

PRAYER: WHAT IS IT? **HOW DOES IT WORK?**

- *Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed*
- *The family that prays together, stays together*
- *Seven days without prayer make one weak*
- *The lower one bends the knees, the closer one gets to God*
- *In prayer, man talks to God; in study, God talks to man*
- *Prayer changes things*

Cliches abound on the subject of prayer. Many of them are good. Most of them are catchy. Each expresses an element of truth. But what, really, is prayer? And how does it work?

One of the most quoted sayings regarding prayer simply states: **PRAYER CHANGES THINGS**

But does it really? Does it change the will of God or merely our attitude toward that will?

Granting that God is all-powerful and all-wise, it would seem logical that he would know the best thing to do in each and every circumstance without our informing him as to what should be done. It seems incomprehensible to believe that God would withhold a needed blessing from a person because no one thought to request it in prayer. Or again, that God would bless someone faster or more completely because he elicited 3000 people to pray for him instead of only 10. Yet the Bible is very specific that God does answer prayer:

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” James 5:16

“If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it.” John 14:14

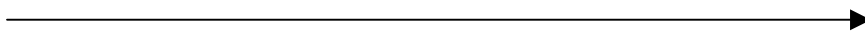
“Whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and are pleasing in his sight.” 1 John 3:22

“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 petitions that we desired of Him.” 1 John 5:14, 15

To resolve this conflict between God's omniscience on the one hand, and his willingness to change his plans according to our prayers on the other hand, is really quite simple. We merely need to examine the subject of “The Will of God.”

TWO VIEWS OF THE WILL OF GOD

Frequently we visualize the will of God as a straight line



directionally pointing one way. Anything on either side of this precise line represents something short of the ideal, and therefore, not the will of God for us.

Recognizing God's holiness and authority to determine that which is best for us, it would seem audacious and presumptuous on our part to suggest that God vary that will to fulfill our prayer request. It would seem that we should almost pray, "God, I know not what your will for me is, so do what you think is right."

Yet the Bible encourages more specific prayers, and abounds in illustrations of many direct requests which were granted. Some of these resulted in consequences somewhat short of the ideal.

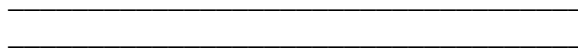
GOD ALWAYS ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS. SOMETIMES IT'S "YES", SOMETIMES IT'S "NO," AND SOMETIMES IT'S "WAIT".

We might note, for example, the prayer of Hezekiah for an extension of his life when sick unto death, and God's granting him 15 additional years in response. (See 2 Kings 20:1-6) However, during this prolongation of his life, Hezekiah fell from being a faithful king to one whose mistakes cost the nation of Israel dearly. It is a notable example of how God can answer selfish prayers, to the disadvantage of the petitioner.

But there is another way of looking at the Will of God. For lack of a better term, we will call it:

THE PERMISSIVE WILL OF GOD

and demonstrate it with a pair of parallel lines



similar to the yellow lines on the edge of a road or highway.

In this illustration, the parallel lines represent the boundaries within which God is willing to grant our prayer requests. He will permit us to ask for any of a number of options that lie within these bounds. Yet those things which would do us actual harm, or which would provide lessons which we would not learn, lie beyond these borders and would represent prayers which would have no answer, or a negative one.

Speaking of these, we read in James 4:3:

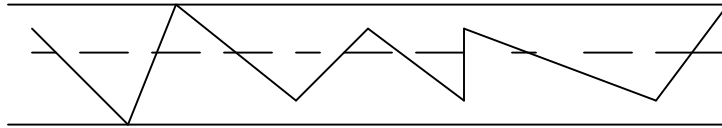
"Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss."

This is precisely what this reasoning implies: that God is not only willing to, but sometimes actually grants prayers which ask for something less than the ideal.

The reason is simple. Prayer not only changes events, but more importantly, it changes our attitudes and perceptions. Prayer is an instructional tool to educate the true Christian.

God desires that we study our own needs, and seek to determine what they are and how they should be filled. If the fulfilled prayer happens not to be in our best spiritual interests, we need to have the humility to study God's Word for a better solution to our problem. Thus, step by step, we are educated to a better perception of God's ways for us.

We might illustrate this thus:



In this illustration, the two bold lines represent the Permissive Will of God for us, within which he is willing to grant our prayer requests. The dotted line down the center represents his Ideal Will which he would have us perceive. The waving line illustrates how our prayers, though not fully correct at first, gradually educates us to come closer and closer to the Ideal Will of God. It is for this reason that the Bible frequently joins the two words:

WATCH AND PRAY

Though this phrase is frequently found in the Bible, we shall quote just one example:

”Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving.” Col.4:2

Notice the three elements in this text: (1) **Continuity** in prayer; (2) **Watchfulness** for the results; and (3) **Thanksgiving**, not only for the fulfillment of the prayer, but also for the educational value in helping us to perceive more clearly the most ideal path for our lives.

The continuity mentioned in this text is not limited to repetitively requesting an answer to a given prayer. More importantly, we are to learn from His answers to our prayers how to refine our future requests. In this way, we begin to approach the Ideal Will of God. By doing this regularly throughout our lives we will find that there are many ways in which the old saying is very true, **“PRAYER CHANGE THINGS.”**

First, God does answer the prayers of his people, except for those which would do harm. Thus events are actually changed.

Second, He changes our attitudes toward Him, recognizing increasingly his wisdom, and developing an ever-deepening thankfulness for his watch-care over our lives.

Third, our perceptions of God's will changes as we watch the results of the answers to our prayers, and we are educated thereby to ever more correct prayer requests.

Finally, our entire lives are changed through this learning experience, as we note the beneficial workings of his Ideal Will in our lives. As one poet so aptly puts it:

**“May Thy Will in me be done,
“May Thy will and mine be one.”**

“YE KNOW NOT WHAT YE ASK”

Frequently Christians are surprised at the responses they receive to their prayers. Sometimes it seems that they receive almost the opposite of what they requested.

To understand the reason for this phenomenon, we must examine the manner in which God deals in our individuals lives. Prayer is not a magical elixir for curing all of life’s problems, but a means of securing divine cooperation in attaining Christlikeness.

For instance, one might desire a great degree of patience. Noting this need, he might properly pray for this grace. Yet he should not expect that God will open up some container in heaven, and pour the spirit of patience into his eager heart.

Rather, the fruits and graces of the spirit must be developed and worked upon. A prayer for patience might well be answered by being in a series of traffic jams, or a hectic day at the office. These are the experiences which develop patience, and prayers for patience will be answered by the experiences which develop it.

Likewise, pray for more love and expect situations where you will be put into constant contact with someone you find difficult to love. Pray for contentment, and look for temptations along the line of covetousness and greed. Pray for faith, and anticipate experiences and questions that will challenge what faith you do have.

One of the faith-strengthening promises of the Bible is found in Malachi 3:3:
“He should sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver.”

In olden times it was customary to seek ways to avoid the difficult refining process for God by seeking, through alchemy, a chemical which would mix with lead and produce gold. This is an attempt to find a shortcut.

In working with man, God does not seek such a shortcut. He is not willing to omit the refining process. As a result he produces a superior product: gold that is thoroughly refined, purified and tried.

Our prayers must recognize this process, and in watching for the answers to them, we will find they are always along the line of some step in the refining process to develop the finest character possible.

JESUS' MODEL PRAYER

The ingredients for a proper prayer are well illustrated in the model prayer which Jesus gave in response to his disciple's question: "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) We quote his answer from the more familiar version given in Matthew 6:9-13:

"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts; as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation' but deliver us from evil."

Let us note briefly the ingredients of this prayer:

OUR FATHER – For anyone to pray and be guaranteed an answer to his prayer, he must be a son of God. The steps to this sonship are spelled out in simple detail by Jesus himself in Matthew 16:24.

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me."

WHICH ART IN HEAVEN—Not only an objective realization of where God lives, but of the authority implied in that habitation. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:9

HALLOWED BE THY NAME—A recognition of the height of God's position is not sufficient, there must also be a cognizant of his righteousness and holiness. It is for this reason that the Psalmist writes, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Psalms 111:10.

THY KINGDOM COME—All of Jesus' ministry was preoccupied with the message of his kingdom, which was to be right here on earth. If the starting point of man's experiences on earth was the Garden of Eden, and the turning point was Calvary, the grand climax of these experiences will be the great Kingdom of God. It is this kingdom that represents God's real designs for man—an eternity of peace and joy in harmonious living with their God and with their fellowman.

THY WILL BE DONE IN EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN—Not only will an acceptance of God's will be the key to happy and peaceful living for mankind in that kingdom, it must be the Christian's present goal. The more one adopts God's will instead of one's own, the more one enjoys life and its living. Thus the proper prayer is to become like Jesus himself, who said, "I delight to do thy will, O my God." Psalms 40:8

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD—The only temporal request in this prayer was for the necessities of life, not for luxuries, or even for health or for earthly happiness. Jesus was introducing a way of sacrifice, and to request more than life's necessities would be counter-productive to this end.

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS—There is no more basic need than this. All the benefits of life are contingent upon a sinless standing before God. All the evils and hardships which men endure are directly traceable to this one cause of sin. As the blind man who was healed exclaimed, "God heareth not sinners." (John 9:31) so this forgiveness is a pre-requisite for all other requests.

AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS—Proper prayer recognizes the fact that God's promises are conditional. If we are not willing to forgive others their trespasses against us, how can we anticipate his forgiveness of our sins against him? (See Jesus' parable on this subject in Matthew 18:21-35.)

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION—Since we are informed in James 1:13 that "God cannot be tempted, neither tempteth he any man," the thought seems to be, as some scholars believe, "Abandon us not

into temptation.” The prayer for strength to overcome temptations is always a proper request for the Christian.

BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL—Or, as the Greek suggests, “from the evil one.” Recognizing the power and cunning of our great adversary, who, “as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour,” (1 Peter 5:8) it is again proper to seek divine strength to ward off Satan’s attacks.

To the elements of this prayer we might suggest three additional features of a proper prayer:

NOT MY WILL, BUT THINE, BE DONE—Although omitted from this model prayer because all requests found in it are manifestly within the will of God, it is certainly wise for us to append this to all of our own prayers. It if were wise for Jesus Christ to use these words in his Gethsamene prayer, (Luke 22:42) how much more for us who lack his perfect knowledge of what the will of God is.

THANKSGIVING—Expressions of thankfulness were probably omitted from this model prayer of Jesus because the disciple’s request was for the proper way to make a prayer of request. Nevertheless, it is manifestly proper to always express our appreciation for past favors received, before making request for new ones to come. The Apostle Paul notes this additional element in Philippians 4:6, “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.”

IN JESUS’ NAME—This inclusion is authorized by the master himself in John 15:16: “Whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father **in my name**, He may give it to you.” This inclusion is more than a ritual, it is also an acknowledgement that any relationship we have with the Creator of the Universe, whatever right we might have to approach God in prayer in the first place, is only through the ministry of his Son, Jesus Christ. In direct words, Jesus says in John 14:6, “No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”