

Does God Hear Prayer?

The Bible gives the answer

MOST people would accept that prayer is part of a religious life. Often those who have little to do with a church, who rarely pick up a Bible, who give scant attention to God, will, when faced with a crisis, turn to Him in prayer. Many helpless individuals, faced with the stark reality of death, have gone down on their knees in prayer. It sometimes comes as a surprise to discover that some of the most powerful people in history have been people of prayer.

What is prayer?

What then is prayer all about? Is it just an exercise to bring comforting thoughts into our minds? Is it a way of miraculously solving impossible situations? Is it simply a religious ritual by priests on behalf of their congregations? Is it the public recital of noble thoughts and ideals or the repetition of certain words and phrases?

This booklet is concerned with Bible teaching on the subject. This is because those who are truly followers of the Lord Jesus Christ must, like him, be guided in all things by what the Bible teaches, for it consists of the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15).

The Bible leaves us in no doubt that believers ought to pray:

“Then he spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.” (Luke 18:1)

“Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

Not to pray is regarded as a sin; Samuel the prophet declared:

“Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way.” (1 Samuel 12:23)

The starting point

Prayer starts with a deep and heartfelt *need*. We may have great difficulty in coping with life; we may be faced with seemingly insuperable problems; we may be conscious of our failings and desire some kind of spiritual renewal; we may be trying to search out the meaning of life. In fact the very problems which confront us emphasise that, for all mankind's great achievements, we are frequently helpless in the midst of human weakness. Our failures rather than our successes are likely to bring us to God in prayer.

In the Gospels we read of men who commanded great armies, of people in high office in government, of mothers and fathers seeking the best for their children, of farmers and fishermen, tradesmen and craftsmen of people of all types and backgrounds who sought out

the Lord Jesus Christ because some need or other could not be fulfilled elsewhere. As we see Jesus always finding time to listen to them, to advise, to help, we see how he reveals to us the character of his Father, the willingness of God to hear prayer:

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

The Bible makes it clear that God *wants* to help us. We should never feel that it is only good people that He will hear. In fact if we think of ourselves as good and managing quite well on our own, the chances are we shall be less inclined to rely upon God.

Two men ...

Jesus spoke about two men who went up to pray in the temple at Jerusalem. One was a Pharisee ó a member of a leading religious sect of the day. The other was a tax collector. As Israel was occupied by the Romans we can imagine that a Jew collecting taxes on behalf of the hated invaders was treated with contempt. So the parable portrays a member of the religious establishment and an outcast. But Jesus says:

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men ó extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes (i.e., 10% given to the religious authorities in the temple) of all that I possess.’”

Obviously this man thought he was doing a good job for God and expected to be commended.

“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:9-13)

This second man’s circumstances had made him keenly conscious of a sense of personal failure. In that frame of mind he begged God to help him. Jesus tells us that his prayer was accepted by God rather than that of the boastful Pharisee.

God’s mercy – man’s need

The seven words of that man’s prayer perfectly summarise the right approach to God. It begins with God and ends with “me, a sinner”. God and the sinner are brought together through the divine mercy. W. E. Vine writes of the word mercy: “It assumes need on the part of him who receives it and resources adequate to meet the need on the part of him who shows it” (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*).

So we pray because we are conscious of a need and we recognise that God alone can meet that need. To accept that God can do what we cannot do is to bow to His greatness, to acknowledge His infinite wisdom. This is *praise*. Praise, when it finds expression in words, is an attempt to describe the ways in which God is superior to man; it is to give God glory. Through praise we reflect on what God is, and what resources He has to meet our need.

Listening to God

Since God knows best, we must listen to what He says to us. God speaks to us through the Bible. The Psalmist said: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). The Apostle Paul wrote:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16,17)

It is vital to realise that prayer cannot be divorced from a knowledge and understanding of the word of God. For prayer is communication with God. The communication is two-way. It is not enough that we should speak to God. He expects us to listen to Him. In fact, it is often better to meditate on His word than to try to talk to Him at great length. The Bible itself warns:

"Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few." (Ecclesiastes 5:2)

The Lord Jesus himself emphasises this point:

"When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words." (Matthew 6:7)

We must not come to God full of ourselves, ready to tell Him what *we* think. That would be like the person who asks a question, not because he wants to know the answer, but because he wants the opportunity to air his own knowledge. If we come to God as people who do not know the answers but believe that He does, then what folly if we ignore what He has already told us through the scriptures! Rather we must read them regularly and reflect on them to attune our minds to the mind of God, as the words of a hymn direct us:

*"Inspirer of the ancient seers,
Who wrote from Thee the sacred page,
A light for all succeeding years,
A lamp in this degenerate age:
Wisdom to us Thy words impart,
And with Thy comfort fill our heart."*

The many examples of prayer in the Bible make it clear that God responds only when we pray in accordance with His will. After all, God knows best what is in our interests and will control events accordingly.

Old Testament examples

"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months" (James 5:17). What was the point of God responding to such a prayer? When we read from 1 Kings 16:29 onwards we discover that the people of Israel "God's witnesses" were in desperate need of reformation. The point of Elijah's prayer and God's response was to make the king and people realise that only by submitting to God could they survive the drought. Yet it was more than this: the suffering brought by the drought should have made them aware of their disobedience to God and their need for His forgiveness.

Just as there had been a special demonstration of the power of God when Israel were brought out of Egypt by Moses, so during the period of Elijah and Elisha there was a spate of miraculous activity to accompany the working of God's prophets. Elijah's overriding concern was that God's will should be done, and his prayer was answered because it accorded with God's will at that time.

Daniel's prayer, recorded in Daniel 9, is another example of prayer which was fully in tune with the will of God. From the beginning of the prayer we see how right Daniel's attitude was. At the time he was living in Babylon in exile with the Jews. The nation was suffering the consequences of failing to heed God's earlier warnings to serve Him faithfully. Daniel, praying on behalf of his people, accepted that God is righteous and that he and his people needed forgiveness for their sins. This led to his request that God would return the Jews to the land of Israel and to Jerusalem in particular.

Two points can be noted: firstly we need to realise that Daniel's prayer is full of allusions to earlier words in the Bible. He prayed as one who had filled his mind with God's thinking and he did this by regular reading of the books of the Bible which then existed.

Secondly, his prime petition that his people should be forgiven and allowed to re-establish themselves and their worship in Jerusalem was something that Daniel knew God had promised He would carry out. Jeremiah, for example, had prophesied:

“For behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that I will bring back from captivity my people Israel and Judah,” says the Lord. “And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it.” (Jeremiah 30:3)

In addition, Daniel knew from Jeremiah 25:11,12 that the period of captivity would last 70 years. Since the people were not taken into captivity all at once, he did not know exactly when the 70 years would end. But he knew approximately, as a result of which he fervently prayed that God's will should be done soon.

So Daniel prayed as a man who had humbled himself before God. He had listened to God and become thoroughly familiar with what He had revealed in His word, and so he prayed in harmony with what he knew to be the will of God. He was the sort of person referred to when God earlier declared:

“But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word.” (Isaiah 66:2)

A right relationship with God

Effective prayer depends upon a relationship with God. This must be built on a knowledge and understanding of Him. The Lord Jesus Christ himself prayed:

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

Such knowledge is to be found, in the first instance, in the inspired writings of the Bible. But to know God is not simply to know *about* Him. When a husband and wife know each other, they do not just have in their minds a pen-portrait of their partner. Their knowledge is

intimate and deep, because of the nature of their relationship. It depends upon continued, regular contact, the acceptance of responsibilities and the desire to grow in knowledge and understanding of each other.

To acknowledge one's need as a sinner, whose imperfection is in marked contrast to the glorious perfection of God's character; to develop that "poor and contrite" spirit, which desires to be moved by the power of God through His word, to realise from the knowledge of God's gracious dealings with men and women of past ages that the same grace can be extended to us today – this is to begin the process of praise and thanksgiving which marks the beginning of prayer.

There is no room here for the casual or the careless. God is in heaven, man upon earth. We cannot assume familiarity or presume upon His loving kindness. It is God's to command, ours to obey. We cannot call God "Our Father", without at the same time giving reverence to His name. And we cannot do that unless we seek to do His will upon earth as it is done in heaven. If we *are* to benefit from the privilege of being called His sons and daughters, we must, after serious consideration, join His family:

"Now by this we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments." (1 John 2:3)

Response and responsibility

As our knowledge of God's commandments grows, so we learn the need for repentance – sorrow at our personal sin and inadequacy and a commitment to turn away from sin. We learn of God's love in providing a perfect Son, "the way, the truth and the life", through whom alone men may come to God. We learn that to be associated with that saving work we must be born again, that is we express our faith and obedience by baptism – immersion into water as a symbol of our association with the death of Jesus and with his resurrection, as we rise from the water to a new life. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). As newly born sons and daughters of God we try to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so there is held out to us the hope of sharing Christ's glory when he comes to rule over the earth in peace and righteousness:

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God – Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:1,2)

Belief, repentance, baptism, a life of faith, the hope of eternal life granted at the judgement after the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, when he will establish the kingdom of God and fulfil the hope of Israel – this is but a brief summary of what we need to understand if our commitment to God's family is to have any real meaning.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer was given in response to his disciples' request for instruction in prayer. Clearly the prayer given by the Lord is not something to repeat vainly, like a magical incantation. Yet it is good that we should meditate upon the weight of those solemn words:

“Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9,10)

What to pray for

For many people prayer consists of asking God for what they want. For some the proof of whether God actually exists consists of testing whether He will grant a particular request. They quote the words of Jesus: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

During the ministry of Jesus and in the years immediately after his ascension, prayer often brought a miraculous response: sick people were healed, the dead were raised to life again, food was provided for hungry people. These miracles were done through the power of the Holy Spirit, possessed by the Lord and his disciples. We know that once the whole Bible had been written these Spirit Gifts were gradually withdrawn by God and therefore we should not expect a miracle in response to every request we make today.

This is not to say that God’s power is not demonstrated today, or to imply that God is not interested in us. There is a children’s prayer which simply states a truth:

*“God always listens whenever we pray,
He’s never too busy to hear what we say.”*

“Your will be done”

No prayer is disregarded by God when it comes from those who sincerely seek Him. But the answer is not always Yes; it may be No, or Wait. What is vitally important is that we keep on praying, thinking over God’s ways and, with the help we gain from His word, coming to terms with the situation.

When Hezekiah received a threatening letter from the king of the Assyrian army, his reaction was to “spread it before the Lord” (2 Kings 19:14). So, too, we should lay our problems before God. At the very least, it will help us to get them in perspective.

But prayer does not produce instant answers to every request. Imagine the chaos if it did, since often God-fearing folk are praying for exactly opposite things. One person might pray for sunshine for some important event; another for rain to water vitally needed crops. Someone may be seriously ill. One relative might pray for his recovery; another that he should peacefully die.

We tend to see things very much from a human perspective, finding it hard to step outside the arena of our immediate needs to gain an overall view. Yet often, after years of bitter disappointment because some hope or ambition has not been realised, we may look back and feel that, after all, things turned out for the best. And even if we never do understand the meaning of certain experiences, we have the assurance that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Of course some of our requests are petty and even selfish. We cannot expect the Almighty to perform conjuring tricks for us. James warns those with such a limited view: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

Praying for others

What is more difficult is that our request may be of an entirely selfless nature, on behalf of some thoroughly worthy cause. Very often such prayers arise from the desire to see suffering removed, which we feel a God of love should want to do. It is not so easy to explain why such earnest requests are sometimes not answered as we wish.

But the fact is that as a result of man's imperfection, or sin, the whole creation has been subjected to "bondage", as the Bible puts it. In other words, we are enslaved to a system which does not function perfectly as a result of the separation from God which sin has caused. Thorns and thistles grow up as well as beautiful flowers and wholesome vegetables. The human body is capable of the grace of a ballet dancer or the speed and stamina of an Olympic runner. But it can be handicapped from birth, be prone to infection and terrible diseases.

As the Apostle Paul puts it: "We know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:22). Around us are constant reminders that we are in an imperfect world; without these reminders we should forget our moral and spiritual imperfection. Just as certain fish can adapt to living in polluted waters, so we have adapted to living in a world of godless values and principles. We need to experience the regular shock of situations which cry out to us of our need of God's salvation. When faced with such situations, people tend to get on their knees.

Of course, many of the problems we face can be traced directly to human sin and stupidity. Smoking brings lung cancer; sexual immorality brings sexually transmitted disease; wars and violence come from hate and aggression within men. But many of the evils which afflict us are not of our own personal making, nor are they always the result of foolish collective policies or wicked systems. In a world that has separated itself from God, both social and natural laws are affected by the curse of sin. Even the man who puts all his trust in God will suffer the consequences. The book of Job is a vivid dramatisation of this truth. Catastrophes will not be fairly distributed in such a world; nor will life's bonuses:

"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill – Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them." (Ecclesiastes 9:11,12)

God cares

What we must realise is that God has not abandoned us in this situation. He asks us to trust Him, to believe in His word, to obey His commandments as far as we are able and to look forward to a time in the future when He will intervene in human affairs to establish a society which *will* be governed by just and fair laws, in which nature itself will ultimately be in harmony with its perfect Creator.

We must understand therefore that God's concern for us is to do with our *eternal* welfare; this is what Paul meant when he wrote that "all things work together for good". God's guidance

of His children means that sometimes we experience trouble in this life to test and strengthen our faith: it may not be best for us to have every problem, big or small, solved instantly. The very setbacks of life can be turned to advantage in the development of our characters:

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:3,4, NIV)

The experiences of our present life can find meaning in the context of God’s eternal plan. In the kingdom of God, we shall be able to look back, by God’s grace, and see the value of even the most testing crises in our lives. So Paul the apostle could write:

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Corinthians 4:16,17, NIV)

Paul wrote from personal experience. He had suffered many trials in the course of his preaching work (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29) and, to make matters worse, he had some kind of physical disability which handicapped him further. He states that three times he prayed to God that this “thorn in the flesh” might be removed yet God declined to do this. His disability showed him both his own weakness, his inability to solve this problem, and also the power of God on which he must depend to continue his work.

“And he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9,10)

God never allows us to be tested more than we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13) and the Bible reveals how God Himself is personally affected as He enters into the feelings of human experience (see, for example, Isaiah 63:9). There is no greater demonstration of this than in the willing suffering of God’s only beloved Son, who “when he was reviled, did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but committed himself to him who judges righteously.” The Lord was greatly strengthened throughout his life by prayer, not least in the hour of keenest trial:

“In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” (Hebrews 5:7-9)

We might think that the prayer of the Lord was *not* heard, for his suffering was not removed. Scripture, however, clearly states that he *was* heard, but it was not in God’s will that the experience should be removed. What good then was it to pray? The Gospels record that in the very process of laying his situation before his heavenly Father, even in the midst of his mental agony, Jesus was actually coming to terms with the necessity of the cross he was to bear. Through suffering he was learning the need for complete obedience to his Father:

“Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me; *nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done.*” (Luke 22:42)

A source of strength

But this was not all. Prayer is not only about taking problems to God, it can provide a very real strengthening power in our lives to bear with whatever problems test us:

“Then an angel appeared to him from heaven, strengthening him.” (Luke 22:43)

Our prayers, then, must not be selfish, though we may lay all before the Lord. Even in our best and apparently selfless requests, we must accept that God knows best: “Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10). In all our prayers we should keep the Lord’s phrase in mind: “*nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done.*” This does not apply, of course, when we are asking God for things which He has clearly declared to be His will. It is unnecessary, for example, when we pray for the coming of God’s kingdom to add “if it be your will”, since we know it is God’s will.

Even though God may not choose to work a miracle on our behalf as we would wish, it is not because He does not care. It is because He is working in us the miracle of transforming our characters to be like that of His Son and sometimes this comes through His chastening of us through difficult experiences in life. At such times we need to remember that for the true believer, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; *for you are with me.*” (Psalm 23:4)

The petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread”, reminds us of how simple are our basic needs and reminds us too of our overriding need of that living bread from heaven which we eat when we share the self-sacrificing life of our Lord: “the bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world”, said Jesus (John 6:51).

*“Lord, who Thyself hast bidden us to pray
For daily bread,
We ask Thee but for grace and strength this day
Our path to tread.”*

Practical consequences

We have already seen that to make our prayers effective, we need to think in harmony with the mind of God. Right thinking will have practical consequences. The first commandment is to love God; the second to love our neighbour. The second is the consequence of the first and must result in practical concern for the welfare of others.

“Forgive us our sins”, the Lord taught his disciples to pray. Indeed, without forgiveness we cannot enjoy the relationship with God which enables us to address Him as “Our Father”. We have to accept the practical consequence of asking God for this.

Firstly we are told, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). Following from this act of faith, we are no more “strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the

saints and members of the household of God (Ephesians 2:19). This relationship with those who are now our brothers and sisters in the Lord makes demands upon us and we have to act as members of God's family. This requires us to show love and compassion to all men, preaching the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ by word and deed.

The Lord emphasised these practical consequences when he added to the words "Forgive us our sins" the heart-searching confession, "for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4, NIV). The Bible roundly condemns those who honour God with their lips but have hearts that are far from Him. "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Prayer *cannot* be effective if we are acting in ways that are inconsistent with the relationship we claim with God through our prayers.

A concern for others

"I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting", Paul advised Timothy (1 Timothy 2:8). The person who bears a grudge against his brother, or is refusing to speak to him, or stirs up trouble against him, cannot expect God to forgive him.

"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23,24)

This is the teaching of Jesus.

The Apostle Peter makes a similar point, this time emphasising the importance of right relationships in our homes and the exercising of our responsibilities within our families:

"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." (1 Peter 3:7, NIV)

It is good that in our prayers we should bring before God the needs of others. Not only will this help us to see our own problems in perspective, but it will remind us of our responsibility to *do* something for those about whom we pray. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers he recalled how regularly he prayed on their behalf, but he also recalled the practical steps he took to minister to their needs when he sent to them Timothy, "to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:2; 3:1-3; see 3:9-13).

People receive great strength from the knowledge that prayers are being offered on their behalf and many can testify to the ways in which prayer has helped them to see the way forward in their lives:

*"With confident and humble mind,
Freedom in service I would find,
Praying through every toil assigned,
Thy will be done."*

"Lead us not into temptation"

We have seen the link between the forgiveness of our sins and our relationship with God. This petition takes it a step further.

In prayer we review our spiritual progress before the Lord, confessing to Him our failures in the knowledge that those who have entered into fellowship with Him through the Lord Jesus are assured of the forgiveness of their sins: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Each time we pray for forgiveness, we are also determined never to do such things again, yet we mostly fail through our weak natures. However there is a distinct difference between deliberate and calculated sin and that which recurs because of this weakness. We are told that, in addition to our prayers we must watch. Watching implies alertness, being on our spiritual guard, a determination to avoid falling into the snare of sin. So Jesus exhorted his disciples: "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). If we pray for help to avoid sin, we shall certainly receive that help if we allow ourselves to be influenced and guided by God's word, if we associate with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, if we avoid those situations which we know will weaken our resolve.

When, where and how?

There is no aspect of our spiritual lives which is not touched by prayer. Therefore to "pray without ceasing" is not about non-stop talk to God. The point is that every moment of our lives should be lived in the consciousness of the presence of God.

However, it is helpful to set aside certain times when we concentrate our minds on prayer. The Law of Moses prescribed that the High Priest should burn incense, a symbol of prayer, morning and evening. It is good that we should begin the day with God and that we should review before Him the day's activities before we go to bed. Mealtimes provide an opportunity, particularly when we are with our families, for more than a perfunctory saying of grace – an opportunity to speak to God with our families about various needs and concerns. Other opportunities will arise in accordance with each person's circumstances and commitments.

It is not necessary to adopt a particular position for prayer. We may be able to kneel by our bedside at night; in other circumstances we may be standing, sitting or flat on our backs. When Nehemiah stood in the presence of the king of Persia and was given the opportunity to make a request on behalf of his people, he first made a silent request to God for help (Nehemiah 2:4). How well this reveals the practical nature of prayer. There is no circumstance in which it is not helpful.

When we read the life of the Lord Jesus, we see how much prayer was a part of his daily experience, the source of renewal, guidance and strength that enabled him to fulfil God's purpose. We have glimpses of him on a mountain alone, spending all night in prayer before making momentous decisions, or seeking help before an exhausting preaching tour. If ever there was a man whose life exemplified the power of prayer, it is the Lord. If, as we should, we feel inadequate in our efforts to commune with God and to express those innermost longings that lie in our hearts, then we have the consolation of knowing that if we have given him our allegiance, he will bear our feeble efforts into the presence of his Father, perfecting that which is lacking:

“He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25)

Sometimes in our personal prayers we may stop because we just cannot find the right words to express what is in our hearts. The Apostle Paul understood this and wrote about it in the Letter to the Romans:

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.” (Romans 8:25-34)

The Lord who was made like us and understands our weakness is able to help those who are tempted and who fail. He knows our hearts and will, if necessary take our deepest yearnings to his Father even though we cannot articulate them.

Prayer and fellowship

We have an individual responsibility to cultivate the habit of prayer and this responsibility extends to our families. We have already seen that effective prayer must lead to acceptance of the Gospel through belief and baptism, with the responsibilities which follow as a result of becoming members of the family of God. Jesus himself prayed for the effective witness of those who, through the preaching of the word of truth, should be united together (John 17:17-23).

Praying together

People who are united on the basis of the teaching of the Lord must certainly pray together. We read how those who were baptized on the day of Pentecost after the preaching of Peter “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). When the believers met together, as they did on the first day of the week to remember the sacrifice of Christ through the breaking of bread, and at other times whenever opportunity permitted, prayer was a natural part of their worship and witness. Some moving scenes are presented to us in the Acts of the Apostles as the disciples strengthened one another, often in trying circumstances. We read of the Apostle Paul urgently reminding the elders of Ephesus of their responsibilities: “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36). Later on the same journey, Paul and his companions stopped briefly at Tyre. They did not hesitate to look up the disciples there and when they came to leave, “we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed” (Acts 21:5).

Sometimes a disciple may live in isolation from his brothers and sisters in the Lord and cannot share prayer with them. Visits, letters, telephone calls are all possible to help maintain vital fellowship. But when we *can* meet regularly together as members of the family of the Lord God we are without excuse if we neglect this. Besides failing in our duty to strengthen others, we shall ourselves be denied the power which comes from united prayer and worship:

*“Wherever in the world I am,
In whatsoever estate,
I have a fellowship with hearts
To keep and cultivate;
A work of lowly love to do
For Him on whom I wait.”*

The blessings of prayer

What blessings come from the fellowship which is possible for those who seek the will of God through His word and are united in the Lord Jesus Christ! A study of the lives of great people in Bible times reveals how the practice of prayer was woven into the pattern of their lives. How wonderfully David, for example, was able to triumph over the turmoil of his life and achieve a state of calm and joyful assurance on the basis of his faith in the Lord. The Psalms which he wrote provide numerous examples of the power of prayer:

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in him!” (Psalm 34:8)

The Lord God Himself challenges us to test for ourselves the benefits of that trust and obedience which is the basis of true worship:

“Try me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.” (Malachi 3:10)

An invitation is extended to each one of us that we, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving may come to share the hope of the Gospel, as a result of which “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7).

Are you willing to pray the words of the Psalmist that follow?

“Let your mercies come also to me, O Lord
Your salvation according to your word.” (Psalm 119:41)

By Michael Owen

Bible quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

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