

Foundations Of An Effective Prayer Life Part 1

Selected Scriptures

This Week's Prayer Requests:

Memory Verse: Hebrews 11:6, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."

Lesson

If we believe the surveys, more people are praying than we think. For instance, Newsweek Magazine devoted its cover story on January 6, 1992 to the subject of prayer, saying, "This week, if you believe the surveys, more of us will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations. According to the recent studies at NORC, a research center, by Andrew M. Greeley, the sociologist-novelist-priest, more than three quarters (78 percent) of all Americans pray at least once a week; more than half (57 percent) report praying at least once a day." In fact, the study went on to find that even among Americans who claim to be either Atheists or Agnostics, nearly one in five admitted to praying at some point every day.

The current edition of *Books in Print* lists nearly two thousand titles on prayer, meditations, and techniques for spiritual growth – more than three times the second runner up, books devoted to sexual intimacy.

So there is apparently a lot of praying going on even among those who claim not to believe in prayer, but how much of it is really effective. That's what we want to talk about over the course of the next two weeks: the foundations of an effective prayer life.

Where should our foundation for understanding prayer begin? Why?

Foundations are important. Any builder knows that a structure is never stronger than its foundation. No building can stand long without a strong foundation and the same truth applies to the practice of all the spiritual disciplines. In order to build a consistent biblical prayer life, you must have the right foundation. Without this, your relationship with Christ will be weak and inconsistent.

I don't want to begin by focusing on us as we lay this foundation, however. Our focus needs to begin with God and who He is. The first rock in our understanding of prayer is this:

1. It is God's Nature to Both Hear and Answer Prayer (Ps. 65:2).

Psalm 65:2 says, “O You who hear prayer, To You all flesh will come.”

How important is it to you that God is the God “who hears prayer”?

The Hebrew verb translated “hear” in this verse is shama (שמע). It has the basic meaning “to hear,” but this verb is generally understood as involving an “effective hearing” or a true “listening” (TWOT). It is a hearing with a view to responding and doing something about what is heard. Therefore we can say with certainty from this text that God is a God who both hears and answers prayer.

This truth is seen many other places in Scripture, as you well know, but here it is especially important because God reveals Himself as the God who hears. Just as His mercy is everlasting and is a part of His unchanging character, so is His readiness and desire to hear prayer. God’s holiness and righteousness never vary. He is always holy and always right. His character and attributes are unchanging and everlasting as He has told us “I am the Lord, I do not change” (Mal. 3:6). “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever,” according to Hebrews 13:8. Even so, this same God over all nations and generations of men, is a God who delights to hear, and does hear and answer prayer.

What does it mean that there is “No partiality with God” (Rom. 2:11).

Our verse doesn’t end there though. It continues, “To You all flesh will come.” This is important because it tells us that God is just as ready to hear the prayer of a Gentile as well as a Jew, or a black person as well as a white person, or a woman as well as a man, an adult as well as a child. God, who is the Creator of all, is ready to hear the prayer of every living soul. He is willing to hear the prayer of our generation just as much as the generations that have gone before. God does not show partiality in the matter of prayer and He is not bound by false human distinctions.

God was delighted to hear the prayers of Enoch, who walked with God daily before the flood, and who He took bodily into heaven that he might not taste death. God heard the prayers of Abraham after the flood. It did not affect the answer to prayer that Elijah was in the land of Canaan or Daniel, who was a captive in Babylon. God heard the prayer of the Canaanite woman, the prayer of the Italian centurion, Cornelius, as readily as He heard the prayer of Peter, the apostle. He heard the prayers of the prostitute weeping at His feet, the publican in the temple, and the dying thief on the cross as readily as those of Simeon and Anna the prophetess. “He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though

He is not far from each one of us,” Acts 17:26-27.

If there are ever conditions that hinder the prayer of a person you can be certain, that they are not racial, social, gender, financial or age based. Men and women readily judge one another by these false human categories, but God who looks at the heart is never bound by these things, and He has said that to Him “all flesh will come.” – [Note, this is not a statement supporting a doctrine of universalism as verse 4 of the same psalm shows, but it is a statement about God’s basic impartiality and the dependence of all mankind upon Him.]

Theologians call the attribute of God’s independent self-existence (i.e. having life from Himself), His aseity, why is this truth about God important for us?

A second foundational truth that will greatly bolster our prayer lives is this:

2. Many attributes of God are implied in the fact that He hears and answers prayer.

When we understand that God hears and answers prayer, then we are able to perceive many truths about God’s nature and attributes that are very encouraging. Namely:

a. A prayer hearing God is a living God. God is not an idol. He is not made of wood, stone, or metal. The Lord mocks those who turn to idols without life in Isaiah 44:19, saying “And no one considers in his heart, nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say, ‘I have burned half of it in the fire, Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals; I have roasted meat and eaten it; And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?’” An Idol has eyes, but it does not see. It has ears, but it does not hear. Likewise our more sophisticated idols: money, sex, possessions, etc, they do not see or hear. But a God Who hears prayer is a living God.

What does it mean for us that God is a personal God? What would life be like, if this were not true?

b. A prayer hearing God is a personal God. A prayer hearing God cannot be some kind of impersonal force. Neither can He be synonymous with creation, but He must be separate from it and able to act within it. A prayer hearing God must be a distinct person. And not just any person, not the disinterested and unfeeling watchmaker of the Deists, who winds up the universe and then lets it go as some sort of cosmic experiment. No, He must be a certain kind of person, one who cares, who feels, who is capable of having an personal emotional connection with His creatures. Psalm 65:2 calls to mind then the beautiful blessing of 1 Peter 5:6-7, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all

your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

Sometimes people say that God is “too big or too busy with important matters to be concerned about me.” Is this a compliment to Him or does it in fact demean Him? Why?

c. A prayer hearing God is an all-knowing God. To hear and answer prayer, God must be omniscient. Does God hear the cry of millions of His people in all countries, in all languages, at the same time? Does He know the circumstances and very hearts of all who call upon His name? Does He see their faith? Does He know their sincerity or perceive hypocrisy in those who pray? In order for Him to be a prayer hearing and prayer answering God, the answer must be “yes” to all of these questions. Therefore His knowledge is limitless. He is the God who knows all things.

d. A prayer hearing God is an all powerful God. If God hears and answers prayer, then He must have sovereign power of all creation. If God answers prayer for rain, He must control the weather. If God answers prayers about crops, He must control the sun, the insects, the moisture, and even the germ of life in the seed itself. If God answers prayer about health, then he must have in His hand every blood cell in the human body, every nerve, every tiny little metabolic process. If God answers prayers about revival, or about the conversion of sinners, then God must have influence on the very souls and consciences of men. We know from Scripture and super-abundant personal and historical evidence that these things are true. Moreover, since God is able to answer even the prayer of Joshua, that the sun might stand still in its relation to the earth (Josh. 10:12-13), then He must have power over the whole endless universe. A prayer hearing God is a God of infinite power.

What does such thinking reveal about such a person’s understanding of who God is?

e. A prayer hearing God is a God of infinite wisdom. Since God has all knowledge and all power, He must in fact be the Creator. In light of His evident ability to make such a universe, forming it in it’s seemingly infinite complexity and cohesiveness, and working in it in such a way that it is sustained, it is easy to see His glorious wisdom. Thus we can trust Him, who holds all things together, to answer prayer rightly and beautifully despite our own weakness, and our own constant inability to ask as we should or even see the kinds of things we should be asking of Him.

Do you believe in Miracles? Why or why not? What have you seen God do?

f. A prayer hearing God is a God who works miracles. If there is a God who hears and answers prayer, then of necessity His work is miraculous in the sense of the Bible. It may seem natural or ordinary, but He may also work in an extraordinary or supernatural way. His work may come through either human or divine means. Whichever, it is

still His working.

Every time a soul is saved, it is a supernatural act, not a natural one. Every time God intervenes and controls nature or changes the normal order to make it rain when it otherwise would not have rained, it is a miracle. Every time a person gets well in answer to prayer, when otherwise he would not have gotten well, it is a miracle. As John Blanchard once said, “If there be a God, He must act like a God.”

How does answering prayer reveal God’s love and mercy?

g. A prayer hearing God is a God of love and mercy. God knows that none of us deserve to have our prayers answered. We are sinners, who deserve only condemnation, separation from Him and the punishment of death. But God loves those who are His enemies. His mercy and grace are boundless. “Where sin abounded, grace abounded more” (Romans 5:20). If there is a God who loves sinners so much as to hear and answer their prayers, then we are but a shadow away from the great doctrines of atonement, imputation of righteousness, salvation and all that goes with it.

When a person understands these things and really believes that God is a prayer-hearing God, then he has the secret to the heart of God and begins to dimly see and touch upon all the graces and powers and majesties of the one true infinite God, who has love and mercy enough to seek and save lost sinners and make them into His very own children.

This brings us now to a third foundational truth, for which we need to consider Hebrews 11:6, our memory verse for this week. The third truth is this:

What does it mean practically to “diligently seek” God?

3. It is impossible to come to God or please Him unless you believe He is a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God.

Hebrews 11:6 reads, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

In this verse we are told that before anyone can come to God he must believe two things. First, he must believe that there is a God, and second, he must believe that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, in other words, that God both hears and answers prayer. No one can come to God, no one can be saved, no one can please God, unless they believe that God is a prayer hearing God.

One cannot know God at all or please Him in the least, unless one has a very real confidence of God's personal existence and in this attribute of His, that He can be sought out and is in fact a rewarder, giving to those who come to Him in prayer with diligent hearts.

Must one fulfill the qualification of Hebrews 11:6 to be saved? Explain your answer.

Some might think it strange perhaps, but it seems perfectly logical to me that the one attribute of God everyone must acknowledge before coming to Him is this idea that He hears and answers prayer. And apparently enough of God's wondrous nature, attributes and qualities are involved in this aspect of His character of hearing and answering prayer, that when one believes that God "is a rewarder of those that diligently seek Him," then he knows enough about God to come to Him and please Him and receive His blessing. This is the baseline. This is the starting point not only for building a solid prayer life, but for the whole of living the Christian life as well.

What are some excuses people make for not praying to God or pursuing the blessing of Heb. 11:6? Does this honor Him?

Another truth is implicit in this text. Namely, when we as individuals limit God's willingness to answer prayer either in our hearts or practice, we become guilty of a terrible sin of unbelief. To limit His working or His interest in blessing those that earnestly seek Him in prayer is to insult Him and strike at the very dignity of God's character. It is simple unbelief in His nature as a prayer-hearing God and very displeasing to Him.

Many people do this unconsciously, even Christians. They will go for days and sometimes even weeks without making any real effort whatsoever to come to Him, let alone "diligently" seeking Him in prayer. What does this say about their believe in God as a prayer-hearing God? Others will be more open in their skepticism. They will simply resign themselves to the status quo and say, "I've already prayed all the prayers that I can." Or they might appeal to "natural law" and suggest that God Himself is a servant of nature rather than the author of it. In doing so they minimize faith, impugn His character and cannot draw near to Him as they should. Or perhaps they will appeal to their own sinfulness as an excuse for not drawing near to Him and thus heap up even more sin upon themselves.

What does your own prayer life say about your faith in God and the promise of Heb. 11:6?

But it is not this way with those that truly believe that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Do you believe this?