

PRAYER

THE GOD WHO ANSWERS



INTRODUCTION

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1) – presumably, because they knew that they had to *learn* to pray. We’re no different two thousand years later. The fact is that wonderful, deep and rich habits of prayer don’t normally just plop down on our lives. Rather, over time, we have to learn good habits and attitudes as the Holy Spirit works in us. That’s encouraging because it means we really can grow in prayer. In other words, however discouraged we might feel about our prayer lives, we’re not actually stuck in prayerlessness. On the contrary, we can grow because the Spirit lives and works in us (Rom. 8:9). He is causing us to cry out, ‘Abba, Father’ (Gal. 4:6).

This book is a small attempt to help us grow in prayer. It isn’t an attempt at a biblical overview of prayer, nor is it a complete theology of prayer. The book is simply a practical encouragement to help us get going with prayer. It is meant as a boost for dry souls, or a spiritual shove for those who’ve stalled. Each day has a Bible verse, an explanation and some questions. The goal is to stir us and deepen our thinking about prayer. This, in turn, should lead us into new prayerful habits and spiritual disciplines.

As we seek to grow in prayer, we need to be both hopeful and realistic. Prayer is a delight *and* a duty. It is joy *and* hard work. There is nothing more wonderful than freely speaking and relating to our Father in heaven. Yet, there is nothing more stubborn than our own apathy, cold-heartedness and distraction. Prayer will bring huge blessing on our lives, but that blessing will come through a battle in our own souls. With that in mind, let’s seek the Lord in prayer.

*‘Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near’ (Is. 55:6).*

*'You who answer prayer,
to you all people will come' (Ps. 65:2).*

It's amazing to think that our exalted, all-powerful, majestic and completely self-sufficient God hears us when we pray. Though we're infinitely smaller than him, made of dust, weak and helpless, we have a God who's pleased to hear us. Of course, there are times when we feel that our prayers barely leave our tongues, and when our words seem dry and lifeless. The encouragement, though, is that our God loves to stoop down to listen to our requests.

Nonetheless, amazing as all this is, we're told in this verse that our God doesn't just hear us when we pray, but he answers us. In fact, he loves to answer our prayers and characterises himself as a prayer-answering God (Luke 18:6-7). This is actually one of the big differences between Israel's God and the idols of the surrounding nations. The idols are deaf, dumb and inactive (Jer. 10:5), while the Lord is always answering Israel's cries for help.

However, our God doesn't even just answer our prayers, but he answers generously! He's not a stingy Father, or a God who holds out on us (Matt. 7:7-11), but his purpose in saving us has been to pour 'the incomparable riches of his grace' into our life for ever and ever (Eph. 2:7).

If we're feeling discouraged in prayer, we should think of this generous, prayer-answering God who has opened up a way for us to constantly speak to him. The good news of the gospel is that we have free access and the certainty of his presence. We can go to him at all times, in every situation and as often as we please. There need be no end to our asking because that is exactly what he wants us to do. We have the certainty that when our prayers are prayed in Christ, they never vanish into thin air. Such prayers are never useless or a waste of time because our God has promised to answer us. Of course, he may defer giving us what we ask for our good, or he may answer our prayer at some future point. But he will definitely answer. Our God is a God who answers prayer.

REFLECTION

- 1. What encouragements are there here for your prayer life?***
- 2. Why does it make sense to keep on asking God for something?***

'Our Father in heaven' (Matt. 6:9).

When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to come to God as our 'Father'. That is striking because he could have chosen many other titles, or ways of addressing God, such as 'King', 'Creator', 'Lord' or 'God Almighty'. Of course, it would hardly be wrong to address God in these ways. Yet, there is something very significant in Jesus using the title 'Father' as a pattern for prayer.

Firstly, it gives us a pattern for how to relate to God. The scriptural pattern for prayer is that we speak to the *Father* in the name of Jesus, the *Son*, by the power of the *Holy Spirit*. In other words, Christian prayer is shaped by the fact that God is Triune. This makes perfect sense when you think about it: who God is has got to shape how we pray! Our praying will always be very closely connected to the nature of the God we believe in. So, we're reminded here that the teaching on the Trinity is not some abstract, strange doctrine unimportant for the average Christian. The reality of the Trinitarian relationships undergirds the very act of praying. We are meant to pray to our Father in the name of Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

The second thing to notice is that we come to a 'Father'. Our God is not simply a Lord who we obey, submit to and

worship. Rather, when we speak to him, we're coming as adopted children to a good, kind and loving Father. We have the confidence that our relationship with him is not uncertain, insecure or yet to be established, but it is permanent, established and loving. Knowing this transforms our confidence in taking our requests and needs to him, as we have a strong hope of answered prayer.

It is good to ask ourselves, therefore, how we've been praying. Do we have confidence and trust in our heavenly Father, or do we feel that we're speaking to a remote and austere God? If we've stopped addressing God as Father, it would be wise to remember Jesus' words to us and to recapture that privilege of boldly coming as a child to their Father.

REFLECTION

- 1. How do you think of God primarily and how do you address him when you speak to him?***
- 2. What confidence do you have as you come to your Father in prayer?***

'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (Rom. 8:32).

This has got to be one of the most staggering promises in the whole Bible. Accordingly, it has the power to put the most depressed, dejected and prayerless Christian on their knees and to fill them with hope. If we can really massage this promise into our souls, it will transform our prayer lives – indeed the whole of our Christian lives!

The power of this promise lays in its watertight logic. The starting point is that God has sent his Son for us, which is amazing. God could have sent wrath instead and there would have been nothing unfair or unjust about this. However, the wonder is not just that he did *not* send wrath, but that he sent the most valuable, wonderful, glorious thing possible: his Son. The Father and the Son's eternal, intimate, personal union and love overflowed for us, as the infinitely valuable Son was sent into a destructive, rebellious world which would crucify him. That he came to save us like this is absolutely incredible. Simply put, it is the greatest, most valuable gift that could ever be bestowed. This generosity has become the starting point for our relationship with God.

God has done that for us, without our asking or requesting it, when we were lost rebels. Then what will he not do for

us when we do ask and request? Can there really be any limit to what our God will give us? Is there really any blessing or any good thing that can be compared to the Son? God has already given us that which is infinitely valuable at an infinite cost to himself, which means that everything else is chickenfeed in comparison. If God's love is so great and his intentions towards us so intensely good, then we cannot ask too much of God! In fact, we do him great honour by asking for a lot because it reveals that we believe him to be very great and very good.

Doesn't prayerlessness look very foolish in the light of such a staggering promise as this?!

REFLECTION

1. Why do we doubt God's generosity?

How does this verse help us to seek God for our needs?

2. What thing in your life are you struggling to trust God for? How does this verse help you to pray with new conviction?

'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son' (John 14:13).

The most difficult thing to interpret in this verse is the word 'whatever'. Intuitively, the promise, as it stands, seems incorrect because we don't receive 'whatever' we ask for! Believers can be puzzled by such a promise. However, Jesus' meaning becomes clearer when we look carefully at the second half of the sentence. It is obvious there that his goal in answering the prayers of his people is to bring glory to his Father. In other words, the Father's fame and honour will always qualify the answers given to our prayers. It is clear that the Son isn't going to grant prayers that contradict his Father's glory – as that glory is the very end he seeks!

This helps us answer some of our questions about why prayers may be answered with a 'no'. The problem is that our prayer lives can all too easily be self-centred and self-promotional. Our coming to the Father may simply become a means of getting a happy life, rather than a means of promoting God's glory and honour. Such self-centred prayer will want to use God as a means to an end, and not as the End. It thinks, 'If God will help me, then I will be happy to believe in him, and will go to him to get my needs met.' This way of praying essentially leaves me in the centre; it effectively seeks to make God my butler.

It is obvious that Jesus isn't going to want to pour out blessing on this kind of immaturity.

Rather, we need to align our praying with Jesus' great goal: the glory of the Father. When we do that, our seeking of our Father is transformed. It takes us out of the centre, and leaves God as the great End of all our praying. His glory and honour become our joy and hope. The focus of our praying is on his priorities, and not our own. The great encouragement for us in this is that Jesus has made astounding promises to exalt his Father through such prayers. Let's learn to pray, then, in a way that makes the Father's renown and fame our biggest concern.

REFLECTION

- 1. To what extent is your prayer life shaped by the glory of the Father?***
- 2. What might you need to do to reshape your prayer life around the Father's glory?***