

Petitionary Prayer for the Church

What Prayer Is

Prayer is a miracle. I cannot explain it. It is a miracle of grace. God gives us the grace to pray. He does not give it to anyone except to those whom he wants to be in his presence with him. And those whom he wants are those who belong to Christ, God's own Son, for God wants Christ to be in his presence.

Prayer is a miracle because simply by talking to God we are carried on the wings of prayer into the place where God lives, high above all the universe and high above heaven itself. We are really in God's presence even though we cannot see him. Did you ever notice that when parents are teaching their children to pray, that these children know that they are praying to God, but they never ask where he is. It does not bother them that they talk with someone they cannot see.

God hears our prayers. He hears everyone one of them. Sometimes it seems to us as if he does not hear. Perhaps we are too wicked; perhaps God cannot be bothered with our silly needs when he has to run the whole universe and the things that happen in heaven. The psalmists all complain that God does not seem to hear them. They ask him if he is on a journey and is too far away to hear their prayers. They even tell God sometimes to wake up, for they have urgent matters to tell him. They even say of God that he puts his hands over his ears so that he cannot hear them.

But he always hears our prayers: Always!

When we are too much concerned with ourselves and do not think very much of anything else but what we want, God hears. Often though, he does not answer in a way we know he hears, just as parents who get weary of the whining of their children and ignore them.

But the miracle is that every prayer we make goes to God through Christ, our exalted Lord. Christ takes every prayer we make and carries it to God for us. It is good that he does this, for he makes our sometimes silly and sometimes even wicked prayers perfect. And he tells God how to answer us.

Prayer is a miracle because it is not time-bound. How shall I explain this? Let me tell you of my own experience. Sometimes I pray for God's blessing on an event in the Philippines. By

the time I pray, the event has already happened, measured by our clocks and different time zones. But God hears the prayer and answers it, for he is not bound by time. He does not say, “Sorry, you are too late.”

The Contents of Our Prayers

We must be careful when we pray. We would be careful if we went into the Oval Office to see the president. We would probably be more careful yet what we say (and ask for) if we were given an audience with the Queen of England in Buckingham Palace.

Our prayers must always be a response to what God says to us. We don’t speak first; God speaks first. But you wonder how? He speaks to us by his word. Our prayers are therefore, governed by his word. God tells us the things we may say to him; but he also tells us what we may not say to him. We had better be very careful what we say. If prayer is the breathing of the Christian, then he gets his breath from the Bible. God’s speech to us in his word creates our speech to him.

Although there are many things that concern our own life that we must ask for and do ask for, God is not pleased when we are so intent on getting from him what we want (especially the things we want in this world). Often we badger him again and again. He becomes impatient with our whining. Jesus warns us against repetitions. We must remember that God knows what we need even before we ask, and he will provide us with what we **need**.

Our prayers must always—let me say it again—**must always** be for the welfare of the church and our fellow saints. And if that means that we ask things for ourselves, it is only because we individually want to benefit the church in some way. Often we can be selfish. We can be so selfish that all that we care about is what happens to us. God intensely despises that sort of thing. And it is no wonder that when we pray selfishly, it seems as if he is too far away to hear us.

We have many needs, and we must seek them from God. But our reason for wanting them is so that we can serve the Lord better as members of his church. When someone is grievously ill and asks God for contentment, that person is eager to be obedient to God’s will. When a busy mother asks for wisdom and patience in the pressing duties of caring for children, she does so that she may bring up her children to be faithful to God’s covenant.

The Importance of Prayer

Some people can be very lax in prayer. It is not only that they do not have any desire to pray or are too busy with earning and spending money to pray, but some really do not think it necessary to pray, because, so they say, God will do what he has in eternity decided to do whether we pray or not. That is surely true. God does what he has planned to do. We want it that way too. We know that left on our own we would soon suffer shipwreck. But we are not released by this truth from praying. It is rather the case that it increases the need and desire for prayer. Does that sound contradictory? Well, it isn't. God sets us straight. Read James 5:16–19. The last part of verse 16 is what I am interested in: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." The Greek here is even stronger: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man has power." The Lord says this about a righteous man. He is one who knows he is righteous in Christ and is thankful for such a superb gift as righteousness, in which he is made known to be innocent of all sin in God's judgment.

Elijah's prayers, first for terrible drought and then for rain, were for the good of apostate Israel under Ahab, not for himself! The prayer of Elijah brought about drought and then rain after 3 ½ years. Elijah's prayer was effectual. Remember how God did not even answer his prayer until Elijah prayed seven times. Elijah's prayer had tremendous power. When we pray for the church, our prayers have tremendous power with God! God does all he has decided in his counsel to do, and it is in fact brought about by the prayers of God's people.

What to Pray For

The most important request we can make to God is that he keep his church faithful to the truth of scripture and our confessions. If our (your) church is unfaithful, there is not a lot of sense in praying for anything at all. Thus when we pray for the church we pray for faithful ministers who know, love, and preach the truth, for faithful elders and deacons who are watchmen on the walls of Zion (Ezek. 33), for all the saints to know the truth, love the truth, study the truth, and live the truth, and for a godly life among the children of the covenant, among the young people, and among everyone in the church. An ungodly life of one who professes to be a Christian does more harm to the church than we can measure with any spiritual yardstick.

When we pray for the church we pray for our fellow saints in all their sorrows and afflictions. Remember that all God's saints go to heaven, or—dreadful thought—none of us does. We pray for the mission work of the church, which today is in Pittsburgh and the Philippines. We pray for the seminary, for what can a church do without ministers? We pray for faithful covenant instruction of the children of the covenant. We pray for God's church everywhere in the world, especially the churches we know, found in Northern Ireland, Singapore, Myanmar, the Philippines, and in Australia. It was Dr. Abraham Kuyper who, although he was speaking of prayers in church, said that no prayer ought to be prayed to God without a prayer for Christ's universal church. I add that whenever and wherever you pray you have a responsibility to pray for Christ's universal church.

When young men and women pray for the church, they pray that if God will be pleased to use them in the church in a special way, that they may consider it a privilege. "He who desires the office of a bishop [elder or minister] desires a good thing (1 Tim. 3:1). They pray for a godly mate: if a man, for a mother in Israel; if a woman, for a father who rules his home in Christ's name. They pray that their lives may center in and rotate around the church so that they eagerly snatch at any way they can be of service. They pray that they may prepare themselves by faithful attendance in church, catechism and Bible study, and by regular personal devotions, to live godly lives.

There is so much to pray for that we need to separate a time in the day for our prayers, keeping in the front of our minds what we must pray for. A strong Christian is a praying Christian. A strong church is a praying church.