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WHY PRAYER IS SO HARD

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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

USE YOUR SUPERIOR WEAPONS • Tim Downs

In a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones runs down a street and rounds a corner, finding himself face to face with an Arab swordsman. Remember the guy? He skillfully brandishes his sword. Indiana Jones just rolls his eyes and pulls out his revolver. Boom—that’s the end of the swordsman.

Did you know that scene was not intended to be in the original movie? An incredible sword fight was choreographed. As a joke, Harrison Ford used the gun; he pulled it out and shot the guy, who played along. The producer liked the scene so much he left it in the movie.

I like the scene because it’s a picture of the Christian life. Something that looks menacing can be neutralized with a superior weapon.

In the Bible, prayer is described as our divine and uniquely powerful weapon. Consider some of the things the Bible says prayer alone can do: change reality, heal the sick, and control the forces of nature. Prayer has brought back the dead. It keeps us alert, keeps us sober-minded, guards us against temptation, and releases our fears and frustrations. Perhaps most significantly of all, prayer can hurt the enemy, restricting his activity and reclaiming hostages from his camp.

I also like the Indiana Jones scene because to me it describes reality. It’s not like the old cowboy movies where the good guys and the bad guys shoot at each other; when the bad guy runs out of bullets, the good guy throws away his gun and they fight it out—hand to hand. That’s not reality.

In the world where I live, if you have a superior weapon you use it. We have a superior weapon, but we don’t always use it. We are able to communicate with our Creator, but we don’t. We don’t pray. Why? It’s simply because prayer is so hard. Why? Let me give you a few reasons.

First, because it’s so strange. When I was in a restaurant once with a group of guys, we decided to say a blessing before we ate. Since we were in the middle of a restaurant I said, “Why don’t we just say our own blessings today?” So we bowed our heads, closed our eyes, and began to say our own grace. Now, I’m like you—my blessing is not just, “Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub. Yeah, God.” I take a minute while I say it, and so did my friends.

In the middle of our grace, the waiter walked up and asked, “What’s the matter?” For a whole minute, he walked around the table asking, “What’s the matter? What’s the matter?”

We forget, sometimes, the entire climate in which we live is against prayer. It seems like some act of desperation, or something you use as a sedative, but not a way of life. It’s just strange.

Second, prayer is so hard because it’s a discipline. Let’s be honest—we’re short on discipline. Some writers describe prayer as though it’s an ecstatic experience; as if every time they pray, angels descend on them. But it’s not like that for me. Is it for you? I’m beginning to believe that for some people, no matter what they do, angels are descending on them.

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I'm not like that, and I meet Christians who no longer pray, because it was a disappointment. Their experience is not what they expected. The bottom line though, is this: you've got to pursue prayer, first and foremost, as a discipline—not as an experience.

I hope that point isn't a disappointment to you, because the fact is most of the excellent things in life are disciplines. Isn't that true? Are you in college? It's a discipline. Knowledge comes from discipline. Physical fitness comes from discipline. Skill in art or music comes from discipline. Prayer first will be a discipline.

Third, I think prayer is so hard because it's so difficult to pay attention. Is it hard for you to pay attention when praying? I hope I'm not the only one. I admit that for me, invisible, formless, shapeless beings are hard to focus on. There are times I have gotten the feeling that maybe I'm talking to the ceiling.

Fourth, I think prayer is hard because, frankly, there are more enjoyable things to do, and other occupations cry louder for my attention. For most of us, we're in too big a hurry to get something done because it's more fun to take out the list of things to do and cross them off than it is to spend time in prayer.

Fifth, prayer is hard because you can get more done by yourself. At least we think so. A famous British general once said, "I've noticed that in battle God always seems to be on the side of the army with the heaviest artillery." I think for each of us there has come some big event in life, and we forgot to pray. The event came and went, and went okay. Then we begin to suspect prayer wasn't as crucial as we thought, and maybe we'd get more done if we quit wasting time on our knees; just got out there and did stuff.

Sixth, prayer is hard because it's a universal failure. Remember the story from John 8 of the woman caught in adultery. She's brought before Christ who simply says to the people around eager to chastise her, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." That sort of cut down the audience.

But He could have said it differently, by simply saying, "Let he who has a superb prayer life cast the first stone." That would leave no one, too.

Everybody struggles with prayer. Because everybody struggles with prayer, very few people are models for you, challenging and encouraging in this area. You'll get together with another Christian and say, "I just have trouble praying," and most of the time they'll say, "Me too." We need more people who can say, "What's the problem? Try this. Do this."

Last of all, prayer is misunderstood. We wonder, "What is prayer? What do I do first? Then what do I do?" As a result, when you see the word "prayer," it calls to mind simply a feeling of frustration, discouragement or guilt. For many prayer is not hard. It's impossible.

Author Samuel Taylor Coleridge once wrote, "The act of praying is the highest energy of which the human mind is capable. Praying...with the total concentration of the faculties. The great mass of worldly men and of the learned men are absolutely incapable of prayer."

Do you believe that's true? After several years of praying, I agree. As college students, you're an elite group; the best of the best. You're intelligent, talented, and ambitious.

I wonder what would happen if we were able to lift off the world's machinery, seeing not your worldly accomplishments, but your spiritual ones. What would you look like as people of prayer? For a lot of us, we'd find our prayer lives were simply endless, boring supplications—a life of complacency, sleepiness, and suspicions that we're wasting time. But it can be better. It can be different.

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You know what we need? A short course on prayer. Fortunately, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives exactly such a lesson. Look at Matthew 6:5-13.

There you'll find three qualities of prayer that we are to have.

1. To pray privately. (See Matthew 6:5,6)
2. To pray genuinely by praying personally, earnestly, honestly, and reverently. (See Matthew 6:7,8)
3. To pray with variety. (See the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:9-13)

Praying as the Lord taught will give us the groundwork for an improved prayer life, and help us use our superior weapon. Prayer makes God's resources available to us, which were otherwise unavailable—physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional resources.

In closing, I'll leave this to mull over:

Edward MacHenry Baum, a Civil War chaplain, was well known among his men because every day during the war he would arise at 4 a.m. and pray until 7 a.m.

He once wrote, "The whole force of Bible statement is to increase our faith in the doctrine that prayer affects God. It secures favors from God which can be secured in no other way, and which will not be bestowed by God if we do not pray." Prayer is admittedly hard, but it is rewarding.

Excerpted from a transcription of a talk Tim Downs gave at the 1989 San Francisco Christmas Conference.

End

The Compass is the discipleship curriculum for Campus Crusade for Christ's Campus Ministry. It was created by Centerfield Productions, the field based division of CruPress. We'd love to hear your feedback on this lesson. Please write us at centerfield@uscm.org

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