

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Douglas Pettman

The Power for Christian Living: The Power of Prayer

We come to the last of our talks on the Power for Christian Living with the message today on the Power of Prayer. Some years ago, a mid-west community in the USA was experiencing a crippling drought after weeks of sunshine. The citizens of one town decided to come together in one of the prairie fields to pray for rain. All, apart from one little girl, came in their summer finery. She came in her raincoat. The Lord graciously answered their prayer that day and they all got soaked through - except the little girl! Perhaps we should ask ourselves if we believe there is power in prayer. For our answer we must look at Scripture and insist that this is the only basis of belief. So what does the Bible have to tell us? Before we try to find out we need to ask ourselves

What is prayer?

Let us commence with a simple dictionary definition of prayer. 'Prayer is the act of offering reverent petitions, especially to God'. At least this gives us a start. Particularly when we think of God, every petition must be reverent because of who God is. When we come into His presence we cannot come in a flippant style, treating God as though we were speaking to a neighbour. He is God.

Some Christians believe we must always follow the same mode in our approach to God. So what approach should we follow? Should we stand, or sit, or kneel to pray? As we search the scriptures we find some examples.

Following the withering of the fig tree, the Lord Jesus speaks to His disciples concerning believing and praying and He says, 'And when ye stand praying...' Mark 11:25. The Lord Himself indicates that to stand and pray is totally acceptable to God.

In Mark 10:46-52, we find the blind man, Bartimaeus sitting by the highway side when the Lord passes by. He forcefully offers his 'reverent petition' by crying out several times, 'Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me'. Then we read, 'Jesus stood still, and commanded him to be called'. It did not matter that he was sitting; his petition was heard and answered.

Lastly, we get several instances of people kneeling and praying.

Perhaps we learn that there is a deeper appreciation of the value of prayer when we sense the necessity of approaching Almighty God on our knees. Darius the emperor, listed in the book of Daniel, signed a decree proposed by his wise men, that if any man should ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, he should be cast into the lions' den. This was a direct affront both to God and to Daniel. Daniel's response was to pray to God on his knees, at his open window, three times a day in direct defiance, of Darius, but in dependence on God. We know the result; the Lord saved Daniel even in and from the lions' den. Daniel 6:10. We read that the great king Solomon knelt at the dedication of the temple, 2 Chronicles 6:13; Stephen knelt at the time of his stoning, Acts 7:60; Peter knelt and prayed at the time of the raising of Dorcas, Acts 9:40; Paul knelt and prayed as he finally left Ephesus, Acts 20:36; finally let us note that the Lord Himself knelt at Gethsemane, Luke 22:41. All of these examples are of times of serious need.

The Lord encourages personal prayer, in secret, Matthew 6:6, while Solomon prayed, as we have just mentioned, in public. So the scriptures allow both posture and place to be as necessary to the occasion but the real necessity is that the heart is right. This brings up another question.

Is all prayer automatically heard?

The answer of scripture is, No. Let us look at Psalm 66:18. 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me', the psalmist writes. How can a righteous God have any contact with sin? 'Thou art of purer eyes that to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity', Habakkuk announces in 1:13. God's very Person is affronted by it and the only way the sinner can have contact with God is to come seeking forgiveness. This was the case with the publican, Luke 18:13-14, who 'standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner ... this man went down to his house justified'. But what of the Pharisee in the same story? He 'stood and prayed thus with himself...' His prayer went no higher than the roof; He did not go down

justified, verse 11. Lastly, let us not forget 1 Corinthians 11:4-5. In church, if we do not come to prayer in the right manner, a man with his head uncovered or a woman with her head covered, we bring dishonour on our head. The Lord Jesus sees, the angels see, verse 10. Do we care what the Lord sees?

The power of prayer.

Now let us consider prayer and its effectiveness and take some examples from the scriptures. These will confirm to us that God is a listening God who distinctly cares for His creatures and longs to bless them.

Abraham was a man who had learned and continued to learn of the mighty power of God and His faithfulness. So much did he value the companionship of God that he became known as 'the friend of God', James 2:23. In Genesis 19 Abraham was told by God's messengers that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was so grievous that they would be visited. Abraham saw that this meant judgement against these cities. He cared very much for his nephew Lot and his family who were in that very place. So we find him pleading with God. Time after time he petitioned God not to destroy Sodom, provided there were righteous people there. God listened and answered. The point was reached where Abraham's pleading had received the promise from God that if ten righteous people were found, God would not act. What persistent, powerful, persuasive praying this was! And God heard and answered. What a merciful God He is! Sadly, there were not even ten righteous and, by force, Lot, his wife and two daughters, were removed and told to flee. Even then Lot's wife disobeyed God and did not reach safety. God answers prayer but, in this instance as so often, He answered it in His own way.

How often a family member has been prayed for earnestly and persistently over a long time. Take courage my friend, the Lord hears and cares. He knows the heartaches you go through. As with Abraham, be sure He will answer, and in His own way. Some years ago a local man came into a Gospel meeting. He continued to come regularly thereafter and gladly came into full fellowship with the Lord's people meeting there. He told us once that, having travelled the world without God in his life, what brought him through, he was convinced, were the prayers of his family over many years. If you are praying for a family member, do not give up! God hears your prayer; may it be powerful!

Jonah's story is found in the book of his name. A servant and a prophet of God, he took a very wilful pathway, refusing to obey the directions of God. How can we criticise when so often we do the same? Having refused in his mind to obey, Jonah fled in the opposite direction, to the coast, found a ship going as far as possible to the other end of the Mediterranean, and set sail. Though knowing God, Jonah rejected His order and went away fully convinced that he had succeeded and even went to sleep in the storm troubled ship. But God knew! When the ship's crew learned that Jonah was responsible they followed his directions and threw him overboard. The all-knowing power of God stopped this man in his tracks and turned the godless mariners into God fearing worshippers. But there is more. The God who cares, had prepared a big fish who swallowed up Jonah and he found himself inside this great fish for three days and nights. Inside that fish we read, 'Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of my affliction unto the Lord, and He heard me...' 2:1-2. After all he had done, how is it possible to read of the Lord as Jonah's Lord? But when he cried to the LORD, he says, 'He heard me'. He ends his prayer by saying 'Salvation is of the LORD', 2:9. Yes, the power of God saved Jonah from a watery grave. Then Jonah went as God required to speak to Nineveh. Do we marvel at God's patience with this man? Was there not a better servant? He had let God down in a striking way. This is the way with God. When a child of God cries to Him, the Lord hears! Haven't we often proved this? Even if we get to the depths of despair, He will hear us. 'And this is the confidence that we have in Him that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us', 1 John 5:14. As children of God let us keep praying!

Zacharias and his wife, whose story is recounted in Luke 1, were a godly couple and the chapter describes them as 'righteous' and 'blameless', verse 6. Zacharias had fulfilled a lifetime's duty as a priest. We would never have known of the failure of their prayers but for this chapter. All their married lives they had prayed that God would reward them with a child and they had lived in such a way that they could have expected the blessing of God. To the Jew it was a mark of God's blessing to have a child and failure would suggest that God was not pleased. They could not understand why their prayers were not heard. Now they had reached the point that it was too late. They might as well stop praying to a God that would not hear. And so Zacharias was nearing the end of his career and was probably engaged in a once in a lifetime service in the Temple on that occasion. Imagine his amazement when an angel appeared, right at the time when he was alone doing his duty, and said, 'Fear not Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard', verse 13. We cannot criticise Zacharias for being a little disbelieving. He would well have thought that it is too late. But God had the most wonderful purpose in mind which He would carry through. Zacharias and Elisabeth were to have a child who would precede the coming of the Lord and bear testimony to Him. What an honour! Towards the end of their lives, they realised what an honour it was to be fully within the purposes of God and their joy was tremendous. We find Zacharias praising God, verse 64, and 'the hand of the Lord was with him', verse 66.

Do we wonder sometimes, particularly when we desire to live for the Lord, if our prayer is heard? Let this incident confirm to us that God hears our prayers, but God has His own way of answering them. Sometimes, in His purposes, the answer may be delayed but it may well be for our greater blessing and encouragement.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was a devout man, doing what he could in the circumstances where he was. He sensed there was more to life than his exalted position in the army and we read, he 'feared God...and prayed to God alway', Acts 10:2. But he lacked a knowledge of God which would set his mind at rest. What could he do? The Lord saw this man and knew his desire. One day, towards evening, Cornelius had a vision of an angel coming to him. He sensed this was more than an angel and, later, he told the apostle Peter what was said to him. 'Cornelius, thy prayer is heard...' verse 31. The almighty God knew that there was, not an Israelite, but a Gentile who desired His blessing. How ready is our God to bless! He will move an apostle for the sake of an individual soul needing peace. And so that day a Roman centurion was ushered into the ranks of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ and received the blessing of the presence of the Holy Spirit, as with every believer. What tremendous encouragement to the Christian company! The Lord Jesus is always ready to meet the needs of every soul seeking Him. The Lord Jesus says, 'Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out', John 6:37. Do we still doubt the power of prayer?

One more example is that concerning the apostle **Peter**. Following the imprisonment and death by the sword of the apostle James, Peter was the next to be arrested. He would also be killed. The night before the execution was to take place the believers decided to hold an all-night prayer meeting. During the night, with all the guards asleep, Peter was set free by an angel and, outside the prison, he was left to decide what to do. 'Ah', he thought, 'perhaps they are praying at Mary's house', so he went there and knocked. Although she recognised Peter, the servant girl did not let him in but went to the prayer meeting and told those gathered that Peter had arrived. Can you believe that they said to her, 'thou art mad', Acts 12:15? They were praying for Peter's release and when the Lord granted it, they would not believe it. Thankfully, they eventually went to the door and let him in, to the astonishment of all. My friend, prayer has power with God! How He delights to answer, in His own way, what we seek. Let us not be astonished at what God can do. Let us trust Him for all we ask of Him. We have no other resource to whom we can turn, but that Resource has all the power to know and to do what is right and best in every circumstance.

Let us sum up.

We have noted that the Lord hears prayer. He delights to answer it with power. He will work with us even when we go far astray and seek our own way. He will bring us back. But, perhaps we ask, how can we know the power of prayer around us?

How often do we pray in the morning for the Lord's care on our day? Do we ever think, in the evening, that the day has passed smoothly and we have not suffered an accident? Here is His power at work every day in keeping us so we can thank Him.

Perhaps we can say that the power of prayer is dependent upon our readiness to:

Listen to the Lord. We need to read His Word and thus understand His mind from the Word of God. There can never be any work of God which contradicts His Word. The strange story was once told of a man who carelessly sought help and forgiveness in advance for a planned robbery in which he was to be involved! Should we pray and expect the power of God to operate in a way which is contrary to His word, and expect His blessing? The Word of God is our guide and the Lord will act in full accordance with what is written.

Depend on God. He knows best in all circumstances, even when it seems hard to us. Matthew 21:22 tells us 'And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive'. Those praying in the Acts for Peter's release had not learned this lesson. We can believe that God has the power, the Lord has the desire to bless, and will bless. Now we need to be careful. The Lord will supply our needs, Matthew 6:30, but the context of the verse quoted brings into view that which is for the glory of God. Faith is exercised to carry through His work; we do not need faith to ask for our personal indulgencies and wants, nor can we expect Him to supply them. That does not accord with the position into which we are brought as believers. We are freed from sin and now fully able to live with all the characteristics of our Lord Himself. Our Lord gave up everything; He became poor for the infinite blessing of each one of us. This is the course we can follow.

Allow His will to operate. This is far more difficult but the Lord only has the best in mind for all His people. This is a most important aspect which characterises a believer. All our examples of the power of prayer have involved this lesson. 1 John 5:14-15 tells us, 'And this is the confidence (or boldness) 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'. What boldness and certainty we have in these verses! We come boldly to a loving Father who listens to the cry of His children, and who answers it according to His will. Would you, my friend, as you

depend on God, want it to be any different? His love is so great that He will never cause any child of His a needless tear.

Let us go on trusting Him, coming boldly to pray and pray again, and expect Him to bless, for His own glory.

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