

## 2.9.2025 Sermon

# Prayer

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Kingdom kids, family vacation, spiritual bypassing, cognitive dissonance, prayer practice, breath prayers, Shema prayer, self-reflection, God's presence, wind metaphor, faith flexibility, emotional anxiety, prayer tools, breath as prayer, liturgies

### SPEAKER

Elder Kevin Brisbin

Good morning... have the children already left for Kingdom Kids? Good. The rest of us are settling in here. Whether you want to go to Kingdom Kids or not, this is where you found yourselves.

Well, good morning. Thank you so much, Brigitte. That was beautiful. And thank you all for being here. It looks a little bit more like The Length and Cornerstone this morning. For those of you online, there is just a lot of Eagles gear in the room. Even those of us who don't follow sports know something is happening today.

Something, what time is that something happening? Oh, I've got plenty of time, plenty of time. I'll definitely have you out of here before 6:30.

Well, good morning. Wow. January was a long year, wasn't it? But we made it. Let's all take a deep, cleansing breath. February, everybody's favorite month. It's all sunshine and warmth from here. In fact, it is so very much *not* those things that my family, my personal family, purposefully plans our family vacations in February. In the four years out of the twenty we've been married that we've actually taken a family vacation, we go to the Sunshine State to escape the cold, the dark, the day-to-day, and into the warm, bright, happiest place on earth outside of Cornerstone, Disney.

Here we are. Look how sunny it is. We will see skies like that again, even here. We will. And do you think they'd mind if we used that tagline? "Cornerstone: The Happiest Place on Earth?" I mean, we kind of feel that, right? It's a happy place.

At any rate, that's what a vacation is, it's vacating the typical and entering into the extraordinary. It helps me weather the Januarys and Februarys of my life to know that I have a week away from work, away from the blue-gray, away from the day-to-day, and into an immersive world that is bright, curated magic, where every minute of every day is spent with those I love most.

To have that hope on the horizon, to look forward to, it makes it noticeably more challenging to weather the other sixteen years and sixteen winters when we did not have a Disney trip on the docket. I used to view prayer kind of like this. Life would get January-ish, as life tends to do, and I would pray for circumstances to change. I believed, much like Pastor Tracy shared a couple of weeks ago, that if I believed enough, whatever that means, if I had enough faith, if I didn't doubt, and if I was good enough, my prayer would be answered.

I would cling to that hope like an upcoming Disney vacation in the early days of January, thinking, "I just have to make it till then," because life just keeps life-ing, doesn't it? I heard that Amen.

For every spring, summer, and autumn of the soul, there is also a cold, dark winter. While I like winter's invitation to stay inside and rest and hibernate, life just isn't that accommodating. The demands of work and school trudge on, and these metaphorical winters leave me with more questions than answers, winters like a cancer diagnosis or a month with more month than money (strike that, reverse it).

We find ourselves in states of cognitive dissonance when life isn't turning out the way we expected. So what do we do when life isn't going the way we hoped or planned?

How many of you have heard of spiritual bypassing? Is that a phrase any of you have heard? When you Google it, the AI overview, the top result we're all familiar with, summarizes spiritual bypassing this way:

*"Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual practices to avoid dealing with difficult emotions, psychological issues, or unfinished tasks. It can be a way to protect oneself, but it doesn't resolve the underlying problems."*

Speaking for myself, this was my previous model for prayer. This was how I resolved that cognitive dissonance. Something bad would happen, and I would pray for it to be fixed. I would bypass my current response to the challenging circumstances by praying that God would fix or change them for me. In doing so, I used my spirituality to bypass my physical and emotional anxiety by placing my hope in God to fix it.

Using our current paradigm this year, this would be like living in the hospital, not just going there when you're sick, but actually moving in. I wasn't really taking personal responsibility, or at least I viewed my responsibility as a temporary placeholder until God stepped in and gave me what I asked for.

My faith was also pretty rigid, like a carefully fortified building. Architecture is interesting. I work in construction, commercial construction specifically, and I get to see these large buildings, even skyscrapers, rise from the ground. They're framed in iron and clad in glass and metal, all materials that are strong, sturdy, and rigid.

We might think that's how we should build our faith too, out of sturdy, stable things. And to a large degree, we should. But in order to build high, architects and engineers have learned there's something else you have to consider. Any guesses?

Wow, that all came at once, flexibility, wind. Yes, that's it! You're onto it, the wind. The higher you build, the more wind you encounter and the stronger the force. Skyscrapers, though they appear immovable, are designed with flexibility in mind. They *must* be built to move.

And as far as I'm concerned, that will preach, or at least it did for me.

When building a skyscraper, engineers design it to sway. They use techniques like aerodynamic shapes, tuned mass dampers, and corner softening to control the sway and prevent excessive vibrations. Essentially, the building dances with the wind rather than resisting it directly.

This is achieved by considering factors like wind vortex shedding, resonant frequency, and carefully managing the building's mass distribution to minimize the sway's impact on occupants.

You find these principles in all sorts of construction, and in the natural world too. Construction doesn't exist in a vacuum, just like us. It exists in a very real world with very real forces, not just the wind.

When building a bridge, for example, you have to consider compression, tension, and thermal expansion and contraction in response to temperature changes. Without these considerations, the wind would snap skyscrapers, and the temperature would tear bridges apart.

I particularly love the language of tall buildings being designed to *dance* in the wind. It made me think of Pastor Tracy and her love for the dance, and here it was, even in an article on architecture, speaking to me about prayer.

This might be the closest language I have to explain the shift in my personal view of prayer.

I used to pray for the wind to stop, but that rarely, if ever, happened. There's always more wind. Wind happens. But now, I pray to tune my mass dampers and soften my corners so the wind can move around me without snapping me in half.

Even my view of the wind has changed. Maybe it wasn't a force out to get me. Maybe the world just has wind. And while prayer may not change my circumstances, maybe it can change me, like those softened, aerodynamic corners.

Maybe prayer invites me to see God's presence with me, like the tuned mass dampers inside skyscrapers that shift and rebalance the building in response to wind

forces. That's what mass dampers are, huge weights at the top of a skyscraper, guided by sensors on the outside of the building that detect wind forces and adjust the damper to counterbalance them.

Maybe God's presence in my life, through prayer, can be that counterbalance to life's forces. And maybe, through prayer, we can learn to dance with the wind rather than resist it.

This allows us to build higher. If we don't account for the wind, we can only build our faith so high, limited by life's forces. And I don't want my life to be limited by them.

Conversely, if I built my faith out of fabric alone, with no structure, it would be tossed and torn by the wind. Instead, I feel called to prayer as a way to study the principles of the wind, life itself, and learn how to weather it. To build my faith with stable materials, but in a way that allows enough flexibility so it won't break.

You getting it? You coming with me?

Okay, enough allegory. Take a breath. I *love* allegory, I could live there all day. But let's get real for a second.

Any of you who know me probably know I love my children. I love children. In premarital counseling, I told Erica that I wanted, how many children? Six to twelve children. I know, and she married me anyway. We were 22 years old and homeless but believed it was God's plan for people to get married and have children. So we did, and we prayed for children.

We got pregnant in our second month of marriage at 22 years old, and we were elated, I mean, thrilled, so excited. We had just moved to West Chester and were living in the Winkleblecks' basement, a family from Cornerstone who had five children of their own. Some of you here remember them. We prayed and prayed for that baby. We named them, dreamed about their future, and imagined the milestones they would reach.

But then, just as we crossed into the safe zone of the second trimester, the bleeding started. We prayed, but then the water broke, along with our hearts, as contractions began and our dreams ended. Were our prayers answered? I can tell you, it certainly didn't feel like it.

There are those who would spiritually bypass this and twist or contort it as God's answer to prayer, suggesting that since we were young and not stable, maybe He knew better. But that is unconscionable to me. I personally cannot reconcile that with a theology of a God who is in any way good.

We buried Elk in Enoch, which means "belongs to God" and "dedicated", along with our hopes and dreams for him, in the Saint Agnes Cemetery up on High Street.

Less than a year later, we lost our second child, this time at 17 weeks. We received a call in the middle of the night that my Granny Joe, who was my person, my favorite person that ever walked the earth, had passed away. That same morning, we went to an ultrasound before heading to Tyrone for the funeral, only to find out that our baby had also passed away within hours of that other news.

This time, the labor was walking through double grief, a funeral before we could have a D&C to let go of the child that even our bodies were not ready to release. But having no other choice, we surrendered our second child and named them El Han and Emsley, meaning "God is gracious" and "gift of God."

We were 23, heartbroken, and confused. Many well-meaning Christians said terrible things that should never be said to grieving people. But we are products of our perceptions and theologies, right or wrong. That was the spiritual bypassing they clung to, trying to reconcile the irreconcilable cognitive dissonance of hurt and loss, or the age-old mystery of why bad things happen to good people.

Fast forward another year, and we finally welcomed our double rainbow baby, Evangeline Amara, meaning "bringer of good news," like evangelist, and Amara, which means "inextinguishable." It's the Greek word picture of a light that can't be snuffed out. That's what it felt like, holding our first child here on Earth.

Two years later, we had Josiah David, meaning "God supports and heals" and "beloved." Then came our fifth pregnancy. We had been hearing heartbeats, and everything was going well. We went to the 20th-week ultrasound, excited to count fingers and toes, but were told, "I'm sorry, there's no heartbeat." The tech might as well have been speaking about me, because that's how I felt in that moment, no life, no breath.

At this point, I had a stable job. We were renting a house. I know I'm sniffing, no need to hand me a tissue to say "stop crying", I'm okay.

We were renting a house, I was a deacon at Cornerstone, Erica was serving in multiple ministries, and we were praying. Our home group was praying, our pastors were praying, our Christian families were praying. And yet, here we were again, decimated. There's no preparing for such news. In my opinion, there's no explaining it either. No amount of spiritual bypassing could resolve this for me or for Erica.

What we needed wasn't a pithy spiritual explanation to make sense of the unexplainable. What we needed was a spiritual presence, someone to abide with us in our grieving. So, we ignored those who said, "God just loved them so much He had to take them home," and instead, we saw God come to us with the same heartache on His face and the same tears in His eyes. We grieved together with God.

We grieved Eliaki Emerson, meaning "God raises up" and "brave."

Those of you who know us know our story didn't end there. Three years later, we welcomed Josefina Morris, meaning "God increases" and "promised by God." And then, two years after that, Seraphim Anne, "burning ones," like the seraphim that worship around the throne of God, and "grace," as our hearts were full of worship and immense gratitude.

I want to say, God was with us through it all. Even in our messy theology, God was our through line. God is our constant. His presence was the answer to our prayers. His presence softened our corners, tuned the dampers, and offset the wind so that we swayed without breaking in half under the force of that virulent storm.

God's presence taught us to dance with the wind. Because life moves, and the longer you live, the higher you build, the stronger the forces of the wind feel. So either we stay small or we learn how to build with the wind and life in mind.

That sounds good, but how do we do that? How would one practice prayer?

For me, it's practicing God's presence, seeking contentment in that presence. More and more intentional, mindful connection with God, that is my prayer practice. But what is it for you?

Let me give you some tools, some etymology, a little Hebrew and Greek grammar school, and some cultural context.

Prayer can be such a loaded word, especially since we seek it most when we have the most at stake, praying when we're desperate, vulnerable. We often frame it as either God comes through or He doesn't. We define God as the outcome we want, rather than seeing God join us in our circumstances, regardless of the result.

Vulnerable questions, you can raise your hand if you want or abstain if you'd like:

- How many of you have prayed for a miracle and seen it happen, however you define that? Me too.
- How many of you have prayed for a miracle and not seen it happen? Me too.
- How many of you have prayed and felt the presence of God? Me too.
- How many of you have prayed and felt nothing at all? Me too.

When it comes to experience, it's a mixed bag. The only constant is my choice to see God's presence with me, which, I acknowledge, is a choice.

So, where did prayer begin?

It could be in Genesis 1, 2, 3, or 4. If prayer is communion or connection with God, maybe it started when the Spirit hovered over the waters in Genesis 1, God with God's own self: Parent, Child, and Spirit. Or maybe it's when God spoke creation

into being. Seeing creation as both a prayer request and an answer to prayer is a beautiful thought, and perhaps a journal prompt for some of you.

Or maybe it began in Genesis 2, when Adam first spoke in verse 23 after God created Eve. But it's unclear whether Adam was speaking to God or just making a proclamation.

Maybe it's in Genesis 3, verses 9-10, when God calls out, "Where are you?" and Adam replies, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." Perhaps that's the first prayer, dialogue between God and man.

But many scholars consider Genesis 4:26 as the first prayer, where humans initiated the dialogue with God. "Seth also had a son and named him Enosh. At that time, people began to call on the name of the Lord."

All that aside, according to Jewish tradition, the first notable prayer recorded in Hebrew Scripture is the Shema, specifically, the Shema Yisrael, which begins with the Hebrew word "Shema," meaning "hear," found in Deuteronomy 6:4.

Shema, Israel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is one.

It continues with these words from verse five: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These two verses became the basis for the Shema prayer that people of the Jewish faith recite twice every day. They are taught it when they're young children, often as a bedtime prayer, and it is also tradition for it to be used as their last words at the end of their lives.

It's not only written on these metaphorical bookends of their lives but also physically inscribed on parchment, rolled up, and placed in the Mezuzah, affixed to the posts and lintels of their doors, their homes, and their cities.

The power of prayer, and my favorite discovery of the Shema, is when we see the presence of this prayer pop up in the New Testament. Listen when Jesus himself recalls the Shema when cornered in Matthew chapter 22, verses 34 to 40:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might," directly quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 from the Shema, a prayer that every one of those Jewish leaders would have known so well that they could have recited it along with him. Doesn't that bring a whole new layer to that interaction?

He continues in verse 38: "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself," from Leviticus 19:18. "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

While the Shema is the most notable early example of prayer in the Torah, it's not the Hebrew word for prayer. Shema means "Hear", as in "Hear, O Israel." The Hebrew word for prayer is *tefillah*, which interestingly means "to judge oneself" or "to self-evaluate." When I saw this, my mind was blown. It was so fascinating, right?

In English, prayer is often defined as "to ask." Its etymology traces back to the Latin *precari*, meaning "to beg," through Old French *preier* (an entreaty or petition), and into Middle English *pray*, meaning "to ask earnestly." But in Hebrew, the word for prayer doesn't mean "to ask" someone else, it means to judge oneself. Prayer as self-examination, contemplation, taking account of oneself.

This understanding of prayer invites introspection. Now, overlay that interpretation of prayer, as self-reflection, with the words of the Shema prayer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." Pray that as self-examination:

- How are we loving the Lord with all our heart?
- How are we loving the Lord with all our soul?
- How are we loving the Lord with all our might?

And for those of us living post-New Testament, we can also add Jesus' words from that interaction:

- How are we loving our neighbors?
- How are we loving ourselves?

Now, imagine this as a daily practice, done twice every day. Imagine teaching our kids to do this when they are young. Imagine these self-examining questions being what we want to cling to at the end of our lives. Mind-blowing, right?

In Hebrew, there isn't just one word for prayer. Other commonly used Hebrew words for prayer include:

- *Atira*, meaning "digging", I really like that one.
- *Techina*, meaning "supplication" or "humble request."
- *Siakh*, meaning "meditate," "speak," or even "to complain."

For example, in Genesis 25:21, "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife, Rebecca, became pregnant." Both "Isaac prayed" and "the Lord answered his prayer" use *Atira*, Isaac *dug in*, pleaded, interceded, and God answered his digging.



In Numbers 6:25, *techina* appears in the priestly blessing over Israel by Aaron and his sons: "The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious (*techina*) to you."

In Psalm 119:15, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways," *siakh* is used for "meditate." Yet, in Job 23:2, the same word means "complaint": "Even today, my *siakh* is bitter; my groaning is heavier than my sighing."

Moving on to Greek, there are four main words translated as "prayer" in the New Testament:

1. *Proseuché* (*pros* meaning "toward" and *euché* meaning "a wish" or "a vow"), the most common word, found 127 times.
2. *Euchomai*, meaning "to pray" or "make a vow."
3. *Deésis*, meaning "an urgent request" or "supplication."
4. *Proseuchomai*, meaning "to pray" or "to seek God", implying directness, as if standing face-to-face with God.

There are also two additional Greek words often translated as "pray" in English:

- *Aíteo*, meaning "to ask."
- *Deomai*, meaning "to beg" or "bind oneself", as in making a vow or promise. This word is used when the leper implores Jesus to heal him (Luke 5:12), the father's desperate plea for Jesus to cast out a demon (Luke 9:38), and even in Jesus' own words in Matthew 9:37-38: "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. *Deomai* the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his field."

For me, prayer is mindful presence with God. For the Hebrews, it was self-reflection, digging, communicating, even complaining. For the ancient Greeks, coming from a polytheistic culture with specific gods for specific needs, prayer was more transactional, asking, begging, pleading for help, often with offerings.

So, what is prayer for you? What's your prayer muscle? How do you work it out?

Let's take a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth, or however you take deep, calming, relaxing, cleansing breaths.

Breathing is fascinating. Dr. John Bocock, a licensed psychiatrist and practicing psychotherapist, says breathing is the bridge between the brain and the body. In her book *Breath as Prayer*, Jennifer Tucker shares that just as emotions like worry and fear can trigger the body's stress response, what we experience physically can affect our emotions.

Because of this, we can often quiet our worries and calm anxiety simply by controlling one critical body function: breathing. Breathing is unique, it can be

regulated both consciously and unconsciously. We can't intentionally lower our heart rate or willfully regulate our blood pressure, but we can control our breathing. We can choose slow, deep breaths or rapid, shallow ones.

Breathing directly connects to the vagus nerve and our parasympathetic nervous system. Changing our breathing affects the signals sent to the brain. Dr. Curt Thompson, psychiatrist and author, writes that by controlling our breath, we can willfully influence the brain and autonomic nervous system, literally changing our mind-body state.

So this week, my invitation to you is breath prayers. Some believe that even the act of breathing itself is a prayer, that inhaling and exhaling can profess "Yahweh." Though that might feel like a stretch, it's a beautiful thought.

Breath prayers are simple, often two-line prayers, usually from scripture, prayed alongside breathing. For example, when the author of *Breath as Prayer* felt overwhelmed, they recalled Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and prayed it in rhythm with their breath:

Inhale: "The Lord is my shepherd."

And then exhale through your mouth and remember, I have everything I need. Now, let's do that two to three times again on your own, at your own speed, and again, the words are on the screen.

You know my challenge: find a verse that is meaningful to you, or find a verse that's relevant to your current situation or a challenging circumstance when you might need this. Plan for that and create your own breath prayer, then practice it every day. Get a few reps in every day, for example.

Just to kind of show you again how simple this is, don't overcomplicate it, if we use a verse from today, like Numbers chapter six, verse 25, as an example. The verse is, "The Lord makes his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you."

You could do it this way: inhale, "The Lord's face shines on me." Exhale, "God is gracious to me." Repeat: "The Lord's face shines on me. God is gracious to me." Simple, and then repeat it a few times while breathing.

Or even the Shema prayer itself, you could use that. It's four lines, but: "I love you, God, with all my heart, all my soul, and with all my might. I love you, God, with all my heart, all my soul, and with all my might." And just breathe.

It really is that simple, and it can be really meaningful if you find a verse, like if you have a favorite verse, or again, if the 23rd Psalm is one that really comforts you, or whatever that verse might be for you. Or even a song lyric. Just simplify it to two simple phrases in plain language that make sense to you. Then inhale and exhale those truths as a prayer, both to God and over yourself.

It's that simple, and I truly believe it can be that impactful for us, connecting our heart and our head, our bodies and our soul, our breath and our prayer muscle. Can you do that this week? Amen. Amen.

And one final fun fact, Amen, of course, doesn't mean "the end." It is from the Hebrew word *emmeth*, meaning truth. Like, "Yes, I agree. So be it." It's a continuation from a point of mutual understanding and connectedness. It is a going on from here with God, just like we sang. It's not a goodbye, but a "Let's go together." Truth, truth.

And again, these two resources I just wanted to recommend if you're like, "I still struggle to write a breath prayer for myself." There's this book called *Breath as Prayer* by Jennifer Tucker, with the foreword by Ann Voskamp, if you like her.

And there's another book I wanted to recommend called *Black Liturgies* by Cole Arthur Riley. I'm not sure if any of you know her. She's on Instagram. Some of you know her? Yes, she's great, isn't she? You can follow her on Instagram if you'd like as well. She has been there since 2020, putting beautiful liturgies out. She also does a lot of breath prayers, both in her book and on her Instagram platform, where they're just like screenshots: inhale, pray this; exhale, pray this.

Cole, C, O, L, E, Arthur Riley. She has two books. This one is called *Black Liturgies*. This is the one that has breath prayers in it. If you're thinking, "I struggle to write my own prayers. I want to just recite some prayers that someone else has written," those are two great resources that I use and can recommend.

So, with that, thank you...