

Come As You Are

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[0:00] So, Heavenly Father, we are coming to your word, and your word is powerful!. It is active, it is living, it divides bone and marrow, as your word says, which means it! it just gets deep into the depths of our soul, into those places that it needs to go to bring conviction and healing and transformation according to your truth and your goodness and all the things that you are. And so, we just, I ask today, for me, a very broken, fallible human being that, as I preach, that you would lead and guide me. I pray for us as we listen, those of us listening, that you would open our hearts to receive all that you have for us. Amen. So, I get to continue us on in the next part of our series on prayer, and I just want to say this to you, God doesn't want you to give up on prayer. And he knows you're going to struggle with it. Jesus, he experienced this firsthand with his apostles one time in the Garden of Gethsemane, his most, his most, I don't know, darkest time of his ministry on earth. He goes, and he's going to pray, and he pleads with his disciples three times, hey, come and pray with me, watch and pray with me. And they nodded off to sleep each time. And yet, those same apostles that did that, that failed in that moment, seemingly, they turned into men whose ministry and life was marked and saturated with prayer. They didn't give up on prayer.

And they became those who prayed, and they prayed with confidence. And that's what we're going to look at today. How do we come with confidence in prayer? And I'm going to kick us off with this little teaser.

Confidence for prayer isn't about technique. It actually comes with the right understanding of who you are and who God is. Most struggles with prayer never change because what we do is when we're struggling with prayer, we often go to try to solve it by looking at prayer and considering prayer.

Because the Western church, it's big on knowledge-based only discipleship. Like if you just know a little bit more, you'll get it figured out. And they're very, very undeveloped or underdeveloped on relational connection discipleship. And so when we think about prayer, when we're taught to pray, we are given a kind of scientific method approach. Let's dissect what prayer is. What are the acceptable methods and structures? What scenarios should it be used for? And what for when? And what makes prayer work? And what causes it not to work? And again, like you can get into all those things and considering all those things. It's not a terrible idea. But we can take that and see that's all there is to this thing, to know about prayer and grow in prayer or fight back against struggling with prayer. But we can also just see prayer and approach it as a subject to master. Or I think what God is holding out to us, and I think what most of Scripture holds out to us, it's not a subject to necessarily master, but it should be approached as a relational reality to enjoy. You know, when you think about the apostles coming to Jesus and saying, Lord, teach us how to pray. They didn't come and say,

Lord, we really want to understand how prayer works in the divine counsel. And they came to him and said, teach us how to pray, because they wanted to pray with confidence. But they didn't ask for a theological treatise on the subject, and Jesus really didn't give them one. And the reason that they came and said, Lord, teach us to pray, is they were watching Jesus's life. And from that, they gleaned that, man, for Jesus, prayer is really, really important. But I would also hold out to you, he must, Jesus must have been engaging in prayer in a very different way, because these guys did not grow up absent of prayer all around them all the time. They were in a culture that was saturated in prayer. In that day and age, when Jesus was alive and walking on this earth, if you were a good practicing Jewish person, there were three hours of fixed prayer that you would enter into every day. And that's what you did. When you engaged in the annual festivals that happened, there were moments of worship and there were moments of prayer that you were followed in on. Prayer was everywhere all the time. When you were at the synagogue, you prayed the prayer. Psalms was their prayer book, the biggest book in the Old Testament. They were spoiled with teaching on prayer, practicing prayer, knowing prayer, having written prayers to follow along.

[4 : 55] You could say that the disciples grew up in this prayer environment, and yet still they struggled. So guess what? You're in good company. And I say all this to give you hope and to encourage you not to give up on prayer, no matter where you're at in this. Because if the apostles could grow in confidence, so can you. So let's first talk about why we struggle with prayer. A quick search on the internet provides these as the most common reasons. Prayer isn't, first, prayer isn't productive. It doesn't really do anything. Or two, we feel unworthy to come to God and ask anything because of sin, or because of cynicism and doubts that we have. Or three, we believe that there is a right way to pray, and we just know we're not doing it right, and we're failing at it. So you know what? I'm giving up.

And it's a pretty good, like when you think about those three things, it's a pretty honest projection of our American cultural values on the prayer. We value productivity. We value quick results. We value earning your worth. So anything you're gonna get, you gotta earn it. And we value expertise.

And so we go to prayer believing that good praying, good praying will yield specific results, right? Good prayers, the right kind of prayers, they get answered. Or, and, we go to prayer, and it's largely, it's somewhat to largely dependent on, getting your prayers answers is somewhat to largely dependent on you as a person, aka good Christians, are the ones who get their prayers answered.

So in response to those presuppositions, let's hear from God in what he tells us about prayer in his written word. Hebrews 4, verses 14 to 16, this is what we're gonna work from today. It says this, since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

Jesus, the son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[7 : 30] The invitation and implication of this passage of scripture is that you and I, we can draw near to God with confidence, which is good news. But it also shows us what kind of people do that.

And these verses paint the very opposite kind of person that we think we need to be in order to approach the throne of grace with confidence. And to be honest, it's the kind of person we don't want to be seen as, because it says it's the weak and the needy. Which brings us to our first point, confidence in prayer grows the more you see how helpless you really are.

Jack Miller was a pastor in the late 20th century, and he was the father to my favorite author, Paul Miller, who wrote a book, *A Praying Life*. You might have heard of it. It's one of the seminal books on prayer in the last couple of decades. And he was also a mentor to the late Tim Keller. Tim Keller even says about Jack Miller, if I didn't sit under his tutelage, there would have been no Tim Keller ministry that really happened in the way that it did. And Jack was famous for repeating a handful of cheer up statements throughout his ministry. And one of them was this, and I love it, cheer up, you're far worse than you know. But cheer up, God's grace is greater than you have ever dared hope.

And that truth that he spoke over and over and over again got through to his son Paul when he wrote that book on prayer. Here's a little quote from that *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller that kind of gets at what those cheer up statements were saying. It's a bit long, but it's so good. So just listen, I'm just gonna read it. We tell ourselves, strong Christians pray a lot. If I were a stronger Christian, I'd pray more. Strong Christians do pray more, but they pray more because they realize how weak they are.

They don't try to hide it from themselves. Weakness is the channel that allows them to access grace. I'm not referring to well-known Christians. In fact, there's a story of an interviewer who once asked Edith Schaeffer, the author and wife of evangelist and philosopher Francis Schaeffer, who is the greatest Christian woman alive today? I wonder how we would answer that question.

[10:05] She replied, we don't know her name. She's someone dying of cancer somewhere in a hospital in India. I'm talking about that woman. Underneath her obedient life is a sense of helplessness. It has become a part of her nature, almost like breathing. Why? Because she is weak.

She can feel her restless heart, her tendency to compare herself with others. She is shocked at how jealousy can well up in her. She notices how easily the world gets its hooks into her. In short, she distrusts herself. When she looks at other people, she sees the same struggles. The world, the flesh, and the devil are just too much for her. And the result, her heart cries out to God in prayer. She needs Jesus. He goes on to say this, as we mature as Christians, we see more and more of our sinful natures. But at the same time, we see more and more of Jesus. And as we see our weakness more clearly, we begin to grasp our need for more grace. The gospel uses my weakness as the four for God's grace. Paul, what he's saying here is what these verses in Hebrews 4 are trying to get us to realize.

And it's this, confidence in prayer doesn't grow despite our weakness and helplessness. They are the basis for it. Think about that. If you don't believe me, who did Jesus say we should come to God like? As the expert? It was a child. Come like children. The apostles James and Peter tell us in their writings that God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. I mean, just look at, look at Jesus. Consider him. He chose to humble himself and put on our weakness. No wonder he prayed so much to the Father. And this idea of being humble, of being weak and needy is so counterintuitive because we often equate humility with a lack of confidence. But that isn't so. Humility is a shift of where we put our confidence. See, pride, what it does, pride puts confidence in our own merit and capabilities. I am good enough, I've done enough, that I am deserving of every good and perfect thing because of who I am and all those things that I've done. So we often come to God with this idea of like,

I gotta have this great resume to give to him and then I'll get my prayers answered. But a humble confidence, what it does, it embraces our weakness and it looks to God for help.

And we never feel entitled to what we want. Humble confidence asks, makes that request, and then it leaves the outcome, outcomes to God's will and timing.

[13:24] And that humble confidence, it demands something of you and me, if we wanna go another layer deeper, demands something of you and me that we just aren't comfortable with. Dependence on someone else. A needy heart is a praying heart.

And dependency is the heartbeat of prayer. Confidence in prayer. Confidence in prayer grows when you realize that dependence is maturity. We often think of it the other way. We often think of independence as, that's what mature people do, they don't need anybody else.

But that's not so in God's kingdom. Think about this, prayer is our declaration of dependence on God. And if that's true, that means prayerlessness is our declaration of independence.

Now, this is tough for us because independence is something that our culture today glorifies. Lift yourselves up by your bootstraps. Don't owe anybody anything.

Being a person that is able to call your own shots is the pinnacle of success. We even have a theme song for it. I did it my way by Frank Sinatra.

[14 : 43] See, we see independence as strength. We look and we see, man, the independent man, that's the ultimate flex. But is it really? Because if you're anything like me, you prefer independence because it's safe.

To be dependent upon someone else is one of the most vulnerable positions to put yourself in. A truly strong and courageous person embraces dependence, not independence.

And you need to be strong and courageous to do that because people will fail us. We open our hearts to them and they hurt us. They break their promises. Dependence is unsafe and scary.

And perhaps that fear is really what lies beneath our doubts about prayer and our reticence about prayer. Can I really trust God? Will he respond how I want him to?

Is he really for me? You know, I've prayed before and nothing happened. Is God really there or am I just lobbing up words to an empty sky?

[15 : 58] And these are all legitimate questions we all have. Like none of us want to be the 20-year-old who hasn't figured out Santa yet, right? We want our faith and our trust in God to be validated.

And that validation, that need for validation, that need and that sure thing, it's one of the obstacles that the religious leaders of Jesus' day just couldn't get over.

They kept asking him for a sign. Prove yourself, prove yourself, prove yourself. Because if Jesus could give them a sign that they wanted, it would be a validation that took away the risk of them being wrong about Jesus being the Messiah.

They didn't want that to happen. They wanted the sure thing. But Jesus never gave them the sign that they wanted. Dependence on God requires you and me to let go of outcomes and to let go on timings of things that we want to look to to be like, oh yeah, God, you're proving yourself to me.

We've got to let those things go. And here's why you don't need them. When you focus on God proving himself through a sign, you are missing out on the best proof that you ever need.

[17 : 08] And that's his presence. That's it. That presence that's attended by his love and his peace and his goodness. You know, my story is God met me in a very real way at the age of eight.

And that's when I got saved. And I remember as a kid closing my eyes and I knew about Jesus. And then suddenly I was like, I am scared to open my eyes because I think I'm going to see the risen Savior. And that was freaking my heart out because I know that's like I was a sinner and did not deserve to be there.

And so when I prayed that prayer, Lord, I'm a sinner. I need to be saved. Everything changed. That moved from that to I was flooded with peace, with love, with his goodness, all those things.

And I just boohooed for the longest time. And I knew that, man, even to this point, there is nothing that anybody can say or do. There is no argument that science can make to convince me that God isn't real, that Jesus isn't real.

And I follow it all the way back to that point. You can make the finest sounding argument and I just have a yeah, but. I've met the guy.

[18 : 20] You can't tell me that wasn't real. You can't tell me that what I experienced was beyond anything I've ever experienced in my life. Nobody could give me that.

Not an experience, not a person, not a concert, not a sunset, nothing. Not the best dinner. That's the validation.

Now, I want to say this. If God answers a prayer request or gives you a powerful sign, maybe healing or speaks to you through a word of knowledge, and I've seen those things happen, appreciate that and take them as a gift.

But don't build your faith on signs. Relationship with God is all you need to validate your faith. I mean, Satan tried to get Jesus to perform signs and miracles in a very public way during his temptation of Jesus.

He said, go stand up on the temple, the most public place and the most religious city, the biggest city in Israel. Cast yourself down from that place in front of the crowds and show them who you are.

[19 : 28] His angels will come and save you, and then everybody will know. Who could deny that? Jesus said, no, I'm not going to do that. He rejected making grand public displays of power to prove himself.

All his teachings, all his miracles, they were done out of the spotlight. And yet they were still sufficient to prove he was who he was. He kept choosing weakness.

He kept choosing humility rather than massive displays of power. And this is fitting if you're going to be the most God-dependent person of all time, and he was. John 5, 19, listen to what Jesus says in front of everybody.

Jesus said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, the son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the father doing.

For whatever the father does, that the son does likewise. Now, imagine you overheard me saying that to my 82-year-old dad.

[20 : 33] You know, dad, I know I'm 47, but I do nothing except what you tell me to do. You'd be a little more than concerned for me. Right?

And that makes sense when it comes to people. Because people, they're fallible. They're not experts at everything. But God is. And that's why dependence on him made sense to Jesus.

I only do what the father tells me to do. And it's also why Jesus expects his disciples to follow his lead in that way. Think about it. For any of us, if you have a mass growing out of your neck, are you going to self-diagnose?

Are you going to the doctor who can do a biopsy and figure out what's actually going on? Furthermore, would it not seem to us quite foolish if the doctor came back and said, hey, guess what?

It's cancer. And we need to surgically remove it. And your reply is, ah, you know what? I just don't like, that's not good for me. Can we just do some over-the-counter medicine? Can we get like a more powerful version of Tylenol?

[21:45] Now, over-the-counter medicine might be what you want. But the doctor is not going to write that prescription for you. He is only going to do what he knows you need.

God's no different. He knows what's best for us. We can come to him with our problems. And as this Hebrew passage says that we started with, draw near to Jesus.

Go to the doctor's office. And to receive, go there. And you know what's going to happen? You're going to receive the mercy and find grace for the help that you need.

And that's a big confidence booster. Knowing that God knows what's best for us is a confidence booster. And it's a great truth that answers another common insecurity of ours with regards to prayer.

One of our biggest insecurities, if you're anything like me, how do I know if I'm praying what I should be praying? Am I asking for the right things? Am I discerning God's will correctly in this?

[22:48] And if you ever had unanswered prayers for like serious things that you are really needing God to come through on, things like healing or for a spouse or to get pregnant or rescue from addiction or to get you out of this abusive situation you might be in, man, you're praying and praying and praying and God's doing nothing, you will wrestle with this insecurity.

You will ask those questions. That is very, very normal. Now I want to say those are all legitimate needs and you should go to God with those requests.

You should pray for God to intervene in those things. And yet we know from experience God isn't predictable on how he answers them. Wish he was, but he is not.

And typically when that happens, when God doesn't answer those big requests, we respond in one of two ways. We let him off the hook and we just say, well, he's sovereign.

He just wants to do, he's going to do what he wants. Anyways, then we kind of land in, so actually, why pray? If he's just doing what he wants to do, why pray? Or we put the responsibility on ourselves and we say, you know what?

[24:01] I just didn't ask it the right way. I didn't have the right incantation. There's something, must have been something blocking this from happening. Maybe I didn't come with enough faith.

Maybe there was some hidden sin in my life. Maybe there was that. And we come with all those things. We take on that responsibility for God. And both of those responses will only make you less likely to pray.

And you will lose more and more confidence to come to God in prayer. Well, Jess, then what should we do? Let's listen to Jesus' words.

Matthew 6. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them. Listen to this. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Ah. But then Jesus says, okay, based on that, pray like this.

[25:04] He doesn't say, based on that, don't pray. He already needs, like, don't waste your time, guys. He already knows what you need. He actually says, based on that, what I just said, God knows what you already need.

He then goes and says, okay, now pray like this. What Jesus, the prayer of all prayers, is saying is confidence in prayer doesn't require you knowing what God knows.

All right? It doesn't, you do not have to be a divine mind reader. Ask away. Ask away with whatever is on your heart.

Whatever is filling your mind with anxiety or worry or fear or whatever it may be. You want to, or anything you may, you want to win the lottery?

Ask away. Are you concerned about your sick relative? Ask away. Is there a job promotion you would really like to get? Ask away. Do you have a family member who has wandered from Jesus or is far from God and you want God to intervene?

[26 : 09] Ask away. Is there severe persecution or injustice or violence occurring somewhere around the world that you want to see end? Ask away.

Ask away. And not getting the answer you requested doesn't mean God isn't there. And it also means God doesn't care.

It doesn't mean God doesn't care. He cares more than we ever could and knows what's best even more than we do and has a good, perfect plan that involves you and everyone else.

Think about this when it comes to prayer. If you were to know what God knows and have his heart that is bent towards goodness and mercy and justice, then we would pray the prayers that we know we should be praying.

They would line up with him. But we know that's not us. And if you think that's you, guess what? You are delusional. We are selfish.

[27 : 09] We don't know the end from the beginning like God does. We don't have foreknowledge of things like he does. And yet Jesus says, ask away. Just do it knowing that God already knows what you need before you ask.

Which means asking is important. But also that God will only deliver on what he knows is best. You don't have to worry if your prayer is long enough, clear enough, theologically sound enough.

If you don't have to worry about, you don't have to worry about like, oh no, man, I came with my list and I got sidetracked by these other things I've been thinking about. Man, Lord, I'm so sorry.

Thinking about those petty things. You don't really care about those things. Eh. He cares about the big and the small stuff. Don't worry about that. Confidence in prayer grows when you focus on who you're coming to rather than how you're doing.

The guy who wrote the book Praying Life, Paul, that we, I quoted earlier. He's taught on countless, countless times on prayer.

[28 : 26] He's taught at prayer conferences. He's done workshops for hundreds of churches. He's been doing this for the last three decades. And you think a guy like that has prayer down and he says this.

When it comes to prayer, nobody's an expert. We're all beginners. Get your eyes off yourself. Get your eyes off how you are praying and how your prayer performance is going.

God is not counting that at all. Get your eyes off yourself and get your eyes on who God is. Jesus' prayer template starts with our Father in heaven.

His prayer life was get your eyes on the Father as soon as possible. As that relationship draws you in. Draws you into prayer. With that in mind, let's revisit the passage we read at the beginning.

Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness.

[29 : 33] But one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.

The basis of your confidence in prayer is God's mercy and grace. And your weakness that he shared in. Think about that.

The basis of your confidence in prayer to come to God is his mercy and his grace. And your weakness that he shared in.

He knows who you are inside out. He knows you better than you realize. He's experienced all the disappointments. All the hardship.

All the suffering. All the difficulty. He has faced every temptation that you have faced. So don't give up on prayer. Come with confidence. God is available.

[30 : 30] And he wants to speak with you. And he wants to hear from you. So what we're going to do before we close. We typically kind of land in communion. I just want to land in practicing some prayer together.

It's not going to be long. Just give me a few minutes. Okay. And I guarantee you the first 20 seconds you're probably going to feel a little weird. But then you're going to get over it.

All right. So let's close our eyes. The whole idea is who we're coming to. We're not caring about what people are thinking about us.

We're all doing this together. We're all being weird together. All right. We're all coming to God. The band comes up. And I want to lead you in some prompts.

On having a conversation with God. Simply to show you how easy prayer is. We just make it way too complicated. And just say to God, Lord, I do believe.

[31 : 37] And just quietly, not out loud. Just say this to yourself. Lord, I believe that you are there. You are here. You see me and you're listening. Now ask the Father how he is seeing you right now.

And not in a super deep way. Just in a very practical way. Oh, I see you in a church gathering. I see you watching over in the family room.

I see you sitting or standing or pacing. I see that your eyes are closed. And you're trying your best to be fixed on me. Just say those things in your mind.

And now ask him how he's experiencing your heart right now. Maybe it's calm. Maybe it's racing. Maybe it's scattered. Maybe it's anxious. Maybe it's hopeful.

Maybe it's angry. Maybe it's desperate. Maybe it's a bit cynical. Maybe it's a bit judgmental. Maybe it's excited.

[32 : 54] Just say, God, this is how you're experiencing me right now. Because he's the God who hears you.

And now bring to God what are the thoughts, all the thoughts that are dominating your mind right now. Not the things you think you should be thinking about in this time of prayer, but the things you are thinking about.

Bring those things to God. Maybe it's, my Lord, my mind's full of that meeting I have with my boss tomorrow that I'm really nervous about. Or I'm feeling overwhelmed by the current financial situation I'm in.

Or I feel defeated by this particular sin and really guilty. I can't seem to get victory over it. Gosh darn it, I've done it again. Lord, I'm angry and hurt by that close friend that did this thing or that thing to me.

Or maybe it's something good. Just bring it to God. Whatever's top of it. We always think like, Lord, you don't want to hear this. Yeah, he does. Bring it to him. Invite him into it with you.

[34 : 21] Now listen to what God is saying in response to what you brought to him. Don't look for his answers and tell him what he should be saying.

Listen to his understanding and his comfort towards you. Hear him saying back to you, my son, my daughter, I know.

I see you. I know this is hard for you. I know how disappointed you're feeling.

I know how frustrated that this happened again. And then tell God how you need his help. If you would see you.

[35 : 45] Stand with me. We're going to continue to pray. Let's just keep our eyes closed. If you're here and you're not yet a follower of Jesus, God's promises from Jeremiah, it says that if you seek me, you will find me.

If you seek me with all your heart, I will be found of you. Come to Jesus just as you are. He doesn't want you to come as the expert.

He doesn't want you to come as the person who suddenly got it all together. He says, come to me just as you are. Come to me just as you are. Amen.