

THE CHRISTIAN'S PRAYER LIFE

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Prayer to God manifestly must hold great importance to those who would be truly spiritual. While God's Word to us is always to have first place in our lives, prayer must certainly have second place; indeed, we must even study God's Word with prayers for understanding and willingness to obey.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

The Scriptures everywhere exhort God's people to pray, and in the epistles of Paul we find greater cause, greater reason and greater incentive than ever to pray—to pray "always," "in everything," "without ceasing." The example of our Lord and of His apostles—particularly Paul—is a call to prayer. Every need, every anxiety, every heartache is a call to prayer. Every temptation, every defeat—yes, and every victory is a call to prayer.

Yet, merely praying, or even spending much time in prayer, is not in itself evidence of true spirituality. Many carnal Christians, still "babes in Christ," and even many unsaved people, spend much time in prayer. But the truly spiritual believer will join the Apostle Paul in saying: *"I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also"* (I Cor. 14:15). *"With the spirit,"* earnestly, fervently, pouring out to God my adoration, my supplications and my thanks. And *"with the understanding also,"* intelligently, with a clear grasp of what the Scriptures, rightly divided, say about God's will and His provisions for *my* prayer life in this present dispensation of Grace.

THE PREVALENT MISUSE OF PRAYER

The gross misuse of prayer in our day is a clear indication that many are failing to pray "with the understanding."

Prayers by the Unsaved

In the minds of tens of thousands of unsaved people prayer is a power in itself. They say: "I believe in prayer" or "I don't believe in prayer." They try it. If they get what they pray for, they say: "It works. I've tried it." If they fail to get what they ask for, they say: "It's all so much nonsense. I've never gotten what I've prayed for." Other tens of thousands who have never trusted in Christ for salvation just go on praying, in some cases often and earnestly, feeling that somehow, sometime it might help. But all this is sheer superstition, not faith. It is founded, not on divine revelation, but on human imagination. It springs, not from the Word of God, but from the will of man.

The Scriptures make it abundantly clear that those who reject Christ have no claim whatever upon God. He is in no way obliged to hear their prayers.¹

Our Lord said to His disciples:

"...I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

In Hebrews 10:19,20, we are informed that it is the *"brethren"* who have,

"...boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh."

And it is distinctly to *"the people of God,"* who can rest in the finished work of Christ (Heb. 4:9,10) that the apostle says:

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace..." (Heb. 4:16).

According to both Romans 5:2 and Ephesians 2:18 it is *through Christ* that we have access to the Father. How then can the Christ-rejector expect to be heard? It is further because believers are *sons of God* that they have a legitimate claim upon Him as Father.

"...ye have received the Spirit of adoption [sonship] whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).

"And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6).

Apart from all this, the prayers of the unsaved are unnatural, for surely it is unnatural to address God in prayer while He is still unknown and His Word doubted. It is only as He is known, loved and trusted that prayer becomes natural.

True prayer is an evidence of salvation. Saul of Tarsus had offered many prayers to God as a religious Jew, but it was not until his conversion that the Lord said: *"Behold he prayeth"* (Acts 9:11).

Misuse of Prayer by the Saved

But illegitimate uses of prayer are not confined to the unsaved alone. Many of God's people fail to pray acceptably. They indulge their wills, earnestly praying that God will lead; yet all the while determined that He shall lead *according to their desires*, even if contrary to His revealed will. Then, when faced with the written Word, they say: *"But I have prayed much about it."* They even challenge God, like the young woman who justified herself for entering into an unequal marriage vow by saying: "I asked the Lord if this wasn't His will just to hinder it somehow." Such misuse of prayer is worse than superstition; it is sacrilege, for the young woman should have known—probably *did* know—that the written Word had already condemned what she wanted, prayed about and got.

Then too, there is much superstition among God's people with respect to prayer. How readily many believers "feel led," seek for "inner promptings" or listen for that "still small voice" in answer to their prayers! They say: "The Lord told me" this or that, or "The Spirit whispered to me" or "I could just hear Him saying." When such remarks are made to this writer he usually inquires further into the details and invariably learns that no voice was heard at all, but that the speaker merely took some feeling or impression to be, in some mystic way, a direction from the Lord.

God *does* speak to us through His Word, even when some incident or circumstance emphasizes the truth of His Word, but with the Word complete He no longer speaks to us by visions or even by still small voices, and the instructed believer will be careful not to depend upon "inner promptings," knowing that by nature *"the heart is deceitful above all things"* (Jer. 17:9).

Wrong claims are also often made for prayer by true believers. Taking Scripture out of its context and applying it to the wrong people in the wrong dispensation some preacher will say: *"Ask, and it shall be given you...for every one that asketh receiveth"* (Matt. 7:7,8). And then come the face-saving qualifications: *If* you ask in faith, according to God's will, for His glory and don't harbor sin in your heart! *"All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive"* (Matt. 21:22). *But—!* We will deal further with this incongruity under the problem of unanswered prayer.

Repetition of Prayers

One of the most unscriptural and unspiritual misuses of prayer is the *repeating* of prayers composed by others. Many members of both Protestant and Catholic churches, indeed, many sincere believers, repeat over and over again prayers that have been prepared for them to recite. Undoubtedly the greatest number of all make it a practice to repeat the so-called "Lord's Prayer," taken from the Gospel records.

Evidently all these millions of professing Christians have overlooked the fact that it was when the disciples asked our Lord to *teach* them *how* to pray (Luke 11:1) that He said: *"AFTER THIS MANNER therefore pray ye"* (Matt. 6:9). Moreover, He prefaced these words with the specific injunction:

"But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them..." (Matt. 6:7,8).

Yet Roman Catholics are actually taught to say "ten Hail Marys," "three Our Fathers," etc., as though the mere repetition of a prayer can make it more effectual, with the result that most Catholics and even their priests repeat their prayers in a sing-song fashion or rattle them off as though they had no meaning at all. Likewise the members of various Protestant denominations are taught to read prayers out of prayer books—not to study them as examples of acceptable prayer, or to recite them as one might recite a poem or a bit of prose, but to offer them up as their *own* prayers. Thus the same prayers are repeated over and over again.

Both Protestants and Catholics make much of repeating the "Lord's Prayer." They repeat it singly and in unison, in trouble and sorrow, in sickness and death, in storm and drought, in war and disaster, with little or no regard to its contents. Imagine praying, "Give us this day our daily bread" at a funeral service! Imagine praying, "Thy kingdom come" at a sick bed or in a storm at sea! Yet this is solemnly done again and again throughout Christendom. Whole audiences continue to repeat the prayer in unison—and this in the face of the fact that it was in connection with this very prayer that our Lord pronounced the mere repetition

of prayers "vain" and enjoined His disciples not to follow the heathen in this practice.²

What a difference there is between *praying* and *saying prayers*! No truly spiritual person will do the latter.

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

The question is sometimes asked: If God's will and purpose are unalterable, why pray? The answer is simply: Because the divine purpose, which any answer to prayer must represent, includes the prayer itself. It is enough that He "*who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will*" (Eph. 1:11) invites and exhorts His people to "*come boldly unto the throne of grace*" and to "*let [their] requests be made known unto God*" (Heb. 4:16; Phil. 4:6).

But prayer is not merely *petition*, as many suppose. It is one aspect of active *communion with God* (meditation on the Word being the other) and includes *adoration, thanksgiving* and *confession*, as well as supplication. Hyde, in *God's Education of Man*, Pp. 154,155, says: "Prayer is the communion of two wills, in which the finite comes into connection with the Infinite, and, like the trolley, appropriates its purpose and power."

We have an example of this in the record of our Lord's prayer in the garden, for, while He is not to be classed with finite men, yet He laid aside His glory, became "a servant" (Phil. 2:7) and "learned obedience" (Heb. 5:8; Phil. 2:8). In this place of subjection He made definite and earnest requests of His Father, but closed His prayer with the words: "*Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine, be done*" (Luke 22:42) with the result that He was "strengthened" for the ordeal He had to face (Ver. 43).

Thus prayer is not merely a means of "getting things from God" but a God-appointed means of *fellowship* with Him, and all acceptable prayer will include the supplication—as sincerely desired as the rest—"Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine, be done."

But this raises a problem with respect to certain passages of Scripture which seem to indicate that *whatever we ask for in true faith* will be granted.

THE PROBLEM OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

What about such plain passages as the following:

"And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. 21:22).

"Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 18:19).

These are remarkable promises. Ponder over them thoughtfully. "*All things—whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing!*" "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching *anything that they shall ask*, it shall be done...!"

How many sincere Christians have been encouraged by these verses to expect physical healing, daily employment, deliverance from temptation and solutions to all sorts of problems in answer to their prayers! Yet who can deny that many godly people, claiming these promises in simple faith have also been deeply disappointed to find their requests ungranted? Such experiences have often left deeper scars on the lives of sincere believers than their fellowmen observe. How can we explain this apparent failure on the part of God to keep His Word? The answer is basically a dispensational one, for while it is true that condoned sin, selfish motives, unbelief, etc., often account for unanswered prayer, it is also true that such promises as those quoted above *were not made to us in the first place*, and we have no right to claim them.

Before the reader thrusts this book aside in anger, we would urge him to consider one simple fact: that the "whatsoever" promises are to be found in only one small portion of the Bible: that dealing with our Lord's earthly ministry (though they are *alluded* to in the Hebrew Christian epistles). Never in the Old Testament, nor in Paul's epistles will we find that *"all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."*

Why is this? Simply because these promises had to do with the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth. In the days that will usher in that kingdom, as at Pentecost, the believers will be *supernaturally controlled* by the Holy Spirit,³ Who will cause them to do His will (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26,27; Psa. 110:3). Thus their very prayers will be Spirit-inspired. These are the conditions which will prevail in connection with our Lord's reign and He proclaimed them as part of *"the gospel of the kingdom."* Further, we must remember that the bringing in of this present dispensation was then a "mystery...hid in God" and that the kingdom was then being proclaimed *"at hand"* (Matt. 4:17).⁴

Before we leave this subject we must emphasize the other reasons for unanswered prayer already referred to. Here there are certain basic principles involved which necessarily maintain in any dispensation.

The Psalmist rightly said: *"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me"* (Psa. 66:18). Sin harbored in the heart cannot but hinder fellowship between God and the believer. Thus it is always true that *"the...prayer of a righteous man availeth much"* (Jas. 5:16).

Likewise, in any dispensation a spirit of unbelief hinders answers to prayer (Jas. 1:5-7) as do selfish motives: *"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts [desires]"* (Jas. 4:3).

An effective prayer life, then, must be based on an intelligent understanding of God's Word as to prayer and a life in fellowship with Him.

PRAYER IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

The divine program of prayer has undergone several important historical, or dispensational, changes through the centuries to Paul. For example, the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ affected it significantly. It was in view of His ascension that He said:

"Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

While even this statement was made with the kingdom in view, it was from this time on that they were to begin praying to the Father *in Christ's name*. Today prayer is to be offered to the Father, in the name of the Son and "in the Holy Spirit" (John 16:24; Eph. 3:14; 6:18).

Furthermore, prayer in Israel was based upon a *covenant* relationship with God, while prayer in the Body of Christ is based solely upon God's grace through the work and merits of Christ.

By grace we, the members of Christ's Body, have a closer relationship to God than Israel of old had. While Israel's calling was to make God's name great in the earth, our position is in the heavenlies at the right hand of God (Eph. 1:3; 2:4-6; Phil. 3:20). While Satan and his wicked spirits would prevent us from *occupying* that position *experientially* (Eph. 6:10-17) we have a *right* to occupy it and are *exhorted* to do so (Col. 3:1,2). Thus, *positionally* we are seated in the heavenlies, while *experientially* we have "access by faith into this grace wherein we stand" (Rom. 5:2).

"For through Him [Christ] we both [Jewish and Gentile believers] have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. 2:18).

Further, the central place of prayer for Israel was the "golden altar" before the "mercy seat," where God met in mercy with His failing people, but to us, the members of Christ's Body, Paul says, by the Spirit:

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the *throne of grace*, that we may obtain mercy, and find *grace to help in time of need*" (Heb. 4:16).

As to receiving whatever we ask for, even in faith, would this be good for us in "this present evil age"? But the wonderful fact is that we have far more than this under grace.

In Romans 8:26 we read what our hearts must often confess to be true:

"...we know not what we should pray for as we ought..."

But the apostle hastens to explain that the Spirit makes intercession for us according to the will of God, adding:

"And we know that all things work⁵ together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Yes, "*the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for...the redemption of our body*" (Rom. 8:22,23) but few believers appreciate the fact that the Holy Spirit groans *with us* in our present state. He sympathizes deeply and "*maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered*" (Rom. 8:26). Thus God, by His Spirit, comes alongside to help.

Believers may not receive whatever they ask for in the darkness of this age, but, **"God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (II Cor. 9:8).**

We may not receive whatever we ask for, but by His grace we may have so much more than this, that the apostle, in contemplating it, breaks forth in a doxology:

**"Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,
"Unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages,
world without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:20,21).**

In the light of all this the highest expression of faith today is found in the words of Paul in Philippians 4:6,7:

"Be careful for nothing;

"But in everything

"By prayer and supplication,

"With thanksgiving,

"Let your requests be made known unto God

"And..."

"And" what? And "Whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive"?
NO!!

"...and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep [garrison] your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

Here is ample proof that God is not deaf to the cries of His children in this age. He urges them to pour out all their hearts before Him. "Tell Me *everything*," He says, "and be anxious about *nothing*, for I will work it *all* out for your good."

In conclusion, Paul's epistles to the members of Christ's Body exhort us:

1. To pray *sincerely*, "with a true heart" (Heb. 10:22).
2. To pray *fervently*, "with the spirit" (I Cor. 14:15).
3. To pray *intelligently*, "with the understanding also" (I Cor. 14:15).
4. To back our prayers with *Godly lives*, "lifting up holy hands" (I Tim. 2:8).
5. To pray with *confidence*, "boldly" (Heb. 4:16).
6. To pray with "*full assurance of faith*," knowing that He will work all out for our good (Heb. 10:22).
7. To pray about *every need*, "in everything" (Phil. 4:6).
8. To pray *immediately*, as needs arise, "instant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12).
9. To pray "*with thanksgiving*" (Phil. 4:6).
10. Never to *stop* praying, "always," "without ceasing" (Eph. 6:18; I Thes. 5:17).

Endnotes

1. This is not to deny that God may, in His sovereignty, answer the prayers of the unsaved when He so chooses. We only insist that the unsaved have no claim to a hearing.
2. We freely acknowledge, of course, that this prayer is sublime and perfect in every way, but as a whole it cannot be legitimately applied to the changed circumstances of the present dispensation. See the writer's booklet: *The Lord's Prayer and the Lord's People Today*.
3. See Acts 2:4, and the author's booklet: *The Believer's Walk in This Present Evil Age*.

4. It is not our purpose here to discuss prayer solely from the dispensational viewpoint. A fuller consideration of this subject may be found in the writer's booklet: *Unanswered Prayer*.

5. Lit., "are being worked."