

Prayer

Pete: On one occasion I was co-leading an expedition into a North African country in a vehicle with 15 passengers. We were spending some time in the desert at least 3 hours' drive from any civilisation. One night someone left an electrical item charging in the van (it wasn't me!). When we tried to start the van in the morning the battery was dead. You might know that 'oh no' groan when this has happened to you. It was a bit louder in us since we had no way of charging it. We could not even bump start it as the surrounding desert environment prohibited that option. The effects of the cold deserts nights and the electrical discharge had completely emptied the battery's power. It was now mid-morning and it was getting hot and we needed supplies. God was our only way out. Being fully aware of our predicament my co-leader laid hands on the battery while I had my hands on the keys. We both prayed and then I, in hope and a bit of desperation, turned the key. It didn't start but it had power! Wow - where did that come from? I tried a second time and amazingly the diesel engine started. It was an intervention from heaven giving life to a dead battery. We were so relieved and quickly made our way out. The point is - prayer is the means for asking God into any situation and nothing is impossible for him.

What can we say from a story like this? Well if God does not answer prayer then why waste time praying? Yet if God does answer prayer as the story demonstrates then why don't we spend more time praying?

If we had not prayed then would God have done it anyway? No!

God spoke these words to an Old Testament prophet named Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 33:3

"Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know."

From this we can see that the provision of God's answers comes as we 'call' to him. In another Old Testament story God was prepared to do something for a whole nation of people but they first alongside other things had to call to him through prayer.

2 Chronicles 7:14

"If my people who are called by My name will 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."

From these two passages we can say that God's intervention in the affairs of our own lives and the affairs of nations does require our prayers. In fact, not only is it a requirement God makes, it a command that he gives as the following scriptures show...

Matthew 6:9-10

"In this manner therefore pray. Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

My colleague and I became anxious on that morning. You can quickly imagine the outcome if God had not intervened in a hot, deserted place with little water for ourselves and the 15 others. Yet God knows that you and all other believers will get anxious about so many things. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul wrote,

Philippians 4:6

'Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplications with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.'

From the passage above we can make a clear statement that prayer is the channel through which all needs, anxiety and uncertainty are met. God certainly did that for us.

Are there conditions for receiving answered prayer? Yes!

My colleague and I had been believers for a few years so we were aware of the lifestyle needed to help us pray without hesitation and in times of desperation. The first condition is outlined in the following passage – we are to ask in the name of Jesus.

John 14:14

'If you ask anything in my name I will do it'.

This does not make the name of Jesus a magical formula that has to be spoken after every prayer. It means that our prayers are not answered on the basis of who we are in our natural selves. In and of ourselves we have no claim before the throne of God, but Jesus does. It is a bit like taking a cheque to a bank to receive money. The bank cashier won't give you the money because of who you are, but because the writer of the cheque has a valid bank account. Prayer is answered on the basis that Jesus would sign the prayer request you are presenting because it matches who he is and what he wants to do.

How did we know what God wanted to do in our story above?

You could call it spiritual instinct as well as an understanding of God's character. We had been very prayerful about this trip for weeks before so there was a build-up of faith that just seemed to kick in when it was needed. This is why the bible exhorts us to develop a strong consistent prayerful life. Consider this next verse.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-17

'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.'

This above verse is one to really remember and practice. You could say it this way – if you want to develop a godly spiritual instinct for God's will then – '*rejoice always, pray without ceasing* (or be prayerful throughout the day), *and in everything give thanks* (or don't grumble but be thankful not for everything but in all situations)'. The verse then explains that doing these things is the will of God for your life. Why? Because these things keep you in communion with God so that he can communicate with you and you can receive faith. In the example of our plight in the desert, my colleague and I were living out this verse and so knowing what God wanted was like a natural instinct to us - except it was spiritual.

What can hinder effective prayer?

The following scriptures show us what can block us from hearing God and being effective in prayer.

1. Sin

Psalm 66:18

'If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear.'

If you are conscious of unconfessed sin and have not repented then repent and clear the blockage.

2. Wrong motives

James 4:3

'You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.'

Our motive for wanting God's help in our story was for the well-being of our passengers and ourselves. It was not selfish.

There will be times in your life when spiritual instinct will not be enough in order to know what to pray.

As time passes questions will arise that require you to hear God in a more specific way, perhaps regarding long term matters. For these answers we will need to set time aside to seek out his answers and wait patiently for his reply. This next verse gives us a promise for this.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.'

What does this verse tell us? It tells you that God has a future for you that will produce hope and peace. If you want to know what that future is then you will need to call upon him. He promises that as you begin to pray and ask him about it, he will be listening. Finally, you will find your answer as and when your whole heart wants it. This last point is important.

Sometimes while seeking out God's will in this way it seems he is asking us, 'how much do you really want to know?' The closer we come to say, 'I want it with all my heart' then the closer we are to receiving his answer. When we receive the answer, a whole new area of prayer opens up to us within the context of what he has spoken to you.

All of the above required conditions for answered prayer can be summed up by this next verse.

1 John 5:14-15

'Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked for.'

It is simple. God does not answer prayer that does not match his will.

Finally, a word about the ultimate purpose of prayer

Out of those 15 passengers in our van, 13 were non believing teenagers. Yet during our one month's expedition travelling across Europe and North Africa they not only heard the gospel but they experienced the presence of God, through situations like the story of the battery. My colleague and I used to pray a prayer of thanks before we all ate our meals together, which was a totally new experience for them. At one evening meal on our return journey we both forgot to pray and started to eat when one of them suddenly said 'we forgot to say thanks'. Something was getting through to them and in the next day 2 of them really believed and gave their lives to Christ with the rest having been touched by God throughout this trip.

What is the ultimate purpose of prayer? It is for God's glory and God's plan.

1. God's glory

John 14:13

'And whatever you ask in my name, that will I do that the Father may be glorified in the Son'

2. God's Plan

Matthew 6:10

'Your Kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'

Prayer is asking God to activate spiritual power to change the natural here on earth. Yet the one who Jesus described as the 'god of this world' (a spirit-being called Satan or the Devil) resists that. As a result there is spiritual warfare. This is the topic for our next session.

Suggested Further Study

Listening to God

Praying For Others