

Chapter 1



Prayer Is Conversation with God

My grandfather, Paul Sutton, was not a preacher; he was a farmer, but he taught me much about God. He wore denim overalls practically every day, other than on Sundays when he went to church. I learned much about prayer as conversation with God from listening to my grandfather pray.

I was one of many grandchildren in the Sutton family, sixteen, to be exact. At one time, many of us attended the same church in rural Lawrence County, Alabama. It was wonderful to be raised in that small church with a big family.

All the grandkids loved to spend the night at Granddaddy and Grandmother's house. It was a small, white house situated on a farm, but it miraculously swelled to accommodate all the grandchildren whenever we wanted to spend the night.

My grandmother, Beatrice, was a fantastic cook. We were often awakened in the morning by the smell of her biscuits, thick chocolate gravy (a Southern breakfast dish), and various meats

being fried from the livestock Granddaddy raised. For me, those times spent with cousins at my grandparents' house were precious. They were grand for many reasons, but perhaps the grandest of reasons was the opportunity I had to listen to Granddaddy pray.

Every night at bedtime, Granddaddy would turn off the television, stop all activity, and gather all of us into the living room. He would then ask us to find a place to pray, and we would all kneel. Granddaddy's small living room would be filled with tiny Sutton kids on our knees beside Granddaddy and Grandmother. All ages were represented. We all said our dutiful prayers for our parents, siblings, Sunday school teachers, pets, football teams, "Bear" Bryant, or whatever else was on our young hearts. Eventually the room would grow still as our little voices faded off and got quiet. We'd slowly stop praying, one by one, and wander off to our beds. But whenever our prayers ceased, Granddaddy's didn't. He always continued to pray even after we were all finished.

He would talk to God like he was talking to his friend. And I distinctly remember one specific line from Granddaddy—I've never heard anyone say it quite like him—"Lord, bless all those that it is our duty to pray for." When we heard him pray, we knew Granddaddy was listening to God. But perhaps even more so, when we heard him pray, we knew God was listening to Granddaddy. It was a conversation between heaven and earth. Hearing Granddaddy's prayers helped me realize early on that prayer is simply a conversation with God. We speak and we listen. We talk and we hear. God wants us to converse with him, much like speaking with a friend.

Jeremiah 33:3 says, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell

you great and unsearchable things you do not know.” These are powerful words indeed—a promise from God. Why then would we *not* pray? The truth is that we have many reasons. And even when we pray, prayer can become just another option for us, something to pick up and put down for our own purposes. But it can and should be so much more than that.

The truth is that prayer is a mighty vehicle for us. It is something we use to carry out the purposes of God in our lives. We know prayer can increase the effectiveness of our ministry; we know prayer will boost our ability to reach the harvest. We pray so we can lead; we pray so we can work; and we pray so we can preach. We pray so we can accomplish what God wants us to accomplish. We pray so we can talk to God. And we pray so we can hear from God.

Prayer and the life of prayer are spiritual practices. I cannot explain them to you; rather, they must be experienced. I’ve seen a myriad of T-shirts and bumper stickers that say, “Prayer changes things.” But prayer does not change things. Prayer has no power whatsoever in and of itself. If simply being enthusiastic about prayer as a powerful vehicle were enough, I could pray to anything and receive an answer. No, prayer doesn’t change things; it is God who changes things! I’ll say it again: It is not prayer or even a life of prayer that brings us power; it is the God to whom we pray who has all power.

Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” The church has been called to pray continually. You and I have been called to pray continually, pray without

stopping. It is a vital part of the life of a Christian. Whatever has gone on in the past, you can decide today that you're going to be a person who prays—a person who maintains a lifestyle of prayer. I've made the decision—I will pray.

*It's not prayer itself that has the power; rather,
it is the God we pray to who has the power.*

MAKE THE DECISION: AN EXPERIENCE OF SCRIPTURE

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."
(Matthew 22:37)

Make the decision to pray by first learning to love God and making him your priority. Since the greatest of all the commandments is to love God, let's pause to consider the question: "How is it that we really love God?" Often our response indicates that we believe that loving God is equal to doing things *for* God. All the while, he is simply longing for us to *relate* to him.

If God needed something done, then he could enlist the angels for perfect execution and without complaint. We, as his created image bearers, have the privilege of intimacy with him. Our journey with God in prayer provides this unique opportunity.

As we approach him in prayer, where do we begin? The psalmist declares:

Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the LORD is God.
 It is he who made us, and we are his;
 we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.
 Enter his gates with thanksgiving
 and his courts with praise;
 give thanks to him and praise his name.
 (Psalm 100:2–4)

Imagine that you're a parent and one of your teenagers initiates this conversation: "Mom/Dad, I'd like to take this time to share the gratefulness I feel for all the ways you have loved me so well!" What an absolute miracle that would be, right? But wouldn't you agree that kind of heartfelt expression of gratitude communicates love? Likewise, you and I express our love to the Lord in many relational ways, and one of the most important is through our gratitude.

Prayer is a journey into deepened love with the Lord. "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). Pause now to pray a prayer of thanksgiving and serve God with a glad heart:

Father, as I reflect on the countless ways you have loved me well, my heart overflows with thanksgiving. I'm especially grateful for how you have blessed me with _____, and how you have sustained me through _____. I praise you for your generosity and grace. Receive my thanksgiving and praise as a small expression of my deep love. Amen.



L1. Practicing thanksgiving in all things.

In 1 John 5:14, we read, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” Prayer is a conversation with the one who is always there. It allows us access through Jesus Christ into a conversation with God. The Father is always seeking a conversation with us; he greatly desires to communicate with us.

My wife, Renee, and I recently did some redecorating in our upstairs bathroom. We took down some wallpaper, spackled a few holes, and repainted the walls. She purchased some new decorations and pictures. Of course, she wanted me to hang these pictures on the walls.

So I went into my garage, reached into my black tool bag, pulled out my hammer, and grabbed some nails from my old plastic ice-cream bucket. I took my hammer and used it to drive in every one of those nails in the exact location where Renee wanted the pictures hung.

When I finished, I hung the pictures and headed back into my garage. I opened my black tool bag once again, placed my hammer back inside, and zipped up the bag. Finished! Right now, as I’m writing this, my hammer is put away. I know where it will be the next time I need to drive in a few nails or hang up more pictures. That’s using my hammer as the tool for which it was intended.

We might as well admit it: We often use prayer in our lives and in the church as a tool from a tool bag. When we need God to do something for us, when we need something in ministry, when we desire to have something accomplished, we go to the spiritual tool bag because we know that prayer is what we should use. We

pick up prayer, we pray the prayer, and then we put prayer back in the bag until we need it again. But prayer is intended to be so much more than this!

What if prayer was not simply a vehicle to take us somewhere? What if prayer was not just a tool to get God to move when we wanted him to? What if we could participate in prayer in a completely different—and much more valuable—manner?

So often we use prayer as a vehicle to get us to a desired destination. We need provision, so we pray. We need anointing, so we pray. We need healing or deliverance, or cleansing, so we pray. But what if prayer is not the vehicle that brings us *to* our destination? Rather, what if it *is the destination*?

Prayer is not simply a step of the journey; prayer *is the journey*. When we realize this, we will understand prayer as a continual conversation with God. And as I think back, I'm pretty sure this is a truth my grandfather fully grasped.

In Genesis, we read about the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had committed a sin—they had eaten the forbidden fruit—and now their eyes were open. The imagery the Word of God painted here is that in the cool of the day, God comes walking through the garden, seeking to talk with them. Can you imagine what that would look like? In the garden of Eden, in the cool of the day, maybe in the afternoon, God comes walking along. Why is he taking a walk in the garden? He's looking for Adam and Eve so he can have a conversation with them.

As God walks, he asks, "Where are you?" God, who is omnipresent—everywhere at every time—and omniscient—all-knowing—asks Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" He knew

where they were, obviously, but they were hiding. They were avoiding this conversation with their Creator. Their sin had led them to avoid God; their disobedience had brought separation. In our lives, sin also separates us from God. Nonetheless, the powerful question God asks them still remains for us to answer, “Where are you?”

Do you think God didn’t know where Adam and Eve were? Do you think God didn’t know the exact pinpoint location, without a GPS, where Adam and Eve were hiding? Have you ever stood in a room that was full or sat at a table with other people and felt completely ignored? Though the room was full, no one was paying attention to you. Have you ever attended an event one day and then the following day you ran into someone who said, “I saw you there,” and you said, “I didn’t see you there”? It is easy to ignore and be ignored.

So many times, God walks into our lives in the cool of the day, and even though he knows exactly where we are, he asks, “Where are you?” Maybe the question God was asking Adam and Eve was not for him. Maybe it was for them.

WHERE ARE YOU? AN ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

Consider this question: What was going on in the heart of God when he asked the question: “Where are you?” Was his intention to find Adam and then wipe him off the face of the planet? Did God ask the question because he planned to give Adam the silent treatment and never speak to him again? Or was God’s heart and divine intention to ask the

question that ultimately revealed his plan for redemption and restoration?

There were certainly consequences to Adam's disobedience, but the heart of God was filled with compassion and love. We know this because God's plan is revealed throughout Scripture where he is always reaching out to humanity.

Don't miss this: How we view God's heart toward us determines our pursuit of intimacy with him. Listen as he asks the same question of you: "Where are you?" And remember, his heart's intention isn't to harm you or never speak to you again. Who would want to pursue closeness with that kind of "god"?

Instead, imagine this kind of God. Imagine that you're a parent of a small child. You're in a busy shopping mall during the holidays. Hundreds of people are crowding the aisles, hustling to get to the next store, elbowing their way through the halls, and shoving to keep their place in line. Your preschooler is intrigued and distracted by everything in sight. And then it happens. You're focused on a conversation with the salesperson, you look around and your child is gone. You panic. You retrace your steps. Over and over, you're thinking to yourself, *Where are you?*

Consider the emotions flooding your heart. You may be irritated at your child's impulsiveness and scared about the dangers of being separated, but underneath all that is your heart of compassion. Your irritation is no match for the compassion you feel as you imagine your child alone and afraid. The question, "Where are you?" is motivated by love. Now imagine the relief you feel after being reunited with your child; the joy you would feel when the relationship and security are restored.

Though God never has and never will lose sight of us, perhaps we may fail to see him at times. Reflect again on your view of God, just in case you've seen God in another way. *This* is the real God. This is the God who is longing to love you and to intimately relate with you. This kind of God prompts our pursuit of him.

"Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18). Pause quietly to meditate on the Lord. Use your imagination to picture Jesus sitting at the Father's right hand. *You* have been the lost child, anxious and uncertain. And now he sees you with joy and excitement. He arises with compassion in his heart to embrace you. Allow your heart to celebrate this kind of Jesus!



L3. *Experiencing God as he really is through deepened intimacy with him.*

When prayer becomes more than an event, more than just a hammer in a tool bag that we grab when we need it; when prayer becomes a constant, ongoing conversation with God, we will begin to recognize the countless times we have ignored him. When prayer becomes conversation, God will ask us, "Where are you?" so we can answer, "I am right here."



I learned a lot about farming from Granddaddy. To feed livestock, a person needs hay, so my grandfather grew hay. We would cut,

rake, bale, and store the hay so we could feed it to the cows. Hay can be gathered into large rolls that must be lifted and transported by a tractor, or it can be gathered into smaller bales (usually rectangle-shaped) that can be lifted by hand. Most of the time, our hay was gathered into the smaller bales, which meant we had to pick up every single bale by hand and throw it onto the trailer. We would then drive the trailer back to the barn where we'd unload all the bales to protect them from the weather until winter, when we'd feed it to the livestock.

As a boy, it seemed as if we only hauled hay on the hottest days of the year. It was hard work, and almost every child and grandchild participated, except for the youngest of the young. We recruited as many people as possible to help so the work would go faster. It was hard work, but it was a joy to participate together to accomplish something that meant so much to my grandfather.

I look back at those times with joy, but I also I remember what it felt like before I was old enough to help, when I was too little to be of much use. I wanted to contribute like everyone else, but I was just too small to lift a bale of hay. My father must have seen this longing inside of me as a little boy, because he would often call out to me, "Can you come help me pick up this bale of hay and put it on the trailer?" And all fifty pounds of me would run over to grab one end of that seventy-five-pound bale of hay, hoist it up, and throw it onto the trailer with all my might.

"I did it!" I would proclaim. "I put the hay on the trailer!" I'm sure my dad just laughed, knowing that he had done all the lifting and pulling—I was only there with my hands on the hay. But it felt so wonderful to believe I was a part of this family chore.

As I think back to moments like these, I realize God seems to work in a similar manner. God doesn't need you or me, but he loves us so much that he calls us over to participate in what he's doing: "I have a weight that is far too heavy for you, but if you'll come over, we'll pick it up together. We'll accomplish more together than you ever thought you could. It's my strength that gets the job done. It's your cooperation with me that makes it enjoyable for us both."

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Only in constant conversation with God can we come to these realizations. This is how the participation begins. To help with the bale, I had to hear Daddy's voice calling to me. I had to listen. I had to know his voice. We come to know the voice of God through constant conversation. In such conversation, we hear God calling us to participate with him in the work he's doing in this world. That's why Granddaddy prayed; that's why we pray. John 14:11–14 says:

Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whosoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.



On January 8, 2015, my younger brother, Jason, passed away. I've told many that, between the two of us, I believe the Lord gave Jason all the good looks, charm, and charisma. He was the funniest person I ever met. He had suffered with addiction problems most of his adult life. He was a wonderful brother, but he struggled to be free from the strongholds of addiction. He had been in and out of many rehab programs. Our family tried to walk through Jason's struggles with him; I'm not sure I supported him enough or gave him what he needed, but I always wanted to help. Most of the time, I didn't know what to do or how to do it. We loved him greatly.

Before Jason died, however, the Lord began to speak to my heart about addiction and how we could and should respond to the needs of the addicted. There are addicts all over the world, probably some who will read this book. Addicts are not second-class people; they are not terrible people. If you have an addiction that you can't seem to shake, you're not a horrible person. You have a stronghold in your life. And like everyone who wrestles with sin or any sort of bondage, God desperately loves you, and he will not leave you to struggle alone. He will lead you to the right people, the right program, and the right help, if you'll ask him; if you start a conversation with him about your struggle.

One day, I told my brother I wanted to have a recovery program at Peerless Road Church, where I served as pastor. I asked his opinion on the different programs available. His response got my attention: "All of those programs you mentioned are great. But if you think you can run any of them, you are wrong. You cannot