

515 What Can Prayer Do for Me? God's Answers to Life's Questions

Today we're asking the question, "What can prayer do for me?" Most of us grew up hearing prayers at the dinner table or saying our bedtime prayers. Does prayer really work? Does God really hear what I have to say? And when I am talking to God, will it make any difference? Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day." Perhaps you too are driven to your knees. Will it make a difference?

Prayer was important to people in ancient times: Daniel would rather be cast into the lion's den than go one day without prayer. Jesus regularly sought out a quiet place to pray—even though He lived a sinless life. Jesus began the cross with a prayer and He ended the cross with a prayer. When Jonah was cast overboard and certain to drown, he prayed. When Judah had become so wicked with Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah prayed that it would not rain. When Moses faced the Red Sea ahead and Pharaoh's armies behind, he prayed.

When you can't do anything else, you can pray! But why wait till you are desperate before you pray. Prayer is a gift—a marvelous gift—that God gives; it is the gift of Himself, His ear, His heart, His love to pay attention to us! Imagine that you had full access to the President of the United States at any time you wanted. Imagine having his undivided attention and his favor. Imagine him saying to you. Ask, seek, and knock! He will answer, help you find, and open the door at any time. All you have to do is approach Him. There is someone greater than the President—that's God!

●Prayer Will Bring you into the Presence of God!

Prayer at its base is communicating with God. It is a time of exposure of the soul to God. In Exodus 3:2-5, when Moses saw a burning bush, the Scripture says: When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Prayer is like that experience—we come into God's presence.

He [God] said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:6) We don't have to be afraid, like Moses was, because we are praying to our Father in heaven, who loves us. But we do need to be reverent to God, He is hallowed. The Hebrew writer describes the greatness of the Lord in Heb. 4:14, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."

He notes then how the Lord understands us, saying, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16). When we pray, let us with reverence but with confidence approach our Father and God who is to be honored but who is also one that understands us and is willing to give us mercy and grace to help in the time of need. God is God, but He is compassionate toward us.

● Prayer Will Unleash the Power of God.

Prayer is God's idea. He wants us to pray. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-8, "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks

receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" God is a good Father who loves and wants to bless our lives and meet our needs.

I believe in the power of prayer, because I believe in the power of God to answer my prayers. Prayer works because God works. Nothing lies outside the reach of prayer except that which is outside the will of God. Prayer doesn't need proof; it needs practice. James says, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit." (James 5:16-18 ESV)

James challenges us to have faith in God in whatever we pray. In James 1:5-8, James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom [*this is daily wisdom not special revelation*], let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." God will bless us if we have faith in Him and believe that He can help us to find the answers we seek. God does not always answer prayers the way that we want Him to, but God answers prayers the way that is best for us. We don't always know what is best for ourselves.

Sometimes God says yes to our prayers. He did so for Elijah, a man like us, and God may bless our lives as well. Let's remember that God expects His children to keep on asking until we receive. Jesus in Luke 18:1-8 told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" There are times when what we need most is to believe that God will hear us and answer our prayers.

Sometimes God says no to our prayers. A negative answer may be the answer of a loving God who cares for His people. No parent would give his four-year-old son a brand new car. God did not remove Paul's thorn in the flesh, even though this faithful apostle asked him to do so three times! Paul learned some things from this experience. He said in 2 Cor. 12:9 that God's grace was sufficient for him and that God's power is made perfect in weakness. Paul responded, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (12:10) Christians must learn to pray, then, that God's will be done, realizing that God's will may be better in the long run than our getting what we want.

Sometimes God says, "Wait a while." Though Israel suffered much in Egyptian slavery and cried out to God, God did not answer their prayers until Moses was eighty years old (Exodus 1-3). Jesus also responded slowly to the request of Mary and Martha, that Jesus come and heal Lazarus. Jesus did not heal

Lazarus; He raised him from the dead. In waiting Jesus did a greater work than if he had merely healed His sick friend.

Sometimes God gives us something different from what we ask. The thief on the cross only wanted to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom, but Jesus said to him that he would be with Him in Paradise (Luke 23:43). We don't always know what is best or how we should pray (Rom. 8:26). We can confidently be assured, however, that God as a loving Father will do what is best for us. God knows us so very well and will give to us the things we need—even when we cannot see our own needs. God sees what we cannot and knows what we do not. Let us trust Him to do what is best for us.

Often God does more than you or I ever ask Him to do or think He can do. Paul had great faith in God's ability to answer prayer. In his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3:20-21, he said, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." We live limited lives, but God is not limited. We do not serve a small God but a great One. God is able—that is what we must always remember. Christianity is built upon what God can do in and through us. In 1 Kings 3 God granted to Solomon the opportunity to pray for anything he wished. Solomon prayed, "So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). 1 Kings 3:10 says, "It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this." And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.

(Verse 13 continues) I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."

God certainly blessed Solomon far beyond his expectations. Perhaps we all can thank God for what He has done for us. Who knows how many blessings we have received from His hands and do not know it. He has likely been far kinder to us than we realize. Let us never fail to be thankful to our Father in heaven.

Jesus said that our heavenly Father knows our needs even before we ask. He knows our physical needs of food, clothing and shelter. He knows our emotional needs of love and respect. He knows our spiritual needs of instruction, encouragement, and even correction. When children of God come to Him humbly, sincerely and fervently, He will bless them richly. Even though the spiritually poor tax gatherer could not lift his eyes toward heaven (out of shame), God heard his prayer, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13); and he went home justified. God does not despise a broken and contrite spirit (Psalm 51:17).

It is in prayer that we come to realize that we need our Father in heaven. It is a great day in a person's life when he realizes that however wise and strong he thinks he is, he still needs a Father in heaven to help and to bless him. We can approach with reverence and boldness our God because He is our Father, who makes His ear and His heart available to us when we pray. How sad it is that so many people fail to pray, fail to take their sorrow and heartaches and worries to the only One who can do something about them—God! Paul's advice is worth our hearing today: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

James spoke straight to the people of his time about why their prayers were not working. He asked in James 4:1-3, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you

murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." If we wish God to hear our prayers, then our motives must never be selfish. We want to get ahead, but often our desires are not to do God's will but our own will. God won't bless that.

John said in 1 John 5:14-15, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Our prayers need to fulfill God's will. God is not a genie in a bottle or a bellhop; He is Lord of all. Our task is to conform to His will in our thinking and behavior. When we live and ask according to His will, He will readily grant our requests. When our hearts and lives belong to Him, God will be willing to help us and bless us in doing what He asks of us.

To live a life according to His will we must know what He wills. We must know Him and His Word. One of the reasons people fail in prayer is because sin is in their lives. The psalmist said in Psalm 66:18, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." People need forgiveness of sin to have that close relationship with God they seek. If you are not a Christian, believe in Jesus, love and trust Him, repent of your sins, confess His name, and be baptized (immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins). If you have been baptized, repent of that sin and pray for God's forgiveness that no barrier will ever come between you and your Father.

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