# **The Power of Prayer**

# **How Must We Pray So God Will Answer?**

## **How should we pray so God will answer? What conditions must prayer meet? When, where, and how often should we pray? What power does prayer have?**

## **Does God really answer prayer? If so, why are prayers sometimes not answered? What should we pray about: praise, thanks, petition, worship, requests, intercession for others? When and how often should we pray? What conditions must we meet for our prayers to be heard and answered? What power does prayer have?**

#### ***Introduction:***

In Luke 11:1 Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Christians today also need to learn to pray.

The purpose of this study is to help Christians improve in prayer. People who are new in the faith may have never studied about how to pray. Some members do not pray properly so their prayers are not even answered. All of us can improve in this aspect of worship.

We need to learn what to pray about. Should we make requests, be thankful, offer praise, intercede on behalf of others, offer petition? And what power does prayer have? Does God really answer prayer? If so, how should we pray and what conditions must prayer meet in order for God to hear and answer? These and other questions will be considered in this study.

What is prayer? Note Acts 4:24,31. Prayer is simply man talking to God, expressing his thoughts to God (Rom. 10:1; Matt. 6:9ff). Hence, it is a form of communication similar in may ways to simply talking to our earthly father, except that we must remember whom we are addressing and must meet conditions of acceptable prayer.

## **I. What Should We Pray About?**

What should we include in our prayers? Some cannot seem to think of much to say. Others say things that are inappropriate or even unscriptural. Some just repeat memorized phrases they have heard others pray.

Let us examine Bible examples of prayer. What did God's people in the Scriptures talk about in prayer? How do our prayers compare? Can we improve our prayers by considering what Bible characters prayed about?

### **A. We Should Praise God's Character and Work.**

Bible prayers quite commonly included many descriptions of the glory and greatness of God. Jesus began the model prayer by praising God's name (Matt. 6:9). Many psalms are filled with praise (note Psalm 86:5-12).

From the passages below, consider some particular qualities or works of God that were praised in prayer. How do our prayers compare? Do we praise God like this?

\* ***God's authority and Lordship*** - He is the true God, in contrast to idols - 1 Chronicles 29:10-13. [Psalm 86:8-10; Neh. 9:4-6; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Kings 19:15; Matt. 6:13; Rev 11:17; 2 Sam. 7:22]

\* ***God's power*** - 1 Chronicles 29:11,12. [Jer. 32:16-23; Eph. 1:16-19; Job 42:1,2; Neh. 9:4-38; Dan. 2:20-23]

\* ***God's holiness, goodness, and righteousness*** - Psalm 86:5-12 (note v5). [Psalm 143:1-12; 1 Sam. 2:2]

\* ***God's mercy, grace, kindness, and willingness to forgive*** - God has provided redemption and salvation for His people, especially sending Jesus as our Savior - Psalm 86:5. [Col. 1:12-14; 2 Sam. 7:23; Neh. 9:4-38; Luke 2:37,38; 1 Kings 8:23; Ezra 9:8,9; Psalm 17:7]

\* ***God's wisdom and knowledge*** - Jeremiah 32:16-23 (note v19). [Dan. 2:20-23; 1 Sam. 2:3]

\* ***God's justice*** - God cares for His people and rewards them but punishes the wicked - Jeremiah 32:19,23. [1 Sam. 2:6-10; Gen. 18:25; Psalm 90:7-11]

\* ***God's eternal existence*** - Psalm 90:1-4. [Psalm 102:1,12,24-27]

\* ***God's faithfulness to His word*** - Nehemiah 9:4-8. [Neh. 1:5; 1 Kings 8:23-30; Dan. 9:4; Psalm 143:1]

\* ***God's work as Creator and Source of life*** - Nehemiah 9:4-6. [Jer. 32:17; Psalm 90:2; 102:1,24,25; 2 Kings 19:15; Acts 4:24; 1 Sam. 2:6]

We could never list here all the great qualities and works for which God deserves our praise. Yet surely we ought to praise God in prayer, so we should meditate about why He deserves our praise. Instead of just thinking of more things for God to give us, do we need greater emphasis on describing His greatness?

### **B. We Should Pray on Behalf of Others.**

1 Timothy 2:1,2 says to offer prayer, supplication, intercession, and giving of thanks on behalf of all men. Yet we sometimes neglect to pray for others because we concentrate so much on our own interests.

How often do we think to pray for others, whether or not they request our prayers? Bible prayers are filled with requests and thanksgiving for people other than the one offering the prayer. Consider some groups of people for whom we should pray:

\* ***Rulers*** - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Ezra 6:10; 1 Chron. 29:19]

\* ***Children and family members*** - our spouse, relatives, etc. - 1 Chron. 29:19. [Matthew 19:13-15; Gen. 25:21,22; 24:12-14; 18:23-33; 1 Sam. 1:10-12; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Luke 1:13]

\* ***Lost sinners*** - Romans 10:1-3. Remember, however, that these people must meet the gospel conditions of salvation in order to be forgiven. [Matt. 9:36-38; Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]

\* ***Enemies and persecutors*** - Luke 6:27,28. [Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34]

\* ***People sick and suffering*** - 3 John 2. [James 5:16; Num. 11:2; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Gen. 20:17,18]

\* ***Elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers*** - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4; Acts 4:25-29; 6:6; 14:23; 13:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; Matt. 9:36-38; 2 Thess. 3:1,2; Heb. 13:18]

\* ***All Christians*** - Ephesians 6:18. [James 5:16]

The Bible contains multitudes of examples in which men of God interceded on behalf of God's people. Here are just a few of them:

Moses [Num. 11:2; 21:7; 14:13-20; Deut. 9:18-20,25-29; Ex. 32:9-14,31,32].

Samuel [1 Sam. 7:5-11; 12:19-25].

Solomon [1 Kings 8:22-54].

Ezra [Ezra 9:1-15].

Nehemiah [Neh. 1:4-11].

Daniel [Dan. 9:3-20].

Jesus - Luke 22:31,32 (for Peter); John 17:9-22 (for all believers). [Luke 23:34]

Peter - Acts 8:24 (for Simon)

Epaphras [Col. 4:12]

Paul - Col. 1:3,9-14 [Rom. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-19; Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:11,12; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3]

Note that most examples were prayers, not just for God's people in general, but for specific individuals or congregations. Do we show this personal concern for others in our prayers?

Furthermore notice that Paul openly told people he was praying for them. If we would do this, it would motivate us to be more diligent to pray for others, but it would also give Christians a greater sense of love and appreciation for one another.

### **C. We Should Make Requests and Give Thanks.**

We should pray for the things we truly need, however some people forget to thank God for what they have received. Their prayers consist almost entirely of asking for more. God is a generous God, willing to give what we need. But He also expects appreciation for what He gives.

#### ***Passages teaching we can request what we need:***

Philippians 4:6,7 - Instead of worrying, let your requests be made known to God. "Supplication" refers to requests for needs to be "supplied."

Matthew 7:7-11 - God is like a loving father who gives what his children need. If we ask, we will receive.

1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on God because He cares for you.

James 4:2,3 - Sometimes we do not receive because we do not ask. On the other hand, God will not answer selfish requests for things we do not need.

1 John 5:14,15 - If we ask according to God's will, we receive our petitions.

[Cf. 1 John 3:21,22; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26]

#### ***Passages teaching we should also give thanks for our blessings:***

Philippians 4:6,7 - Our requests should be made known with thanksgiving.

1 Timothy 2:1 - Prayers for others should include thanksgiving.

Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks to the Father always for all things.

[1 Thess. 5:18; Col. 4:2; 2:7; 3:17]

Bible prayers generally include thanksgiving right alongside requests. God invites us to ask for what we need, but He is displeased by those who are so ungrateful as to offer no thanks when the request is granted (Luke 17:12-17).

### **D. Some Specific Things We Should Pray about**

No one prayer or combination of prayers could mention all the possible subjects there are to pray about. But an examination of Bible prayers can teach us the kind of specific things that are commonly included in Bible prayers. We may pray about these things for ourselves or for others. We may request them and should give thanks when we receive them.

All these things are mentioned in Bible prayers:

\* ***God's will to be done*** - Matthew 6:9-13 (note v10). [Matt. 26:39]

\* ***Necessities of life*** - Matthew 6:11. [Acts 27:35; Matt. 15:36; 14:19; 1 Tim. 4:3-5; Luke 24:30]

\* ***Forgiveness of sins*** and deliverance from the consequences of sin - Matthew 6:12. But note that one who has not been baptized should not pray for forgiveness but be baptized - Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16. [Acts 8:22,24; James 5:16; Luke 18:13,14; Psalm 32:5-7]

\* ***Ability to recognize and resist temptation*** - Matthew 6:13. [Matt. 26:41; Eph. 6:11-18; 2 Cor. 13:7; Luke 22:31,32; John 17:14-16]

\* ***Good health*** and freedom from other threats to life or safety - 3 John 2; 2 Kings 20:1-7 (Hezekiah) [James 5:13-18; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Kings 8:35-53; 2 Chron. 7:13-15; Jonah 2:1-10; Psalm 50:15; 86:6,7; 32:6,7; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Num. 11:2; Luke 21:36]

\* ***Deliverance from enemies*** and persecution - Acts 12:1,5,12. [2 Thess. 3:1,2; 2 Cor. 1:8-11; Acts 4:23-31; 16:25; 1 Kings 8:33-35; 2 Kings 19:4,15-19]

\* ***Freedom from oppression by rulers*** - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Neh. 1:11-2:5]

\* ***Safety in travel and care for loved ones we are separated from*** - Acts 21:5. [Acts 20:36-38; 28:15; Ezra 8:21-23; Gen. 24:26,27; 1 Thess. 3:9-11; 2 Tim. 1:3-5; Rom. 1:10; 15:30-32; Philem. 22]

\* ***Peace, courage, joy instead of disappointment or discouragement*** - Philippians 4:6,7. [1 Samuel 8:6-9; 2:1-11; Jer. 29:7; Psalm 122:6; 1 Peter 5:7; Matt. 26:36-46; Col. 1:11; 1 Thess. 3:9; 2 Sam. 7:18-29]

\* ***Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of God's will*** - Psalm 119:169-172. Note that this comes today through the Scriptures, not by direct revelation. [James 1:5,6; Col. 1:9,10; Phil. 1:9,10; Psalm 86:6,11; 143:1,8,10]

\* ***Salvation of lost sinners*** - Romans 10:1-3. [Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]

\* ***Laborers to teach the lost*** - Matthew 9:36-38.

\* ***Bold, clear preaching*** - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4]

\* ***Opportunities to preach and teach*** - Colossians 4:3 [2 Thess. 3:1]

\* ***Support for preachers*** - Philippians 1:3-5.

\* ***Choosing of elders, deacons, teachers,*** etc. - Acts 14:23. [Acts 6:6; 13:3]

\* ***Jesus' death, the Lord's supper*** - Matthew 26:26-29. [1 Cor. 11:23-26]

\* ***Baptism*** - Luke 3:21.

\* ***Faithfulness, good works, a life pleasing to God*** - Philippians 1:3-6,9-11. [Col. 1:9-11; 4:12; John 17:9-12; 1 Thess. 3:10-13; 2 Thess. 1:11]

\* ***Love*** - Philippians 1:9. [1 Thess. 3:10-12; Eph. 3:14-19]

\* ***Strength*** - Colossians 1:9-11. [Eph. 3:14-19; 2 Thess. 1:11]

\* ***Patience, long-suffering*** - Colossians 1:11.

\* ***Grace and mercy*** - 2 Corinthians 4:15. [Psalm 4:1; 86:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:4]

\* ***Proper speech*** - Psalm 141:1-3.

\* ***Sanctification*** - John 17:17.

\* ***Unity*** - John 17:20-23.

\* ***Eternal life, eternal glory*** - John 17:24-26.

This is not a complete list, but it suggests many things we could properly pray for. Remember that these are things both to make request for and to give thanks for.

Also note how Bible prayers often concerned spiritual needs and blessings. Some people seem to view prayer like sending a "Christmas list" to Santa for all the physical things they want. Biblical prayers may concern physical needs, but mainly they reflect man's greatest needs which are spiritual.

How do our prayers compare to Bible prayers? Are there areas where we need to improve?

## **II. When, Where, How Long, and How Often Should We Pray?**

What are the proper circumstances for prayer? Should we pray only in church meetings or as daily routing or spontaneously as circumstances dictate? Should we pray in public or in private? What posture must we use?

### **A. General Admonitions about Frequency, Place, etc.**

Notice these passages that generally discuss where and how often we should pray:

1 Timothy 2:8 - Men should pray "everywhere."

Acts 2:42 - "Continue steadfastly" in prayer.

1 Thessalonians 5:17,18 - Pray "without ceasing"; in everything give thanks.

Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks "always" for all things.

[Eph. 1:16; 6:18; Col. 1:3,9; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2,12; Luke 18:1-7; Rom. 12:12; Acts 6:4; 1:14; Phil. 1:4; 4:6; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Thess. 1:3,11; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13]

These verses do not mean we should pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for then we could not do the other good works God has commanded. Even Jesus and his apostles did not pray all the time (Luke 11:1).

The passages do mean that prayer should be a regular, frequent part of our daily lives, and that we should never quit or cease the practice of prayer. Further, we should live so that we are always ready to pray at any moment. We should never participate in practices such that we would be ashamed to pray to God in the midst of that activity.

### **B. Specific Examples of Frequency, Place, etc.**

To give us a fuller understanding, consider these examples showing specifically when and where people prayed:

\* ***In public worship assemblies*** - 1 Corinthians 14:15 (see the context). [1 Kings 8:22; Ezra 9:4,5ff; Neh. 9:1-5]

\* ***In special gatherings*** regarding special needs - Acts 4:23ff. [Acts 12:5,12; 20:36]

\* ***In one's own home*** - Matthew 6:6. [Dan. 6:10,11; 2 Kings 20:1-3]

\* ***Before meals*** - Acts 27:35. [Matt. 15:36; 14:19; Luke 24:30]

\* ***On a mountain, in a garden,*** or other deserted place - Matthew 14:23. [Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12; 9:18; Acts 10:9; Matt. 26:36-46]

\* ***In the morning*** - Mark 1:35 (a long time before day). [Psalm 5:3; 88:13]

\* ***In the evening*** - Matthew 26:36-46. [Ezra 9:5]

\* ***Morning, noon, and evening*** - Psalm 55:16,17.

\* ***Three times a day*** - Daniel 6:10,11.

\* ***For forty days and nights*** - Deut. 9:18,25,26.

\* ***All night*** - Luke 6:12.

\* ***Night and day*** - 1 Thessalonians 3:9,10. [1 Tim. 5:5; Psalm 88:1]

Note: We should pray in private but also in public worship assemblies. We should not pray to make a show before others, but we should not be ashamed to pray around others at times when we otherwise would pray (cf. Acts 27:35). We should pray habitually throughout the day but also at special times when needs arise.

Do we pray regularly like faithful people of God in the Bible?

### **C. Posture and Physical Conduct During Prayer**

Some people believe we should kneel or sit for prayer, but not stand. Must we speak out loud for God to hear us? Must we fold our hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes as we often teach children to do? Consider these Bible examples:

\* ***Kneeling, falling down prostrate*** - Luke 22:41. [Matt. 26:39; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14; Dan. 6:10,11; Deut. 9:18-20,25; 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5]

\* ***Sitting*** - Nehemiah 1:4. [1 Kings 19:4; 2 Sam. 7:18]

\* ***Standing*** - Mark 11:25; Luke 18:13,14. [1 Sam. 1:26; Gen. 24:12,13; Neh. 9:4,5ff] Note: If someone demands an example of standing in a congregational assembly, I ask where is the example of kneeling in a congregational assembly?

\* ***Bowed heads*** - 1 Chronicles 29:20 (Israel), Luke 18:13 (the publican would not lift his eyes to heaven). [Gen. 24:27,48; Ex. 34:8,9; 4:31; 12:27; 2 Chron. 20:18; 29:30; Neh. 8:6]

\* ***Eyes lifted toward heaven*** - John 17:1ff (Jesus). [John 11:41; Matt. 14:19]

\* ***Speaking in the heart***, but no sound from the lips - 1 Sam. 1:12,13 (Hannah).

Other postures, due to special circumstances, include: on the cross (Luke 23:46,34); in the belly of a fish (Jonah 2:1); in stocks in prison (Acts 16:24,25).

The variety in these examples shows that the position is a matter of choice or expediency and does not, of itself, determine whether or not God hears us. We can pray anytime or place, yet certain positions may at times better suit our circumstances or reverence.

[Other information regarding posture & related points:

Prayer with fasting - Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3ff; Acts 9:9-11; 14:23; Luke 2:37; 5:33-35; 1 Cor. 7:5.

Hands lifted up - 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; 1 Tim. 2:8; Isa. 1:15(?); Psalm 28:2. But note: Did Hannah lift her hands (1 Sam. 1:12,13)?

Hands laid on other people - Acts 6:6; 8:14-18; 13:3; Matt. 19:13-15]

## **III. Can Prayer Really Change the Future?**

Does God really answer prayer, or are the benefits of prayer just psychological? Because we have prayed, does God so intervene in the course of history that events occur differently than they would have?

### **A. Promises that God Will Answer Prayer**

Consider several Bible passages expressly stating that God does answer prayer:

1 John 5:14,15 - We can have confidence that, if we pray according to God's word, He will hear us and grant what we ask.

1 John 3:22 - Whatever we ask we receive because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.

James 5:16 - The fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah prayed and it did not rain for 3 1/2 years. He prayed again and it rained (v17,18).

Matthew 7:7-11 - If we ask, seek, and knock, we receive what we requested. God is like an earthly father who gives good gifts to His children who ask.

1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on Him for He cares for you.

There are conditions we must meet in order for God to answer our prayers. If we meet those conditions and if He can answer our prayers in harmony with His will, He has promised to do what is good for us.

[Mark 11:24; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26; James 1:5,6; Luke 18:1-8; 1 Peter 3:12; Matthew 6:6,8; Psalm 55:22; 86:7; 28:6; 31:22; 118:5; 120:1; 116:1; 21:2]

### **B. Bible Examples of Answered Prayers.**

Many Bible examples show God's response to prayers of His people. God does not do miracles today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but He is able to control events according to natural law so as to answer prayer without miracles. We will focus on cases of this nature.

1 Samuel 1:10-20,26-28 - Hanna was barren, having no child. She prayed, and as a result she conceived and bore Samuel. [Luke 1:13]

1 Samuel 7:5-11 - Samuel prayed for Israel's deliverance from an enemy, and the prayer was answered. [Cf. 2 Kings 19:15-37; 2 Chron. 33:10-13.]

2 Chronicles 7:11-14 - God promised to hear Israel's prayer for deliverance from pestilence, famine, etc.

2 King 20:1-7 - God said Hezekiah would die, not live. Hezekiah prayed about it, God promised to add 15 years to his life, and Hezekiah recovered.

Exodus 32:9-14 - God said He would destroy Israel, but Moses prayed and God changed His mind.

[Neh. 1:4-2:8; Psalm 32:5-7]

### **C. Some Conclusions about God's Answers to Prayers**

#### ***God does act in response to prayer.***

Some people think that, if God does not do miracles, then He must not be acting at all. Others see only psychological benefits in prayer or perhaps just the fact that we have obeyed God's command to pray. Even though we pray Scripturally, they claim God does not actually intervene in the course of earthly events to bring about what we asked for. But the examples just listed show that God does act in response to prayer, acting in harmony with natural law, without miracle.

Note Matthew 18:19 - When we ask God to do something, it will be ***done*** by the Father in heaven. God does act. This is true of "anything" we ask. Every kind of Scriptural request is included. [Cf. John 14:13,14; 15:7]

If God does not act to change the course of events in response to prayer, the same effect could be produced by a person praying with sincere faith to an idol! The idol could not do anything, but the worshiper would receive the psychological benefits.

Yet the Bible clearly teaches that Scriptural prayer to God produces results that cannot be achieved by people who do not serve the true God (James 5:16; 1 John 3:22; Prov. 15:8,29; Psalm 34:15-19; etc.). These promises can be valid only if prayer produces results beyond psychological benefits.

#### ***However, we must also work, to the extent of our ability, to achieve what we prayed for.***

God does act in response to Scriptural prayers, but He will not act if we are not willing to do our part.

Matthew 6:11 teaches us to pray for our daily bread, but we must still work for it (2 Thess. 3:10). God does not answer through miracle (as by manna from heaven). But He does work through natural law to bless our effort so the needed result is achieved where it may not have been achieved had we worked but not prayed.

James 1:5 says to pray for wisdom (cf. Col. 1:9), but we must still study the word (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). The prayer is answered, not by miraculous direct revelation, but through the natural process of study. God gives us opportunities to learn and blesses our study so we learn what we might not have known had we not prayed.

3 John 2 - A prayer for good health requires us to care for our bodies, not knowingly damaging our health for personal pleasures.

In a similar way, we should pray for the spread of the gospel, but we must also work to teach it to the lost. But because we prayed, God blesses our work so it accomplishes good that may not have been accomplished had we not prayed.

#### ***God gives, not necessarily what we want, but what is best for everyone involved.***

Matthew 7:7-11 - Like an earthly father, God gives ***good*** things, not things that do harm.

Matthew 26:36-46 - Jesus prayed to avoid the cross, but said, "Thy will be done." He still had to die, but an angel strengthened Him (Luke 22:43). God met His need while still doing what was needed for mankind.

Psalm 34:10 - Those who seek God will not lack any ***good*** thing. [Rom. 8:28; James 1:17]

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - Paul prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. God did not grant the request but instead did what was best for Paul.

[Matt. 6:8; Eph. 3:20; 1 Kings 3:5-13]

God is infinite, where our knowledge is limited. We may not know what is best, but God does. This is why we ought always to pray for God's will to be done. He can then give us what we asked, something greater, or something different, according to what He knows to be best.

We further may not understand ***how*** God can control the universe without miracles, yet the Bible affirms that He does (consider also the story of Esther). Those who believe in God must believe in His power to answer prayer, even though we cannot explain how He does it.

## **IV. What Conditions Must Prayer Meet?**

God had promised to answer prayer, yet some prayers are not answered. How can this be? The only possible explanation is that there are conditions prayer must meet in order for God to answer, just as there are conditions we must meet in order for God to forgive our sins. What conditions must prayer meet in order for God to answer?

### **A. We Must Pray in Jesus' Name (though Him as Mediator).**

#### ***Consider these verses:***

John 14:13,14 - If we ask anything in Jesus' name, He will do it. [Cf. John 15:16; 16:23,24,26; Eph. 5:20]

Romans 1:8 - Paul thanked God through Jesus Christ. [Col. 3:17]

1 Timothy 2:5 - Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. The immediate context refers to salvation, but the broader context refers to prayer (see v1,2,8). Jesus is the mediator in prayer because He is our mediator in salvation. He is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16).

#### ***What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name?***

Are these just meaningless words we mouth at the end of a prayer to make it effective [like a magic spell - "Open, Sesame"]?

A person's name stands for the person and all that He is. God's name is "hallowed" because God Himself is hallowed (Matt. 6:9). More specifically, a person's name represents his will and authority. Your name signed on a check or other legal document authorizes it as acceptable to you. "Halt in the name of the law" means the authority of the law requires you to stop.

Further, Jesus is the mediator who makes it possible for us to approach God in prayer. We pray "through Him" because His authority enables us to be heard. Because of our sins, we could never approach God. We need a "go-between" to reconcile us to God so we can communicate with Him. Because Jesus died as our sacrifice, He is the only one who can authorize us to approach God in prayer.

Why then would anyone pray through Mary or a dead "saint"? They did not redeem us by their death, hence they cannot mediate our prayers. No one can mediate instead of or in addition to Jesus. He is the "one mediator" between God and man.

To pray in Jesus' name means we are appealing to His authority as the one mediator between us and God. We are trusting His power to make it possible for God to hear our prayer. We should understand this if we are to avoid praying with "vain repetition."

### **B. We Must Pray According to God's Will.**

This follows from the concept of prayer "in Jesus' name." Note further:

1 John 5:14,15 - God hears us if we ask according to His will.

Matthew 26:39 - Jesus prayed for the Father's will to be done. [Matt. 6:10]

But God's will may fall into one of two categories:

#### ***In things essential to salvation, God's will is revealed in the Scriptures.***

Note 2 Tim. 3:16,17; 1 Cor. 14:37; etc. Regarding such matters, we must never pray for things that do not harmonize with God's revealed will.

For example, God says we should not pray for things just to satisfy our selfish lusts (James 4:3). Such would not be praying according to His will.

Likewise, God's has revealed that sinners must meet conditions, including baptism, to be forgiven (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16; etc.). We must never pray for God to save such people without them meeting these conditions.

Since the gospel came into effect, no passage ever tells an unbaptized person to pray for forgiveness of sins. Yet preachers often tell such people to "pray through" or "pray the sinner's prayer" to be saved. Such a prayer would not be answered because it is not according to God's will.

#### ***In things not essential to salvation, God's will may not be expressly revealed in Scripture.***

Many events of everyday life may not be a matter of right or wrong, so we may not know God's expressed will. For example, we know God allows suffering and death, so in a particular instance of illness we may not know whether God would be willing for the person to get better or not. [2 Cor. 12:7-10]

In these cases we may pray for what we believe to be best, but then we should ask God to do what He knows to be best. Then by faith we accept the outcome.

### **C. We Must Pray with Understanding and Meaning.**

1 Corinthians 14:15,16 - Pray with the spirit and the understanding. Think about the words to be sure you mean what is said. When you lead public prayer, help people understand so they can say "amen" (cf. vv19,26,40). Use words people can understand. Speak loudly and distinctly.

Matthew 6:7 - Do not use vain (meaningless) repetition. Even if we understand the words, if we repeat them frequently, we may be tempted to just mouth the words without meaning them. This does not prove it is wrong to repeat a request (Matt. 26:36-46; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Luke 18:1-7), but we should mean it every time we pray it!

### **D. We Must Pray with Sincerity and Earnestness.**

1 Samuel 1:10,15 - Hannah poured out her soul in prayer.

Jeremiah 29:12,13 - God promised He would hear His people when they prayed with "all their hearts."

Luke 22:44 - In Gethsemane Jesus prayed earnestly.

Matthew 6:5 - Do not pray from hypocritical motives such as to be seen of men. Pleasing, impressing, and entertaining people are not proper motives for prayer. We must pray to please God and honor Him. [Mark 12:40]

Prayer must never become a mere formality or outward ritual that we go through without meaning what we do. Our hearts must be involved in fervent prayer, thanksgiving, and appeals to God.

[1 Cor. 14:15; Psalm 17:1; 145:18; James 5:16,17]

### **E. We Must Pray in Faith.**

James 1:5-8 - Ask in faith without doubting. One who doubts will received nothing from God. First we must believe that God exists, then believe that He has power to answer prayer. The skeptic or agnostic who prays ("just in case there is a God") is wasting his breath.

Mark 11:24 - To receive the blessing we request, we must believe that God will answer. The context discusses miracles, which do not occur today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but the principle still applies. God answers prayer today through natural law, but we must believe He does answer else we can be sure He will not.

Remember, as discussed previously, that there are some things God has expressly revealed that He is willing to give, such as forgiveness to a penitent child of God. Faith requires us to believe He will give what He has promised. In other matters He has not necessarily revealed what He will give (such as good health), so we must pray "Thy will be done." Then we must believe He will do what is best.

Praying in faith also requires us to accept what God sends as being what is best. Too often, when we do not receive exactly what we asked for, we complain or think God broke His promise. Faith requires us to believe He will give the best thing at the best time, and then believe that the result is what is best.

### **F. We Must Pray with Humility and Respect for God.**

2 Chronicles 7:14 - God will hear His people if they "humble themselves" and pray.

Luke 18:9-14 - The self-righteous Pharisee praised and exalted himself in prayer, instead of exalting God. Such a person will be abased by God, not justified.

Matthew 6:9 - Pray, "Hallowed be Thy name." Prayer must express respect and reverence for God.

God should not be approached casually as another human ("Hi, Pop!"), nor as a servant at our beck and call. Our attitudes and speech should exalt His greatness while recognizing our weaknesses, sins, and human limitations. [2 Chron. 33:10-13; Gen. 18:27]

### **G. We Must Pray with Repentance for Sin.**

2 Chronicles 7:14 - In order for God to hear His people's prayers, they must turn from their wicked ways.

Acts 8:21-23 - When a child of God has sinned, they must repent and pray for forgiveness. (See our earlier list of other passages teaching this.)

Luke 18:13,14 - The publican received justification because he was willing to admit his sins.

Forgiveness is not granted to those who persist in sin, excuse it, rationalize it, overlook it, or hide it. To receive forgiveness when we pray, we must be truly sorry for sin and determine to overcome it. [Psalm 32:5-7; Dan. 9:3-12; James 5:16; 1 Kings 8:33-36,46-53]

### **H. We Must Pray with Forgiveness for Others.**

Matthew 6:12,14,15 - God will forgive us only if we willingly forgive others. [Mark 11:25; Matt. 18:21-35]

To have a right relationship with God we must pursue right relationships with people (Matt. 5:23,24). Have others apologized to you requesting your forgiveness, yet you continue to hold a grudge? Do you seek revenge, wishing harm to come to those who have wronged you, unwilling to pursue peace and harmony?

To receive God's forgiveness when we pray, we must have the same attitude toward others that we expect Him to have toward us!

### **I. We Must Pray While Living a Faithful Life.**

James 5:16 - The supplication of a righteous man avails much.

1 John 3:21,22 - We receive what we ask from God because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.

Proverbs 28:9; 15:8,29 - If someone turns away from God's law, his prayer is an abomination. But God hears the prayer of the righteous.

Psalm 66:18 - God will not hear me if I regard iniquity in my heart.

Isaiah 1:15-17 - God would not hear the prayers even of His own people because of their sins. They needed to cease doing evil and learn to do well. [Jer. 11:9-14; 14:10-12; Ezek. 8:17,18; Micah 3:4; Zech. 7:11-13; Isa. 58:1-9]

Isaiah 59:1,2 - Your sins and iniquities separate you from God so that He will not hear. It surely follows that God will not hear the prayers of alien sinners, but the direct application in the context of many of these passages is to unfaithful children of God.

God heard the prayer of Cornelius before he was baptized (Acts 10:4,31). If a person in sin is sincerely seeking to know the truth, God may give him an opportunity to learn it. Beyond that, God there is nothing God has promised to give alien sinners in answer to prayer.

But God likewise rejects the prayer of the impenitent child of God. Too many people want to live their lives for themselves, then go running to God in time of need. They expect Him to do service to them despite the fact they refuse to serve Him! God says it will not work. If you want God to hear your prayers, first repent of your sins and live in obedience to Him.

[1 Peter 3:12; Psalm 34:15-19; 109:7; John 9:31; Lam 3:1,8; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Tim. 2:8; Prov. 1:24-29; 21:13; 2 Chron. 7:14]

### **Conclusion**

God will answer prayer for you. He desires to meet your needs and offer you everything He has promised to His faithful children. But first you must become a faithful child of His and must meet the conditions of prayer.

Are you a child of God? If not, you cannot pray for forgiveness. Instead you must believe in Jesus, repent of sins, confess Him, and be baptized to receive remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 10:9,10; 6:3,4; etc.). Then if you live a faithful life, He has promised to hear your prayers according to His will. Why not begin now to accept His offer?

The Power of Prayer
How Must We Pray So God Will Answer?
How should we pray so God will answer? What conditions must prayer meet? When, where, and how often should we pray? What power does prayer have?
Does God really answer prayer? If so, why are prayers sometimes not answered? What should we pray about: praise, thanks, petition, worship, requests, intercession for others? When and how often should we pray? What conditions must we meet for our prayers to be heard and answered? What power does prayer have?
Click here to listen to this material as a free MP3 audio Bible study message.
Introduction:
In Luke 11:1 Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Christians today also need to learn to pray.
The purpose of this study is to help Christians improve in prayer. People who are new in the faith may have never studied about how to pray. Some members do not pray properly so their prayers are not even answered. All of us can improve in this aspect of worship.
We need to learn what to pray about. Should we make requests, be thankful, offer praise, intercede on behalf of others, offer petition? And what power does prayer have? Does God really answer prayer? If so, how should we pray and what conditions must prayer meet in order for God to hear and answer? These and other questions will be considered in this study.
What is prayer? Note Acts 4:24,31. Prayer is simply man talking to God, expressing his thoughts to God (Rom. 10:1; Matt. 6:9ff). Hence, it is a form of communication similar in may ways to simply talking to our earthly father, except that we must remember whom we are addressing and must meet conditions of acceptable prayer.
I. What Should We Pray About?
What should we include in our prayers? Some cannot seem to think of much to say. Others say things that are inappropriate or even unscriptural. Some just repeat memorized phrases they have heard others pray.
Let us examine Bible examples of prayer. What did God's people in the Scriptures talk about in prayer? How do our prayers compare? Can we improve our prayers by considering what Bible characters prayed about?
A. We Should Praise God's Character and Work.
Bible prayers quite commonly included many descriptions of the glory and greatness of God. Jesus began the model prayer by praising God's name (Matt. 6:9). Many psalms are filled with praise (note Psalm 86:5-12).
From the passages below, consider some particular qualities or works of God that were praised in prayer. How do our prayers compare? Do we praise God like this?
\* God's authority and Lordship - He is the true God, in contrast to idols - 1 Chronicles 29:10-13. [Psalm 86:8-10; Neh. 9:4-6; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Kings 19:15; Matt. 6:13; Rev 11:17; 2 Sam. 7:22]
\* God's power - 1 Chronicles 29:11,12. [Jer. 32:16-23; Eph. 1:16-19; Job 42:1,2; Neh. 9:4-38; Dan. 2:20-23]
\* God's holiness, goodness, and righteousness - Psalm 86:5-12 (note v5). [Psalm 143:1-12; 1 Sam. 2:2]
\* God's mercy, grace, kindness, and willingness to forgive - God has provided redemption and salvation for His people, especially sending Jesus as our Savior - Psalm 86:5. [Col. 1:12-14; 2 Sam. 7:23; Neh. 9:4-38; Luke 2:37,38; 1 Kings 8:23; Ezra 9:8,9; Psalm 17:7]
\* God's wisdom and knowledge - Jeremiah 32:16-23 (note v19). [Dan. 2:20-23; 1 Sam. 2:3]
\* God's justice - God cares for His people and rewards them but punishes the wicked - Jeremiah 32:19,23. [1 Sam. 2:6-10; Gen. 18:25; Psalm 90:7-11]
\* God's eternal existence - Psalm 90:1-4. [Psalm 102:1,12,24-27]
\* God's faithfulness to His word - Nehemiah 9:4-8. [Neh. 1:5; 1 Kings 8:23-30; Dan. 9:4; Psalm 143:1]
\* God's work as Creator and Source of life - Nehemiah 9:4-6. [Jer. 32:17; Psalm 90:2; 102:1,24,25; 2 Kings 19:15; Acts 4:24; 1 Sam. 2:6]
We could never list here all the great qualities and works for which God deserves our praise. Yet surely we ought to praise God in prayer, so we should meditate about why He deserves our praise. Instead of just thinking of more things for God to give us, do we need greater emphasis on describing His greatness?
B. We Should Pray on Behalf of Others.
1 Timothy 2:1,2 says to offer prayer, supplication, intercession, and giving of thanks on behalf of all men. Yet we sometimes neglect to pray for others because we concentrate so much on our own interests.
How often do we think to pray for others, whether or not they request our prayers? Bible prayers are filled with requests and thanksgiving for people other than the one offering the prayer. Consider some groups of people for whom we should pray:
\* Rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Ezra 6:10; 1 Chron. 29:19]
\* Children and family members - our spouse, relatives, etc. - 1 Chron. 29:19. [Matthew 19:13-15; Gen. 25:21,22; 24:12-14; 18:23-33; 1 Sam. 1:10-12; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Luke 1:13]
\* Lost sinners - Romans 10:1-3. Remember, however, that these people must meet the gospel conditions of salvation in order to be forgiven. [Matt. 9:36-38; Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]
\* Enemies and persecutors - Luke 6:27,28. [Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34]
\* People sick and suffering - 3 John 2. [James 5:16; Num. 11:2; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Gen. 20:17,18]
\* Elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4; Acts 4:25-29; 6:6; 14:23; 13:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; Matt. 9:36-38; 2 Thess. 3:1,2; Heb. 13:18]
\* All Christians - Ephesians 6:18. [James 5:16]
The Bible contains multitudes of examples in which men of God interceded on behalf of God's people. Here are just a few of them:
Moses [Num. 11:2; 21:7; 14:13-20; Deut. 9:18-20,25-29; Ex. 32:9-14,31,32].
Samuel [1 Sam. 7:5-11; 12:19-25].
Solomon [1 Kings 8:22-54].
Ezra [Ezra 9:1-15].
Nehemiah [Neh. 1:4-11].
Daniel [Dan. 9:3-20].
Jesus - Luke 22:31,32 (for Peter); John 17:9-22 (for all believers). [Luke 23:34]
Peter - Acts 8:24 (for Simon)
Epaphras [Col. 4:12]
Paul - Col. 1:3,9-14 [Rom. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-19; Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:11,12; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3]
Note that most examples were prayers, not just for God's people in general, but for specific individuals or congregations. Do we show this personal concern for others in our prayers?
Furthermore notice that Paul openly told people he was praying for them. If we would do this, it would motivate us to be more diligent to pray for others, but it would also give Christians a greater sense of love and appreciation for one another.
C. We Should Make Requests and Give Thanks.
We should pray for the things we truly need, however some people forget to thank God for what they have received. Their prayers consist almost entirely of asking for more. God is a generous God, willing to give what we need. But He also expects appreciation for what He gives.
Passages teaching we can request what we need:
Philippians 4:6,7 - Instead of worrying, let your requests be made known to God. "Supplication" refers to requests for needs to be "supplied."
Matthew 7:7-11 - God is like a loving father who gives what his children need. If we ask, we will receive.
1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on God because He cares for you.
James 4:2,3 - Sometimes we do not receive because we do not ask. On the other hand, God will not answer selfish requests for things we do not need.
1 John 5:14,15 - If we ask according to God's will, we receive our petitions.
[Cf. 1 John 3:21,22; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26]
Passages teaching we should also give thanks for our blessings:
Philippians 4:6,7 - Our requests should be made known with thanksgiving.
1 Timothy 2:1 - Prayers for others should include thanksgiving.
Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks to the Father always for all things.
[1 Thess. 5:18; Col. 4:2; 2:7; 3:17]
Bible prayers generally include thanksgiving right alongside requests. God invites us to ask for what we need, but He is displeased by those who are so ungrateful as to offer no thanks when the request is granted (Luke 17:12-17).
D. Some Specific Things We Should Pray about
No one prayer or combination of prayers could mention all the possible subjects there are to pray about. But an examination of Bible prayers can teach us the kind of specific things that are commonly included in Bible prayers. We may pray about these things for ourselves or for others. We may request them and should give thanks when we receive them.
All these things are mentioned in Bible prayers:
\* God's will to be done - Matthew 6:9-13 (note v10). [Matt. 26:39]
\* Necessities of life - Matthew 6:11. [Acts 27:35; Matt. 15:36; 14:19; 1 Tim. 4:3-5; Luke 24:30]
\* Forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the consequences of sin - Matthew 6:12. But note that one who has not been baptized should not pray for forgiveness but be baptized - Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16. [Acts 8:22,24; James 5:16; Luke 18:13,14; Psalm 32:5-7]
\* Ability to recognize and resist temptation - Matthew 6:13. [Matt. 26:41; Eph. 6:11-18; 2 Cor. 13:7; Luke 22:31,32; John 17:14-16]
\* Good health and freedom from other threats to life or safety - 3 John 2; 2 Kings 20:1-7 (Hezekiah) [James 5:13-18; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Kings 8:35-53; 2 Chron. 7:13-15; Jonah 2:1-10; Psalm 50:15; 86:6,7; 32:6,7; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Num. 11:2; Luke 21:36]
\* Deliverance from enemies and persecution - Acts 12:1,5,12. [2 Thess. 3:1,2; 2 Cor. 1:8-11; Acts 4:23-31; 16:25; 1 Kings 8:33-35; 2 Kings 19:4,15-19]
\* Freedom from oppression by rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Neh. 1:11-2:5]
\* Safety in travel and care for loved ones we are separated from - Acts 21:5. [Acts 20:36-38; 28:15; Ezra 8:21-23; Gen. 24:26,27; 1 Thess. 3:9-11; 2 Tim. 1:3-5; Rom. 1:10; 15:30-32; Philem. 22]
\* Peace, courage, joy instead of disappointment or discouragement - Philippians 4:6,7. [1 Samuel 8:6-9; 2:1-11; Jer. 29:7; Psalm 122:6; 1 Peter 5:7; Matt. 26:36-46; Col. 1:11; 1 Thess. 3:9; 2 Sam. 7:18-29]
\* Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of God's will - Psalm 119:169-172. Note that this comes today through the Scriptures, not by direct revelation. [James 1:5,6; Col. 1:9,10; Phil. 1:9,10; Psalm 86:6,11; 143:1,8,10]
\* Salvation of lost sinners - Romans 10:1-3. [Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]
\* Laborers to teach the lost - Matthew 9:36-38.
\* Bold, clear preaching - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4]
\* Opportunities to preach and teach - Colossians 4:3 [2 Thess. 3:1]
\* Support for preachers - Philippians 1:3-5.
\* Choosing of elders, deacons, teachers, etc. - Acts 14:23. [Acts 6:6; 13:3]
\* Jesus' death, the Lord's supper - Matthew 26:26-29. [1 Cor. 11:23-26]
\* Baptism - Luke 3:21.
\* Faithfulness, good works, a life pleasing to God - Philippians 1:3-6,9-11. [Col. 1:9-11; 4:12; John 17:9-12; 1 Thess. 3:10-13; 2 Thess. 1:11]
\* Love - Philippians 1:9. [1 Thess. 3:10-12; Eph. 3:14-19]
\* Strength - Colossians 1:9-11. [Eph. 3:14-19; 2 Thess. 1:11]
\* Patience, long-suffering - Colossians 1:11.
\* Grace and mercy - 2 Corinthians 4:15. [Psalm 4:1; 86:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:4]
\* Proper speech - Psalm 141:1-3.
\* Sanctification - John 17:17.
\* Unity - John 17:20-23.
\* Eternal life, eternal glory - John 17:24-26.
This is not a complete list, but it suggests many things we could properly pray for. Remember that these are things both to make request for and to give thanks for.
Also note how Bible prayers often concerned spiritual needs and blessings. Some people seem to view prayer like sending a "Christmas list" to Santa for all the physical things they want. Biblical prayers may concern physical needs, but mainly they reflect man's greatest needs which are spiritual.
How do our prayers compare to Bible prayers? Are there areas where we need to improve?
II. When, Where, How Long, and How Often Should We Pray?
What are the proper circumstances for prayer? Should we pray only in church meetings or as daily routing or spontaneously as circumstances dictate? Should we pray in public or in private? What posture must we use?
A. General Admonitions about Frequency, Place, etc.
Notice these passages that generally discuss where and how often we should pray:
1 Timothy 2:8 - Men should pray "everywhere."
Acts 2:42 - "Continue steadfastly" in prayer.
1 Thessalonians 5:17,18 - Pray "without ceasing"; in everything give thanks.
Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks "always" for all things.
[Eph. 1:16; 6:18; Col. 1:3,9; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2,12; Luke 18:1-7; Rom. 12:12; Acts 6:4; 1:14; Phil. 1:4; 4:6; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Thess. 1:3,11; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13]
These verses do not mean we should pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for then we could not do the other good works God has commanded. Even Jesus and his apostles did not pray all the time (Luke 11:1).
The passages do mean that prayer should be a regular, frequent part of our daily lives, and that we should never quit or cease the practice of prayer. Further, we should live so that we are always ready to pray at any moment. We should never participate in practices such that we would be ashamed to pray to God in the midst of that activity.
B. Specific Examples of Frequency, Place, etc.
To give us a fuller understanding, consider these examples showing specifically when and where people prayed:
\* In public worship assemblies - 1 Corinthians 14:15 (see the context). [1 Kings 8:22; Ezra 9:4,5ff; Neh. 9:1-5]
\* In special gatherings regarding special needs - Acts 4:23ff. [Acts 12:5,12; 20:36]
\* In one's own home - Matthew 6:6. [Dan. 6:10,11; 2 Kings 20:1-3]
\* Before meals - Acts 27:35. [Matt. 15:36; 14:19; Luke 24:30]
\* On a mountain, in a garden, or other deserted place - Matthew 14:23. [Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12; 9:18; Acts 10:9; Matt. 26:36-46]
\* In the morning - Mark 1:35 (a long time before day). [Psalm 5:3; 88:13]
\* In the evening - Matthew 26:36-46. [Ezra 9:5]
\* Morning, noon, and evening - Psalm 55:16,17.
\* Three times a day - Daniel 6:10,11.
\* For forty days and nights - Deut. 9:18,25,26.
\* All night - Luke 6:12.
\* Night and day - 1 Thessalonians 3:9,10. [1 Tim. 5:5; Psalm 88:1]
Note: We should pray in private but also in public worship assemblies. We should not pray to make a show before others, but we should not be ashamed to pray around others at times when we otherwise would pray (cf. Acts 27:35). We should pray habitually throughout the day but also at special times when needs arise.
Do we pray regularly like faithful people of God in the Bible?
C. Posture and Physical Conduct During Prayer
Some people believe we should kneel or sit for prayer, but not stand. Must we speak out loud for God to hear us? Must we fold our hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes as we often teach children to do? Consider these Bible examples:
\* Kneeling, falling down prostrate - Luke 22:41. [Matt. 26:39; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14; Dan. 6:10,11; Deut. 9:18-20,25; 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5]
\* Sitting - Nehemiah 1:4. [1 Kings 19:4; 2 Sam. 7:18]
\* Standing - Mark 11:25; Luke 18:13,14. [1 Sam. 1:26; Gen. 24:12,13; Neh. 9:4,5ff] Note: If someone demands an example of standing in a congregational assembly, I ask where is the example of kneeling in a congregational assembly?
\* Bowed heads - 1 Chronicles 29:20 (Israel), Luke 18:13 (the publican would not lift his eyes to heaven). [Gen. 24:27,48; Ex. 34:8,9; 4:31; 12:27; 2 Chron. 20:18; 29:30; Neh. 8:6]
\* Eyes lifted toward heaven - John 17:1ff (Jesus). [John 11:41; Matt. 14:19]
\* Speaking in the heart, but no sound from the lips - 1 Sam. 1:12,13 (Hannah).
Other postures, due to special circumstances, include: on the cross (Luke 23:46,34); in the belly of a fish (Jonah 2:1); in stocks in prison (Acts 16:24,25).
The variety in these examples shows that the position is a matter of choice or expediency and does not, of itself, determine whether or not God hears us. We can pray anytime or place, yet certain positions may at times better suit our circumstances or reverence.
[Other information regarding posture & related points:
Prayer with fasting - Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3ff; Acts 9:9-11; 14:23; Luke 2:37; 5:33-35; 1 Cor. 7:5.
Hands lifted up - 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; 1 Tim. 2:8; Isa. 1:15(?); Psalm 28:2. But note: Did Hannah lift her hands (1 Sam. 1:12,13)?
Hands laid on other people - Acts 6:6; 8:14-18; 13:3; Matt. 19:13-15]
III. Can Prayer Really Change the Future?
Does God really answer prayer, or are the benefits of prayer just psychological? Because we have prayed, does God so intervene in the course of history that events occur differently than they would have?
A. Promises that God Will Answer Prayer
Consider several Bible passages expressly stating that God does answer prayer:
1 John 5:14,15 - We can have confidence that, if we pray according to God's word, He will hear us and grant what we ask.
1 John 3:22 - Whatever we ask we receive because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.
James 5:16 - The fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah prayed and it did not rain for 3 1/2 years. He prayed again and it rained (v17,18).
Matthew 7:7-11 - If we ask, seek, and knock, we receive what we requested. God is like an earthly father who gives good gifts to His children who ask.
1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on Him for He cares for you.
There are conditions we must meet in order for God to answer our prayers. If we meet those conditions and if He can answer our prayers in harmony with His will, He has promised to do what is good for us.
[Mark 11:24; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26; James 1:5,6; Luke 18:1-8; 1 Peter 3:12; Matthew 6:6,8; Psalm 55:22; 86:7; 28:6; 31:22; 118:5; 120:1; 116:1; 21:2]
B. Bible Examples of Answered Prayers.
Many Bible examples show God's response to prayers of His people. God does not do miracles today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but He is able to control events according to natural law so as to answer prayer without miracles. We will focus on cases of this nature.
1 Samuel 1:10-20,26-28 - Hanna was barren, having no child. She prayed, and as a result she conceived and bore Samuel. [Luke 1:13]
1 Samuel 7:5-11 - Samuel prayed for Israel's deliverance from an enemy, and the prayer was answered. [Cf. 2 Kings 19:15-37; 2 Chron. 33:10-13.]
2 Chronicles 7:11-14 - God promised to hear Israel's prayer for deliverance from pestilence, famine, etc.
2 King 20:1-7 - God said Hezekiah would die, not live. Hezekiah prayed about it, God promised to add 15 years to his life, and Hezekiah recovered.
Exodus 32:9-14 - God said He would destroy Israel, but Moses prayed and God changed His mind.
[Neh. 1:4-2:8; Psalm 32:5-7]
C. Some Conclusions about God's Answers to Prayers
God does act in response to prayer.
Some people think that, if God does not do miracles, then He must not be acting at all. Others see only psychological benefits in prayer or perhaps just the fact that we have obeyed God's command to pray. Even though we pray Scripturally, they claim God does not actually intervene in the course of earthly events to bring about what we asked for. But the examples just listed show that God does act in response to prayer, acting in harmony with natural law, without miracle.
Note Matthew 18:19 - When we ask God to do something, it will be done by the Father in heaven. God does act. This is true of "anything" we ask. Every kind of Scriptural request is included. [Cf. John 14:13,14; 15:7]
If God does not act to change the course of events in response to prayer, the same effect could be produced by a person praying with sincere faith to an idol! The idol could not do anything, but the worshiper would receive the psychological benefits.
Yet the Bible clearly teaches that Scriptural prayer to God produces results that cannot be achieved by people who do not serve the true God (James 5:16; 1 John 3:22; Prov. 15:8,29; Psalm 34:15-19; etc.). These promises can be valid only if prayer produces results beyond psychological benefits.
However, we must also work, to the extent of our ability, to achieve what we prayed for.
God does act in response to Scriptural prayers, but He will not act if we are not willing to do our part.
Matthew 6:11 teaches us to pray for our daily bread, but we must still work for it (2 Thess. 3:10). God does not answer through miracle (as by manna from heaven). But He does work through natural law to bless our effort so the needed result is achieved where it may not have been achieved had we worked but not prayed.
James 1:5 says to pray for wisdom (cf. Col. 1:9), but we must still study the word (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). The prayer is answered, not by miraculous direct revelation, but through the natural process of study. God gives us opportunities to learn and blesses our study so we learn what we might not have known had we not prayed.
3 John 2 - A prayer for good health requires us to care for our bodies, not knowingly damaging our health for personal pleasures.
In a similar way, we should pray for the spread of the gospel, but we must also work to teach it to the lost. But because we prayed, God blesses our work so it accomplishes good that may not have been accomplished had we not prayed.
God gives, not necessarily what we want, but what is best for everyone involved.
Matthew 7:7-11 - Like an earthly father, God gives good things, not things that do harm.
Matthew 26:36-46 - Jesus prayed to avoid the cross, but said, "Thy will be done." He still had to die, but an angel strengthened Him (Luke 22:43). God met His need while still doing what was needed for mankind.
Psalm 34:10 - Those who seek God will not lack any good thing. [Rom. 8:28; James 1:17]
2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - Paul prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. God did not grant the request but instead did what was best for Paul.
[Matt. 6:8; Eph. 3:20; 1 Kings 3:5-13]
God is infinite, where our knowledge is limited. We may not know what is best, but God does. This is why we ought always to pray for God's will to be done. He can then give us what we asked, something greater, or something different, according to what He knows to be best.
We further may not understand how God can control the universe without miracles, yet the Bible affirms that He does (consider also the story of Esther). Those who believe in God must believe in His power to answer prayer, even though we cannot explain how He does it.
IV. What Conditions Must Prayer Meet?
God had promised to answer prayer, yet some prayers are not answered. How can this be? The only possible explanation is that there are conditions prayer must meet in order for God to answer, just as there are conditions we must meet in order for God to forgive our sins. What conditions must prayer meet in order for God to answer?
A. We Must Pray in Jesus' Name (though Him as Mediator).
Consider these verses:
John 14:13,14 - If we ask anything in Jesus' name, He will do it. [Cf. John 15:16; 16:23,24,26; Eph. 5:20]
Romans 1:8 - Paul thanked God through Jesus Christ. [Col. 3:17]
1 Timothy 2:5 - Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. The immediate context refers to salvation, but the broader context refers to prayer (see v1,2,8). Jesus is the mediator in prayer because He is our mediator in salvation. He is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16).
What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name?
Are these just meaningless words we mouth at the end of a prayer to make it effective [like a magic spell - "Open, Sesame"]?
A person's name stands for the person and all that He is. God's name is "hallowed" because God Himself is hallowed (Matt. 6:9). More specifically, a person's name represents his will and authority. Your name signed on a check or other legal document authorizes it as acceptable to you. "Halt in the name of the law" means the authority of the law requires you to stop.
Further, Jesus is the mediator who makes it possible for us to approach God in prayer. We pray "through Him" because His authority enables us to be heard. Because of our sins, we could never approach God. We need a "go-between" to reconcile us to God so we can communicate with Him. Because Jesus died as our sacrifice, He is the only one who can authorize us to approach God in prayer.
Why then would anyone pray through Mary or a dead "saint"? They did not redeem us by their death, hence they cannot mediate our prayers. No one can mediate instead of or in addition to Jesus. He is the "one mediator" between God and man.
To pray in Jesus' name means we are appealing to His authority as the one mediator between us and God. We are trusting His power to make it possible for God to hear our prayer. We should understand this if we are to avoid praying with "vain repetition."
B. We Must Pray According to God's Will.
This follows from the concept of prayer "in Jesus' name." Note further:
1 John 5:14,15 - God hears us if we ask according to His will.
Matthew 26:39 - Jesus prayed for the Father's will to be done. [Matt. 6:10]
But God's will may fall into one of two categories:
In things essential to salvation, God's will is revealed in the Scriptures.
Note 2 Tim. 3:16,17; 1 Cor. 14:37; etc. Regarding such matters, we must never pray for things that do not harmonize with God's revealed will.
For example, God says we should not pray for things just to satisfy our selfish lusts (James 4:3). Such would not be praying according to His will.
Likewise, God's has revealed that sinners must meet conditions, including baptism, to be forgiven (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16; etc.). We must never pray for God to save such people without them meeting these conditions.
Since the gospel came into effect, no passage ever tells an unbaptized person to pray for forgiveness of sins. Yet preachers often tell such people to "pray through" or "pray the sinner's prayer" to be saved. Such a prayer would not be answered because it is not according to God's will.
In things not essential to salvation, God's will may not be expressly revealed in Scripture.
Many events of everyday life may not be a matter of right or wrong, so we may not know God's expressed will. For example, we know God allows suffering and death, so in a particular instance of illness we may not know whether God would be willing for the person to get better or not. [2 Cor. 12:7-10]
In these cases we may pray for what we believe to be best, but then we should ask God to do what He knows to be best. Then by faith we accept the outcome.
C. We Must Pray with Understanding and Meaning.
1 Corinthians 14:15,16 - Pray with the spirit and the understanding. Think about the words to be sure you mean what is said. When you lead public prayer, help people understand so they can say "amen" (cf. vv19,26,40). Use words people can understand. Speak loudly and distinctly.
Matthew 6:7 - Do not use vain (meaningless) repetition. Even if we understand the words, if we repeat them frequently, we may be tempted to just mouth the words without meaning them. This does not prove it is wrong to repeat a request (Matt. 26:36-46; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Luke 18:1-7), but we should mean it every time we pray it!
D. We Must Pray with Sincerity and Earnestness.
1 Samuel 1:10,15 - Hannah poured out her soul in prayer.
Jeremiah 29:12,13 - God promised He would hear His people when they prayed with "all their hearts."
Luke 22:44 - In Gethsemane Jesus prayed earnestly.
Matthew 6:5 - Do not pray from hypocritical motives such as to be seen of men. Pleasing, impressing, and entertaining people are not proper motives for prayer. We must pray to please God and honor Him. [Mark 12:40]
Prayer must never become a mere formality or outward ritual that we go through without meaning what we do. Our hearts must be involved in fervent prayer, thanksgiving, and appeals to God.
[1 Cor. 14:15; Psalm 17:1; 145:18; James 5:16,17]
E. We Must Pray in Faith.
James 1:5-8 - Ask in faith without doubting. One who doubts will received nothing from God. First we must believe that God exists, then believe that He has power to answer prayer. The skeptic or agnostic who prays ("just in case there is a God") is wasting his breath.
Mark 11:24 - To receive the blessing we request, we must believe that God will answer. The context discusses miracles, which do not occur today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but the principle still applies. God answers prayer today through natural law, but we must believe He does answer else we can be sure He will not.
Remember, as discussed previously, that there are some things God has expressly revealed that He is willing to give, such as forgiveness to a penitent child of God. Faith requires us to believe He will give what He has promised. In other matters He has not necessarily revealed what He will give (such as good health), so we must pray "Thy will be done." Then we must believe He will do what is best.
Praying in faith also requires us to accept what God sends as being what is best. Too often, when we do not receive exactly what we asked for, we complain or think God broke His promise. Faith requires us to believe He will give the best thing at the best time, and then believe that the result is what is best.
F. We Must Pray with Humility and Respect for God.
2 Chronicles 7:14 - God will hear His people if they "humble themselves" and pray.
Luke 18:9-14 - The self-righteous Pharisee praised and exalted himself in prayer, instead of exalting God. Such a person will be abased by God, not justified.
Matthew 6:9 - Pray, "Hallowed be Thy name." Prayer must express respect and reverence for God.
God should not be approached casually as another human ("Hi, Pop!"), nor as a servant at our beck and call. Our attitudes and speech should exalt His greatness while recognizing our weaknesses, sins, and human limitations. [2 Chron. 33:10-13; Gen. 18:27]
G. We Must Pray with Repentance for Sin.
2 Chronicles 7:14 - In order for God to hear His people's prayers, they must turn from their wicked ways.
Acts 8:21-23 - When a child of God has sinned, they must repent and pray for forgiveness. (See our earlier list of other passages teaching this.)
Luke 18:13,14 - The publican received justification because he was willing to admit his sins.
Forgiveness is not granted to those who persist in sin, excuse it, rationalize it, overlook it, or hide it. To receive forgiveness when we pray, we must be truly sorry for sin and determine to overcome it. [Psalm 32:5-7; Dan. 9:3-12; James 5:16; 1 Kings 8:33-36,46-53]
H. We Must Pray with Forgiveness for Others.
Matthew 6:12,14,15 - God will forgive us only if we willingly forgive others. [Mark 11:25; Matt. 18:21-35]
To have a right relationship with God we must pursue right relationships with people (Matt. 5:23,24). Have others apologized to you requesting your forgiveness, yet you continue to hold a grudge? Do you seek revenge, wishing harm to come to those who have wronged you, unwilling to pursue peace and harmony?
To receive God's forgiveness when we pray, we must have the same attitude toward others that we expect Him to have toward us!
I. We Must Pray While Living a Faithful Life.
James 5:16 - The supplication of a righteous man avails much.
1 John 3:21,22 - We receive what we ask from God because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.
Proverbs 28:9; 15:8,29 - If someone turns away from God's law, his prayer is an abomination. But God hears the prayer of the righteous.
Psalm 66:18 - God will not hear me if I regard iniquity in my heart.
Isaiah 1:15-17 - God would not hear the prayers even of His own people because of their sins. They needed to cease doing evil and learn to do well. [Jer. 11:9-14; 14:10-12; Ezek. 8:17,18; Micah 3:4; Zech. 7:11-13; Isa. 58:1-9]
Isaiah 59:1,2 - Your sins and iniquities separate you from God so that He will not hear. It surely follows that God will not hear the prayers of alien sinners, but the direct application in the context of many of these passages is to unfaithful children of God.
God heard the prayer of Cornelius before he was baptized (Acts 10:4,31). If a person in sin is sincerely seeking to know the truth, God may give him an opportunity to learn it. Beyond that, God there is nothing God has promised to give alien sinners in answer to prayer.
But God likewise rejects the prayer of the impenitent child of God. Too many people want to live their lives for themselves, then go running to God in time of need. They expect Him to do service to them despite the fact they refuse to serve Him! God says it will not work. If you want God to hear your prayers, first repent of your sins and live in obedience to Him.
[1 Peter 3:12; Psalm 34:15-19; 109:7; John 9:31; Lam 3:1,8; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Tim. 2:8; Prov. 1:24-29; 21:13; 2 Chron. 7:14]
Conclusion
God will answer prayer for you. He desires to meet your needs and offer you everything He has promised to His faithful children. But first you must become a faithful child of His and must meet the conditions of prayer.
Are you a child of God? If not, you cannot pray for forgiveness. Instead you must believe in Jesus, repent of sins, confess Him, and be baptized to receive remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 10:9,10; 6:3,4; etc.). Then if you live a faithful life, He has promised to hear your prayers according to His will. Why not begin now to accept His offer?The Power of Prayer
How Must We Pray So God Will Answer?
How should we pray so God will answer? What conditions must prayer meet? When, where, and how often should we pray? What power does prayer have?
Does God really answer prayer? If so, why are prayers sometimes not answered? What should we pray about: praise, thanks, petition, worship, requests, intercession for others? When and how often should we pray? What conditions must we meet for our prayers to be heard and answered? What power does prayer have?
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Introduction:
In Luke 11:1 Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Christians today also need to learn to pray.
The purpose of this study is to help Christians improve in prayer. People who are new in the faith may have never studied about how to pray. Some members do not pray properly so their prayers are not even answered. All of us can improve in this aspect of worship.
We need to learn what to pray about. Should we make requests, be thankful, offer praise, intercede on behalf of others, offer petition? And what power does prayer have? Does God really answer prayer? If so, how should we pray and what conditions must prayer meet in order for God to hear and answer? These and other questions will be considered in this study.
What is prayer? Note Acts 4:24,31. Prayer is simply man talking to God, expressing his thoughts to God (Rom. 10:1; Matt. 6:9ff). Hence, it is a form of communication similar in may ways to simply talking to our earthly father, except that we must remember whom we are addressing and must meet conditions of acceptable prayer.
I. What Should We Pray About?
What should we include in our prayers? Some cannot seem to think of much to say. Others say things that are inappropriate or even unscriptural. Some just repeat memorized phrases they have heard others pray.
Let us examine Bible examples of prayer. What did God's people in the Scriptures talk about in prayer? How do our prayers compare? Can we improve our prayers by considering what Bible characters prayed about?
A. We Should Praise God's Character and Work.
Bible prayers quite commonly included many descriptions of the glory and greatness of God. Jesus began the model prayer by praising God's name (Matt. 6:9). Many psalms are filled with praise (note Psalm 86:5-12).
From the passages below, consider some particular qualities or works of God that were praised in prayer. How do our prayers compare? Do we praise God like this?
\* God's authority and Lordship - He is the true God, in contrast to idols - 1 Chronicles 29:10-13. [Psalm 86:8-10; Neh. 9:4-6; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Kings 19:15; Matt. 6:13; Rev 11:17; 2 Sam. 7:22]
\* God's power - 1 Chronicles 29:11,12. [Jer. 32:16-23; Eph. 1:16-19; Job 42:1,2; Neh. 9:4-38; Dan. 2:20-23]
\* God's holiness, goodness, and righteousness - Psalm 86:5-12 (note v5). [Psalm 143:1-12; 1 Sam. 2:2]
\* God's mercy, grace, kindness, and willingness to forgive - God has provided redemption and salvation for His people, especially sending Jesus as our Savior - Psalm 86:5. [Col. 1:12-14; 2 Sam. 7:23; Neh. 9:4-38; Luke 2:37,38; 1 Kings 8:23; Ezra 9:8,9; Psalm 17:7]
\* God's wisdom and knowledge - Jeremiah 32:16-23 (note v19). [Dan. 2:20-23; 1 Sam. 2:3]
\* God's justice - God cares for His people and rewards them but punishes the wicked - Jeremiah 32:19,23. [1 Sam. 2:6-10; Gen. 18:25; Psalm 90:7-11]
\* God's eternal existence - Psalm 90:1-4. [Psalm 102:1,12,24-27]
\* God's faithfulness to His word - Nehemiah 9:4-8. [Neh. 1:5; 1 Kings 8:23-30; Dan. 9:4; Psalm 143:1]
\* God's work as Creator and Source of life - Nehemiah 9:4-6. [Jer. 32:17; Psalm 90:2; 102:1,24,25; 2 Kings 19:15; Acts 4:24; 1 Sam. 2:6]
We could never list here all the great qualities and works for which God deserves our praise. Yet surely we ought to praise God in prayer, so we should meditate about why He deserves our praise. Instead of just thinking of more things for God to give us, do we need greater emphasis on describing His greatness?
B. We Should Pray on Behalf of Others.
1 Timothy 2:1,2 says to offer prayer, supplication, intercession, and giving of thanks on behalf of all men. Yet we sometimes neglect to pray for others because we concentrate so much on our own interests.
How often do we think to pray for others, whether or not they request our prayers? Bible prayers are filled with requests and thanksgiving for people other than the one offering the prayer. Consider some groups of people for whom we should pray:
\* Rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Ezra 6:10; 1 Chron. 29:19]
\* Children and family members - our spouse, relatives, etc. - 1 Chron. 29:19. [Matthew 19:13-15; Gen. 25:21,22; 24:12-14; 18:23-33; 1 Sam. 1:10-12; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Luke 1:13]
\* Lost sinners - Romans 10:1-3. Remember, however, that these people must meet the gospel conditions of salvation in order to be forgiven. [Matt. 9:36-38; Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]
\* Enemies and persecutors - Luke 6:27,28. [Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34]
\* People sick and suffering - 3 John 2. [James 5:16; Num. 11:2; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Gen. 20:17,18]
\* Elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4; Acts 4:25-29; 6:6; 14:23; 13:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; Matt. 9:36-38; 2 Thess. 3:1,2; Heb. 13:18]
\* All Christians - Ephesians 6:18. [James 5:16]
The Bible contains multitudes of examples in which men of God interceded on behalf of God's people. Here are just a few of them:
Moses [Num. 11:2; 21:7; 14:13-20; Deut. 9:18-20,25-29; Ex. 32:9-14,31,32].
Samuel [1 Sam. 7:5-11; 12:19-25].
Solomon [1 Kings 8:22-54].
Ezra [Ezra 9:1-15].
Nehemiah [Neh. 1:4-11].
Daniel [Dan. 9:3-20].
Jesus - Luke 22:31,32 (for Peter); John 17:9-22 (for all believers). [Luke 23:34]
Peter - Acts 8:24 (for Simon)
Epaphras [Col. 4:12]
Paul - Col. 1:3,9-14 [Rom. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-19; Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:11,12; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3]
Note that most examples were prayers, not just for God's people in general, but for specific individuals or congregations. Do we show this personal concern for others in our prayers?
Furthermore notice that Paul openly told people he was praying for them. If we would do this, it would motivate us to be more diligent to pray for others, but it would also give Christians a greater sense of love and appreciation for one another.
C. We Should Make Requests and Give Thanks.
We should pray for the things we truly need, however some people forget to thank God for what they have received. Their prayers consist almost entirely of asking for more. God is a generous God, willing to give what we need. But He also expects appreciation for what He gives.
Passages teaching we can request what we need:
Philippians 4:6,7 - Instead of worrying, let your requests be made known to God. "Supplication" refers to requests for needs to be "supplied."
Matthew 7:7-11 - God is like a loving father who gives what his children need. If we ask, we will receive.
1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on God because He cares for you.
James 4:2,3 - Sometimes we do not receive because we do not ask. On the other hand, God will not answer selfish requests for things we do not need.
1 John 5:14,15 - If we ask according to God's will, we receive our petitions.
[Cf. 1 John 3:21,22; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26]
Passages teaching we should also give thanks for our blessings:
Philippians 4:6,7 - Our requests should be made known with thanksgiving.
1 Timothy 2:1 - Prayers for others should include thanksgiving.
Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks to the Father always for all things.
[1 Thess. 5:18; Col. 4:2; 2:7; 3:17]
Bible prayers generally include thanksgiving right alongside requests. God invites us to ask for what we need, but He is displeased by those who are so ungrateful as to offer no thanks when the request is granted (Luke 17:12-17).
D. Some Specific Things We Should Pray about
No one prayer or combination of prayers could mention all the possible subjects there are to pray about. But an examination of Bible prayers can teach us the kind of specific things that are commonly included in Bible prayers. We may pray about these things for ourselves or for others. We may request them and should give thanks when we receive them.
All these things are mentioned in Bible prayers:
\* God's will to be done - Matthew 6:9-13 (note v10). [Matt. 26:39]
\* Necessities of life - Matthew 6:11. [Acts 27:35; Matt. 15:36; 14:19; 1 Tim. 4:3-5; Luke 24:30]
\* Forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the consequences of sin - Matthew 6:12. But note that one who has not been baptized should not pray for forgiveness but be baptized - Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16. [Acts 8:22,24; James 5:16; Luke 18:13,14; Psalm 32:5-7]
\* Ability to recognize and resist temptation - Matthew 6:13. [Matt. 26:41; Eph. 6:11-18; 2 Cor. 13:7; Luke 22:31,32; John 17:14-16]
\* Good health and freedom from other threats to life or safety - 3 John 2; 2 Kings 20:1-7 (Hezekiah) [James 5:13-18; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Kings 8:35-53; 2 Chron. 7:13-15; Jonah 2:1-10; Psalm 50:15; 86:6,7; 32:6,7; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Num. 11:2; Luke 21:36]
\* Deliverance from enemies and persecution - Acts 12:1,5,12. [2 Thess. 3:1,2; 2 Cor. 1:8-11; Acts 4:23-31; 16:25; 1 Kings 8:33-35; 2 Kings 19:4,15-19]
\* Freedom from oppression by rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Neh. 1:11-2:5]
\* Safety in travel and care for loved ones we are separated from - Acts 21:5. [Acts 20:36-38; 28:15; Ezra 8:21-23; Gen. 24:26,27; 1 Thess. 3:9-11; 2 Tim. 1:3-5; Rom. 1:10; 15:30-32; Philem. 22]
\* Peace, courage, joy instead of disappointment or discouragement - Philippians 4:6,7. [1 Samuel 8:6-9; 2:1-11; Jer. 29:7; Psalm 122:6; 1 Peter 5:7; Matt. 26:36-46; Col. 1:11; 1 Thess. 3:9; 2 Sam. 7:18-29]
\* Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of God's will - Psalm 119:169-172. Note that this comes today through the Scriptures, not by direct revelation. [James 1:5,6; Col. 1:9,10; Phil. 1:9,10; Psalm 86:6,11; 143:1,8,10]
\* Salvation of lost sinners - Romans 10:1-3. [Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]
\* Laborers to teach the lost - Matthew 9:36-38.
\* Bold, clear preaching - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4]
\* Opportunities to preach and teach - Colossians 4:3 [2 Thess. 3:1]
\* Support for preachers - Philippians 1:3-5.
\* Choosing of elders, deacons, teachers, etc. - Acts 14:23. [Acts 6:6; 13:3]
\* Jesus' death, the Lord's supper - Matthew 26:26-29. [1 Cor. 11:23-26]
\* Baptism - Luke 3:21.
\* Faithfulness, good works, a life pleasing to God - Philippians 1:3-6,9-11. [Col. 1:9-11; 4:12; John 17:9-12; 1 Thess. 3:10-13; 2 Thess. 1:11]
\* Love - Philippians 1:9. [1 Thess. 3:10-12; Eph. 3:14-19]
\* Strength - Colossians 1:9-11. [Eph. 3:14-19; 2 Thess. 1:11]
\* Patience, long-suffering - Colossians 1:11.
\* Grace and mercy - 2 Corinthians 4:15. [Psalm 4:1; 86:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:4]
\* Proper speech - Psalm 141:1-3.
\* Sanctification - John 17:17.
\* Unity - John 17:20-23.
\* Eternal life, eternal glory - John 17:24-26.
This is not a complete list, but it suggests many things we could properly pray for. Remember that these are things both to make request for and to give thanks for.
Also note how Bible prayers often concerned spiritual needs and blessings. Some people seem to view prayer like sending a "Christmas list" to Santa for all the physical things they want. Biblical prayers may concern physical needs, but mainly they reflect man's greatest needs which are spiritual.
How do our prayers compare to Bible prayers? Are there areas where we need to improve?
II. When, Where, How Long, and How Often Should We Pray?
What are the proper circumstances for prayer? Should we pray only in church meetings or as daily routing or spontaneously as circumstances dictate? Should we pray in public or in private? What posture must we use?
A. General Admonitions about Frequency, Place, etc.
Notice these passages that generally discuss where and how often we should pray:
1 Timothy 2:8 - Men should pray "everywhere."
Acts 2:42 - "Continue steadfastly" in prayer.
1 Thessalonians 5:17,18 - Pray "without ceasing"; in everything give thanks.
Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks "always" for all things.
[Eph. 1:16; 6:18; Col. 1:3,9; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2,12; Luke 18:1-7; Rom. 12:12; Acts 6:4; 1:14; Phil. 1:4; 4:6; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Thess. 1:3,11; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13]
These verses do not mean we should pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for then we could not do the other good works God has commanded. Even Jesus and his apostles did not pray all the time (Luke 11:1).
The passages do mean that prayer should be a regular, frequent part of our daily lives, and that we should never quit or cease the practice of prayer. Further, we should live so that we are always ready to pray at any moment. We should never participate in practices such that we would be ashamed to pray to God in the midst of that activity.
B. Specific Examples of Frequency, Place, etc.
To give us a fuller understanding, consider these examples showing specifically when and where people prayed:
\* In public worship assemblies - 1 Corinthians 14:15 (see the context). [1 Kings 8:22; Ezra 9:4,5ff; Neh. 9:1-5]
\* In special gatherings regarding special needs - Acts 4:23ff. [Acts 12:5,12; 20:36]
\* In one's own home - Matthew 6:6. [Dan. 6:10,11; 2 Kings 20:1-3]
\* Before meals - Acts 27:35. [Matt. 15:36; 14:19; Luke 24:30]
\* On a mountain, in a garden, or other deserted place - Matthew 14:23. [Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12; 9:18; Acts 10:9; Matt. 26:36-46]
\* In the morning - Mark 1:35 (a long time before day). [Psalm 5:3; 88:13]
\* In the evening - Matthew 26:36-46. [Ezra 9:5]
\* Morning, noon, and evening - Psalm 55:16,17.
\* Three times a day - Daniel 6:10,11.
\* For forty days and nights - Deut. 9:18,25,26.
\* All night - Luke 6:12.
\* Night and day - 1 Thessalonians 3:9,10. [1 Tim. 5:5; Psalm 88:1]
Note: We should pray in private but also in public worship assemblies. We should not pray to make a show before others, but we should not be ashamed to pray around others at times when we otherwise would pray (cf. Acts 27:35). We should pray habitually throughout the day but also at special times when needs arise.
Do we pray regularly like faithful people of God in the Bible?
C. Posture and Physical Conduct During Prayer
Some people believe we should kneel or sit for prayer, but not stand. Must we speak out loud for God to hear us? Must we fold our hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes as we often teach children to do? Consider these Bible examples:
\* Kneeling, falling down prostrate - Luke 22:41. [Matt. 26:39; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14; Dan. 6:10,11; Deut. 9:18-20,25; 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5]
\* Sitting - Nehemiah 1:4. [1 Kings 19:4; 2 Sam. 7:18]
\* Standing - Mark 11:25; Luke 18:13,14. [1 Sam. 1:26; Gen. 24:12,13; Neh. 9:4,5ff] Note: If someone demands an example of standing in a congregational assembly, I ask where is the example of kneeling in a congregational assembly?
\* Bowed heads - 1 Chronicles 29:20 (Israel), Luke 18:13 (the publican would not lift his eyes to heaven). [Gen. 24:27,48; Ex. 34:8,9; 4:31; 12:27; 2 Chron. 20:18; 29:30; Neh. 8:6]
\* Eyes lifted toward heaven - John 17:1ff (Jesus). [John 11:41; Matt. 14:19]
\* Speaking in the heart, but no sound from the lips - 1 Sam. 1:12,13 (Hannah).
Other postures, due to special circumstances, include: on the cross (Luke 23:46,34); in the belly of a fish (Jonah 2:1); in stocks in prison (Acts 16:24,25).
The variety in these examples shows that the position is a matter of choice or expediency and does not, of itself, determine whether or not God hears us. We can pray anytime or place, yet certain positions may at times better suit our circumstances or reverence.
[Other information regarding posture & related points:
Prayer with fasting - Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3ff; Acts 9:9-11; 14:23; Luke 2:37; 5:33-35; 1 Cor. 7:5.
Hands lifted up - 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; 1 Tim. 2:8; Isa. 1:15(?); Psalm 28:2. But note: Did Hannah lift her hands (1 Sam. 1:12,13)?
Hands laid on other people - Acts 6:6; 8:14-18; 13:3; Matt. 19:13-15]
III. Can Prayer Really Change the Future?
Does God really answer prayer, or are the benefits of prayer just psychological? Because we have prayed, does God so intervene in the course of history that events occur differently than they would have?
A. Promises that God Will Answer Prayer
Consider several Bible passages expressly stating that God does answer prayer:
1 John 5:14,15 - We can have confidence that, if we pray according to God's word, He will hear us and grant what we ask.
1 John 3:22 - Whatever we ask we receive because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.
James 5:16 - The fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah prayed and it did not rain for 3 1/2 years. He prayed again and it rained (v17,18).
Matthew 7:7-11 - If we ask, seek, and knock, we receive what we requested. God is like an earthly father who gives good gifts to His children who ask.
1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on Him for He cares for you.
There are conditions we must meet in order for God to answer our prayers. If we meet those conditions and if He can answer our prayers in harmony with His will, He has promised to do what is good for us.
[Mark 11:24; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26; James 1:5,6; Luke 18:1-8; 1 Peter 3:12; Matthew 6:6,8; Psalm 55:22; 86:7; 28:6; 31:22; 118:5; 120:1; 116:1; 21:2]
B. Bible Examples of Answered Prayers.
Many Bible examples show God's response to prayers of His people. God does not do miracles today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but He is able to control events according to natural law so as to answer prayer without miracles. We will focus on cases of this nature.
1 Samuel 1:10-20,26-28 - Hanna was barren, having no child. She prayed, and as a result she conceived and bore Samuel. [Luke 1:13]
1 Samuel 7:5-11 - Samuel prayed for Israel's deliverance from an enemy, and the prayer was answered. [Cf. 2 Kings 19:15-37; 2 Chron. 33:10-13.]
2 Chronicles 7:11-14 - God promised to hear Israel's prayer for deliverance from pestilence, famine, etc.
2 King 20:1-7 - God said Hezekiah would die, not live. Hezekiah prayed about it, God promised to add 15 years to his life, and Hezekiah recovered.
Exodus 32:9-14 - God said He would destroy Israel, but Moses prayed and God changed His mind.
[Neh. 1:4-2:8; Psalm 32:5-7]
C. Some Conclusions about God's Answers to Prayers
God does act in response to prayer.
Some people think that, if God does not do miracles, then He must not be acting at all. Others see only psychological benefits in prayer or perhaps just the fact that we have obeyed God's command to pray. Even though we pray Scripturally, they claim God does not actually intervene in the course of earthly events to bring about what we asked for. But the examples just listed show that God does act in response to prayer, acting in harmony with natural law, without miracle.
Note Matthew 18:19 - When we ask God to do something, it will be done by the Father in heaven. God does act. This is true of "anything" we ask. Every kind of Scriptural request is included. [Cf. John 14:13,14; 15:7]
If God does not act to change the course of events in response to prayer, the same effect could be produced by a person praying with sincere faith to an idol! The idol could not do anything, but the worshiper would receive the psychological benefits.
Yet the Bible clearly teaches that Scriptural prayer to God produces results that cannot be achieved by people who do not serve the true God (James 5:16; 1 John 3:22; Prov. 15:8,29; Psalm 34:15-19; etc.). These promises can be valid only if prayer produces results beyond psychological benefits.
However, we must also work, to the extent of our ability, to achieve what we prayed for.
God does act in response to Scriptural prayers, but He will not act if we are not willing to do our part.
Matthew 6:11 teaches us to pray for our daily bread, but we must still work for it (2 Thess. 3:10). God does not answer through miracle (as by manna from heaven). But He does work through natural law to bless our effort so the needed result is achieved where it may not have been achieved had we worked but not prayed.
James 1:5 says to pray for wisdom (cf. Col. 1:9), but we must still study the word (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). The prayer is answered, not by miraculous direct revelation, but through the natural process of study. God gives us opportunities to learn and blesses our study so we learn what we might not have known had we not prayed.
3 John 2 - A prayer for good health requires us to care for our bodies, not knowingly damaging our health for personal pleasures.
In a similar way, we should pray for the spread of the gospel, but we must also work to teach it to the lost. But because we prayed, God blesses our work so it accomplishes good that may not have been accomplished had we not prayed.
God gives, not necessarily what we want, but what is best for everyone involved.
Matthew 7:7-11 - Like an earthly father, God gives good things, not things that do harm.
Matthew 26:36-46 - Jesus prayed to avoid the cross, but said, "Thy will be done." He still had to die, but an angel strengthened Him (Luke 22:43). God met His need while still doing what was needed for mankind.
Psalm 34:10 - Those who seek God will not lack any good thing. [Rom. 8:28; James 1:17]
2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - Paul prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. God did not grant the request but instead did what was best for Paul.
[Matt. 6:8; Eph. 3:20; 1 Kings 3:5-13]
God is infinite, where our knowledge is limited. We may not know what is best, but God does. This is why we ought always to pray for God's will to be done. He can then give us what we asked, something greater, or something different, according to what He knows to be best.
We further may not understand how God can control the universe without miracles, yet the Bible affirms that He does (consider also the story of Esther). Those who believe in God must believe in His power to answer prayer, even though we cannot explain how He does it.
IV. What Conditions Must Prayer Meet?
God had promised to answer prayer, yet some prayers are not answered. How can this be? The only possible explanation is that there are conditions prayer must meet in order for God to answer, just as there are conditions we must meet in order for God to forgive our sins. What conditions must prayer meet in order for God to answer?
A. We Must Pray in Jesus' Name (though Him as Mediator).
Consider these verses:
John 14:13,14 - If we ask anything in Jesus' name, He will do it. [Cf. John 15:16; 16:23,24,26; Eph. 5:20]
Romans 1:8 - Paul thanked God through Jesus Christ. [Col. 3:17]
1 Timothy 2:5 - Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. The immediate context refers to salvation, but the broader context refers to prayer (see v1,2,8). Jesus is the mediator in prayer because He is our mediator in salvation. He is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16).
What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name?
Are these just meaningless words we mouth at the end of a prayer to make it effective [like a magic spell - "Open, Sesame"]?
A person's name stands for the person and all that He is. God's name is "hallowed" because God Himself is hallowed (Matt. 6:9). More specifically, a person's name represents his will and authority. Your name signed on a check or other legal document authorizes it as acceptable to you. "Halt in the name of the law" means the authority of the law requires you to stop.
Further, Jesus is the mediator who makes it possible for us to approach God in prayer. We pray "through Him" because His authority enables us to be heard. Because of our sins, we could never approach God. We need a "go-between" to reconcile us to God so we can communicate with Him. Because Jesus died as our sacrifice, He is the only one who can authorize us to approach God in prayer.
Why then would anyone pray through Mary or a dead "saint"? They did not redeem us by their death, hence they cannot mediate our prayers. No one can mediate instead of or in addition to Jesus. He is the "one mediator" between God and man.
To pray in Jesus' name means we are appealing to His authority as the one mediator between us and God. We are trusting His power to make it possible for God to hear our prayer. We should understand this if we are to avoid praying with "vain repetition."
B. We Must Pray According to God's Will.
This follows from the concept of prayer "in Jesus' name." Note further:
1 John 5:14,15 - God hears us if we ask according to His will.
Matthew 26:39 - Jesus prayed for the Father's will to be done. [Matt. 6:10]
But God's will may fall into one of two categories:
In things essential to salvation, God's will is revealed in the Scriptures.
Note 2 Tim. 3:16,17; 1 Cor. 14:37; etc. Regarding such matters, we must never pray for things that do not harmonize with God's revealed will.
For example, God says we should not pray for things just to satisfy our selfish lusts (James 4:3). Such would not be praying according to His will.
Likewise, God's has revealed that sinners must meet conditions, including baptism, to be forgiven (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16; etc.). We must never pray for God to save such people without them meeting these conditions.
Since the gospel came into effect, no passage ever tells an unbaptized person to pray for forgiveness of sins. Yet preachers often tell such people to "pray through" or "pray the sinner's prayer" to be saved. Such a prayer would not be answered because it is not according to God's will.
In things not essential to salvation, God's will may not be expressly revealed in Scripture.
Many events of everyday life may not be a matter of right or wrong, so we may not know God's expressed will. For example, we know God allows suffering and death, so in a particular instance of illness we may not know whether God would be willing for the person to get better or not. [2 Cor. 12:7-10]
In these cases we may pray for what we believe to be best, but then we should ask God to do what He knows to be best. Then by faith we accept the outcome.
C. We Must Pray with Understanding and Meaning.
1 Corinthians 14:15,16 - Pray with the spirit and the understanding. Think about the words to be sure you mean what is said. When you lead public prayer, help people understand so they can say "amen" (cf. vv19,26,40). Use words people can understand. Speak loudly and distinctly.
Matthew 6:7 - Do not use vain (meaningless) repetition. Even if we understand the words, if we repeat them frequently, we may be tempted to just mouth the words without meaning them. This does not prove it is wrong to repeat a request (Matt. 26:36-46; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Luke 18:1-7), but we should mean it every time we pray it!
D. We Must Pray with Sincerity and Earnestness.
1 Samuel 1:10,15 - Hannah poured out her soul in prayer.
Jeremiah 29:12,13 - God promised He would hear His people when they prayed with "all their hearts."
Luke 22:44 - In Gethsemane Jesus prayed earnestly.
Matthew 6:5 - Do not pray from hypocritical motives such as to be seen of men. Pleasing, impressing, and entertaining people are not proper motives for prayer. We must pray to please God and honor Him. [Mark 12:40]
Prayer must never become a mere formality or outward ritual that we go through without meaning what we do. Our hearts must be involved in fervent prayer, thanksgiving, and appeals to God.
[1 Cor. 14:15; Psalm 17:1; 145:18; James 5:16,17]
E. We Must Pray in Faith.
James 1:5-8 - Ask in faith without doubting. One who doubts will received nothing from God. First we must believe that God exists, then believe that He has power to answer prayer. The skeptic or agnostic who prays ("just in case there is a God") is wasting his breath.
Mark 11:24 - To receive the blessing we request, we must believe that God will answer. The context discusses miracles, which do not occur today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but the principle still applies. God answers prayer today through natural law, but we must believe He does answer else we can be sure He will not.
Remember, as discussed previously, that there are some things God has expressly revealed that He is willing to give, such as forgiveness to a penitent child of God. Faith requires us to believe He will give what He has promised. In other matters He has not necessarily revealed what He will give (such as good health), so we must pray "Thy will be done." Then we must believe He will do what is best.
Praying in faith also requires us to accept what God sends as being what is best. Too often, when we do not receive exactly what we asked for, we complain or think God broke His promise. Faith requires us to believe He will give the best thing at the best time, and then believe that the result is what is best.
F. We Must Pray with Humility and Respect for God.
2 Chronicles 7:14 - God will hear His people if they "humble themselves" and pray.
Luke 18:9-14 - The self-righteous Pharisee praised and exalted himself in prayer, instead of exalting God. Such a person will be abased by God, not justified.
Matthew 6:9 - Pray, "Hallowed be Thy name." Prayer must express respect and reverence for God.
God should not be approached casually as another human ("Hi, Pop!"), nor as a servant at our beck and call. Our attitudes and speech should exalt His greatness while recognizing our weaknesses, sins, and human limitations. [2 Chron. 33:10-13; Gen. 18:27]
G. We Must Pray with Repentance for Sin.
2 Chronicles 7:14 - In order for God to hear His people's prayers, they must turn from their wicked ways.
Acts 8:21-23 - When a child of God has sinned, they must repent and pray for forgiveness. (See our earlier list of other passages teaching this.)
Luke 18:13,14 - The publican received justification because he was willing to admit his sins.
Forgiveness is not granted to those who persist in sin, excuse it, rationalize it, overlook it, or hide it. To receive forgiveness when we pray, we must be truly sorry for sin and determine to overcome it. [Psalm 32:5-7; Dan. 9:3-12; James 5:16; 1 Kings 8:33-36,46-53]
H. We Must Pray with Forgiveness for Others.
Matthew 6:12,14,15 - God will forgive us only if we willingly forgive others. [Mark 11:25; Matt. 18:21-35]
To have a right relationship with God we must pursue right relationships with people (Matt. 5:23,24). Have others apologized to you requesting your forgiveness, yet you continue to hold a grudge? Do you seek revenge, wishing harm to come to those who have wronged you, unwilling to pursue peace and harmony?
To receive God's forgiveness when we pray, we must have the same attitude toward others that we expect Him to have toward us!
I. We Must Pray While Living a Faithful Life.
James 5:16 - The supplication of a righteous man avails much.
1 John 3:21,22 - We receive what we ask from God because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.
Proverbs 28:9; 15:8,29 - If someone turns away from God's law, his prayer is an abomination. But God hears the prayer of the righteous.
Psalm 66:18 - God will not hear me if I regard iniquity in my heart.
Isaiah 1:15-17 - God would not hear the prayers even of His own people because of their sins. They needed to cease doing evil and learn to do well. [Jer. 11:9-14; 14:10-12; Ezek. 8:17,18; Micah 3:4; Zech. 7:11-13; Isa. 58:1-9]
Isaiah 59:1,2 - Your sins and iniquities separate you from God so that He will not hear. It surely follows that God will not hear the prayers of alien sinners, but the direct application in the context of many of these passages is to unfaithful children of God.
God heard the prayer of Cornelius before he was baptized (Acts 10:4,31). If a person in sin is sincerely seeking to know the truth, God may give him an opportunity to learn it. Beyond that, God there is nothing God has promised to give alien sinners in answer to prayer.
But God likewise rejects the prayer of the impenitent child of God. Too many people want to live their lives for themselves, then go running to God in time of need. They expect Him to do service to them despite the fact they refuse to serve Him! God says it will not work. If you want God to hear your prayers, first repent of your sins and live in obedience to Him.
[1 Peter 3:12; Psalm 34:15-19; 109:7; John 9:31; Lam 3:1,8; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Tim. 2:8; Prov. 1:24-29; 21:13; 2 Chron. 7:14]
Conclusion
God will answer prayer for you. He desires to meet your needs and offer you everything He has promised to His faithful children. But first you must become a faithful child of His and must meet the conditions of prayer.
Are you a child of God? If not, you cannot pray for forgiveness. Instead you must believe in Jesus, repent of sins, confess Him, and be baptized to receive remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 10:9,10; 6:3,4; etc.). Then if you live a faithful life, He has promised to hear your prayers according to His will. Why not begin now to accept His offer?The Power of Prayer
How Must We Pray So God Will Answer?
How should we pray so God will answer? What conditions must prayer meet? When, where, and how often should we pray? What power does prayer have?
Does God really answer prayer? If so, why are prayers sometimes not answered? What should we pray about: praise, thanks, petition, worship, requests, intercession for others? When and how often should we pray? What conditions must we meet for our prayers to be heard and answered? What power does prayer have?
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Introduction:
In Luke 11:1 Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Christians today also need to learn to pray.
The purpose of this study is to help Christians improve in prayer. People who are new in the faith may have never studied about how to pray. Some members do not pray properly so their prayers are not even answered. All of us can improve in this aspect of worship.
We need to learn what to pray about. Should we make requests, be thankful, offer praise, intercede on behalf of others, offer petition? And what power does prayer have? Does God really answer prayer? If so, how should we pray and what conditions must prayer meet in order for God to hear and answer? These and other questions will be considered in this study.
What is prayer? Note Acts 4:24,31. Prayer is simply man talking to God, expressing his thoughts to God (Rom. 10:1; Matt. 6:9ff). Hence, it is a form of communication similar in may ways to simply talking to our earthly father, except that we must remember whom we are addressing and must meet conditions of acceptable prayer.
I. What Should We Pray About?
What should we include in our prayers? Some cannot seem to think of much to say. Others say things that are inappropriate or even unscriptural. Some just repeat memorized phrases they have heard others pray.
Let us examine Bible examples of prayer. What did God's people in the Scriptures talk about in prayer? How do our prayers compare? Can we improve our prayers by considering what Bible characters prayed about?
A. We Should Praise God's Character and Work.
Bible prayers quite commonly included many descriptions of the glory and greatness of God. Jesus began the model prayer by praising God's name (Matt. 6:9). Many psalms are filled with praise (note Psalm 86:5-12).
From the passages below, consider some particular qualities or works of God that were praised in prayer. How do our prayers compare? Do we praise God like this?
\* God's authority and Lordship - He is the true God, in contrast to idols - 1 Chronicles 29:10-13. [Psalm 86:8-10; Neh. 9:4-6; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Kings 19:15; Matt. 6:13; Rev 11:17; 2 Sam. 7:22]
\* God's power - 1 Chronicles 29:11,12. [Jer. 32:16-23; Eph. 1:16-19; Job 42:1,2; Neh. 9:4-38; Dan. 2:20-23]
\* God's holiness, goodness, and righteousness - Psalm 86:5-12 (note v5). [Psalm 143:1-12; 1 Sam. 2:2]
\* God's mercy, grace, kindness, and willingness to forgive - God has provided redemption and salvation for His people, especially sending Jesus as our Savior - Psalm 86:5. [Col. 1:12-14; 2 Sam. 7:23; Neh. 9:4-38; Luke 2:37,38; 1 Kings 8:23; Ezra 9:8,9; Psalm 17:7]
\* God's wisdom and knowledge - Jeremiah 32:16-23 (note v19). [Dan. 2:20-23; 1 Sam. 2:3]
\* God's justice - God cares for His people and rewards them but punishes the wicked - Jeremiah 32:19,23. [1 Sam. 2:6-10; Gen. 18:25; Psalm 90:7-11]
\* God's eternal existence - Psalm 90:1-4. [Psalm 102:1,12,24-27]
\* God's faithfulness to His word - Nehemiah 9:4-8. [Neh. 1:5; 1 Kings 8:23-30; Dan. 9:4; Psalm 143:1]
\* God's work as Creator and Source of life - Nehemiah 9:4-6. [Jer. 32:17; Psalm 90:2; 102:1,24,25; 2 Kings 19:15; Acts 4:24; 1 Sam. 2:6]
We could never list here all the great qualities and works for which God deserves our praise. Yet surely we ought to praise God in prayer, so we should meditate about why He deserves our praise. Instead of just thinking of more things for God to give us, do we need greater emphasis on describing His greatness?
B. We Should Pray on Behalf of Others.
1 Timothy 2:1,2 says to offer prayer, supplication, intercession, and giving of thanks on behalf of all men. Yet we sometimes neglect to pray for others because we concentrate so much on our own interests.
How often do we think to pray for others, whether or not they request our prayers? Bible prayers are filled with requests and thanksgiving for people other than the one offering the prayer. Consider some groups of people for whom we should pray:
\* Rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Ezra 6:10; 1 Chron. 29:19]
\* Children and family members - our spouse, relatives, etc. - 1 Chron. 29:19. [Matthew 19:13-15; Gen. 25:21,22; 24:12-14; 18:23-33; 1 Sam. 1:10-12; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Luke 1:13]
\* Lost sinners - Romans 10:1-3. Remember, however, that these people must meet the gospel conditions of salvation in order to be forgiven. [Matt. 9:36-38; Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]
\* Enemies and persecutors - Luke 6:27,28. [Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34]
\* People sick and suffering - 3 John 2. [James 5:16; Num. 11:2; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Gen. 20:17,18]
\* Elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4; Acts 4:25-29; 6:6; 14:23; 13:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; Matt. 9:36-38; 2 Thess. 3:1,2; Heb. 13:18]
\* All Christians - Ephesians 6:18. [James 5:16]
The Bible contains multitudes of examples in which men of God interceded on behalf of God's people. Here are just a few of them:
Moses [Num. 11:2; 21:7; 14:13-20; Deut. 9:18-20,25-29; Ex. 32:9-14,31,32].
Samuel [1 Sam. 7:5-11; 12:19-25].
Solomon [1 Kings 8:22-54].
Ezra [Ezra 9:1-15].
Nehemiah [Neh. 1:4-11].
Daniel [Dan. 9:3-20].
Jesus - Luke 22:31,32 (for Peter); John 17:9-22 (for all believers). [Luke 23:34]
Peter - Acts 8:24 (for Simon)
Epaphras [Col. 4:12]
Paul - Col. 1:3,9-14 [Rom. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-19; Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:11,12; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3]
Note that most examples were prayers, not just for God's people in general, but for specific individuals or congregations. Do we show this personal concern for others in our prayers?
Furthermore notice that Paul openly told people he was praying for them. If we would do this, it would motivate us to be more diligent to pray for others, but it would also give Christians a greater sense of love and appreciation for one another.
C. We Should Make Requests and Give Thanks.
We should pray for the things we truly need, however some people forget to thank God for what they have received. Their prayers consist almost entirely of asking for more. God is a generous God, willing to give what we need. But He also expects appreciation for what He gives.
Passages teaching we can request what we need:
Philippians 4:6,7 - Instead of worrying, let your requests be made known to God. "Supplication" refers to requests for needs to be "supplied."
Matthew 7:7-11 - God is like a loving father who gives what his children need. If we ask, we will receive.
1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on God because He cares for you.
James 4:2,3 - Sometimes we do not receive because we do not ask. On the other hand, God will not answer selfish requests for things we do not need.
1 John 5:14,15 - If we ask according to God's will, we receive our petitions.
[Cf. 1 John 3:21,22; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26]
Passages teaching we should also give thanks for our blessings:
Philippians 4:6,7 - Our requests should be made known with thanksgiving.
1 Timothy 2:1 - Prayers for others should include thanksgiving.
Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks to the Father always for all things.
[1 Thess. 5:18; Col. 4:2; 2:7; 3:17]
Bible prayers generally include thanksgiving right alongside requests. God invites us to ask for what we need, but He is displeased by those who are so ungrateful as to offer no thanks when the request is granted (Luke 17:12-17).
D. Some Specific Things We Should Pray about
No one prayer or combination of prayers could mention all the possible subjects there are to pray about. But an examination of Bible prayers can teach us the kind of specific things that are commonly included in Bible prayers. We may pray about these things for ourselves or for others. We may request them and should give thanks when we receive them.
All these things are mentioned in Bible prayers:
\* God's will to be done - Matthew 6:9-13 (note v10). [Matt. 26:39]
\* Necessities of life - Matthew 6:11. [Acts 27:35; Matt. 15:36; 14:19; 1 Tim. 4:3-5; Luke 24:30]
\* Forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the consequences of sin - Matthew 6:12. But note that one who has not been baptized should not pray for forgiveness but be baptized - Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16. [Acts 8:22,24; James 5:16; Luke 18:13,14; Psalm 32:5-7]
\* Ability to recognize and resist temptation - Matthew 6:13. [Matt. 26:41; Eph. 6:11-18; 2 Cor. 13:7; Luke 22:31,32; John 17:14-16]
\* Good health and freedom from other threats to life or safety - 3 John 2; 2 Kings 20:1-7 (Hezekiah) [James 5:13-18; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Kings 8:35-53; 2 Chron. 7:13-15; Jonah 2:1-10; Psalm 50:15; 86:6,7; 32:6,7; 2 Sam. 12:15,16; Num. 11:2; Luke 21:36]
\* Deliverance from enemies and persecution - Acts 12:1,5,12. [2 Thess. 3:1,2; 2 Cor. 1:8-11; Acts 4:23-31; 16:25; 1 Kings 8:33-35; 2 Kings 19:4,15-19]
\* Freedom from oppression by rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1,2. [Neh. 1:11-2:5]
\* Safety in travel and care for loved ones we are separated from - Acts 21:5. [Acts 20:36-38; 28:15; Ezra 8:21-23; Gen. 24:26,27; 1 Thess. 3:9-11; 2 Tim. 1:3-5; Rom. 1:10; 15:30-32; Philem. 22]
\* Peace, courage, joy instead of disappointment or discouragement - Philippians 4:6,7. [1 Samuel 8:6-9; 2:1-11; Jer. 29:7; Psalm 122:6; 1 Peter 5:7; Matt. 26:36-46; Col. 1:11; 1 Thess. 3:9; 2 Sam. 7:18-29]
\* Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of God's will - Psalm 119:169-172. Note that this comes today through the Scriptures, not by direct revelation. [James 1:5,6; Col. 1:9,10; Phil. 1:9,10; Psalm 86:6,11; 143:1,8,10]
\* Salvation of lost sinners - Romans 10:1-3. [Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60]
\* Laborers to teach the lost - Matthew 9:36-38.
\* Bold, clear preaching - Ephesians 6:18-20. [Col. 4:3,4]
\* Opportunities to preach and teach - Colossians 4:3 [2 Thess. 3:1]
\* Support for preachers - Philippians 1:3-5.
\* Choosing of elders, deacons, teachers, etc. - Acts 14:23. [Acts 6:6; 13:3]
\* Jesus' death, the Lord's supper - Matthew 26:26-29. [1 Cor. 11:23-26]
\* Baptism - Luke 3:21.
\* Faithfulness, good works, a life pleasing to God - Philippians 1:3-6,9-11. [Col. 1:9-11; 4:12; John 17:9-12; 1 Thess. 3:10-13; 2 Thess. 1:11]
\* Love - Philippians 1:9. [1 Thess. 3:10-12; Eph. 3:14-19]
\* Strength - Colossians 1:9-11. [Eph. 3:14-19; 2 Thess. 1:11]
\* Patience, long-suffering - Colossians 1:11.
\* Grace and mercy - 2 Corinthians 4:15. [Psalm 4:1; 86:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:4]
\* Proper speech - Psalm 141:1-3.
\* Sanctification - John 17:17.
\* Unity - John 17:20-23.
\* Eternal life, eternal glory - John 17:24-26.
This is not a complete list, but it suggests many things we could properly pray for. Remember that these are things both to make request for and to give thanks for.
Also note how Bible prayers often concerned spiritual needs and blessings. Some people seem to view prayer like sending a "Christmas list" to Santa for all the physical things they want. Biblical prayers may concern physical needs, but mainly they reflect man's greatest needs which are spiritual.
How do our prayers compare to Bible prayers? Are there areas where we need to improve?
II. When, Where, How Long, and How Often Should We Pray?
What are the proper circumstances for prayer? Should we pray only in church meetings or as daily routing or spontaneously as circumstances dictate? Should we pray in public or in private? What posture must we use?
A. General Admonitions about Frequency, Place, etc.
Notice these passages that generally discuss where and how often we should pray:
1 Timothy 2:8 - Men should pray "everywhere."
Acts 2:42 - "Continue steadfastly" in prayer.
1 Thessalonians 5:17,18 - Pray "without ceasing"; in everything give thanks.
Ephesians 5:20 - Give thanks "always" for all things.
[Eph. 1:16; 6:18; Col. 1:3,9; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2,12; Luke 18:1-7; Rom. 12:12; Acts 6:4; 1:14; Phil. 1:4; 4:6; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Thess. 1:3,11; 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13]
These verses do not mean we should pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for then we could not do the other good works God has commanded. Even Jesus and his apostles did not pray all the time (Luke 11:1).
The passages do mean that prayer should be a regular, frequent part of our daily lives, and that we should never quit or cease the practice of prayer. Further, we should live so that we are always ready to pray at any moment. We should never participate in practices such that we would be ashamed to pray to God in the midst of that activity.
B. Specific Examples of Frequency, Place, etc.
To give us a fuller understanding, consider these examples showing specifically when and where people prayed:
\* In public worship assemblies - 1 Corinthians 14:15 (see the context). [1 Kings 8:22; Ezra 9:4,5ff; Neh. 9:1-5]
\* In special gatherings regarding special needs - Acts 4:23ff. [Acts 12:5,12; 20:36]
\* In one's own home - Matthew 6:6. [Dan. 6:10,11; 2 Kings 20:1-3]
\* Before meals - Acts 27:35. [Matt. 15:36; 14:19; Luke 24:30]
\* On a mountain, in a garden, or other deserted place - Matthew 14:23. [Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12; 9:18; Acts 10:9; Matt. 26:36-46]
\* In the morning - Mark 1:35 (a long time before day). [Psalm 5:3; 88:13]
\* In the evening - Matthew 26:36-46. [Ezra 9:5]
\* Morning, noon, and evening - Psalm 55:16,17.
\* Three times a day - Daniel 6:10,11.
\* For forty days and nights - Deut. 9:18,25,26.
\* All night - Luke 6:12.
\* Night and day - 1 Thessalonians 3:9,10. [1 Tim. 5:5; Psalm 88:1]
Note: We should pray in private but also in public worship assemblies. We should not pray to make a show before others, but we should not be ashamed to pray around others at times when we otherwise would pray (cf. Acts 27:35). We should pray habitually throughout the day but also at special times when needs arise.
Do we pray regularly like faithful people of God in the Bible?
C. Posture and Physical Conduct During Prayer
Some people believe we should kneel or sit for prayer, but not stand. Must we speak out loud for God to hear us? Must we fold our hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes as we often teach children to do? Consider these Bible examples:
\* Kneeling, falling down prostrate - Luke 22:41. [Matt. 26:39; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14; Dan. 6:10,11; Deut. 9:18-20,25; 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5]
\* Sitting - Nehemiah 1:4. [1 Kings 19:4; 2 Sam. 7:18]
\* Standing - Mark 11:25; Luke 18:13,14. [1 Sam. 1:26; Gen. 24:12,13; Neh. 9:4,5ff] Note: If someone demands an example of standing in a congregational assembly, I ask where is the example of kneeling in a congregational assembly?
\* Bowed heads - 1 Chronicles 29:20 (Israel), Luke 18:13 (the publican would not lift his eyes to heaven). [Gen. 24:27,48; Ex. 34:8,9; 4:31; 12:27; 2 Chron. 20:18; 29:30; Neh. 8:6]
\* Eyes lifted toward heaven - John 17:1ff (Jesus). [John 11:41; Matt. 14:19]
\* Speaking in the heart, but no sound from the lips - 1 Sam. 1:12,13 (Hannah).
Other postures, due to special circumstances, include: on the cross (Luke 23:46,34); in the belly of a fish (Jonah 2:1); in stocks in prison (Acts 16:24,25).
The variety in these examples shows that the position is a matter of choice or expediency and does not, of itself, determine whether or not God hears us. We can pray anytime or place, yet certain positions may at times better suit our circumstances or reverence.
[Other information regarding posture & related points:
Prayer with fasting - Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3ff; Acts 9:9-11; 14:23; Luke 2:37; 5:33-35; 1 Cor. 7:5.
Hands lifted up - 1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; 1 Tim. 2:8; Isa. 1:15(?); Psalm 28:2. But note: Did Hannah lift her hands (1 Sam. 1:12,13)?
Hands laid on other people - Acts 6:6; 8:14-18; 13:3; Matt. 19:13-15]
III. Can Prayer Really Change the Future?
Does God really answer prayer, or are the benefits of prayer just psychological? Because we have prayed, does God so intervene in the course of history that events occur differently than they would have?
A. Promises that God Will Answer Prayer
Consider several Bible passages expressly stating that God does answer prayer:
1 John 5:14,15 - We can have confidence that, if we pray according to God's word, He will hear us and grant what we ask.
1 John 3:22 - Whatever we ask we receive because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.
James 5:16 - The fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah prayed and it did not rain for 3 1/2 years. He prayed again and it rained (v17,18).
Matthew 7:7-11 - If we ask, seek, and knock, we receive what we requested. God is like an earthly father who gives good gifts to His children who ask.
1 Peter 5:7 - Cast your cares on Him for He cares for you.
There are conditions we must meet in order for God to answer our prayers. If we meet those conditions and if He can answer our prayers in harmony with His will, He has promised to do what is good for us.
[Mark 11:24; John 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26; James 1:5,6; Luke 18:1-8; 1 Peter 3:12; Matthew 6:6,8; Psalm 55:22; 86:7; 28:6; 31:22; 118:5; 120:1; 116:1; 21:2]
B. Bible Examples of Answered Prayers.
Many Bible examples show God's response to prayers of His people. God does not do miracles today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but He is able to control events according to natural law so as to answer prayer without miracles. We will focus on cases of this nature.
1 Samuel 1:10-20,26-28 - Hanna was barren, having no child. She prayed, and as a result she conceived and bore Samuel. [Luke 1:13]
1 Samuel 7:5-11 - Samuel prayed for Israel's deliverance from an enemy, and the prayer was answered. [Cf. 2 Kings 19:15-37; 2 Chron. 33:10-13.]
2 Chronicles 7:11-14 - God promised to hear Israel's prayer for deliverance from pestilence, famine, etc.
2 King 20:1-7 - God said Hezekiah would die, not live. Hezekiah prayed about it, God promised to add 15 years to his life, and Hezekiah recovered.
Exodus 32:9-14 - God said He would destroy Israel, but Moses prayed and God changed His mind.
[Neh. 1:4-2:8; Psalm 32:5-7]
C. Some Conclusions about God's Answers to Prayers
God does act in response to prayer.
Some people think that, if God does not do miracles, then He must not be acting at all. Others see only psychological benefits in prayer or perhaps just the fact that we have obeyed God's command to pray. Even though we pray Scripturally, they claim God does not actually intervene in the course of earthly events to bring about what we asked for. But the examples just listed show that God does act in response to prayer, acting in harmony with natural law, without miracle.
Note Matthew 18:19 - When we ask God to do something, it will be done by the Father in heaven. God does act. This is true of "anything" we ask. Every kind of Scriptural request is included. [Cf. John 14:13,14; 15:7]
If God does not act to change the course of events in response to prayer, the same effect could be produced by a person praying with sincere faith to an idol! The idol could not do anything, but the worshiper would receive the psychological benefits.
Yet the Bible clearly teaches that Scriptural prayer to God produces results that cannot be achieved by people who do not serve the true God (James 5:16; 1 John 3:22; Prov. 15:8,29; Psalm 34:15-19; etc.). These promises can be valid only if prayer produces results beyond psychological benefits.
However, we must also work, to the extent of our ability, to achieve what we prayed for.
God does act in response to Scriptural prayers, but He will not act if we are not willing to do our part.
Matthew 6:11 teaches us to pray for our daily bread, but we must still work for it (2 Thess. 3:10). God does not answer through miracle (as by manna from heaven). But He does work through natural law to bless our effort so the needed result is achieved where it may not have been achieved had we worked but not prayed.
James 1:5 says to pray for wisdom (cf. Col. 1:9), but we must still study the word (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). The prayer is answered, not by miraculous direct revelation, but through the natural process of study. God gives us opportunities to learn and blesses our study so we learn what we might not have known had we not prayed.
3 John 2 - A prayer for good health requires us to care for our bodies, not knowingly damaging our health for personal pleasures.
In a similar way, we should pray for the spread of the gospel, but we must also work to teach it to the lost. But because we prayed, God blesses our work so it accomplishes good that may not have been accomplished had we not prayed.
God gives, not necessarily what we want, but what is best for everyone involved.
Matthew 7:7-11 - Like an earthly father, God gives good things, not things that do harm.
Matthew 26:36-46 - Jesus prayed to avoid the cross, but said, "Thy will be done." He still had to die, but an angel strengthened Him (Luke 22:43). God met His need while still doing what was needed for mankind.
Psalm 34:10 - Those who seek God will not lack any good thing. [Rom. 8:28; James 1:17]
2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - Paul prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. God did not grant the request but instead did what was best for Paul.
[Matt. 6:8; Eph. 3:20; 1 Kings 3:5-13]
God is infinite, where our knowledge is limited. We may not know what is best, but God does. This is why we ought always to pray for God's will to be done. He can then give us what we asked, something greater, or something different, according to what He knows to be best.
We further may not understand how God can control the universe without miracles, yet the Bible affirms that He does (consider also the story of Esther). Those who believe in God must believe in His power to answer prayer, even though we cannot explain how He does it.
IV. What Conditions Must Prayer Meet?
God had promised to answer prayer, yet some prayers are not answered. How can this be? The only possible explanation is that there are conditions prayer must meet in order for God to answer, just as there are conditions we must meet in order for God to forgive our sins. What conditions must prayer meet in order for God to answer?
A. We Must Pray in Jesus' Name (though Him as Mediator).
Consider these verses:
John 14:13,14 - If we ask anything in Jesus' name, He will do it. [Cf. John 15:16; 16:23,24,26; Eph. 5:20]
Romans 1:8 - Paul thanked God through Jesus Christ. [Col. 3:17]
1 Timothy 2:5 - Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. The immediate context refers to salvation, but the broader context refers to prayer (see v1,2,8). Jesus is the mediator in prayer because He is our mediator in salvation. He is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16).
What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name?
Are these just meaningless words we mouth at the end of a prayer to make it effective [like a magic spell - "Open, Sesame"]?
A person's name stands for the person and all that He is. God's name is "hallowed" because God Himself is hallowed (Matt. 6:9). More specifically, a person's name represents his will and authority. Your name signed on a check or other legal document authorizes it as acceptable to you. "Halt in the name of the law" means the authority of the law requires you to stop.
Further, Jesus is the mediator who makes it possible for us to approach God in prayer. We pray "through Him" because His authority enables us to be heard. Because of our sins, we could never approach God. We need a "go-between" to reconcile us to God so we can communicate with Him. Because Jesus died as our sacrifice, He is the only one who can authorize us to approach God in prayer.
Why then would anyone pray through Mary or a dead "saint"? They did not redeem us by their death, hence they cannot mediate our prayers. No one can mediate instead of or in addition to Jesus. He is the "one mediator" between God and man.
To pray in Jesus' name means we are appealing to His authority as the one mediator between us and God. We are trusting His power to make it possible for God to hear our prayer. We should understand this if we are to avoid praying with "vain repetition."
B. We Must Pray According to God's Will.
This follows from the concept of prayer "in Jesus' name." Note further:
1 John 5:14,15 - God hears us if we ask according to His will.
Matthew 26:39 - Jesus prayed for the Father's will to be done. [Matt. 6:10]
But God's will may fall into one of two categories:
In things essential to salvation, God's will is revealed in the Scriptures.
Note 2 Tim. 3:16,17; 1 Cor. 14:37; etc. Regarding such matters, we must never pray for things that do not harmonize with God's revealed will.
For example, God says we should not pray for things just to satisfy our selfish lusts (James 4:3). Such would not be praying according to His will.
Likewise, God's has revealed that sinners must meet conditions, including baptism, to be forgiven (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16; etc.). We must never pray for God to save such people without them meeting these conditions.
Since the gospel came into effect, no passage ever tells an unbaptized person to pray for forgiveness of sins. Yet preachers often tell such people to "pray through" or "pray the sinner's prayer" to be saved. Such a prayer would not be answered because it is not according to God's will.
In things not essential to salvation, God's will may not be expressly revealed in Scripture.
Many events of everyday life may not be a matter of right or wrong, so we may not know God's expressed will. For example, we know God allows suffering and death, so in a particular instance of illness we may not know whether God would be willing for the person to get better or not. [2 Cor. 12:7-10]
In these cases we may pray for what we believe to be best, but then we should ask God to do what He knows to be best. Then by faith we accept the outcome.
C. We Must Pray with Understanding and Meaning.
1 Corinthians 14:15,16 - Pray with the spirit and the understanding. Think about the words to be sure you mean what is said. When you lead public prayer, help people understand so they can say "amen" (cf. vv19,26,40). Use words people can understand. Speak loudly and distinctly.
Matthew 6:7 - Do not use vain (meaningless) repetition. Even if we understand the words, if we repeat them frequently, we may be tempted to just mouth the words without meaning them. This does not prove it is wrong to repeat a request (Matt. 26:36-46; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Luke 18:1-7), but we should mean it every time we pray it!
D. We Must Pray with Sincerity and Earnestness.
1 Samuel 1:10,15 - Hannah poured out her soul in prayer.
Jeremiah 29:12,13 - God promised He would hear His people when they prayed with "all their hearts."
Luke 22:44 - In Gethsemane Jesus prayed earnestly.
Matthew 6:5 - Do not pray from hypocritical motives such as to be seen of men. Pleasing, impressing, and entertaining people are not proper motives for prayer. We must pray to please God and honor Him. [Mark 12:40]
Prayer must never become a mere formality or outward ritual that we go through without meaning what we do. Our hearts must be involved in fervent prayer, thanksgiving, and appeals to God.
[1 Cor. 14:15; Psalm 17:1; 145:18; James 5:16,17]
E. We Must Pray in Faith.
James 1:5-8 - Ask in faith without doubting. One who doubts will received nothing from God. First we must believe that God exists, then believe that He has power to answer prayer. The skeptic or agnostic who prays ("just in case there is a God") is wasting his breath.
Mark 11:24 - To receive the blessing we request, we must believe that God will answer. The context discusses miracles, which do not occur today (1 Cor. 13:8-10), but the principle still applies. God answers prayer today through natural law, but we must believe He does answer else we can be sure He will not.
Remember, as discussed previously, that there are some things God has expressly revealed that He is willing to give, such as forgiveness to a penitent child of God. Faith requires us to believe He will give what He has promised. In other matters He has not necessarily revealed what He will give (such as good health), so we must pray "Thy will be done." Then we must believe He will do what is best.
Praying in faith also requires us to accept what God sends as being what is best. Too often, when we do not receive exactly what we asked for, we complain or think God broke His promise. Faith requires us to believe He will give the best thing at the best time, and then believe that the result is what is best.
F. We Must Pray with Humility and Respect for God.
2 Chronicles 7:14 - God will hear His people if they "humble themselves" and pray.
Luke 18:9-14 - The self-righteous Pharisee praised and exalted himself in prayer, instead of exalting God. Such a person will be abased by God, not justified.
Matthew 6:9 - Pray, "Hallowed be Thy name." Prayer must express respect and reverence for God.
God should not be approached casually as another human ("Hi, Pop!"), nor as a servant at our beck and call. Our attitudes and speech should exalt His greatness while recognizing our weaknesses, sins, and human limitations. [2 Chron. 33:10-13; Gen. 18:27]
G. We Must Pray with Repentance for Sin.
2 Chronicles 7:14 - In order for God to hear His people's prayers, they must turn from their wicked ways.
Acts 8:21-23 - When a child of God has sinned, they must repent and pray for forgiveness. (See our earlier list of other passages teaching this.)
Luke 18:13,14 - The publican received justification because he was willing to admit his sins.
Forgiveness is not granted to those who persist in sin, excuse it, rationalize it, overlook it, or hide it. To receive forgiveness when we pray, we must be truly sorry for sin and determine to overcome it. [Psalm 32:5-7; Dan. 9:3-12; James 5:16; 1 Kings 8:33-36,46-53]
H. We Must Pray with Forgiveness for Others.
Matthew 6:12,14,15 - God will forgive us only if we willingly forgive others. [Mark 11:25; Matt. 18:21-35]
To have a right relationship with God we must pursue right relationships with people (Matt. 5:23,24). Have others apologized to you requesting your forgiveness, yet you continue to hold a grudge? Do you seek revenge, wishing harm to come to those who have wronged you, unwilling to pursue peace and harmony?
To receive God's forgiveness when we pray, we must have the same attitude toward others that we expect Him to have toward us!
I. We Must Pray While Living a Faithful Life.
James 5:16 - The supplication of a righteous man avails much.
1 John 3:21,22 - We receive what we ask from God because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him.
Proverbs 28:9; 15:8,29 - If someone turns away from God's law, his prayer is an abomination. But God hears the prayer of the righteous.
Psalm 66:18 - God will not hear me if I regard iniquity in my heart.
Isaiah 1:15-17 - God would not hear the prayers even of His own people because of their sins. They needed to cease doing evil and learn to do well. [Jer. 11:9-14; 14:10-12; Ezek. 8:17,18; Micah 3:4; Zech. 7:11-13; Isa. 58:1-9]
Isaiah 59:1,2 - Your sins and iniquities separate you from God so that He will not hear. It surely follows that God will not hear the prayers of alien sinners, but the direct application in the context of many of these passages is to unfaithful children of God.
God heard the prayer of Cornelius before he was baptized (Acts 10:4,31). If a person in sin is sincerely seeking to know the truth, God may give him an opportunity to learn it. Beyond that, God there is nothing God has promised to give alien sinners in answer to prayer.
But God likewise rejects the prayer of the impenitent child of God. Too many people want to live their lives for themselves, then go running to God in time of need. They expect Him to do service to them despite the fact they refuse to serve Him! God says it will not work. If you want God to hear your prayers, first repent of your sins and live in obedience to Him.
[1 Peter 3:12; Psalm 34:15-19; 109:7; John 9:31; Lam 3:1,8; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Tim. 2:8; Prov. 1:24-29; 21:13; 2 Chron. 7:14]
Conclusion
God will answer prayer for you. He desires to meet your needs and offer you everything He has promised to His faithful children. But first you must become a faithful child of His and must meet the conditions of prayer.
Are you a child of God? If not, you cannot pray for forgiveness. Instead you must believe in Jesus, repent of sins, confess Him, and be baptized to receive remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 10:9,10; 6:3,4; etc.). Then if you live a faithful life, He has promised to hear your prayers according to His will. Why not begin now to accept His offer?