

How God Answers Prayer

“I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

***—I Timothy 2:8,
New King James
Version***

HOW CAN WE BE SURE

that God will answer our prayers? It is not enough that we affirm our belief in prayer. Thousands of parents, for example, have believed in prayer and have asked God to protect their children on the battlefield, only to receive a message that they had been killed or severely injured. Nor does affirming our belief in prayer explain why, when a whole nation prays for peace, it often finds itself caught in a whirlpool of war.

On the other hand, there are thousands who are eager to testify that God has answered their prayers for the safety of their children. Others will testify of the wonderful manner in which God has given them special blessings they asked for in prayer. On the basis of experience alone, therefore, it may seem that God answers the prayers of some, yet does not answer the prayers of others.

This is not, however, in keeping with what the Scriptures tell us about God. The Bible says that he “shows no partiality.” (Acts 10:34, *NKJV*) Thus there must be some good reason why God answers some prayers, and not others. If we can find that reason, it should help restore the faith of some whose prayers have seemingly gone unanswered.

Prayer is a very important phase of Christian experience. It is also practiced widely by the adherents of many other religions. The desire to pray is an acknowledgment of our dependency upon a higher power and the expression of a realization that we need help from some source outside of and wiser than ourselves. Doubtless God is pleased with the sincere desire of all who try to contact him in prayer, because to this extent at least, it is a recognition of a higher sovereign power.

The almost universal urge to pray is due to the fact that the original man, Adam, was created in the image of God. (Gen. 1:27) As a result of man's fall into sin and death, the divine image in his character has been much blurred, and in many cases almost erased. Yet remnants of it still remain, and one of its manifestations is the urge to pray. There may also be millions who never pray, yet often feel that they should, and have a sense of guilt because they do not.

God is pleased with the spirit of prayer on the part of his creatures. Why, however, does he hear the prayers of some, while apparently other prayers go unheeded? Jesus hints at the answer to this question in his observations about the prayers of many in his day. They prayed to be seen and heard of men, Jesus explained, and thought God would

hear them for their “much speaking.” (Matt. 6:5-7) By this we are reminded that there are proper and improper attitudes of prayer, as well as correct and incorrect methods. Many who enter into prayer may be sincere, but their method is inappropriate.

The Scriptures indicate that there are proper and improper things for which to pray. The Apostle James wrote: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss.” (James 4:3) It is vitally important to ascertain what we have the privilege of asking God to give us in the way of favors. We cannot expect to ask God for things which merely our fancy dictates, and have our prayers answered.

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

There is a divine purpose in prayer, and it is highly important that we keep this in mind if we are to understand why some prayers go unanswered. God did not design prayer as a means of finding out how he should manage his affairs here on the earth. He is not looking to us to tell him what he should do. He has his own fixed plans and purposes, and if we are to receive the riches of his blessing, it is essential that our prayers be in harmony with these. To use the language of James, we ask “amiss” if we petition God in such a way that we are making known to him our own desires in the absence of seeking his will to be done in our life.

In the Scriptures various types of prayer are brought to our attention. Foremost among these are prayers of thanksgiving. (Ps. 92:1) God is undoubtedly pleased when his creatures recognize him as the source of their blessings, and because of this lift up their hearts and voices to him in thanksgiving.

There are prayers of adoration, which give recognition to the glorious attributes of the Creator's character—his wisdom, his justice, his love, and his power. The desire to glorify God and show our adoration for his character should be the motive for much of our praying.—Ps. 29:1,2

Prayers for God's mercy are also appropriate. The Scriptures urge all Christians to seek divine forgiveness of their sins through the medium of prayer. (I John 1:7-9) Paul speaks of this as going "boldly unto the throne of grace," there to obtain mercy and find grace to help in every time of need.—Heb. 4:16

Then, of course, there are the prayers which are requests for certain blessings or favors from the Lord. It is with these that we are particularly concerned at the moment. Some pray for health, either for themselves or for others. Some pray for wealth. Some pray for protection while on a journey. Millions pray for peace. It has often happened that citizens of countries which are opposing each other in war pray that their respective armies will be victorious. We will assume that all who go to God in prayer are sincere, and of course they ask him for the things which to them seem the most important at the time. However, does the Bible justify us in the belief that all these prayers should be answered in accordance with the requests uttered?

It might be that God would answer a parent's prayer for the safety of their child on the field of battle. It might be, too, that prayers for the peace of a nation are answered. If and when such prayers are answered, it simply means that it was in keeping with the divine will to do so. God has a fixed

plan, in keeping with which he is mindful of the human race. That plan was not made to satisfy the whims and wishes of his human creatures, nor will any amount of praying change his plans.

“Prayer changes things,” it is said, but it does not change God’s plans. God is not looking to us, nor to the nations, to learn what changes he should make in order to bring about better conditions for us or for the world in general. How little confidence we would have in a god whose opinions could be swayed or plans changed simply by the eloquence or persuasion of people’s prayers!

“THY WILL BE DONE”

In their prayers, God’s people should have uppermost in mind and heart the desire that his will be done in all their experiences. We have an outstanding example of this in the case of Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the Master was facing arrest and death, “Anguish and dismay came over him, and he said to them [his disciples], My heart is ready to break with grief. ... He went on a little, fell on his face in prayer, and said, My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet, not as I will, but as thou wilt.”—Matt. 26:38,39, *New English Bible*

It was God’s will that Jesus suffered humiliation and death as the Redeemer and Savior of men. This important feature of the divine arrangement had been foretold by the holy prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus wanted above everything else to have his Father’s will accomplished, regardless of what it meant to him. He affirmed this later, when he was about to be arrested. Peter drew his sword to protect his Master, who said to him, “Put up thy

sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"—John 18:10,11

The followers of Jesus have the privilege of suffering and dying with him. Paul spoke of being "crucified with Christ," and he also wrote, "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:29) We are called upon to follow in Jesus' footsteps, so we know that it is not God's will to spare us from all hardship. Thus, as with Jesus, our chief concern should be that the Lord's will might be done in our mortal bodies. The Lord's will might be that for a time we enjoy certain earthly blessings. However, the burden of our prayers should not be for these, but for his will to be done in every experience of life.

Jesus enlarged upon this point when he said to his disciples that as long as they were abiding in him and his words were abiding in them, they could ask in prayer for whatever they desired, and it would be granted unto them. (John 15:7) This might seem like an assurance that we are privileged to ask God for anything which we may happen to think of and want, but not so.

Note the condition attached to this statement by the Master: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you." To abide in Christ means to be a member of his body, he being our Head. (Col. 1:18) This means that his thoughts become our thoughts, and his plans our plans. If our wills have thus been wholly surrendered to God, through Christ, we will have no will of our own, hence our prayers will not be requests for what we want, but only for those things which are in harmony with the will of our

Head. By thus praying in harmony with the Lord's will, we can be assured of favorable answers.

This is in harmony with another statement made by Jesus to his disciples in which he informs us that the Heavenly Father will be pleased to give the "Holy Spirit to them that ask him." (Luke 11:13) To be filled with the Spirit of God means to have his thoughts dominate our thinking, and for our lives to be conformed to those thoughts. Then we will not be asking God for blessings except those which he has promised to give, and so there will never be any question about our prayers being answered.

"THY KINGDOM COME"

Luke 11:1 records the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray." In response to this, Jesus gave them what is now familiarly known as "The Lord's Prayer." In this model prayer we are given a guide to what we may pray for.

An important part of this brief outline of prayer is the proper method of approach to God: "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." (vs. 2) In the Scriptures, Adam is styled a "son of God." (Luke 3:23,38) When he sinned, however, he lost his sonship, being alienated from God and sentenced to death. Adam's children, the entire human race, are likewise separated from God, so they cannot properly address him as "our Father which art in heaven." This is a privilege which belongs exclusively to those who have repented of their sins, accepted Jesus as their personal Savior, and devoted their lives to God in full dedication, or consecration, to do his will. Such are represented as having received God's Spirit

of sonship, and thus have become his children.—Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6

As the children of God, these will desire above all else to honor the name of their Father. Thus by word and by action their attitude will always be, “Hallowed be thy name.” To properly hallow our Heavenly Father’s name implies that when we approach him in prayer we will do so in the manner outlined for us in the Scriptures by Jesus. He explained that our prayers should be offered in his name.—John 15:16

There is a reason for this. As members of the justly condemned race, we have no standing at the divine throne except through Jesus, our Advocate. (I John 2:1) In his name, and through the merit of his shed blood, we are privileged to go “boldly” to the throne of grace to seek forgiveness and all the other blessings which our loving Heavenly Father has promised to give. (Heb. 4:16) If we properly hallow his name we will never presume to approach him except through Jesus.

When we follow the example of The Lord’s Prayer, our requests will not be so much on our own behalf as they will be for the blessing of others. This is indicated in the opening petition: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2) The answer to this request will be an answer to much for which people have prayed throughout the centuries. That answer will satisfy the legitimate desires of all people. It will mean peace, health, and everlasting life for all who conform themselves to the righteous laws of the Lord’s kingdom.

The blessings which the human race craves, and for which millions pray, were all anticipated by God

and provided for through the kingdom that he has promised by all his prophets. In these promises we find many details of the blessings that it will guarantee to the people, including the restoration to life of those who have died. God has not been unmindful of the suffering of the people, nor has he turned a deaf ear to their cries for help. His answer to their prayers, when in his due time it comes, will be far beyond anything that they have ever dared to hope.

Take the case of parents who pray for the safety of their child on the battlefield. The parents love their child, and nothing could mean more to them than their safe return to the family home. Yet if the child does not return, and their first thought might be that God does not care, that he has no pity. How differently the parents would feel if they could believe that God has provided a homecoming far more satisfactory than ever entered their mind when they prayed!

How little does a parent sometimes know of the hardship and suffering their child may be saved by falling asleep in death. After all, both the parent and child are members of a dying race, and the difference between dying on the battlefield and dying later of old age is only a momentary one when compared with the endless stretch of eternity. It is from this standpoint that we must learn to view the subject of prayer and the manner in which God answers our petitions.

The very fact that we pray to God is acknowledgment of our belief that his wisdom and power and love far exceed our own. Yet we often forget this, and feel that he has not honored our prayers because he has not answered them as we would have, through

the exercise of our own minimal abilities. The length of our condemned life is very short. We judge accomplishments by whether or not they reach maturity within this short time of which we have knowledge. However, we should not judge God's works from this standpoint.

The Scriptures speak of God as being "from everlasting to everlasting." (Ps. 41:13; 90:2) He is under no necessity to complete any particular phase of his plan within our short lifetime, not even if it has to do with our individual requests. If we prayed to God today for some special blessings which would be in keeping with his will, and the answer did not come until tomorrow, or even the day after tomorrow, we would not lose faith in him, but would rejoice when the answer did come. God has his "tomorrows" also. His days are not measured by hours, for they are ages, and in his "tomorrow" age, the thousand-year period of Christ's kingdom, all those blessings which the world has legitimately craved, and for which millions have voiced requests to God, will be abundantly showered upon humanity. In recognition of this, the people will then respond: "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."—Isa. 25:9

"AS IT IS IN HEAVEN"

We have already learned that God will not answer any prayer that is not in harmony with his will. In The Lord's Prayer, this principle is clearly set forth. It asks God for blessings upon the people of earth—not any sort of supposedly good things which they may crave, but things in harmony with

the divine will: "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."—Matt. 6:10

What great latitude he has given us about things in harmony with his will. God's will is done in heaven, and it is his purpose it shall be done in earth to the same degree. We do not know, of course, all the ways God's will is done in heaven, but we can be reasonably sure that the evils which now exist on earth do not plague the lives of those in the spirit realm we call heaven.

War is one of the great evils that is not in harmony with the divine will. We, then, should pray for peace. (Ps. 122:6; Nah. 1:15) Indeed, we could not pray for God's will to be done in the earth as it is in heaven without praying for peace. Our prayers for peace should be in keeping with God's plan to establish peace, and that is his kingdom plan. (Ezek. 37:21-28) He has promised to set up a kingdom, to establish a government. Jesus will be the King in that government. "The government shall be upon his shoulder," wrote Isaiah, and "of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end."—Isa. 9:6,7

Doubtless God looks with sympathy upon the yearnings of mankind to abolish war. When international tension is at a high pitch and war seems inevitable, devout people on both sides feel compelled to pray for peace. The differences which threaten to precipitate war may be resolved or they may not be, but we know that ultimately there shall be universal and lasting peace. It will not be because the nations will at last find a workable formula for peace, but because "The Prince of Peace" will take over the rulership of earth.

(Isa. 9:6) Then the prayer “Thy kingdom come,” will be answered.

Christ’s government is symbolized in the Scriptures as the “mountain of the LORD.” In Micah 4:1-4 we read that the time will come when the people will say, “Let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the Law shall go forth of Zion, and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it.”

What a wonderful program for disarmament! It is God’s program, and when we pray for peace, and for the nations to disarm, let us do so with the assurance that God will hear, and that he will answer our prayers in harmony with his will, which will be through his kingdom. “He maketh wars to cease,” prophesied David.—Ps. 46:9

Part 2 in our consideration of this important subject will appear in next month’s issue of *The Dawn* magazine. In it, we will examine other portions of The Lord’s Prayer in detail. We will also look into further aspects of God’s coming kingdom on earth which, according to the Scriptures, will bless all people and provide answers to millions of heart-felt prayers which have been uttered down through the centuries. ■