

Reasons to Believe in Prayer

By Paul R. Blake

In November 2011, I considered the matter of prayer in two articles [Pleading the Promises of God (11-20-11), and Constant Prayer (11-27-11)] to emphasize the efficacy of prayer. Our faith will not be complete until we arrive solidly at the conviction that whatever we ask in prayer, God will hear and answer in His wisdom. Our faith increases even more when we come to believe that God longs to hear from us and is eager to answer our prayers, and that He will answer our prayers out of proportion to our limited expectations.

Individuals struggle with doubts over whether God actually hears their personal prayers or is even interested in their needs. The scriptures are filled with texts that emphasize the love God has for all of humankind (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1John 4:7-17). It seems that there is some disconnect in the reasoning of one who believes that God loves them enough to send Jesus to die for his sins, but somehow He doesn't care enough to listen to their petitions after they are saved. Often it is not a lack of faith in God that leads people to believe He will not answer their prayers, but it is an exaggerated belief generated by low self-image and poor self-confidence leading them to think they are so loathsome that God no longer cares for them. Ironically, broken-spirited people have an even greater assurance that God hears and cares for them than those who are less humble: *"The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all"* (Psalm 34:17-19).

It is also possible, due to a misunderstanding of the Lord's parable of the unjust judge, that some believe God is unwilling to hear and answer prayers (Luke 18:1-8). Their misguided view of this passage leads them to reason that because the judge was unjust and unwilling to help the woman and she had to ask often to have an expectation of a result, so God must be unwilling and we have to ask often in order to have any expectation of an answer to our prayers. This IS NOT the Lord's point at all! Jesus began and ended that parable by stating His point. Verse one: *"He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,"* and verse eight: *"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"*

Jesus wants us to understand that praying to God is less about getting what we specifically ask for and more about having the faith that God will answer according to His wisdom regarding what we really need, and in His own time in keeping with when He knows we need it. Our problem is that we have our own expectations of how the prayer needs to be answered and of when we think the answer should come. Often the answers we seek and the timing we expect is different than that of the Almighty. Therefore, when we do not get our specific requests in what we consider to be a timely manner, we draw even more misguided conclusions: 1) we think God must be petitioned multiple times before He hears and is moved to answer, 2) we think that perhaps God is unwilling to hear and answer our prayers, 3) we think we are so vile that God is too repulsed to listen to our prayers, 4) or we may even believe God does not hear and answer prayers.

Regardless of why we receive things other than what we ask for or why it seems to take so long before God responds, it is not about God's love for us; it is about our faith in Him. Prayer is a means of measuring or proving our faith. Our faith should not depend on whether or not we receive the answer we ask for immediately after we ask for it. Instead, our faith should guide our reactions to God's answers. Consider the possible outcomes of our prayers:

1) We pray and receive the answer we asked for immediately. Our faith in God increases, and rightly so.

2) We pray and receive the answer we asked for, but it is delayed in coming. Our faith in God moves us to glorify Him and His foresight for knowing better than us what will be the perfect time to give us our petition.

3) We pray and immediately receive a different answer than what we asked for. Our faith in God moves us to glorify Him and His wisdom for knowing better than us what will be the perfect answer to our problem.

4) We pray and receive no apparent answer. Our faith moves us to glorify Him for granting us an opportunity to have our faith tested and proven, and we rejoice in the trial of our faith knowing it will make us better Christians (James 1:2-4).

In point of fact, God wants to hear from us. *"I love the LORD, because He has heard My voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, Therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live"* (Psalm 116:1-2). *"He shall pray to God, and He will delight in him, He shall see His face with joy, For He restores to man His righteousness"* (Job 33:26). *"LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will prepare their heart; You will cause Your ear to hear"* (Psalm 10:17). *"...He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; When He hears it, He will answer you"* (Isa. 30:19). *"So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened"* (Luke 11:9-10).

In addition, we receive blessings in response to our prayers in far greater proportion than our expectations, regardless of whether we can discern it with our senses. Paul writes about the power of God: *"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us"* (Eph. 3:20). It must be accepted by faith that God knows what is in our very best interests, and He will give us exactly what we need, exactly when we need it. If we are disappointed by His response, it is because our hopes were resting on a solution to our problems that falls far short of what God's answer would accomplish.

The apostle Paul prayed that his thorn in the flesh might be removed. In his limited vision, Paul believed he would be better off without it and that perhaps he would become more effective as an evangelist. Nevertheless, the Lord could see the whole picture, and in His wisdom knew that Paul would be a better preacher with it. Paul perhaps thought that the primary good in this matter was his own ideas about his effectiveness and his own inconvenience in having to bear the thorn. The Lord knew that the gospel would spread further with Paul bearing his thorn and that living with it would make him a better man. The Lord had greater things in store for Paul than what Paul could think of on his own.

Our faith needs to grow to the point that when we have prayed, we do so with full assurance that God hears and answers every petition in His wisdom and in His time, regardless of whether His answer meets with our desires and expectations or not. God wants to hear from His children, He is eager to listen and answer, and His answers will be more glorious and more comprehensive than we can imagine.