

## REACHING OUT TO TOUCH THE HAND OF GOD

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In 1965 a movie by the name of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* was released. It portrayed the contentious relationship between Pope Julius II and the great artist and sculptor Michelangelo during the painting of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. The pope had in mind a fresco portraying the twelve Apostles on the vaulted ceiling of the chapel. Michelangelo reluctantly began work on this commissioned painting, but his artistry was uninspired. Displeased with what he had drawn, he scratched it out and fled from Rome. Awakened by a beautiful sunrise at the mouth of the cave where he had been hiding, it was like viewing the dawn of creation. That became the vision for what he would paint on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He would create a magnificent mural of the creation and in the center of that painting he would portray the hand of God reaching out to touch the finger of mankind.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could reach out and touch the hand of God? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could walk hand in hand with the Lord each and every day? Is that too much to ask? Is that something which we mere mortals can never expect to experience this side of eternity? Perhaps so, but maybe not. Perhaps there is a way to reach out and touch the hand of God. Perhaps there is a way to commune with Him, to enjoy His friendship and His companionship. Perhaps there is a way we can enter into a personal relationship with Him. It's called **PRAYER**. Beginning today and continuing in the weeks to come both on Sunday mornings and during our Wednesday afternoon Something More sessions, we're going to reach out to touch the hand of God. We're going to discover how we can walk hand in hand with God through prayer. So let's get started by asking this question, "Why do people pray? Why do people want to talk to God? Why do they want to get His attention, to grasp His hand and hopefully His heart in order to speak with Him?"

There are four primary reasons. Let me share them with you along with Scriptural references that will illustrate why we as human beings pray to God. The first is **protection**. We pray for protection from all kinds of things like illness, adversity, or enemies. Psalm 140:1, for example, declares, "Rescue me, O LORD, from evil men; protect me from men of violence." Hezekiah, one of the ancient kings of Judah, may have prayed a similar prayer. He was facing the army of the Assyrian Empire which was besieging

Jerusalem. Later he petitioned God for healing because a serious disease threatened his life. Chapters 19 and 20 in the book of 2 Kings in the Old Testament describe how God heard Hezekiah's prayers and protected both him and his people from harm.

A second reason why people pray is for **provision**. We need God's assistance to meet our daily needs. Jesus was aware of that when He taught His disciples to pray saying, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). I suspect that all of us have faced a situation like this, an immediate need that overwhelmed our available resources. In my own life years ago it involved a dental emergency. My dentist said that my teeth needed immediate and expensive attention. Embarrassed because I could not pay for the work that needed to be done, I told the dentist that I would have to think about it. Arriving back home, I cried out in despair, "Lord, what am I going to do?" Little did I realize that the God was already addressing my need. I returned to the dentist's office a few days later. Before I could even address my financial difficulties, he said, "Philip, we'll work this out, you just pay me what you can, little by little."

A third reason why people pray is for **wisdom**. Have you ever asked God to give you wisdom and discernment about an important decision? How about wisdom regarding the governance of a nation. I suspect that all of us have heard about Solomon's request for wisdom in the pages of the Old Testament. Newly crowned as the king of Israel, Solomon went to a revered worship center to present an offering unto the Lord. Remaining there that night, he fell asleep and had a dream. In the dream God told him to ask for whatever he wished. In response, Solomon asked for wisdom. He said, "Give Your servant a discerning heart to govern Your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). Even though all of this took place in a dream, it was nevertheless a real prayer, because dreams are like a window into our souls. They often describe the issues and needs that we are struggling with.

The fourth reason why people pray is for **fellowship**. In Psalm 84, verse 10, the writer declares, "Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked." The man who wrote this psalm just wanted to enjoy a time of intimate fellowship with his God. It was better than anything else this world has to offer, be it good or bad. Have you ever felt that way, longing to experience God's presence? When you get right down to it, that's probably one of the most profound reasons why people reach out to God in prayer. As Saint Augustine, one of the greatest theologians in the early centuries of Christianity once wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Hopefully, in the weeks to come our hearts will be uplifted as they find their rest in God through prayer. Under no circumstances, however, should anyone believe that we can cover all there is to know about prayer in such a brief period of time. Countless volumes have been written on prayer and the lives of some of God's most ardent disciples have been devoted to the study of prayer. At best, we will but touch the hem of a meaningful prayer life with God. Nevertheless, we will do our best, just as the woman did who struggled so courageously, pushing through the multitudes, to touch the hem of Jesus's robe.

Her story is told in the gospel of Mark, chapter 5, verses 21-34. Jesus had been summoned to the home of Jairus, a religious leader in the community. His daughter was seriously ill and the synagogue ruler hoped that Jesus could heal her. In the crowd accompanying Jesus to the home of Jairus, there was a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhaging malady that had afflicted her for twelve years. She had seen many doctors and none had been able to help her. If anything they made her condition worse. Hearing about Jesus and His ability to heal people, she thought to herself, "If only I can reach out and touch the hem of His garment. I will be healed. The bleeding will stop." Pushing her way through the crowd, she was finally able to reach out and touch the edge of His robe. In that moment a surge of healing energy swept through her body. She knew that she had been healed. Then much to her surprise and embarrassment, Jesus stopped and turned to the crowd who was walking with Him. "Who touched my clothing?" He said. His disciples who were walking with Him immediately replied, "A lot of people have touched you, a whole multitude. What are you talking about?" Jesus paid them no mind, but kept looking all around at the sea of faces in the crowd. Realizing that Jesus was talking about her, the woman came and fell at Jesus' feet. With fear and trembling she told Him her story. Lifting her up to her feet, He said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Sometimes prayer is more than a word. It's an action. It's something that we do. It's like reaching out to take the hand of God. It's an act of faith. It's a cry for help to the One who can bring new life and hope into our weary lives. That's what happened a long time ago in the bedroom of an elderly widower. His wife had died six months earlier and he was bereft with grief. She had been the source of his joy and strength in life. They were inseparable. Now she was gone. It was almost more than he could endure. Each evening before retiring for the night, they would kneel beside their bed, holding hands, as they prayed. Now that too was gone. But old habits die hard. Before slipping between the covers, he got down on his old, wobbly knees and reached out to take his wife's hand. "Lord, Jesus," he prayed.

"I'm so weary and I miss my dear wife, Alice, so much. Can you find it in Your heart to comfort an old, lonely widower who feels so terribly alone?" In that moment he sensed God's presence. Someone was holding his hand just like Alice had done.

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