

Prayer

Why does God want us to pray? How can we pray effectively?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The character of God and his relationship to the world, as discussed in the previous chapters, lead naturally to a consideration of the doctrine of prayer. Prayer may be defined as follows: *Prayer is personal communication with God.*

This definition is very broad. What we call “prayer” includes prayers of request for ourselves or for others (sometimes called prayers of petition or intercession), confession of sin, adoration, praise and thanksgiving, and also God communicating to us indications of his response.

A. Why Does God Want Us to Pray?

Prayer is not made so that God can find out what we need, because Jesus tells us, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8). God wants us to pray because prayer expresses our trust in God and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase. In fact, perhaps the primary emphasis of the Bible’s teaching on prayer is that we are to pray with faith, which means trust or dependence on God. God as our Creator delights in being trusted by us as his creatures, for an attitude of dependence is most appropriate to the Creator/creature relationship. Praying in humble dependence also indicates that we are genuinely convinced of God’s wisdom, love, goodness, and power—indeed of all of the attributes that make up his excellent character. When we truly pray, we as persons, in the wholeness of our character, are relating to God as a person, in the wholeness of his character. Thus, all that we think or feel about God comes to expression in our prayer. It is only natural that God would delight in such activity and place much emphasis on it in his relationship with us.

The first words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9), acknowledge our dependence on God as a loving and wise Father and also recognize that he rules over all from his heavenly throne. Scripture many times emphasizes our need to trust God as we pray. For example, Jesus compares our praying to a son asking his father for a fish or an egg (Luke 11:9–12) and then concludes, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13). As children look to their fathers to provide for them, so God expects us to look to him in prayer. Since God is our Father, we should ask in faith. Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (Matt. 21:22; cf. Mark 11:24; James 1:6–8; 5:14–15).

But God does not only want us to trust him. He also wants us to love him and have fellowship with him. This, then, is a second reason why God wants us to pray: Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with God, and he loves us and delights in our fellowship with him.

A third reason God wants us to pray is that in prayer God allows us as creatures to be involved in activities that are eternally important. When we pray, the work of the kingdom is advanced. In this way, prayer gives us opportunity to be involved in a significant way in the

work of the kingdom and thus gives expression to our greatness as creatures made in God's image.

B. The Effectiveness of Prayer

How exactly does prayer work? Does prayer not only do us good but also affect God and the world?

1. Prayer Changes the Way God Acts. James tells us, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2). He implies that failure to ask deprives us of what God would otherwise have given to us. We pray, and God responds. Jesus also says, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Luke 11:9–10). He makes a clear connection between seeking things from God and receiving them. When we ask, God responds.

We see this happening many times in the Old Testament. The Lord declared to Moses that he would destroy the people of Israel for their sin (Ex. 32:9–10): "But Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, "O Lord ... Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against your people" (Ex. 32:11–12). Then we read, "And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people" (Ex. 32:14). When God threatens to punish his people for their sins he declares, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, *and pray and seek my face* and turn from their wicked ways, *then I will hear* from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). If and when God's people pray (with humility and repentance), *then* he will hear and forgive them. The prayers of his people clearly affect how God acts. Similarly, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We confess, and then he forgives.

If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, as Scripture repeatedly teaches that he does, then we would pray much more than we do. If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all.

2. Effective Prayer Is Made Possible by Our Mediator, Jesus Christ. Because we are sinful and God is holy, we have no right on our own to enter into his presence. We need a mediator to come between us and God and to bring us into God's presence. Scripture clearly teaches, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

But if Jesus is the only mediator between God and man, will God hear the prayers of those who do not trust in Jesus? The answer depends on what we mean by "hear." Since God is omniscient, he always "hears" in the sense that he is aware of the prayers made by unbelievers who do not come to him through Christ. God may even, from time to time, answer their prayers out of his mercy and in a desire to bring them to salvation through Christ. However, God has nowhere promised to respond to the prayers of unbelievers. The only prayers that he has promised to "hear" in the sense of listening with a sympathetic ear and undertaking to answer when they are made according to his will, are the prayers of Christians offered through the one mediator, Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:6).

Then what about believers in the Old Testament? How could they come to God through Jesus the mediator? The answer is that the work of Jesus as our mediator was foreshadowed by the sacrificial system and the offerings made by the priests in the temple (Heb. 7:23–28; 8:1–6; 9:1–14; et al.). There was no saving merit inherent in that system of sacrifices (Heb. 10:1–4),

however. Through the sacrificial system believers were accepted by God only on the basis of the future work of Christ foreshadowed by that system (Rom. 3:23–26).

Jesus' activity as a mediator is especially seen in his work as a priest: he is our "great high priest who has passed through the heavens," one who "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:14–15).

As recipients of the new covenant, we do not need to stay "outside the temple," as all believers except the priests were required to do under the old covenant. Nor do we need to stay outside of the "Holy of Holies" (Heb. 9:3), the inner room of the temple where God himself was enthroned above the ark of the covenant and where only the high priest could go, and he but once a year. But now, since Christ has died as our mediatorial High Priest (Heb. 7:26–27), he has gained for us boldness and access to the very presence of God. Therefore "we have confidence to enter *into the holy places* by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19, author's literal translation), that is, into the holy place and into the holy of holies, the very presence of God himself! We enter "by the new and living way" (Heb. 10:20) that Christ opened for us. The author of Hebrews concludes that since these things are true, "and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22). In this way, Christ's mediatorial work gives us confidence to approach God in prayer.

We do not just come into God's presence as strangers, or as visitors, or as laypersons, but as priests—as people who belong in the temple and have a right and even a duty to be in the most sacred places in the temple. Using imagery from the ceremony for ordination of priests (see Ex. 29:4, 21), the author of Hebrews pictures all believers as having been ordained as priests to God and thus able to enter into his presence, for he says that we draw near "with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22; cf. 1 Peter 2:9). Does all this make sense to a modern Christian? No one today goes to Jerusalem to enter the temple and there "draw near" to God. Even if we did go to Jerusalem, we would find no temple standing, since it was destroyed in A.D. 70. What then does the author of Hebrews mean when he says we enter into the "holy places"? He is talking about a reality in the unseen spiritual realm: With Christ as our Mediator we enter not into the earthly temple in Jerusalem, but into the true sanctuary, into "heaven itself," where Christ has gone "to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24).

3. What Is Praying "in Jesus' Name"? Jesus says, "Whatever you ask *in my name* I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13–14). He also says that he chose his disciples "so that whatever you ask the Father *in my name* he may give it to you" (John 15:16). Similarly, he says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Hitherto you have asked nothing *in my name*; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:23–24; cf. Eph. 5:20). But what does this mean?

Clearly it does not simply mean adding the phrase "in Jesus' name" after every prayer, because Jesus did not say, "If you ask anything and add the words 'in Jesus' name' after your prayer, I will do it." Jesus is not merely speaking about adding certain words as if these were a kind of magical formula that would give power to our prayers. In fact, none of the prayers recorded in Scripture have the phrase "in Jesus' name" at the end of them (see Matt. 6:9–13; Acts 1:24–25; 4:24–30; 7:59; 9:13–14; 10:14; Rev. 6:10; 22:20).

To come in the name of someone means that another person has authorized us to come on his authority, not on our own. When Peter commands the lame man, "in the name of Jesus Christ of

Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:6), he is speaking on the authority of Jesus, not on his own authority. When the Sanhedrin asks the disciples, “By what power or *by what name* did you do this?” (Acts 4:7), they are asking, “By whose authority did you do this?” When Paul rebukes an unclean spirit “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:18), he makes it clear that he is doing so on Jesus’ authority, not his own. When Paul pronounces judgment “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:4) on a church member who is guilty of immorality, he is acting with the authority of the Lord Jesus. *Praying in Jesus’ name is therefore prayer made on his authorization.*

In a broader sense the “name” of a person in the ancient world represented the person himself and therefore all of his character. To have a “good name” (Prov. 22:1; Eccl. 7:1) was to have a good reputation. Thus, the name of Jesus represents all that he is, his entire character. This means that praying “in Jesus’ name” is not only praying in his authority, but *also praying in a way that is consistent with his character* that truly represents him and reflects his manner of life and his own holy will. In this sense, to pray in Jesus’ name comes close to the idea of praying “according to his will” (1 John 5:14–15).

Does this mean that it is wrong to add “in Jesus’ name” to the end of our prayers? It is certainly not wrong, as long as we understand what is meant by it, and that it is not necessary to do so. There may be some danger, however, if we add this phrase to every public or private prayer we make, for very soon it will become to people simply a formula to which they attach very little meaning and say without thinking about it. It may even begin to be viewed, at least by younger believers, as a sort of magic formula that makes prayer more effective. To prevent such misunderstanding, it would probably be wise to decide not to use the formula frequently and to express the same thought in other words, or simply in the overall attitude and approach we take toward prayer. For example, prayers could begin, “Father, we come to you in the authority of our Lord Jesus, your Son ...” or, “Father, we do not come on our own merits but on the merits of Jesus Christ, who has invited us to come before you ...” or, “Father, we thank you for forgiving our sins and giving us access to your throne by the work of Jesus your Son ...” At other times even these formal acknowledgments should not be thought necessary, so long as our hearts continually realize that it is our Savior who enables us to pray to the Father at all. Genuine prayer is conversation with a Person whom we know well, and who knows us. Such genuine conversation between persons who know each other never depends on the use of certain formulas or required words, but is a matter of sincerity in our speech and in our heart, a matter of right attitudes, and a matter of the condition of our spirit.

4. Should We Pray to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit? A survey of the prayers of the New Testament indicates that they are usually addressed neither to God the Son nor to the Holy Spirit, but to God the Father. Yet a mere count of such prayers may be misleading, for the majority of the prayers we have recorded in the New Testament are those of Jesus himself, who constantly prayed to God the Father, but of course did not pray to himself as God the Son. Moreover, in the Old Testament, the trinitarian nature of God was not so clearly revealed, and it is not surprising that we do not find much evidence of prayer addressed directly to God the Son or God the Holy Spirit before the time of Christ.

Though there is a clear pattern of prayer directly to God the Father through the Son (Matt. 6:9; John 16:23; Eph. 5:20) there are indications that prayer spoken directly to Jesus is also appropriate. The fact that it was Jesus himself who appointed all of the other apostles, suggests that the prayer in Acts 1:24 is addressed to him: “Lord, who knows the hearts of all men, show which one of these two you have chosen ...” The dying Stephen prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my

spirit” (Acts 7:59). The conversation between Ananias and “the Lord” in Acts 9:10–16 is with Jesus, because in verse 17 Ananias tells Saul, “The Lord Jesus ... has sent me that you may regain your sight.” The prayer, “Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor. 16:22) is addressed to Jesus, as is the prayer in Revelation 22:20, “Come, Lord Jesus!” And Paul also prayed to “the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 12:8 concerning his thorn in the flesh.

Moreover, the fact that Jesus is “a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17) who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15), is viewed as an encouragement to us to come boldly before the “throne of grace” in prayer “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). These verses must give us encouragement to come directly to Jesus in prayer, expecting that he will sympathize with our weaknesses as we pray.

There is therefore clear enough scriptural warrant to encourage us to pray not only to God the Father (which seems to be the primary pattern, and certainly follows the example that Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer), but also to pray directly to God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Both are correct, and we may pray either to the Father or to the Son.

But should we pray to the Holy Spirit? Though no prayers directly addressed to the Holy Spirit are recorded in the New Testament, there is nothing that would forbid such prayer, for the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is fully God and is worthy of prayer and is powerful to answer our prayers. (Note also Ezekiel’s invitation to the “breath” or “spirit” in Ezek. 37:9.) To say that we cannot pray to the Holy Spirit is really saying that we cannot talk to him or relate to him personally, which hardly seems right. He also relates to us in a personal way since he is a “Comforter” or “Counselor” (John 14:16, 26), believers “know him” (John 14:17), and he teaches us (cf. John 14:26), bears witness to us that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), and can be grieved by our sin (Eph. 4:30). Moreover, the Holy Spirit exercises personal volition in the distribution of spiritual gifts, for he “continually distributes individually to each one as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11, author’s translation). Therefore, it does not seem wrong to pray directly to the Holy Spirit at times, particularly when we are asking him to do something that relates to his special areas of ministry or responsibility. In fact, through the history of the church several well-used hymns have been prayers to the Holy Spirit (see two at the end of chapter 30, pp. 652–53; one at chapter 52, pp. 1047–48; and one at chapter 53, pp. 1087–88). But this is not the New Testament pattern, and it should not become the dominant emphasis in our prayer life.

5. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Our Praying. In Romans 8:26–27 Paul says:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Interpreters differ on whether the “sighs too deep for words” are the sighs the Holy Spirit himself makes or our own sighs and groans in prayer, which the Holy Spirit makes into effective prayer before God. It seems more likely that the “sighs” or “groans” here are our groans. When Paul says, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness” (v. 26), the word translated “helps” (Gk. *συναντιλαμβάνομαι*, G5269) is the same word used in Luke 10:40, where Martha wants Mary to come and *help* her. The word does not indicate that the Holy Spirit prays instead of us, but that the Holy Spirit takes part with us and makes our weak prayers effective. Thus, such sighing or groaning in prayer is best understood to be sighs or groans which we utter, expressing the desires of our heart and spirit, which the Holy Spirit then makes into effective prayer.⁸

Related to this is the question of what it means to pray “in the Spirit.” Paul says, “Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18), and Jude says, “pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20). In order to understand this phrase, we should realize that the New Testament tells us that many different activities can be done “in the Holy Spirit.” It is possible just to be “in the Spirit” as John was on the Lord’s day (Rev. 1:10; cf. 4:2). And it is possible to rejoice in the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:21), to resolve or decide something in the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:21), to have one’s conscience bear witness in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 9:1), to have access to God in the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18), and to love in the Holy Spirit (Col. 1:8). As we will explain more fully in chapter 30, below (see pp. 647, 651–52), these expressions seem to refer to dwelling consciously in the presence of the Holy Spirit himself, a presence characterized by the Godlike qualities of power, love, joy, truth, holiness, righteousness, and peace. To pray “in the Holy Spirit,” then, is to pray with the conscious awareness of God’s presence surrounding us and sanctifying both us and our prayers.

C. Some Important Considerations in Effective Prayer

Scripture indicates a number of considerations that need to be taken into account if we would offer the kind of prayer that God desires from us.

1. Praying According to God’s Will. John tells us, “This is the confidence which we have in 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 obtained the requests made of him” (1 John 5:14–15). Jesus teaches us to pray, “Your will be done” (Matt. 6:10), and he himself gives us an example, by praying in the garden of Gethsemane, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39).

But how do we know what God’s will is when we pray? If the matter we are praying about is covered in a passage of Scripture in which God gives us a command or a direct declaration of his will, then the answer to this question is easy: His will is that his Word be obeyed and that his commands be kept. We are to seek for perfect obedience to God’s moral will on earth so that God’s will may be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). For this reason knowledge of Scripture is a tremendous help in prayer, enabling us to follow the pattern of the first Christians who quoted Scripture when they prayed (see Acts 4:25–26). The regular reading and memorization of Scripture, cultivated over many years of a Christian’s life, will increase the depth, power, and wisdom of his or her prayers. Jesus encourages us to have his words within us as we pray, for he says, “If you abide in me, *and my words abide in you* ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7).

This means, for example, that if we are seeking wisdom in the making of an important decision, we do not have to wonder whether it is God’s will that we receive wisdom to act rightly. Scripture has already settled that question for us, because there is a promise of Scripture that applies:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord. (James 1:5–8)

We should have great confidence that God will answer our prayer when we ask him for something that accords with a specific promise or command of Scripture like this. In such cases, we know what God's will is, because he has told us, and we simply need to pray believing that he will answer.

However, there are many other situations in life where we do not know what God's will is. We may not be sure, because no promise or command of Scripture applies, whether it is God's will that we get the job we have applied for, or win an athletic contest in which we are participating (a common prayer among children, especially), or be chosen to hold office in the church, and so on. In all of these cases, we should bring to bear as much of Scripture as we understand, perhaps to give us some general principles within which our prayer can be made. But beyond this, we often must admit that we simply do not know what God's will is. In such cases, we should ask him for deeper understanding and then pray for what seems best to us, giving reasons to the Lord why, in our present understanding of the situation, what we are praying for seems to be best. But it is always right to add, either explicitly or at least in the attitude of our heart, "Nevertheless, if I am wrong in asking this, and if this is not pleasing to you, then do as seems best in your sight," or, more simply, "If it is your will." Sometimes God will grant what we have asked. Sometimes he will give us deeper understanding or change our hearts so that we are led to ask something differently. Sometimes he will not grant our request at all but will simply indicate to us that we must submit to his will (see 2 Cor. 12:9–10).

Some Christians object that to add the phrase "if it is your will" to our prayers "destroys our faith." What it actually does is express uncertainty about whether what we pray for is God's will or not. And it is appropriate when we do not really know what God's will is. But at other times this would not be appropriate: to ask God to give us wisdom to make a decision and then say, "If it is your will to give me wisdom here" would be inappropriate, for it would be saying that we do not believe God meant what he said in James 1:5–8 when he told us to ask in faith and he would grant this request.

Even when a command or promise of Scripture applies, there may be nuances of application that we do not at first fully understand. Therefore it is important in our prayer that we not only talk to God but also listen to him. We should frequently bring a request to God and then wait silently before him. In those times of waiting on the Lord (Pss. 27:14; 38:15; 130:5–6), God may change the desires of our heart, give us additional insight into the situation we are praying about, grant us additional insight into his Word, bring a passage of Scripture to mind that would enable us to pray more effectively, impart a sense of assurance of what his will is, or greatly increase our faith so that we are able to pray with much more confidence.

2. Praying with Faith. Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24). Some translations vary, but the Greek text actually says, "believe that you *have received it*." Later scribes who copied the Greek manuscripts and some later commentators have taken it to mean "believe that you *will* receive it." However, if we accept the text as it is in the earliest and best manuscripts ("believe that you have received it"), Jesus is apparently saying that when we ask for something, the kind of faith that will bring results is a settled assurance that when we prayed for something (or perhaps after we had been praying over a period of time), God agreed to grant our specific request. In the personal communion with God that occurs in genuine prayer, this kind of faith on our part could only come *as God gives us a sense of assurance that he has agreed to grant our request*. Of course, we cannot "work up" this kind of genuine faith by any sort of frenzied prayer or great

emotional effort to try to make ourselves believe, nor can we force it upon ourselves by saying words we don't think to be true. This is something that only God can give us, and that he may or may not give us each time we pray. This assured faith will often come when we ask God for something and then quietly wait before him for an answer.

In fact, Hebrews 11:1 tells us that “faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Biblical faith is never a kind of wishful thinking or a vague hope that does not have any secure foundation to rest upon. It is rather trust in a person, God himself, based on the fact that we take him at his word and believe what he has said. This trust or dependence on God, when it has an element of assurance or confidence, is genuine biblical faith.

Several other passages encourage us to exercise faith when we pray. “Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith,” Jesus teaches his disciples (Matt. 21:22). And James tells us we are to “ask in faith, with no doubting” (James 1:6). Prayer is never wishful thinking, for it springs from trust in a personal God who wants us to take him at his word.

3. Obedience. Since prayer is a relationship with God as a person, anything in our lives that displeases him will be a hindrance to prayer. The psalmist says, “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Ps. 66:18). Though “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,” by contrast, “the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8). Again we read that “the LORD ... hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29). But God is not favorably disposed to those who reject his laws: “If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov. 28:9).

The apostle Peter quotes Psalm 34 to affirm that “the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer” (1 Peter 3:12). Since the previous verses encourage good conduct in everyday life, in speaking and turning away from evil and doing right, Peter is saying that God readily hears the prayers of those who live lives of obedience to him. Similarly, Peter warns husbands to “live considerately” with their wives, “in order that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). Likewise, John reminds us of the need for a clear conscience before God when we pray, for he says, “If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:21–22).

Now this teaching must not be misunderstood. We do not need to be freed from sin completely before God can be expected to answer our prayers. If God only answered the prayers of sinless people, then no one in the whole Bible except Jesus would have had his or her prayers answered. When we come before God through his grace, we come cleansed by the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 2:13; Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 1:2). Yet we must not neglect the biblical emphasis on personal holiness of life. Prayer and holy living go together. There is much grace in the Christian life, but growth in personal holiness is also a route to much greater blessing, and that is true with respect to prayer as well. The passages quoted teach that, all other things being equal, more exact obedience will lead to increased effectiveness in prayer (cf. Heb. 12:14; James 4:3–4).

4. Confession of Sins. Because our obedience to God is never perfect in this life, we continually depend on his forgiveness for our sins. Confession of sins is necessary in order for God to “forgive us” in the sense of restoring his day-by-day relationship with us (see Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:9). It is good when we pray to confess all known sin to the Lord and to ask for his forgiveness. Sometimes when we wait on him, he will bring other sins to mind that we need to confess. With

respect to those sins that we do not remember or are unaware of, it is appropriate to pray the general prayer of David, “Clear me from hidden faults” (Ps. 19:12).

Sometimes confessing our sins to other trusted Christians will bring an assurance of forgiveness and encouragement to overcome sin as well. James relates mutual confession to prayer, for in a passage discussing powerful prayer, James encourages us, “Therefore *confess your sins to one another* and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

5. Forgiving Others. Jesus says, “If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14–15). Similarly, Jesus says, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). Our Lord does not have in mind the initial experience of forgiveness we know when we are justified by faith, for that would not belong in a prayer that we pray every day (see Matt. 6:12 with vv. 14–15). He refers rather to the *day-by-day relationship with God* that we need to have restored when we have sinned and displeased him. In fact, Jesus commands us to build into our prayers a request that God forgive us in the same way that we have forgiven others who have harmed us (in the same “personal relationship” sense of “forgive—that is, not holding a grudge or cherishing bitterness against another person or harboring any desire to harm them): “Forgive us our sins, *as we also have forgiven those who sin against us*” (Matt. 6:12, author’s translation). If there are those whom we have not forgiven when we pray this prayer, then we are asking God not to restore a right relationship with us after we sin, in just the same way as we have refused to do so with others.

Since prayer presumes a relationship with God as a person, this is not surprising. If we have sinned against him and grieved the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph. 4:30), and the sin has not been forgiven, it interrupts our relationship with God (cf. Isa. 59:1–2). Until sin is forgiven and the relationship is restored prayer will, of course, be difficult. Moreover, if we have unforgiveness in our hearts against someone else, then we are not acting in a way that is pleasing to God or helpful to us. So God declares (Matt. 6:12, 14–15) that he will distance himself from us until we forgive others.

6. Humility. James tells us that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; also 1 Peter 5:5). Therefore he says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you” (James 4:10). Humility is thus the right attitude to have in praying to God, whereas pride is altogether inappropriate.

Jesus’ parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector illustrates this. When the Pharisee stood to pray, he was boastful: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11–12). By contrast, the humble tax collector “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” ’ (Luke 18:13). Jesus said that he “went down to his house justified,” rather than the Pharisee, “for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). This is why Jesus condemned those who “for a pretense make long prayers” (Luke 20:47) and those hypocrites who “love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men” (Matt. 6:5).

God is rightly jealous for his own honor. Therefore he is not pleased to answer the prayers of the proud who take honor to themselves rather than giving it to him. True humility before God, which will also be reflected in genuine humility before others, is necessary for effective prayer.

7. Continuing in Prayer Over Time. Just as Moses twice stayed on the mountain forty days before God for the people of Israel (Deut. 9:25–26; 10:10–11), and just as Jacob said to God, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26), so we see in Jesus’ life a pattern of much time given to prayer. When great multitudes were following him, “he himself was often withdrawing into the wilderness regions and praying” (Luke 5:16, author’s translation). At another time, “*all night* he continued in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12).

Sometimes, as in the case of Moses and Jacob, prayer over a long period of time may be prayer for one specific item (cf. Luke 18:1–8). When we are earnestly seeking God for an answer to a specific prayer, we may in fact repeat the same request several times. Paul asked the Lord “three times” (2 Cor. 12:8) that his thorn in the flesh would be taken from him. Jesus himself, when he was in the garden of Gethsemane, asked the Father, “Remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Then after he came and found the disciples sleeping, Jesus prayed again, making the same request in the same words: “And again he went away and prayed, *saying the same words*” (Mark 14:39). These are instances of earnest repetition in prayer for a deeply felt need. They are not examples of what Jesus forbids—the heaping up of “empty phrases” in the mistaken belief that “many words” will earn a hearing (Matt. 6:7).

There is also an element of a continual fellowship with God in praying over time. Paul calls on us to “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17), and he encourages the Colossians to “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). Such continual devotion to prayer even while about daily duties should characterize the life of every believer. The apostles are a telling example. They freed themselves from other responsibilities in order to give more time to prayer: “*But we will devote ourselves to prayer* and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

8. Praying Earnestly. Jesus himself, who is our model for prayer, prayed earnestly. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear” (Heb. 5:7). In some of the prayers of Scripture, we can almost hear the great intensity with which the saints pour out their hearts before God. Daniel cries out, “O LORD, hear! O LORD, forgive! O LORD, listen and take action! For Thine own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name” (Dan. 9:19 NASB). When God shows Amos the judgment that he is going to bring on his people, Amos pleads, “O Lord GOD, forgive, I beseech you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” (Amos 7:2).

In personal relationships, if we attempt to fake emotional intensity and put on an outward show of emotion that is not consistent with the feelings of our hearts, others involved will usually sense our hypocrisy at once and be put off by it. How much more is this true of God, who fully knows our hearts. Therefore, intensity and depth of emotional involvement in prayer should never be faked: we cannot fool God. Yet, if we truly begin to see situations as God sees them, if we begin to see the needs of a hurting and dying world as they really are, then it will be natural to pray with intense emotional involvement and to expect God, as a merciful Father, to respond to heartfelt prayer. And where such intensely felt prayer finds expression in group prayer meetings, Christians should certainly accept and be thankful for it, for it often indicates a deep work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the person praying.

9. Waiting on the Lord. After crying out to God for help in distress, David says, “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the LORD!” (Ps. 27:14). Similarly, he says, “But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O LORD my God, who will answer” (Ps. 38:15). The psalmist likewise says,

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the LORD
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning. (Ps. 130:5–6)

An analogy from human experience may help us to appreciate the benefit of waiting before the Lord for a response to prayer. If I wish to invite someone home for dinner, there are various ways I can do so. First, I can issue a vague, general invitation: “It would be nice to have you come to dinner sometime.” Almost no one will come to dinner based on that kind of invitation alone. This is rather like the vague, general prayer, “God bless all my aunts and uncles and all the missionaries. Amen.” Second, I could make a specific but hurried and impersonal kind of invitation: “Fred, can you come to dinner Friday night at 6:00?—but as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I rush away leaving Fred with a puzzled expression on his face because I didn’t allow him time to respond. This is like many of our prayer requests. We simply speak words to God as if the very act of voicing them, without any heart involvement in what we are saying, will itself bring an answer from God. But this kind of request forgets that prayer is a relationship between two persons, myself and God.

There is a third kind of invitation, one that is heartfelt, personal, and specific. After waiting until I’m sure I have Fred’s full attention, I can look him directly in the eye and say, “Fred, Margaret and I would really love to have you come to dinner at our home this Friday at 6:00 P.M. Could you come?—and then, continuing to look him in the eye, I wait silently and patiently while he decides what to answer. He knows from my facial expression, my tone of voice, my timing, and the setting in which I chose to talk to him that I am putting my whole self into this request, and that I am relating to him as a person and as a friend. Waiting patiently for an answer shows my earnestness, my sense of expectancy, and my respect for him as a person. This third kind of request is like that of the earnest Christian who comes before God, gains a sense of being in his presence, earnestly pours out a request to him, and then waits quietly for some sense of assurance of God’s answer.

This is not to say that all our requests must be of this nature, or even that the first two kinds of requests are wrong. Indeed, in some situations we pray quickly because we have little time before we need an answer (see Neh. 2:4). And sometimes we do pray generally because we do not have more specific information about a situation, or because it is far removed from us or because of shortness of time. But the material in Scripture on earnest prayer and on waiting for the Lord, and the fact that prayer is personal communication between ourselves and God, do indicate that prayers such as the third kind of request are much deeper and will undoubtedly bring many more answers from God.

10. Praying in Private. Daniel went to his upper chamber and “got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God” (Dan. 6:10). Jesus frequently went out into solitary places to be alone to pray (Luke 5:16 et al.). And he also teaches us, “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your

Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). This statement is in the context of avoiding the error of the hypocrites who loved to pray at the street corners “that they may be seen by men” (Matt. 6:5). There is wisdom in Jesus’ encouragement to pray in secret, not only that we might avoid hypocrisy, but also that we might not be distracted by the presence of other people and therefore modify our prayers to suit what we think they will expect to hear. When we are truly alone with God, in the privacy of a room to which we have “shut the door” (Matt. 6:6), then we can pour out our hearts to him.

The need to pray in private may also have implications for small-group or church prayer meetings: when believers come together to seek the Lord earnestly about a specific matter, it is often helpful if they can be in the privacy of a home where the door is shut and they can collectively cry out to God. Apparently this was the way the early Christians prayed when they were making earnest supplication to God for the release of Peter from prison (see Acts 12:5, 12–16).

11. Praying with Others. Believers find strength in praying together with others. In fact, Jesus teaches us, “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:19–20).

There are many other examples in Scripture where groups of believers prayed together or where one person led the entire congregation in prayer (note Solomon’s prayer “in the presence of all the assembly of Israel” at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:22–53 or the prayer of the early church in Jerusalem when “they lifted their voices together to God” in Acts 4:24). Even the Lord’s Prayer is put in the plural: It does not say, “Give me this day my daily bread” but “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread” and “Forgive *us our* sins” and “Lead *us* not into temptation but deliver *us* from evil” (Matt. 6:11–13, author’s translation). Praying with others, then, is also right and often increases our faith and the effectiveness of our prayers.

12. Fasting. Prayer is often connected with fasting in Scripture. Sometimes these are occasions of intense supplication before God, as when Nehemiah, on hearing of the ruin of Jerusalem, “continued *fasting* and praying before the God of Heaven” (Neh. 1:4), or when the Jews learned of the decree of Ahasuerus that they would all be killed, and “there was great mourning among the Jews, with *fasting* and weeping and lamenting” (Esth. 4:3), or when Daniel sought the LORD “by prayer and supplications with *fasting* and sackcloth and ashes” (Dan. 9:3). At other times fasting is connected with repentance, for God says to the people who have sinned against him, “ ‘Yet even now,’ says the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning’ ” (Joel 2:12).

In the New Testament, Anna was “worshiping with *fasting* and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:37) in the temple, and the church at Antioch was “worshiping the Lord and *fasting*” when the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). The church responded with further fasting and prayer before sending Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey: “Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:3). In fact, fasting was a routine part of seeking the Lord’s guidance with regard to church officers, for on Paul’s first missionary journey, we read that he and Barnabas, as they traveled back through the churches they had founded, “appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting” (Acts 14:23).

So fasting appropriately accompanied prayer in many situations: in times of intensive intercession, repentance, worship, and seeking of guidance. In each of these situations, several benefits come from fasting, all of which affect our relationship to God: (1) Fasting increases our sense of humility and dependence on the Lord (for our hunger and physical weakness continually remind us how we are not really strong in ourselves but need the Lord). (2) Fasting allows us to give more attention to prayer (for we are not spending time on eating), and (3) it is a continual reminder that, just as we sacrifice some personal comfort to the Lord by not eating, so we must continually sacrifice all of ourselves to him. Moreover, (4) fasting is a good exercise in self-discipline, for as we refrain from eating food, which we would ordinarily desire, it also strengthens our ability to refrain from sin, to which we might otherwise be tempted to yield. If we train ourselves to accept the small “suffering” of fasting willingly, we will be better able to accept other suffering for the sake of righteousness (cf. Heb. 5:8; 1 Peter 4:1–2). (5) Fasting also heightens spiritual and mental alertness and a sense of God’s presence as we focus less on the material things of this world (such as food) and as the energies of our body are freed from digesting and processing food. This enables us to focus on eternal spiritual realities that are much more important. Finally, (6) fasting expresses earnestness and urgency in our prayers: if we continued to fast, eventually we would die. Therefore, in a symbolic way, fasting says to God that we are prepared to lay down our lives that the situation be changed rather than that it continue. In this sense fasting is especially appropriate when the spiritual state of the church is low.

“Yet even now,” says the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.” (Joel 2:12–13a)

Though the New Testament does not specifically require that we fast, or set special times when we must fast, Jesus certainly assumes that we will fast, for he says to his disciples, “And *when* you fast” (Matt. 6:16). Moreover, Jesus also says, “The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15). He is the Bridegroom, we are his disciples, and during this present church age he has been “taken” away from us until the day he returns. Most western Christians do not fast, but, if we were willing to fast more regularly—even for one or two meals—we might be surprised how much more spiritual power and strength we would have in our lives and in our churches.

13. What About Unanswered Prayer? We must begin by recognizing that as long as God is God and we are his creatures, there must be some unanswered prayers. This is because God keeps hidden his own wise plans for the future, and even though people pray, many events will not come about until the time that God has decreed. The Jews prayed for centuries for the Messiah to come, and rightly so, but it was not until “the time had fully come” that “God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). The souls of martyrs in heaven, free from sin, cry out for God to judge the earth (Rev. 6:10), but God does not immediately answer; rather he tells them to rest a little longer (Rev. 6:11). It is clear that there can be long periods of delay during which prayers go unanswered, because the people praying do not know God’s wise timing.

Prayer will also be unanswered because we do not always know how to pray as we ought (Rom. 8:26), we do not always pray according to God’s will (James 4:3), and we do not always ask in faith (James 1:6–8). And sometimes we think that one solution is best, but God has a

better plan, even to fulfill his purpose through suffering and hardship. Joseph no doubt prayed earnestly to be rescued from the pit and from being carried off into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:23–36), but many years later he found how in all of these events “God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

When we face unanswered prayer, we join the company of Jesus, who prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). We join also the company of Paul, who asked the Lord “three times” that his thorn in the flesh be removed, but it was not; rather, the Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:8–9). We join the company of David, who prayed for his son’s life to be saved, but it was not, so he “went into the house of the LORD, and worshiped” and said of his son, “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Sam. 12:20, 23). We join the company of the martyrs throughout history who prayed for deliverance that did not come, for they “loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev. 12:11).

When prayer remains unanswered we must continue to trust God, who “causes all things to work together for good” (Rom. 8:28 NASB), and to cast our cares on him, knowing that he continually cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We must keep remembering that he will give strength sufficient for each day (Deut. 33:25) and that he has promised, “I will never fail you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5; cf. Rom. 8:35–39).

We also must continue to pray. Sometimes an answer, long awaited, will suddenly be given, as it was when Hannah after many years bore a child (1 Sam. 1:19–20), or when Simeon saw with his own eyes the long-expected Messiah come to the temple (Luke 2:25–35).

But sometimes prayers will remain unanswered in this life. At times God will answer those prayers after the believer dies. At other times he will not, but even then the faith expressed in those prayers and their heartfelt expressions of love for God and the people he has made will still ascend as a pleasing incense before God’s throne (Rev. 5:8; 8:3–4) and will result in “praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:7).

D. Praise and Thanksgiving

Praise and thanksgiving to God, which will be treated more fully in chapter 51, are an essential element of prayer. The model prayer that Jesus left us begins with a word of praise: “Hallowed be your name” (Matt. 6:9). And Paul tells the Philippians, “in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6), and the Colossians, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it *with thanksgiving*” (Col. 4:2). Thanksgiving, like every other aspect of prayer, should not be a mechanical mouthing of a “thank you” to God, but the expression of words that reflect the thankfulness of our hearts. Moreover, we should never think that thanking God for the answer to something we ask for can somehow force God to give it to us, for that changes the prayer from a genuine, sincere request to a demand that assumes we can make God do what we want him to do. Such a spirit in our prayers really denies the essential nature of prayer as dependence on God.

By contrast, the kind of thanksgiving that appropriately accompanies prayer must express thankfulness to God for all circumstances, for every event of life that he allows to come to us. When we join our prayers with humble, childlike thanksgiving to God “in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18), they will be acceptable to God.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Do you often have difficulty with prayer? What things in this chapter have been helpful to you in this regard?
2. When have you known the most effective times of prayer in your own life? What factors contributed to making those times more effective? Which other factors need most attention in your prayer life? What can you do to strengthen each of these areas?
3. How does it help and encourage you (if it does) when you pray together with other Christians?
4. Have you ever tried waiting quietly before the Lord after making an earnest prayer request? If so, what has been the result?
5. Do you have a regular time each day for private Bible reading and prayer? Are you sometimes easily distracted and turned aside to other activities? If so, how can distractions be overcome?
6. Do you enjoy praying? Why or why not?¹

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 376-93.