The Doctrine of Prayer

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The single most powerful weapon in a Christian's arsenal is prayer. But the problem is that many believers do not really know how to use this marvelous tool. We can be weak prayer warriors, even failed ones, and frankly, not many of us are truly powerful prayer warriors. That is a terrible shame because even a casual study of Scripture reveals numerous passages on the subject of prayer. I was amazed at the number of passages on prayer in the Bible, far more than we can address in this study. Those passages contain many promises related to the effectiveness of prayer, promises that, if we fully appreciated and put faith in them, have the power to change our lives as well as the lives of others.

Sadly, we often pray ineffectively and seemingly without results. We pray fervently, weep, and moan, and nothing seems to happen. At least it seems that nothing happens. This can lead the Christian to believe prayer is a waste of time, or worse, it can cause us to lose faith in God and His promises to respond to our prayers. But God does promise to respond; the Scriptures clearly state this. So what happened?

Sometimes God seems not to respond to our prayers. The sad truth is, sometimes our prayers don’t go any higher than the ceiling. In this study, we will examine why prayer is not answered and the biblical reasons for it. Understanding those reasons can make your prayer life more effective.

Sometimes we pray for something, and the prayer is answered, but not in the way we expected. We wanted healing, but the person got sicker. We wanted a new house and ended up in one in another city, two states away. We asked for guidance in choosing a university and ended up in a trade school instead. This study will attempt to explain why that happens.

The concept of prayer seems like it ought to be simple, and in some respects it is, but some aspects of prayer have confused me, and I am sure they have confused you too. For example, we are told to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Well, how do you do that? Walk around with your head bowed, hands piously clasped, and praying continuously?

How do I make a living if I am praying like that all the time? That is another question we will attempt to answer.

In some passages on prayer, we are urged to have faith, and as a result of demonstrating faith, our prayers will be answered. The truth is, many of us have little or no faith that God will answer our prayers. We pray as if it were a wish, and we don't really believe the wish will be granted; we merely *hope* it will. That isn't praying with faith.

Do you pray for something repeatedly, or do you pray for it once and never mention it again? Some say that mentioning a prayer request more than once shows a lack of faith. They say we should ask once and then forget it.

Scripture tells us to pray in God's will. How do you do that? How are we supposed to know what God's will is? Some argue that claiming to know God's will is blasphemous and that we are arrogant to think we can know His will. Nevertheless, we are told to pray in His will. If it is a commandment, there must be a way to do it. God never demands something without providing the means to accomplish it.

And if God already knows everything, including what we will pray about, why bother praying? God knew what you would ask, and being sovereign, He will do what He wants to do anyway. So what is the point of praying?

It looks like we have our work cut out for us as we tackle this important study of the doctrine of prayer. I can't promise clear answers to every question that will satisfy everyone, but we can explore the subject and perhaps gain a better understanding of prayer, which might lead to further personal study. This will not be an exhaustive study, but I hope to address some questions you may have thought about yourself, as I have. And together, maybe we can gain a better understanding of how to properly use this powerful tool we have been given.

Define Prayer

As I thought about prayer, it seemed to me that it falls into two broad categories: formal prayer and everything else. Within those, there are subcategories such as praise, thanksgiving, petition, and supplication. In

this study, we will look at what I will call “core issues” surrounding prayer that generally apply to all types.

The tendency is to view prayer in a formal sense. We “ritualize” it into what, in business, we would call a “process.” As such, it has an objective, an almost ceremonial structure, with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. There is nothing wrong with a ritualized approach to prayer, *as long as it does not become a rote exercise in which we merely “recite” the same prayer over and over, losing its power and becoming meaningless.*

Formalized prayer can happen anytime, but we tend to set aside certain occasions or times for it, such as asking for our food to be blessed or offering a morning or evening prayer. If we are a bit more prayer-conscious, we will pray during a difficult situation or trial, or even before facing such difficult situations. On these occasions, most of us use this formalized approach to prayer. But we are called to approach prayer with much more frequency (1 Thessalonians 5:17: “Pray without ceasing”) than formalized prayer allows.

All of us have prayed the two-word prayer, “God, help!” It’s not very formalized, but it works – amen? This is an informal prayer, and it's what I meant by “everything else.” In my experience, we tend to put far more emphasis on formalized prayer than on the “everything else” kind of praying. When we do that, we severely limit our prayer life and the potential prayer holds for us. Before this study is over, I hope we will view the “everything else” kind of prayer as more important than the formalized version.

Prayer is an essential part of our spiritual walk. It is a required element of our relationship with our Creator. You cannot have any meaningful relationship with your earthly father without some form of dialogue. We converse with Him, and He replies. Our day-to-day relationship is based on this dialogue. Prayer is our side of the dialogue with our Heavenly Father. His side of the dialogue is grace, conviction, leading, providence, and enablement.

Just as we have conversations with our earthly fathers, we should have conversations with our Heavenly Father. That suggests that, in addition to formalized prayer, we should also have “conversations” with God moment

by moment, just as we might converse with our earthly father when we are together.

What do we mean by that? We are called to abide in Christ (John 15:1-8), that is, to be with Him and trust in Him at all times. That word “abide” implies a vital spiritual connection—a union. Does not this also suggest that *conversation or dialogue* with God is necessary for that union to function properly? Most of the time, this will take the form of “asking” for something—“Lord, get me through this,” “Lord, I need you now,” or “Lord, give me the strength to do this or to avoid this temptation.”

I believe God expects us not just to ask for victory once a day, but moment by moment, acknowledging that we depend on Him. It also reminds us of our human limitations and how much we need His enabling grace. Unlike Lucifer, we acknowledge that the creature needs the Creator. That is God-glorifying! It is a worshipful attitude! It is exactly the relationship God is calling us to have with Him.

Another term for this relationship is “a fully functioning spiritual life.” Here is my definition: A fully functioning spiritual life is when we, as a born-again believer, yield our will to God's will, depend on God’s grace rather than human effort, and maintain a dialogue with God. We manage our abiding in Christ through prayer and divine guidance and enablement. We are aware of our sinful nature and the risk it poses to our spiritual walk. We maintain that personal relationship with God through constant vigilance against temptation and sin, and we rebound immediately when we are carnal.

A fully functioning spiritual life is entirely dependent on God. A key statement in that definition is “manages our abiding in Christ through prayer and divine guidance and enablement.” There is no spiritual walk apart from divine enablement. I have come to see prayer as the catalyst for that—the glue that binds it together.

Take a look at a few verses concerning prayer:

> **Psalm 116:1** I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. ² Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

Isaiah 65:24 Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.

John 14:13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Psalm 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Matthew 7:7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

And I especially like this one…

Jeremiah 33:3 Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

God is prepared to deliver wisdom, and all the believer needs to do is ask. This doesn't make God a medium for fortune-telling; the wisdom is about Himself and you. In my experience, I sometimes get stumped on a passage or a word while studying and don't understand what it is trying to tell me. When that happens, I stop and pray, asking for illumination and understanding. Often, I take a break, get something to drink, or walk around, then come back to the problem. When I resume my study, the passage makes sense. Sometimes it feels like the proverbial light bulb

turning on. Other times I have to dig a little more, but the Lord leads me to another related passage or a commentary that helps me connect the dots. Based on this experience, I have become convinced that the Lord withholds information or blessing until we ask for it, *to train us* to depend on Him and His faithfulness in delivering.

Biblical scholar and commentator Adam Clarke puts it this way:

> "Prayer is the language of *dependence*; he who prays not, is endeavouring to live independently of God."

God wants you to ask, thereby demonstrating your dependence on Him. Most of the passages I cited above say exactly that. Prayer is part of maintaining that relationship of dependence.

Consider this for a moment: What was Satan's sin? **He declared his independence from God.**

What did Satan tempt Adam and the woman to do? **To act independently of God.**

We can classify this as arrogance.

- Arrogance is acting contrary to God's will for our lives.
- Humility is acting in accordance with God's will for our lives.
- Humility is not relying on self.
- Humility is dependence on God.

And how is salvation appropriated?
By depending on God.

How is the spiritual life appropriated?
By depending on God.

What is prayer all about?
Depending on God.

Are you beginning to see a pattern here? What is God teaching humanity and, in the same process, demonstrating to Satan? The creature cannot exist apart from the Creator. That is, when the creature places faith and

trust in the Creator—complete dependence—then the Creator will supply all needs. As Adam Clark put it, “Prayer is the language of dependence.”

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

This passage about prayer has always confused me. This little 3-word passage tells us something terribly important about prayer!

But what?

As Bible-believing Christians, we believe the Bible is to be taken literally. If so, what does this passage tell us? The word translated “without ceasing” is *adialeiptos,* meaning without stopping or intermission. Taken literally, this passage tells us to never stop praying. Now, go and read the commentaries on this passage, and you will find answers that relate to regular prayer in your prayer closet or to organizational prayer at meetings or meals. But is that “without ceasing”?

I don't see much “wiggle room” in the Greek. Nothing in it suggests this is intermittent or occasional. You can’t stretch that to “sometime” or even “most of the time.” It says “without ceasing,” which sounds to me like *all the time*.

How do we pray without ceasing? Do we walk around in some kind of prayerful mode 24/7? What would that look like? Like the Pharisees? But Jesus didn’t paint a very pretty picture of them and their outward displays of piety. Are we to become monks, withdrawn from society, with our lives devoted to continuous prayer? Nowhere else in Scripture is that implied.

Adam Clarke, in his commentary, came through with something that I think makes some sense:

> “Ye are *dependent* on God for every good; without him ye can do nothing; feel that dependence at all times, and ye will always be in the spirit of prayer; and those who feel this spirit will, as frequently as possible, be found in the exercise of prayer.”

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul tells us that prayer is not something we do only when we go to bed at night, when we get up in the morning, over meals, or even when we have a special need. *Prayer is all the time*!

Prayer is dependence on God and acknowledging that moment by moment. Prayer is the language of dependence.

> **John 15:1** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

The word translated "abide" is *meno*, a relationship word. In John 15, in the context of the branch and the vine, "abiding" means dependence on God. The branch depends on the vine for nourishment that produces fruit. Apart from the roots, the branches can do nothing, but when attached to and depending on the roots, the branches can produce fruit—in this context, divine fruit.

And lookie what verse 5 says:

> **John 15:5** I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

And verse 7 says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Abiding means being in fellowship with God, which, by application, means you are free of sin and live entirely dependent on God for fellowship and support—a branch depending on the roots to supply the nourishment needed to produce divine fruit. Galatians 5:16 calls this "walking in the Spirit." In such a state, the "walking" believer experiences the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and is free of sin.

If you have this abiding/walking relationship, what you ask (in prayer) will be done. This asking will have some qualifications, as we shall see, but it appears that abiding and prayer are closely related. Interestingly, we are called to *abide all the time*, that is, never be out of fellowship and in carnality. The natural and expected state for the believer is abiding—ceaselessly. *And that sounds a lot like "praying without ceasing."*

Yes, we know that is an ideal state, and believers do fall from grace sometimes, but that should be the exception, not the rule.

> **My conclusion is that praying without ceasing means abiding in Christ.**

Adam Clark again:

> "Ye are *dependent* on God for every good; without him ye can do nothing; **feel that dependence at all times, and ye will always be in the spirit of prayer**; and those who feel this spirit will, as frequently as possible, **be found in the exercise of prayer.**"

Adam Clark closely associates abiding and prayer but regards them as distinct. I see them as one and the same. The very act of abiding *is* prayer. It is the continuous declaration of one's faith in Christ. "Prayer is the language of dependence."

> **If we are called to continuously abide/walk, a condition of faith and dependence on the Vine, that is, in effect, praying continuously.**

What do we have so far?

We are called to pray more than once, twice, or even three times a day. *It is to be a continuous action*, an unbroken dialogue with God. Such ongoing faith and dependence on God is *praying without ceasing*. I believe this is what Paul was saying.

Faith, the Language of Prayer

Luke18:35 As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the
roadside begging. 36 And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what
this meant. 37 They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” 38 And
he cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” 39 And those
who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out
all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 40 And Jesus stopped
and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he
asked him, 41 “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let
me recover my sight.” 42 And Jesus said to him, “Recover your sight;
your faith has made you well.” 43 And immediately he recovered his sight
and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it,
gave praise to God.

Here we have an incident in the life of Jesus that reflects many such incidents during his ministry. Jesus and the disciples are on the way to Jerusalem when they come upon the city of Jericho, a little east of Jerusalem. A crowd described as a “multitude” is drawn to Him. A blind beggar is nearby, probably right alongside the road, and hears the commotion.

In verse 38, the blind man “cried out.” The NASB and NIV both translate it as “called out.” The word is *boao,* which means to shout for help in a loud voice, to implore for aid.

“Hearing the multitude pass by…” this blind man didn’t just call out for help; he screamed at the top of his voice, desperate to be heard over the crowd's noise.

In verse 36, he asked what the commotion was about and was told that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And what does he yell out? “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” “Son of David” is a term usually reserved for the Messiah. He knew exactly who he was yelling at.

Now, imagine for a moment this person’s circumstances—put yourself in his place. You are blind, probably since birth. You hear the clamor of voices, and it makes little sense because you can hear but not see. “Who is it?” you ask. “Jesus of Nazareth,” comes the disembodied reply. In one brief, exhilarating moment, you realize what that means! Imagine the flash of recognition shooting through you. You know he is the Messiah, and you know that He has the power to heal.

For a blind person in the first century, that meant a life of poverty and begging, a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence. What would you do? Sit by and hope Jesus notices you and your plight? You would probably do what the beggar did; you would yell out, desperate to be heard above the din of voices! “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

> **Luke18:39** And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

The NASB renders it, “And those who led the way were sternly telling him to be quiet…” The NASB translation suggests they were in Jesus’ entourage, perhaps even His disciples. They tell you, “Shut up! Be quiet!”

Given the noisy crowd, we must assume from this rebuke that the beggar was very loud and even annoying in his cry for help. Does this stop you? Does this shut you up? The Messiah is here, and He can heal you, so cry out even louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

> **Luke18:40** And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him,

The word translated “stood” means to stand still or stop. Jesus stops and turns to you. Remember, you cannot see Him, but the crowd's sound changes; perhaps it grows silent as they see that Jesus has heard you and is about to speak. Jesus orders that you be brought to Him. Unseen hands grab you and urge you forward. Since you are blind, this is difficult as you take stumbling steps, pulled by the unseen hands of others.

Then you hear His voice; it is beautiful, and you sense His compassion as He asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” What a powerful question!

In a desperate voice, you answer simply and to the point, “Lord, I want to see.”

> **Luke 18:43** And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

Jesus replies sternly, almost matter-of-factly, yet with the authority to do what he says, “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.”

"Well" is *sozo*, a Greek word for "save." It might be rendered more literally as "Your faith has *saved* you." However, I do not think Jesus meant the blind man's salvation when he said, "Your faith has made you well." That was accomplished sometime in the past, as acknowledged when the blind man called Jesus the "Son of David." He already knew who Jesus was and what He could do. No one had to tell him anything beyond that Jesus was passing by. The blind man's recognition of Jesus as the Son of David, who had the power to heal, clearly expressed his prior faith for salvation.

I believe Jesus was referring to *the blind man's faith that Jesus would answer his prayer uttered in faith*— "Lord, I want to see." The translation: "Your faith has made you *well*" supports that interpretation.

The blind man was probably born blind. Was there any hope of ever regaining his sight medically? No. What he asked for was, in this time and place, impossible. But that did not stop him from asking for his sight and from *believing* his request would be granted.

> ***Do you realize the statement,* "Lord, I want to see,"** ***is, in effect, a prayer founded on faith?***

Did he sit passively by and "hope" the Lord would have mercy on him? What did the blind man do when he was told to be quiet? He yelled louder and asked even more forcefully. Did he doubt that the Lord *could* heal him? Did he doubt that the Lord *would* heal him?

Regarding the impossible, Oswald Chambers puts it like this:

> "We think it is ridiculous to ask God to do this. If it is an impossibility, it is the very thing for which we have to ask. …And God will do what is absolutely impossible."

Faith is essential to a successful prayer life.