

“Help! Needed and Wanted”

November 7, 2021

Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers series

Help! How many of us are quick to ask for help? Maybe a few of us. If we’re honest, probably not many of us - or at least not very often. How many of us struggle to ask for help?

So much of our culture prizes independence and individualism that asking for help - relying on someone else for help - is not a normal practice for most of us. Asking for directions, reading instruction manuals, seeking advice, or even admitting we need professional help doesn’t come easily. Feeling vulnerable and in need isn’t easy. Receiving help sometimes come with an unspoken expectation that we’ll return the favor one day. The one who helps us may not have that expectation, but we do.

And it’s not always much different if we’re talking to God. Our faith tells us that we’re dependent on God. We don’t earn our salvation; it’s a gift we receive. We don’t deserve God’s grace, but we open ourselves to it. Even in our prayer life, asking for God’s help isn’t the first place we go, even though it can be a great blessing to us - and a witness to our faith.

Anne Lamott writes, “Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we’re invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence.” She advocates for keeping prayer simple, which is where we get these three essential prayers: *Help!, Thanks, and Wow!* Our prayers don’t have to be flowery or complex or perfect; prayer is our heart communicating to God. Hopefully, our prayers are real, truthful, honest, and sincere. God can handle them, and God invites us to pray them. God invites us to ask for help.

We hear cries of help throughout the psalms. We hear Jesus opening his heart to God - and asking for help - to remove the struggle of sacrifice. Ultimately, though, we hear Jesus rest in God’s purpose - and pray for God’s will to be done.

I’ve struggled to offer prayer when the opportunity presents itself, though I’ve become more comfortable asking if I can pray for people. I want people to know that prayer matters to me and that prayer is a powerful spiritual discipline. Maybe you’ve seen the (**SLIDE**) Praying hands emoji on social media. It’s become fairly popular, though some say it’s a high-five. Prayer really can change us and change others, and prayer offers incredible comfort. I hear that all the time. But there’s always the question: do we follow through when we say we’ll pray?

I asked Facebook friends to share their help prayers this week. Some were shared openly; some were sent in a private message. The first one I received came from a high

school classmate who offered this reflection: "there is no greater comfort I could ever know than prayer. It has saved my life." And then this, "I've found peace in being ok with not knowing everything." It was a powerful witness to me. Prayer doesn't necessarily bring certainty, but prayer does remind us that we're not alone - that God listens.

I recommended Anne Lamott's book because she offers great reminders about our prayer life. **SLIDE:** "Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to being helped by something, some force, some friends, some *something*." I resonate with Lamott's words because I want to be in charge, and prayer reminds me that I'm not.

And prayer is something we're thinking about - maybe more than we realize or admit. Earlier this year, I received a meaningful E-mail from a person in our congregation who shared a reflection about the difference between a wish, a hope, and a prayer after a medical procedure. "I certainly was wishing and hoping for a good outcome today...But I prayed for God's wisdom and guidance for my caregivers today. They were wonderful."

There was more. "A wish seems to be something "cheap." Like: I wish I will win the lotto, or I wish that something else good happens randomly. A hope seems to be something that people of faith or those searching for faith may already realize that there is a higher level of power above them. I can easily identify with them. A prayer seems to already assume that the believer is good with the belief of God and God's presence in our lives. Something that I constantly am looking for." I saved the message for this series because it was a prayer in itself - a deep dive into our spiritual lives - and the questions and wonders we all have. It's these kind of moments when those words of the psalms came to mind, especially Psalm 46: (**SLIDE**) *Be still, and know that I am God.*

My question about "Help!" prayers got more responses than I expected - and from a wider audience than I anticipated. My high school classmate offered her witness. My seminary professor reminded me of the psalmist's word: *I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.* From my 20-something niece to the more mature churchgoer at 90, here's a sampling. First, some personal prayers: *Don't let me screw up. Help me remember that you're in charge. Help me figure this out. Help me to be more like you. God, please take this, and have your way with me. Help me listen and be obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Help me live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly, and leave the rest to you. Help me overcome my unbelief! Help me keep my mouth shut!* One person prayed to be a good parent to her new baby.

Some were big, wide prayers: *Help me remember the bigger picture, find peace in uncertain times, be loving to other persons (especially those who have different views*

and values). Help us find a way to come together...to accept and appreciate each other...bring us together to live out your will. Handle the details, God.

Some Help! prayers were really specific. One person shared about praying before they went into their workplace during a hard season. Others said, *Help me choose the most meaningful words when writing notes of encouragement, give me wisdom in knowing whether to make a major life change, help me find peace and understanding in difficult work situations, help me to be a good caregiver to my loved one and meet their needs. Help the world to be more peaceful and caring so that I can quit worrying about my children and grandchildren's future. Help me leave it in your hands. Help me be patient and understanding in working with others and make the best life decisions. Help me be a blessing to someone today.* One person bore witness of the struggle to understand the dynamics of worrying if things will work out, especially around finances, and feeling exposed and fearful even as they offered it to God - and wondering if they were the only one who struggled. I assured them they were not alone.

Something happened as I read those Help! prayers. They became a part of me - not my own prayers - but a witness to what prayer is as I live my own faith. For some, it was asking for God's power in situations where we're powerless. For some, it was asking for wisdom and guidance. For others, it was admitting a struggle. But for all of them, Help! prayers show our dependence on God, our recognition of a lack of control, our vulnerability - getting real with God, and our humility - *God, you're God, and I'm not.*

Help! prayers show that we believe in God's power to do what we can't do. It doesn't mean that God will act according to our expectations, but it does mean that we believe that God can do what God will do. We trust that God is God. Help! prayers help us remember that God is faithful - that God has brought us through before and that God is at work for good (even when it's so hard to understand). And all of that took me to another psalm - 121: (**SLIDE**) *I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

Help! That's our prayer today, and each of us has a GOD BOX as a spiritual tool. When Anne Lamott talks about the GOD BOX, she's clear that a part of using it is letting go of whatever it is - the name of a person with whom you're angry, a situation that's causing distress. She writes, "You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this: *'Here. You think you're so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed.'*" (I've prayed this before!)

"Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off...until I hear back" Lamott says. And the response may not come in the way we expect, but it will come. And it's a way we release ourselves from the idea that we do this alone or carry those burdens alone. We

don't. God is our Helper.

So, we have a GOD BOX. What would you put in it today? What's your Help! prayer right now? What's hard or scary or overwhelming - or something you need to let go of and let God carry? Where are you seeking wisdom and guidance? How can you offer your heart to God more honestly? Something happens when we're more honest. We grow in a deeper relationship with God who knows us - knows all about us. So, take this home and use it. Then look back and see how God is at work - to bring healing, hope, and help.

Today we come to the table that Jesus sets for us. We know that Jesus cried for help, and God was with him, even in the hardest moments. Even as he gathered his friends at the table, he knew what was coming. He needed God's help, and still gathered them, loved them, and shared with them this holy meal.

As we come, I invite us to hear this word from I Thessalonians 5: 16-18, some of the earliest words to the early church, and a powerful reminder to us: *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* As we're thinking about prayer, are we praying continually and offer those Help! prayers as our witness that we don't go it alone.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, offered a Help! prayer in all vulnerability and humility. We offer our prayers - knowing that God's help is wanted as we admit our need for God's grace. God's help is needed. We can't do this alone, and we trust that God hears us, knows us, and is with us.

Let us pray...