

When should we pray?

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray, shall we? Father, as we've just sung, we come to your word now for inspiration, for clarity, for your word to that question, why should we pray? This week we're asking, when should we pray?

Maybe we should ask two more questions as well, which we're not going to deal with on the course of this short series. When can we pray and where should we pray?

See, just as there are times when, however desperate you might be for a pint of milk or a Big Mac, Tesco's and McDonald's are sometimes shut. And you can go and you can rattle on the door as much as you like, but there will be no one there to sell them to you. Is that true with God? Is there a time during the week, during the day, when God shuts up the shop, pulls down the shutters and says, I'm having a tea break, leave me alone. Is there? No.

No, there isn't. God never slumbers nor sleeps. Psalm 121 tells us, he who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. There is no time of day or night when God pulls down the shutters and closes shop. As we sang in that little song earlier on, you can tell the Lord that you love him any time. But is there a place where we might go where our prayers won't get through? Is there a part of creation so far away where God cannot hear us when we cry to him? No, there isn't. Psalm 139 teaches us these beautiful words. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there. There's something for you budding astronauts. However far up you go, you won't escape the presence of God. If you make your bed in the depths, for you budding scuba divers, the Lord is there. If you rise on the wings of the dawn, settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand hold me fast. If I say, surely the darkness will hide me, the darkest times of night, the deepest cave.

[2 : 3 6] Well, even the darkness is not dark to you. There is no time when we cannot pray, no place in all creation where our prayers won't get through. But the deeper question behind that one we're asking today is this, really. Are there situations where our prayers are either unnecessary or useless?

Are there times that we face in our life, not times of day, but seasons, times in our lives when our prayers are unnecessary or useless? Or for example, do we need to keep praying when everything is going well? And conversely, in life, when it's not, is there a time in life when frankly it's not worth us praying, when things are so bleak that we are beyond God's help?

Well, the answer, in case you hadn't guessed, is no. There are no times like that. There are no times or situations when our prayers are unnecessary because we should pray at all times. And there are no times or situations when our prayers are hopeless and a waste of breath. Because the power of God of prayer in the darkest times is not only in the fact that God is almighty and all-powerful and can do anything. But as we'll see, even by that very act of praying, we find light and hope.

We'll get to both of those things in turn. But we started with our readings in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. Would you like to open your Bibles up there just for a moment or two? It's on page 1188.

Just skimming through these verses, it's clear, isn't it, that the Thessalonian church was far from perfect. Some of them have the impression that the churches of the New Testament, well, they were just great. And the rest of us have been struggling to keep up since then. That's not the case. Just have a look down. The pastors had to work hard and admonish some in their congregation. If the church was perfect, the pastor's life would be a breeze. There'd be no need for admonishment.

[4 : 3 9] Paul had to urge the people to live at peace with one another. Who'd ever heard of a church where there are arguments? Surely it can't be true, can it? Well, it's true here, it's true there as well.

Some people were idle. Some people were disruptive, verse 14. Others were weak and disheartened, perhaps by the difficulties of life and following Jesus. Verse 15 includes an encouragement to strive to do what is good for each other and a warning not to seek revenge. Wow, what kind of a church family is this? It seems these Christians had a lot to learn, doesn't it? But it's into this messy situation, a church full of broken, sinful people, some of them having difficult, really difficult times in life, that Paul ends with three commands. Did you see them? Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. When should we rejoice? Always, no matter the time of day, no matter our location or circumstances we are facing. When should we pray? Always. In fact, Paul says we should pray continually, without ceasing. Paul's not saying that we should spend every moment of every day on our knees, or sat with our eyes closed, or never have a conversation with anyone else because we're busy talking to God. No, he's encouraging these Thessalonian Christians and us to continually have an open line of communication with God. Like an open phone line, if you like. So words of praise and thankfulness and requests for God's help can flow ceaselessly from our lips as we go through every day of our lives.

If you've ever been on a journey with someone, you'll know how this works. Maybe it's a holiday or a work or school trip. And as the day goes on, you're spending with them. The conversation flows, doesn't it?

[6 : 39] You share your joys together. You seek out lunch together. You do things for each other. You say thank you. When issues arise, you seek help together or ask for help together from someone else.

There may not be a constant stream of words without pausing for breath, although occasionally I've met people who are a little like that, struggling to get a word in edgeways. But as you spend the day with this person, as you have these conversations, those words naturally flow as the day progresses.

Paul is saying prayer should be like that for the Christian. We walk with God through life with a channel of communication, open, constantly, one that is frequently used.

So something wonderful happens and we say, just an arrow prayer, thank you for that, Father. You're desperate for a parking place in Asda. You say, Lord, I'm in a hurry, please.

We're open to him about our sorrows and fears. We ask for help for ourselves and for others. So imagine you're on this coach journey with God. You're looking out the window, you're seeing some amazing sights and you can praise him for his creation.

[7 : 53] The bus swerves to avoid a crash and you thank him for his rescue. You see someone out the window in need or distress, so you pray for God's blessing. You can't find your friend who has wandered off at lunchtime, so you pray for his help.

Then thank him when you're reunited. And as you go through that day, that channel of communication is open. And remember, that channel of communication is open with the God of heaven.

And you can lift your heart in praise and wonder for his love and grace and his amazing condescension that at whatever you are, whatever you're doing, God, your Father, is listening to you.

Does that make sense? When should we pray? Well, we can pray at all times. We should be praying all kinds of prayers. We'll get on to that next week. At all times. We'll get on to that next week.

Another vital benefit from that open line of communication is here. See, when we're as happy as Larry and full of joy, when life is as good as it can get, such an ongoing conversation with God prevents us from thinking that all this good stuff is down to us.

[9 : 27] And that we don't need him anymore. Because that is a real danger. I'm sure the fact that the church in the UK and the wider West is so weak is largely because we have had it so good.

Compared to the vast number of Christians in the world today, life is easy. We all have beds to sleep in. We have homes to call our own. We have more food and free time than we know what to do with.

So God gets left by the sides. After all, we already have all we need, don't we? So why do we need him? The Israelites faced that issue when entering the promised land.

In fact, God knew that their hearts were so hard that he told them through Moses what would happen when they got there. Deuteronomy chapter 31. When they get to this land, flowing with milk and honey, the land I promised on oath to their ancestors, when they eat their fill and they thrive, what will they do?

They will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my commandment. That's what happens. If we're not careful when life is good.

[10 : 34] That's why the end of the book of Proverbs, Agar, whose wise words are recorded there, has this as his prayer. God give me neither poverty nor riches, but only my daily bread.

Otherwise I will say, I have too much and disown you and say, who is the Lord? Or I become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God. There is real danger for us in too much wealth and comfort and ease.

When life is good, we can so fall in love with the gifts that we've been given that we take our eyes off the one who's given them to us. That constant flow of communication, as we'll talk about in our prayer course this week, praying to God in the ordinary time of life is a vital safeguard to us.

Prayer in these times keeps us grounded in God. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. But what about those times when life is not good, when the sun is not shining? What about those times when the darkness is deep? When the pain levels are through the roof? When any sense of hope or goodness, any feeling of God's loving presence is absent?

[11 : 51] Should we pray then? Should we keep on praying even when God doesn't seem to be listening? Well, we find the answer to that in Psalm 88. Despite the depth of darkness in this psalm, it gives us a resounding and defiant yes.

Absolutely. So turn back to that psalm. Psalm 88, page 597. I don't know whether you've ever faced times of depression or fear or loneliness or abandonment.

But if you have, then the words of this psalm may resonate with you deeply. Especially if you've been through those times as a Christian. And along with dealing with those things, you've got that extra question in your mind.

Where is God in all this? Are my prayers hitting the ceiling? Will this darkness ever end? Is God listening? Does he still care? If our Christian lives have been largely comfortable.

Or if we imagine that the carefree life is our right simply because we're Christians. Then facing times like the psalmist is facing here can throw us into a dangerous tailspin.

[13 : 08] Where we begin to question and doubt God's love and purposes. Even his very existence. But I want to show you this morning that these questions, this kind of wrestling is far from a bad thing.

Times like this might stretch out in front of us. They can seem to wear away the solid rock under our feet. But asking these kind of questions is far, far better than facing such times without God at all. See, the unbeliever has no one to call on. No evidence of God's love to cling on to. No promises of hope to fall back on. The Christian has all that and more despite the depths and darkness of the pit. The psalmist who wrote this psalm surely knew what those times were like. Psalm verse 1 tells us that his anguish lasts both day and night.

His troubles are overwhelming. Verse 3. They've brought him to the point of death. In fact, he's been at this point time and time again through his life, it seems.

[14 : 19] He feels cut off from God's care. Verse 5. As if God had forgotten him. And he's looking at his prospects and he can only see the grave. What's more, in verse 6, he says that he knows that it is God who has put him there.

You, he says, have put me in the lowest pit and the darkest depths. He feels under God's wrath and judgment, although there's no acknowledgement of any sin or guilt.

And it's not just his physical health that's suffered. His friends have deserted him. Verse 8. He is stuck and confined at home with no means of escape. Maybe the weightiest words of the psalm are the ones right at the end.

Darkness is my closest friend. What a helpless situation it seems for him. I wonder if you've ever felt anything in approaching that level of fear, of loneliness, of hopelessness.

If so, the psalmist here knows something of what you went through. Maybe what you're going through right now. Given all that, I wonder if the psalmist's pleas to God have surprised you.

[15 : 35] Because this psalm is not a cry of anguish and helplessness to an uncaring universe, or a broken political system, or an uncaring family. This whole psalm is a prayer of lament to God.

It's a prayer with a purpose. We'll be thinking more about that at our prayer course this week as well. And of course, he's not the only one to respond to God like this.

Jesus himself knew at least one time in his life that felt like this. And he cried out to God in exactly the same way. That first Good Friday is Jesus hung on the cross, enduring terrible suffering, great darkness, excruciating pain.

His friends had abandoned him. His father had distanced himself from him as he bore the sins of the world. What words came to mind then? Well, actually not Psalm 88, but Psalm 22.

This is how it starts. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And it is a cry of lament of anguish. And if you look down for the rest of that psalm, it's worth looking at later while you're on your own.

[16:49] It captures the crucifixion scene wonderfully well. All who see me mock me. They hurl insults, shaking their heads. He trusts in the Lord, they say. Let the Lord rescue him.

Verse 16. Dogs surround me. Packs of villains encircle me. They pierce my hands and feet. Verse 18. They divide my clothes among them. They cast lots for my garments.

Like the psalmist in Psalm 88, Jesus is lamenting his situation. He's being brutally honest about what is going on in his life. He's not hiding it anywhere.

We do that sometimes, don't we? Someone says to you, sir, how are you doing? You say, I'm fine. You're not fine. Sometimes in our prayers we can be like that to God as well.

Cloak ourselves. Not the psalmists. They are brutally, brutally honest. And that deepest darkness and the greatest suffering of all of history was poured out on Jesus.

[17:50] What did he do? Well, he turned to the psalms and he poured out a prayer of lament. We're facing those kind of times, those kind of emotions. That's what we should do too.

And it's not impertinence or faithlessness. It's quite the opposite. Actually, what we see from the psalmist here is a way, even in the darkest time, the deepest pit of expressing our faith and trusting God, even as we are honest about how hard life is.

Is that kind of anger allowed in prayer? Yes, it is allowed. In fact, it's encouraged. We'll get to why that is in a moment. As we've seen, this is a kind of prayer modelled by Jesus.

How can we feel for ourselves that, well, I can't possibly say those kind of things to God. Jesus himself spoke to his father like that. So back to Psalm 88.

See, the very fact that the psalmist directs his prayer to God is in itself a great statement of faith. Lord, you are the God who saves me.

[19:04] What's more, the psalmist continues to express his faith, even though his darkness is not brightened, nor his faith, nor his pain and anguish diminished. So day and night he calls out to you, verse 1.

I call out to you every day, Lord, verse 9. In the morning my prayer comes before you, verse 30.

How much faith must this man have that day after day, night after night, his cries do not stop?

Why does he keep on praying? Because deep down at the bottom of his being, he knows some wonderful truths about God. And he holds on to them. He knows that God is good.

He knows that even if it seems to be a one-way conversation at the moment, that God is listening.

And he knows that however little activity there seems to be in changing his circumstances, that God can act.

And that he will do something. That he is, verse 1, he is the God who saves me. And as he cries out to God like this, two things happen.

[20:11] His eyes, even for the briefest of moments, are lifted away from himself and they're placed back on God again. So notice how the psalmist reminds God and reminds himself of God's saving work, verse 1.

His willingness to listen, verse 2. His sovereign power over all things, verse 6. The wonders God has done in the past and his power to do them in the future, that's here. Verses 10 and 12.

He speaks of God's love and faithfulness, verse 11. Deep in this prayer of lament, the psalmist is doing what Paul told the Thessalonians to do. It doesn't feel like a prayer of rejoicing, does it?

But he is still rejoicing in these great qualities of God that give him the ability to express these words of lament to his father. Friends, one of the best things we can learn to do is to pray using words that God has already spoken to us in his words.

To turn truths back to him. It doesn't feel like you are good at the moment, God, but I know you are. You are the God who saves me.

[21 : 23] You need to save me now. Amen. Amen. The psalmist does that wonderfully well here. And as he does that, his strength is being renewed.

Not for the weeks and months to come, but just for that next day. That's why he is praying this again and again. The final line of the psalm is more literally just a cry.

Utter darkness! Every other psalm where the psalmist talks about the problems they're having, the enemies they're facing, the challenges they have. All of them, every single one, ends with something positive.

But I know you will rescue me. But I know you are good. Or if it's written in the past tense, thank you for saving me from this. This psalm ends with a cry of dereliction.

No hope! Utter darkness! Utter darkness! But even though that is his cry, that darkness now resonates with the echo of his prayer.

[22 : 34] A cry to the God who has heard him, who does see, and who can act. See, nothing in his circumstances has changed. At the moment, he can't see any prospect of them getting any better.

But still, as he cries out to God like this, the psalmist is able to find the strength to go on. To keep hoping. To keep trusting. To keep praying, even as the darkness continues.

See, the psalmist's circumstances haven't changed. But in the middle of this prayer, the psalmist has reminded himself that God hasn't changed either.

He is still listening. He is still listening. He is still sovereign. He is still powerful. His love and his faithfulness never fail. Which means when things haven't changed tomorrow, the psalmist still has a reason to come back to God again.

See, just as there are no places where we cannot pray, no time of day where we cannot pray, so there are no seasons in our life, good or bad, where we should not pray.

[23 : 44] And let me just say this. If we refuse to pray, perhaps out of anger or frustration of the darkness surrounding us, what are we saying? If we say, that's it.

I'm done with you, God. I'm not going to talk to you anymore. What are we saying? Well, we're saying that God is not good. Because he's not interested. That he doesn't love us.

Or that God is too weak to save. Well, none of those things are true, are they? None of them are true. And how do we know that? Well, we look to Jesus. We look to Jesus.

We remember, though, he was perfect light. That he endured our darkness for us. That though he was sinless, he bore our sins.

Though he once enjoyed for all eternity this perfect union with his father, he experienced on the cross divine separation so that you and I might be drawn in and enjoy that closeness with his father ourselves.

[24 : 47] Crying out to God when it feels as if God isn't listening or crying out to him that he is not acting is a hard thing to do sometimes.

Particularly if those situations go on day after day. But Psalm 42 that we looked at last week had this wonderful refrain in it. As I wrap things up, let me just remind you of this.

See, there are times when we spend too much time listening to ourselves rather than giving ourselves a good talking to. And in Psalm 42 and 43, the psalmist is wrestling with some difficult things.

He is feeling almost as bleak as the psalmist here. But repeated throughout that psalm and Psalm 43, the psalmist writes this. Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why are you so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. For I will yet praise him, my saviour and my God. When the darkness deepens.

[25 : 56] When perhaps we couldn't feel less like praying. The psalmist tells us to stop listening to ourselves. And tells us to talk to ourselves. To tell ourselves again that there is hope.

To remind ourselves that God is good. That it may seem like a one-way conversation, but God is listening. And that his power is undiminished. That he can act.

And that he will save. And so to keep crying out to him. Let's go back to those words in 1 Thessalonians 5.

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. When should we pray?

Always. Continually. In all circumstances. However dark and bleak they might be. Even if our only prayer is a prayer of lament.

[26 : 56] Like the one in Psalm 88. For God is always listening. His love never fails. And his mercies never run dry.

Remembering and acting on that will keep us firm in our faith. Through times of joy and through times of grief. In times of plenty and in times of want. And it will develop that relationship with our Heavenly Father.

That will keep us safely. To the end of time. When all of these struggles will be over. And we will be with the Lord forever. May we go deeper in our prayer.
However dark the day has become. Amen. Amen. Amen.