell Him what is truly in our hearts.
- 3) God speaks to us, and we listen to Him, primarily through the Bible and the sharing of believers.
- 4) We follow God when we hear God.

May God help us learn and practice the two-way prayer, so that we know Him more and love Him more!