

God and Prayer

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In our recent study of prayer, we've given a great deal of consideration to our end of the deal. We've looked at how often we should pray, what sort of things we should pray for, and how righteous men of old found victory through their prayers. However, that's only half of the equation. If we wish to truly appreciate prayer and what it can do for us, we must turn our attention not just to ourselves and our needs, but to God and His nature.

If we fail to do this, we run the risk of falling into the prayer problems that beset so many. If we forget God altogether, and we're just sort of flinging words into the ether when we pray, we're much less likely to be devoted to prayer, even if we pray at all. It's equally problematic when we construct a God in our own image, who cares about the things that we care about. Once we've done this, we will probably end up treating God like a spiritual ATM, someone who is supposed to give us every spiritual blessing we ask for. When He doesn't, we often become disillusioned.

These failures are all the more tragic when we consider all that the Bible has to say about God's characteristics, and even the way that those characteristics interact with prayer. When we study the prayer heroes of the Bible, we see that one of the things that made their prayers so effective was their grasp of who God was. They paid attention to what God has said about Himself, and they offered their prayers in accordance with that information.

In many cases, we're actually operating with a fuller understanding of God than the godly men of Scripture did. After all, they didn't have the written record of themselves to learn from. We do. We would be foolish, then, not to incorporate this priceless body of knowledge about our Creator into the way we pray. Once we start thinking in that way, it will surely add power and effectiveness to our prayers. Let's turn our attention, then, to God and prayer.

God's Nature.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can draw is that **GOD IS GREAT**, so we should **SEEK UNDERSTANDING**. This is evident from the prayer of Elisha in 2 Kings 6:15-17. To our natural human understanding, this would be an alarming situation. The Syrian king has figured out that Elisha is warning the Israelites about the location of the Syrian army, so he sends the army to the pipsqueak town of Dothan to kill or capture the prophet. Elisha's servant sees this huge army surrounding the town, panics, and runs to Elisha. However, Elisha is not the least concerned. He asks God to open his servant's eyes so that the servant can see what he does, that even though the army of Syria is against them, the army of God is for them. The apparent danger is just an illusion.

Friends, we too must understand that those who are with us are always more than those who are with them. No matter how bad our situation gets, God is always going to provide for us, and the only thing that can stop Him is if we start doubting Him. Like Elisha's servant, what we need most may simply be to have our eyes opened. Let's stop worrying about what God is going to do and start praying for understanding of what He's already doing.

We should also remember that **GOD IS WATCHING**, so we can **PRAY ALL THE TIME**. Look at the way that David describes his prayer life in Psalm 55:17. We serve a God who is constantly attentive to the cries of His people. God doesn't put us on a cell phone plan. We don't have a fixed number of prayer minutes every month, and once we use those up, He cuts us off. If we pray to Him after normal business hours, our prayers aren't just going to roll to voice mail. If we call on Him when a lot of people are seeking His care, He isn't going to put us on hold for half an hour while He works with the guy in the front of the queue. We have complete, instant access to the throne of heaven, 24/7/52.

Now, brethren, if we have a Father in heaven who is constantly listening for our prayers, doesn't it make a whole lot of sense to constantly talk to Him? Anytime we have a need, anytime we have something on our minds, we ought to bring that before God. It's not like we're going to bore Him. Instead, it will make our relationship that much stronger.

Third, we need to see that **GOD KNOWS US**, so we can **TRUST HIM**. Along these lines, consider the exchange between Moses and God in Exodus 33:15-17. This conversation does not mark a high point in the history of the children of Israel. They have just made the golden calf while Moses was up on Mount Sinai, and their idolatry has offended God so much that He has declared that His presence will no longer travel with them. As often happened in Exodus, Moses here is trying to talk God out of a punishment that the Israelites richly deserve. He wants God to relent and travel with His people again. God agrees because Moses has found favor in His sight, and He knows Moses by name. The appeal of one man whom God loves is so powerful that it outweighs the guilt of a whole wicked nation.

Brethren, every Christian is someone whom God knows by name. The governor and the president might not have the foggiest idea who we are, but God knows us better than we know ourselves. We are so important to Him that He has numbered the hairs on our heads, and He probably keeps a running total. Surely, then, we can trust a God who knows so much and cares so much to take care of us. He will never overlook us. He will never forget us. He will never forsake us. We can bring our problems to Him and rest assured that He is going to do what He has promised.

Fourth, we should recognize that **GOD KNOWS OUR NEEDS**, for then we will **PRAY WITH MEANING**. Jesus teaches us this in Matthew 6:7-8. Notice the contrast that He makes between the prayers of the Gentiles and what our prayers should be. The Gentiles believed that their gods were fickle and uncaring, so they prayed rote prayers, over and over again, in the hope that the sheer mass of prayer would get some beneficial attention somewhere. It's kind of like the guy who's looking for a job and sends out 500 copies of his resume to a list of employers he got off the Internet. Both are an act of desperation, when you don't know anybody and you don't think anybody cares. Sadly, there are people today who claim to be Christians who have this same desperate prayer life filled with vain, empty repetitions.

Thankfully, our prayers don't have to be like that. God does know us. God does care. We aren't spamming resumes to every firm in town. We get to send one resume to the company where our dad is the CEO, and that should change the way we communicate. There's no point in treating our heavenly Father like a stranger and burying Him in rote, meaningless, repeated prayers. Instead, we should pray to Him like the adopted children that we are. He already knows what we want. Let's come to Him with that in mind: humbly, meaningfully, and trusting in His love for us.

God's Attitudes.

Nor is God like some kind of mean dad with whom we have a crummy relationship—at least, if our relationship with Him is like that, it isn't His fault. Instead, we should know that **GOD IS GOOD**, so that we can **ASK** for what we need. Jesus illustrates this point in Matthew 7:9-11. This is something that's familiar to every parent, and even though Zoë is only turning a year this week, I get it too. When she's hungry and wants me to feed her, she makes that quite plain. When she's staring up longingly at the box of goldfish crackers on the table and saying, "Num-num!", I don't go out into the garden, grab a handful of last year's mulch, dump it on her tray and say, "Here you go!" I give her what she asks for. I'm not the world's best Christian or the world's best dad, but I will still make sure that my little girl gets the food she needs. Now, if I will do that for my child, then surely God, who is a whole lot better than I am, will do that for His children. He will devise intricate plans, stretching for years or decades, to make sure that we get what we need.

Of course, what we need and what we think we need are two different things, and God is much more concerned with our reality than with our perceptions. That's why when our prayers aren't answered as we think they should be, we should remember that **GOD'S GRACE IS SUFFICIENT** and **BE CONTENT** with that. Paul explains how he came to this realization in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Once again, we have a lot to learn here from our relationships with our earthly children. For example, one of Zoë's core beliefs is that she should be allowed to crawl headfirst down the stairs, or, better still, be allowed to wiggle through the bars of the staircase railing and leap out into empty space. I know perfectly well what Zoë wants, but that doesn't mean that I will set her at the top of the stairs and give her a swift kick to speed her on her way. Nor, indeed, am I even neutral to her desires. On the contrary, I have spent a lot of time building barriers to make sure that she cannot get what she wants. Why? Because I know better than she does what's good for her. I would much rather deprive her of that moment of mid-air happiness than see her suffer long-term pain.

Likewise, friends, our Father is interested not in our happiness, but in our good. There are all sorts of things that we want that we're too dim to understand would be bad for us, just as Zoë hasn't yet figured out that the landing at the bottom of the stairs would be a hard one. God often protects us from those things by saying "No" to our prayers. When He does say no, we can pitch a fit and blame Him, but that doesn't change anything, nor does it make Him wrong and us right. Instead, we should take that opportunity to learn contentment and wisdom, and trust in Him to give the best.

Also, we should consider that **GOD HATES EVIL**, and learn from that to **BE RIGHTEOUS** so that we can pray as effectively as possible. Peter establishes this principle in 1 Peter 3:12. Remember, friends—God is certainly our heavenly Father, but if we turn our backs on Him and walk away, He's not going to run after us and be our enabler and clean up our messes. Like any healthy relationship, our relationship with God is a two-way street, and if we aren't going to invest in the relationship, He isn't going to either. This means that if we want our prayers to be effective, our lives have to be righteous. Of course, God doesn't demand sinlessness from us in exchange for His attention. No one, whether Christian or no, lives up to that standard. However, He does want to see us committed to righteousness. He wants to see us making the effort to walk in the footsteps of Christ, struggling up the upward path, getting back up when we stumble, and not giving up and rolling back down the hill. When we live in this way, He is glad to answer our prayer.

However, if we have chosen to live wickedly, that doesn't mean that we're doomed, and God is never going to listen to us instead. Instead, the Bible promises us that **GOD FORGIVES**, so that we have the opportunity to **REPENT**. Isaiah vividly presents God's perspective on this in Isaiah 1:15-18. As we just discussed, God refused to listen to the Israelites when they came before Him stained with the guilt of their sin. However, if they were to repent and begin making an effort to live righteously, in return, God was willing to cleanse them from their unrighteousness. It's that two-way street thing again. If we are willing to draw near to God, He is willing to draw near to us. Once we've removed the obstacle of our sins through prayer, we can be certain that we can obtain all of the other benefits of prayer too. His mercy and love are such that no matter what we have done, He is always waiting to wipe the slate clean.