

PRAYER

Communication with God. Because God is personal, all people can offer prayers. However, sinners who have not trusted Jesus Christ for their salvation remain alienated from God. So while unbelievers may pray, they do not have the basis for a rewarding fellowship with God. They have not met the conditions laid down in the Bible for effectiveness in prayer.

Christians recognize their dependence upon their Creator. They have every reason to express gratitude for God's blessings. But they have far more reason to respond to God than this. They respond to the love of God for them. God's love is revealed through the marvelous incarnation and life of Christ, His atoning provision at the Cross, His resurrection, as well as His continuing presence through the Holy Spirit.

Prayer cannot be replaced by devout good works in a needy world. Important as service to others is, at times we must turn away from it to God, who is distinct from all things and over all things. Neither should prayer be thought of as a mystical experience in which people lose their identity in the infinite reality. Effective prayer must be a scripturally informed response of persons saved by grace to the living God who can hear and answer on the basis of Christ's payment of the penalty which sinners deserved. As such, prayer involves several important aspects.

Faith. The most meaningful prayer comes from a heart that places its trust in the God who has acted and spoken in the Jesus of history and the teachings of the Bible. God speaks to us through the Bible, and we in turn speak to Him in trustful, believing prayer. Assured by the Scripture that God is personal, living, active, all-knowing, all-wise, and all-powerful, we know that God can hear and help us. A confident prayer life is built on the cornerstone of Christ's work and words as shown by the prophets and apostles in the Spirit-inspired writings of the Bible.

Worship. In worship we recognize what is of highest worth—not ourselves, others, or our work, but God. Only the highest divine being deserves our highest respect. Guided by Scripture, we set our values in accord with God's will and perfect standards. Before God, angels hide their faces and cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isa 6:3).

Confession. Awareness of God's holiness leads to consciousness of our own sinfulness. Like the prophet Isaiah, we exclaim, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isa 6:5). By sinning we hurt ourselves and those closest to us; but first of all, and worst of all, sin is against God (Ps 51:4). We must confess our sins to God to get right with Him. We need not confess them to another being. But we should confess them directly to God, who promises to forgive us of all our unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Adoration. God is love, and He has demonstrated His love in the gift of His Son. The greatest desire of God is that we love Him with our whole being (Matt 22:37). Our love should be expressed, as His has been expressed, in both deeds and words. People sometimes find it difficult to say to others and to God, "I love you." But when love for God fills our lives, we will express our love in prayer to the one who is ultimately responsible for all that we are.

Praise. The natural outgrowth of faith, worship, confession, and adoration is praise. We speak well of one whom we highly esteem and love. The one whom we respect and love above all others naturally receives our highest commendation. We praise Him for His "mighty acts...according to His excellent greatness!" (Ps 150:2), and for His "righteous judgments" (Ps 119:164). For God Himself, for His works, and for His words, His people give sincere praise.

Thanksgiving. Are we unthankful because we think we have not received what we deserve? But if we got what we "deserved," we would be condemned because of our guilt. As sinners, we are not people of God by nature. We have no claim upon His mercy or grace. Nevertheless, He has forgiven our sins, granted us acceptance as His people, and given us His righteous standing and a new heart and life. Ingratitude marks the ungodly (Rom 1:21). Believers, in contrast, live thankfully. God has been at work on our behalf in countless ways. So in everything, even for the discipline that is unpleasant, we give thanks (Col 3:17; 1 Thess 5:18).

Dedicated Action. Christ's example does not require us to withdraw from society, but to render service to the needy in a spirit of prayer. He wept over Jerusalem in compassionate prayer, and then He went into the city to give His life a ransom for many. Authentic prayer will be the source of courage and productivity, as it was for the prophets and apostles.

Request. Prayer is not only response to God's grace as brought to us in the life and work of Jesus and the teaching of Scripture; it is also request for our needs and the needs of others.

For good reasons God's holy and wise purpose does not permit Him to grant every petition just as it is asked. Several hindrances to answered prayer are mentioned in the Bible: iniquity in the heart (Ps 66:18), refusal to hear God's law (Prov 28:9), an estranged heart (Isa 29:13), sinful separation from God (Isa 59:2), waywardness (Jer 14:10-12), offering unworthy sacrifices (Mal 1:7-9), praying to be seen of men (Matt 6:5-6), pride in fasting and tithing (Luke 18:11-14), lack of faith (Heb 11:6), and doubting or double-mindedness (James 4:3).

More positively, God has promised to answer our requests when we start helping the hungry and afflicted (Isa 58:9-10), when we believe that we will receive what we ask (Mark 11:22-24), when we forgive others (Mark 11:25-26), when we ask in Christ's name (John 14:13-14), and when we abide in Christ and His words (John 15:7), pray in the Spirit (Eph 6:8), obey the Lord's commandments (1 John 3:22), and ask according to His will (1 John 5:14-15). Until we have properly responded to God and His Word, He cannot entrust us with His powerful resources.

Prayer is request to a personal Lord who answers as He knows best. We should not think that we will always have success in obtaining the things for which we ask. In His wisdom, God hears and answers in the way that is best.

Effectiveness. Prayer has power over everything. God can intelligently act in any part of the universe or human history. Although some people think prayer is a waste of time, the Bible declares that "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16).

Prayer meets inner needs. One who prays will receive freedom from fear (Ps 118:5-6), strength of soul (Ps 138:3), guidance and satisfaction (Isa 58:9-11), wisdom and understanding (Dan 9:20-27), deliverance from harm (Joel 2:32), reward (Matt 6:6), good

gifts (Luke 11:13), fullness of joy (John 16:23-24), peace (Phil 4:6-8), and freedom from anxiety (1 Peter 5:7).

Is prayer effective only in the inner lives of those who pray? No, prayer can make a difference in the lives of others. Biblical writers believed prayer for others could result in greater wisdom and power (Eph 1:18-19); inward strength, knowledge of Christ's love, filling with God's fullness (Eph 3:16-19); discernment, approval of what is excellent, filling with the fruits of righteousness (Phil 1:9-11); knowledge of God's will, spiritual understanding, a life pleasing to God, fruitfulness, endurance, patience, joy (Col 1:9-12); a quiet, peaceable life (1 Tim 2:1-2); love for one another and all people, holiness before God (1 Thess 3:10-13); comfort and establishment in every good word and work (2 Thess 2:16-17); love for God, steadfastness in Christ (2 Thess 3:5); the sharing of one's faith, promotion of the knowledge of all that is good (Philem 6); and equipment for every good work that is pleasing to God (Heb 13:20-21).

Some people who think prayer can affect others question the ability of God to change His usual patterns in the physical world. But some prayers in the Bible changed nature and physical bodies.

Jabez prayed for enlarged borders and protection from harm (1 Chron 4:10). Other people in the Bible prayed for deliverance from trouble (Ps 34:15-22), deliverance from both poverty and riches (Prov 30:7-9), deliverance from the belly of a great fish (Jonah 2:7-10), daily bread (Matt 6:11), preservation and sanctification of spirit, soul, and body (1 Thess 5:23), the healing of the sick (James 5:14-15), and the ending of the rain and its beginning again (James 5:17-18).

When the disciples prayed, the building around them shook (Acts 4:31) and an earthquake opened the doors of their prison (Acts 16:25-26). Our prayers do make a difference in how God acts in the world!