

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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How to pray

It was Martin Luther who wrote, "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray". Prayer is the very essence of our faith. Through prayer we praise, worship and commune with God. Through prayer we ask God to bless our fellow men, our fellow Christians and ourselves. Through prayer we bring the power of heaven down to earth.

There are many examples in the Bible of men and women who prayed. But the greatest example is the Lord **Jesus Himself**. Prayer pervaded every aspect of His life beginning with His baptism, "It came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened," (Luke 3:21). So today, prayer opens heaven to us. He prayed in the wilderness, "So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed," (Luke 5:16). Prayer needs a quiet place. He prayed all night on a mountain, "Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God," (Luke 6:12). Prayer involves commitment. He prayed at His transfiguration, "Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening," (Luke 9:28-29). Prayer changes us.

The Lord's constant prayerfulness had an effect on His disciples so that in Luke 11 verse 1 they ask Him, "Lord, teach us to pray". They witnessed the closeness of the Lord Jesus to His Father and wanted to experience the same kind of communion with God. This is the starting point of an effective prayer life. Do we want to experience real communion with God? Prayer is not about asking God for things, although it sometimes includes this. Prayer is about a living relationship with the God who loves us and wants us to enjoy His presence and His power. This, of course, means that we have to be ready to do His will. Although the disciples in Luke 11 wanted to pray like Jesus, it was some time before they understood what real prayer was. Before this happened, they were to discover the depth of the Lord's love for them expressed through His intercession and sacrifice.

In Luke 22, in spite of the fact that Peter was to deny his Lord, Jesus had prayed for him that his faith would not fail and, that, he when he was restored, he might be a source of encouragement to his brethren. It is a beautiful example of the Lord's service of intercession. Intercession is to pray on the behalf of others and it is service the Lord Jesus still continues to this day. In the words of Hebrews 7:25, "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

In Matthew 26, Jesus takes His disciples to the Mount of Olives and asks Peter, James and John to watch with Him whilst He prayed. It is in the Garden of Gethsemane that we see the true nature of prayer. Jesus expresses this in His prayer to the Father in verse 39, "Not as I will, but as You will". Prayer is about discovering and doing God's will. Once the holy matter of His sacrifice had been settled in the Father's presence, Jesus finishes praying and goes on to the cross, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" (John 18:11).

In the first chapter of Acts we see the apostles praying together, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers," (Acts 1:14).

In chapter 2 verse 42 we see prayer as a **key feature** of the newly formed church, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Paul, in his letters, often prays for the people of God, "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Colossians 1:9). He also asked for prayer, " Meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains" (Colossians 4:3).

If prayer is so important to the Christian, **how do we do it?** I am reminded of the conversion of a drunken fish merchant who stumbled into a Gospel Hall. The preacher spent a lot of time explaining the Gospel to him. The Spirit of God worked in the man's heart and he trusted Christ. Returning home late at night he told his wife he had become a Christian. "Drunk again!" was her response. As they got ready to go to bed he turned to his wife and said they should pray. But he had never prayed in his life before. After a few moments he took his hat off his head, he swung it

in the air just had he done every Saturday at football matches and exclaimed, "Hurrah for Jesus!" That was a good first prayer. Prayer should be instinctive.

Why is it that people who are not Christians but find themselves in crisis situations instinctively pray? We are made to have fellowship with God and even though we can live our lives far from Him, in times of danger we often instinctively appeal to Him. When we are born again, the Spirit of God within us moves us to pray. We should never lose that simplicity of heart and expression when praying to our Father.

In response to a disciple's plea, "Lord, teach us to pray", the Lord gives us what has become known as the **Lord's Prayer** in Luke 11:1-4. It begins, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come." In these opening words we have God's person, God's home and God's honour brought to our attention. The prayer teaches us that we have a relationship with God as our Father. It is a relationship of nearness but there is also a sense of God's greatness and holiness. We should never take God for granted or cease to be reverent in His presence.

There is also an understanding of where God is - in heaven. Prayer makes the great link between heaven and earth. Even in today's world, with its bewildering range of technology, sometimes communications break down. Mobile phones are not always answered. The Internet can lose its connection. But we never lose our connection with God. He is always there to listen and to respond to our prayers. "For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers" (1 Peter 3:12).

The Lord's Prayer also expresses a desire for God's kingdom to come. Prayer should look forward to the hope of Christ's return and the promise of the establishment of His kingdom on earth. I wonder if the same hope colours our prayers. Do we pray in view of a coming kingdom? Do we look for God to be gloried in our lives now as He will be glorified in the future?

The Lord's Prayer then turns to God's will. "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". This is a very powerful part of the Lord's Prayer. As we have seen, the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed for the Father's will to be done. So, in this prayer, the will of God is central. It is in the light of God's will that the prayer then turns to daily provision, forgiveness and deliverance before ending with God's Kingdom, God's Power and God's Glory. God does provide for our daily needs and we should not forget to ask God to provide for us and to thank Him for the blessings we receive. There was a once a Christian farmer who was invited to an important banquet. Alongside him were some well educated but rude guests. At the beginning of the meal the farmer bowed his head and gave thanks for the meal. One of the guests scornfully asked the farmer if everyone down on the farm gave thanks for their food. "No," replied the farmer "the animals never give thanks!" Ungodliness is marked by unthankfulness. Paul reminded the Colossians, "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful" (Colossians 3:15).

Our prayers should always express thankfulness. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6).

The need and willingness to forgive is the next aspect of the prayer. The Lord Jesus teaches that we need to confess our sins but also to be willing to forgive others, thereby displaying the character of God revealed in Christ: "Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do" (Colossians 3:13).

The prayer goes on to the importance of being kept from temptation and the evil one. I used to live near Oldham in Lancashire where Winston Churchill once had a constituency. One day when he was campaigning in an election he asked a passerby if he would vote for him. "Vote for you," exclaimed the man, "I would rather vote for the devil." To which Churchill replied, "As far as I know the devil is not standing in this election so perhaps you might vote for me!" Too often we can unintentionally "vote for the devil". Prayer keeps us from the evil one and away from spiritual and moral dangers.

The Lord's Prayer ends with God's Kingdom, God's Power and God's Glory. It ends in worship. The Lord's Prayer focuses on God's interests yet in doing so ensures God's blessing in my life. This is the great lesson about prayer that the Lord teaches us: that as a consequence of seeking God's will and glory we are blessed.

It is interesting that, in the Bible, prayer, as we have just seen, is generally addressed to God the Father. **The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray in His name** in John 14:13: "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

There are also examples of addressing our prayers to the Lord Jesus. In Acts 7:59, Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". In 2 Corinthians 12:8, Paul writes, "Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

It is striking that nowhere in the New Testament do we find the Spirit being addressed in prayer. He indwells us and is with us as Jesus explains in John 14-16. That He is not addressed directly may be because He is so intimately involved with the ministry of intercession on our behalf. "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to interpret our needs and to intercede for us. On those occasions when we cannot express the depth of the feelings in our hearts, it is the Spirit of God who has the power to communicate our need.

Just as we have One who intercedes for us on earth, we also have a Great High Priest who intercedes in heaven: "Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

This ministry of intercession by both the Son of God and the Spirit of God should encourage us to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

In doing so not only will we know the power of God in our lives but also the joy which Christ wants us to experience, "And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:23-24).

There are some essential aspects to prayer. The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray **believingly**, "And all things whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22). "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). These principles of prayer have not changed. It has been said that prayer is the key to heaven and faith is the hand that turns that key.

We also need to be **persistent** in our prayers. Jesus tells the story of the widow in Luke 18:1-8 who persistently pleaded for justice from an unjust judge until he answered her cry. He finishes the story with the words, "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?" Patience is a great characteristic of the Christian faith and one which we often learn through a patient prayer life. God teaches us to wait His time and discover that His timing is always perfect.

James also writes about prayer using the example of Elijah, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (James 5:16-18). James gives us the secret of an effective prayer life. For our prayers to be effective, we have to live consistent with the will of God - righteous lives. It is no use expecting God to answer our prayers if we are not living lives consistent with following Christ. It is no use speaking about the love of God if I refuse to forgive. It is no use speaking about the holiness of God if I am dishonest.

Elijah lived righteously and he also prayed **fervently**. To him praying was hard work. It needed effort. This challenges my heart when I analyse how much effort I put into praying. Great blessing comes through great praying and, like Elijah, it is possible for it to begin in the heart of one person. I remember a young Christian girl who suggested to her friends that they should meet to pray before work each morning. We young men did not think this was such a great idea as we had enough problems getting up in a morning! But we agreed. From those early morning prayer meetings several young people were led to Christ and several more grew as believers. The word 'fervent' has the idea of stretching - using your strength to reach out. That is exactly what God wants us to do. He wants us to reach out to Him and prove His ability to bless. This takes time, effort and strength but if we are to know God's power we need to make this sacrifice.

Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 is someone who teaches us about praying **clearly**. We can, over a period of time, develop prayer jargon and lose clarity in speaking to God. Hannah came into God's presence with a great sense of burden and knew that only God Himself could answer her need. Do we approach in this way? Do we have the same sense of bringing our needs and those of others to the throne of grace because there is no other place where they can be met? Hannah shed tears. Do we feel deeply about the matters we lay out before the Lord or are they simply a well-worn list? Hannah spoke in her heart. Do we understand that, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise" (Psalms 51:17)? Also, as Hannah's son Samuel learned as an older man, "The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Hannah also asked for what she wanted. Hers was a simple, straightforward prayer - not like the Pharisees who thought they would be heard for their much speaking. Hannah prayed quietly and privately - not like the Pharisees who loved to be seen at street corners praying. God is not interested in outward display but in simple quiet faith. The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray succinctly, "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as

the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7). Finally, Hannah finished praying. It should be part of our experience to leave a matter before the Lord having prayed for it and then wait for His answer.

I have always thought there are two ways to pray: systematically and spontaneously. Daniel gives us a great example of what it is to pray **systematically**, "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days" (Daniel 6:10). It is a good thing to plan your prayers, especially at the beginning and end of the day. At the beginning, because you want God to go before you and to guide into His will. Every day is a fresh opportunity to serve and live for God and every day we need His presence. At the end of the day we can review the activities we have engaged in - what we can give thanks for; what mistakes we made; what needs arose; what plans we have.

But there is also a need for **spontaneous** prayer. Nehemiah gives us a good example, "Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king..." (Nehemiah 2:4-5). Nehemiah was sorrowful because of the state of Jerusalem and the king asked him what he wanted to do. Instantly Nehemiah prayed to God and immediately spoke to the king. There will be times when we need God's immediate help. At such times we can send these arrow like prayers to heaven. God always hears the cries of His people. Sometimes He delivers them and sometimes He allows them to suffer in a righteous cause.

We see this in Daniel's friends, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up'" (Daniel 3:16-18). These three men were convinced that God was with them even though they had to go through the experience of the fiery furnace. Equally God answers our prayers in different ways. Sometimes He takes difficulties away and sometimes Christ goes with us in those difficulties as verse 25 demonstrates.

Our **private prayers** are important and so are our **prayer meetings**. Often, even very large churches have surprisingly small prayer meetings. We noted at the beginning of this study that the early church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Praying together was an essential part of their Christian experience and service. When Peter was in prison, "constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church" (Acts 12:5). At Philippi, Paul and Silas were used in the conversion of Lydia, the deliverance of a slave girl and the salvation of the Philippian jailer (see Acts 16). Each of these remarkable events was preceded by fellowship in prayer. The prayer meeting has been called the powerhouse of the church. That power, of course, comes from the Holy Spirit. He not only has an intercessory role but He guides and empowers our prayers, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints." (Ephesians 6:18)

Our prayer meetings are not optional they are **compulsory**.

George Müller was a remarkable man of prayer and also a very practical man. He advised Christians to begin the day early with prayer and suggested that the best aid to this was to invest in a good alarm clock to get into the habit of rising early!

Samuel Chadwick said, "The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, he mocks at our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray."

It's time to buy that alarm clock!

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