

Introduction

When I say the words "Hail Mary," what do you think of? If you're from a Catholic background, you probably think of a prayer, taken from the angel's greeting to Mary in Luke 1:28. If you're a football fan though, you probably think of a pass, thrown into the end zone at the end of a game. Hail Mary passes are ones thrown up in such desperate and impossible circumstances that the only way they can be completed is by divine intervention. Football fans use another idiom that means the same thing. The quarterback "threw up a prayer."

Hail Mary Prayers

In his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg claims that those two idioms reflect something about people's attitude toward prayer. It's that they associate it with desperation.

Think of it in the context of football. We've relied on our own resources and skills during the game but they've failed us. We've run out of opportunities and time. There's only one thing we can do now – throw up a Hail Mary, throw up a prayer.

It's the very same way in the context of life. People pray when they're desperate. Their spouses have just left them, their children are seriously injured or ill, they've lost their jobs, or they're pinned down in a foxhole. There's nothing else they can do. So, instinctively, they pray. We saw that after 9/11 didn't we? Churches held special prayer meetings and people who hadn't been to one in years, or ever, flocked to them. It's true isn't it? People pray when they're desperate.

But why is that? Why is it that people don't pray during normal times but do during desperate times, when there's nothing else to rely on? It's because of what they believe. Prayer doesn't really change things. Don't get me wrong. They do believe in God. But they don't believe that He acts in response to their prayers. What He was going to do, He will do – whether I pray or not. What was going to happen will

happen – whether I pray or not.

That belief though is paralyzing. It makes prayer a psychological impossibility at worst, a dead ritual at best. Consequently, you and I need to know the truth about prayer. We find it in the Daniel 9.

What Prayer Is

Verses 4-19 record a prayer of Daniel. In 605 BC, the Babylonians conquered Judah. Over the next 18 years, they exiled tens of thousands of God's people, including Daniel, into foreign lands. God had prophesied in Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10 that this would happen as a divine punishment and that the exile would last 70 years. He'd then return His people home. According to 9:1-2, Daniel was reading the book of Jeremiah in the first year of King Darius, which was 538 BC, 67 years after the exile began. He came across 25:11 and 29:10 as he did and learned, for the first time apparently, that the exile was going to last 70 years. He did some quick calculations in his mind and realized that there were only three more years left. So, he asked God in verses 4-19 to end the exile, to bring His people home - now, before the 70 years was up.

That shows us what prayer is. It's God's people asking Him to give or do something. We have a serious and healthy relationship with Him and request is at the heart of it. Thus, I want bad things not to happen to my wife. So I ask God everyday to keep them from happening. Request is the substance of prayer. We ask God to give or do things for others or us. When we ask for us, we call it petition. When we ask for others, we call it intercession. Both of those are what comprise prayer.

What We Should Pray About

But what is it that we should pray about? Notice the specific request of Daniel here. He loved his country, Judah, and its people and desperately wanted them to return to their homeland. So, he asked God to do just that, return them. That shows us what we should pray about - the things that really matter to us.

Many disciples of Jesus have a gap in their prayer lives. What *they want to pray about* are things that matter to them. But they believe that they're being selfish if they do and that God won't like it. So, they don't. They pray about the lofty and noble things, instead, *that they think they should pray about*. There is a gap then in their prayer lives – between what they want to ask and what they actually ask.

I knew a young woman who was single but wanted to meet and marry a fine Christian man. She wouldn't ask God to help her do that though. She'd pray about spiritual things, she said, but not that. She didn't pray in other words, about one of the things that mattered most to her.

The problem is that no one can keep that up for very long. The prayer lives of people who pray that way die from lack of interest. Prayer eventually becomes a tiresome irrelevancy to them. Nothing kills it faster than pretending to be nobler in it than we really are.

So bridge the gap. Paul tells us to do that in Philippians 4:6, ***“But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*** Barb Johnson tells about a single woman who hung a pair of trousers at the end of her bed and asked God everyday to fill them with a fine Christian man. We should pray about the things that matter to us no matter how ordinary they seem.

Why We Should Pray

Now that we know what prayer is and what we should pray about, let's examine why we should pray. Daniel 9 tells us. It's because there's power in prayer – for two reasons.

First, God hears our prayers. Verses 20-23 make it clear. He listened attentively to each and every word that Daniel prayed in verses 4-19. And you know what? He does the same with us.

A man once approached C.S. Lewis and said that he could believe in God. But what he couldn't believe was that He attended to a million prayers all at once. Most of us can empathize with that can't we. I mean think about it. This morning, I prayed for my Administrative Council

prayer partner, Amy Fanzo. How many people do you suppose were praying to God at that same time I did? It was probably millions. So didn't my prayer just get lost in the shuffle of all that?

No, it didn't. I don't have to explain how but God listened attentively to it. C.C. Lewis said it this way: ***“God has infinite attention to spare for each one of us. He does not have to deal with us in the mass. You are as much alone with Him as if you were the only human being He had ever created.”*** When you pray, in other words, it is to God as if you're the only one who is doing so. When you speak, He listens. He hangs on each and every word that you say.

There's a second reason that there's power in prayer. It's because God responds to our prayers. He certainly did to Daniel's. God had planned and prophesied that the exile would last 70 years. It began in 605 BC and He set it to end in 535 BC. But in 538 BC, Daniel asked Him to end it and, I quote verse 19, “do not delay.” That's what Daniel asked and God did it. He ended the exile two years early in 537 BC. That's an astonishing thing isn't it? God actually changed His plan and prophecy in response to Daniel's prayer.

He does the same with us. When we pray, He often gives or does what He wasn't going to. Or He doesn't give or do what He was going to. God answering our prayers isn't just a charade. He doesn't just pretend to answer them and then go ahead and give or do what He was going to anyway. On the contrary, prayer actually changes things. The infinite triune God is actually prevailed upon by our requests.

C.S. Lewis tells about a good man who prayed for a woman to be healed of cancer and she was. He rightly contends that God would not have healed the cancer if the good man hadn't asked him to. And that He healed the cancer because he asked him to. There was a cause and effect relationship between the man's prayer and God's action. Prayer changes things, in other words, because God responds to our prayers.

There's a reason that He does. The brilliant philosopher, mathematician, and Christian, Blasé Pascal, explained it well over 300

years ago. He said that ***“God instituted prayer in order to allow His creatures the dignity of causality.”*** It’s the chief way that we partner with God in His work in the world and thus learn to reign.

That makes prayer our most important and powerful ministry. Ortberg says it well. History belongs to the intercessors, the pray-ers.

How We Should Pray

So let’s just do it! Let’s pray! In that regard, Daniel’s prayer life, one of the finest in the Bible, teaches us three things about how to pray.

The first is found in 6:10. That verse says, ***“and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks to God.”*** You can see that Daniel prayed at the same time each day and so should we if we can. That time, if possible, should be when we’re at our best, when our powers of concentration are greatest. Many of us have calendars or schedules and our prayer time should be the most important daily item on it.

Daniel’s prayer life teaches us a second thing about how to pray. Notice these words in 6:10, ***“he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem).”*** You can see that Daniel prayed in the same place each day and so should we if we can. The physical setting of prayer is important. It should be one that supports our attempts at prayer. Making it the same place helps achieves that. One place that is used over and over again becomes sacred over time. That sacredness in turn helps us enter more deeply into prayer.

I had an attorney friend named David who was a devoted follower of Jesus and pray-er. Every day at noon, while everyone else went out to lunch, David withdrew into his office, closed the door, sat in his “prayer chair,” and prayed. If you looked at his calendar, you’d see these words written at noon each day, “Appointment with God.” Just as Daniel did, he prayed at the same time and in the same place everyday. So should we if we can.

Daniel’s prayer life teaches us a third thing about how to pray. Look

at 9:3-4. Daniel didn't just pray. He also gave His attention to God, supplicated, fasted, mourned, and confessed. And once again, so should we. We must accompany our prayer life with other spiritual activities. Certain spiritual activities are central in our lives with God: solitude, silence, fasting, study, confession, worship, fellowship, and celebration. Our prayer lives must take place in the context of those. They're enlivened and empowered when they do.

Preachers talk all the time about men and women of God who were great pray-ers: John Wesley, George Mueller, Hudson Taylor, David Brainerd, and more. But what they usually fail to mention is the larger context in which their prayer lives took place. Those close friends of Jesus practiced a host of spiritual activities that enabled them to pray as effectively as they did. To see their prayer lives outside that larger context deceives and injures us. In the end, it's an overall spiritual life that makes prayer the dynamic force for good that it can be.

That then is what Daniel's prayer life teaches us about how we should pray. First, at the same time everyday if we can. Second, in the same place everyday if we can. And third, in the context of other spiritual activities.

Conclusion

There's a lot more to be said about prayer but that's enough to make at least one point. We should pray just as naturally and fervently during the normal times as we do during the desperate times.

Consider this. It isn't the last second pass into the end zone that should be called a "Hail Mary." It's all the regular plays during the game instead: the down and out pass in the first quarter, the draw play in the second quarter, the sweep in the third quarter. That's actually more reflective of what prayer is. It isn't something that we should do just during the desperate times. It's something that we should do during the normal times as well. It's powerful and changes things. So, make every day, every situation of life, a "Hail Mary" one.