

PRAYER

Why and how should I pray?

It is a fact that prayer is something more people engage in, than would actually admit it. For some, prayer is the last resort when everything else has failed. When people get in a jam, it's quite amazing how 'prayer' suddenly becomes an option.

In World War I the fighting was at times atrocious as men faced each at close range in the trenches. One veteran remarked that when the deadly mustard gas came over, the most hardened started praying fervently (to 'someone' they often did not believe in).

WHAT IS PRAYER ?

Prayer is the most important activity of our lives. It is the main way in which we develop a *relationship* with God. Prayer is about communication that enriches that relationship.

Can you imagine how a relationship can progress when there is no communication? In a marriage, where communication breaks down and is not restored, the relationship begins to die.

Prayer is not a ritualistic torrent of mindless and mechanical words. Jesus said, "Do not keep babbling on like pagans" (Matthew 6:7). It is a conversation with our heavenly Father - a vertical conversation, not a horizontal one. A little boy once yelled, 'Please God bring me a big box of chocolates for my birthday'. His mother said 'There is no need to shout dear! God isn't deaf'. Back came the reply, 'No, but Grandpa is and he is in the next room!' When we pray it is not to others or to ourselves but to God. So prayer is a matter of relationships and when we pray, the whole Trinity is involved.

Jesus taught us to pray 'Our Father in Heaven' (Matthew 6:9). God is personal. Man is made in the image of God. Personhood is a reflection of something within the nature of God. He is our loving Father and we have the extraordinary privilege of being able to come into his presence and can call him 'Abba' - a word for 'Daddy'. There is a remarkable intimacy about our relationship with God and about praying to our Father in heaven.

When we pray we are speaking to the Creator of the universe. He is the One who is all knowing, all seeing and all powerful. His love and care for us extends to knowing even the most seemingly insignificant details of our lives - the hairs on our head are numbered (Matthew 10:30).

When we pray He is present to listen. We are not praying to a 'cloud of unknowing' but to God whose presence transcends everything. Our prayers do not just hit the plaster ceiling and reverberate back unattended to.

Paul says that through Jesus we have access to the Father by one Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). Jesus said that his Father would give 'whatever you ask in my name' (John 15:16). We have no right to come to God in ourselves but we are able to do so 'through Jesus' and 'in His name'. That is why prayers often end 'in the name of Jesus'. This is not a formula but our acknowledgement of the fact that we can only come to God through Jesus.

It is Jesus, through his death on the cross, who removed the barrier between us and God. He is our great High Priest. That is why there is such power in the name of Jesus.

WHAT KINDS OF PRAYER ARE THERE ?

There are quite a few forms of prayer - thanksgiving, praise, adoration, confession, listening, asking etc. God delights in all of them. Asking is an important part of prayer. Sometimes people say, "If God knows our needs, why do we have to ask?" Well, it would not be much of a relationship if there was no communication.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. He assumed they would be, saying, "When you pray..." (Matthew 6:7), not "If you pray..."

Jesus also taught that there were incentives to prayer as it was a means of us receiving from our Father the things we need.

The Lord's prayer (really the disciples' prayer) is a good model for us to see the various expressions our praying can contain. Let's look at it from Matthew 6: 6-15.

Our Father:

This clarifies our approach to God in prayer, and our relationship with Him through the work of Christ on the Cross of Calvary. It reminds us of our relationship with others... We can never come to "our" Heavenly Father knowing that we have something against a brother or sister. As you begin to pray, direct your thoughts to the Fatherhood of God. Clear your heart of anything you may have against another Christian, and determine to forgive that person.

In Heaven:

We are reminded of the sovereignty of God, His glory, majesty and power. God is on His throne and has all things under control.

Concentrate on the glory and majesty of God. Learn to praise and worship Him in your private prayer life.

Hallowed be Thy Name:

The name of God reveals His nature and character, His person and purpose. God is our Provider, our Healer, our Banner, our Peace, our Righteousness, our Shepherd, our Most High God.

As you read the Word of God you will come to know more and more about the wonderful Name of Jesus. Express your appreciation to God for all that His name and character means.

Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven:

As we pray this, we must ask, "How do you want to use me to help reach the world for Christ, to establish your rule here on earth?" God needs dedicated people with a burning desire to see souls saved for Christ, for lives to be healed, restored and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Confess your desire to God to be involved in reaching the lost world for Christ. Ask Him to show you how you can participate in this great task of seeing his purposes established in the earth

Give us this day our daily bread:

Here we acknowledge God as the Source and Provider of all our needs. We reaffirm our constant dependence upon Him. All that we have comes from God, and here we are reminded of our stewardship of our possessions and materials. Begin to thank God for His provisions for you - your clothing, your food, your job, your good health.

Forgive us our debts:

We need daily cleansing and forgiveness, Here we are reminded that not only do we ourselves need to be forgiven of the Lord, but that we must first forgive those who have wronged us in any way. When we forgive others it gives us the privilege to function as God functions, with a heart of forgiveness, grace and love.

Allow the Holy Spirit to shine His light into every area of your life to illuminate those things that are not pleasing to God and which will hinder you in your walk with Him.

Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory:

All prayer concludes with placing everything in God's hands, An attitude of surrender waits in helplessness, inviting his mercy and intervention. It is not saying 'brace yourself for failure', but trusting Him. No matter how low you sink, you can always rise in triumph from your knees before God.

Before you finish your prayer, ask yourself if you have found release and victory through it. Remind yourself that God is in control and has your best interest at heart. Even if the answer has not yet come, begin to thank Him for it and praise Him for His goodness and faithfulness.

DOES GOD ALWAYS ANSWER PRAYER ?

Every Christian can know through experience, that God answers prayer. You cannot prove Christianity on the basis of answers to prayer because they can always be explained away by cynics as coincidences. The effect of answered prayer reinforces our faith in God.

Sometimes answers to our prayers do not come immediately however much we might like them to. There are several reasons why this might be so but always remember that 'delays' are not God's 'denials'. Sometimes He withholds in His wisdom because He sees a wider picture. In His love a condition for answered prayer is that it is in his will. He knows best.

At other times we must learn to persevere in our praying. Jesus said,

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will open to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7: 7-8).

Asking - seeking - knocking implies a degree of tenacity and perseverance. Jesus' parable in Luke 18 describes this need for not praying once and giving up. *Faith* and *patience* are important ingredients in our prayer life. (See Hebrews 6:12 and Hebrews 10:35).

WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE HINDRANCES ?

Timing

Sometimes God works amazing things into our lives as we patiently wait on Him for our requests to be fulfilled. Waiting for the Lord to move on our behalf reveals a lot about what is in our hearts.

Unconfessed Sin

God never promises to answer the prayer of a person who is not living in a relationship with Him. Sometimes He may graciously answer the prayer of an unbeliever but there is no basis for expecting that.

If we have a sense that our prayers are not 'getting through' the question could be asked if there is any area of our life that needs God's forgiveness or if there is any blockage due to attitudes of unforgiveness or resentment we may hold toward another person.

Norman Vincent Peale tells a story from his childhood. Forbidden by his father to experiment with cigarettes, one day Norman was caught doing the very thing he knew he had been told not to do. Trying to conceal his activity he held the cigarette behind his back and sought to divert his father's attention. "Dad", he asked, "there's a circus come to town and you know how I'd love to go. I've never been to a circus, could we go?" His father looked at him knowingly and said very sternly, "**NEVER** make a request while hiding a smouldering disobedience!"

God will not have much regard to prayers from those who seek to cover their disobedience and unconfessed sin.

"He that covers his sin shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes it, will obtain mercy." Proverbs 28:13

Wrong Motivation

Our motivation can be a hindrance to getting what we ask for. Not every request for a new Porsche gets answered! James writes:

"You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4: 2-3)

Remember God always knows best...

Sometimes prayers are not answered because what we are requesting is not good for us, God only promises to give us 'good gifts' (Matthew 7:11). He loves us and knows what is

best for us. A good human father does not always give his children what they ask for. If a five year old wants to play with a carving knife, hopefully a good father will say 'no!' God will answer 'no' if the things we ask for are “either not good in themselves, or not good for us or for others, directly or indirectly, immediately or ultimately”, as John Stott has written.

The answer to our prayer will either be 'yes', 'no' or sometimes 'wait', and for this we should be extremely grateful. If we were given carte blanche we would never dare pray again.

As the preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it,

“I thank God that he is not prepared to do anything that I may chance to ask Him... I am profoundly grateful to God that He did not grant me certain things for which I asked, and that He shut certain doors in my face”

Any Christian who has been a Christian for some time will appreciate this sentiment. Many years ago, Ruth Graham (married to Billy Graham) told an audience in Minneapolis,

“God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man - several times”

Sometimes we will not know during this life why the answer was 'no'.

That is why the promises in the Bible that prayers will be answered are sometimes qualified. For example, John writes, “If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 John 5:14). The more we get to know God, the better we will know His will and the more our prayers will be answered.

WHEN SHOULD WE PRAY ?

The New Testament encourages us to pray always (1Thessalonians 5:17, Ephesians 6:18). We do not have to be in a special building to pray. We can pray in the car, on the bus, on our bike, at home, at work, any time or place. There is benefit in setting aside times to pray. Jesus said, 'When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen' (Matthew 6:6), He himself went off to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35).

As well as praying alone it is important to pray with other people. This could be in a small group of two or three for example. Jesus said, “I tell you that if two or three agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven (Matthew 18:19).

Praying out aloud with other people can be a bit hard or awkward at first. However persevere - keep it simple and remember God hears your words and sees your heart. It does not have to be a pretty, flowery piece for those listening. God answers simple prayers spoken in faith.