

Introduction

Miller did not intend to write a book on prayer. Rather, he was asked to fill a pulpit for one month, and the lessons he taught on prayer became a prayer seminar that he traveled around teaching, and that others found very helpful. He was encouraged to write the book, though he felt another book on prayer was not necessary.

This book, however, while teaching doctrine, will be full of personal stories. "The meat of the book is the family stories I tell...nitty-gritty tales of surviving and thriving in a world of stress and disappointment" (p. 12). "I wrote for Christians, for those struggling to do life, who pray badly yet long to connect with the heavenly Father" (p. 11).

Chapter 1 – What Good Does it Do?

He begins with a story of answered prayer. It is a simple story of praying so that they would find the contact lens of his 14-year old daughter. She is cynical about prayer because God has not answered her prayers for her autistic, developmentally delayed sister. Even as he prayed, he worried he would make her view of prayer worse if they asked for God's help, and then were not able to find the contact (they did find it; whew!).

He highlights three concerns about prayer in the life of the typical Christian. First, Christians are seldom honest enough to express their thoughts, doubts and cynicism about prayer. It is very easy to begin to think prayer does not work and to become cynical. Saying so, however, only adds guilt and shame to our cynicism, so we often hide how we think and feel about prayer. Second, it is very easy to become glib and trite in the way we talk about prayer. "I'll pray for you," "you're in my prayers," and "I'll lift you up in prayer," are phrases we use, but not necessarily the life that we live. And third, we may want to pray, but find we have such short attention spans that it is ineffective or virtually non-existent. In all of this, we think to ourselves, "others do not have trouble praying; what is wrong with me?"

While being made in God's image puts a desire to pray within us, sin and evil mar this desire and frustrate our efforts. Additionally, there are a lot of misunderstandings and pre-conceived notions about what constitutes "good praying." Prayer lists can keep us on track, but can also discourage us if we see few answers to the things on our list. The affluent, noisy and busy nature of American society also adds to the difficulty. And at some level, we have the obvious oddity that prayer is (in some sense) "speaking into the air." We do not hear a verbal response from God, yet believe prayer is

conversation with God. It is hard to understand and describe what it means to *be with* God in prayer, or *talk with* God. The fact is, that “most Christians feel frustrated when it comes to prayer! (p. 16). “You talk as if you have an intimate relationship, but you don’t. Theoretically, it is close. Practically, it is distant. You need help” (p.17).

Chapter 2 – Where We Are Headed

“Even if you feel that you pray badly, we need to know what good prayer looks and feels like in order to develop a praying life. Knowing where we are headed can help us on the journey” (p.19).

“When Jesus describes the intimacy he wants with us, he talks about joining us for dinner. ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me’ (Rev 3:20)...many people struggle to learn how to pray because they are focusing on praying, not on God...Conversation is the only vehicle through which we experience one another. Consequently, prayer is not the center of this book. Getting to know a person, God, is the center” (p. 20).

Prayer is not an isolated part of life. It is part of a relationship that must be participated in while you live life together with God. A life of prayer develops as you relate to God while going through life’s experiences. Like *growing up* and *learning to love*, it has an overall feel of slow and steady maturing, with ups and downs. All of it, however, must be pursued with the attitude of knowing and loving God as He providentially weaves the fabric of your life. We must see Him in and through life, not dull our souls with activity or live as though He is at a distance. “Learning to pray doesn’t offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart...By spending time with our Father in prayer, we integrate our lives with his, with what he is doing in us” (p. 23). It must be part of a vital relationship with God that is interconnected with every aspect of life, leads to change and hope, and that is inseparable from repentance and a real encounter with a loving, holy Savior. “When you give God your life, he gives you the gift of himself” (p. 25).

Part One: Learning to Pray Like a Child

Chapter 3 – Become Like a Little Child

Jesus taught that saving faith, and the Christian life, ought to be gained and lived with faith like a child. Miller points out at least three things that characterize those who have faith like a child. First, little children have a tendency to blurt out what they are thinking. God does not want us to pretend to be or think something. Second, children are selfish and messy. God still loves us as His children when we come in faith. He wants the weary to come to Him, not the stable. You don't have to "try to get the prayer right: just tell God where you are and what's on your mind. That's what children do" (p. 32). Third, in contrast to the pretentious, hypocritical Pharisees, Jesus prepares praise for Himself from the mouths of babes (Matt 21:16). We need to simply be ourselves, and not put on a show of spirituality when we pray. Jesus appreciated Nathaniel's honesty, when he said, "can anything good come out of Nazareth" (John 1:46-47). "God would much rather deal with the real thing" [the real you] (p.34). Because He is your heavenly Father, you are the center of your heavenly Father's affection.

Chapter 4 – Learn to Talk with Your Father

Here, Miller highlights three more ways that Christians should talk with their heavenly Father. First, you should learn to ask like a child. Children ask for everything, they ask often, and they ask for what they want (whether it's good or bad). Even evil people like us give our children things they ask for. God is much better than us, and will give good things to those who ask (Matt 7:7-11). Second, you should believe like a child. "If you know your parent loves and protects you, it fills your world with possibility" (p. 38). Children think all things are possible, and can't imagine that we won't eventually say yes. "The gospel frees us to ask for what is on our hearts" (p. 40). Third, we should not be uptight if our prayers exhibit the same kind of attention span that a child shows when they are playing (three seconds, or three minutes). Even normal conversation bounces from subject to subject. Prayer is conversation with God, and may be very similar. Even the Apostle Paul's prayers seem to often be interrupted and resumed later. "When it comes to prayer, we just need to get the words out" (p. 41), like children who mumble or babble. "It's ok if your mind wanders or your prayers get interrupted" (p. 41). "When you stop trying to be an adult and get it right, prayer will just flow" (p. 41).

Chapter 5 – Spending Time with Your Father

“Jesus seemed to need time with God just as much as we do” (p. 43). He would often find a secluded place early in the morning to pray. Three things highlight his desire and reason for doing so. First is Jesus’ childlike, dependent identity. He has always been in relationship with the Father, and “can’t conceive of himself outside of that relationship” (p. 45). His prayers and desire to be alone with God is an expression of that relationship. Second, his desire to pray alone is because his life was often focused on the person who was most important to him in the moment. Daily, this focus was on his relationship with his heavenly father. And third, his desire to pray alone flowed out of his limited humanity. He needed to be away at times to foster that focus. “Jesus’ example teaches us that prayer is about relationship” (p. 47).

There is a pattern in Scripture of praying in the morning, and of praying out loud. Verbally expressing prayer can help maintain focus, make your thoughts and confessions/sins seem more concrete, and audibly declares your faith/trust in God. Praying “on the go,” while good and right, is no substitute for focused times of prayer. “You can’t build a relationship by sound bites” (p. 49). So set reasonable goals, and consider following these seven suggestions: (1) get to bed, (2) get up, (3) get awake, (4) get a quiet place, (5) get comfortable, (6) get going, and (7) keep going.

Chapter 6 – Learning to Be Helpless

“Prayer is bringing your helplessness to Jesus...Our helplessness is what makes prayer work” (p. 55). The “idiot approach to life” forgets you are helpless, thinks you know the solution to every problem (or can plan one), and therefore does not pray. The chapter contains a story of prayer regarding their daughter, and an ongoing struggle she had with her autism, which revealed his shallow degree of understanding about his own reliance upon God. “God wants us to come to him empty-handed, weary, and heavy-laden” (p. 54). Strong Christians pray more because they have a clearer sense of their own weakness. Less mature Christians have little need to pray, because they don’t clearly see or understand their helplessness or weaknesses. “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. As we see our weaknesses more clearly, we begin to grasp our need for more grace” (p. 56). God uses trials and affliction in your life to reveal your weakness and need for Him (which then motivates and energizes your prayer life). The trials and afflictions make prayer important to us, and is an important part of the process of learning how to pray. “When something is important to us, we make room for it” (p. 59).

Chapter 7 – Crying “Abba” – Continuously

Short, brief, spontaneous prayers are part of “a praying life.” It is similar to a child running to his mother saying, “Mommy, mommy, mommy.” If we had a constant sense of our spiritual poverty, spiritual weaknesses, and need for mercy, then this would be a more regular experience. The awareness of those things would drive us to constant prayer. The pattern Jesus set included referencing God by the intimate term “Abba,” which likely is equivalent to the idea of “papa.” These short prayers can be requests for help, cries for mercy, appeals for forgiveness, or asking for strength. They flow out of your spiritual poverty and helplessness, in contrast to a mystical, pseudo-spiritual mindset, that might think you need to be calm, at peace, or “spiritually minded” to pray. The Apostle Paul mentions “unceasing prayer” 12 times in Scripture, doing so in various ways. Miller concludes, “A praying life isn’t simply a morning prayer time; it is about slipping into prayer at odd hours of the day, not because we are disciplined but because we are in touch with our own poverty of spirit, realizing that we can’t even walk through a mall or our neighborhood without the help of the Spirit of Jesus” (p. 68).

Chapter 8 – Bending Your Heart to Your Father

Anxiety creates openings for prayer. “Instead of fighting anxiety, we can use it as a springboard to bending our hearts to God. Instead of trying to suppress anxiety, manage it, or smother it with pleasure, we can turn our anxiety toward God. When we do that, we’ll discover that we’ve slipped into continuous praying” (p. 69). Anxiety results from wanting to control our present and future life (like God), even though we don’t have the wisdom, power or knowledge of God. Instead of trying play God in our life, we should cling to God in the midst of our chaos, praying continuously, helplessly and humbly. “David captured the connection between a humble heart and a quiet heart in psalm 131:1-2” (p. 71). As you pray words similar to those, your heart will begin to experience quietness. It is as though praying itself becomes the answer to your prayer. Be humble, helpless and dependent. “Instead of hunting for the perfect spiritual state to lift you above the chaos, pray *in* the chaos...We see this pattern in Paul’s advice to the Philippians about anxiety [Phil 4:6-7]...Moments when you are prone to anxiety can become invitations to drift into prayer” (p. 72). “When you stop trying to control your life and instead allow your anxieties and problems to bring you to God in prayer, you shift from worry to watching. You watch God weave his patterns in the story of your life” (p. 73).

Part Two: Learning to Trust Again

Chapter 9 – Understanding Cynicism

The opposite of childlike faith is cynicism. This attitude is pervasive in our age and culture. In our prayer life it often manifests itself when prayers ARE answered (and we say, "it would have happened anyway"). But we can be cynical when our prayers are NOT answered too ("I knew prayer wouldn't work"). Cynics convince themselves that they see "what is really going on," and that their interpretation of things is realistic, authentic and accurate. Sadly, it creates weariness with life that kills intimacy with God. A praying life is full of hope and of a vital relationship with God.

Cynicism begins when we have either *naïve optimism* or *foolish confidence* about life and prayer. Naïve optimism believes we don't need to pray, because it will all work out. Foolish confidence believes God always intends to give us a pain-free, problem-free life. Our optimism and confidence, however, must be centered in the promises and character of God to avoid being naïve or foolish. This helps avoid the dangers of not being able to see the dark side of life honestly.

Chapter 10 – Following Jesus out of Cynicism

Jesus offers SIX CURES for cynicism (five in chapter 10, and the sixth one is the subject of chapter 11). First, "Be Warm But Wary." Be wary and realistic about evil in the world, but warm and confident toward the goodness and sovereignty of God in your life. "The feel of a praying life is cautious optimism...I am called to trust that God sees what I see. In fact, he sees beyond what I see. He sees the whole story and is completely trustworthy to be at work on a grand scale" (p. 84). Second, "Learn to Hope Again." "The cynic believes we are swept along by forces greater than we are" (p. 85). Those who hope in God believe that he will act, and will always act in a way that is good for those he loves, so that we will have joy and peace. Third, "Cultivate a Childlike Spirit." Our tendency is to pray that God would do what we WANT (or want to DO ourselves), rather than simply believe he is able to do more than we can imagine. We must learn to trust the Good Shepherd. Fourth, "Cultivate a Thankful Spirit." Realizing your whole life is a gift from God undercuts cynicism. It necessarily draws you into fellowship with God. "Thanksgiving looks reality in the face and rejoices at God's care" (p. 90). Fifth, "Cultivating Repentance." The cynic must repent of the pride that constantly explains everything, or believes their false "insight" into life, prayer, and the hearts of others.

Chapter 11 – *Developing an Eye for Jesus*

This is the sixth cure for cynicism: “Developing an Eye for Jesus.” He means we must cultivate a mindset of recognizing and appreciating God’s goodness in his daily providence in our lives. It is hard to be cold and cynical about life (and prayer) when we are recognizing with gratitude his grace manifested in the lives of others, or his protection of us in the circumstances of life. This must be an orientation of the heart, if we are to avoid the cynicism in the cultural air that we breathe.

Part Three: Learning to Ask Your Father

Chapter 12 – Why Asking Is So Hard

Western culture has been transformed by secular, enlightenment-age thinking, relegating prayer to a place of private and personal activity rather than being understood as something that is public, real and true. When Kant and other enlightenment philosophers categorized prayer and religion as aspects of life that are based only on “feelings” rather than “facts,” relating to God through prayer was increasingly marginalized as a normal experience. “First, prayer is defined as phony, and then it feels phony” (p. 107). Sadly, this secular mindset cannot explain many other basic components of life (love, guilt, etc.). This secular mindset has resulted in a world where prayer as simple conversation with an unseen God is considered socially inappropriate in many (if not most) contexts.

[I believe he touches on other topics that contribute to a general sense that prayer is phony. Other factors contribute to this, like Shallow prayers, man-centered prayer, misunderstanding of what God has promised, and especially these concepts as they intersect with God’s sovereignty and goodness in providence. In other words, it doesn’t always feel phony ONLY because we heard someone define it as phony. Sometimes it can actually BE phony because we don’t understand it deeply enough to make it a real and vital experience in our lives.]

Chapter 13 – Why We Can Ask

God is both infinite and personal. Western culture embraces an infinite God, as long as He doesn’t become personal. Many other cultures embrace a personal God, but fail to understand His infinite nature. The Bible presents God as both. “We just don’t think God could be concerned with the puny details of our lives. We either believe he’s too big or that we’re not that important” (p. 116). “A praying life opens itself to an infinite, searching God. As we shall see, we can’t do that without releasing control, without constantly surrendering our will to God. ‘Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10) is actually scary. Learned desperation is at the heart of a praying life” (p. 117).

Chapter 14 – How Personal Is God?

He read a book stating that we shouldn’t pray for trivial things such as parking spaces. He disagrees (along with his mother, who often prayed for such things—and other similar things—in a hostile missionary environment).

“Some theologians think we shouldn’t pray for parking places because [it is selfish] it means someone else doesn’t get one” (p. 120). Praying over potential problems, however, is an expression of helplessness and an invitation for God to cause his energy to impact the situation. To state “your will be done” so quickly that your own heart and desires are not expressed reduces prayer to a “zero-sum game” [makes it pointless]. In contrast, God’s love [and sovereignty] is not disengaged from responding thoughtfully and generously to our requests. Being “spiritual” does not mean thinking of God in such clear, raw, and objective terms, that it stifles honest, person-to-person praying to God. The author thinks that in reality, “God makes us nervous when he gets too close. We don’t want a physical dependence on him. It feels hokey, like we are controlling God” (p. 125). Trying to figure out the mystery of *how* God actually answers prayer is impossible. Like many things, it cannot be measured or observed directly. “We simply cannot see the causal connection between our prayers and what happens” (p. 128).

[The author accused those who disparage prayer about trivial things as being cynical, “over-spiritualizing” prayer, or failing to have a vital, personal and dependent relationship with God. He quickly dismisses the idea that praying for parking spaces can be selfish. Prayer for trivial things may be appropriate, depending on the burdens and pressures and purposes that are motivating those prayers. Yet, it MUST be acknowledged that we CAN be selfish in our prayers, and we often ask for things that we should not. There is a reason prayer CAN “feel hokey, like we are controlling God” (his words). And that reason is that sometimes we ARE simply trying to control God, to get what we want, or to make our life easier, or to get relief from our circumstances—circumstances HE has sovereignly ordained for our good. In an effort to encourage personal, childlike prayer, the author does not seem to make an allowance for this. He offers no warning that such shallow (or sinful) prayer is possible, and, in fact, suggests that those who say it is are “over-spiritualizing” prayer, and have bought into worldly enlightenment philosophy. This can be dangerous.]

Chapter 15 – What Do We Do with Jesus’ Extravagant Promises About Prayer?

Jesus made some extravagant promises that sound like blanket guarantees of an answer (John 14:13-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24). How are we to understand these? Some scholars try to avoid making God a cosmic vending machine by suggesting that this only applies to “ministry” requests. Miller suggests the essence of this promise is God’s desire to be a part of our honest expressions of desires, feelings and passions. It is God’s way of helping us lose all confidence in ourselves, and put all confidence in Him. “All

of Jesus' teaching on prayer in the gospels can be summarized with one word: *ask*" (p. 134). He suggests simply that "praying in Jesus' name" is what "gives my prayers royal access" to the throne of God (p. 135). He also suggests that praying "in Jesus' name" "not only guarantees that my package gets through, but it also transforms the package" by inviting the Spirit to intercede as we pray (p. 135).

He then shares some stories of answered prayers, and concludes, "the closer my prayers are to the heart of God, the more powerfully and quickly they are answered" (p. 137). His "experience is that most people do not put God to the test. They don't ask him for what they want" (p. 138). The next two chapters will investigate "areas where we don't ask God, where we've kept him at a distance" (p. 139).

[This chapter is vague and unhelpful. He diminishes the idea that careful, biblical thought about what it means to "pray in Jesus' name" is needed, by demeaning the opinion of a "scholar," but offers no definable meaning to the concept himself. In fact, you cannot discern that he believes praying "in Jesus' name" means anything more than adding those words at the end of the prayer (although I don't think he believes that). The idea of "name" being associated with both the "character" of a person, and the "family identity" of the person needs to be understood. Praying in Jesus' name means coming to the Father on the basis of Jesus Christ being our family representative (in union with our mediator), and coming in the same spirit, will, desire and character of that person. When we do that, we will get what we ask for because we will be praying consistent with the Father's will.]

Chapter 16 – What We Don't Ask For: "Our Daily Bread"

Miller correctly observes that the typical prayer list is shallow and related to physical or circumstantial needs. Praying for "our daily bread" is difficult in a place where our refrigerators and checking accounts are not empty. He suggests, however, that praying about the daily concerns of life (even material ones) open the door to teach and show us our need the spiritual bread from heaven (our spiritual needs and weaknesses). An abiding, praying life, invites God and others into the daily decisions of life. We often avoid praying about material things (or asking others) because we don't want to hear any truth about the spiritual aspects of our heart that relate to those material pursuits. Or, if we do pray, we sometimes do it only to "mask our desires" so that we can say, "I prayed about it," but then pursue our own will without really searching our hearts. In other words, maybe we don't WANT to hear what God and others think. Inviting God to actually rule our lives makes us vulnerable. Bringing all things (daily bread) to God forces us to surrender our will, and abandon our quest for unlimited freedom.

Chapter 17 – What We Don't Ask For: "Your Kingdom Come"

Christians too often think that "your kingdom come" relates only to religious or institutional events. But it properly relates to change in others, change in ourself, and even change in things in the culture around us. To illustrate the first aspect, Miller uses the example of a husband praying for his wife to be less critical of him. It may be hard to pray for this for various reasons: (1) cynicism about the possibility of change; (2) it reminds you how much the criticism hurts; (3) may feel like you're trying to control your wife; or (4) it may expose your own weaknesses (she might be right!). Prayer opens the way for your heart to be exposed and submissive to God, which naturally changes your attitude and reveals ways you also need to change. Over time, it makes the husband more mindful and ready to love and teach her.

The second aspect, change in ourself, is often avoided because we've embraced the cultural idol that we are entitled to our attitudes. This only makes us a slave to our ever-changing feelings. We must abandon this attitude, and pray for our own hearts. There is a parallel with the third aspect. Believing the culture cannot be impacted and changed by God through our prayers is faithless. We must embrace the mysterious way God can use the prayers of many to effect change in large ways.

Chapter 18 – Surrender Completely: "Your Will Be Done"

Our will is strong, and too often influences our prayers in the opposite direction of "your will be done" (Matt 6:10). Instead of committing our lives (circumstances, attitudes, others) to God, we deal with it all in a self-willed way. Doing the opposite, submitting it to God's will through prayer, opens a "small door from my soul to God" (p. 157). This helps us to discern and disown the self-will in our heart, and see our circumstances as being ordered from our sovereign God. Miller describes how the Sermon on the Mount gives a new view of the world that does not have your will or desires at the forefront. He then gives an illustration of a wife praying for her husband about his weaknesses and failures, rather than berating or trying to control him. The kind of understanding and surrender of heart that enables us to defeat our self-will and commit our lives to God is part of a praying life.

Part Four: Living in Your Father's Story

Chapter 19 – Watching a Story Unfold

Miller shares a story of praying for his daughter Emily that she would not be overcome by a desire for worldly things. He saw her weakness in areas like cars, sports, and peers. The process of praying for her heart's desires (1) made him more aware of her as a person, (2) exposed similar ways that he needed to change, and (3) informed the ways he made decisions about other things that impacted her thinking and life. "Our prayers didn't sit in isolation from the larger story God was weaving in her life and in ours" (p. 167). "I often find that when God doesn't answer a prayer, he wants to expose something in me ... Most of us isolate prayer from the rest of what God is doing in our lives, but God doesn't work that way" (p. 168). When we are praying well, we are recognizing that God is in control, we are focused on Him and His presence in our life, and make our fellowship of prayer with Him central to our life.

Chapter 20 – A Father's Love

Miller's story with Emily continues with the admission that he felt a distance between him and her during her teen years. She had decided to spend a year between high school and college in Guatemala, and a sharp conflict motivated him to pray "God, you have got to give Emily faith this year. You have no choice" (p. 174). He did not mean this in a "name it and claim it" manner, but was recognizing her great need and his own powerlessness in the situation. He shares how her life was changed during that time, in answer to years of prayers, in this context where she was separated from the icons of modern American teenage life. She came to understand the love that her father had for her, despite his inadequacies and quirks. At the same time she was gaining a greater appreciation for God's love for her despite her own sin and weakness. Prayer spurred all of this relational growth, not personal challenge or words aimed at changing her thinking.

Chapter 21 – Unanswered Prayer: Understanding the Patterns of Story

The chapter begins with a story of how Miller's wife had prayed the truth of Psalm 121 that God would keep her baby from harm. Unfortunately, during the birth everything went wrong, and the baby was severely handicapped. This began a long road of hardship and heartache for their family.

Through a series of charts [*these may, or may not, help the readers*], Miller tries to diagram the relationship between HOPE, TIME, EFFORT and REALITY. If reality never changes, while we maintain some semblance of hope, this will cause us to feel as though we are living life in a DESERT place. If we look at life unrealistically while maintaining hope for change or answered prayer, then we are probably just living in DENIAL.

Some respond to these hardships with effort and determination to change reality. The degree to which your effort helps, while hope is maintained, may serve to increase your DETERMINATION. A fourth chart, however, points out that when hope and reality don't seem to go anywhere that the result is usually DESPAIR.

He suggests that people of faith live in the desert place (chart 1), because "they are aware of the reality of their circumstances but are fixed on hope. Paul describes how 'in hope [Abraham] believed against hope'" (p. 183). The hardest part for Abraham (and us) is that in this desert place we maintain our hope without any vision of the way out, when it will end, or how we will experience relief. You feel like "the Father [is] turning his face against you" (p. 184). He suggests "God takes everyone he loves through a desert." He does this to kill our idols, drive us to helplessness, and help us realize only HE can be our hope and joy. His presence is the best gift we enjoy in this desert place. "When we don't receive what we pray for or desire, it doesn't mean that God isn't acting on our behalf. Rather, he's weaving his story" (p. 187).

[This chapter fails to help the reader understand that HOPE and REALITY must be tied together by the thread of God's PROMISES. Abraham had a VERY SPECIFIC PROMISE that his wife would have a son, and that he would have an heir. It was this very specific promise that enabled him to continue to hope. Using Abraham as an example of how we must "keep hoping against hope" is probably going to discourage the person who feels as though God is not answering their prayers, or keeping His promises. If we simply have "faith" or "hope" that is tied to our prayer or our desire, without a specific promise like Abraham had, then this is not a kind of faith and hope that the Bible describes. It is faith or hope in our "confidence," or in our prayer itself, or sadly just faith or hope that our "desire for an answer" is strong enough.

He does try to point out that unanswered prayer means that God is doing something else, and something better, and is seeking to draw us near to Himself. But I think he does a poor job of relating the "hope" he speaks of, to specific promises (like Abraham had), and to the promises of answered prayer and their relationship to the sovereign plan of God.]

Chapter 22 – How God Places Himself in the Story

When we are in a desert of difficulty “we feel like God is absent” (p. 189). Miller uses three examples of Jesus dealing with women that show how God is not absent, but ever-present, in our troubles.

The Canaanite woman in Matthew’s gospel is the first example. She pleads with Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter and Jesus doesn’t respond at all. Finally, the disciples ask to send her away and he addresses her by saying she is the wrong race to be blessed. She pleads anyway, and Jesus commends her for her faith and grants her request. Miller suggests, “If the miracle comes too quickly, there is no room for discovery, for relationship” (p. 190). “The waiting that is the essence of faith provides the context for relationship. Faith and relationship are interwoven” (p. 191).

The second woman is his wife, Jill. She wrestled with God for strength and faith in the trial with their daughter’s condition. She begged God to give her the faith [TRUST] to put the situation in God’s hands. Miller says, “God permitted a difficult situation in both of their lives, and then he lingered at the edge...they would not have developed the faith to have a real relationship with him. God would have been a magic prayer machine, not a friend and lover” (p. 192).

The third woman is Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus greeted outside the tomb after the resurrection. He initially hid his identity to her, however. He desired to hear her heart, and address her sorrows. “When we suffer, we long for God to speak clearly, to tell us the end of the story and, most of all to show himself. But if he showed himself fully and immediately, if he answer all the questions, we’d never grow” (p. 193-194).

Chapter 23 – Praying Without a Story

Miller proposes that many Christians fail to see their prayer life through the lens of understanding that your life is a story being woven together by a loving heavenly Father. As a result, when prayers aren’t answered, we tend to become bitter or cynical, rather than see it as part of something greater that God is doing. Unanswered prayer is not God ignoring us. It is God doing something else, which we cannot see but must trust Him in. This means that we must learn to live our life with the tension that comes from knowing God is at work, even when we are not seeing specific answers to prayer. He suggests to do this well, that we remember three things: (1) Don’t demand that the story go your way; (2) Look for His hand [at work], and then pray in light of what you are seeing; and (3) Stay in the story; don’t shut down when it goes the ‘wrong’ way (p. 201). He relates a story of Joanne (negative example), along with Job and Joseph (positive examples).

Chapter 24 – Hope: The End of the Story

Praying amidst the story that God is weaving in our life involves both getting to know Him and the concrete hope [promise] that God is concerned about our lives and situation. “The infinite God touches us personally...We can dream big because God is big” (p. 206). His story of years of prayers and pursuits in trying to find their disabled daughter a job helps illustrate how our prayers should not be “above” or “separated” from the details of our life. “Our family was focused on both the reality line and the hope line. Praying was inseparable from working, planning, and good old-fashioned begging” (p. 209). God desires us to see Him at work, and to marvel at His goodness and grace, and learn to know and trust Him more in the process.

Chapter 25 – Living in Gospel Stories

A praying life is also characterized by recognizing how the life/story God is weaving for you is constantly being informed and moves us toward a better understanding of the gospel and how it must impact our daily lives. He relates taking his daughter Kim on a speaking trip, and the trials that he endured in the process. All of this he saw later was a living out the gospel. He was loving his daughter, sacrificing for his wife (so she could have a needed respite), and having his own weaknesses and spiritual inadequacies revealed through the difficulties. Rather than praying for relief, he needed to be recognizing and praying for what God was trying to accomplish IN his life, as well as thank God for what He was graciously doing for others through it. He warns that we should not “pursue joy directly,” but find joy by embracing the ways God’s weaving leads us to understanding and living out the gospel. This prayerful understanding gives meaning to our suffering. The difficulty is that these connections between our suffering and living the gospel are not always to recognize. “Imbedded in the idea of prayer is a richly textured view of the world where all of life is organized around invisible bonds or covenants that knit us together. Instead of a fixed world, we live in our Father’s world, a world built for divine relationships between people where, because of the Good News, tragedies become comedies and hope is born” (p. 217).

Part Five: Praying in Real Life

Chapter 26 – Using Prayer Tools

Miller relates that while 95% of people use calendars, approximately 5% of people use any kind of written prayer system. The perception that the personal consequences of neglecting our calendar is more serious than neglecting prayer is wrong. We forget that “we have a disorder that mars our ability to talk with God” (p. 222). It takes effort and organization to overcome this innate weakness. Miller’s favorite tools for prayer are journals and prayer cards. While helpful, we should remember that “systems can become rote, desensitizing us to God as a person” (p. 223). We should be cautious, but not suspicious of all prayer systems/helps. Being careful not to allow it to become rote, however, we can follow them while maintaining the childlike praying that Miller has been encouraging.

Chapter 27 – Keeping Track of the Story: Using Prayer Cards

Miller’s prayer card idea grew out of a desire to put the Word to work in his prayers. He keeps cards for family members, friends, missionaries and topics. Each card has a verse (or verses) that he is praying for the person or situation. It also contains brief words or notes about circumstances or requests. They are brief and sloppy. He then prays through these cards daily, and very quickly. It helps focus your attention on one person or area of your life at a time. Speaking of his son’s card, he said, “Over time, almost every phrase on that card became mini-story with twists and turns on the way to answer” (p. 227). He will also have “big and small” requests, focusing on the “hope” line and the “reality” line in the chart on page 181. Suffering people is an important area, because we tend to only like to pray for people who suffer if their suffering is defined and there is an end in sight (p. 229). Praying for those who suffer, or for those who need to be saved, tunes our hearts to their lives and struggles. He suggests using your prayer time to write the cards, rather than put it off.

Chapter 28 – Prayer Work

Regular prayer generally leads to being involved in the “work” that leads to answered prayers. This happens both because it is fresh in your mind, making you more sensitive to needs, and because God is at work in you. He shared about praying for Bob, a friend with a critical spirit. God brought suffering into Bob’s life, and because Miller had been expressing his concern and care for Bob in prayer, he was poised and ready to serve and care for

Bob in his suffering. The human tendency is to be thankful for the “karma” that Bob is experiencing, or even to enjoy his suffering (p. 237). What God often does, however, is engage you in “working” as part of the answer to your prayers. Like Mark 4:26-29, a parable of kingdom seed sowing and reaping, God wants us to sow seeds of prayer [and the word, which is the meaning in its context; but they go hand in hand] and be prepared to be involved in reaping the rewards and answers to that ministry (in word and prayer).

Chapter 29 – Listening to God

Miller encourages us to ask, “How is God speaking into my life? What is God doing” (p. 239)? He relates having a clear thought in answer to a self-posed question, that God desired him to work on his character that year rather than set other goals. He asks, “Was God speaking to me during that day of prayer, or was I just recording my own thoughts in my prayer journal? ... Did God prompt me, or was it just my intuition” (p. 240 & 241)? He gives three reasons why he believes it was God: (1) the question and answer were immersed in God’s Word, (2) the answer surprised him, and was not typical of his own thoughts or desires (he says, “It was distinctively his *voice*. It matched Scripture” p. 241), and (3) it came true (p. 241-242). Having concluded that God does speak, he goes on to explore two common ways Christians go wrong when it comes to hearing God’s voice in their lives.

FIRST, some Christians are “Word Only” believers, who focus on seeing and hearing God ONLY in and through His written Word. If we think this way, he suggests, “Our lives will lack the sparkle and immediacy of God’s presence” (p. 242) [***It is not true that our “wrong thinking” can alter the reality of God’s presence! He is equating a feeling, or the “intuition,” or the “leading” he mentions later with the reality of God’s presence. This is a dangerous equation!***]. “If we believe Scripture only applies to people in general, then we can miss how God immediately personalizes his counsel to us as individuals” (p. 242-243) [***no one really asserts this, however; it is a straw man argument. Of course God’s Word applies to everyone in the specifics of life, and not just generally. And it is the Spirit that convicts us of this.***]. “Seeing God’s activity in the details of our lives enhances the application [***makes us more aware?***] of God’s Word” (p. 243).

The SECOND way a Christian might go wrong is by being a “Spirit Only” believer, who elevates “human intuition to the status of divine revelation” (p. 244) [which would be blasphemy]. He warns, “When people call their own thoughts or feelings ‘God’s voice,’ it puts them in control of God and ultimately undermines God’s Word (p. 244) [***and yet, he suggests the***

alternative that we let "Scripture guard and direct our intuitions;" how can you tell the difference with certainty?. "The problem is that the Holy Spirit comes in on the same channel as the world, the flesh, the Devil. The Lord does lead—we just need to be careful that we aren't using the Lord as a cover for our own desires" (p. 244). "Under the cover of 'being led by the Spirit,' they can easily do what they want. What they 'hear' from God might mask their self-will" (p. 246).

He suggests finally, "To correctly discern when God is speaking to us, we need to keep the Word and Spirit together" (p. 245) [Again, there is no way to certainly discern "Spirit" from "desires," "intuition," etc.]. "We need the sharp-edged, absolute character of the Word and the intuitive, personal leading of the Spirit. The Word provides the structure, the vocabulary. The Spirit personalizes it to our life" (p. 247) [***I am ok with the wording here, but am not sure it is consistent with other things he says, and particularly a measure of CERTAINTY, that you are listening TO GOD***].

He also warns, "There is a tendency among Christians to get excited about 'listening to God' as if they are discovering a hidden way of communicating with God that will revolutionize their prayer lives...This subtly elevates an experience with God instead of God himself" (p. 248). "The interaction between the divine Spirit and my own spirit is mysterious" [***which is why we need to be SO CAREFUL about how we speak about, how we define it, and how certainly we identify it!***].

Chapter 30 – Prayer Journaling: Become Aware of the Interior Journey

Prayer journaling can be a valuable tool or means of consciously recognizing and expressing the inner workings of your heart (motives, desires, emotions, choices, etc.) and the significance of those things in relation to your life and relationship with God and others. It helps us think carefully and meditatively about life. "Journaling helps us to become aware of the journey" (p. 250). "Many of us rush around without much conscious knowledge of the pilgrimage God is carving out for us" (p. 251). He equates this simply with "walking with the Shepherd" (p. 251), and observes that, "The discovery of self in relationship to God leads to a lifestyle of repentance" (p. 252). He shares a personal story of how journaling helped him think carefully during a particularly difficult time in his own life, and also helped him to see the progress and growth that God was causing in him. Writing down reflections helps you clarify exactly what God is doing and teaching you. "The best part is that over time you will begin to see patterns of what God is doing" (p. 256).

Chapter 31 – Real-Life Praying

Miller describes a typical morning prayer time. It included sleeping through his alarm, a distraction from his daughter, and then the kinds of things you might expect. He gives thanks for things he has seen God do in his family's life, and for what God was doing in his life. He prays for the pressures his wife is facing. And he prays for the members of his family. He sees this as normal life, and can't imagine how he could love others without the opportunity to pray for them. It is an expression of his learned helplessness, and he is convinced, "things are happening because I pray" (p. 261).

Chapter 32 – Unfinished Stories

God doesn't always explain to us what He is doing in our lives. And our lives are overlapping other lives, within which God is at work. Israel's captivity into Babylon is an example of how God is weaving a story, but does not always complete it until after those who prayed for the end He is working toward have died. This difficult time in Israel's history paved the way for a number of blessings in the NT age. One thing Miller highlights is that the more distant [relationally] that he is from a story/life, the less he can know or see what God is doing. That's why it is hard to pray for strangers. They are not part of "your story." All of the unfinished stories in our life remind us that God is ultimately drawing us toward the ultimate finish—the return of Christ, and the consummation of all things. The unfinished stories of our prayer life ought to draw us to that hope, and cause us to long for it more.