

HELP WITH PRAYER

Introduction

In this ‘Sound Words’ study booklet we take a fresh look at the subject of prayer. We have already considered prayer in an earlier study booklet called ‘Bible Study and Prayer’, and if you do not have a copy then please write for one. In this booklet we take things on a stage further. We shall consider a number of important requirements as we come to God in prayer, as well as looking at some common problems about prayer. You will benefit most if you have a Bible by your side as you read this booklet, so that you can find the verses to which we refer. As you read, do so prayerfully, seeking God’s help to teach you and to write his word on your heart.

The following is a list of the areas to be covered:-

- The right attitudes that we should have as we come to God in prayer
- Praying when we feel unfit to pray
- Praying in weakness
- Praying in emergencies
- Dangers to avoid when praying
- The problem of unanswered prayer
- Why some answers to our prayers are delayed

Again, I am indebted to Dr John Hall for his help with the series of ‘Sound Words’ programmes on which this booklet is based. In his first series on prayer, John Hall gave us a very useful definition of prayer which came from John Bunyan. John Bunyan lived in England in the 1600s,

became a preacher of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was imprisoned for his faith. You may be familiar with his most famous book, ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’, and its companion volume, ‘The Holy War’. John Bunyan described prayer in this way: *“Prayer is a sincere, intelligible, affectionate pouring out of the heart to God through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised or according to his word (i.e. the Bible), for the good of the church, with submission in faith to the will of God.”*

Bunyan’s definition is very timely for our own day. He reminds us that in prayer we do not come to demand things from God, or just come to God with a shopping list, as if we were going to the heavenly market, or the heavenly shop. He tells us that true prayer comes from our hearts. It is talking to the God that we love, and asking for things that he has promised in the Bible. (See the example of the Lord Jesus Christ referred to in Hebrews 5:7.) Prayer is asking for things which fit in with his word and his will. And when his will is not clear, being willing to leave the outcome in his hands – *“... in submission in faith to the will of God”*.

Derek French,
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Chapter 1 Praying with the Right Attitudes

Knowing that God is great (Psalm 145:3) and glorious (Exodus 15:11), we must ask ourselves the question, ‘How should we approach God in prayer?’ This is very

important; because talking with God is quite different from talking to someone we may meet in the street. He is Lord of all, infinitely holy, all powerful, and, therefore, the way in which we conduct ourselves in his presence is very important. This will affect our thinking about him and our speaking to him, whether it is to praise him or to bring our requests before him. The following attitudes are, therefore, to characterise us as we draw near to God in prayer.

a. Love and Delight

We read in Psalm 37:4-5, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him...” We are commanded in Psalm 31:23, “Love the Lord, all his saints!” Indeed, when a man asked which was the first and greatest of all the commandments, the Lord Jesus Christ replied in Mark 12:30, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” This is to be the constant response of the Christian believer to Almighty God. We are always to love him. And this is not hard to do, of course, when we consider who he is and what he is like and what he has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. As we consider the amazing love he has poured out upon us in giving his own dear Son to be our Saviour, that causes our own hearts to consider him with the deepest affection (1 John 4:9-10). Therefore, as we come to God in prayer, it is this love for him which gives us a warm and tender spirit in his presence. Remember John Bunyan’s words quoted in the introduction, where he described prayer as “... *the*

affectionate outpouring of the heart to God through Christ...”

Prayer is an expression of the remarkable relationship that exists between God and the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a relationship whose foundation is love – God’s love for the believer. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). This gives confidence as we approach God for we come to one who cares for us beyond measure. It also gives direction to our praying, for when we delight in him we are more likely to ask for those things that are in accord with his will and for his glory, which in turn means we will, therefore, receive the answers to our prayers.

b. Faith

In Psalm 37:5, as well as delighting in God, we are urged to **commit** our way to the Lord and to **trust** in him. This is very important and a central part of true prayer. After all, we cannot see God with our eyes, and also we do not always understand the way that God works in our lives, so we need faith to believe that he actually hears us when we pray, and that he will answer us. It is true that we begin the Christian life by faith, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour (Eph 2:8-9). But that is only the first step in a whole lifetime of faith. And prayer to God from our hearts is to be the daily and constant expression of our trust in him.

Faith is that confidence in God that comes from knowing he is able to do more than we can ask or think, and that he delights to have his children seek him in prayer (Ephesians 3:20f): “Now unto him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...” Jesus said in Mark

11:24, “Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Earlier in Mark’s Gospel Jesus said to one man in Mark 9:23, “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

Praying with faith, however, does not mean that we can ask for anything and expect to get it, regardless of what we request. Praying with true faith means praying for those things which are in accord with God’s will (1 John 5:14-15): “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: **that if we ask anything according to his will**, he hears us. And if he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.” It is praying for those things that God has promised us in the Bible. Therefore, we need to think about what God has promised and then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, turn those promises into prayers which apply to our daily needs and situations. This is where we see something of the value of regular Bible reading, for the Bible instructs us about the mind of God and gives insight into what God wants for us.

Sometimes when we pray we are not sure if a particular request is God’s will or not. At such times we must trust the situation to God to do what is best, because he is infinitely wise and good and, therefore, cannot make a mistake. Indeed, we must ask God only to give us things which will help us develop in our spiritual lives and cause us to grow in holiness and to be filled with his Spirit, and which will bring glory to his name. Praying with faith means that you actually trust God to know what is best for you.

c. Humility

We must always remember we are coming to God when we pray. He is our Creator and we are his creatures. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, while we are but dust and ashes in his sight (Genesis 18:27). He is our heavenly Father and we are his children. Therefore, we will approach God with true humility of spirit, acknowledging his greatness and our smallness and complete dependence on him.

Now, note that true humility does **not** mean that we are too insignificant for God to be bothered with us. That is one of Satan’s temptations to keep us from praying and drive us away from God. The reverse should actually be the case, for humility helps us to approach the Lord in the right way, even with boldness. We read in Hebrews 4:16, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Confidence or boldness does not mean arrogance, for that is to be guilty of pride. Neither does it mean that we may demand any thing from God. But it does mean we can come humbly with all our weaknesses, sins and needs to seek mercy and help from God our heavenly Father, and do that with confidence.

A lovely example of true humility in prayer is seen in the contrasting attitudes of the Pharisee and tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. The Pharisee boasted proudly about himself in prayer, “*God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*” The tax collector prayed with quite a different spirit. Completely humbled before God, “*He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have*

mercy on me, a sinner.” It was not the proud Pharisee who had his prayer accepted by God, but the humble tax collector.

This humility of spirit does not come to us naturally, but is the result of God’s grace in our lives. In the Bible we find that humility characterised the truly great believers. One of the great men of prayer in the Bible was Daniel (see Daniel 6:10). One of his prayers is recorded in Daniel 9, and it was his response to reading part of the Bible in the book of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:1-3). He starts his prayer with a tremendous statement about God (Daniel 9:4), *“O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands.”* And then, immediately following this marvellous statement, he humbly confesses in verse 5, *“... we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled...”* And this continues throughout the prayer as he pleads with God for mercy. Even though Daniel was a godly man and had stood for God many years and through very difficult trials, and though he was a great man in the land with a high position, there is not a gram of pride in him. He was saying to God, in effect, that he was not making his requests because he and the people were righteous, but rather because God is merciful. He did not burst into God’s presence and make proud demands of God, but humbly pleaded with God for mercy.

By contrast, the two sons of Aaron the high priest, Nadab and Abihu, thought they could come into God’s presence just as **they** considered best. We read in Leviticus 10:1-2: *“... Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them*

and added incense; and they offered unauthorised fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” They had no regard for the majesty and greatness of God and, with pride, had too high an opinion of themselves with tragic results.

The reason, and the only reason, why the Christian believer can approach God with boldness is because we come to God through Christ. We are *‘in Christ’*; we have faith in him and rest on what he has done in his life, death and resurrection, and what he is now doing in heaven for us. For the believer it is Christ’s blood which cleanses him, Christ’s Spirit which helps him to pray, and it is Christ that represents him before the Father in heaven now. (See 1 John 1:7, 2:1; Ephesians 2:18; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25.) This, therefore, gives the believer confidence to come into God’s presence because the Lord Jesus Christ is perfect. It also gives us humility because we have nothing of ourselves to boast about, it is all Christ’s work.

d. Simplicity and honesty

New Christians can sometimes be hindered in their praying because they feel unable to pray as well and as long as older Christians. This can be a problem when we pray with others, for example, in our church prayer meeting. But really that should not discourage us or stop us from praying, because God wants us to pray simply and honestly.

There is nowhere in the Bible where God commands us always to pray long prayers. Neither is there anywhere where God requires us to use long complicated words or

have a good vocabulary before he will listen to our prayers. Indeed, there is the danger when praying with others of wanting to impress them with how well we are able to pray. That, of course, is pride and is, therefore, sinful and unacceptable to the Lord. And with regard to the length of our prayers, if we have opportunity to spend more time in prayer, or feel the need to spend more time in prayer, then that is good and we should use such times to their full. But it is not a requirement for every prayer we utter.

If you look at the prayers recorded in the Bible you will see that they contain plain, ordinary language. There is a simplicity and honesty about them. Consider the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:9f, or Jesus' own prayer in John 17, or the believers' prayer in Acts 4:23-31. The important thing is that we pray, and that our prayers come from our hearts. Therefore, we should come to God and have specific things to focus on in our prayers such as adoration, confession, thanksgiving and requests.

Chapter 2 Praying with Perseverance

A question that sometimes arises in the believer's mind is this: 'How long should we go on praying about something?' This is particularly the case when we know that what we are praying about is in accord with God's will, perhaps based on one of his promises in the Bible, yet for whatever reason he does not answer immediately. At such times should we stop praying or not?

It is helpful to note that the Bible teaches us that we are to persevere in prayer, and not give up. Jesus taught the

parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:2-8 to his disciples (v1), "... *to show them that they should always pray and not give up*". So Christian believers are to be people who persevere in prayer.

Then, there will be some things which we will pray about continually. For example, the Bible commands us to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and, therefore, this is something we should be praying for constantly. In Luke 11:9 Jesus taught his disciples, "*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*" To illustrate this, Jesus told this story: "*Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will he give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*" (See also Matthew 7:7-11.)

Sometimes, however, we are not too sure whether we should continue to pray for a particular matter. At such times we should continue to pray as long as our hearts are burdened to do so, but if the Lord removes that burden then we should commit the matter into his hands and leave it with him.

Some Christians have prayed for the salvation of their loved ones for many years without any apparent effect. This can make them discouraged and question whether they should go on praying for them. But if we love people as the Lord has commanded us to, then we will want the best for them. And the very best thing anyone can have is to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. So we

should continue to pray for them, not in a demanding way, but longing that they should come to know Christ. To encourage us in this task we need to remember that no heart is too hard for the Lord. God is able, by his grace, to open the hardest heart and bring a person into his kingdom. Think of a man like Saul of Tarsus who persecuted Christian believers, but was brought to love the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9). Then, there was the thief on the cross whom Jesus saved in his dying hours (Luke 23:39-43). Acts 16 tells us of the conversion of a business woman named Lydia, the liberation of a demon-possessed slave girl, and the transformation of the jailer, all in the city of Philippi. There are many other examples both in the Bible itself and in the history of the Christian Church to encourage us to persevere in prayer.

Remember the clear and simple command of 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “... *pray continually*”.

Chapter 3 Praying Regularly

The Bible teaches us on many occasions that believers are to pray regularly, and be diligent to do so. Paul urged the Colossian Christians (Colossians 4:2): “*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*” The word ‘watchful’ means to guard or protect. In other words, we are to make sure that we always have time each day for communion with God in prayer, and we must not let anything else take its place.

There are a number of examples of this in the Bible itself. In Psalm 5:3 we have David’s own testimony recorded for

us. “*In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*” Then, in Psalm 55:17 he writes, “*Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress and he hears my voice.*” And it is recorded of Daniel in Daniel 6:10 when king Darius had issued a decree that no one should pray to anyone else except himself: “*Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, **just as he had done before.***” So we can see that godly people in the Bible ensured every day that they spent time in prayer to God.

The Bible tells us to pray on all occasions (Philippians 4:6), and in any time of need (Hebrews 4:16). We are to pray for things large (Genesis 18:14) and things small (Matthew 10:30). Indeed, we are to pray about everything. To help us in this, Martin Luther, the great leader in the Reformation, wrote: “*Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness.*” What a lovely encouragement to pray regularly.

Chapter 4 Praying in Specific Situations

While the Bible teaches us to pray about everything, it also indicates the need for prayer at particular times.

a. When facing temptation

The Lord Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer to pray (Matthew 6:13), “*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*” *And when he was praying in*

the garden of Gethsemane, just before his crucifixion, he taught his disciples in Luke 22:46, "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." The wisdom of these instructions is obvious to see, for all around us there are things that tempt us to do wrong and forsake following the Lord. We have an enemy, Satan or the devil, who goes about as a roaring lion seeking to devour us (1 Peter 5:8). And we have our own weaknesses to contend with. To face all of these in the right way, to resist the devil and the temptations we face, and to overcome our own frailty, requires the special help of the Lord, and so prayer for this is an absolute necessity.

How reassuring to know that God delights for us to seek his help over such matters!

b. When facing an emergency

It is a strange thing that the only time many non-Christians will pray is when they are in trouble and faced with an emergency. They never dream of praying at other times, or of thanking God for his common mercies to all men. That, of course, is an abuse of prayer. But having said that, the Christian believer, because he prays every day, is also assured that God wants us to pray to him when we face emergencies.

There are a number of such instances found in the Bible. For example, godly Nehemiah in the Old Testament, in Nehemiah chapter 2. He had prayed earnestly for several months over the sad condition of the city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1). Then, one day the king asked him why he was sad. Nehemiah told him. The king then asked him what he wanted. And we read (Nehemiah 2:4), "*Then I*

prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king." It was an emergency, and this prayer must have been spoken silently in his heart and simply been something short like, "*Lord help me.*" But Nehemiah knew he could do that, and God heard and answered him as the rest of that chapter indicates. In the New Testament, when Peter was imprisoned, it was an emergency and the Church prayed for him (Acts 12:5). When the disciples were in a boat with Jesus asleep at the stern and a terrible storm arose, it was an emergency. So the disciples quickly called out to the Lord to save them (Matthew 8:25). Peter did a similar thing when he began to sink after walking on the water. It was an emergency, so he prayed (Matthew 14:30).

How helpful it is to know this, but we must also ensure that those are not the only times that we pray, for we should be praying on all occasions (Philippians 4:6; Ephesians 6:18).

c. When feeling unfit or unready to pray

This is a common experience of the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, especially when we know we have done something wrong. We feel ashamed and not fit to come into his presence. However, in our personal lives especially, we should pray if we do not feel fit to, or do not feel led to, or if we have become hard hearted, because we can always tell our heavenly Father about it. One elderly and godly pastor told me when I was at Bible College, "*When you do not feel like praying, then get on your knees and pray until you do!*" And that is very good advice.

At such times we need to remember that God is able to restore our souls and refresh our weary hearts (Psalm 23:3).

He is able to fill us with his Spirit and help us overcome our reluctance to pray.

The fact that prayer is open to the Christian believer, and that we are commanded to pray, means we are without excuse if we do not pray! Therefore, statements such as, 'I don't feel led to pray' or 'I don't feel ready to pray or fit to pray' should never become excuses for prayerlessness (Hebrews 10:19-22):

*“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.**”*

d. Praying at times of weakness

In Romans 8:26-27 there is a most helpful and comforting reference to Christians praying in weakness:

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.”

In John's Gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ assured us that all his followers would receive the help of the Holy Spirit in their lives. He is called the Counsellor or Comforter. That name literally means 'one called alongside to help', and is

a lovely description of the Spirit's ministry in the believer's life. And there are times when the Christian believer is in so much difficulty, such as times of severe illness or persecution or deprivation or whatever, that we do not know how we should pray. We can become so confused that we are almost lost for words. We may not have any idea of what is best and wise to pray for. We may be so physically weak that we lack the power to concentrate or even to utter any words in prayer. It is at such precise times that the Holy Spirit prays for us and helps us in our weaknesses. He knows what to pray for, and as we groan, being lost for words, he is able to take those groans and come before the Father and ask for those things which are best for us. Therefore, at such times we can come into God's presence and tell him we are too weak to pray, and think about how the Holy Spirit can help. He is able to bring all the riches of grace that Christ offers us, even in our times of illness and distress.

Perhaps another time when we can be lost for words is when we are so aware of the majesty and wonder and glory of God that we find ourselves unable to form words adequate enough to worship and adore him. These are very rare times, but when that happens and all we can do is to groan in wonder in the presence of God, the Holy Spirit takes those groans and presents them to God acceptably. He helps us in our weakness.

God, our Father, remembers that we are frail, and but dust, and yet he loves us with an everlasting love, and sends the Comforter, the Holy Spirit to help us in our times of need. That in itself is a cause for praising him.

Chapter 5 Dangers to avoid when praying

The word ‘danger’ indicates something that is harmful and to be avoided. And there are things which can endanger our praying. We need to be aware of them and take steps to avoid them.

a. The danger of pride

We have already referred to this in chapter 1, but it is such a pernicious and persistent thing it is necessary to remind ourselves of it again. Pride in prayer can be displayed by long prayers and vain repetition and mechanical praying, thinking our many words make us worthy to be heard by God. To correct such wrong thinking Jesus taught in Matthew 6:7-8, *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* And Ecclesiastes 5:2 tells us, *“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”* The verses following go on to say that it is better not to make a vow to God than to utter one and not fulfil it. It is better to have said nothing than to have made a false promise. We need to recognise that God sees through any empty words which we may utter, however fine they may sound to others. Such was the way the Pharisees often prayed and Jesus said about them (Mark 7:6-7): *“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their*

hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”

Another way that pride can display itself in prayer is by demanding that God should do what we want, instead of being willing to submit to what he has revealed in the Bible or made known through his providence. Sadly, there are some who think that as long as they name something, then they can claim it, and God is bound to listen to them because of what they have said. Now, how different this is from the example of the Lord Jesus Christ in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39): *“Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. **Yet not as I will, but as you will.**’”*

A further way that pride can display itself in prayer is when we think we are better than the other people that we may be praying for or about. We have already noted the Pharisee in Luke 18:9ff. (See also Isaiah 65:5.) The right response is so different, as Paul teaches us in Philippians 2:3: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”*

b. The danger of insincerity

It is so easy to go through the motions of praying without true communion with God, and to utter the words without really meaning them. Hebrews 10:22 teaches us to *“... draw near to God with a sincere heart...”* There is a searching hymn about this by John Burton:

*“I often say my prayers,
But do I ever pray?
And do the wishes of my heart*

*Go with the words I say?
I may as well kneel down
And worship gods of stone,
As offer to the living God
A prayer of words alone.
For words without the heart
The Lord will never hear,
Nor will he to those lips attend
Whose prayers are not sincere.
Lord, teach me what I need
And teach me how to pray;
And do not let me seek your grace
Not meaning what I say.”*

c. The danger of presumption

This is thinking that as long as we do certain things we are bound to get what we want. It is very easy to think that as long as we pray with sufficient determination, God is bound to answer us. Now, this is a very subtle danger, because it is very close to the truth. We have already seen that the Bible teaches us to pray continually, fervently and with all our hearts (see also James 5:16b). This danger sounds so much like that, but in actual fact it is quite different. It is presuming that we get answers to prayer by our own efforts instead of by God's grace.

Another way in which presumption can display itself in prayer is by dictating to God that he ought do whatever we say! Such an opinion really is to make God a servant who has to do what we tell him! All such thoughts are grievous sins against God. James helps us by telling us that, instead

of boasting of this or that and dictating what is going to happen and what we are going to do, we should say (James 4:15): *“If it is the Lord's will.”*

d. The danger of self-centredness

It is, of course, right that we pray for our own needs and those of our loved ones. Indeed, sometimes our needs are so overwhelming that our whole thinking and praying is taken up with them. But a danger we need to be aware of is that we do not allow such times to bring us to the place where we only ever pray for ourselves to the exclusion of others. The helpful balance is found in Philippians 2:4: *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*

To help them avoid this danger, a number of Christians find it useful to have a booklet in which they write down the needs of others as a reminder when they pray. This also has the added advantage of helping us recognise when God answers those prayers, which then become a source for praising him.

e. The danger of an unforgiving spirit

God hates hypocrisy. Therefore, when we come before him in prayer to pray for the forgiveness of our own sins, we must do so knowing that we are willing ourselves to forgive those who have wronged us. Failure here is to displease God. Jesus taught in Mark 11:25, *“When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”* Paul also wrote about this in Ephesians 4:32: *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each*

other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Therefore, if we harbour bitterness or a grudge against someone else when we approach God in prayer, we need to resolve the matter immediately – or as soon as possible. (See also Matthew 6:12, comparing the same principle with reference to offering gifts to God in Matthew 5:23-24.)

Chapter 6 When God Says No

The Bible teaches us throughout that God does hear and answer the prayers of his children. And it is good and right for us to look for such answers and acknowledge them with thankfulness when they come. But there are times when we want the answer to come, and God says ‘No’ to us. This then raises the question, ‘Why should that happen?’ And the Bible gives us a number of reasons.

a. Unconfessed Sin

First of all, unanswered prayer can be caused by unconfessed sin in us. We have an example of this with the people of Israel in Old Testament days. They were praying but were not getting the answers they wanted, and Isaiah gives the reason why this happened (Isaiah 59:1-2): *“Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear.”* They had not repented of their sin and, therefore, God would not listen to them, however much they prayed.

The Psalmist wrote similarly in Psalm 66:18, *“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have*

listened...” Now you may say, ‘But surely everyone sins, so does that mean God will never listen to us?’ The key to the answer lies in that word ‘*cherished*’. It means to love our sin, to be glad about it, to hold on to it with delight, to deliberately live in a way which God prohibits, instead of requesting forgiveness. It is this clinging to our sins that hinders our prayers.

When our prayers are unanswered we need to search our hearts to see if we have unconfessed sin, and then bring it to God in repentance for his forgiveness. When our sin has been dealt with then we have a wonderful access into the presence of God. (See Hebrews 10:19-22.)

b. When we ask in the wrong way

It is possible to ask God for something and not receive it because we have asked with the entirely wrong motive. James explains this for us (James 4:3): *“When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures.”* In other words, we do not have the glory of God as our first desire when we pray. Instead, we are more interested in our own glory, our own pleasures, to draw attention to ourselves. If we pray like that God will not give us what we desire. (See Psalm 37:4-5 for the right approach.)

c. When we ask for the wrong thing

We have two similar examples of this in the Old Testament. Two men prayed to die: Moses (Numbers 11:15) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:4). On both occasions these godly men were very discouraged because of the hardness of their work and the opposition they were receiving. The

result was that they became very depressed. But God said ‘No’ to each of them. And we can say there were two important reasons why he did so. Firstly, it is God who decides when we are to die and not us. We should want to live as long as God wants us to and, therefore, seek to live to his glory. But then, secondly, God still had more work for both Moses and Elijah to do. To have taken them prematurely would have meant that their work would have been left undone and God’s people would have been deprived of the benefit. God in his wisdom said ‘No’ because they were asking for the wrong thing.

A time when we might feel like praying the same prayer is when we have failed the Lord by some sin, and then feel overwhelmed with our guilt and shame, and feel that we cannot go on living any longer. But that really is escapism. What we should do at such times is to face up to our guilt and shame and bring it to God for his forgiveness, asking him to restore us and graciously to give us the help of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us so that we can overcome that sin and live in a way that honours him.

It is not wrong to desire to be in heaven with the Lord, as Paul knew something about that (Philippians 1:21f):

“For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

Now, that desire was born from a deep love for Christ. However, he did not ask to die but, instead, was content to

live for as long as the Lord wanted him to do so. Where the desire to be with the Lord becomes a wrong desire is when it makes us **not** want to live our lives today as God wants us to do.

d. When to say ‘yes’ would cause us harm

There are times when the Lord knows that if he gave us certain things we have asked for, then it might seriously damage our spiritual lives. For example, if he gave us some success or blessing, we might suddenly become filled with pride and ruin our Christian testimony. Many believers have prospered in business only to discover that it has taken over their lives and spiritual things have been squeezed out.

What we need to remember is that God is wise and good. And, therefore, he knows what is best for us, and that should give us both reassurance and contentment. He has also promised to cause all that happens in our lives to do us good, to make us more and more like the Lord Jesus and to bring us safely to heaven (Romans 8:28-30). When we are unsure whether a particular request will result in that, then we need to ask the Lord to do what he knows is best. Faith in God’s goodness at such times is essential, especially if we are ill or in great distress and after prayer the situation does not improve. Though we do not always understand God’s ways, as they are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9), they are always designed for our ultimate spiritual and eternal good. We can rest absolutely assured that if God sees fit not to give us something we have asked him for, then it is because he loves us and does not want to harm us.

Chapter 7 When the Answer is Delayed

When we speak of answers to prayer being delayed, we are thinking of it with reference to our own appreciation of timing. It is important to stress this, because as far as God is concerned there is never any delay, since his timing is perfect in all that he does. But having said that, this is a problem that has puzzled God's children on many occasions. Why is it that when there is a real need, we pray about it, and the answer does not come immediately? Indeed, we have examples in the Bible itself of believers who grappled with this question. In Psalm 40:1 David speaks of having "... waited patiently for the Lord." The prophet Habakkuk faced the same dilemma (Habakkuk 1:2): "*How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?*" Indeed, delay in answer to his prayers made the Psalmist feel that God had turned away from him (Psalm 88:14): "*Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?*" (See also Psalm 80:4.)

There are various reasons why this happens, and the first is where we began this chapter – **God's timing is always good, wise, and best.** And we need to learn that contentment that characterised Paul in Philippians 4:12-13.

Then, secondly, delay tests and exercises and develops our faith, our trust in the Lord, as we are compelled to depend on him more. It shows whether we really trust him or not, or will forsake him at the least difficulty that comes our way. In the parable of the sower Jesus spoke of those like the soil with stones and weeds on it like this (Mark 4:16-19):

"Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."

When such difficulties come to believers, they pray over them, and persist in praying and trusting in God, even though the answer is delayed. The result being unlike those in the parable, they do not fall away but grow spiritually and become stronger in faith. (See also the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8.)

Thirdly, such delays develop that expectancy which often we lack, and increase our patience. Patience is something that does not come to us easily, and can only be exercised when under test (James 1:2ff). The result is that when prayer is answered our joy and praise of God is increased. We realise that God's love and grace toward us never fails, and our hearts are uplifted and God is glorified.

Conclusion

Prayer is very, very important for the Christian believer. Very often we do not receive because we do not ask (James 4:2), so the Bible encourages us to spend time in prayer to God, on our own in the secret place, and with other believers. In James 5:13 we read, "*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray.*" How wise James is, because

only God is really able to sort out our troubles and problems, and the wonder is he wants us to tell him about them. And in James 5:16 we are told that, *“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”*

God has provided the help of two persons for us. Firstly, the Holy Spirit, who not only helps us during our weaknesses, but also gives us the faith, the energy, the understanding of the Bible, and the prompting to deal with our problems in a spiritual way by seeking God in prayer. He is our Comforter. And the second person is the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we are able to approach God in prayer, and who represents us before the Father in heaven every day. Contrasting him with all the other Old Testament priests, we read (Hebrews 7:23-25):

“Now, there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for us.”

So we have these three great encouragements to pray. The Bible commands us to pray. The Holy Spirit enables us to pray. And the Lord Jesus Christ himself prays for us constantly. Therefore, whatever else you may do as a result of reading this booklet, pray.

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