

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

57 Does God Really Hear and Answer Prayer?

Scripture: Matthew 21:17-22

And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there. Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered. And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and cast into the sea, it, shall happen. And everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive."

The question before us has to do with prayer and I will begin with story. We are familiar with the name Ulysses S. Grant. He was the rugged, able leader of the Union forces during the Civil War. When He was fighting his last battle at Mount McGregor, which was a losing battle against cancer, one of his generals, O. O. Howard, called on him. Howard was known as "The Christian General." He was a man who was outspoken about his faith and of what God had done in his life through Christ. For some time General Howard spoke of Grant's distinguished service to the nation, how he had planned the campaign and brilliantly executed it. Grant listened attentively for a while. Finally he interrupted his visitor with this earnest request: "Howard, tell me something more about prayer".

The reason for mentioning Ulysses Grant has little to do with the fact of his being a famous general, or for that matter, even a president. Few of us are able to identify with him in that way. Where we can come close to him is at the point of this unusual request he made of General Howard. We would all like to know more about prayer. Some of us would like to know more about prayer because it is an exercise that has not impressed us very much. There are others of us who have become rather skeptical about prayer because of the fact that prayers offered up to God in the past have not been answered. Yes, there is the great company of the curious concerning prayer. Does God really hear and answer our prayers? Is prayer effective? Is it pointless to pray? The abundance of literature now available on the subject of prayer offers different answers to these

questions. There are those who suggest it is not a waste of time or energy to pray because the act of prayer is psychologically beneficial. It is therapeutic inasmuch as it releases tensions and breeds healthy attitudes toward life. The reader may want to refer to **Prayer And Personality** by James A. Kirk, Rand & McNally, 1962, pp.247-250. I think it can be agreed that prayer may have that kind of an effect.

This view, however, can pretty well deny the supernatural and is most often held by those who prefer a closed system of natural causes in the universe. The theological liberal will believe in prayer for reason of these benefits. Secondly, there are those who believe that prayer effects only the person who prays because communion with the Almighty can scarcely leave the devout unchanged. This is the neo-orthodox position. Certainly, it can be shown from Scripture that our lives are enriched by God in prayer. Psalm 42:1 reads, *"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My Soul thirsteth for God, for the living God."* Thirdly, there are those who believe God answers prayer in the mental and spiritual realms. There is little point in praying for good weather at the Sunday School picnic because weather conditions result from atmospheric causes which are a result of ordinary laws. Prayer has a personalistic value center. The meaning of love is to relate to the highest good of people. Intercessory prayer establishes a community in love through which God acts to bring psychosomatic healing on the one hand or a sense of forgiveness on the other. There is a question of who God is in this man centered effort to do good to persons known as Personalism. Lastly, there are those who believe prayer affects not only the person who prays, the spiritual world, but all of the natural and physical world also. Providential miracles do happen today in the most incredible ways in answer to the prayers of believers. Strictly speaking, is the power of God operative as He has chosen to respond to His children's requests. It is prayer which sets in motion the power of God, rather than the power of prayer itself. People who have come to understand prayer in this way look for things to happen as a result of this activity on their part much the same as they look for things to happen as a result any other activity.

The passage of Scripture we have chosen includes what is considered the strongest statement Jesus ever made concerning the effectiveness of prayer. The fact that it immediately follows His strange miracle regarding the barren fig tree seems to me very significant. Many people have wondered about Jesus cursing a tree. Several reasons come to mind. First, there was the reason of the tree.

It was a fruit-bearing tree which produced only leaves or form. The Lord of Creation thus destroyed what had not fulfilled its reason for living. Secondly, there was the reason of the nation. The Jewish nation owed its existence to God, but had not brought forth fruit to His glory. This would lead to their ejection nationally and open the door of salvation to all men. (Romans 10:8-13) More personally to us, there was the reason of the disciples who witnessed this unusual demonstration of displeasure and power. Three years they had walked with Jesus, watched Him and listened to Him. In spite of this great privilege they had not grown in faith and Jesus detected leaves of form rather than fruit. He therefore showed them something and told them something. He wanted to impress upon them the utter barrenness of the life which does not trust God completely and look to Him in all things. Hence, we have recorded for our edification and spiritual challenge. If we believe what Jesus taught was true, we must see from this passage that prayer is indispensable in the Christian life. If you will forgive the alliterated outline perhaps these strong words of Jesus will inspire a more effective prayer life for us all. There are several considerations which come to mind.

I. THE POSSIBILITY OF PRAYER: *"JESUS ANSWERED AND SAID TO THEM..."* (21:21)

It is, of course, the existence of a personal, loving God who makes prayer possible. A well-known verse for Christians is Hebrews 11:6 where we read, *"for He who comes to God must believe that He is."* Christians are people who live in an awareness of their dependence upon the fact that God exists. In Romans 1:17 Paul wrote that the *"just shall live by faith."* That means that day by day Christians live in faith that God is there. Otherwise, they live lives of unfaith which means they act as if the supernatural has no meaning for them. The prayerless Christian, no matter how sound his doctrine or proper his manner, lives like an earthling and is as powerless in spiritual battle. The saintly blind Malaval wrote, "There are many who have much knowledge and little virtue, who speak of God, but rarely to Him." Part of living by faith is relating to the God you believe is there to hear you. Now, the Jesus of this passage who said, *"And everything you ask in prayer..."* is the Jesus who supremely revealed the existence of God, making prayer possible. It remained for Jesus to declare a personal God (John 1:18), a sovereign God (Matthew 19:26), and a God who could be understood as Father (Luke 11:13). Jesus came into a world that floundered because of the unknowability of God. Plato well said it in the words, "Never can

man and God meet.” Jesus came and revealed that though God was holy, His presence could be entered in prayer through the cross of Calvary. (Hebrews 10:19-22) Jesus figures into the possibility of prayer in yet another way. He is personally the guarantor of the many promises about prayer which are found in Scripture. He is the “*amen*” to the promises of God about prayer. (II Cor.1:20) If Jesus had not come anyone could say that all the promises of God about prayer are just too good to be true! We cannot say that now. A God who would give us His Son has already given us His best. In a word, it is all down hill after Jesus. He is the “so be it” to the promises. It is not a vain thing to pray. Verses which remind us that God will hear and answer our prayers are; Jeremiah 29:13, 33:3, Isaiah 58:9, 65:24; Psalm 91:15; II Chronicles 7:14.

II. THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER: – “AND EVERYTHING YOU ASK IN PRAYER” (21:22)

Jesus said, “*And everything you ask in prayer...*” The purpose of prayer is to bring the “everything” of life into adjustment with God's will. The disciples who witnessed the cursing of the fig tree had not yet learned that all things, everything, was to be related to the will of God. Form marks the life which refuses to recognize the purpose of prayer as bringing everything to God. The purpose of prayer serves the “*everything*” of our lives in several ways.

1. We First Become Christians by Calling upon God:

We are told that “*whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” (Romans 10:13) This may not necessarily mean a formal prayer with actual words, but there is that offering up of the heart's desire to God. A person prays to God for salvation. (Luke 18:9-14. 23:39-43)

2. We Obey God:

Prayerlessness is disobedience because believers are commanded to pray. (Luke 18:1; I Thessalonians 5:17; Philippians 4:6; I Timothy 2:1; Ephesians 6:18-19) We all know what it is to fail here. We ought to remember that not to pray is a sin. In I Samuel 12:23 we have the words of Samuel to the people of Israel and he says, “*Moreover as for me God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.*” It is what the theologians call a sin of omission. “*To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin.*” (James 4:17) No, it is never a neutral matter, it is a sin against God.

3. We Obtain from God Through Prayer:

In this very passage Jesus assures the disciples their prayers will be answered. Verse 22 reads, *"...believing, you shall receive."* No prayer falls to the ground. People in this world are evaluated by their ability to accomplish things. People manage this by planning, working, saving, knowing and understanding. In the same world there are people who get things done in an additional way, by praying. I want to say that God always answers prayer. The answer may be welcome or unwelcome, but it is an answer nonetheless. It may take the form of "No, my child." Sometimes, it may be "yes, my child." It could possibly be, "Not yet, my child." It may be, "There is another way, my child." Whatever, there is always the answer.

4 We Escape a Life of Worry and Anxious Care:

How often we have sung, "O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer." Prayer is God's way for the Christian to have fullness of joy. *"Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name. Ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full."* Prayer is God's way to bring peace into our lives as taught in Philippians 4:6-7. A Christian can make a habit of praying about every grief, burden, problem, need and care until he knows something of *"taking no thought for your life."* (Matthew 6:25)

5. We Live Under the Anointing and the Power of the Holy Spirit:

The Bible often associates the power of the Holy Spirit with prayer. (Ephesians 3:14-19) The Bible makes it clear there can be no power in our lives, no victory, without the fullness of the Holy Spirit. There is no such control unless we ask for it in prayer. Prayer is the means of overcoming temptation. Jesus made this very clear in Matthew 26:41, *"Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation."* Prayer keeps us from temptation because we maintain a communion with God. There is a passage in the Old Testament which reads, *"And when he had left off communing with God, he went his way."* Prayer is communion with God and when we are communing with God we are not easily led into temptation. It was John Wesley who said, "Bear up the hands that hang down, by faith and prayer; support the tottering knees. Storm the throne of grace and persevere therein, and the power will come down."

III. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER: - *"EVERYTHING YOU ASK IN PRAYER, BELIEVING..."*

A large group of children had gathered in Edinburgh, Scotland, and D. L. Moody was asked to speak to them. He thought he would best get their attention by asking a question. He asked, "What is prayer?" He was ready to give an answer himself as he did not expect a reply. To his great surprise scores of little hands went up, all over the hall. He called on one lad and this answer came loud and clear, "Prayer is the offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to His will in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies." Mr. Moody was delighted. The last night Jesus spent with His disciples He had a serious talk with them about prayer. He instructed them no less than six times to pray in His name. In I Timothy 2:8 we have reference to a common posture in prayer, that of standing with hands outstretched and palms open toward heaven as if in expectancy. God will not fill soiled hands with Heaven's clean gifts. The picture is figurative and bespeaks confession and cleansing. In II Thessalonians we have unceasing prayer united with unceasing thanksgiving. Praising and praying are part of each other, (I Thessalonians 5:17-18) The passage we studied together stresses the need for prayer in our lives. God will never be a reality in our lives unless we have experienced for ourselves His responses in prayer.

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