

HOME BIBLE STUDY SERIES

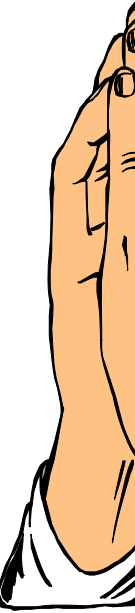
Praying to God

1. Why Pray?
2. Does God Hear My Prayer?
3. Lord, Teach us to Pray
4. Why Aren't My Prayers Answered
5. Hindrances to Prayers
6. A Lifestyle of Prayer



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Lesson One

"Why Pray?"

Jesus said, *"Men ought always to pray, and not to faint."* (Luke 18:1). One version says, *"and not to lose heart."* Let me pose some questions that you may have entertained at one time or another in your life:

1. *If God knows our needs, why urge on Him our petitions?*
2. *If God loves us, why beseech Him to bless us? Won't He do it anyway?*
3. *If God is good, then why urge Him to work good in the world?*
4. *Why pray at all—just let God do what seems good to Him?*

Someone has suggested: *"Don't we look sort of silly—ignorant humanity asking an all-wise God to do something?"* Or, maybe this observation: *"We are weak and sinful humans asking a Holy God of perfect love to do something?"* Did you say, **"Stop right there! You have convinced me! I have felt that way all along."** Some do feel that the only value of prayer is to the person praying. Prayer is often looked upon as a glorified "pep talk" to spur us on to greater accomplishments. Some have even called prayer a "healthy lie of life." But in the face of all of this, Jesus teaches us to always pray and not to faint or lose heart! God evidently did not give prayer as a "glorified pep rally." Nor did He design prayer just to make us a better person! And for sure, it was not designed by God to mock us or make God appear foolish! God not only insists that we pray, but He has also promised to answer our prayers!

But there is another evident reason for praying—God has made us in such a way that we desire to pray. All religions have some form of praying involved. It is not only a duty, but it is a natural inclination of the human heart.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Several different words in the Hebrew and Greek Testaments are connected with the concept of prayer. It can generally be defined as man's avenue of communications with God. Trying to define prayer seems to be better done by pointing out what is involved in the process. We know from a study of prayer that it involves: **Praise, Adoration and Reverence for God; Confession; Supplications; and Thanksgiving.** Supplication for self and for others is at the heart of prayer. Such springs from a sense of need and that God is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). One of man's primary needs is forgiveness, pardon, purity and a right relationship with God. While this definition of prayer may seem to be very simple, yet prayer is a very complex subject for study. There are many factors that are involved in the over-all picture about prayer.

REASONS FOR PRAYING TO GOD

Men move or do things from motivation! What is our motivation for praying to God? What kind of logical reasons can be given for such an activity? May we suggest the following:

1. Prayer is our only means of talking to God. Prayer takes us beyond ourselves to a higher Being. It is our way of drawing nigh to God and He has promised to draw nigh to us (James 4:8-10). God speaks to us through His word (Heb. 1:1-2) As we read, listen, or hear the Word of God, He is speaking to us. Prayer is our way to speak back to God. If we do not draw nigh to God, He has not promised to draw nigh to us!

2. Prayer helps us to keep a close relationship with God. It is generally understood that we not only are better people when we sincerely pray often, but our minds and hearts are centered more upon spiritual things. Prayer is definitely a way of keeping us close to God (Ps. 55:16, 22). Otherwise, there is a danger of spiritual decay in our lives and our religion will only become a shell.

3. Prayer is God's means of conferring benefits and blessings that we need. Some look upon prayer as something that is burdensome, dull and difficult; and, in reality benefits God more than man. To them, prayer is a kind of favor we can confer upon God. But, contrary-wise, man is the one who needs prayer, not God. We are benefited, not God! Prayer is a great privilege, a blessing, and an opportunity for the Christian! Prayer should not be looked upon as "begging God for something" in order to get our way. God will not become our slave (Phil. 4:6-7). Someone has expressed the thought in this way: "*Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of His highest willingness.*" He wants to bless us, but He also wants us to come nigh to Him (Matt. 7:7). God is definitely interested in His children's welfare and desires our good. He has the power and willingness to help. He is a wise, loving, and beneficent God. But He also challenges His people to draw nigh to him in prayer.

4. Our forgiveness, day by day, is dependant upon our praying to God and His answering our prayer. (1 John 1:9; Acts 8:22). Under the Old Testament, daily sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people—indicating continual cleansing. Under the New Testament, it is by continual confessing and penitent prayer that we can have continual forgiveness and cleansing (1 Jn. 1:7).

5. To express our Respect and thankfulness to God. (Phil. 4:6). All men have much to be thankful for before God, but the Christian in particular has even more reasons. We can never praise Him enough for all His benefits!

PRAYER IS A BLESSING FOR THE CHRISTIAN

While prayer may be a natural thing for human beings, it is not really the privilege of all people. If the unsaved person has the same privileges that the saved person has—then, why be a Christian! The very way that Jesus taught His disciples to pray was: "***Our FATHER, which is in heaven!***" Who can truthfully call God "Father"—but the children of God! We believe prayer is a great blessing for the Christian!

Some religious people have mis-used the story told of two men going up to the Temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). They have taken the prayer of the Publican ("***God, be merciful to me a sinner!***") and have advocated that a sinner can become saved by praying this prayer! It is quite obvious that both men were already children of God—they both went up to the Temple to pray. But one had the right attitude in approaching God (humility) and the other had a wrong attitude (self-righteousness). The New Testament clearly teaches that our faith in Christ as Lord has to be put into action by "obeying the Gospel" in order to be saved and become children of God (Acts 2:38, etc.).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

God challenges His people to come nigh to Him—not only with a humble heart, but with clean hands and hearts (James 4:6-10). To approach Him with the wrong attitude invalidates any effort on our part to pray to God. And, since we only act out of motivation, God has given us sufficient reasons, logical reasons, for us to pray always and not to faint or grow weary.

Prayer is pictured as part of the armor of the Christian that helps him to ward off the temptations of the devil (Eph. 6:11-18). We are told to resist him, steadfast in the faith (1 Pet. 5:9). When Jesus' temptations were the strongest (in the Garden of Gethsemane), He resorted to ardent, fervent prayer to His Father (Matt. 26:36-39). He even exhorted His disciples at the same time to ***Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.*** "***The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.***" (Matt. 26:41).

Why pray? There are many good reasons! Let's enroll ourselves in the school of prayer so that we can become the kind of praying people that God desires us to become!

Lesson Two

"Does God Hear My Prayer?"

There are two issues involved in this question. We will be looking at one of the views in this Lesson and the other view will be discussed in Lesson Four. In this Lesson we will be dealing with the following questions:

1. *"Who should pray?"*
2. *"Should everyone pray?"*
3. *"Will God hear everyone's prayers?"*

There probably should be a clarification as to what is meant by the expression: "to hear!" If God is all-powerful, everywhere-present, and all-knowing, it would seem to be obvious that God knows about everything that is going on in this universe. Such possibilities are beyond our comprehension, but the Bible does seem to indicate that God has all three of these capabilities (Ps. 145:3; 147:5; 90:1-2; Jer. 23:24, etc.). We can reasonably conclude that if God is all-knowing that he knows when everyone prays and He hears them. But in what sense does an all-knowing God "hear" those who pray to Him? Does God hear everyone who prays in the sense that he wants to do something about their prayer; or, is it in the sense that an all-knowing God is aware of everything that goes on in this universe? For now, let's all agree on the last part of this question....and the rest of the Lesson will then deal with the first part of the question.

"GOD HEARS NOT SINNERS"

The above quote comes from John 9:31—*"Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him."* This statement was made by a blind man who had been healed by Jesus. It was his way of saying that Jesus could not have been a sinner, because God allowed Him to open the eyes of the blind—something that was unheard of since the beginning of the world. Where did this man get this idea? It is possible that he had been taught it from someone who was acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures. This concept is expressed in several places.

1. **Isa. 1:15—God will not listen to the prayers of His people whose hands are covered with blood.**
2. **Isa. 59:1-2—The sins of God's people caused God not to hear this prayers.**
3. **Ps. 34:15-16—God's ears are open to the cries of the righteous, but His face is against those who do evil. These verses are quoted in 1 Peter 3:12.**
4. **Ps. 66:18—If God's people regard iniquity in their hearts, God will not hear them.**

5. **Ps. 109:6-7—Let a wicked man's prayer become sin.**
6. **Prov. 15:29—The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.**
7. **Prov. 28:9—The one who turns his ear from hearing the law, his prayer is an abomination.**

These passages are very specific in stating that God does not "hear" sinners! But in what sense are these passages saying that God does not hear sinners? It is quite obvious that all of us sin at times, even the very best among us. So, does that mean that God will not hear any of us? Two factors need to be looked at carefully in regards to these questions:

1. The Old Testament passages were primarily dealing with God's chosen people who were suppose to be living righteous lives, but were guilty of continuing in the way of sin! They needed desperately to repent if they wanted God to hear their prayers. Until they repented, their prayers were useless—went unheard!
2. The second concept would seem to naturally follow. God does not hear (receptively listen to) those who are not His children—who are in rebellion against His Will (Law).

SINNER versus CHILD OF GOD?

The above Scriptures would lead us to the conclusion (even for us today) that God is willing to hear (receptively listen to) His faithful, humble, penitent children; but, His ear is not attuned to those who are not His children. Does that mean that God will not hear the prayer of a person who is not His child, but who is sincerely wanting to seek after God and to do His Will in his life? The example of "Cornelius" in Acts 10-11 is often used to indicate that God does hear such people even though they are not His children. The one problem that I have with using Cornelius as an example is that this was at the point of the changing of Religious Systems. Cornelius probably was an acceptable "Gentile" believer in God, but needed to come under the New Covenant to have the benefit of the blood of Christ. He needed to **"hear words whereby he and his house could be saved."** (Acts 11:14). The Scriptures do not actually state that God heard his prayers, but that they went up before God as a memorial (reminded)—that the Gentiles were to be saved as well as the Jew. One thing for sure, we cannot understand the example of Cornelius where it will directly contradict all the other plain passages of Scriptures.

Another thought might be worthwhile here that should be studied out carefully. Inspiration states that the Christian (child of God) has access to **"all spiritual blessings....in Christ."** (Eph. 1:3). Those outside of Christ do not have these blessings. If they do, then there remains no real reason for becoming a child of

God. One of the most obvious spiritual blessings that we have is the privilege of prayer to our "heavenly Father!" He is our Father for He has begotten us by the Word of Truth (1 Pet. 1:23; Jas. 1:18). No man has direct access to God on his own merit, he needs a mediator. Jesus has become the mediator of the child of God so that he has access to the throne of God (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 4:14-16). It sounds "sort of like" man needs to be right with God if he expects God to listen to his prayer.

"HEAR" versus "ANSWER"

The word "hear" can be used in different ways. Often the context in which the word is used gives us the clue to how it is to be understood.

1. To "hear" sound, but ignore it.
2. To "hear" words that communicate an idea to my mind.
3. To "hear" in the sense of expecting to take action on the basis of what I have heard.

In the Revelation Letter (2:7) the expression is used: *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* To hear is more than just hearing a sound, and it is more than understanding what is communicated, but it is to hear, understand, and be willing to do something about what was said. When we say that God hears our prayers, we are saying that He not only is aware of my making sounds and that He is also aware of what I am trying to communicate to Him, but that He will "answer" (take action) in regards to my prayer. God may hear some people praying but have no intent of doing anything about what they are praying—in other words, He has no intent of "answering" some people's prayers.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Does God hear everyone's prayers? Yes, in the sense of being aware that they are praying. Does God hear everyone's prayers in the sense of intending to do something about their prayers? No, He does not. And it is also obvious that those whom God hears may not receive the answer they desired. God may say "yes," or "no," or "wait," or "maybe!" God may even substitute something different than what we ask. The Apostle Paul had been wanted to go to Rome. God finally answered his request, but not in the way that he may have desired. He simply let the Roman Government pay his way to Rome (as a prisoner). (Acts 19:21; 26:31-32; 27:1-2).

Our job is not to know just how God answers prayer, but to believe that He will hear us and give us our petition according to His Will. We are warned about doubting God (James 1:5-8); and the reason is obvious. Prayer is not like a magic wand—we speak, and it is done! More is involved, which we will be looking at together in Lesson Four.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does God hear everyone's prayers? How do we know?
2. The word "hear" can be only used in one way—to answer by doing something.
3. Who made the statement in John 9:31 that God does not hear sinners?
4. Are there any Scriptures that indicate that God does not hear sinners?
5. In what sense does God not "hear" sinners?
6. Does this mean that no one can be heard by God?
7. What is the difference between a "sinner" and a "child of God?"
8. Did God hear and answer Cornelius' prayer? (Acts 10)
9. Does everyone have the privilege of prayer to God?
10. Who can rightfully address God as "Father?"
11. What is the difference between "hearing" and "answering" prayers?
12. How many ways can God answer a prayer?

Lesson Three

"Lord, Teach Us How To Pray!"

If you have read and meditated on the last two lessons in this series, I believe that you are quite ready to say to Jesus, "***Lord, teach us how to pray!***" Prayer was a part of the religious life of the Jewish people. John had evidently taught his disciples how to pray (Luke 11:1). But as the disciples observed the prayers of Jesus, they were different. Possibly, they saw an intimacy and a trust in His prayers that were not necessarily seen in the people about them. The "model" prayer that Jesus taught at this time is recorded in Luke 11:2-4 and Matt. 6:9-13.

Men, everywhere, have prayed! They may have prayed blindly, with uncertainty, or erratically, but they have prayed! Prayer is a common activity of all religions. It is believed that the disciples of Jesus saw something different about Jesus' prayers—they were impressed and wanted to learn to pray like Jesus. We, too, need to be impressed with Jesus' prayers and His life and be willing to sincerely say: "***Lord, teach us how to pray!***" We also need to enroll in His School of Prayer.

One thought before we proceed—"*If prayer is so natural, why do we need to be taught how to pray?*" It may be natural for men to turn to a higher being and petition Him, but to do it correctly and effectively may be another matter! Even a child can and does pray when trained. We may pray because of our early training or habit. We may pray because our emotions are stirred or we are in some kind of stressful situation. But is there one among us that does not feel the need to learn how to pray effectively and fervently? "***The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.***" (Jas. 5:16). Would we not like for our prayers to avail much? Isn't this the kind of prayer-life that we can earnestly ask the Lord to teach us? Aren't we certain that this is the kind of prayer-life that He wants to teach us?

WHY TEACH US TO PRAY?

1. Because Jesus is the Master teacher! Who better to turn to for a teacher than Jesus? He knows His subject matter well (Matt. 7:28-29). He knows it as well by the experiences of life—amid trials and tears (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:14-16; 5:5-9). Nothing would please Jesus any more than for us to learn to persevere in prayer and become effectual in prayer.

2. Because Prayer is so valuable in our lives! It is close fellowship with the High & Holy One in heaven. It is the ability to take hold of God's strength and power. It opens the channels of God's blessings to us and others. Proper, effectual, and sincere prayer brings us into an intimate relationship with God.

3. Because effectual prayer is not as easy as it looks! Even though prayer may look simple, it is more difficult than it looks. We need to come to know God's teachings on prayer:

- a) To know what and how to pray for the right things;
- b) To make our life right in full surrender to God's Will;
- c) To learn how to persevere and not faint;
- d) To believe in our "worthiness" to approach God in prayer.

We must also overcome our ignorance and doubts! ***"But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind."*** (Jas. 1:6). This is especially critical when our petitions are not given to us that we request; or, when it seems that our prayers are powerless; or, when there seems to be no answer coming through after long praying.

HOW ARE WE TAUGHT?

1. By instructions in His Word! There is much said about prayer by Jesus in the Gospels. But there is much instruction in the remainder of the New Testament—as well as the Old Testament teaching (Rom. 15:4). One of the major "rules" to follow in the study of the Bible is to gather all the passages that deal with the subject and draw an harmonious conclusion from such a study. If we do not follow this rule, we will wind up believing and teaching something that is not truly taught by God; and, we will be misled and may mislead others.

2. We can be taught effectively by Jesus' examples of praying! The information recorded about Jesus' life is for an example for us to follow (1 Pet. 21). Some of the more touching times in Jesus' life was when He prayed earnestly to His Father. He prayed often and under all kinds of situations. He prayed all night before choosing His Apostles (Matt. 10); He prayed earnestly before His death in great agony (Matt. 26:42); He prayed earnestly for His Apostles as well as for us (John 17); and even as He was dying a horrible death, He prayed for others (Luke 23:34). There is no greater example to follow than that of Jesus.

3. We can be instructed by examples of godly people who prayed! The Bible has many such examples. The Apostles early emphasized prayer's importance to the early church when they said: ***"But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*** (Acts 6:4). All of these examples have been recorded for our benefit today. Even godly people today can serve as a source of encouragement for us to learn how to pray correctly and effectively. But we need to be careful in using these examples that we do not expect miraculous events to occur like the Apostles. The miraculous was only for that early period of the beginning of the church.

THE "MODEL" PRAYER

There is no indication that Jesus gave this outline of what prayer should contain to be prayed verbatim. To do so would make prayer more mechanical than real! It does give a quick overview of what our prayers can contain.

1. **Honor to God.** (Matt. 6:9) Express appropriate praise of His being.
2. **Petitions to God.** (1 John 5:15) There are all kinds of things to ask God's blessing upon, as well as people.
3. **Supplications to God.** (Phil. 4:6) Not only for ourselves, but for others.
4. **Indicate dependence upon God.** (Matt. 6:11) We rely on God for all that we have.
5. **Confession to God.** (1 John 1:9) After examining our lives, we can confess our failures to God.
6. **Ask for deliverance from temptation.** (Matt. 6:13) They will come and we need to overcome them with God's help.
7. **Indications of submission to God's Will.** (Matt. 26:39) What we pray about may not be for our or others' best good.
8. **Thanksgiving to God.** (Phil. 4:6) Such should always be included!

These are basic factors that we need to keep in mind as we pray to God. There possibly are other things that could be mentioned that would come under one of the above headings.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If we are to be taught how to pray, we must: (a) Be willing and desirous to be taught; (b) Be sincere and honest; (c) Be willing to study, learn and apply what we are taught; and (d) Be willing to stay with it—persevere—always pray and faint not!

A life of prayer often requires more than most people are willing to give. Not only must we give ourselves to God, but as well, endless study, meditation, and evaluation of our faith so that we can become strong in prayer. Do we really want to enroll in Jesus' School of Prayer? Are we willing to let His teachings compel us to pray? Will we let His promises prompt us to pray! Will we let His offer of mediatorship prostrate us before the throne of God?

How truly blessed we are to live with the knowledge that the great and true God of the Universe is our Father and seeks for us to come into His august presence to make our petitions known to Him. May our prayers always acknowledge His Fatherhood and may we strive to live up to our relationship as the "children of the Most High God!"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. For what could John the baptizer have taught his disciples to pray?
2. How would Jesus' prayers have been different from John's?
3. If prayer is natural for us, why do we need to be taught how to pray?
4. Is effective prayer easy? Give reasons for answer.
5. What are some of the means of our being taught how to pray today?
6. What are some important basic factors in praying to God?
7. What is a factor that keeps us from becoming effective in our prayer life?

Lesson Four

"Why aren't My Prayers Answered?"

Do "unanswered prayers" lead to atheism? Or, is it a mis-understanding or being mis-taught about prayer that leads people to a lack of faith in God? Have you ever prayed earnestly for something over and over and saw no results? And....has this caused you to doubt the validity of prayer or the promises that God makes? Be honest! If we pray for something and do not receive it; then, how do we understand God's promises about receiving what we pray for? How would you understand the following passage:

"And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." (1 John 3:22).

Have you ever asked something of God and not received it? How do you reconcile the inspired statement of John with the fact that you did not receive what you requested? Is this passage teaching us that prayer is like a magic wand—wave it and presto it happens? Is God like a "cosmic bellhop" that is waiting for His creatures to give Him directions so He can do their bidding? Do you consider this a very mature view of God and of prayer?

Let's go a step further! How would you understand this statement of Jesus in view of answering Prayer:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." (Matt. 7:7-8)

Are we to believe that all I have to do is just to ask for something and God will give it to me? That is what it seems to be saying, isn't it? But all of us know that it just doesn't work that way! The inspired Apostle Paul said that he asked God three times for the "thorn in his side" to be removed, and God did not do it! (2 Cor. 12:8-10). So, something is wrong! How am I to understand these plain, simple statements of Jesus? It is just possible that there are more teachings about prayer that modifies the above statements.

Let me illustrate the above statement! John 3:16 plainly states that a person who believes will receive eternal life! So, all a person has to do is just believe! Right? If there were not other passages in the Scriptures to modify our understanding of John 3:16, that would be all that one has to do. But there are many other plain Scriptures that show that the word "faith" involves more than a mere mental assent to some facts! It must be an obedient faith (Jas. 2:17-24; Acts 2:38, etc.). **So, there must be passages of Scripture that would modify our understanding of such passages as Matt. 7:7-8 or 1 John 3:22.** And to keep our faith strong in the promises of God, we need to see what these other passages teach!

MODIFIED OR CONDITIONAL PROMISES

A great number of God's promises are conditional or depend upon certain activities of His people. Prayer would certainly seem to be one of those conditional promises. When the Apostle John said *"Whatever we ask we receive"* he did not end his statement there—he added *"because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight."* (1 John 3:22). But the conditions do not stop there even, for in the 5th chapter he writes: *"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."* (5:14). Jesus illustrated this concept when He prayed to the Father to remove the cup of suffering ahead of Him, but ended the prayer with: *"not my will but your will be done!"* (Luke 22:42). God did not remove the cup of suffering! Thus, God urges us to earnestly pray for things in our lives, but He keeps the privilege of whether to grant them or not in His own power. And since He certainly knows what is best in every situation, we willingly surrender to His Will in the matter! (Matt. 7:11). It is not a question of God making promises and then not keeping them, but that His promises are conditioned on one or more things (some of which we may never be aware of) which modifies His promises. Thus, we need to keep on praying and believing in God and His promises, but all the time realizing that God knows what is best for His children.

A SPECIAL MODIFIER OF PRAYER

Jesus made several statements of promise to His special disciples or Apostles that do not apply to us today. It basically deals with the time during Jesus' public ministry and during the early years of the beginning of the church. Let's look at a few passages to illustrate:

Matt. 21:21-22—*"Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."*

John 14:13-14—*"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."*

John 14:12—*"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father."*

These are outstanding promises and the Apostles learned by experience that

they were given great power. They were able to do the same works that Jesus did, but even more, they were able to teach and bring people into the kingdom of Heaven that Jesus did not personally do during His public ministry. And there is an important fact to notice about the powers that the Apostles had—they did not heal everyone they came in contact with. Even some of their fellow-workers that got sick were not healed by them. It is obviously not God's will that every sick person get well—even though we may pray earnestly for them. Just remember.....many of the early Christians were put to death for their faith in Jesus—God allowed such! The Apostle Peter was delivered from prison and death, but the Apostle James was beheaded! We have to depend upon God to know what is best in each case. We probably should be thankful that God doesn't just give us everything we ask for. In our limited view of things, we cannot see the "big picture!" (Isa. 55:8). So, even if we pray for the wrong thing, God will not give us what is bad for us (Rom. 8:28).

PRAYER & RESPONSIBILITY

A most important statement is: *"Prayer is not a substitute for what is our responsibility to do!"* God does not promise to do for us what we can and should do for ourselves. He does not promise to protect us from all difficulties, failures, or tragedies, etc. By now, we should have learned that problem solving can be a means of growth for us (Heb. 12:3-11; James 1:2-4). We should not knowingly put ourselves in harm's way and expect God to deliver us (Matt. 4:7). Prayer is not a substitute for obedience (1 John 3:22). Sinners are not saved by prayer, but by an obedient faith in Jesus (Heb. 5:8-9). Prayer is not a substitute for medical help (1 Tim. 5:23; James 5:14-16)—we need to do what we can! Prayer is not a substitute for work (Matt. 6:11; Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:6-10).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Lord, teach us about prayer, the need of prayer, and how to understand our responsibilities in view of prayer. Teach us "how" we ought to pray and "for what" we ought to pray. May we do so with great humility realizing who is the creature and who is the creator! May we humbly submit to the will of God—strongly believing that God absolutely knows best! May we be like Job as he earnestly ask God for a reason for all the things going wrong in his life—but was never told why! Yet, he could still say: *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him!"* (Job 13:15).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can unanswered prayers lead to atheism?
2. Can you make this statement: "I have never asked God for something that He did not give me!"
3. After the Apostle prayed to God for Him to remove the "thorn in his side," what did God do?
4. Are there other Scriptures that you know besides John 3:16 that would modify your understanding of this Scripture statement?
5. What is meant by the expression that "other passages may modify how we understand plain simple statements of fact?"
6. What are some conditions that God says will modify his promises about answering prayer?
7. Do the promises that Jesus gave to the Apostles about miraculous powers and prayer apply to us today?
8. If unconditional prayer can heal a person, why would anyone die?
9. Is prayer a substitute for our responsibility? Please explain.
10. How does Job illustrate this lesson?

Lesson Five

"Hindrances to Prayers"

In this lesson we are interested in seeing what keeps the Christian from either praying to God acceptably or what can hinder his prayers from being answered by God. There are a few basic things that we need to state before we get into looking at hindrances to prayers, such as:

1. Prayer is for the Christian, not for sinners.
2. Prayer is a spiritual blessing that God grants to His children.
3. These prayers must be offered in the name of Jesus, for He is our one and only mediator between God and man.
4. It is not the purpose of prayer to impose our will upon God, but to make our request according to the will of God.
5. To realize that acceptable prayer to God is conditioned upon many things that we are now ready to study about.

ACCEPTABLE versus NON-ACCEPTABLE PRAYERS

1. Believing versus Doubting! (Mark 11:24; Jas. 1:5-6). A lack of or a weak faith on the part of the Apostles made it where they could not perform miracles. But the same is true in principle for us today—if we doubt God's response, then why ask? It is the one who believes that can expect God to hear and answer our request—but according to His Will! But even faith must overcome many obstacles in order to stay strong.

2. Asking versus not Asking! (James 4:2). James' statement that men have not because they ask not may reflect either neglect or lack of faith that God will hear them. We certainly cannot know if God will grant our petition unless we ask Him!

3. Sincerity versus Hypocrisy! (Matt. 6:5). The strongest condemnations that Jesus expressed during His public ministry were against hypocrisy! Much stress is laid upon God's people being sincere. An outward shell of prayer has little value and the many unanswered prayers should make this obvious. Prayer is more than words or formality in bowing before God or just telling God what we want or need. It must come from the heart, soul, or the inner person (John 4:24). Sincerity is appreciated by both God and men. Hypocrites, God will judge and their prayers are an abomination to him. If we are sincere in prayer, we will be intense, fervent, not half-hearted, listless, or indifferent (Jas. 5:16).

4. Persistence versus Losing Heart! (Luke 18:1-8). We know that we can prevail upon some men if we persist long enough. Our children show this!

But we also know about man's reluctance to give what others need. His reluctance is real, but God's seeming reluctance only seems real. He has merely chosen to operate this way for our good.

5. Humility versus Pride! (Luke 18:10-14). Pride, self-exaltation, self-righteousness filled the heart of the Pharisee. He extolled his virtues and looked upon the Lord as his debtor because of his good life. The Publican made no pretense of righteousness. He realized his true condition before God and in humility and self-abasement, he cast himself upon the mercy of God. Acceptable prayer must be characterized by such a spirit. ***"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*** (James 4:6). Jesus condemned the person that did his praying to be seen and praised of men (Matt. 6:5).

6. Forgiving versus Un-Forgiving! (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:21-35; James 2:13). A forgiving spirit shows mercy. If we refuse to forgive, we have no assurance of God's forgiveness! Unforgiveness is literally asking God to deal with us different than we deal with our fellow-man. ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy!"*** (Matt. 5:7).

7. Right Motive for Asking versus Wrong Motive for Asking! (James 4:3). We should honestly and sincerely ask ourselves why I am praying or asking God for whatever I am asking. Do we want this to pamper our lusts and carnal appetites? Do we want this so we can live in ease and pleasure? Acceptable prayer is when our will is in harmony with God's Will—it is when our petitions are His petitions—it is when that which we ask for will bring glory to His name. We need to study diligently so that we can know the Will of God and abide in it and by it.

8. With Understanding versus Without Understanding! (1 Cor. 14:15; Matt. 6:7-8). Our prayers should show that we have understanding of the teachings of God's Word, as well as show thoughtfulness in the request that we make. Meaningless words repeated over and over, hard to understand expressions, or words with little meaning are worthless.

9. With Watchfulness versus Slothfulness! (Mark 14:38; Col. 4:2). A sense of watchfulness makes us aware of the dangers of the evil one, but it also emphasizes the need for constant prayerfulness. The dangers are real that we can fall into temptation and sin. ***"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."*** (1 Pet. 5:8). The slothful person will be an easy prey for the evil one (Matt. 25:26, 30).

Prayer is not simple, but quite complex! To avail with God, we must learn how to pray. This involves getting our attitudes and actions correct.

"ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL"

Possibly one of the factors that plays such a big role in prayer is that we need to ask for things according to the will of God! In the model prayer that Jesus gave, he used the expression: "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" (Matt. 6:10). In Jesus' fervent prayer in the garden when He asked the Father three times about not having to "*drink this cup,*" He ended His prayer with: "*Not my will but according to Your will.*" (Matt. 26:39). It should be obvious that fallible, sinful, and weak humans do not always know what is best for themselves or for others. We surely do not want to pray for something that would be harmful to us or others. But Jesus' prayer should make it even more obvious that we should want God's will done and not our's. He was the Son of God and saw the need to say "*Not My will, but Your will be done!*" He not only wanted what was best for mankind, but what would bring glory to the Father. So Jesus was willing to submit to whatever was the will of the Father regardless of what the consequences would be for Him (1 Cor. 10:31).

What does the expression mean: "*according to God's will?*" It is quite obvious that God has Given His Word by inspiration of the Spirit so that men may know what God expects of them. This we call the "revealed will of God" (Heb. 1:1-2; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). But there seems to be a will of God that is not revealed to us until possibly after it has happened—that God's providence works out for the good of His children (Rom. 15:32; 1 Cor. 4:19; James 4:15; Rom. 8:28). When we pray and use this expression, we possibly should use it with reference to both of these concepts. But it should be uttered sincerely and willingly wanted to be submissive to whatever God wants of His people.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If prayer was easy and God gave us everything we asked for, I am afraid that we would be "spoiled" children! God doesn't want spoiled children, but as a good Father He disciplines us for our good (Heb. 12:1-11). Possibly, a large part of that discipline is denied petitions! We need to learn some very important lessons and sometimes discipline situations help to bring that about. The more mature we become, the greater our faith in God—even when our petitions are often not granted! We may not fully know why, but we are sure of one thing—He always gives us what is best for us or for others that we pray sincerely about.

There are quite a few hindrances to our praying, but also to our prayers being effectively answered. We need to be aware of these and avoid them as much as possible.

Lesson Six

"A Lifestyle of Prayer"

A significant fact about prayer is given in Ephesians 6:14-18! Paul, by inspiration of God, is stressing the necessity of the Christian putting on the **"WHOLE"** armor of God; and, a part of that armor is **"PRAYER!"** He stresses: *"praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints..."* In his Colossian Letter, Paul uses an example of one of his fellow-laborers (Epaphras) to illustrate this idea: *"Who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."* (4:12). Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians was: *"Pray without ceasing!"* (1 Thess. 5:17). Such language as the above quotes certainly leads to the idea that fervent and ceaseless prayer should be the "Life-Style" of the Christian!

LOSING THE RACE!

Why do so many Christians drop out of the Christian race? I am sure that several good reasons could be given, but one basic reason is obvious—a lack of a devout prayer life! The old adage that says: *"If you don't grow, you go backwards!"* may be another way of saying that *"without prayer, the Christian will not progress spiritually!"* It not only takes a lot of continuous Bible study along with fervent prayer; but as well, an obedient life in order to stay faithful to the end! (Rev. 2:10).

God's people should have these important watchwords to express their life before God: **Powerful, Persistent, and ultimate Victory!** Prayer has to play a big role to make these words sincerely a part of our thinking (2 Tim. 1:7). There are no quitters among those who have make Prayer a major part of their life. **The Apostles** saw the need for prayer (Acts 6:4). **The early church** continued steadfastly in prayer (Acts 2:42, etc.). **Jesus** saw the need for prayer in his public ministry continually.

"If we think that we can survive this world and its challenges without continual prayer, it is quite obvious that we have too great an inflated opinion of ourselves!"

Without prayer, the Christian will be vulnerable to the devil's fiery darts and we will not be able to stand against his wiles! We will have to endure the misery and despair that this world brings to us without the powerful help and comfort of prayer. Our lives will be filled with worry and anxiety that will drag us down

because we do not have prayer to cast all our cares upon Him who cares for us (Heb. 13:6; 1 Pet. 5:7). No wonder that such people do not endure to the end (Heb. 3:6, 12-14).

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. Pray when we wake up in the morning! We can be thankful for the night's rest, but also ask for His protection during the day. Prayer helps us to start the day off right!

2. Pray before our meals! God has amply provided for our welfare. The least we can do is to offer thanksgiving for the bounties of life we enjoy. We can bow and say a silent prayer if we are in a public situation where it would be harder to understand when others are involved.

3. We may want to have other set times for prayer as well! Daniel had his set times that he felt the need for in his life. Certainly, we today have some of the same needs that he felt that caused him to set aside time for prayer.

4. We are privileged to pray at any time in any place! Things often come up that will cause us to want to go to God in prayer and petition for ourselves or for others. Prayers need not be long—make them straight to the point!

5. It is good to prayer with one's family! Children need to see and hear their fathers and mothers pray for them and for others. They need to see that their parents feel their dependence upon God as they feel their dependence upon their parents.

6. We should pray, not only when we feel a need, but also when we are happy and contented. We need to pray when we feel discouraged or face some special problem. But that should not be the only time we pray! It is easy to pray when we have a need, but do we forget to pray when things are going well?

7. We should pray simply and naturally. Prayers should be simple, sincere, and heart-felt. They are not for show to men or to God! God is not impressed with our eloquence or much speaking, but with a broken and contrite heart!

8. We should pray fervently. Such will avail before the throne of God. We need to feel deeply about the things we talk to God about and show that concern by doing what we can in addition to our petitions to the Father.

9. Pray until prayer becomes a desirable habit—a life-style! It must not be a "mere" habit, but something we do on a regular basis just like we do eating and sleeping. Our lives are largely made up of habits. We need to have good habits filling our lives.

10. Spend time in prayer each day. Someone has stated: *"I guarantee that anyone who prays as much as ten minutes each day will be saved."* This is pretty rash...so, why would a man make such a statement? His reasoning was that if a man spent this much time in prayer that he would also do all the other things the Lord requires of him. I think that most of us can see from experience why such a statement would be made.

FAITHFUL TO THE END!

Possibly, one of the greatest reasons and blessing of continual prayer is that it helps to maintain my relationship with God. The inspired Apostle John encourages the Christian to:

- 1. Walk in the light as God is in the light;**
- 2. Confess our sins.** (1 John 1:7-10).

Why? What is so important about how we walk and what we talk to God about? In both instances it clearly states that if we do these two things we can be assured of our relationship with God—all our sins will be forgiven, cleansed, taken away! It is not hard for the humble, sincere Christian to realize that continual prayer is needed for this alone if for no other reason. Also, notice that John adds this then: *"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."* (2:1). Jesus makes it possible for our prayers to go up before the Father because of His intercession for us. No man can do what Jesus can do when we access His help in prayer.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Why pray? Such a question really seems trite now that we have just briefly looked at prayer and what it can mean to our lives! We certainly should want to avoid those things that would hinder our prayers from going up before the throne of God. And beyond a doubt, all of us could very easily say as the Apostles did: *"Lord, teach us to pray!"*

While all men may attempt to pray to a supreme Being, that is no indication that they will be heard or that God will give them what they request. We firmly believe prayer to be a spiritual blessing of the Christian and that it should be a major part of the life of a Christian.

We pray that this study may be a means of helping to encourage you to be more concerned and involved in your prayer life and that prayer will certainly become (if it is not already) a life-style that all can see.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you concern of prayer as being a vital part of the Christian's armor?
2. What does it mean to "pray without ceasing?"
3. Why do so many Christians drop out of the Christian race?
4. Who in the New Testament saw a need for sincere prayer?
5. Who may have an inflated view of themselves?
6. Without prayer, what does the Christian have to face?
7. Which one of the ten practical suggestions do you feel meant the most to you?
8. What two things do we have to do to maintain our relationship with God?
9. Why is continual prayer needed?

