

A Study Of Prayer

Introduction. What word is so mighty that it can conquer God? What is the word that unifies separated souls around one common mercy seat? What is the word that lifts the load of guilt from the conscience-smitten heart? What is the word that puts a sword in our hand when we face temptations? What is the word that gives us strength to bear our daily burdens? What is the word that lifts us up when we have fallen? What is the word that stays with the soul in its hours of loneliness and that comforts it in the day of sorrow? That mighty, all prevailing, God-conquering word is prayer.

When we select illustrations from the Bible which prove our proposition that prayer is the word that conquers God, our only embarrassment is the riches of the Bible in that respect. Abraham prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:23-33 and it conquered God. He could have said, "That is what they deserve. They have had plenty of warnings and have not heeded them. Now let them perish." However, this noble, magnanimous friend of God prayed for them and conquered God.

One of the greatest blessings enjoyed by Christians in this life is the privilege of prayer, by which we can approach God. Through prayer, the Christian can find forgiveness for sins (1 John 1:9), peace to replace anxiety (Philippians 4:6-7), and strength from God through His Spirit (Ephesians 3:14-16). For such reasons, Paul frequently exhorted Christians to be diligent in their prayers (Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

However, Jesus knew that people would become slack in their prayers (Luke 18:1). It is for this reason that we need to study prayer.

I. ***The Characteristics Of Prayer***

A. Prayer must be offered in faith.

1. Jesus said that if we ask in faith, we will receive (Matthew 21:22).
2. We must have faith in God, and in His ability to answer (Hebrews 11:6).
3. Otherwise, prayer will not be answered (James 1:5-8).
4. Is our faith weak? Then increase it with the help of God's word (Romans 10:17).

B. Prayer must be offered with a spirit of humility.

1. The Pharisee had no humility (Luke 18:9-14).
2. Psalm 34:18 says, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."
3. James 4:6 says, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble."

- C. Prayer must be offered in harmony with God's will.
 - 1. God answers prayer that is offered according to His will (1 John 3:22; 5:14; cf. Matthew 17:4; 18:15; Mark 4:33; John 7:51; Acts 23:35; 28:28).
 - 2. Jesus provided the example for us in His prayers at Gethsemane (Luke 22:42).
 - 3. Too often, prayers are unanswered because they are more concerned with our will, rather than God's will (James 4:3).
- D. Prayer must be offered by those righteous before God.
 - 1. Peter wrote, "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil" (1 Peter 3:12).
 - 2. The prayers of the righteous person are effective (James 5:16-18).
 - 3. But those continuing in sin He will not hear (Proverbs 28:9; Isaiah 59:1-2).
 - 4. To be righteous before God, one must submit to the "righteousness of God" offered in Christ (Romans 10:1-4).
- E. Prayer must be offered in a spirit of thanksgiving.
 - 1. This fact is persistently stated in the New Testament (Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).
 - 2. Do we think God will help us with our present burdens if we do not take the time to thank Him for past blessings?
- F. Prayer must be offered with persistence.
 - 1. Jesus illustrated this aspect of prayer through two parables.
 - a) The parable of the persistent friend (Luke 11:5-10).
 - b) The parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8).
 - 2. The virtue of persistence is demonstrated in three instances of prayer.
 - a) Jesus at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:44).
 - b) Paul, pertaining to his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-8).
 - c) The early church (Acts 2:42).
- G. Prayer must be offered in the name of Jesus.
 - 1. This means much more than simply adding a little phrase "in Jesus' name" at the end of our prayers (Ephesians 5:20)!
 - a) Jesus is the only way by which we can approach God (John 14:6).
 - b) Jesus is our high priest who intercedes for us (John 14:13; Hebrews 7:24-25).
 - 2. Appealing to God in the name of His Son can give us great confidence that God will give us what we need (Hebrews 4:14-16).
 - 3. Does one have to audibly state that the prayer is being offered in the name of Jesus?

- a) This is a common practice, usually at the close of the prayer, among most brethren in the prayers offered in the worship assemblies.
- b) This is similar to what is done when one is baptized.
 - (1) Baptism is to be "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38).
 - (2) It is a good practice to audibly express that baptism is being done "in the name of Jesus Christ" when baptizing someone so that those viewing it, especially non-Christians, will be able to recognize and acknowledge that fact.
- c) The phrase states to everyone present, including first-time visitors or others who would not know otherwise, that prayer is through Jesus and by His authority (cf. Romans 1:8).
 - (1) It reminds the Christian of the wonderful access he has with the Father because of the loving sacrifice of Jesus and His gracious gift of prayer. It is a recognition of His Lordship over him.
 - (2) In personal prayers, even though they may not be stated audibly, it is good to always acknowledge the love and authority of Jesus.

II. ***The Practice Of Prayer***

A. When should we pray?

- 1. Having "set times" to pray can help to create the habit of praying.
 - a) There are two good examples in the Bible.
 - (1) David, whom God described as "a man after mine own heart" (Psalm 55:17).
 - (2) Daniel, whom the angel described as "O man greatly beloved" (Daniel 6:10).
 - b) These great men of God made it a habit to pray at set times throughout the day; we would do well to imitate their example.
 - c) At the very least, you should make a special time each day to be alone with your heavenly Father in prayer.
- 2. Yet prayers should not be limited to "set times."
 - a) Special needs call for special times of praying.
 - b) There are three good examples in the Bible.
 - (1) Jesus, praying on important occasions (Luke 6:12-13; 23:34).
 - (2) Paul, praying in trying circumstances (Acts 16:25).
 - (3) Nehemiah, praying on the spur of the moment (Nehemiah 2:4-5).
- 3. The goal is to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
 - a) Having "set times" will help develop experience in praying.

- b) Praying spontaneously as needs arise will develop the disposition to pray in every circumstance.
- B. With whom should we pray?
1. Jesus exhorted us to pray "in secret" (Matthew 6:5-6).
 - a) Private prayer should occupy the largest portion of our prayers.
 - b) Consider the value of secret prayer.
 - (1) It forms a close union, communion and fellowship with God.
 - (2) It is a true test of your sincerity and devotion for men cannot see you and God can see right through you!
 - c) Your Father will reward you "openly."
 2. Jesus also spoke of praying with "two or three" (Matthew 18:19-20).
 - a) The early Christians prayed together often.
 - (1) They prayed in times of trouble (Acts 4:23-24; 12:5, 12; 16:25).
 - (2) They prayed in times of departure (Acts 20:36; 21:5).
 - b) A sweetness of fellowship and sense of strength comes when God's people pray together.
- C. How should we pray?
1. Jesus taught how to pray (Luke 11:1-4).
 - a) The "Lord's Prayer," as it is commonly called, is a model or guide for learning how to pray.
 - b) A careful examination of this prayer reveals what proper prayer includes.
 - (1) To "whom" we should pray.
 - (2) Praise to God.
 - (3) Supplication to God for His purposes, our physical needs, our spiritual needs, and the spiritual needs of others.
 2. Jesus also taught us simplicity in our prayers (Ecclesiastes 5:2; Matthew 6:7-8).
 - a) Therefore, our prayers ought to contain four elements.
 - (1) Adoration for God and His greatness.
 - (2) Confession to God for sins we have committed.
 - (3) Thanksgiving to God for all the blessings we have been given (health, family, friends, guidance, forgiveness, hope, etc.).
 - (4) Supplication to God for what we need and praying on behalf of others.
 - b) By following these, our prayers will be acceptable to Him.
- D. For what should we pray?
1. In the scriptures, God indicates for what He wishes us to pray.
 - a) Self and family.
 - (1) For physical daily needs (Matthew 6:11).
 - (2) For personal growth in devotion to God (Colossians 1:9-12).

- (3) For spouse, children, parents, siblings, etc.
- (4) For their nurture and growth in the teaching of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).
- b) Community and nation.
 - (1) For peace to prevail (Jeremiah 29:7).
 - (2) For godly and moral standards and righteous living.
 - (3) For national penitence and awareness of God (Psalm 33:12; Proverbs 14:34).
 - (a) Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15).
 - (b) The Levites (Nehemiah 9:32-37).
 - (c) Daniel (Daniel 9:3-19).
 - (4) For leaders to rule wisely (1 Timothy 2:2).
- c) Church and non-Christians.
 - (1) For love and unity to prevail (John 13:35; 17:20-21).
 - (2) For the spiritual growth of each member (Philippians 1:9-11).
 - (3) For the gospel to have free course (2 Thessalonians 3:1).
 - (4) For their salvation (Romans 10:1).
 - (5) For the effort of those involved in teaching them (Ephesians 6:18-20).
- d) Sick, poor and oppressed.
 - (1) For their restoration to health (James 5:14-15).
 - (2) For spiritual strength and peace of mind (James 5:16).
 - (3) Such as the homeless, fatherless, and unborn children (Proverbs 29:7).
 - (4) Those in other nations oppressed by their own rulers or outside influences.
- 2. As we make our supplications known to God, we should have specific objectives for which to pray.

III. ***The Obstacles To Prayer***

A. Unconfessed sin.

- 1. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."
- 2. The basis for prayer rests upon our being in fellowship with Him; such fellowship is broken if we do not confess our sins to Him!

B. Improper treatment of others.

- 1. How we treat others has a bearing upon whether God will hear our prayers.
 - a) E.g., how we treat the poor (Psalm 41:1-3).
 - b) E.g., how one treats his friend (Matthew 5:23-24).
 - c) E.g., how a husband treats his wife (1 Peter 3:7).

2. We must correct our relationships with others (if possible) before we can expect God to hear our prayers and forgive us of our sins (Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-23).

IV. ***The Answers To Prayers***

A. "Request granted."

1. God may answer "yes," and grant the petitions we ask of Him (Isaiah 38:1-8). He is pleased to grant our petitions (Matthew 7:7-8).
2. This will be the case the more we try to do His will in our lives (1 John 3:22).

B. "Request granted, but not yet."

1. We are all familiar with the well-known saying, "Timing is everything." God may grant our request, but according to His time and purpose (Psalm 40:1; Ecclesiastes 3:1).
2. We need to remember God's promise (Philippians 4:19), continue to exercise patience (James 5:10-11), and keep on asking (Luke 11:5-10).

C. "Request granted, but not as you might expect."

1. Sometimes God says "yes," but answers it in way differently than we anticipated (John 11:3, 43-44).
2. We must remember that God has perspective, wisdom, and power above anything that we can even imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Also, we do not always know what we should pray for or how to pray for it (Romans 8:26).
3. God's thoughts and methods are often much different than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). For example, think how God might answer a request for strength and perseverance.
 - a) He may give us trials to bear.
 - b) Which in turn develops the virtues we prayed for!

D. "Request denied."

1. Often God says "no" (Deuteronomy 1:45; 23:5).
2. We must trust that God, who knows all and what is best, would do so only if granting our request would not be for our good (Hebrews 12:5-11).
3. Perhaps we need to learn to appreciate what we already have. Paul prayed three times that the Lord would remove his thorn in the flesh. He was told no, and made to understand that he needed the thorn in the flesh to make him better (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).
4. We may not fully understand, but we can still fully trust Him (Habakkuk 3:17-19), especially in light of the promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13.

V. **Common Questions About Prayer**

A. "Can we pray to Jesus?"

1. When a Christian prays, all persons of the Godhead have a role; therefore, in that sense, one cannot pray without involving Jesus.
 - a) Prayers come before the throne of God (Revelation 8:3-4).
 - b) The intercessory roles of both Jesus (1 Timothy 2:1-5) and the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26-27) are clearly stated.
 - c) Therefore, Jesus has knowledge of prayers offered in His name by His disciples.
2. The New Testament plainly teaches that prayer is to be directed to the Father.
 - a) The instructions of Jesus (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2; John 16:23).
 - b) The example of the apostle Paul (Ephesians 3:14; 5:20; Colossians 1:3).
 - c) James 1:17 says the Father is the giver of "every good gift and every perfect gift." If one desires to receive those things for which he is petitioning, he must make his requests to the one who grants those gifts.
 - (1) The heavenly Father knows the needs of His children (Matthew 6:32).
 - (2) The Father supplies "all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

B. "Does God hear the prayer of sinners?"

1. The usual answer to this question is "no" with some qualifications such as Cornelius (Acts 10:4). However, if God never hears the prayers of sinners:
 - a) How can His children who have sinned ever receive forgiveness through prayer as instructed in 1 John 1:9?
 - b) Why did the apostle Peter tell Simon the sorcerer to "pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee" when he was in the "bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:22-23)?
2. A consideration of John 9:31.
 - a) In this text the blind man, having been healed by Jesus, stated, while making His defense before the Jews, "Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth."
 - b) Some have said this verse is not applicable because the man was not inspired but the scriptures support his statement (Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 15:29; 1 Peter 3:12).
 - c) In each of the above scriptures, the matter under consideration is whether or not God will even hear the prayers of His own children, Jew or Gentile, when they continue in sin.

- (1) God will not hear the prayer of one who claims to belong to Him if one persists in sinning (Isaiah 59:1-2).
 - (2) When a child of God truly repents, he may always turn to God in prayer with the full assurance that God will hear him, but as long as he continues to sin impenitently, he has no hope that God will hear him.
3. The more accurate question is, "Does God ever hear the prayers of non-Christians?"
- a) The case of Cornelius.
 - (1) Though he was not a Christian, his prayers were heard (Acts 10:4, 31).
 - (2) We are not told for what Cornelius was praying.
 - (a) Even though God answered his prayer by sending Peter to him, he likely was not praying for Peter to be sent to him or about the gospel Peter would preach.
 - (b) He may have been praising God, thanking Him, or making some special requests based on what he knew.
 - (3) Not realizing that he was not a true child of God, he offered many prayers. God heard his prayers for God always hears the prayers of those who truly seek Him (Matthew 7:7-11; Hebrews 11:6).
 - (4) Since he was not a child of God and did not really have the right to approach God in prayer as his Father, there was only one answer God could give him. Peter was sent with the answer as to how to become a child of God.
 - (a) Cornelius was "on the outside looking in" -- seeing children of God praying, and wanting to be like them, he prayed too.
 - (b) His understanding was still imperfect so he did not realize that he did not have access to the throne of grace like those who were already Christians had.
 - (c) God heard his prayer and answered it, not by granting what a non-Christian has no right to request, but by providing what the man really needed -- the opportunity to hear and obey the gospel and thereby gain access to God's throne of grace through Jesus Christ.
 - b) The case of Saul.
 - (1) After Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Saul went into the city where he penitently spent three days in fasting and prayer (Acts 9:8-9, 11).
 - (2) God sent Ananias to him "for, behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:12).
 - (a) The prayers of Saul were heard by the Lord.

- (b) As in the case of Cornelius, God provided Saul with what he really needed -- the opportunity to hear and obey the gospel.
- c) When one obeys the gospel, as a child of God he may approach God as his Father. He may do so with the assurance and confidence that the scriptures give him. No one outside of Christ has that assurance or right.

Conclusion. The discouragements of the world are all around us (Job 21:15). In the silence we long to hear the voice of God. In these moments of discouragement and in the face of these difficulties, remember those who conquered God by their prayers.

Prayer is the key to the problems of our day; it locks the door that keeps out the doubts and dangers of the night. Remember that you wield in your prayer the mightiest power, the power that moves the hand that moves the world.

The ability to pray to God and receive answers in our lives is truly one of the greatest blessings we can have as children of God! Hopefully, understanding and applying the principles discussed in this lesson will assure greater success in having our prayers answered.