

# YOUR CALL:

By R. Herbert

A hand holding a black smartphone. The screen of the phone is white and displays the title 'Using the Direct Private Line of Prayer'. The words 'Using the', 'Direct', 'Private', and 'Line of' are in a black serif font, while 'Prayer' is in a red script font.

*Using the  
Direct  
Private  
Line of  
Prayer*

*A Tactical Belief Book*

# YOUR CALL:

Using the Direct Private Line of *Prayer*

By R. Herbert

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# INTRODUCTION:

## A DIRECT PRIVATE LINE

How can we most easily understand the privilege we call prayer? How should we pray, and how can we improve our prayers? Sometimes, comparisons and analogies can help us to answer such questions and to see the infinite potential we have in our opportunity to communicate with God himself. For example, using the analogy of a telephone conversation, prayer has been called a “hotline” or “direct private line” between us and God.

This book takes that analogy and expands it as the basis for the introduction you are now reading and also the first chapter which is a guide to the practical aspects of prayer that you can apply immediately. The following chapters then look at prayer in more depth, so whether you are a new Christian who would like to know how to pray or an established believer who would like to further broaden and deepen your relationship with God through prayer, this book is for you.

### **Direct, Instant, and Answered!**

Some of the most important people in the world – the presidents, prime ministers, kings or queens of great countries, or the CEOs of massive international corporations – have direct private telephone lines so that their close family members and personal assistants can reach them. That, of course, is exactly the kind of opportunity we are given in prayer – though to an infinitely greater degree!

It’s humbling to think that we are each, individually, important enough to God to have a direct line to the King and CEO of the universe. It’s a “direct private line” that is always there. We don’t have to wait on hold in order to get through eventually – the line we are given is direct and instant. And we can use it at any time.

Unlike our regular phones, there isn't some complicated plan where we end up having to wait to call because we are low on minutes. There are no downed or bad telephone lines, no poor satellite signals, no answering machines or dropped calls – ever. We can actually reach the Ruler of heaven and earth faster than we can get through to our doctor's office or local grocery store.

The fact that we have direct access to our Heavenly Father is truly a great gift. When we consider the importance of the One with whom we are able to speak, the directness of our access is amazing. Some believe they can only call on God through various intercessors, but Jesus' words are clear. Although we are told to pray in his name (John 16:23) and we are only able to approach God through the sacrifice of Christ (John 14:6), we do not need any other intercessor but may pray directly to the Father (John 16:26-27). Many scriptures show that we can also pray to Jesus himself when this is appropriate (John 14:14, Acts 7:59-60, etc.), but he urges us to pray directly to God the Father (Matthew 6:9).

Another wonderful thing to remember is that our “prayer calls” are always answered. Although we talk about “answered prayer” and “unanswered prayer,” it's helpful to remember that prayer really is like a phone call that's always answered. We will see that later in this book, but God is always there and the “phone” is always on. When we ask for things, for our own good he may not give us exactly what we ask for or respond as quickly as we may hope, but the sincerely made call is always answered. When we do our part, God promises exactly that: “Call to me and I will answer you...” (Jeremiah 33:3a) – as those who pray know: “...I call to you, because you answer me” (Psalms 86:7).

## **More Than We Ask**

But just like our phone calls with our closest friends and loved ones, prayer is so much more than just calling to ask for help. Hopefully, we call to affirm and enhance our relationships. This truth was

eloquently summed up by the celebrated Christian writer C. S. Lewis in his remarks on what prayer is:

Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. – C. S. Lewis, *The Efficacy of Prayer*

In this metaphor Lewis shows us prayer as it really is – as an approach to God, beginning at the threshold of his heavenly temple and moving closer and closer to him. In the same way, answered prayer is much more than just getting what we ask for. More often than not, we grow in grace and knowledge – even in ways we do not ask for – through prayer more than in any other way. That was Jeremiah’s full thought in the scripture we partially quoted above: “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know” (Jeremiah 33:3). The act of prayer is itself an invitation for God to work in our lives; as a result, very often we receive so much more than we even ask for.

## **Using the Direct Private Line**

Of course, we have to pray for prayer to work. That’s the only catch to the direct private line that is made available to us. We have to use it regularly for maximum effectiveness. It’s not like that legendary “hotline” between the leaders of the United States and the old Soviet Union – to be used only if circumstances became desperate enough that it was needed.

In fact, we must use prayer on a daily basis and even more frequently than that if God is to fully use our prayers to our advantage. The apostle Paul shows we should pray in “all things” and “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18). In the same vein, Martin Luther wrote that “To be a Christian without prayer is no



more possible than to be alive without breathing.” We will see exactly what that means in the course of this book.

But for now we just need to commit ourselves to thinking about the different aspects of prayer and to learning how to use them to the full. The first chapter of this book gives a “quick start guide” to prayer that is aimed primarily at newer Christians, but might also serve as a refresher for anyone. This guide is followed by chapters that look at “how to pray” in more depth as well as chapters on each of the major types of prayer that we can and should utilize in approaching God. Most of these sections end with a case study that gives practical examples. The final section looks at how we can make our prayers more answerable. We invite you to read these chapters with an eye to utilizing new understandings you may gain or better applying what you already know.

Most of all, this book invites you to commit to enhancing your prayer life – to more fully using the direct line we have been given. Remember, we don’t even need a reason to call. God is always desirous to hear from us, but if we are willing to learn to develop our “conversation skills,” prayer can become much more than a one-way conversation and can be a truly transforming experience.

The Creator-CEO of the universe has offered you a personal invitation to get to know him better. Will you accept the invitation? – It’s your call.

**PART ONE:**  
**HOW TO PRAY**

# **1. A STARTING GUIDE TO PRAYER**

Like many other electronic devices nowadays, phones often come with a “quick start guide” that you can read in order to use your phone right away – before you read the whole instruction manual that you also receive. You will certainly need the full, detailed instructions if you are going to use all the features of your phone effectively, but at first a quick start guide will give you the basic information you need to know. There are certain – almost parallel – things we can also say regarding getting started in prayer.

## **Connection Options**

When you purchase a new phone you have two primary options: land-line telephones for “heavy duty” home or office use and, of course, smaller mobile phones for use wherever you may be. We have a similar dual option for communicating in prayer – extended prayer in full conversations with God from the privacy of our homes (Matthew 6:6) and shorter, spontaneous prayers offered from wherever we may find ourselves (1 Timothy 2:8). As we will see, “deeper” prayer and spontaneous prayer are both necessary options for our fullest communication with God.

## **When: The Anytime Prayer Plan**

Just like the phone plans we might purchase that allow us to make calls at any time, our options for prayer are unbounded with the “anytime prayer plan” God graciously gives us. The wonder of prayer is that we can communicate our thoughts, needs, and deepest feelings at any time of day and night. Of course, some times of day work best for extended personal prayer when we can focus and fully develop our conversation with God.

In the Old Testament we find that the ancient Israelites offered sacrifices three times a day – in the morning, at noon, and in the

early evening – and the people of God often prayed specifically at those times (Psalm 55:17, Daniel 6:10, etc.). We also find prayer mentioned in the New Testament at exactly these three times (Acts 2:15; 10:9; 10:1-3).

However, as Christians we are not commanded to follow this pattern. While it may be helpful if we are able to do so, for many in our modern world who have jobs where prayer in the middle of the day is difficult, in-depth prayer twice each day – in the morning and evening – is often more feasible.

It is interesting that we can see this pattern of morning and evening prayer in the life of Jesus himself. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus offered prayers frequently and at many times in the day, but the only instances where the time of day is mentioned regarding his extended prayers are in the early morning and evening (Mark 1:35, Matthew 14:23).

This pattern can work well for us, too. If we use the opportunity for full prayer early each day, before the chores and cares of the day take our attention, we will be more likely to offer brief prayers as we go about our jobs and other daytime activities.

Prayer in the evening – especially before we get tired – is just as important in terms of our relationship with God. While we may find we concentrate more on the needs of others and ourselves in our morning prayers, evening conversations with God often have greater stress on asking for forgiveness, discussion of lessons learned and, of course, thanksgiving. If prayer regularly unlocks the beginning of our day and seals it at its end, we are beginning to use it successfully.

We will talk more about shorter spontaneous prayers at other times of day a little later.

## **Where: Universal Coverage**

You have doubtless seen the coverage maps many phone service providers use to show the areas where their service works. Some offer impressive coverage with very few “dead” areas. Prayer, of

course, comes with no coverage maps, as there are no areas where God cannot hear us. David reminds us of this fact when he says in the Psalms: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:7).

But at the practical level, the question of where we pray usually means where in our homes or elsewhere we choose to pray. For regular personal prayer, Jesus set the example in saying “... when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). The Greek word that is used in this verse for “room” (*tameion*) can mean a storeroom, closet, inner room, or any other room where you can be alone. What matters for our in-depth contact with God is that we find a place to pray that is private, preferably quiet, and without other distractions.

This principle can be applied just as well outside our homes as within them. The Gospels tell us, for example, that “... Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray ...” (Luke 6:12, etc.).

But Jesus also offered up short prayers in many other places – in a banquet room and a sickroom, inside houses and outside them, as well as on the road and even on boats and outside tombs. We too can pray anywhere, alone or with others, though as he showed us, our main prayers should be in private where we can focus entirely on God and the conversation we desire to have with him.

## **How Long: Unlimited Prayer Minutes**

How long we pray is primarily a matter of balance. On the one hand we have the incredible opportunity to speak with God for as long as we wish. Human rulers grant “audiences” for only short periods of time, and the fact that the Ruler of the universe grants us unlimited audience is a gift which we only fully come to appreciate as we grow in our relationship with God and find that we desire to spend more and more time in his company. Invariably, the more we pray, the more we want to pray.

On the other hand – and this is where balance comes in – both new and established Christians sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that we should always pray for a certain amount of time each day. If half an hour of prayer seems good, then perhaps an hour is more righteous, and two hours even more so. The truth is that prayer should never be measured in time but – as we will see – in fervency and focus. It is one thing to set aside a period of time to pray, but it is another to try to artificially fill that time.

Imagine how your friends would react if you called them every day and just kept talking for an hour until you had fulfilled your time, rather than having a real conversation which ended naturally. Real and effective prayer does not need to be long. Martin Luther wrote that “The fewer the words, the better the prayer.” It is known that Luther prayed devoutly, sometimes for long periods of time, but he realized that the effectiveness of a prayer is not based on its length.

The Old Testament also gives a wonderful example of this fact. The Book of Kings tells the story of how the Prophet Elijah challenged the prophets of the pagan god Baal to a contest to prove whether his God or their god should be followed. The account tells us that Baal’s prophets prayed feverishly for some six hours – from early morning till the time of the afternoon sacrifice – with no result. At that point Elijah prayed to God with a short but fervent prayer of only 35 words (somewhat more in English translation) which would take only a minute to utter, but which was answered immediately and in a spectacular manner (1 Kings 18:18-40).

Jesus himself provides the perfect example of how long prayer in public need be. We know the Son of God prayed privately for extended lengths of time (Luke 6:12, etc.), but all his public prayers recorded in the Gospels are short, and most are no more than a few words long. In fact, as we will see, Jesus specifically cautioned his disciples against praying with “many words” (Matthew 6:7).

The lesson is clear – long prayers are not more likely to be heard than short ones, and if our prayers are artificially drawn out, they are likely to be less effective. There may certainly be times when

we wish to seek God in protracted prayer, but in our normal day to day lives it is often a far more effective way to keep close to God if we pray deeply each morning and evening and offer short but frequent spontaneous mental prayers in the hours between. Even if they are prayers of only a few seconds duration, those “in between” prayers are what enable us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:16) and to live in an attitude of prayer.

## **Prayer Positions: Body, Hands and Eyes**

Just as you can use your phone in any position, so it is possible to pray in any position – standing (1 Kings 8:22), sitting (2 Samuel 7:18), kneeling (1 Kings 8:54), or lying down (Matthew 26:39).

But the Bible does make it clear that the normal position for in-depth private prayer is that of kneeling (Luke 22:40-41, Ephesians 3:14, etc.). This posture is one of humility that shows our submission and respect before God, which is why we should utilize it in private prayer when possible. On the other hand, those who are ill or disabled in some way that makes kneeling painful or impossible should never be concerned about this. God looks on the heart, of course, which is where our respect for him really lies.

Our heads may be bowed in prayer (Genesis 24:26), lifted up as if toward God (John 17:1), or at any other angle. So, too, the hands may be uplifted in prayer (1 Kings 8:22) or held in any other way. Praying with the hands clasped or held in a certain way is simply a culturally learned tradition which we should not confuse with what is “right” or acceptable to God. Numerous instances of prayer in the Bible do show individuals praying with hands outstretched toward the heavens (Psalm 28:2, etc.), but again, it is how we extend our hearts in prayer, not how we hold our hands, that matters.

In the same way, when we think of prayer we may think of closing our eyes, but this is not necessary or even biblical. We can certainly pray with our eyes closed just as well as with them open, but the reverse is also just as true. In some parts of the world,

where Christianity is outlawed and punishable by severe penalties, believers routinely pray with their eyes open to avoid unnecessary arrest and punishment.

The Bible also shows that praying with open eyes was probably the norm in biblical times. On two occasions when Jesus prayed to the Father, we are told that he looked up to heaven. In the first instance he was giving thanks: “Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me’” (John 11:41), and in the second he was making a request: “After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed ...” (John 17:1). In fact, the only other time a praying person’s eyes are mentioned in the New Testament is in the story of the repentant tax collector who was so distraught that when he prayed “... He would not even look up to heaven” (Luke 18:13), indicating that looking up to heaven would have been the normal way to pray.

Sometimes we may wish to close our eyes in order to not be distracted by things happening around us, but it is fine if we prefer to keep our eyes open, for example, to see that for which we are giving thanks or just to feel a closer connection with the One who is “near to all who call on him” (Psalm 145:18).

## **Troubleshooting**

A frustration experienced by all of us at times is finding that our mind may wander as we pray. Some people have more of a problem with this than others, but the cause need not be one of lack of dedication – usually it is a function of praying silently in our minds. Silent prayer in our thoughts works well for short prayers, but the normal process of association that occurs within the mind can easily send our thoughts off on tangents. The answer is simply to make our praying as much like real conversation as possible. It is hard for our thoughts to wander when we are in the process of actually speaking with someone, and it is so in prayer. If we are praying privately but in an area with others close by, we do not need to audibly speak the words, we can just form them silently on our



lips (1 Samuel 1:13). This kind of “silent speaking” will solve the problem of wandering thoughts 99% of the time!

## **Warnings**

Finally, any phone you might purchase will come with a few printed warnings or cautions – reminding you at the very least not to do anything with the phone that might hurt or injure you in some way. The privilege of prayer comes with a few warnings, too. Before giving his disciples the Lord’s Prayer (which we will see could be called the Bible’s own “quick start guide” to prayer), Jesus gave some specific warnings that he felt were particularly important. Let’s look at them individually:

*Warning 1:* “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full” (Matthew 6:5). Because this warning is given in a specific context (praying on street corners and in religious buildings), it’s easy to read over it and not think it applies to us. But the spirit of what Jesus said applies to any time we pray or talk about our prayers primarily to seem righteous to others. God hates this use of prayer for self-righteous purposes, and it is perhaps not surprising that it is the first thing Jesus warned against.

*Warning 2:* “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words” (Matthew 6:7). This does not mean that we should never repeat statements or requests made to God. Jesus himself used the same words in his fervent prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane on the final night of his life (Matthew 26:39-44).

There are times when we too may say the same or similar things in fervent prayer when we have something very important to say, or just in expressing our thanks or love for God. What is warned against is the “babbling” (NIV), “empty phrases” (ESV), or “vain

[meaningless] repetition” (KJV) that occurs in insincere prayer and which can occur, if we are not careful, when we simply recite memorized prayers or let our prayers drop below the level of a true personal conversation with God.

*Warning 3:* We can add another warning to those given to us by Jesus that centers on our attitude of respect for God. Pastors are sometimes asked “Can I pray while I shave/shower/put on makeup?” These are all examples of failing to really comprehend the level of respect we need to have for the One to whom we pray. Perhaps asking if we would do any of these things while we were granted an audience with a president, king or queen answers the question. We should not confuse the ability to pray in any circumstances with praying without due respect. Prayer should always be made with the focus and respect that a conversation with God deserves (Hebrews 12:28).

Keeping these simple instructions and warnings in mind, we can proceed to the exciting task of learning how to use prayer more deeply and richly – to its fullest and most transforming effect.

## 2. USING THE “LORD’S PRAYER”

Once we have mastered the basic “mechanics” of prayer, we can begin to look in more detail at what the Bible shows us about how to pray. The New Testament gives us a particularly helpful guide that we can use in this way. The Gospels record that Jesus taught: “When you pray, say ...” and he then proceeded to give what we know as the “Lord’s Prayer”:

*Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.*

*Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done  
On earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts,  
As we forgive our debtors.*

*And do not lead us into temptation,  
But deliver us from the evil one.*

*For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen. (Matthew 6:9–13)*

### **Actual Prayer or Guideline?**

There are a number of views of this prayer. Some think Jesus meant that it was given to be prayed just as it is, while others feel that it is really an outline which could be used as a guide and expanded in our own words. This latter approach – that the Lord’s Prayer was intended as a guide – seems to best fit the biblical evidence.

The wording of the Lord's Prayer is different in the two accounts in which the prayer occurs in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4) – so reciting its exact words is clearly not as important as following its general outline.

All the prayers recorded after this point in the New Testament are, in fact, different prayers, so Jesus could not have meant that these words are the only words we must pray.

Finally, there are some things not mentioned in the Lord's Prayer that other scriptures tell us Jesus said we should pray for – indicating again that the Lord's Prayer was intended primarily as a guide or outline (a “quick start guide” to prayer) rather than words simply to be repeated without expansion.

## **Expanding the Outline**

If we look at the Lord's Prayer as an outline guide for our in-depth prayer, we soon see how wonderfully it fulfills this function.

The very first words, “Our Father in heaven,” establish our relationship with God as both our Father and the Ruler of all there is – allowing us to prepare our mindset for an audience with him. They are followed by the words of praise and respect “Hallowed [honored] be your name” and these initial eight words alone can be expanded in all kinds of ways as we acknowledge, praise and thank God in our own words for everything he is and does.

And so it is with every section of the prayer: each small sentence opens up avenues of expression that we might not think of without its guidance. All the individual points can be prayed day after day without meaningless repetition because the prayer's framework engages our day to day experiences, our changing needs and concerns, as well as our developing goals and aspirations, and allows us to incorporate them into our conversations with God.

You will find a fully expanded outline for the Lord's Prayer in the Appendix at the end of this book. If you have never done so, try using the prayer as a guide in this way – it may be the single most effective way in which you can immediately transform your prayers.

## Teaching Us How to Pray

Beyond telling us what to pray, the Lord's Prayer shows us in at least three ways how to pray! First, the prayer teaches us about prayer based on love for God and our fellow human beings in the same way that the Ten Commandments stress these things. Second, the prayer helps us focus beyond ourselves in every request we make. And third, the prayer helps us prioritize the things we ask about. We will look briefly at all these additional ways in which the Lord's Prayer helps us to pray:

- **The Prayer and the Commandments.** When we look closely at the Lord's Prayer, we see that it is actually similar in structure to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5). The first group of points in both deal with our relationship with God, and the remaining points have to do with our relationship with others. There are even direct touch-points between the Prayer and the Commandments: "Father in Heaven"/ "I am the Lord Your God..."; "Hallowed be your name"/ "Do not take my name in vain"; etc.

When we understand this similarity, we see that the Lord's Prayer is not just about asking for what we need so much as it is asking for things that show our love for God and others. If the Ten Commandments show us how to love God and others, the Lord's Prayer teaches us how to ask for help to do that properly.

Rather than seeing the prayer as an unrelated list of requests, we begin to see it as a prayerful "walk through" of key areas of our relationship with God and with others. That fact in itself gives us an important clue as to how Jesus' prayer outline can be expanded, as we use it.

Humanly it may be easy to expand "give us today our daily bread" by mentioning our many physical needs, but how much do we expand on requests such as "hallowed be your name"? Realizing the dual stress of the prayer helps us to see this as an opportunity to express our love for God rather than just a statement to be recited.

• **First Person Plural.** Another basic thing to remember as we look at the model prayer we are given is that there isn't a single "I" or "my" in this prayer – only "you" and "us," "your" and "our." Considering how obvious this fact is, there seems to be a clear lesson not to focus our prayers entirely on ourselves.

Seen this way, the Lord's Prayer is very different from the individual list of personal wants and needs we may be tempted to offer at times, given the challenges of everyday life that we all face. There is certainly no problem with praying for ourselves, and the prayer outline does not deny us the ability to ask for the things we need – it just puts our requests in the context of "our" needs, helping us to keep our minds on the fact that the problems of others are just as real – and sometimes much more serious – than those we ourselves face.

The Book of Psalms gives some great examples of this fact. Remember there are more prayers there than in any other book of the Scriptures, and if you look at many of David's personal requests for help, they end with requests for others – for his people, for all of Israel (see Psalms 25:18, 22; 28:2, 9 for just two examples).

• **Prayer Triage.** When we kneel before God, dozens of things may come into our minds – the many needs and concerns of our own lives and those of family, friends and others whom we know. These many individual-level needs are in addition to things God shows us are even bigger needs – of worldwide scale. Sometimes it's hard to know where to start and where to end. That fact underscores one of the great purposes of the model prayer we have been given – putting things in the right context and priority.

Think of the Lord's Prayer as prayer triage. Jesus' guide to communication with our Father sorts through all those clamoring thoughts and needs and puts our concerns and requests in the right order. Matthew 6:7-8 tells us that "... your Father knows what you need before you ask him;" but even though God already knows what our most urgent needs are, the prayer outline puts things in proper perspective for us.

## **Putting It All Together**

So the Lord's Prayer functions as a wonderful guide to structuring our prayers. Although none of the recorded prayers of Jesus or the disciples after the time the outline was given follow the wording of the prayer, each later recorded prayer in the New Testament stresses some aspect found within the guide, showing how complete the model prayer is. Perhaps we could say that while spontaneous prayers will usually focus on one aspect of the outline, the Lord's Prayer provides a perfect guide for those occasions when we wish to seek God in more in-depth prayer.

Although God is doubtless more concerned with the content rather than the form of our prayers, the guide Jesus gave us covers all the main aspects of our relationship with God and with others; it constantly directs our focus outward to include the needs of others; and it helps us to bring order and priority to the requests we make. These three areas of guidance help us to understand what regular prayer is all about. The Lord's Prayer is more than just a prayer – it is a guide we can all use to help us gain fuller communication with God.

### 3. FOUR DIMENSIONS OF PRAYER

The Lord's Prayer is a wonderful introductory guide showing us what to pray, but it is not the only guidance the Bible gives us for developing our prayer skills. For example, the apostle Paul also provides a great deal of information about prayer that we can utilize. Paul frequently urges Christians to pray (Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, etc.), and in his first letter to his assistant Timothy he gives some very specific instruction:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:1-5).

Paul packs an amazing amount of guidance into these few verses. Notice that he begins with the words “I urge, then, first of all...” and if we study Paul's letter carefully we see that he does not follow with a “second” or “third” exhortation – the “first” is not the first of many, but something he feels is first in importance. Paul tells us it is of primary importance that we are active in four types of prayer: “petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving.”

These are not just four random aspects of prayer. Paul mentions each of them at other points in his writings – for example, he mentions prayer, petition, and thanksgiving in Philippians 4:6, but it is only in his first epistle to Timothy that he brings all four aspects together as a complete list.

Although there is some overlap, each of these four aspects of our conversations with God represents a different “dimension” of prayer:



- **“Petitions”** (Greek *deésis*) indicates prayer for a particular need – simply asking for something. Although prayer should never be just a list of requests, God’s word shows he does want us to look to him for our needs, of course (Matthew 6:11, 1 Peter 5:7, etc.), and our conversations with God will usually involve some “petitions.”
- **“Prayers”** (*proseuche*) is a more general word for speaking to God, but it often carries the idea of worship and praise. The same word is found in Matthew 21:13 where Jesus said of the temple, “My house will be called a house of prayer.”
- **“Intercessions”** (*enteuxis*) represent what may often be an urgent request on the behalf of others. But this intercession with God can be either for or against someone or something. We see this difference in Romans 8:34 “Christ Jesus ... is also interceding for us” and in Romans 11:2 “Elijah ... appealed to God against Israel.” The word can mean to intervene or to interfere in a situation, and the central idea is one of strong pleading for justice, mercy, or some other aspect of God’s intervention.
- **“Thanksgiving”** (*eucharistia*) conveys expressions of gratitude which are a vital dimension of fully effective prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:18). It is also important to understand that our expressions of thankfulness should be for the good things that have been given not only to us personally, but also to others – as Paul stresses in telling us that all these forms of prayer are to be made “for all people.”

We may notice a few other details regarding this instruction. After listing these four general dimensions of prayer, Paul then specifically mentions that they be used for all people and especially for “kings and all those in authority” so that believers “may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (vs. 2) – something we will return to later.

Paul also makes the point in these verses that our prayers should be offered through (or in the name of) the “one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.” While the pagan peoples of the ancient world believed in many intermediaries between humans and the gods, Paul shows the fallacy of this idea in stressing that there is only one mediator for full and acceptable prayer – Jesus Christ – because only Christ paid the penalty for our sins, allowing us to approach God in prayer.

These are important points, but the major thrust of Paul’s message to Timothy about prayer is found in what he says is of “first” importance: the four types of prayer he lists. We should understand that these four aspects of prayer do not somehow contradict the seven themes of prayer Jesus gave in the Lord’s Prayer. In fact, the two approaches to prayer interact completely. Each of the points Christ mentioned in the Lord’s Prayer can be seen to fit into what Paul says and, as we will see, the four aspects of prayer that Paul lists enhance our understanding of how to pray through the Lord’s Prayer.

While Jesus’ guide to prayer stresses the themes of our prayer, the list Paul gives us looks at the types of prayer we offer. Paul is stressing the way we approach God as we pray about the specific things Jesus mentions. In other words, the Lord’s Prayer gives us points to pray about, while Paul looks at the underlying approaches we should be taking as we pray about these things.

But there are some differences between what we pray about and the approaches we take. What we pray about will change according to circumstances, while the approaches we take will remain the same. We can easily and quickly learn the topics or subjects of prayer listed in the Lord’s Prayer, but there is much more to learn about the approaches we can take to these topics.

That is why we will look more closely at Paul’s four approaches to prayer – examining each “dimension” individually in the following parts of this book. It is to the degree that we come to understand the potential of each of these approaches that we will be fully utilizing the “direct line” of prayer we have been given!

**PART TWO:**  
**PRAISE**

## 4. THE FIRST STEP OF PRAYER

Today, many people think of prayer as asking – asking for help or asking for something we need – but for the first followers of Jesus, this was not the case. The first Christians viewed prayer not just as petition, but primarily as worship and praise.

We see this in the fact that the word used for prayer more than any other in the New Testament is *proseuche* – not the word for asking for things, but a word that more often connoted praise and worship. That is the second word in Paul’s list of the four aspects or dimensions of prayer in 1 Timothy 2:1 and the word for prayer that he and the other writers of the New Testament used the most frequently.

*Proseuche* is the word used when Jesus said “This, then, is how you should pray” (Matthew 6:9), so *proseuche* can mean prayer in a general sense. It can certainly include petitions, but its meaning is much broader; and the underlying usage of the word was one which usually focused on worship and praise.

### **A Word is Born!**

A little bit of history can demonstrate this for us. In the centuries before the time of Jesus, Jewish scholars produced the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek – the language most people understood and used at that time. When it was appropriate, the translators used the normal Greek word for prayer, *euche*, which meant making a religious vow – as we see in Job 22:27: “You will pray to him, and he will hear you, and you will fulfill your vows.”

But the Jewish scholars knew that in many cases this word did not fit the underlying meaning of prayer in the Hebrew Bible – which often focused more on worship and praise.

For those many cases, the translators of the Septuagint coined a new word, *proseuche*, which combined the idea of prayer, *euche*, with the word *pros* – meaning “to” or “toward.” By simply adding this prefix to the normal word for prayer, the focus of its meaning was moved away from the one vowing or praying to the One to whom the prayer was offered.

When we get to New Testament times, we find that although the old Greek word *euche* was used twice to mean “vow” in the Christian Scriptures (Acts 18:18; 21:23), the term the New Testament writers primarily chose to speak of prayer was that newer word *proseuche* – the word which focuses on God himself and which includes our worship and praise of God.

## **Prayer and the Temple**

For the people of ancient Israel living in Old Testament times and the people of Roman Judea in New Testament times, prayer was primarily associated with the temple in Jerusalem. Three times in the day – when the sacrifices were made – or at other times, many devout people went to the temple and offered their personal prayers (Acts 3:1). Prayer of this type was not an ongoing stream of asking for things – petitions – but primarily a daily expression of worship and praise.

We see this fact in a psalm of King David when he wrote: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalms 100:4). The “gates” and “courts” of which David speaks are the gates and courtyards of the temple and to “enter” them with praise is to begin our prayers, our worship, with praise.

In a similar way, in the New Testament we are told that after the resurrection of Jesus the disciples “... joined together constantly in prayer ...” (Acts 1:14) and that “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts ... praising God ...” (Acts 2:46-47). What we see here is the early Christians continually joining together not to ask for things, but to worship and offer praise.

## **Prayer Begins with Praise**

These examples and many others show that for the Jews and the early Christians worship and praise were at the heart of what regular prayer was all about. So we should not be surprised that in the Lord's Prayer the words that Jesus gave his disciples to begin their prayers were: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name" (Luke 11:2 NKJV) – offering the worship and praise that is implicit in addressing God in this way and affirming our desire that his name always be honored.

We see this pattern of beginning communication with God with worship and praise in many other prayers in the Bible. As we will see later, time and again in the Psalms King David begins his prayers with praise followed by requests, thanksgiving, and other aspects of prayer. But for now, notice two other examples. When David prayed after collecting gifts to build a temple to God, we find his prayer begins with seven verses of praise (followed by only two verses of the rest of the prayer!). Here is how David began that prayer:

David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, "Praise be to you, LORD, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name" (1 Chronicles 29:10-13).

If you look closely, you will see that this introduction to the prayer of David corresponds quite closely to a number of points in the Lord's Prayer. David gives thankful praise for many of the same things mentioned in Jesus' prayer, but what is important for our

present discussion is to see the clear way in which praise and worship formed the introduction to David's prayer.

Later, at the dedication of the temple of God once it was completed, David's son Solomon also offered a prayer which consists of specific requests for God to bless the temple and the people, but which also begins in praise:

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven and said: "Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today" (1 Kings 8:22-24).

We find this pattern throughout the Bible. Not only do many prayers consist entirely of worship and praise, but a great many – if not most – of the prayers recorded in Scripture begin with these aspects. The lesson for us is obvious: the biblical concept of prayer rests directly on our worship and praise of God, and we can be sure that our prayers are being offered in a manner pleasing to him if we pray with these aspects firmly in mind. The Lord's Prayer shows we should begin our prayers with worshipful praise, and many other biblical examples show that it is right for us to return to this theme and to close our prayers with it.

But why is this? Why is praise and worship so vital to successful prayer? The answers may surprise you, and we will take a look at them next.

## 5. WHY DO WE WORSHIP?

*“Let’s face it; God has a big ego problem. Why do we always have to worship him?” – Bill Maher*

The Bible does clearly teach that God directs us to worship and praise him. We see this, for example, in the Exodus story: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me’” (Exodus 8:1).

In the Psalms, David puts it poetically by writing that God is “enthroned on the praises” of his people (Psalm 22:3 ESV). We find praise and worship being continually offered to God throughout the Old and New Testaments.

In fact, 1 Peter 2:9 tells us that one of the reasons we are called as Christians today is to praise God: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

But for many atheists and agnostics, the idea of a God who encourages praise and worship seems to suggest a being who is selfishly motivated and self-centered. It is presumed that a divine desire for worship is the equivalent of the actions of humans whose egos cannot get enough praise and reinforcement.

The failure to understand God’s requirement for worship is based on the fallacy that God acts in human ways, for human reasons. While a man or woman who constantly seeks praise is at the least insecure and self-centered, that is not the character or personality of God.

When we look beneath the surface of what might “appear” to be, we find that God seeks our praise not primarily for his sake, but for ours. Consider four aspects of this truth.



## **Happiness Requires Verbalizing What We Love**

C. S. Lewis convincingly argued that God initiated the cycle of praise and worship because humans need to praise things they love in order to fully appreciate and enjoy them. Have you never walked a beautiful beach or watched a serene sunset and wished there was someone you could tell about it? As Lewis pointed out, wine lovers don't just drink fine wines, they talk about them – describe them and extoll them. Lovers don't just stare at each other; they verbalize how they feel about each other with praise.

Lewis touched on a clear aspect of the human mind in that our happiness about anything we like or love is made complete in praising it; and this is something recognized by every human society. Although not a Christian, Mahatma Gandhi wrote: “When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator.” The biblical correlation between praise and happiness is clear.

We see this often in the Psalms: “My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him” (Psalm 28:7b), and elsewhere in the Bible – including the life of Jesus himself: “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...’” (Luke 10:21). It is only natural to praise what brings us happiness and what we love!

## **Praise Helps Us to Remember Our Need of God**

Many of us grow up learning the value of self-reliance, and that is not always a bad thing if it is maintained in right balance. But there are things in life for which we cannot be self-reliant. The Christian faith, by its very nature, demands that we come to see our need of God in terms of his forgiveness and righteousness. Those are things that Christianity shows we cannot manufacture ourselves, and it is in our ongoing worship of God that we are continually reminded of our need of him.

As author Madeleine L'Engle once wrote, “One cannot be humble and aware of oneself at the same time.” It is in getting our focus off of ourselves and onto God in praise and worship that we find that broader perspective and remain humble – as King David wrote:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? (Psalms 8:3-4).

It is in praise that we gain true perspective and better see our need of God.

## **Worship Helps Us to Remain Obedient**

Yet another benefit of worship is that it helps us dedicate ourselves to the purposes of God. It is in worshipping the nature and character of God that we are reminded of the nature and character we are called to emulate, as much as is possible, in our own lives (Psalm 119:15).

There is an important aspect of this that we should always remember. Despite what many atheists may think, the question we all end up answering in life is not “Will I worship?” but “What will I worship?” As Pastor Paul David Tripp wrote: “You cannot divide human beings into those who worship and those who don’t. Everybody worships; it’s just a matter of what, or whom, we serve.” Those who do not worship God eventually worship things of their own choosing, and history has shown that this inevitably leads to humans badly hurting themselves, and others, in the process.

That is why the writer of the Book of Chronicles states: “For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods” (1 Chronicles 16:25). When we realize the truth of this, we see that worship and praise of God protects us from wrong worship that inevitably harms us.

## **Praise Is a Form of Thankfulness**

When someone helps us or does something for us, we often don't just use the expression "thank you." We feel we want to go beyond that and we say something like "That's very kind of you!"—acknowledging the help and even praising the person who helped us. That is the natural reaction of sincere appreciation. Not surprisingly, then, we find that individuals throughout the Bible who recognized what God had done for them offered praise as part of their thanksgiving.

Look at these two examples from the many we find in Scripture: "Praise be to the Lord ... who with his own hand has fulfilled what he promised..." (1 Kings 8:15); "Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name" (1 Chronicles 29:13). Praise is a natural part of grateful thanksgiving, and the more thankful we feel, the more natural it is to praise.

In all these ways, and more, Christians find that their worship has nothing to do with the imaginary flattering "worship" envisaged by atheists and others. Those who hold a meaningful relationship with God may have begun to worship him in some cases because they see God's instruction to do so, but they invariably continue because they want to do so – whether they are "supposed to" or not. They realize what worship adds to their lives. The critics of religion do not understand that it is not God who needs our worship, but we who need to praise him.

In the next chapter we will see how we can learn to do this – to praise in a full and intensely meaningful way.

## 6. THE MASTER OF PRAISE

*“I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands” (Psalm 63:4).*

Once we come to understand the vital role of praise in our prayer lives, perhaps the first question that comes to mind is “How do I do that – how can I better express praise?” While we do not ever need to self-consciously worry about whether the praises we offer are “good enough,” we would all agree that it would be great to have a “master coach” who could help us see how to more effectively show our feelings.

The good news is that we do have such a personal praise coach! The Bible’s master of praise was undoubtedly King David, whose prayers in the Book of Psalms contain some of the most profound words of praise recorded in the Bible. In fact, songs of praise are the most numerous of all the types of David’s prayers and actually form the core of the Book of Psalms – where they outnumber all other types of psalms combined.

We can use these psalms of praise written by David to enhance our own worship, not just by praying the same words – though some psalms are perfectly appropriate for our own use – but also by learning from David how he used his words of praise and the attitude of worship that he so clearly displayed.

### **Patterns of Praise**

Probably the first thing we notice about David’s worship, as we read the Psalms, is the continued praise he offers for the wonder and beauty of God’s creation. He does this not just in abstract terms, but by noticing specific things in nature and stressing how their design, function, and very existence inspired him to offer words of praise (Psalm 19:1, 148:3, 7-10, etc.). These things may seem like obvious objects of praise, and they are, but if we read his psalms

carefully we can learn from David's eye for detail and the sense of awe he exhibits in relating the created to the Creator.

In addition, David frequently praises God for his perfect nature and character – his goodness (Psalm 135:3), loving kindness (Psalm 117), justice (Psalm 99:3-4), mercy (Psalm 25:6, 7), and many other characteristics, as well as for his salvation (Psalm 27:1).

The Psalms also offer praise for many things that are far less obvious. Take, for example, the words in most translations of Psalm 76:10 which tell us that even human anger against God praises him, perhaps because it acknowledges God's existence and power whether intentionally or not! You may have to think about this verse for a minute to see how that applies. But as we meditate on David's psalms, we come to see the almost infinite number of ways in which we may be inspired to praise.

Another thing we learn from David is that he often tied his praise to actual events that occurred in his own life and the lives of others. Psalm 63, "A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah," is an excellent example of this. The first verse of the composition sets it in that desert environment, and David uses the situation poetically to reflect his relationship with God.

You, God, are my God,  
earnestly I seek you;  
I thirst for you,  
my whole being longs for you,  
in a dry and parched land  
where there is no water (vs. 1).

This is one of the major reasons the praises we read in the Psalms seem so fresh and real – they are based on real events and living responses to actual circumstances. David's praises are never generic, and there is a lesson in that for us.

As this same psalm progresses, we see another pattern David uses – he praises God for specific things using a formula he employs in many of his compositions: "Because you do X, I will praise you in

way Y.” In other words, David ties what God has done to what he now does in response to God. Notice these examples:

Because your love is better than life ...  
I will praise you as long as I live (vss. 3-4a).

Because you are my help,  
I sing in the shadow of your wings (vs. 7).

I cling to you; [because] your right hand upholds me (vs. 8; note the reversed order, but the identical concept).

If we look for them, we will find these methods of expression frequently in David’s compositions, but they are only some of the many patterns of praise we can find in the Book of Psalms. David offers praise for things God has done in the past or present, and for things God will do in the future; he offers praise for things God has done for him, and for others; for things asked for, and for things unasked for yet given by God. There are, in fact, dozens of ways we can find David offering thanks and praise and dozens of different responses David offers in return for God’s graciousness and help.

## **Catalogs of Praise**

Many of David’s psalms show how he structured his prayers of praise based on a number of specific points. It is as if David were making or keeping lists of things to praise! Look, for example, at Psalm 103. In that psalm David begins his prayer by saying: “Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name” (vs. 1), and then he continues by listing seven specific reasons for praise:

Praise the Lord, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—  
who forgives all your sins

and heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit  
and crowns you with love and compassion,  
who satisfies your desires with good things  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's (Psalm 103:2-5).

The fact that seven things for which we can offer praise are mentioned in these verses may be significant in that the number seven was symbolic of completion or totality in Hebrew culture (seven days of the week, seven annual festivals, etc.). So the seven reasons for praise may well be intended to represent the idea of "complete" praise, but David gives other, different, lists of praise in his psalms as well.

Many believers find it helpful to keep a notebook to record things to give thanks for in prayer. We can expand this idea to also list items for which we can give praise. Keeping notes like this may seem artificial at first, but it is easy to think of things during the course of the day only to forget them by the time we do approach God in prayer.

This is especially true when we are experiencing stresses in our lives because problems can cloud our vision and keep us from praising God effectively. But David continued to give praise in all circumstances (Psalm 25, etc.), and it is in some of the psalms composed in the most difficult times that we see David enumerating things for which he wanted to offer praise.

Keep that fact in mind. Often our problems seem lighter when we turn to God with praise for everything God is as well as what he does. There is nothing like a list of things for which we can offer praise in difficult times to help us remember – as David doubtless did – that God is there and he has everything in his control.

## **David: The "Praise Professional"**

David wrote "I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth" (Psalm 34:1 NKJV), and it is clear that

for him praise was a way of life. No other biblical figure gives us as much information on both public (Psalm 95:1-7) and private (Psalm 63:6-8) praise. So, as the Bible's true "master of praise," there is much we can learn from him. Reading through his psalms with an eye to how he worshipped God, we cannot fail to see ways in which our own praise may be expanded and enriched.

The Book of Psalms also contains prayers of praise by other individuals, as well as those by David, and many of the psalms that focus on worship give us a window into how praise was conducted in biblical times and can still be applied today. For example, Psalm 150 (which is anonymous and may have been written by David or someone else) uses the term "praise" thirteen times in its six verses – addressing not only the where (vs. 1) and why (vs. 2) of praise, but also the how (vss. 3-6)!

So if you have not read through the Psalms recently, consider that book for your next personal study project. No other book of the Bible will better help you to see richly effective praise and inspire you to aim for it yourself.



**PART THREE:**  
**PETITION**

## 7. PRAYING FOR OUR NEEDS

God takes our needs very seriously. Have you ever thought about that? Consider the Lord's Prayer that we looked at earlier in this book. In the outline prayer he gave, Jesus placed the "petition" or request "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11 and also Luke 11:3) directly after the opening praise and request for God's kingdom and his will – and even before a number of important spiritual issues such as asking forgiveness and protection from evil.

Why would Christ have given such priority to our needs if they were not extremely important to God? At the physical level, our heavenly Father understands that without having our basic needs it may be pointless for us to pray for ongoing spiritual issues. We must survive and function if we are to grow spiritually and serve others.

Jesus himself worked according to that basic truth in dealing with people. The Gospels record a number of occasions when he healed and helped people first and only then told them to "sin no more" (John 5:14, 8:11) or gave them other spiritual instruction. Jesus knew people's physical needs had to be in place and then they could look to spiritual needs. "Our daily bread" can include both.

### **Our Daily "Bread"**

So let's examine the request for our needs that Jesus incorporated into the Lord's Prayer. First, we must recognize, of course, that asking God to supply our daily bread is not asking or expecting God to rain down food or other needs from heaven as he did in the story of the manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4)! That was a situation in which God's people were in an area where it was impossible to get food by any normal means. The Bible is clear that in most cases we need to work and do whatever we can to supply our needs (Proverbs 21:25, 2 Thessalonians 3:10, etc.); but in asking God's

help, we are asking him to bless our efforts and to grant us what we need in areas where we are unable to provide for ourselves.

Next, we should understand that asking for the physical “bread” we need means much more than just nourishment. In the biblical world the word “bread” was often used to refer to food in general – just as the miraculous manna given to the ancient Israelites was called “bread from heaven” – but it could also mean our basic needs. Today we still speak of the “breadwinners” in our families, and in the Lord’s Prayer asking for “bread” is clearly meant in the broader sense of asking for all our needs, not just our nourishment. The more we look at this petition, the broader we see it is. Shortly after giving the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus instructed his disciples not to worry about physical things and told them:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ... your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:25-33).

This clear teaching indicates that the request for our daily “bread” involves more than just food and other basic physical necessities. In fact, this request in the Lord’s Prayer may have a broader and deeper meaning than we often realize.

The word “daily” in the expression “Give us today our daily bread” is not the usual word (*hemeran*) used in the New Testament, but a different Greek word (*epiousios*) which is not found anywhere else in the Bible – or in other ancient Greek writings. Although many versions of the Bible translate this word as “daily,” that is really just a guess; but there is no reason to repeat “Give us today our daily bread.” Many biblical scholars feel that the word should be translated either the bread that is “necessary for existence” (in other words, bread as a symbol of all our physical needs) or bread

that is “beyond-substance” (in other words, spiritual “bread” or nourishment).

We may not be able to know which translation is closest to the ancient meaning of the word often translated “daily,” but the two possibilities should remind us that we are encouraged to pray for what we need – whether it is a physical or spiritual need.

## **Physical Needs**

The physical needs covered by the request for our “daily bread” are wide-ranging indeed. Jesus invites us to pray not only for the food we need, but also for any such necessities of life – a home to live in, a job to work at, clothes to wear, education or training from which we may benefit in order to be able to successfully survive – whatever is essential as opposed to merely wanted (Matthew 6:25).

Although it is not wrong to pray for some things we desire that are not actually necessary to stay alive – as we will see in the next chapter – our physical requests should first and foremost be for actual needs. And even if we have the things we need at this moment, it will not help us if we are not kept safe – so we can and should pray for protection. We see this prayer in so many of the Psalms and in the prayer of Jesus for his disciples: “... Father, protect them by the power of your name” (John 17:11).

In the same way, we can pray for healing from illness or help in dealing with disabilities. Healing itself is a broad area – we may need help with physical, emotional or mental healing, but God is willing to hear our prayers for any aspect of wellness (James 5:14-16). The apostle John showed the importance of our need for health when he wrote: “I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 1:2).

We may find ourselves suffering in other ways, perhaps from anxiety, grief, or persecution, but God’s word to us is the same in any case: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray” (James 5:13). Implicit in this command, of course, is God’s desire to help

us and to provide for us in all our physical needs. And we should not hesitate to take our needs to God – no real need is too small to be prayed about. As Christian Holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom wrote: “Any concern too small to be turned into a prayer is too small to be made into a burden.”

The key is always putting God first in our lives, and then no real need is too small to take to him. If we have sincerely prayed according to the outline given by Jesus then we have put God and his will and kingdom first in our prayers and can confidently ask “Give us today our daily bread.” That is why the apostle Paul could write dogmatically: “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

## **Spiritual Needs**

Jesus himself talked about the necessity of both physical and spiritual “bread” (Matthew 4:4), and we also have the clear account of how he dealt with those who were following him – feeding them when they were hungry and then explaining the importance of the true “spiritual bread” that he and his words represented (John 6:35). As we saw above, Jesus did not stop at fulfilling people’s physical need – he continued by then making available what they needed spiritually. So our “daily bread” is not limited to the purely physical. The apostle Paul makes this point in writing to the church of Corinth:

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Corinthians 9:10).

How clear it is that we should be asking for the one as we ask for the other. Our spiritual needs are primarily for God’s presence and Spirit in our lives, but we should also be praying daily for increased understanding of God’s will and for help in overcoming sin and our own human nature. This is an ongoing battle, of course, and in the

same letter Paul reminds us of the need to be confidently and continually going to God for this daily spiritual need:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day (2 Corinthian 4:16).

Some of our spiritual needs – such as the ability to forgive, and to be delivered from evil – are covered by specific petitions in the Lord’s Prayer outline, so we should already be praying for those things; but our requests for our daily spiritual bread should include the specific needs that we face in our own lives as we seek to love and obey God. In this regard we should not neglect to pray for our own prayer life. This is something few people think to do, but asking for ongoing guidance in how and what to pray can lead to greater success in everything we pray about!

And we should always remember that God is more than desirous to grant us our requests for spiritual help and growth (Romans 8:5-13, 26-27, 31-32). Specifically, Romans 8:32 tells us: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” That is a beautiful verse, but we must never forget its context, which is one of God’s gift of our spiritual needs.

## 8. PRAYING FOR OUR DESIRES

“You have granted him his heart’s desire and have not withheld the request of his lips” (Psalm 21:2).

In the last chapter we saw that God takes our needs seriously. God is also willing to take seriously our desires for things we dearly would like, but do not necessarily “need.”

We should always remember that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6); as long as we have everything we need, we should strive to be content whenever possible. But that does not mean that our human desires for good things are wrong in God’s eyes. The same God who created the human mind and its longings inspired the truth that “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12).

For example, God placed within the human mind the desire to find a mate, and the Book of Proverbs tells us that “He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 18:22). Abraham’s servant prayed for a wife for his master’s son (Genesis 24:12, 15), and we are told that God answered that particular prayer immediately!

We can add many other things to this single example of something we may rightly desire or long for. The story of Isaac praying for a child for his wife Rebekah (Genesis 25:21) comes to mind, as does the story of Hannah longing and praying for a child (1 Samuel 1-2). The Bible shows a number of other desires that are good and right in God’s eyes, but we do not need to find some scriptural justification for something we would dearly like in this life. David wrote in the Psalms: “The Lord God is a sun and shield, the Lord will give grace and glory, no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11). Notice that David does not say God will give us anything we ask for, but he does say

that God will not withhold something that is good from those who please him if the time and circumstances are right.

## **Should We Pray for Prosperity?**

Saying that we can pray for anything that is good and right for us is not the same as saying we can pray for anything we would like. A case in point is material possessions or wealth beyond what we actually need. Today, the “prosperity gospel” (sometimes called “health and wealth gospel” or “success gospel”) is a belief held by some Christians who think that financial prosperity and physical well-being can be gained from God through faith (and sometimes by donations to the denominations that teach this belief!).

Ironically, this so-called “gospel” closely resembles some of the wrongful approaches that infiltrated the early Church and which are condemned in the Bible as being unscriptural and based on a way of greed. Rather than urging us to seek wealth, the Bible cautions against pursuing it. Jesus himself warned, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). The apostle Paul specifically condemned religious seeking after prosperity when he wrote about:

... people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain ... But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:5-11).



Dozens of scriptures reinforce this truth throughout the Bible and show that physical prosperity should not be our focus. If God desires to bless us with physical abundance, he will do so; but we should not usually pray for money or other possessions beyond what we need. In all too many cases people who receive a great deal of physical wealth are no happier and may be caused great unhappiness and loss of character in the long run. They truly “...pierced themselves with many griefs,” as Paul wrote.

Nevertheless, there are some circumstances when prayer for more than we need personally is right in God’s eyes. If we are praying for success or blessings in specific circumstances that would better enable us to help others or to do the work of God more effectively, that is a prayer that God will often honor; but we must always be careful of our own motivation in making such a request. Sometimes God will also bless us with abundance that is unasked for. And if he does bless us in that way, he may well have a reason for doing so. Very often, that reason involves making it possible for us to do his work and to help others whom he wants to see helped. We are often “blessed to be a blessing” to others, but that is in God’s hands and not something we need worry about. We only need seeing eyes and understanding hearts to recognize the blessings we do receive and the opportunities they provide us – not for getting, but for giving.

## **What We Want Most in Life**

For most of us, great physical prosperity is not important, and that is as it should be. But we do all have valid desires in life, as we have already seen. For all those things, we need only remember that God is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17).

Once our lives become centered in God, it is often amazing how he does begin to bless us and to provide for even desires that are right and proper. One of the psalms – Psalm 37 – contains a wonderful passage that shows that principle very clearly.

Psalm 37 is a skillfully composed poem that David seems to have written as an old man (vs. 25), looking back over his life at “what works” and “what doesn’t work.” One of the most remarkable aspects of this psalm is found in its first seven verses. The psalm begins by reminding us of the fate of those who try to obtain their wants in wrong ways: “Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither” (vss. 1-2). But David then points to the potential for fulfillment of all our right desires:

Trust in the Lord and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.  
Take delight in the Lord,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the Lord;  
trust in him and he will do this:  
He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,  
your vindication like the noonday sun (vss. 3-7).

First, David discusses our physical needs: “Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture” (vs. 3). Here, a life combining faith and good works (“trust” and “do good”) puts us in position for God to care for our basic physical needs. Even though economic hardship sometimes happens to his people, God does supply the vital needs of those who walk with him (vs. 25).

Next, the psalmist covers the fulfillment of emotional needs for those whose devotion to God goes past the level of basic obedience: “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (vs. 4). So often we find that as we walk more closely with God our perspective changes and we begin to “want” rightly and unselfishly – especially in our relationships with others – and our deepest emotional desires seem to be granted.

Then, David points to a level of total commitment to God: “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your

vindication like the noonday sun” (vss. 5-6). The word “commit” in this verse is a strong one which does not signify any kind of half-hearted application of our energy. The word is a form of the Hebrew word *gol*, used for the concept of “rolling” – as in rolling a large, heavy stone (Genesis 29:3, 8, etc.). It implies a fully energetic moving or thrusting of our will – an all-out effort toward God’s way. This kind of commitment, David tells us, results in eventual achievement of even our highest spiritual goals.

In these few verses we see the fulfillment of everything we really want in this life and beyond: our physical needs, emotional desires, and ultimately our spiritual aspirations. David makes it clear that this three-level staircase of walking with God is no selfish investment program of giving more to get more. Rather, he paints a picture of the sincere development of our dedication and love for God, and the resulting fulfillment of our rightful desires that God delights to give us.

## 9. THE STORY OF GRACE

The story of Grace is a very beautiful one. Grace was a woman who wanted something – wanted something as much as you have ever wanted anything in your life, and perhaps more. According to the story, Grace asked God for what she wanted and God smiled on her and answered her prayer.

But that has happened to many people. What is so different about the story of Grace is that having finally received what she had always wanted, this remarkable woman gave up the gift in order to put God before her own desires. But we cannot out-give God, and he then blessed Grace more than she could have dared to dream. Her story still inspires us today – for Grace was the biblical figure you know as Hannah. Hannah means Grace.

### **What Grace Requested**

You probably remember the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 – how she was infertile and how, in an age which had no medical help for this problem or any system of adoption, she deeply longed for a child. Hannah's longing led her to pray for a son, promising that she would give the child back to God, as a lifelong servant, if he would answer her prayer (1 Samuel 1:10-11).

Notice that Hannah did not ask for a child – she asked for a son. Her request was not for a son to carry on the family – because she intended to dedicate him to God. Hannah asked for a son so he could be used to serve in the tabernacle: her request was one which focused on the gift she intended to make to God.

Hannah was not alone in her infertility. The Bible records that Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel – the wives of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – could not conceive, but we are not told that any of these women sought God in prayer to ask for children. But Hannah stands out as a shining example of someone who went to

God in prayer, who asked for the seemingly impossible while demonstrating total commitment to God – and received what she desired.

## **What Grace Received**

As the story shows, God heard Hannah's prayer and blessed her with a son whom she called Samuel (meaning "God hears"). When her son was born, Hannah rejoiced in her answered prayer, saying poetically of God: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor" (1 Samuel 2:8a). Many years later, the writer of Psalm 113 would pay tribute to Hannah's prayer of thanks when he wrote:

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes, with the princes of his people. He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children ... (Psalm 113:7-9).

But true to her word, after she had finished nursing the young boy, when he was about three years old, Hannah presented him to the high priest Eli for the service of God (1 Samuel 1:24). Notice Hannah's words as she dedicated Samuel: "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:27-28a). But a more literal translation of the last part of this passage would be: "I also have given back what was asked [prayed for] to God ...." The more literal translation puts focus on the fact that Hannah gave back a gift from God, something that meant a great deal to her – the very thing she wanted above all else in this life.

Realize the extent of Hannah's gift – she could have dedicated her son for a specific, shorter, length of time. The refraining from cutting the hair of Samuel she mentions was the most important element in the so-called Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:5) by which

someone was dedicated to God and to his service, but the vow was usually restricted to a limited time period (Numbers 6:13). Hannah extended this vow by making her gift a lifelong dedication.

But that was not the end of the story, of course. Each year when Hannah returned to see Samuel, the priest Eli would pray over the family “...May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord...” (1 Samuel 2:20). God continued to answer these prayers for Hannah, and she was blessed with two more sons and three daughters (1 Samuel 2:21).

## **What Grace Teaches Us**

There are many lessons we can learn from the story of Hannah, which is truly a story of Grace. For one, the story shows us that God often blesses greatly those who have given gifts back to him. Also, we see in the story of Hannah how God often uses gifts which are true sacrifices in very powerful ways. In this case, of course, Hannah’s son Samuel grew to be one of the greatest prophets of ancient Israel and God’s leading servant of that time (1 Samuel 3:19-21). But we also see specific lessons in this story regarding prayer:

- Hannah was not afraid to ask God for something she deeply desired (1 Samuel 1:11).
- She approached God in total humility, completely acknowledging her own inability to achieve what she desired (1 Samuel 1:16).
- She did not ask for a child – she asked for a son so he could be used to serve in the tabernacle –showing that her ultimate desire was to give a gift to God (1 Samuel 1:11B)
- She gave thanks as fervently as she prayed for what she desired (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

- Hannah also showed her total dedication to God in her prayer by giving up her son – dedicating Samuel – for his whole lifetime (1 Samuel 2:11).

Perhaps the greatest lesson of the story of Hannah is that we must never put what we ask for before our relationship with the One we ask. Hannah did not do that and, as a result, she was greatly blessed. Many have learned this same lesson: when we put God's desires first in our lives, he so often grants not only our needs, but also our deepest desires (Psalm 20:4, 21:2, 37:4).

**PART FOUR:**  
**INTERCESSION**



## 10. INTERCESSORY PRAYER

*“...far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23).*

In Part Three of this book we looked at how we can and should pray for our needs – we have Christ’s encouragement to do so. But praying for our own concerns is only part of the overall pattern of prayer we find in the words of Jesus and in the Bible as a whole. In addition to learning to pray for ourselves, we must also learn to effectively pray for the needs of others.

“Intercessory” prayer is the name often given to this kind of prayer made on behalf of others. While we offer “petitions” for ourselves, we make “intercession” for other individuals or groups of people. Intercession is asking for God’s intervention or help for people who cannot themselves pray, perhaps because of illness or some other reason; those who clearly need help because of their circumstances; or those who have asked for the prayers of fellow believers on their behalf regarding some problem.

The Bible gives many examples of this kind of prayer that tell us for whom intercessory prayers were offered and show us the great range of situations in which such prayers were made.

### **In the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament we see intercessory prayer being made by many of the leading servants of God, including Abraham (Genesis 18:23-33), Moses (Exodus 32:9-14), Samuel (1 Samuel 12:19-23), David (Psalm 25:22), Elijah (1 Kings 18:36-37), Daniel (Daniel 9:4-19), and others.

Sometimes these prayers were offered for individuals, for groups of people, places, communities, cities or whole nations. A wonderful example is found in Daniel 9 which records the prophet

Daniel's intercessory prayer on behalf of the Jewish people carried captive to Babylon and for the renewal of the destroyed temple of God. If we study this prayer, we see that it utilizes many of the points found in the outline prayer given by Jesus – the Lord's Prayer.

Daniel begins his prayer with praise, saying: "...Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments..." (Daniel 9:4). He continues by asking for the forgiveness of his own and his people's sins: "we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws ..." (Daniel 9:5-6). He prays for the honoring of God's name (Daniel 9:15, 19). He also asks for the help needed by the people, and for their temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:16-17).

Most of the other intercessory prayers of the Old Testament also include a number of these same points and remind us again that requests for others should be offered, just like requests for ourselves, with praise and acknowledgement of God's power as well as pleas for his mercy and forgiveness, where appropriate.

## **In the New Testament**

The accounts of the life of Jesus are full of examples of intercessory prayer. Not only do we find people praying to Jesus on behalf of others (Luke 7:1-10, etc.), but we also see that intercession is a central part of the character and role of Christ himself. After the resurrection, Jesus is pictured in the New Testament as the Son of God who is the ultimate intercessor, through whom every Christian's prayers are offered to God. We see this in the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy when he wrote "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

But Christ does not only act as the one who enables our prayers to go to God, he also plays a direct role in interceding for us personally. Paul tells us: "...Christ Jesus who died – more than

that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Romans 8:34). The Book of Hebrews shows both aspects of Christ’s intercession in saying that Jesus “... is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

During his ministry Jesus urged his followers to intercede for others – as we have seen in the Lord’s Prayer where the petitions are in the plural and we are instructed to pray for “our” needs rather than just “my” needs. We must never forget that throughout that guide to prayer we are shown that we should pray for the needs of others as well as for our own.

## **Asking in Acts**

If we continue in the New Testament and look at the Book of Acts, we find something very interesting. The vast majority of the prayers recorded in Acts that were made by members of the early Church were “intercessory” prayers offered for others. The Book of Acts continually speaks of prayer in the early Church, but if we set aside the scriptures that simply tell us that the early church members prayed and we look only at verses telling us what the early believers were praying, in most translations we find only two verses in Acts showing people praying for their own situations and twelve verses showing believers praying for the needs and welfare of others.

This means that of the recorded prayers in Acts, some 83% are prayers on behalf of others rather than prayers for the individual who was offering the prayer. If we have not thought about this topic before, that statistic may seem unexpected. Perhaps we would expect the ratio to be about 50/50 – prayer for others just as much as for ourselves. But the approximately 83% prayer for others we find in Acts is a powerful statement of another way of looking at prayer – as an opportunity not just to ask God for his help and favor, but even more as an opportunity to serve and help others. And the Book of Acts is not alone in taking this view.

## **Paul and Prayer**

In the writings of the apostle Paul, we find this principle confirmed. Paul speaks of prayer some fifty times in his epistles. Apart from non-specific examples, when we look at the nature of the prayers Paul mentions we find only three instances of praying for one's own needs. Seven times Paul speaks of praying generally; but in some forty of the fifty instances (80%) where he mentions specific things being prayed about, we find him speaking of praying for others or urging people to do likewise. For example, Paul tells us that he prayed constantly for the spiritual needs of other believers:

God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times... (Romans 1:9-10).

And he urged others to continually do the same:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18).

So the pattern we found in Acts where we are told what people were praying for is repeated in the epistles of Paul where he so frequently tells what we should be praying for. These facts should speak to us. It is not a matter of attempting to establish Christian practice through statistics. It is simply acknowledging that in the prayers recorded and commanded in the New Testament Church, the great majority – somewhere around 80% – are prayers for others.

## **Applying the Principle**

That's why we can think of this fact as the 80% principle of what we ask for in prayer. It's an estimated number with no claim to being correct to the third decimal place, but it's a rounded number with a

clear message. This principle does not mean we should not pray for our own needs – and in some circumstances, of course, our own needs may be urgent and take full precedence in our thoughts. But the 80% principle opens a window for us to see how the early Church saw prayer, how Paul encouraged us to pray; and it gives added meaning to Jesus' words that we pray for "us" in the plural.

We certainly don't need to feel constrained to structure our prayers to a certain percentage in a certain way, but if we are growing more and more like the One to whom we are praying, the chances are that our prayers will become increasingly full of the needs of others and reflect our concern for them. If our prayers are growing in that direction and we begin to see the needs of others as usually greater than our own needs, we can trust that God will be pleased with our prayers – perhaps 100% pleased.

## **11. LEARNING TO INTERCEDE**

As we saw in the last chapter, in the Book of Acts we find the vast majority of recorded prayers made by members of the early Church were “intercessory” prayers offered for others. We also find an almost identical situation in the letters written by the apostle Paul to various individuals and churches.

Paul’s writings provide us with a great number of examples of intercessory prayer – both of the apostle himself praying for others and his encouragement to all Christians to do the same. By looking at some of these examples, we can learn much about this kind of prayer.

### **Examples from Paul**

Paul prayed fervently for fellow Christians. For example, in his letter to the Church at Philippi, Paul writes “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy” (Philippians 1:3-4). Even in this brief mention, we note how Paul was praying often – “in all my prayers.” He was also praying not just for his friends or those he knew were experiencing problems, but “for all of you” – the whole Church.

Paul’s prayers of intercession were evidently not general ones, either. A number of scriptures show that he broke his prayers down into very specific requests. Notice, from this perspective, what Paul tells the Thessalonians:

... we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).

And in his letter to the Ephesians Paul elaborates on his prayers for others:

... ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people (Ephesians 1:15-18).

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

In these examples we again see Paul's mention of his continual, ongoing prayer for his fellow believers, and we also gain a number of ideas for the kinds of things we, too, can ask God on behalf of others.

But we should remember that Paul did not just mention his intercessory prayers to encourage other believers to pray in this way; he directly urged the Christians to whom he wrote to do just as he did:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on

praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should (Ephesians 6:18-20).

## **Circles of Prayer**

Putting together the instructions found in the Old and New Testaments, we see that God desires us to offer intercessory prayers for a wide range of people. We find, for example, that we are encouraged to pray for friends (Job 42:8), fellow citizens (Romans 10:1), God's people (Ephesians 6:18), ministers (Philippians 1:19), the sick (James 5:14-16), as well as those who deny or forsake us (2 Timothy 4:16), those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44), and our enemies (Jeremiah 29:7). Additionally, we see that we should pray for leaders at every level (1 Timothy 2:2), and leaders should intercede for those they lead (1 Samuel 10:2-7). We are also urged to pray for all people (1 Timothy 2:1)!

But even these examples of people for whom we should pray make for a huge list – how can we possibly pray for so many in a meaningful way? The answer is that we can most effectively intercede for others if we have a “battle plan” – a “campaign map” to help guide us through the many areas in which we can pray for those who need help.

One of the most effective strategies we can utilize in this way is to simply pray outward away from ourselves in expanding circles like the ripples that spread when a pebble is thrown into a pond. This method of prayer is actually something we find in the prayers of Jesus himself.

In his “Great Intercessory Prayer” in John 17:1-26 – the longest recorded prayer of Jesus, which he offered after the Last Supper and before his betrayal and arrest – we see that he prayed first regarding his own situation, then for his disciples, for all believers, and finally for all people:



*For Himself:* “...Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you ... glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began ...” (John 17:1-5).

*For His Disciples:* “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world... I pray for them... Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one ... My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one ...” (John 17:6-19).

*For All Believers:* “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20-21a).

*For All People:* “May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me ...” (John 17:21B).

If you read the entire chapter of John 17, you will see that these are the expanding “circles” Jesus used in addressing the Father in this important prayer. And notice that in the final passage given above, though his stress in this intercessory prayer was on the body of believers themselves, Jesus mentioned all people of the world, that they also might come to believe.

If we utilize this same outwardly expanding approach, after praying for our own needs we can then enlarge our prayers to intercede for our families, friends and fellow believers, our community and nation, the nations of the world and their leaders. Of course, if we attempted to pray for all the problems in all of these areas each time we prayed, it would be a full-time activity. But we can stress different circles on different occasions as we are aware of specific situations where people need our prayers.

The main thing is to realize that if we follow such a plan of outgoing circles, we organize our thoughts and are less likely to forget needs in different areas. Following such a plan also helps us to focus better and makes it less likely that our minds will wander off course in this vitally important area of our prayers.

## **The Importance of Intercession**

We will have more to say on the importance of intercession when we look at answered prayer, later in this book, but consider one example. Over a hundred years ago the British missionary James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) established the “China Inland Mission” with more than 300 missionary stations throughout China. The missionary staff noticed that the number of people converted at one of these stations far exceeded the number converted at any other, and its success could not be accounted for. The particular success of the one mission station remained a mystery until Taylor made a routine trip back to England. There, after one of his lectures, a member of the audience introduced himself who clearly had a great deal of knowledge of the successful missionary station.

When Taylor asked the man how he knew so much about this one outpost, the man replied that he knew and corresponded with one of the missionaries there. The man went on to say that his friend regularly sent him the names of people inquiring about the Christian faith at that station and that he prayed daily for those people, that their minds might be opened. After talking with the man, Taylor firmly believed that this individual’s daily, detailed prayer was making a difference that accounted for the most successful missionary station in China.

This story of the effects of intercessory prayer in a specific situation could be multiplied many times. Similar things have often happened, and we can experience them, too. All we have to decide on a given day is for whom, and where, we will direct our own prayers in the circles that radiate out from our own lives.

## **12. THE MAN WHO NEGOTIATED WITH GOD**

You probably remember the story in the Book of Genesis of how God appeared to Abraham and told him that he planned to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their overwhelming evil (Genesis 18:16-33). The account tells us that Abraham then pleaded with the Lord for those cities and for any righteous people who might be living in them in one of the most detailed examples in the Bible of a person interceding with God on the behalf of others. This was, indeed, an intercession from which we can all learn – a bold pleading that might even be called the story of a man who righteously bargained with God.

“Bargaining,” “dealing,” or “haggling” are all terms often used of the practice of negotiating an agreement that has long been part of Middle Eastern business transactions. The practice was widespread in the ancient world and remains common today, so the original readers of the biblical account of Abraham negotiating with God would not have found it as shocking as those of other cultures might. Yet there is no question that Abraham did not take this negotiation lightly. We will look at the account of his interaction with God in its entirety before focusing on what we can learn from its details.

### **Standing before God**

... Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it

from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home (Genesis 18:22-33).

## **Effective Intercession**

This is a powerful case study in interceding for others. Some of the story's details, although they are easily missed, show us exactly how Abraham addressed God and made his plea effective:

*Effective Intercession Requires Closeness to God:* Abraham was already "standing before the Lord," but the story stresses that he got closer still: "... Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said..." (Genesis 18:22-23). Abraham began his plea for others by drawing closer to God. Although the story is talking about moving physically closer, the principle applies spiritually. If we really desire to intercede with

God for others regarding important situations, one of the first things we can do is to move closer to him. We may feel that we are already keeping close in our daily spiritual activities, but Abraham's actions shadow a spiritual reality: successful intercession often involves moving closer to God in intensified prayer and study before making our intercession.

*Effective Intercession Requires Both Humility and Boldness:* Abraham knew full well that the One with whom he was speaking was God himself (Genesis 18:27, 30-32). He calls God "Adonai," meaning "Lord" or "Master," and he remembered his own nothingness in his presence: "...I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes" (vs. 27). Nevertheless, Abraham's proper attitude of humility did not stop him from showing respectful boldness toward God. The New Testament tells us that we may approach God with this kind of confidence: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16 NKJV). But notice that it is a boldness based on our need, not our righteousness – exactly the attitude that Abraham showed.

*Effective Intercession Requires a Reason:* Simply praying "Please help this person" may be intercession, but it is never as powerful as when we verbalize reasons for why God should change his mind or intervene. Notice that Abraham did this from the beginning of his intercession for the cities of the plain: "... Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?" (Genesis 18:23-24). Abraham was not trying to be morally superior in his argument – he makes a plea based on both his understanding of God's nature and character and a concern that God's judgment be properly perceived by those who would hear about the destruction of the cities. We see the same concern for God's name in the prayer of

Daniel we mentioned in the first chapter of this section: “... Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name” (Daniel 9:19). Making a specific case for why individuals need encouragement, rescue, wisdom, or help often makes for more powerful intercession.

*Effective Intercession Requires True Love for People:* We can no more “fake” true love for those for whom we intercede before God than we can fake repentance or true sorrow for our mistakes. Abraham doubtless knew the sinful state of the cities for which he interceded, but he showed compassion on them by struggling to find a way to save them. Notice that Abraham did not just ask that God remove or rescue his relatives or any other righteous individuals before destroying the cities – he interceded for both the righteous and the unrighteous in praying that the cities be spared for the sake of the righteous who were there. As we saw in Hebrews 4:16, our boldness is based on God’s mercy toward us. Abraham’s prayers of intercession reinforce the lesson that anyone who has received mercy should try to find mercy for others where that is possible.

*Effective Intercession Requires Persistence:* True intercession does not just mention someone in prayer, then go away. When the Lord agreed that for the sake of fifty innocent people he would not destroy the cities of the plain, Abraham successively lowers the number. He asks if God would spare the cities for the sake of forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then ten people. In each case God agrees that he would spare the cities for those smaller numbers. We see Abraham’s persistence not just in the ongoing naming of lower numbers, but also in the way in which he continually asked God to hear him yet again on this matter. Persistence is often not easy, but it is the heart of intercession. This may be the most obvious lesson from Abraham’s negotiating with God, but it is also a profound one. As we will see, Abraham did not

just persist for a while, then drop the matter feeling he had “done his part” or “done his best.”

## **Why Stop At Ten?**

Although he had successfully negotiated with God in lowering the number of righteous people for whose sake the cities would not be destroyed, when he reached ten people the negotiations end. Some biblical commentators have even written that the patriarch “ran out of steam” as it were – that he lacked the resolve to continue to plead for fewer than ten people. Others have said that perhaps Abraham thought that if there were fewer than ten righteous people, perhaps there was no excuse for those cities.

But this kind of speculation forgets an important detail in the story. Immediately after Abraham pleaded for ten, God answered: “‘For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.’ When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home” (Genesis 18:32-33). Notice that it was God who ended the conversation – before Abraham could plead further. Given the pattern he had utilized, it is likely that Abraham might next have pleaded for the sake of five people, but God knew that there were fewer than five righteous individuals in the two cities and He chose to spare those very few – the family of Lot (Genesis 19) – and to destroy the cities of sin.

We see in this story God’s willingness for his people to pray for those who are in dire danger, and perhaps we see the desire of God to look for and to see the compassion of his servant Abraham in this situation. It’s something we might ask ourselves: would we have gone as far as Abraham? At what point would we have stopped asking for mercy on others?

True intercession, the kind that God shows he is more than willing to hear, is based on a love for others that does not “run out.” Abraham’s story shows that if we truly love others as ourselves, we will not only intercede for them when intercession is needed, but we will not stop until the problem no longer exists.

**PART FIVE:**  
**THANKSGIVING**



## 13. THE ART OF GIVING THANKS

*“To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything he has given us – and he has given us everything.” – Thomas Merton*

It is one of the great truths of Christian life that thankfulness lies at the core of our attitude toward God. This is what the scripture implies in saying “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19) – we thankfully return God’s love for us. So giving thanks should be a central part of every Christian’s life and a core part of our prayers. Yet this is an area in which we can all improve – and one that, if we develop it, can greatly enrich our relationship with God.

### **No “Thank You”?**

Some people think that because the model prayer outline given by Jesus to his disciples (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) does not contain any word of thanks, thanksgiving is not a necessary part of regular prayer. It is important that we understand why this is not the case, and why nothing could be further from the truth.

The disciples knew that it was certainly Jesus’ custom to give thanks. We see examples of this not only in his giving thanks for food (Matthew 14:19), but also in the thanks included in his other prayers (for example, John 11:41). When we look at the Lord’s Prayer, we see that the context was one of things for which we should ask (Matthew 6:7-8), rather than focusing on other dimensions of prayer. So we can presume that the disciples, knowing Jesus’ own example, would understand that rather than a separate point of thanks in prayer, every request was to be made with thanks – both for help already given in that area and in faithful expectation of God’s continued help.

Thus the apostle Paul wrote: “... in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6, emphasis added). Paul also showed that our attitude in prayer should be one of: “... always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). Such an attitude of thankfulness follows the example of Jesus himself and explains why the Lord’s Prayer has no separate point of thanksgiving – every part of that outline prayer should be offered with thanks!

But strange as it might seem to anyone who is appreciative of the many blessings we all enjoy, thankfulness is not a common human trait. Paul stressed this fact in several of his letters (Romans 1:21, 2 Timothy 3:2, etc.). You doubtless remember the story of how Jesus healed ten lepers on one occasion and how, after he sent them to purify themselves at the temple, only one of the ten returned to thank him (Luke 17:11-19).

That story teaches us several important principles. It records Jesus’ words “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?” (vs. 17), showing as well as any other scripture in the Bible God’s desire to see thankfulness expressed and his sadness when it is not. But Luke also tells us that the one who did return “... came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him ...” (Luke 17:15-16). Notice that the man both praised and thanked God. As we will see, thanksgiving is closely related to praise, and we do not fully praise if we do not thank.

## **Thanksgiving as Worship**

The Bible makes many references to the fact that God views thanksgiving as praise and that our praise is not complete without it. The Book of Psalms continually urges us to worship God with thanksgiving as well as praise – as we see in these examples:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High (Psalm 92:1 ESV).

Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving and praise him with music and song! (Psalm 95:2).

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name (Psalms 100:4).

Notice that in these and in other examples, thanksgiving is actually mentioned before praise as the first aspect of our worship that is being stressed. This relationship between thanksgiving and praise is not just an Old Testament concept. Paul told the Christians at Corinth: “All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:15). A few chapters later Paul makes the point even more explicitly: “This service that you perform ... is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God...” (2 Corinthians 9: 12-13).

In fact, we can say that we cannot properly worship God without regular, heartfelt giving of thanks. That is exactly what the author of the Book of Hebrews meant in writing: “let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28B).

But even when we do wish to show our thankfulness, we can often improve in the active, ongoing expression of our gratitude. How do we do that? The apostle Paul tells us in a statement that is perfectly captured in the Holman translation of the Bible: “Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2 HSCB). Paul tells us that we need to “stay alert” in our thanksgiving – we need to continually be watching for the things we can and should express our gratitude for.

That “staying alert” involves being sure to give thanks for things we might otherwise take for granted – we can become accustomed to even the greatest blessings if we do not think about them – and we need to look with seeing and grateful eyes at our own lives, our

families, homes, jobs, and friends. But thankfulness also involves being willing to see things outside of the moment in which we live.

## **Thankfulness through Time**

In his letter to the Philippians Paul gives another dimension of gratitude: that we should give thanks not only for things throughout “space” – the blessings of the family, home, work, recreation, relationships and friendships near and far – but that we should also give thanks for things throughout time.

This does not just mean in an ongoing manner, which is right and good, of course, but also regarding the different parts of time. Events of the present are naturally things for which we should express ongoing appreciation; but because we live in the present, we can often limit our thankfulness to gratitude for that which we see around us in the here and now. Paul shows that deep and full gratitude extends further than that.

One of the first things Paul mentions as he begins his letter to the Philippian church is that “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3). It had clearly been some time since Paul had seen the brethren in that congregation, and his statement is one not only of affection for them, but also one of giving thanks for his time with them in the past. Paul is certainly clear that we do not need to dwell on the misfortunes and mistakes of the past (Philippians 3:13), but shows here that we can certainly remember the good aspects with a spirit of thanksgiving.

This is true of many things and is especially true of relationships. So often we remember the good times with spouses, friends and family members after they are no longer alive. Paul’s words remind us that we can remember the good past things of our relationships and be thankful for them now. But the principle of gratitude for past things certainly extends beyond relationships. In fact, many of Paul’s letters express his thankfulness for the spiritual growth that had occurred in the lives of those to whom he writes.

Paul also extends the theme of thankfulness in Philippians into the future by saying that one of the reasons for his gratitude and joy was “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6 and see vs. 9-11). We see the same thought in some of Paul’s other letters, such as Colossians: “...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:12). This is not just “positive thinking” about the future – it’s an attitude of thankfulness for the future! It is a mark of Paul’s faith – and ours – that when we are certain of things to come, we are thankful for them just as much as for things we see and receive in the present moment.

So Paul shows that giving thanks for the blessings of the past, as well as those events to which we look forward, is just as much a part of true thanksgiving as gratitude for every good thing we experience in the present.

## **Beyond Thankful**

There is another important lesson we can learn about true thankfulness. We may know the Bible verses encouraging us to express gratitude in our prayers, even for things beyond the moment, yet the Bible shows that we can be grateful and yet not fully thankful in the way God desires us to be.

Take, for example, that famous Pharisee in Jesus’ parable – the one whose prayer extolled his own virtue and religious deeds while rejoicing that he was not a sinner like others. Jesus did not say that the man simply bragged about his spiritual life to God – he said he thanked God for it: “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector’” (Luke 18:11). Clearly, the Pharisee’s thanksgiving was really only an extension or proclamation of his own self-satisfaction.

So it is possible to give thanks to God and yet to miss true thankfulness because of what it is that we appreciate. Consider some of the ways we can make this mistake in our own lives in terms of the things for which we give thanks.

*Do we only give thanks for **our** physical things* – such as our family, our friends, our health? Put another way, how much of our thanksgiving is not for our physical things but for help, blessings, and growth in the lives of others? That is the very opposite of the Pharisee's prayer.

*Do we only give thanks for our **physical** things* – such as our job, our relationships, our country? How much of our gratitude is expressed not for our physical things, but for the help, guidance, encouragement and other spiritual gifts with which we and others have been blessed?

*Do we only give thanks for our physical **things*** – our home, our food, our possessions? How much of our appreciation is expressed to God not for things, but for actions and qualities – for love and truth, for patience and strength, for all such good qualities whether experienced directly from God or in the lives of those he indwells?

Finally, how much of our thankfulness is expressed along with praise of God? The Pharisee's thanks were tied to praise of himself, and it is possible for our own thanks to sometimes focus on our successes and accomplishments. These are valid things to give thanks for, but they may be only a short way from personal pride. As we have seen, the Book of Psalms constantly reminds us of the connection between thanksgiving and praise, and where the focus of that praise should be: "I will praise God's name in song and *glorify* him with *thanksgiving*" (Psalm 69:30, emphasis added).

While we may not be as far from real gratitude as the Pharisee in Christ's parable, it is often profitable to think about what does move

us to give thanks. What we are grateful for can be a window into our soul. It's something we should all reflect upon occasionally.

But the more we come to know and love God, the more we will grow in wanting to give thanks for ourselves and for others. Thanksgiving, like praise, is one of the most uplifting aspects of talking with God. With a little thought, we can find thousands of reasons for expressing overflowing thankfulness in prayer.

## 14. THE BLESSINGS OF THANKFULNESS

Earlier in this book we saw that giving praise to God in our prayers is something that is primarily for our good rather than something God needs. We will see in this chapter that something similar can be said of giving thanks in our prayers!

We tend to think of gratitude as something we owe God – something we think he wants in the same way we might feel disappointed if we give something to someone and they do not acknowledge the gift. But if we look at this subject closely, we see that it is far more likely that God wants us to be thankful for our sake, not his.

There are physical, mental and spiritual benefits of thankfulness that show us a great deal about why the Bible puts so much stress on this aspect of prayer.

### **Physical Blessings**

While we would hopefully never give thanks just to get the benefits associated with thankful behavior, it is clear that being thankful is itself a blessing. Medical studies have found that people who are grateful often experience fewer aches and pains – or notice them less – and not only feel healthier, but also actually live longer than people who do not self-report as being thankful. Perhaps because thankful people appreciate what they do have, these studies have also found that they are more likely to take care of their own health – they exercise more frequently and are more likely to seek regular medical check-ups, further contributing to their health and longevity.

There are other physical benefits of people who are thankful and who express their thanks. According to a study published in 2011 in the journal *Applied Psychology*, people who spent a few minutes



writing down things for which they were grateful before they went to bed experienced measurably better sleep. Once again, these benefits tie into longevity, as people who sleep better have increased life expectancy.

## **Mental Blessings**

While it is often difficult to separate mental and emotional issues from physical ones, it is clear that thankfulness also leads to a wide range of benefits in our mental and emotional well-being. A great many studies have been done to demonstrate this link, and we can only mention a few here.

Research has clearly shown that thankfulness actively reduces stress and also appears to aid people in overcoming trauma. For example, one psychological study published in *Behavior Research and Therapy* showed that veterans of the Vietnam War with high levels of gratitude had low rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. A similar study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found thankfulness to be associated with increased resilience among those traumatized by the September 11 terror attacks in the United States.

Thankfulness has also been shown to increase empathy and reduce feelings of aggression. Not surprisingly, therefore, people who are grateful have less depression and are less likely to seek revenge or to become violent.

Gratitude has even been shown to improve self-esteem, as well as athletic, business, and social success. In all these ways, and others, thankfulness – especially thankfulness that is expressed – directly contributes to our overall happiness and mental well-being.

## **Spiritual Blessings**

But there are also spiritual benefits that come from gratefulness expressed in prayers of thanks. The more we come to appreciate all that God gives us and give thanks for those things, the closer we

move toward God and the more we experience a deeper and more meaningful relationship with him.

One such spiritual blessing that comes from thankfulness is that of increased trust in God. We grow in trust by focusing on what God has done in our lives and the lives of others and all that he is now continuing to do. We do that most effectively by simply giving thanks. But that's not something we naturally do consistently. The Bible gives the interesting example of Hezekiah – one of ancient Judah's few righteous kings – who despite his right behavior and relationship with God neglected to give thanks for a healing he received (2 Chronicles 32:24-25). It's a human failing – we can't forget a problem when we suffer from it, but we don't always remember the help we receive when the problem is gone. It's as though nothing disappears faster from our minds than problems that are resolved!

That's why the apostle Paul admonishes us to give thanks “in all things” (Ephesians 5:20); and it is by consistently doing so that we learn to focus properly and to see the help we are already receiving. You can start to do this in any area of life, from the most basic things on up. The old saying “Sometimes the only blessings you need count are your heartbeats” is not a bad place to start. Giving thanks for each day of life and building on that, we begin to see more and more what we are given and how we are helped – and trust grows naturally out of that ongoing thanksgiving (Psalm 4:5).

In fact, when we learn to give thanks regularly for all the help we have been given, the question becomes not “What shall I give thanks for?” but “Where shall I start and where shall I stop in giving thanks?” It is as we recognize help in every aspect of our lives that we give thanks for more and more; and the more we give thanks, the more we learn to trust.

The apostle Paul learned this lesson that giving thanks leads to trust and peace of mind, and he confirms that for us:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests

to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7, emphasis added).

How easy it is to read over these verses and to see only that we should pray about situations rather than be anxious about them; but Paul stresses giving thanks just as much as he stresses making petitions for help. Paul knew, and wanted his readers to know, it is to the degree that we are aware of what God has done in our lives that we will be confident regarding what he will do in the future.

## **Ongoing Blessings**

When we look at all these areas in which giving thanks is beneficial to those who do so, it gives new depth of meaning to the words of the psalm:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, and Your faithfulness every night (Psalm 92:1-2 ESV).

The word for “good” used in this psalm means not just “righteous” or morally “good,” but also “beneficial.” Like many other aspects of prayer, giving thanks is just as much a gift to us as something we give to God. When we understand that, we realize that God’s commands to give thanks to him in prayer are no different from all his commands – they are ultimately for our good, our growth and our happiness. In fact, the opportunity to give thanks is something for which we should all give thanks!

## 15. THE APOSTLE OF GIVING THANKS

*“...Be thankful... with gratitude in your hearts ... giving thanks to God...” (Colossians 3:15-17 HCB).*

There is no doubt that when the writings of the New Testament apostles are compared, it is the apostle Paul who might be called “the apostle of giving thanks.” Paul uses the word for “thanks” in its various forms more than all other New Testament writers combined, and all except two of Paul’s epistles (his letters to the Galatians and Titus) speak of giving thanks or the quality of thankfulness.

Think about that for a moment. The epistle to the Galatians was a corrective one aimed at some severe problems widespread in the Galatian church, so it is perhaps not surprising that Paul did not discuss the giving of thanks in that letter compared to others. But even in his epistles that don’t mention thankfulness specifically, we can see that Paul’s own underlying attitude of gratitude is implicit in what he says, for example, regarding the hope of eternal life (Titus 1:2), God’s grace (Titus 2:11), and God’s goodness, kindness, and mercy (Titus 3:4-6).

In the majority of Paul’s writings, however, the expression of gratitude is a primary part of the apostle’s message. His writings show him giving thanks for blessings that he and others received, as in 1 Corinthians 15:57, where we read: “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (and see also 1 Corinthians 1:14 and 14:18).

Yet these instances are actually quite rare. If we read his epistles carefully, we see that Paul’s thankfulness is primarily expressed throughout his writings not so much for things he had received, but far more often for the spiritual gifts God had bestowed in the lives of others.

## **Paul's Thanksgiving Was Outgoing**

Typically, after greeting his readers, or very soon after, Paul gives thanks. This was frequently done in the world of his day, where individuals writing to others would often give thanks to their gods for benefits and blessings they had received. But in Paul's writing, the thanksgiving is different. Instead of thanking God for blessings he has received, Paul usually gives thanks for those to whom he is writing and for blessings they have received. We already saw how Paul's prayers of petition were directed far more at others than himself, and we find the same thing in his prayers of thanks.

Look at a couple of examples of this. Paul tells the believers in Philippi: "I thank my God every time I remember you" (Philippians 1:3). Similarly, he tells the Colossians: "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you" (Colossians 1:3). Also, as we saw earlier, in his letter to the Ephesians Paul says: "... because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:15-16).

So Paul was clearly not just the "apostle of giving thanks," he was also the apostle who primarily gave thanks for others. In fact, when we understand that, we realize it is typical of Paul that he writes: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and *thanksgiving* be made for all people" (1 Timothy 2:1, emphasis added).

## **Paul's Thanksgiving Was Specific**

The next thing we notice about Paul's prayers of thanksgiving is that he is never vague or general in what he prays. Just as we saw in the chapter on intercessory prayer that he broke down his prayers for individuals into very specific requests, so when we look at Paul's prayers of thanks, we find the same thing.

Although he tells us that we should give thanks for "everything" (Ephesians 5:20), Paul stresses specific things for which he shows

gratitude. Notice how he gives thanks for a specific gift – that of faith – in the church at Rome: “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world” (Romans 1:8). This is actually the first thing Paul says to the believers at Rome after the introductory greeting of his epistle – his thanksgiving for this gift was evidently a top priority in his mind. And look at another example where Paul tells us explicitly that he gave thanks for a number of spiritual traits – faith, love, and hope – exhibited by those at Thessalonica:

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).

## **Paul’s Thanksgiving Was Ongoing**

As we saw in the last chapter, saying that true gratitude is ongoing doesn’t just mean that we should give thanks each day – it means that we should not hesitate to continue to give thanks for things for which we have already expressed appreciation.

It is relatively easy to persist in our prayers of petition and intercession. As long as a problem continues for us or for those for whom we pray, we have a reason to continue to pray and to ask God’s help. But prayers of thanksgiving are different. Humanly, blessings of the past are among the easiest things to forget – or at least not to actively think about.

Yet Paul’s prayers are full of references to the ongoing giving of thanks. In 1 Corinthians 1:4, for example, he writes “I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus” – showing not only Paul’s outgoing attitude of gratitude for others, but also how his thanksgiving was expressed in an ongoing manner. We saw similar scriptures above, in Colossians 1:3-5 and Ephesians 1:15 where he writes: “I do not cease to give thanks for you.” This

ongoing giving of thanks was unlikely to be for new reasons in each instance – it was doubtless a purely ongoing expression of heartfelt appreciation.

And ongoing thanksgiving means that we don't stop feeling or expressing gratitude when things get rough. Paul teaches that we should give thanks in every situation – whatever the circumstances:

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Paul shows us that just as we should never stop asking for God's help and blessings, we should never stop giving thanks for them.

### **Paul's Thanksgiving Was Joyful**

This last point is one which you may not have noticed in Paul's writings, but his many prayers of thanks frequently mention joy. Paul linked joy with gratitude in the verse we just read when he wrote: "Be joyful always ... give thanks in all circumstances ...," and we find similar thoughts often in his writing.

Perhaps there is no better example than what Paul wrote to the Colossians:

... live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way... *giving joyful thanks* to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light (Colossians 1:10-12, emphasis added).

Just as it is possible to say "sorry" without really feeling remorse, we can also say "thank you" without really feeling gratitude. But joy is the great guardian of gratitude, and Paul expresses it well. If our prayers of thanks are full of joy, we can know that our gratitude is real, that our thanks are the kind that God wants to hear.

## **Lessons in Gratitude**

So Paul's letters provide us with a number of lessons regarding prayers of gratitude. As the "apostle of giving thanks," he not only mentions thanksgiving far more than any other New Testament writer, he also shows us more about how to give thanks. The first thing we notice is how outwardly focused Paul's thanksgiving is, and that's a major lesson we can all keep in mind. We can all ask ourselves occasionally how much of our giving thanks is focused on what we personally have to be thankful for, and how much is focused on thankfulness for God's gifts to his people – and to all people – everywhere.

Paul shows us that true and full thankfulness is gratitude for others and what they have received physically and spiritually, just as much as it is gratitude for what we ourselves have to be thankful for. The "apostle of giving thanks" shows us that thanksgiving involves prayers of thanks that reach far beyond our own lives – in specific and ongoing ways that are grounded in joy for what we and others have received.



**PART SIX:**  
**ANSWERED PRAYER**

## 16. UNDERSTANDING ANSWERED PRAYER

*“When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't pray, they don't.” – William Temple*

Surprising as it may seem, many Christians do not deeply understand how and under what circumstances our prayers can be answered. The very expression “answered prayer” is based on the assumption that prayer is asking for something. In reality, as we have seen in this book, that is only a small part of what prayer is all about. In that sense, answered prayer is much more than just getting what we ask for. When we understand the full breadth and depth of prayer, the potential riches of our communication with God, worrying about “unanswered prayer” becomes almost meaningless – in the same way we would not be concerned about “unanswered conversation” every time we talked with a friend.

More specifically, every prayer of praise is answered in the sense that its purpose is fulfilled as we glorify God. Every prayer of thanksgiving is fulfilled as we express our gratitude, and every prayer for forgiveness is fulfilled when it is made in true repentance (1 John 1:8-9). We may not think about it, but God “answers” all these prayers in terms of what they accomplish in unseen ways in our lives.

It is only in our prayers of petition and intercession – where we ask specific things for ourselves or others – that the idea of “unanswered prayer” becomes an issue in our minds, so we will look at that potential problem in this chapter.

### **Can We Change God's Mind?**

First of all, we must look at a concept that sometimes short circuits even the best-intentioned Christian. Sometimes our prayers are not

answered because we simply do not ask with conviction. We may feel sure that God can and does answer prayers, but we may not feel confident that he will intervene in our circumstance because we feel he has already allowed something bad to happen, and that he will not change his mind in that regard. This feeling can even be based on a misunderstanding of certain scriptures.

For example, in 1 Samuel we find that God “... does not ... change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind” (1 Samuel 15:29 and see Malachi 3:6, etc.). Correctly understood, verses like this are among the most encouraging verses in the Bible. God’s love, forgiveness, patience, mercy, and other qualities are just not going to change. We can find great relief in that fact. Once he has accepted us, God will work with us tomorrow just as he did yesterday and does today.

But incorrectly understood, verses like this can limit us. We can discourage ourselves by thinking that God will never change his mind once he has determined something – so our prayers otherwise are probably futile and useless.

This is especially true in areas where it looks as though God has allowed something to happen to us or to others that does not change for the better despite our prayers. In situations like this, is it possible to change God’s mind? And if God is all knowing and has perfect wisdom, why should we consider even trying to ask God to change a decision he has made?

Many situations recorded in the Bible show that actually God is willing to change his mind, so we will look at only one example in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament.

The first example that comes to mind is the one we saw in the chapter on Abraham – the Genesis account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25). In that chapter we saw that although God did destroy those cities and had clearly decided to do so (Genesis 18:17-32), he nevertheless relented in at least sparing Lot and his family as a result of Abraham’s persistent intercession (Genesis 19:22-32).

The second example – the New Testament account of the Canaanite woman who pleaded with Christ to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30) – makes our point even more directly. Jesus made it clear to the woman that he was not sent to the Gentiles and that he would not answer her pleas. Yet when the woman persisted, he relented and essentially made an exception to the rule he himself had explained regarding the fact that he was not sent to help the Gentiles at that time.

These examples point up something we should always remember. The fact that God is all-knowing and all-wise doesn't mean a decision he makes is the only wise decision possible in a given circumstance. The truth is, by virtue of the fact that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, he can look at a situation and adjust things to make another outcome work just as well if he knows it will still be for the best.

God obviously has the power to do exactly that kind of changing, and asking God to change his mind by considering other outcomes is not disrespectful as long as we are willing to accept his answer - it just means we have a healthy understanding of how all-knowing and all-powerful God is. Prayer does not ever change the overall intent and purposes of God, but prayer can sometimes change God's plans – the details of how he fulfills his purposes.

## **When Prayer Seems To Be Unanswered**

Yet every Christian experiences both answered and what seems to be “unanswered” prayer regarding specific requests. It's easy to appreciate the former and then to move on, but unanswered prayer sometimes becomes a discouragement for us: the illness that persists, the job opening that doesn't come, the ongoing difficulties we all face and may, in many cases, have prayed about fervently.

We see this situation in the apostle Paul's admission regarding a problem he prayed about unsuccessfully: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me” (2 Corinthians 12:8). Apparently Paul's prayers were unanswered in this case. The Bible

often states that the prayers of the unrighteous go unheard (John 9:31); but this was clearly not the situation in Paul's case, any more than it is for others who are sincerely trying to walk according to God's will.

So why do some of our prayers seem to go unheard? Only God knows the answer to this question for specific cases, but the Bible gives us a number of reasons why prayers may not be answered, and we will look closely at those in the next chapter. But sometimes the problem is not with unrighteousness or some other negative reason.

There is also another situation which applies to Christians in cases of what seems to be unanswered prayer, and it is one that we must understand. Like sincere children, sometimes we just don't understand what to ask for and may well be asking for something that is not going to be given in the way we ask. Put simply, God gives us what we would ask for if we knew everything he knows. God knows our need before we ask it (Matthew 6:8), and Paul says "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit itself intercedes for us..." (Romans 8:26).

But that doesn't mean God will answer us according to our request if we are asking for the wrong solution to the problem. As a result, we may not realize it when God works out the situation in a different manner from what we ask. No matter how sincere we may be, if we try to tell God how to do his job, we may find that's the one way it won't happen! We must always resist the temptation to try to tell God how to solve our problem or supply our need. Prayer is not, as C. S. Lewis reminded us, "advice offered to God."

This is also true in the matter of timing. When we pray urgently for help that doesn't arrive just when we think we need it, it's easy enough to feel that the prayer was unanswered, but that's not necessarily the case at all. We have to remind ourselves that we pray on our schedules and God answers on his. He doubtless knows when it will be best to answer our requests, so a delay doesn't mean our prayers will never be answered.

## Open-Ended Asking

There is a great biblical example of asking in a way that doesn't stipulate what or when we think help needs to be given. In 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat – one of ancient Israel's few good kings – was told that a vast enemy army was heading toward Jerusalem.

Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah ... Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD and said: "Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations ... here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir ... coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance. Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chronicles 20:3-12).

Notice that Jehoshaphat didn't ask for angelic armies to come to Israel's aid; he didn't ask for plagues or whirlwinds to strike the enemy or any of the many ways we might imagine God could take care of the situation; and he didn't even ask for help now! His prayer ended with a simple "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." "What kind of a prayer is that?" you might ask. Jehoshaphat just mentions the situation and doesn't even seem to ask for any specific help. Indeed, he does not. Yet God hears more than we say and answers more than we ask – and Jehoshaphat's prayer was answered. We are told that "The Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated" (2 Chronicles 20:22).

Think about this. If Jehoshaphat had earnestly asked God for firestorms or floods or whatever to be unleashed upon his enemy, he might well have thought his prayer was unanswered. In this case his prayer obviously was answered, and quickly, but the point is

that Jehoshaphat simply showed his faith and asked God's help, leaving the details up to God. When we remember that God will always answer our prayers as he knows best, we come to realize that we actually have far fewer unanswered prayers than we often think. That is why we find such clear and unequivocal promises regarding answered prayer in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, just as Christ himself told his disciples:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11).

## **17. SEVEN KEYS TO ANSWERED PRAYER**

One of the first things we learn about prayer is that – just like salvation itself – we cannot “earn” God’s favor or in some way make him obliged to grant us our requests. But God does make it clear that if we meet certain conditions, we can expect him to consider the petitions we make on behalf of ourselves and others.

The Scriptures show seven specific conditions that we must keep in mind. We will look at these “keys” to answered prayer individually.

### **1. Understanding God’s Will**

The very first condition that needs to be met for answered prayer is, of course, that what we ask must comply with God’s will. This is clear in the words of the apostle John:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him (1 John 5:14-15).

But we must not presume that God’s will in a specific situation never changes. God may choose to grant a request one day and not grant the same request another day. Once we understand that God answers prayers according to his knowledge of every aspect of the situation, based on what is ultimately best for us and for others, we realize that even an answer that seems to be a “no” may be a “yes” in disguise! This is implied in something Jesus himself said in the scripture we read last chapter:



If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11).

Notice that Jesus did not just say “you give your children gifts, how much more will your Father in heaven give you gifts.” He stressed that we “know how to give *good* gifts” to our children – in other words we know how to give them gifts that will not harm them, gifts that will be good for them. That is his point in stressing how much more God will give us *good* gifts. When what we ask for would not be a good gift for us, God usually will not grant such a request, or he may adjust what he gives to make it something that will be good for us.

If you have ever prayed for something, then – because of new information or whatever – realized that what you asked for is not what you needed or wanted, you probably learned the value of praying for what God wants rather than what we want. This has happened to many of us, and as a result we gradually come to realize that asking “Your will be done” is ultimately in our best interests!

## **2. An Ongoing Relationship with God**

God’s word makes it clear that those who have no relationship with him have no guarantee that their prayers will be answered. It may be useless to ignore God throughout our lives, then only look to him when we are in trouble or desperately in need of help. Naturally, this is a matter in God’s hands to decide in individual circumstances, according to his mercy:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

But once our relationship is established with God, it must be maintained for our prayers to be answered. This is a principle confirmed for us in the New Testament specifically regarding our relationship with Jesus, who said: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). It is only as we remain in our relationship with God – not just drift in and out of it as we see needs in our lives – that he will take our requests seriously.

### **3. Obedience**

Obedience is also a primary prerequisite for answered prayer. This does not mean that we earn God’s help through our good deeds or that we must be perfect to ask his help, but the Scriptures make it plain that God does not usually honor the prayers of those who are not trying to obey him. An attitude of disobedience can very effectively cut us off from answered prayer. Notice God’s words through the prophet Isaiah in this regard:

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong (Isaiah 1:15-16).

The psalmist confirmed this in his own experience:

If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer (Psalm 66:17–19).

We find the same principle expounded repeatedly in the New Testament. The apostle John tells us: “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his

will, God listens to him” (John 9:31 ESV). The apostle Peter confirms this:

They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:11-12).

That is why in his epistle, James stresses: “The prayer of a *righteous* person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16b, emphasis added); and John, in his first epistle, makes the matter crystal clear: “... whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22). Peter, James, and John all agree that obedience is a key aspect of answered prayer.

#### **4. Right Motivation**

Naturally, our motivation in asking God’s help or in asking for some gift also plays a large part in how God views our request. Even if we are living obedient lives with an ongoing relationship with God, yet we ask with a motivation that is selfish or wrong in some other way, it is unlikely that our requests will be heard. The apostle James summarizes this situation perfectly in his epistle when he tells people who do this:

You desire but do not have ... You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:2-3).

This does not mean that we cannot ask God for good things for which we long, as we have already seen, but that our motives must be right in asking for them. Do we ask for a blessing that, if granted, would make life more difficult for someone else? Do we

ask for help when we selfishly do not want to assist those we could help? Our reason for wanting things should always be considered before making petitions to God, but if we have considered our own motivation properly, we can ask in confidence.

## **5. Ask in Jesus' Name**

The Gospel of John records a great promise that Jesus made:

In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:23-24).

This promise is almost universally applied by believing Christians, but we must always remember that it is not some kind of magical formula that we have been given. Many people see it as some kind of guarantee that whatever they pray for will be granted as long as they end their prayer “in Jesus’ name.” When such prayers are not answered, it is easy to become disappointed or disillusioned.

But this is not what praying in Jesus’ name means. To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray by his authority, to pray as his representative – just as a police officer might arrest a criminal “in the name of the law.” Prayers offered in Jesus’ name are prayers offered by his followers as his earthly representatives – so to pray in Jesus’ name is ultimately not just to use his name, but to pray as Jesus would, to ask the kind of things he would ask.

If our prayers are not the type of prayers Jesus would offer, they will not be answered just because we use his name in them. That is why asking according to God’s will, as well as our relationship with God, our obedience, right motivation, and other factors must also be present – and when they are we can know that we are truly praying in Jesus’ name.

## **6. Pray in Faith**

In one of his most famous teachings about prayer, Jesus talked to his disciples about how the prayer of faith could accomplish great things – such as symbolically “casting a mountain into the sea.” He concluded his lesson by saying: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 21:18-22). The apostle James gave a specific example of this kind of believing prayer:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind (James 1:5-6).

Although the immediate context of what James wrote is about asking for wisdom, the principle clearly applies to asking in faith for anything. James makes the point that, just as waves rear up and then crash down again, our faith must not be based on our feelings – which unavoidably rise and fall – but on our belief which firmly underlies our conviction that God can and will provide what we ask according to his will. As long as we remember the answer will be according to God's will, we need never waver in our trust. Our faith need never waver, because God's faithfulness never does.

## **7. Pray Persistently**

God promises to answer our prayers if we fulfill the conditions he requires, but he does not promise when he will provide the answers. We must learn that God answers not only how he knows best, but also when he knows best. Because of this we should never be discouraged if our prayers do not seem to be answered immediately. The goal is to continue to pray as long as the problem or need exists – trusting that God hears our prayers and will answer when he knows the time is right.

Jesus told several parables showing that we should always be persistent in prayer because we do not receive an answer at once. He told the parable of the man whose friend came late at night asking for bread and who kept knocking on his door until he finally answered (Luke 11:8-10). Jesus also told of an unjust judge who finally gave in to the pleading of a helpless widow seeking justice (Luke 18:2-8). These parables clearly show us that if persistent asking pays off with uncaring humans, it is certainly something that we should do in our relationship with the One who is ultimately just and compassionate. Luke tells us specifically, in fact, that Jesus gave such parables that we “should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).

## **Using the Keys**

These seven “keys” to answered prayer may seem like a lot to keep in mind if we are only now learning them, but applying them all becomes second nature as we grow in our Christian lives; and the more we apply these principles, the more we see our prayers answered. In our next chapter we will see examples of exactly this – a case study of the prayers of a faithful servant of God being answered not tens or hundreds, but thousands of times!

## **18. PUTTING PRAYER TO WORK**

We live in a world in which prayers are answered in amazing ways every day of the year, yet the degree to which prayer is answered in the lives of some Christians is a lesson to us all. Many faithful believers could be held up as examples of this fact, but few would better demonstrate God's willingness to hear our requests that are grounded in his will than George Müller (1805-1898).

Born Johann Georg Ferdinand Müller (often spelled Mueller) in a small village near Halberstadt in what is now Germany, Müller's early life was marked by his complete absence of faith. It is said that he stole from his father, and that at age fourteen, while his mother was dying, he spent the time drinking and playing cards with his friends.

But while studying at the University of Halle, Müller began to seriously read the Bible and was converted. He began preaching regularly in churches in and around Halle, and in 1829 Müller travelled to London and worked there in a number of church-related positions, including serving as a minister. In 1830, however, Müller renounced his salary for that position and began what would be a lifetime of trusting God for his needs and the needs of his phenomenally productive work.

### **The Work of a Lifetime**

Müller founded the "Scriptural Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad" to assist Christian schools and missionaries. Through this institution he successfully distributed over 285,000 Bibles, one and a half million New Testaments and almost a quarter of a million tracts. He also established a number of Christian schools and orphanages.

Beginning in 1836 Müller and his wife organized their own rented home to care for orphaned girls, and then began to add more

homes as dedicated orphanages for boys and girls. Eventually he ran five orphans' homes which cared for over ten thousand orphans during his lifetime. Müller also established 117 Christian schools which taught over 120,000 children, many of whom were orphans. Müller's work with orphaned children had a vast impact that spread beyond what he could do himself. When he began his work with them in 1834, only 3,600 orphans were being cared for in the whole country. Fifty years later, while his work was still ongoing, at least 100,000 orphans were being cared for in England, and his influence in this regard had spread to other countries where many other homes for orphans were established.

But it is not Müller's accomplishments – great as they were – that are the most significant thing about his life. It is how all these accomplishments were made possible. He received no church or government support for his many projects and never asked anyone for financial help. Despite frequent needs he never borrowed money or went into debt, but continually asked God in faith, day by day, for what was needed for the work he was doing.

On one occasion, for example, a well-to-do woman visited Müller to discuss a possible gift to his institution. Although the woman seemed willing to help, he did not ask her for money, and she gave none. But after she left Müller asked God to help her realize her opportunity for true wealth in Christ and that she might be blessed in serving others. After this prayer asking not just for what he and his institute needed, but for the needs and happiness of the woman herself, it is perhaps not surprising that Müller records the woman sent five hundred pounds – a very large amount at that time – to help in the work he was doing.

It is known that many times unsolicited gifts of food and other supplies for the orphanages would arrive right at the time they were needed. On one documented occasion, Müller gave thanks for breakfast with all the orphan children sitting at the tables, although he had no food to give them. As he finished praying, the local baker came to the door with a gift of sufficient bread to feed everyone, and



a local milkman also arrived with a large amount of fresh milk because his cart had broken down right outside the orphanage.

These and every other gift accepted by Müller – down to the smallest quarter penny – were carefully noted down, and the records of what was received and spent were made available for public scrutiny. So we know that during his lifetime his organization received and used well over one million pounds (around 90 million pounds – or some 117 million US dollars – today) acquired purely through prayer grounded in the needs of others.

Müller also accomplished a great deal of missionary work in over thirty countries – as widely scattered as Egypt, China, Australia and the United States. He worked faithfully in God's service till the end of his life. On the evening of Wednesday, March 9, 1898, he led a prayer meeting and the next morning he was found dead on the floor beside his bed where he had probably been praying.

## **A Lifetime of Prayer**

From his conversion till his death, Müller's life was characterized by his prayer and by the answers he was graciously given to so many of his requests. In fact, it seems that few of his requests were denied.

Müller learned an important lesson about praying in faith that we can apply ourselves. When people talked about his "gift of faith," Müller argued that he had little or no such gift. He stressed that there was a difference between the "gift" of faith and what he called the "grace" of faith. The difference, he said, is that the gift of faith applies to things for which we have no direct promise from God, whereas the "grace" of faith that he utilized daily was simply the act of claiming the promises God has made clear in his word.

In this way, Müller brings praying in faith down from the pinnacle of the efforts of great saints into the lives of all of us. Müller's life work was proof that we can all pray in faith by claiming the promises God gives us. He stressed this in his book, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealing with George Müller*:

For instance, the gift of faith would be needed to believe that a sick person should be restored again though there is no human probability: for there is no promise to that effect; the grace of faith is needed to believe that the Lord will give me the necessities of life, if I first seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness: for there is a promise to that effect...

Müller's life was full of an endless string of what C. S. Lewis and others have called the "coincidences" (in the eyes of others) that occur when we pray and what we ask for comes to pass. When he was asked how much time he spent in prayer, he replied: "Hours every day. But I live in the spirit of prayer. I pray as I walk and when I lie down and when I arise. And the answers are always coming."

But Müller did not take answered prayer for granted, and he knew that prayer is something we have to persist in if we are to prevail. It is said that one day Müller began praying for the conversion of five of his friends. After a number of months, one of them was converted. Ten years later, two others were converted, and after 25 years the fourth man was converted also. For over 50 years, until he himself died, Müller persevered in prayer on behalf of the final friend and although he did not see the conversion of that remaining individual, soon after Müller's funeral the final friend was, in fact, converted. Müller trusted in the reality of answered prayer to such an extent that he was willing to persist over such a long time, and that fact indicates he probably never doubted his final friend would come to conversion eventually.

George Müller's efforts in prayer remain an inspiration to anyone who is willing to look at the good he was able to achieve with virtually nothing but trust in the God who answers prayer. Perhaps even more important, his accomplishments challenge us to ask ourselves what we might accomplish in our own lives through prayer.

# APPENDIX:

## EXPANDING THE LORD'S PRAYER

We can effectively use the Lord's Prayer as a framework for our own prayers by expanding each point.

**1. Seek God's Person:** "Our Father in heaven": The first section of the prayer outline establishes our relationship with God as our Father and prepares our mindset for an audience with him. It gives us opportunity to expand the thought as we:

- Acknowledge God as Creator of heaven and earth and Father of our human family (Genesis 1:1; 1 Corinthians 8:6)
- Thank God for the privilege we have of praying to him as ruler of all there is (Psalm 150:1; John 4:23)
- Thank God for the personal son/daughter relationship we have with him (Romans 8:14-16; 1 John 3:2)

**2. Seek to Praise God:** "Hallowed [Honored] be your name": The second section of the prayer offers respect and praise to God – for everything he is and has done – and reminds us to honor his name.

- Praise for what God is – Creator, Ruler, Sustainer, as well as Love, Righteousness, Mercy and Truth (Psalm 100:3-5; Psalm 145:8-17)
- Praise for all he has done and continues to do – the results of his compassion, patience, sacrifice and salvation (Psalm 146:1-10; John 3:16)
- Ask God's help to honor his name, never misuse it, and always use it with respect (Exodus 20:7; Psalm 86:12)

**3. Seek God's Will:** "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven": The third section of the prayer outline

focuses on the establishment of God's kingdom and will in our lives and eventually throughout the world.

- Pray for help to know and accept God's will and that his kingdom grows in our lives and the lives of all believers (Matthew 13:31-33; Romans 12:2)
- Pray for God's help in bringing his truth to many more people, to continually enlarge his kingdom (Luke 10:2; Matthew 28:19-20)
- Pray for the eventual full establishment of God's kingdom on earth (Psalms 145:11-13; Revelation 12:10)

**4. Seek God's Help:** "Give us this day our daily bread": The fourth section of the prayer outline gives us opportunity to ask for our physical and spiritual needs – both for ourselves and for others.

- Give thanks, ask for our own physical needs and those of other people (Philippians 4:6; Matthew 7:7-11)
- Pray for the spiritual needs of God's people and the support and guidance of his Church (Ephesians 6:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:1)
- Pray for leaders and those helping others that good may be done wherever possible (Jeremiah 29:7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2)

**5. Seek God's Forgiveness:** "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors": The fifth section of the prayer outline shows that we should ask forgiveness for our sins and the sins of others – as well as for help to forgive others.

- Ask forgiveness for our sins, and give thanks for the sacrifice of Christ and God's grace in applying it to us (Psalm 51:1-2; 1 John 1:9)
- Ask for help in forgiving others fully as God forgives us and in letting go of anger and bitterness (Ephesians 4:31-32; Matthew 6:14-15)
- Pray for those that sin against us that God be merciful to them as he is to us (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60)

**6. Seek God's Guidance:** "And lead us not into temptation": The sixth section of the prayer outline requests God's help, for ourselves and for others, to avoid unnecessary trials and to overcome things that tempt us to sin.

- Ask for help in overcoming temptations and sins identified in our own lives (Luke 22:40; Hebrews 2:18)
- Ask for help for all those fighting weaknesses, addictions, sins (Hebrews 4:16; 1 Corinthians 10:13)
- Pray that those who have escaped sin will have the strength not to return to it (2 Peter 2:20; Galatians 6:1)

**7. Seek God's Protection:** "Deliver us from evil": The seventh section of the prayer outline asks for protection from physical and spiritual evil, and help for all those fighting against evil or held in its sway.

- Pray for physical and spiritual protection for all who look to God for help, especially those suffering persecution (2 Samuel 22:2-4; John 17:15)
- Pray for all who are working to suppress evils that are harming people (Hebrews 13:17; Romans 13:3)
- Ask that the eyes of those persecuting the people of God be opened (Matthew 5:44, Romans 12:14)

**8. Seek God's Glory:** ["For Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever. Amen"]: These final words that appear in some translations were not in the earliest Bible manuscripts, but they reflect Christian traditions which remind us to:

- End prayer as we began, with praise and thanks (Psalm 9:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)
- Ask everything in Jesus' name (John 14:6-14; John 16:23-24)
- End with "Amen!" which means "May it be so!" (Psalm 89:52; Revelation 7:12)

## AFTERWORD

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