



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 4

The Importance of Prayer

What is Prayer?

In previous lessons we have seen that baptism is essential for true believers. We also saw that we must confess our sins and be completely honest about ourselves before we are baptized. How do we do this? We are taught in the Bible that all sins are committed against God; it is His law that we break when we sin. So when we confess our sins we must do this before Him and we do this through prayer.

However, prayer is much more than this. The word for 'prayer' that is used in the New Testament simply means 'to present our desires towards (someone)'. So when we turn to God in prayer, we should take all the 'desires of our heart' (Psalm 37:4) to Him and these should include a deeply felt awareness of our sins and our need to be forgiven by Him.

The Need for Humility

There are some lovely verses in the Letter to the Hebrews which tell us of our freedom to approach the Lord God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,
by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,
and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." Hebrews 10:19-22

Although we are able to approach God freely in prayer, we must never do so in a proud or demanding way. Our prayers must always be offered with a humble mind and heart, recognising God's greatness and majesty and our smallness before Him.

When King Solomon came to the throne of Israel, he said to God in prayer that he was 'but a little child' acknowledging that even though he was a great king, before the Almighty God, he was totally insignificant. Years later the same king wrote:

"Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few."
Ecclesiastes 5:2

This sets the first principle of prayer that it brings us before the great God in heaven and we must speak to Him with the utmost reverence at all times.

How God answers Prayer

When we approach God in prayer we *must* believe that He hears us and that He will answer our prayers. This requires faith.

"And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."
Hebrews 11:6

However, this verse does not mean that God will give us everything we ask for. If we pray in the right spirit then God will listen to our prayers and He will answer them in a way that will really benefit us. It is very important to understand what this means. God does *not* promise us that He will take away all the problems of this life *now*. He tells us:

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for **good**, for those who are called according to his purpose."
Romans 8:28

God wants us to be in His Kingdom and our salvation is the **'good'** thing He has promised to faithful disciples. He answers our prayers in ways which help us in our discipleship and our preparation for the coming of the King.

There is a very good example of this in Psalm 102 which is a prayer of a man in trouble. We do not know who he was but we are told quite a lot about his problems.

Verse 2	He is in distress.
Verses 3, 11& 23	He feels like an old man, that his life is nearly over.
Verses 4&5	He cannot eat, he is losing weight and becoming very thin because of his problems.
Verses 6&7	He feels very lonely, like a bird alone.
Verse 8	He has enemies and they treat him badly.
Verse 17	He is destitute (it means that he has nothing at all).

These problems are so bad that he 'cries to the Lord' (verse 1) and he has absolute faith that God will answer him. Concerning God he says:

"He **regards** the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer."
Psalm 102:17

He then tells us that God **does hear** those in distress and answers them.

"He looked down from his holy height; from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, to **hear** the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die..."
Psalm 102:19-20

Yet, although God answers them, He does not promise to take away all their problems immediately but promises that when the Kingdom of God came they will see the end of all their troubles.

"...that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD, and in Jerusalem his praise, **when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.**"
Psalm 102:21-22

This is why we have to live in faith. We believe that, whatever happens to us now, it is God working for good in our lives. We believe that He does hear our prayers; He does care about what happens to us; He will save us and will bring us into His Kingdom.

However, sometimes God hears our prayers and **does** take away our problems immediately. We do not know why God chooses to do this for one disciple but not for another. For example, one person may be healed of a disease whilst another dies, yet both may have prayed fervently for God to help and to heal them. We can only accept in faith that God knows best, however difficult this may be for us. For this reason, when we pray for God to intercede in our lives now and help us with our burdens, then we should always pray for 'His will not ours to be done'.

An Example of Prayer

A wonderful example of prayer in the Old Testament is that of King Hezekiah. He was a man who truly believed in God and followed His commandments. He was the king of Judah at a time when the kingdom was invaded by the Assyrians. Their armies were much stronger than his and defeat seemed inevitable. He was also very ill and was unable to lead his people. Hezekiah took both of these problems to God in prayer and we read about it in 2 Kings 19&20. This is a lesson in the effectiveness of prayer and we can learn much from the way that Hezekiah approached God.

1. He took the entire problem to God. He was totally honest with God and kept nothing back. He actually took the letter from the invading king and laid it before the Lord in the temple.
2. In his prayer he acknowledged the greatness of God:
"And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: "O LORD the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth."
2Kings 19:15

3. He also reminded God of his personal relationship with the Lord. He pleads with God because God is *his* God.

"So now, O LORD **our** God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone." 2Kings 19:19

These points are a vital part of prayer. It *must* give God the honour that is due to Him. It *must* also express faith that He is the God who is close to His children, who cares for them and will look after them.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God *waited* for this prayer of Hezekiah. God wanted the king to approach Him in this humble way and He waited until the king's heart was right before Him before He answered the prayer.

"Therefore the LORD **wants** to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you." Isaiah 30:18-19

God did answer and sent His reply to the king by the prophet Isaiah. In one night the armies of Assyria were miraculously destroyed and God's people were delivered from their enemies.

Praying Constantly

The Bible gives us a picture of prayer as a pleading with God. We should not just ask something of Him once and expect an answer. In Luke 18:1-8 we are given a picture of prayer as "crying day and night to God". Prayer has to bring us to an understanding that no-one other than God can truly help us in our lives. Sometimes it takes many repeated prayers to reach this state in our hearts.

The record of Hannah in the Old Testament shows us this principle. She was a wife who was childless; she must have prayed for a child many times. God had heard her prayers but waited until the right occasion to answer her. Notice the words of Hannah "I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord". (1Samuel 1:15)

Now look at James 5:16-18. Here James refers to two prayers of Elijah the prophet. He lived amongst wicked people and his prayers brought God's judgements upon them. James tells us that Elijah's prayers are an example of effective prayer.

"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

Elijah's desire that God's purpose would succeed filled his mind and heart. He constantly prayed that the Kingdom of Israel would turn to God. We also should pray for the Kingdom of God to come because of the wickedness of the world around us. Our minds should be filled with a desire for Christ to return; we should want it more than anything else and should let God know how we feel in our prayers. There is another important point to note from this example. Elijah is described as a 'righteous' man. This simply means that his relationship with God was right. *Our* relationship with God *must* be right if we want Him to listen to our prayers.

Death Bed Repentance

Solomon wrote that:

"The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous." Proverbs 15:29

Sometimes we read of 'death bed' repentance when a dying man prays to God that He will forgive him. However, if he has not made the effort to put his life right with God, then God will not listen to him! It will be the same at the return of Jesus, many people will suddenly decide they need to pray to God, but it will be too late for them – God will not listen.

The Example of Jesus

We have looked at some examples of powerful and effective prayers in the Bible. Now we must look at the teaching and example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Many of the short prayers that Jesus made to his Father are recorded for us in the Gospels. In other instances we are simply told that he prayed. Look at this example of prayer in his life.

“In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles:”
Luke 6:12-13.

Jesus prayed all night to God because the next day would be very important. He had carefully to select twelve disciples as his close companions for the remainder of his ministry. He did not try to do this alone; he asked for help. The lesson here is that when we are faced with difficult decisions we should always ask for God’s help through prayer.

After the Last Supper, on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to his Father. We read this prayer in John 17. Look at verses 9 and 20. Jesus prayed specially for those who were his disciples at that time. He described them as “Those you have given me”. When you come to verse 20 you will find that the prayer looks forward into the future and includes all future disciples as well. They are described as “Those who will believe in me”. This will include you if you accept God’s salvation through Jesus Christ and are baptized into his saving name. The most wonderful thing in life is to be called from the world to be a true disciple of the Lord Jesus and to belong to him in this way; to understand that Christ prays for us as he prayed for the disciples we read about in the Gospels. This is a marvellous hope and we should be excited about it.

Jesus had already taught his disciples the importance of forgiving others. Part of this forgiveness is to pray for them. This is very hard to do but it is an essential part of Jesus’ message. God has forgiven us far more than we ever have to forgive others and if we are able to pray for those who are evil to us and who persecute us then we show the Lord that we have understood this. Note especially the consequence of such a prayer.

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”
Matthew 5:44-45

Praying for our enemies may have no effect on them; their hearts may be too hard to accept God’s Word. Yet such prayers will always have an effect on *us* – the people who make the prayers. When we pray for others it will always help us to become more Christ-like, children of God, in *our* lives.

If we look carefully at the prayer made by Jesus to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane we shall see how much he understood God’s purpose. He knew he had to die to save people from sin. We also see his absolute obedience to his Father’s will. Matthew 26:36-46 describes Jesus’ final moments before his capture, trial and death. He first prayed that he might be spared the terror and pain that lay ahead. If that prayer had been granted then there would be no hope for us in this world. In his second prayer, however, he acknowledged that God’s will was more important than his own desires and repeated that “Your will be done”. The third prayer repeated these same words and emphasised Jesus’ total obedience to the will of his Father, even though this would take him to a terrible death the next day. Luke tells us that Jesus was in an agony during this prayer – the only time in the whole of the Bible that this word is used. It tells us of the intensity of Jesus’ prayer, the way he poured out his heart and his problems to his Father, nothing was held back.

Jesus Christ our Mediator

There is another important lesson for us to learn about prayer. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. We are told that:

“Christ has entered...into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”
Hebrews 9:24

He is the one who presents our prayers to God and if we ask for things which are in accordance with God's purpose then he will plead for us before his Father. The Bible uses the word 'mediator' to describe this work. A mediator is a 'go between'; someone who takes a message from one being to another. God is too holy and too righteous for us to approach Him directly in our mortal state but we should thank Him from our hearts that we can approach Him through the Lord Jesus.

Note that Jesus will not do this for all people. The verse says that he does this '*on our behalf*' and the Letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that he does it for those who are *called* by God. They belong to His family through their baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come... he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption..."

Therefore he is the **mediator** of a new covenant, so that **those who are called** may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant." Hebrews 9:11-15

When we pray therefore we need to address our prayers through Jesus - read John 14:12-14. The contact that you have with God and with Jesus through your Bible may have come as an answer to your prayers. You may already know how to pray but if you do not, then it is our hope that this short lesson will help you. Like the Psalmist who wrote the words below, you too can pray that God will help you to understand His Word.

"Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart."
Psalm 119:33-34

Daily Prayer

In Matthew 6:9-13 we find the prayer that Jesus gave for all his disciples through the ages. The order of the words of the prayer is very important.

- The name of God is praised.
- Requests are made for His Kingdom to come and His will and purpose to be fulfilled on the earth.
- Prayer is made for the essential things we need in this life.
- Prayer is made for forgiveness – as we have forgiven others.
- Prayer is made for guidance in the future as we journey towards the Kingdom of God.
- Finally the prayer ends as it began – with words of praise and reverence before God.

We must put God's will first in our prayers and pray for what *He* wants before we pray for what we need in life. If we think carefully about the words we use, and if we are truly interested in the Kingdom of God, then we shall find that there is no conflict between God's purpose and what we want.

We know that this was to be a daily prayer because Jesus said:

"Give us **this day** our daily bread:" Matthew 6:11

Every day of our lives we should pray to God and acknowledge Him in this way. This does not mean that we should just repeat the words of the Lord's Prayer every day; if we do this they will soon become so familiar to us that we shall stop thinking about them. We need to find simple words, in our own everyday language to express the ideas of the Lord's Prayer on a daily basis.

But we must take this further. Daily prayer does not mean praying once a day. We can pray at *any time* of the day and in *any situation* in which we find ourselves. The Bible tells us six times that the Apostle Paul prayed without ceasing. He was a man for whom prayer was an essential part of everything he did. For example:

"I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day."
2Timothy 1:3

If we have a difficult or dangerous journey to make we should pray for God's angel to keep us safe before we set off. If we have a difficult conversation with anyone we should pray for help from God's Word to keep our lips from saying anything wrong. We can take our worries, our joy, our sadness, our health, our sickness to God in prayer. Every part of our lives, however small, will benefit from God's guidance as an answer to our prayers.

Just as we can pray at any time to God we can pray anywhere and in any position. It does not matter whether we stand or kneel to pray. In the Bible we find examples of men who stood to pray (Nehemiah, Jesus), who knelt (Solomon), who sat (David), who were prostrate on the ground (Jesus, Solomon), who knelt with head on the ground (Elijah).

Checklist for Prayer

Before you pray make a list of things you want to bring to God. It can be in your mind or written down on paper. It should include:

1. Praise to God as the Maker of us all.
2. A prayer for God's Kingdom to come soon.
3. Thanks to God for His blessings to us every day and for all of the things He supplies for us.
4. Prayers for God's help for those we know are in need.
5. Prayers for our natural family, that God will look after them and help them to learn about Him and accept His Son.
6. If we are baptized, then we should pray for our spiritual brothers and sisters and their problems.
7. Forgiveness for our sins.
8. Guidance in understanding God's Word.
9. Strength from God to work for Him, preaching His Word.

Questions

1. When we pray to God, what should we present before Him?
2. What is the first principle of prayer?
3. What does God promise to those who love Him?
4. Why did God wait until Hezekiah had prayed to Him before He saved Israel?
5. What is a mediator? Who is our mediator?
6. What sort of things should we pray for?