

PRAYER

What is prayer?

No human activity is more sublime, none more mysterious, than prayer. Through prayer we actually make contact with the infinite and supreme Being who created and sustains the universe.

And yet, at the same time, prayer is very simple. It involves only talking and listening, ordinary things we do every day. Prayer is merely conversing with God.

The Lord is a God who speaks. He is not a silent deity; it is His nature to communicate. And God has made us in such a way that we share this ability to communicate. He has given us mouths to speak and ears to hear, as well as the remarkable capacity to express ourselves through the medium of language.

Certainly God knows our innermost thoughts and feelings even without our putting them into words. Nevertheless, God desires the kind of communal relationship that comes only with our active participation. God wants us to talk with Him. He actually listens to what we have to say!

But prayer is not just talking to God. Prayer involves listening as well. Although He usually doesn't speak in an audible voice, God does often speak directly from His Spirit to ours. God's voice may come to us in the form of thoughts implanted in our minds, a leading toward a particular course of action, or new light which enables us to see things we hadn't seen before.

But hearing from God requires concentration on our part, a conscious turning of our heart and attention toward Him. We must not monopolize our conversations with God, so filling our prayers with our own thoughts and desires that we fail to hear what He may be saying to us.

We must *want* to hear from God, and make room for Him to speak. If we do listen, we can be confident that God will speak, for it is His desire to communicate with us. And that is what makes prayer possible.

Are there different kinds of prayer?

There are several different kinds of prayer, including:

Petition -- We often think of prayer as asking God for something. This is called *petition*, and although it is not the only kind of prayer, it is an important one. God encourages us to bring all our needs to Him, including the basic necessities of life (Matthew 6:11).

The Bible is full of examples of people who received what they asked for from God. Jesus told us plainly to "ask and receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24). God takes pleasure in giving to His children. Of course, just like any parent, God sometimes has good reason to refuse the requests of His children. He knows what is best for us, and He also takes note of the motives behind our requests (James 4:3). But we should never hesitate to bring our needs and wants to our Father, for it is His delight to give.

Praise – *Petition* should be balanced with *praise*. Praise is glorifying God, telling Him of our love for Him. Rather than asking for something, we express our appreciation for all He has done for us. In the act of exalting God, our own souls are lifted up as well. God's people are a people of praise.

Confession – Honest and effective prayer includes *confession*. This means allowing the Spirit of God to convict us of our sins, and responding in repentance and contrition. This requires humbling ourselves before God, and being willing to face up to what we have done wrong. Sin will wreck our relationship with God, but "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Intercession -- *Intercession* means praying to God on behalf of someone else. In this type of prayer, our focus is not on

our own needs, but on those of others. Intercession gives us an amazing opportunity to help and influence others, as God moves in their lives in answer to our prayers. Indeed, there is no greater way to demonstrate our love for others than by praying for them. And God is pleased with us when we are unselfish enough to pray for someone else.

Communion -- Finally, there is what we might call *communion*, when we simply open our hearts to God and share with Him our deepest feelings, thoughts and dreams. Such intimate times of fellowship develop and enrich our relationship with God, and draw us closer to Him.

How should we pray?

There is no need to use formal or flowery language when we talk with God. He is more interested in sincerity of heart than in eloquence of speech. If we have trouble getting started, or find it difficult to put our thoughts into words, it can be helpful to use the prayers in Scripture as models. That is the purpose of what is known as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:5-13).

There is no set pattern or posture which we must follow in prayer. We have the freedom to pray silently or aloud; with eyes open or closed; kneeling, standing, sitting or lying down. We can pray in our mother tongue, and in a prayer language given by the Holy Spirit. The important thing is to pray with reverence and sincerity.

When should we pray?

A Christian's prayer life should include all of the following:

- **Daily prayer time.** A specific time should be set aside for prayer each day, perhaps 10 to 15 minutes to start, more as we become more comfortable and more proficient. Many Christians follow the pattern of Jesus in praying first thing in the morning, so as to begin

the day by drawing close to God. Some make a practice of pausing at set times throughout the day for prayer (see Daniel 6:10) But whether morning, afternoon, or evening, choose a time that fits your schedule and stick with it. Of course, interruptions will come and adjustments will sometimes have to be made. Don't be discouraged by this. The important thing is to develop a habit of daily prayer.

- **Group prayer.** Our prayers gain strength when united with the prayers of others (Matthew 18:19-20). We should participate in regular prayer meetings, and join with others periodically to pray for revival or other special needs.

- **Spontaneous prayer.** Sometimes a given situation will call for immediate prayer. This includes everything from prayer for the sick or some other emergency, to thanksgiving for a meal or a beautiful sunset. We should be ready to pray anytime, anywhere.

- **Continual prayer.** Paul advises us to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This involves learning to maintain a continual awareness of God's presence, a heart that seeks Him, and an ear open to His voice.

Why should we pray?

God commands us to pray (Isaiah 55:6; Matthew 6:9; Luke 18:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:17, etc.). This is reason enough!

Prayer is necessary for our spiritual growth. Prayer enriches our knowledge of God and deepens our relationship with Him, and is a source of power for witnessing and holy living.

The Bible is full of promises for those who seek the Lord in prayer (Jeremiah 33:3; Matthew 7:7-11). The blessings of heaven are accessible to those who pray.

God loves us and wants to spend time with us. Our love for Him should cause us to seek out and spend time with Him. What a

privilege to converse with the Creator of the universe, in whose mind is all knowledge and in whose hand is all power!

How can we pray effectively?

As with everything else, "practice makes perfect." The more we pray, the more we will learn about prayer. It is also beneficial to study the prayers recorded in Scripture, to see how Christ, the apostles and the prophets prayed. The Psalms can be especially helpful, for they express the wide range of emotions, desires and concerns of the human heart. Above all, the Holy Spirit is there to help us to pray, and to pray for us and through us (Romans 8:26-27).

Below is a brief list of things that can help or hinder our prayers:

HELPS TO PRAYER

- *Faith* (Matthew 21:21-22) -- Our prayers are more effective when we see God for who He is, and become confident in our Father's love and power. We can increase our faith, not by trying to make ourselves believe, but by meditating on God, His deeds and His promises.
- *Sincerity* (Hebrews 4:13) -- It is essential that we come to God in total openness and honesty. It is foolish to try to hide or disguise ourselves, and only prevents Him from meeting our real needs.
- *Righteousness* (James 5:16) -- We cannot live our lives any way we please, neglecting God and His law, and then expect Him to respond when we want something from Him.
- *Humility* (Psalm 131:1-2) -- God hears those who realize their need for Him, not those who imagine themselves to be self-sufficient.
- *Persistence* (Luke 11:5-10) -- Don't give up! The promise is there for those who persevere. God sometimes says "no," but we shouldn't give up until He does.

HINDRANCES TO PRAYER

- *Unbelief* (Matthew 13:58) -- Unbelief causes us to continue worrying and keeps us from leaving the problem with God. It can prevent us from being receptive to the answer or even seeing it when it comes.
- *Hypocrisy* (Matthew 6:5-8) -- Prayer that seeks to appear "spiritual" will accomplish nothing beyond that.
- *Pride* (Luke 18:9-14) -- Prayer that is focused on ourselves is not in a position to receive anything from God.
- *Sin* (Psalm 66:18) -- Unconfessed sin or an unrepentant heart builds a barrier that blocks the path of prayer.
- *Selfishness* (James 4:3) -- God sees the motives behind our prayers. He is concerned not only with what we ask for, but also with why we ask.
- *Broken Relationships* (1 Peter 3:7) -- The way we treat others can have a significant effect on the way God treats us.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of prayer. Let Jesus be our example: if He needed to spend much time in prayer, how much more do we? Nothing can be accomplished without prayer; but with prayer, anything is possible!

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 17:16-27.

1. How would you describe David's attitude as he comes before God to pray?
2. What does David say about God in his prayer?
3. What does David thank God for?
4. What does David ask God for?
5. What motives can you see in David's prayer?