

Prayer

In the Christian faith, prayer is a direct spiritual communication with our Father, wherein we take the opportunity to worship, praise, express gratitude, love, petition, and make requests of Him, all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are close to Him, and most God-like when we are praying to Him appropriately. Jeremiah 29:3 says "...ye shall seek me and find me when ye shall search for me with all of your heart." And Hebrews 11:16 tells us that God is a "...reward of them who diligently seek Him." While careful, dedicated, inspired study of the Scripture can reveal much about the character and nature of God and what He expects of us, only prayer is capable of actually finding God and having the fellowship He wants to have with us. In these two passages we hear essentially the same message. Prayer is implicit in each case. The Holy Spirit tells us that we must express our prayer diligently and with all our hearts. How do we pray diligently? We do so with fervor, sincerity, love, humility and passionate perseverance. How do we pray with all our hearts? We do so with the full measure of our entire inner being, which is the sum of our intellect and our emotions, all in willful, loving subordination to God's perfect will. This is prayer, the kind God loves to hear and to which He likes to respond. He wants this quality, not quantity of words. He knows all our thoughts, needs and desires better than we do. But He won't waste His time and effort considering prayers, which lack full commitment, are half hearted, mindless, selfish or rote.

The key factor in all prayer, if it is to have standing with God, is that it represents a subordination of our will for His. He isn't impressed by our advice or our persuasion based on our own wills; the only prayers, which count, are those in which we condition our requests to His will. Because He knows all things, He knew before the beginning of time even what we would be praying for, and how serious and compassionate we would be, and has, therefore, already judged the merits and decided what is best for us. Thus it is by His sovereign will and His alone in both His perfect love and judgment that all requests of the believer are answered.

Then why pray at all you may ask? If things have all been decided or predetermined, we are merely a pawn in a grand chess game without investment or influence in our own future or anything else. Wrong! God gave us freedom of choice and we do have control of our destinies, subject, of course, to the many outside influences of other wills, wills in conflict with ours, which seek to dissuade and impose on us. God does not do violence to our wills as does the world, nor will He become an active participant in effectuating our own will. God's influence is fully evidenced and expressed in the glory of His creation and in His Word, which He gave us in the Holy Bible. We always have the choice to either seek Him or to go the way of the world. He simply happens to know what our choices will be long before we make them. Of course, He also knew the nature of our prayers, how much of our heart we would put into them and exactly how consistent to His will and plan for us they would be. Those who are truly born again, who are His sons and daughters, must never forget that He does have a divine plan for each of us, even during this short remainder of our visit here. Everything in our lives is Father filtered, our joys and victories, as well as our sufferings and defeats.

Diligent, fervent prayer is a process through which we grow to know Him and what He wants of us. Prayer is more than asking, it is how we worship Him, how we praise Him, how we show our love for Him, and how we thank Him. Because prayer is how we communicate with our Creator, shouldn't there be something very special about the conversation? If we were given the opportunity to speak to the Queen of England or the President of the United States, wouldn't that be a special and momentous event? Yet, here we have a 24-hour open line directly to our Creator, a personage infinitely greater and more important than any President or Queen. Why should we then treat that opportunity as less momentous and with less awe and importance? True, diligent prayer is the essence of our fellowship with Him. He loves nothing more than to hear from us in this loving, sincere and awe-filled manner. Remember, we all have the potential to "walk with Him as did Enoch (Genesis 5:21), to be considered His beloved as was John (John 21:20) to be personally "sent by Him" as was Abraham (Exodus 3:10), or to be "a man (or woman) after God's own heart as was David (1Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:27). This tells us that we have a very personal God, one who really wants to have fellowship with each

of us as individuals. Scripture gives us no evidence that any of these blessed individuals were worthy, quite the contrary. Nevertheless, they each found favor with Him, and through His grace with their love and humility, along with their sincere and fervent prayer faith and worship, there was provided them that blessed fellowship. As His sons and daughters, we are far better positioned to attain such an exalted place than were these men of old, if we will but fully commit ourselves and our ways to Him through obedience, love, faith, humility, and prayer. Scripture tells us many times to pray and thereby we will receive. The passages that allude to this are perhaps among the most troublesome, difficult and misunderstood in all Scripture. In the Gospel of John 14:14 Jesus says, "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it." In Mark 11:24, Jesus again offers, "What things so ever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them." Again in John 15: 7 Jesus assures us that "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ye shall ask whatever ye wish and it shall be done unto you." Jesus also tells us in Matthew 21:22 "Whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing ye shall receive." In John 5:14 the Holy Spirit tells us "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, he heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask we know that we have the petition that we desire of Him." Furthermore, in John 16:23 we hear that "what so ever ye ask the Father in My name, He will give it you. Even Psalm 37:4, 5 gives rise to such expectations when it says, "Delight thyself also in the Lord and He shall give thee the desires of the heart. Committ thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass."

This is but a sampling of the many verses, which offer similar messages. It is not what they actually say in the whole context of the Scripture, but what they seem to say, that is so troubling. If they say what they seem to say, than all who are born again would be rich, never sick, never suffer, never grow old, and always be happy. Who wouldn't pray for, and thereby expect to receive these blessings? But we all know that that's not the way it works. Lack of understanding of the true meaning of these verses has caused not only many who only thought they were saved to utterly reject God because of 'broken promise,' but even those who are saved, love Jesus and believe in the inerrancy of the

Scriptures, also wonder, are troubled and even question their own salvation when the objects of their petitions are not granted.

Perhaps we may learn something useful by examining these verses one at a time and applying them in the context of the whole Scripture. In doing this, it will be useful to read what is, figuratively speaking, the “fine print” as in an insurance policy. For that reason certain of the key words in those verses have been underlined. In each of these verses the underlined words express or imply the conditions, the “fine print” associated with the promise. In John 14:14 and 16:23 the words again are “in my name” in Mark 11: 24 it’s believe; in John 15:7 it’s “abide in me” and “my words abide in you,” its “...ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” In 1 John 5:14 its “...according to His will, and in Psalm 37:4, 5 its “..delight yourself...” and “Commit thy way...” and also, “...Trust also in Him...” In Examining these one at a time, I pray we will reveal the patterns of conditions, which bring this awesome promise into its true perspective.

First, “in My name”. Surely, we all realize that we should pray always to the Father, but in His name, in the name of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For in 1 John 2:1 we learn that “...we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.” Also in John 14: 6 we learn directly from Jesus that “...I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” However, it should be evident that “in the name of Jesus, or “in His name” is not in itself an accomplishing magical phrase or formula any more than is “open sesame” or the rubbing of a bottle to bring forth a wish granting genie. Jesus is our Lord, our Savior, our God. If simply calling on His name would grant wishes or answer prayers, He would have to be more like a genie and we would be the gods. So it is evident that there must be something much more involved. Surely one’s whole life, heart, will, prayers and other significant factors must accompany our requests in the name of our blessed Advocate, our Intercessor with the Father, who is our grantor of all blessings. Prayers in His name must be for the furtherance of His will and glory. Dave Hunt says, “His name must be stamped on the character and engraved on the heart and life of the one praying in His name.”

Then there is “believe” as in Mark 11:24. We must believe that we will receive answers to our prayers. This is not calling on some mysterious power of the mind that will make God acquiesce or that can produce results apart from God’s will, as the so-called power of positive thinking would seem to suggest. To believe requires faith that He heard you and will respond. As Christians, we know He hears His children. But I suspect that only a very mature faith, a very committed and totally subordinated will, can muster unto itself such assurance. It must be the embodiment of a faith, which has gone very far into self-denial, humility and acceptance of God’s sovereign will as the only will in that life. It’s believing, because the prayer request represents the believer’s knowledge of the will of God and seeks nothing for himself or herself but only the will of God. It is the result of that rare and wonderful state where one finds more and more that one’s desires coincide with His will. It comes from knowing Him and His Word, as He wants us all to know Him, His Word, and His will. This will tend to grow in each of us as grow our submission, humility and love of Him.

Next there is the doctrine of “abiding” as a condition of granted petition as in John 15:7. Abiding means dwelling, a place where one is residing. What a wonderful home He is suggesting! We are residing in Him and His word is residing in us! If, or when, we achieve that place of abiding, when we and His words are fully moved in, we have little need to wonder or to be concerned about answers to our prayers. But surely these “abidings” are not easily attained, for it seems evident that again, the prerequisites of unconditioned submission, humility, worship, and love of a mature believer steeped in the Word are necessary for this move to take place.

Then we have, “ask in prayer,” “believing,” from Matthew 21:24. This is essentially the same as Mark 11:24 and warrants the same comments. Perhaps it might help here to also point to some additional advice Jesus gave us in John 18 in the parable of the widow and the judge. The message is that we should “always pray and not give up” (NIV). That is of course, when the cause is just or consistent with His will. We should persevere in prayer for “...will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?” (Luke 18:7) Thus He encourages us to keep asking, seeking and

knocking at the door. Of course in this vein we must also keep in mind James 4:3 where the Holy Spirit reminds us “..ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss (that is, not to Gods glory) but that ye may consume it upon your lusts.” This again is caution to the wise, to carefully examine what they pray, to be certain that it is appropriate in God’s eyes. This must not be in vain repetition, which Christ condemned.

John 5:14, 15 speaks of prayer “according to His will.” Now, here we are at the root of the issue, the real answer to the dilemma. This has already been alluded to a number of times hereinabove. All prayer, if it is a petition, if it is to be answered in some favorable manner, must be in accordance with His will. Bottom line!! Think about it. Could it be otherwise? Is God going to do anything not in accordance with His will? What kind of God would He be if we, such lowly sinful creatures, could do or think anything to change His mind or to convince Him of anything He didn’t already know or was already intending to do? Surely not the omniscient God we know Him to be. Yet we must at the same time remember, as stated earlier in this paper, that because God foreknew everything, He knew all about our prayers and petitions. He knew the conditions of our hearts, and knew from every conceivable perspective the merits and ramifications of our petitions. Thus, He made His righteous judgment way back then and set down His divine will in each matter to await its appropriate application and answer to us. So all our prayers made responsibly are, or have been judged in advance and properly dealt with by our loving, righteous and all-knowing God. Would we, should we, want it any different, nor could it possibly be otherwise? When we finally stop to think, to apprehend in any degree the wholeness of His word and the nature of His being, we must realize that “in accordance with His will” is implicit and essential in every promise, in every message Scripture gives us. Even Jesus Himself prayed in this manner in Matthew 26:39 saying, “...nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt.”

Lastly, in Psalm 37, we hear the key words, “delight,” “commit” and “trust” all in or to the Lord. Delight in the Hebrew is “anag” which also means soft and pliable. Thus, it suggests that we let Him mould or sculpt us to His way and purpose. “Commit thy way.” That is clear and appropriate as is “trust in Him.” While this verse is simply another way

of expressing the same idea, as has already been delivered in the other messages, it is interesting and comforting to note that our unchanging God was giving similar assurance well before Jesus formally entered His creation.

One final and very important observation. When we pray unselfishly, with sincerity and with all our heart, a prayer where we truly mean "...nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt," we are offering the highest form of worship, as did Jesus at Gethsemane. When we pray in this manner, we are petitioning our Father to have His will prevail and to not allow His will to be thwarted by other wills. Scripture clearly indicates that our God has a permissive will so that at times He does allow His will to be thwarted by other wills, as when Jesus wept and lamented as He rode a donkey into Jerusalem (Matthew 23:3) and in the desert when Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God told him to do. These are also good examples of how we have, through our own free will, authority over our actions but not over their consequences. When we pray "...thy will and not mine be done," we are saying that we don't want our will to be in conflict with His will, and we are also asking Him to disallow or override all other conflicting wills so that only His will be done. Herein would seem to be the greatest power of prayer, our petitions to God to disallow other wills which conflict with His.

In summary, there are three points of importance here regarding prayer, and God's response, which we must keep in mind even when we think we have reason to believe that our prayers are worthy, that they therefore surely reflect His will. First is timing. He knows better than we do, not only if, but also how, and when our petitions should be granted. Second is patience for His timing, which is a virtue in short supply in me, and I suspect in many others. But it is His timing, which determines when all things are to occur. We must wait patiently without grumbling or despairing. This, of course, implies trust as well, for patience is built on trust, trust in Him. Thirdly, we must recognize that "His ways are not our ways," and the "...the foolishness of God is wiser than man." Therefore, His answers to our prayers may be quite different from what we expect, but they will always be appropriate and exactly right because they reflect God's way and His infinite and omniscient perspective.

We all know how grateful we have been at times when He didn't respond as we had prayed, that is, when we later discovered the error of our wants. God's answers or non-answers are never in error. Remember that! And never forget to pray in gratitude and awe no matter what happens, because as His sons and daughters, He has guaranteed to us our ultimate victory when we shall no longer want for anything, when in eternity our prayers will never again be as requests, but only prayers of worship, love and gratitude.