

Make Your Prayers Count!

*Could you be overlooking
some of the most basic principles regarding answered prayer?*

by Clayton D. Steep

A major blunder. That's exactly what Henry had just made. "I simply don't understand why God didn't give me wisdom to make the right decision," Henry sighed, shaking his head.

Actually, Henry had made a double mistake. Double, because if we were to inquire of him, "Did you specifically *ask* God for the wisdom you needed?", Henry's reply would be something like: "Er, well, no – not specifically. But," he would hastily add, "God knew I needed it. He knows all things."

True, God knows all things." He is fully aware of our needs. As Jesus stated, "Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8).

But does that, therefore, render prayer unnecessary?

Not at all! The Bible clearly points that one of the reasons we sometimes do not receive the blessings we could enjoy is simply that we do not ask God for them (James 4:2).

"Ask, and it will be given to you," Jesus declared (Matthew 7:7). To illustrate, He gave the example of a child asking his father for some food. "If you then, being evil," Jesus continued, "Know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things..."

How? With no conditions? Always automatically? As a matter only of due course? Just because He knows we need them? Whether or not we ask? No! Read it: "... to those who *ask* Him!" (verse 11).

Henry should have read James 1:5 more closely. This verse doesn't say that if you need wisdom, God will automatically supply it because you are a Christian and He knows you need it. Rather, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

God is filled with mercy and compassion. He knows what we need. He stands ready to give liberally. But He wants us to ask anyway.

Why? The fact that God tells us to is certainly good enough reason all by itself. But let's see if we can understand why God tells us to.

A vital factor

Prayer is not an isolated and optional religious exercise. It is a vital factor, significant in determining our eternal destiny!

The supreme purpose that God is working out here on earth is the expansion of His Kingdom – His Family. He wants to make out of human beings immortal members of His ruling Family.

These must be individuals who, by their own free choice, come to fully support God's way of doing things, who want to think as God thinks, perceive as God perceives, react as God reacts. They must want with all their hearts to be involved in whatever God is doing.

Such an attitude is essential in order to maintain, throughout eternity, harmony and peace in the God Family.

God has made us temporarily human. This existence is a testing ground so our Creator can try us and know what is in our hearts, whether or not He can trust us to live by His rules and laws (Deuteronomy 8:2). He must be sure. He is looking at us, closely examining our actions and reactions.

God takes note of what we say when we are talking to Him. Of course He knows our hearts and intents. And the Holy Spirit helps where we cannot adequately express ourselves (Romans 8:26-27). Still, as Jesus showed, the actual words we use are also important, and they ought to be meaningful, rather than vain repetitions (Matthew 6:7).

One of the obstacles to effective prayer is not often identified: It is the fact that we live in the age of devalued language. Words have never been so cheap, so frequently meaningless. All around us language is misused in advertising, politics, entertainment and casual conversation.

Because we have been disillusioned more than once by broken promises, exaggerations, shading of the truth, even outright lies, we have come to automatically doubt that words mean what their face value would indicate.

This is one reason some have difficulty believing God's promises. It also could be one of the reasons some prayers are not as effective as they should be.

Remember that God really didn't have to ask Adam and Eve the series of questions about what they had done (Genesis 3:9-13). He already knew the answer. He didn't have to ask Cain where Abel was (Genesis 4:9). He didn't have to come down to earth to verify how evil Sodom was (Genesis 18:20-21). He didn't have to allow Jacob to contend with him all night (Genesis 32:22-30). But he wanted to – and wants to – hear from humans themselves what they have to say, and see their reactions.

Prayer changes things

The great Creator God is working out His plan. He keeps it on course, intervening when necessary in human affairs to do so. But do you realize that He allows humans with whom He is dealing to determine many of the details of how His plan develops?

Twice, Moses directly influenced, by prayer, the course of history. Because of the rebellion of the children of Israel, God on two separate occasions proposed rejecting them all and bringing forth through Moses a new nation to inherit the promises made to Abraham (Exodus 32:9-14; Numbers 14:11-20). Had Moses not fervently prayed to God to change His mind, the implication is that God would have done exactly what He had proposed.

Either way would not have impeded the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan. But Moses' prayers did determine the course that fulfillment took.

Prayer does make a difference. It changes things.

“The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest,” Jesus urged (Luke 10:2). Whether or not or in what number laborers are sent out to do God's work must therefore depend at least partly on prayers or the lack of them.

Make no mistake about it: God will accomplish His work of preaching the message preparing the world for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – even if He has to cause the very rocks of the earth to cry the message out loud (Luke 19:40). Let us not take for granted the privilege we have of taking part in what God is doing! He doesn't need us. But He gives us the opportunity to participate. Are you participating?

Listen to the apostle Paul: “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Whether or not or to what degree God's work has peaceful conditions in which to function also depends therefore, at least in part, on how diligently we pray.

If we don't ask, there is no promise we shall receive.

Do you pray every day for the work of God and for the human instruments carrying it out? You should. Do you pray every day for God's blessings on others as well as on your own endeavors? You should. Do you pray every day for protection and help as you function and move about in this evil and dangerous world? You should.

“Be anxious for nothing,” Paul wrote, “but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known [even though God is already aware] to God”

(Philippians 4:6). This means bringing God into every – yes, every – facet of your daily existence.

Believe and obey

Jesus said, “And all things whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22). So in addition to simply asking, we must believe. There is a definite and close relationship between the degree of one’s sincerity and surrender to God and the degree to which one is able to believe and pray in faith.

If you are, for example, lusting for something when you know better, if your mind is entertaining thoughts you know you should not have, you automatically cannot at the same time be asking God in unswerving faith to grant you a request. It just doesn’t work that way.

Here’s how the apostle John expressed it: “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God” (1 John 3:21). And our hearts won’t condemn us if we are doing what is right. “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (verse 22).

What does it mean to be always in an attitude of prayer? It doesn’t mean you are talking to God every second. Even Jesus didn’t do that. But He was always in the right attitude – His conscience was undefiled before God – so He could talk directly to His heavenly Father on the spur of the moment. His thoughts were on those things that are above.

Being able to pray at any moment and total surrender to God go hand in hand. On one occasion when Jesus suddenly began to pray, He said: “Father, I thank You that You always hear Me” (John 11:41-42).

How did Jesus know that? Why did God always hear Him? For the simple reason that Jesus always did those things that pleased His Father (John 8:29).

Wanting to pray or be in an attitude of prayer in “all things” is actually a valuable incentive to be obedient in all things.

Prayers of intercession

Our prayer life not only reveals to God how deeply we want Him to be involved in our lives and how deeply we want to be involved in what He is doing, but prayer also shows how interested we are in other people.

In all members of God’s Family, God wants to see a spontaneous and universal expression of outgoing concern for the welfare of others. That’s the only way to guarantee peace and harmony. It is the way of giving. Love for one’s neighbor is the very essence of God’s law (Leviticus 19:18).

One of the greatest gifts you can give to others, when you are close to God, is to pray for them. God loves it when people pray for each other. Certainly God will hear the prayers of an individual praying for his own needs. But the Bible leaves no doubt that God particularly enjoys hearing and answering the prayers of one person for the needs of another.

The apostle Paul wouldn't have petitioned the saints to "pray for us" (Hebrews 13:18) if it didn't make any difference whether they did.

If you want a specific request from God, have you ever thought to pray that the identical request be granted to someone else who needs it? In so doing, you get your mind off yourself and on the welfare of others. This is well pleasing to God.

In Jesus' sample prayer outline (commonly, though mistakenly, called the "Lord's Prayer") the words, *I, me* or *my* do not appear once (Matthew 6:9-13). All the way through, the words used are *we, us, and our*, demonstrating an unselfish concern.

God wants to hear prayers of intercession (Isaiah 59:15-16). It was through the prayers of Abraham that Abimelech was forgiven (Genesis 20:17-18). Job's friends were forgiven through Job's prayers (Job 42:7-10). John wrote about praying for one another to be forgiven (1 John 5:16). The Bible records numerous instances of people praying for one another.

For whom have you interceded recently?

In Jesus' early childhood, there was an elderly woman named Anna, "who did not depart from the temple, but served God [the word *God* is in italics to show it was added by translators] with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37).

You can be sure that most of that prayer and fasting was not to seek Anna's own needs and desires. There were probably many people in the area who, over the years, went to Anna when they had a problem, because God heard and answered her prayers and everyone knew it.

King Solomon recorded a vital principle in life that reflects on this subject: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

You who are sick and afflicted, is someone praying *with* you for healing? The instruction from James is to "pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). It makes a difference!

Don't lose heart

One of Jesus' parables was given to show us we ought to be persistent in prayer, that we "always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1-8).

Have you ever “lost heart” because you, along with others have been asked to pray for someone, for example, who is terminally ill, and the person dies anyway? Have you immediately assumed something was wrong with your prayers, with your exercise of faith?

Maybe there was. On the other hand, that may not always be so. Maybe your prayers were what they should be. Maybe you did not waver in faith. But maybe enough others did not pray effectively. Did you ever think of that?

In any case, do not lose heart. Keep at it. Try again.

Being able to pray effectively does not come overnight. It has to be worked at. But it is eternally worth the effort, for through prayer you get to know God. And, just as importantly, He gets to know you.