

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Early Church (Acts 2:42): Prayers

This is the fourth of four sessions looking at that grand verse, Acts 2:42. It tells us that the early Christians “continued stedfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Today, we turn to the subject of Prayers.

I will pose some simple questions, and then see what the Bible says by way of explanation.

WHY should we pray?

The basic question must always be WHY? Unless you have a good reason for doing something, there is no point in doing it at all.

There are two sides to the answer to this question. As to God, the secret of all prayer is this. God cares for all those who trust Him. This thread runs through all scripture. Let us think of a few examples.

Nahum 1:7 “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knoweth them that trust in Him.”
 Psalm 55:22 “Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and He shall sustain thee.”
 Isaiah 26:3 “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, for he trusteth in Thee.”
 1 Peter 5:7 “Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for thee.”

If such a theme is so prominent in the Bible, it must be important to us. That brings us to our side of the question WHY? We must face up to the truth of the matter. In ourselves, we are no better **now** than when we were first converted to God. We are reminded in 2 Corinthians 3:5, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; our sufficiency is of God.” We are no more capable now of living the Christian life, or serving the Lord, than we were of earning our salvation in the first place. The reason for this is plain. It is not God’s intention that we should ever be left independent of Him. The more we get to know ourselves, the more we become aware of our own inconsistency and unreliability, the more grateful we are that He does not leave it to us to muddle along on our own without Him. The Mighty God has put tremendous resources at our disposal. We can only use those resources rightly in a spirit of true dependence. This dependence is expressed in prayer.

WHAT should we pray?

The answer to that is easy. Everything! There is nothing that is too big or too small to bring to the Lord in prayer. Whether big or small, we have no spiritual strength or wisdom of our own to see it through. But, and it is a **big** but, we must bring it to Him before, not after, making our minds up what we are going to do. It is neither honest nor realistic to go through the motions of praying when we’ve already decided what we are going to do, virtually asking the Lord to say Amen to our predetermined decision.

While we must pray for everything, we must be specific. Relatives, friends, jobs, studies, exams, relationships, marriage, service for the Lord, everything. However, there must always be this proviso. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33).

There is a major matter I would refer to particularly. We need especially to pray for help in understanding and using the scriptures. In the scriptures, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God, and, let us not forget, He speaks to us. After all, it would be a strange conversation where one party does all the talking. Prayer is the counterpart to study. First we ask for help in the study of the scriptures, then we give thanks for help received, bearing in mind that it might be much later that we are given the answer to our question.

A very good guide to the manner and variety of prayer is given in the opening verses of 1 Timothy 2. “I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all who are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” Think about that. We are in touch with One who can supply all our needs. We live in expressed dependence upon Him. We do not only pray for ourselves. We intercede for others. What a privilege! We give thanks for blessings received, and for

answered prayer, even if the answer is not what we would have preferred. We accept that He knows far better than we ever could what is for our long-term spiritual benefit. We also give thanks, representatively, on behalf of those who do not give thanks themselves. It is the privilege of Christians to give thanks to God for His many mercies, not only to ourselves, but to all men. Furthermore, we pray for those whom God allows to rule, that conditions may be maintained that will allow us to get on with our Christian service without hindrance. Note, it is not that we might have an easy time. Oh, no! It is that the Christian testimony to the saving grace of God might continue to ring out loud and clear.

HOW should we pray?

We pray in words, but our attitude is at least as important as the words we use. Because of this, our minds need to be saturated in scripture, the Word of God. This is obviously not that we might be able to impress others by quoting scripture verbatim, by the yard. Rather, our minds need to be formed and conditioned by the Word of God, to promote and maintain in us a spirit of prayerful dependence in His presence. We are reminded in Romans 8:26 that there are many occasions when we do not know **what** to pray for as we ought. Minds that are conditioned by the Word of God, lived out in godly behaviour, will be guided in prayer in accordance with the will of God.

In the climax of the Epistle of James 5:13-20, prayer is referred to no less than seven times. Now, that Epistle is universally recognised as a very practical Epistle. The lesson is unmistakable. Prayer is a very practical matter. In verse 16 we read, "The fervent effectual prayer of the righteous man availeth much." Fervency in prayer, backed up by a righteous life, avails much in the presence of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us that we are to pray with thanksgiving. Even before we get the answer, whatever it might be, we are thankful for the privilege of bringing the matter to the Lord.

Jude verse 20, exhorts us to pray "in the Holy Ghost", the Holy Spirit. Prayer is a **spiritual** activity. It can only be undertaken in the power of the Holy Spirit, the only power for **any** spiritual activity.

Still on very practical matters, scripture is just as clear on the manner in which men and women are to pray, when they are together in a mixed congregation of men and women. Putting together the teaching of 1 Corinthians 11:4-15, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, we learn that the men are to pray audibly, and with their heads uncovered. We also learn that the women are to pray, oh yes, they are to pray, but in their case inaudibly, and with their heads suitably covered. I might not be able to understand it, although scripture does make the reason plain. I might not like the teaching, but again my opinions and preferences don't come into it. Whether or not I understand it, or even if I don't like it, I certainly cannot say that scripture isn't clear in what it says.

I think a brief mention of what many people call the Lord's Prayer, but which I prefer to call the disciple's prayer, will be helpful. It is not, strictly speaking, a Christian prayer, as such. The Christian has a heavenly blessing and a heavenly hope. The Lord laid down **that** prayer for disciples on earth, whose hope and destiny were earthly, not heavenly. Nevertheless, in it there are universal principles that the Lord laid down that are very pertinent for the Christian praying **now**. For instance, it is right to pray first for **God's** interests, not **ours**. It is right to recognise that it is **God's** will, not **ours**, that is paramount. It is right to commit ourselves, before Him, to live with a right attitude towards God Himself, towards ourselves and towards other people.

Lastly, as to **how** we are to pray, we read in 1 John 5:14-15, "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask any thing 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." This is surely a wonderful thing. We are to pray confidently. We have full confidence in Him. We know He cares. We know He listens. We know He understands. We know He loves us. We know He will answer in accordance with His will for us, and for our eventual spiritual good. What more could we want?

WHEN should we pray?

The clear, unequivocal answer to this is given in Luke 18:1, where it is said of the Lord, "He spake a parable unto them to this end that men ought **always** to pray, and not to faint." There we have it. We are not self-sufficient. But this is not only true of Christians. It is true of all men everywhere. Mankind as a race is not intended to be self-sufficient. Men are intended to live in conscious, constant dependence upon God. One of the results of sin is that men have no sense of the need to live in dependence upon God, no sense of the need to pray. They are aware that their lives are in a mess. They bewail the fact that the world is in a mess. But the secret of the value of living in dependence upon God, expressed in prayer, completely escapes them. We have been let into the secret. The secret of a contented, fulfilled life is to live in prayerful dependence upon God, **always**.

For general, regular prayer, we do well to organise our lives so that we have set times of day set aside for prayer. We all know our own circumstances. We know how busy we all are. We know we all have to set our priorities. We all think that other people seem to have far more disposable time than we have. Most of us only have time for what we consider to be really important. Fair enough. How important do we rate prayer to be? We are all creatures of habit. Let us be marked by good habits, particularly in prayer. If I say I haven't time to pray, what I am really saying is that to me prayer is not really as important as the other things I do. That is, to me prayer is a lower priority than anything else I do. By the way, we all have the same amount of time at our disposal, 24 hours every day. What differs is how we spend it.

Day by day, then, we need to set aside time for general prayer, general guidance, for things we are aware of that will crop up during the day. In addition, those we love and have responsibility for, aspects of the Lord's work we have knowledge of and interest in, need our prayerful support, as do more long term arrangements and activities dear to our heart.

At any time, of course, emergency prayers might be necessary. Scripture gives us wonderful examples of these. Matthew 14, "Lord, save me." Matthew 15, "Lord, help me." Luke 23, "Lord, remember me." Perhaps one of the best examples of all is the case of Nehemiah, recorded in Nehemiah 2. He was standing in the presence of the king, whose butler he was. "What's wrong", said the king. "You look terrible. What's the matter?" What did Nehemiah do? In his own account, he says, "I prayed to the God of heaven and I said unto the king." Just like that! Wonderful! There was no time for extended prayer. This was an emergency. He lifted up his heart momentarily to God in prayer and answered the king, all in the same breath. The moral is, prayers need not be long or involved. The attitude of the heart before the Lord is at least as important as the words expressed. But we must be specific.

WHERE should we pray?

In Matthew 6:1-6, we find that the Lord pressed upon His disciples the need for private, individual prayer. "When you pray", he told them, "retire to the privacy of your own room." There is a great need for us Christians to pray as individuals, in the Lord's own presence. When we read Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, we find clear teaching about the need to come together with other believers for collective prayer, for prayer meetings, as we speak of them. How much we need to pray; as individuals, as families, as companies of the Lord's people. As to emergency prayer, we pray wherever we happen to be when the emergency crops up. If the emergency arises on a motorway, or in city traffic, say, we can do what Nehemiah did. Lift up our hearts to the Lord for help, while we keep our eyes on the road so that we don't cause danger to anyone else.

WHO is to pray?

I have said what I believe scripture teaches about this in answer to the question HOW? I am convinced that the closer we stay to what scripture teaches, the better it will be. In prayer as in other things, for the Christian the first requirement is to be obedient to what we know to be true. Disobedience to the clearly revealed will of God is not the way to blessing.

Summing up, we are **all** to pray. The privilege is open to **all** believers. In privacy, as individuals, there can be no restrictions, although it is clear from scripture that a man should have his head uncovered, and a woman her head suitably covered, wherever the prayer takes place.

Remind yourselves why by reading the recommended scriptures again. In the family situation, private to them, they can agree on what they regard as proper, exercising their spiritual judgment, within the bounds of scripture. In collective prayer meetings, or when other than immediate family are present, I would suggest that it is wise to treat the occasion as you would a formal prayer meeting, as outlined.

TO WHOM should we pray?

It would be improper to lay down hard and fast rules, but I do have some suggestions to make. In everything important connected with Christianity, the three persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are deeply involved. So in prayer. Let us consider first the role of the Holy Spirit. Scripture speaks about praying **by** the Spirit (Philippians 3:3), and **in** the Spirit (Jude 20), but not **to** the Spirit.

What clinches it for me is this. The Lord Jesus Himself is the perfect example of everything that is good and pleasing to God. Not once in any of the four Gospels is there any indication that He prayed **to** the Holy Spirit. As with all aspects of life and service, the Holy Spirit is the only power **in** whom and **by** whom our prayers can be effective. That is very different to saying that we should pray **to** Him. We do get in scripture examples of prayers to God the Father and to God the Son, the Lord Jesus. There is no example of prayer **to** the Holy Spirit.

Consider also this. The Father is the true source of all blessing. He is the great Provider. It seems to me to be consistent with that to pray to the Father about family matters, creature comforts and material needs. Also, as considered earlier, true spiritual worship, the acme of Christian experience, is the worship of the Father. Likewise, the Lord Jesus Christ is our Lord and Master. It seems to me to be equally appropriate to pray directly **to** the Lord in respect of our service **for** Him.

As a climax to this talk, let me refer you to Luke 11:1. One of the disciples came to the Lord, and said, "Lord, teach us to **pray**." Note that. Not **how** to pray, but to **pray**. It is well said in respect of many skills, the best way to learn a job is to do it. Provided, of course that suitable guidelines are laid down at the outset. Christians, let us **pray**. As so often, the Lord's own words are the most telling. Ye know these things. Happy are ye if ye do them. Amen.

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