

PRAYER

G. Michael Cocoris

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WHERE TO START

Suppose you were chosen to sit next to the Queen of England at a formal banquet. What would you talk to her about? Most people would be at a loss. Even if you managed to come up with a list of things you might talk about, the next question would be, “Where do I start?”

That is the way some people feel about prayer. There are things they would like to discuss with God, but they are not sure where to start. That is particularly true of people who have never prayed in front of others. As a believer, you should pray with your family and with other believers. Some don't, because they do not know how. They do not know where to start.

In order to answer the question concerning where to start, the possibilities need to be discussed. The Bible is full of prayers and references to prayer. A study of these references indicates that there are different kinds of prayer. With which one should you start?

Kinds of Prayer

Praise The Bible repeatedly tells us to “praise the Lord.” For example, Psalm 150 says, “Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament! Praise Him for His mighty acts; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness!” (Ps. 150:1-2).

It is often suggested that the difference between praise and thanksgiving is that praise focuses on who God is, while thanksgiving is thanking God for what He has done. That distinction is not made in the Scripture. We are to *praise* God for His *acts* and His *greatness* (Ps. 150:2, 106:1). Perhaps praise includes thanksgiving. “Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!” (Ps. 107:8).

At any rate, the Bible says things like, “I will worship toward Your holy temple, and praise Your name for Your loving-kindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word above all Your name” (Ps. 138:2) and “Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant” (Ps. 135:3). We are to praise the Lord.

Praise acknowledges the character and conduct of the one being praised. Patricia, my wife, passed a fellow she knew sitting on a bus bench. She drove around the block, picked him up, and took him to work. As we were talking at breakfast, she told me about it and I said, “That’s you. You are that kind of a person.” Prayer is like that. It is talking to the Lord. In doing that, praise just naturally comes forth because of who He is. Recently I praised Him when I saw a full moon.

Thanksgiving We should not only praise God, we should also thank Him for what He has done for us: “Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!” (Ps. 107:8).

Thank God for your salvation. “Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.’ And He said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.’ In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, ‘I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight’” (Lk. 10:17-21).

Thank God for your food. Speaking of food, the Apostle Paul said it was created “to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:3). He adds, “For every creature of God *is* good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

Confession Biblical prayers often contain confession, which is nothing more than acknowledging sin. The Apostle John writes, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). Prayer, especially private prayer, should contain confession, at least periodically.

Request Part of prayer is a request. In the New Testament, several of the Greek words translated “prayer” mean “to ask, to request, to wish,” even “to beg.” The Greek word rendered “supplication” underscores a need. Paul urges us, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

Request God’s help. Addressing believers as “obedient children” (1 Pet. 1:14), Peter exhorts them to be holy (1 Pet. 1:15) and quotes the Scripture that says believers are to be holy (1 Pet. 1:16). In the next breath, he speaks of calling on the Lord (1 Pet. 1:17). The Greek word translated “calling” means “to invoke, appeal to” and was used of calling for aid. This is a reference to calling on God for help and in the context of 1 Peter 1, the help at least includes help in being holy.

Intercession Intercession is praying or pleading on behalf of another. The word “intercession” does not occur very often in the Bible, but the idea does. Jesus (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25) and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:27) intercede for believers and believers ought to intercede for one another (Jas. 5:16) as well as for unbelievers (Rom. 10:1).

Abraham illustrates intercession. He prayed, “‘Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city. Would you also destroy the place and not spare it for fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing as this to slay the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from you! Should not the judge of all the earth do right?’” So the LORD said, ‘If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sake’” (Gen. 18:23-26). Abraham was concerned for the safety of the righteous, which he assumed included Lot. Abraham recognizes that God is the judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25) and, therefore, has the right to judge. He also knows God is righteous (Gen. 18:19) and, therefore, argues that it would not be right to destroy the righteous with the wicked (Gen. 18: 23). He is sure God would not do something as unrighteous as that. So, he asks if God would spare Sodom if there were fifty righteous people in it. God agrees to do that (Gen. 18:26).

“Then Abraham answered and said, ‘Indeed, now I, who am but dust and ashes, have taken it upon myself to speak to the LORD. Suppose there were five less than fifty righteous. Would you destroy all the city for the lack of five? So He said, ‘If I find there are forty-five I will not destroy it.’ He spoke to Him yet again and said, ‘Suppose there should be forty found there?’ So He said, ‘I will not do it for the sake of forty.’ Then he

said, 'Let not the LORD be angry and I will speak. Suppose thirty should be found there?' So He said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.' And he said, 'Indeed I have taken it upon myself to speak to the LORD. Suppose twenty should be found there?' So He said, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty.' Then he said, 'Let not the LORD be angry, I will speak but once more. Suppose ten should be found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.' So the LORD went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place" (Gen. 18:27-33).

Having established the principle that the Lord would not destroy the wicked city of Sodom, if fifty righteous people were in it, Abraham negotiates the number. He speaks with a humble attitude, saying he is but "dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27); "I have taken it upon myself to speak" (Gen. 18:27, 31); "Let not the Lord be angry" (Gen. 18:30, 32); and "I will speak but once more" (Gen. 18:32). The intercessor must always remember who God is and who he is. God is the sovereign judge of the earth (Gen. 18:25) and we are but dust and ashes (Gen. 18:27).

At the same time, Abraham was persistent, not presumptuous. He repeatedly asked God to reduce the number from 50 to 45 to 40 to 30 to 20 to 10. One commentator says, "It would be easy to say that this prayer comes near to haggling, but the right word is 'exploring'" (Kidner). Perhaps the word that best describes what Abraham did is "persistence."

Abraham stopped at ten, knowing the judge of all the earth would do right (Gen. 18:25). The Lord would have done it for only one righteous person (Jer. 5:1)!

Jesus Himself taught us how to pray. He said, "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen" (Mt. 6:9-13). Notice, this model of prayer Jesus gave us contains *praise* (Hallowed be Your name.), *petition* (Give us this day our daily bread. lead us into not temptation, but deliver us from the evil one) and *confession* (forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors). It could be argued that it also has *intercession* (Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven).

Thus the kinds of prayer include praise, thanksgiving, confession, request, and intercession. The question is, "With which kind do you start?"

The Place to Start

The Bible does not specify where to start. May I suggest, however, that there two different answers to that question, depending on the situation.

Privately The first situation involves praying privately.

If you are in sin, the place to start is confession. The prodigal son is an example. "When he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned

against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Lk. 15:17-21).

If you are in a dangerous situation, the place to start is with a request. Even people who are not religious pray when they get into a situation that is beyond their ability. Foxholes produce prayer warriors!

Publicly The second situation involves praying publicly. I am convinced that many believers do not pray in front of others because they don't know where to start and what to do after they start. Here is a simple suggestion.

1. Address God. Pick out an address, such as Father, Lord, almighty God. You don't have to use the same title every time. I have a number of different ways I address my wife and I do not use the same one all the time.

2. Praise God. Prayer should begin with praise and thanksgiving. The Apostle Paul wrote 13 letters. Eleven of them begin with a prayer (Rom. 1:8-12; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; Eph. 1:3-23; Phil. 13-11; Col. 1:3-14; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:10; 1 Tim. 1:12-17; 2 Tim. 1:3-5; Phlm. 4-7.). Without exception, when Paul began an epistle with a prayer, he started the prayer with either praise or thanksgiving. Prayer, especially public prayer, should begin with praise or thanksgiving.

3. Then, ask God for whatever.

Summary: How you begin a prayer depends on where you are, but as a general rule if you are praying before others, start with thanksgiving.

We should constantly be thanking God for His blessings. We certainly have enough for which to be thankful. In February of 1997, Bill Gates, CEO of Microsoft and the richest man in America, spoke to 1,500 people in Seattle at the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. After his speech, Dr. John Cantwell Kiley, a medical doctor with a Ph.D. in philosophy, stood up and asked Bill Gates: If he were blind, would he trade all his billions to have his sight restored? Gates' reply was, "Yes." He said he would trade all his money for his sight. If we have nothing else, we have life and, at least, a measure of health—our sight, hearing, mobility, hands, and fingers. We have much to be grateful for, for we have priceless gifts from God.

We should constantly be thanking God for His blessings—even when things are not going well. Paul says, "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:18). One of the great reminders of that is the origin of the tradition of thanksgiving. Besides symbolizing a time when many of us gather to feast on turkey, cranberry sauce, and apple pie—we are reminded of a group of Pilgrims who were struggling during the fall of 1621.

Peter Marshall and David Manuel's account, *The Light and the Glory*, tells how the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock endured extreme hardship. Three long months at sea aboard the *Mayflower* and a brutal winter left them ragged, malnourished, and susceptible to disease. During the first four months of that year, nearly half of the émigrés had succumbed to illness and died.

The Pilgrims' daily existence was a life-or-death battle to overcome constant hunger, sickness, and exposure to the elements. Crudely assembled houses made of mud daub were their only shelter from the icy New England weather. Because they were not yet knowledgeable about their new environment's agriculture, planting gardens in the hostile conditions proved virtually fruitless. Every meal was portioned out meticulously. The death

toll, a constant reminder of their fragility, rose steadily. At one point, only five men were well enough to care for the sick.

Despite their tribulations, the Pilgrims thanked the Lord every day. One morning, during an ordinary Sunday worship service, The Lord sent tangible evidence that He had heard their prayers. Their church service was interrupted by an unexpected guest, an Algonquin Indian chief who assessed their hopeless situation and returned with a helper named Squanto. The Pilgrims, who had warred with Indians before and lived with a continuous fear of being attacked by them, were astonished by their new friends' eagerness to provide much-needed assistance.

Squanto, a Patuxet Indian who spoke perfect English, taught the Pilgrims how to hunt game, trap beavers, and plant Indian corn, a staple that would eventually save their lives.

When the harvest yielded more than the Pilgrims could eat, Governor William Bradford, their elected leader, declared a day of public thanksgiving. He invited the chief of a friendly neighboring Indian tribe to join in their tribute of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims were excited to celebrate with their honored guest but were completely shocked when he arrived with 90 other Indians.

Although God had provided abundantly, their food supply would not accommodate a group of this size, and they had no idea how to feed them. To their amazement, the Indians had bought with them five dressed deer and 12 fat wild turkeys. Over time they taught the women how to make pudding, maple syrup, and an Indian delicacy—roasted popcorn.

The Pilgrims' trials were far from finished; their plentiful autumn was followed by a particularly treacherous winter. Unfortunately, the weather proved to be the least of their problems. In November, a ship called the *Fortune* dropped anchor in their harbor. Aboard the ship were 35 more colonists who had brought with them no provisions—no food, no extra clothing, no equipment for survival. Additionally, the oppression of the physical environment had become almost unbearable after a 12-week drought dried up their crops and withered their spirits. The newcomers' arrival had drained already inadequate food rations and there was no obvious resource for sustenance. At their lowest point, the Pilgrims were reduced to a daily ration of five kernels of corn apiece. In utter desperation, they fell to their knees and prayed for 8 hours without ceasing.

Again God heard their supplications. Fourteen days of rain followed. A second Day of Thanksgiving was declared. The neighboring Indian chief was again their honored guest; this time He brought with him 120 braves. The Pilgrims feasted on game and turkey as they had during the previous celebration, only this time one dish was different. The first course, served on an empty plate in front of each person, consisted of five kernels of corn, a gentle reminder of God's faithful provision for them.

The Pilgrims thanked God even when things were not going well. We should follow their example. God commands us to live a life of gratitude and thanksgiving: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

WHEN DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

Once after I had spoken on prayer, a man said to me, “I have two questions about prayer: 1) Why does God answer prayer? 2) When does God answer prayer?”

The question, “Why does God answer prayer?” comes from the fact that the Bible teaches that God is Sovereign. He has a will that is going to come to pass. Well, if it is going to happen, why pray? Or to say the same thing another way, if prayer affects what happens, was God’s will not established in the first place? The answer to the question of why God answers prayer is that God has ordained the means as well as the ends. When I was in college, a professor said that one of his teachers once told him, “A Sovereign God answers prayer, because in His Sovereignty, God said, ‘I will answer prayer.’”

What about the question, “When does God answer prayer?” If you mean by that how long, I do not know the answer. If you mean by that, what are the conditions when God promises to answer prayer, the Scripture gives us the answer. There are three conditions in the New Testament for God to answer prayer.

When We Abide

The first condition is in John 15. Jesus says, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you” (Jn. 15:7). There are three elements here.

Requirements The requirements in this passage are for us to “abide” in Him and for His Word to abide in us. Abiding in Christ is essential to getting an answer to prayer. The Greek word translated “abide” in John 15:7 is the same Greek word that was translated “continue” in John 8:31. In other words, abiding in Christ assumes you have trusted Christ for the gift of eternal life (Jn. 8:30). Having trusted Christ, you continue to trust Him (believers walk by faith; Gal. 2:20). John 15 illustrates that with the image of the vine and the branches. The branch *depends* on the vine (cf. “without Me you can do nothing” in verse 5).

Abiding also requires obedience. Jesus explains abiding in verse 10: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” Abiding in Him is obeying Him (1 Jn. 3:24).

His Word abiding in us is His Word dwelling in us richly (Col. 3:16). It is having the Word in us to the point that we are influenced by it.

Request The request is, “Ask what you desire.” Is that *carte blanche*? No. His Word abiding in us shapes our desire.

Result If the requirements are met and the request made, there is a guaranteed result. In the words of Jesus, “It shall be done for you.”

Thus, among other things, this passage emphasizes that if believers who are praying are abiding, their prayers will be answered. On the other hand, if they are not abiding (trusting and obeying), they will not be answered. As the Psalmist says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear” (Ps. 66:18). Peter tells husbands to live with their wives with understanding and to give them honor. Then he adds that they ought to do this that their prayers may not be hindered (1 Pet. 3:7). A husband’s relationship with God can never be right, if his relationship with his wife is wrong (Barclay).

A mother bathed and dressed her small son to go to Grandmother's house. She then told him to go into the backyard until she finished getting ready. While he was in the yard, the neighborhood bully came along and called him a sissy because he was all dressed up. One thing led to another and they ended up on the grass in a scuffle. About that time, the ice cream truck came by, ringing its bell. The little boy ran into the house and asked his mom for money for ice cream. She took one look at him and said, "You are in no position to ask for favors."

Believers who are not abiding are in no position to ask for favors.

When We Ask According to His Will

The second condition is in 1 John 5. John says, "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (1 Jn. 5:14-15). This passage contains the same pattern of prayer that appears in John 15.

Requirement The requirement in this passage is, asking "*according to His will.*" This is the same as His Word abiding in us.

Request After the requirement, there is a request. In this case, the request is simply stated: "If we ask anything." Again the Word and will of God inform our prayer life.

Result If the requirement is met and the request made, there is a guaranteed result. In the words of John, "We have the petitions that we have asked of Him."

The Word of God reveals the will of God. For example, it is God's will to provide for your physical needs (in Mt. 6:28-34, Jesus says don't give that issue a second thought). It is the will of God to forgive us our sins (1 Jn. 1:9) and to be set apart to Himself (1 Thess. 4:3).

With that in mind, review the Lord's Prayer, which delineates some of the specific things for which Jesus said we should pray: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt. 6:11). This is a request for our physical provisions. (The Bible also says if you do not work, you will not eat; 2 Thess. 3:10.) "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). This is a request for forgiveness. Sins are viewed as debts to God that need to be wiped away. A four-year-old boy prayed, "Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." The third petition concerning us is, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Mt. 6:13a). This is a request for spiritual protection. Believers are instructed to pray for deliverance from temptations. Instead of praying to be delivered from temptation *at the moment of* temptation, we should pray that we will be delivered *before* the temptation. Left to ourselves, we would walk into temptation.

Barclay suggests that asking for daily bread is our need in the present, asking for forgiveness deals with our past, and asking not to be led into temptation is about the future. He concludes, "In these pure brief petitions, we are taught to lay the present, the past, and the future before the footstool of the grace of God." Barclay also suggests that this prayer brings the whole of life before the whole of God. Our need for bread concerns God the Father, the Sustainer of all life. Our need for forgiveness is related to Jesus Christ, the Savior, and our need to overcome temptation involves the Holy Spirit, the Strengthened.

He concludes, “Jesus teaches us to bring the whole of life to the whole of God, and to bring the whole of God to the whole of life.”

A lady known for getting answers to prayer was once asked, “What is your secret to getting answers to prayer?” She replied, “I take God at His Word and He takes me at mine.”

When We Believe

The third condition is in Mark 11: “So Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be removed and be cast into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them’” (Mk. 11:22-24). This passage contains the same pattern of prayer found in John 15 and 1 John 5.

Requirement The requirement in this passage is “believe.” Jesus makes that point over and over again in this passage. He says, “Have faith in God” (Mk. 11:22), “but believe[s] that those things he says will be done” (Mk. 11:23), “whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them” (Mk. 11:24). Three times in three verses, Jesus says “believe.” In fact, it might even be suggested that the subject of the passage is faith, not prayer.

Request After the requirement, there is a request. In this case, the request is for a mountain to be removed into the sea. That is obviously hyperbole for something that is humanly impossible.

Results If the requirement is met and the request made, there is a guaranteed result. In the words of Jesus, “He will have whatever he says” and “you will have them.”

A pastor in Texas tells of being in his study at home when his young daughter asked him to build her a doll house. He told her he would, and she disappeared. A few moments later, he looked in the back yard and there was his daughter, putting all her dolls in a pile. He said to his wife, “What is she doing?” His wife replied, “You said you would build her a dollhouse and she believed you.” The father said, “But I didn’t mean today.” Nevertheless, because, she believed him, he built her a doll house—that day.

This pattern is both encouraging and discouraging. It is encouraging in that if we meet God’s conditions, we are assured of an answer to prayer. It is discouraging in that it sounds as if we have to meet His conditions to get an answer.

When We Just Ask

Paul says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7).

Requirement Is there anything about this passage that strikes you as different? There is no requirement (with the possible exception of thanksgiving).

Request This passage just says, “Let your requests be made known to God.”

Result The result is you will get the peace of God. This passage, which has no requirement, also does not guarantee receiving the request, but we have the liberty to just

ask. James says we don't have because we don't ask (Jas. 4:2). Just remember, there is no guarantee, as there is in the other passages.

Summary: God answers prayer when we abide, ask according to His will, and believe, but He also invites us to just ask.

Ask *according to His will*. God wants to give you the grace to do what He asks you to do. So ask for grace (Heb. 4:13). That is according to His will.

Also, remember to *just ask*. In God's sovereignty, He has a will He has revealed in His Word, but God is also a Father. Listen to Jesus: "And He said to them, 'Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if *he asks* for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Lk. 11:5-13).

C.I. Scofield, the author of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, lived at the turn of the last century. One day he looked out the window and saw a new invention coming down the street. It was a horseless carriage. He said to the Lord, "I don't need one of those, my horse and carriage are fine, but I'd like to have one." The Lord answered his prayer.

Let your request be made known. Your gracious Father may just give it to you.

HOW TO GET YOUR PRAYERS ANSWERED

What is the key to answered prayer? Why does God answer some prayers and seemingly does not answer others? The Scripture speaks of several things that would hinder prayer, but Nehemiah 1 contains a story that illustrates the key to getting an answer.

The story begins with a report from Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, concerning the deplorable condition of the city of Jerusalem and the distressed situation of its inhabitants. Hanani said that the people of Jerusalem were in great distress and reproach, the walls around Jerusalem were broken down, and the gates of Jerusalem were burned with fire (Neh. 1:3). In those days, a city without locked gates and lofty walls was no city at all. Armies could attack and take the city at will. Arab tribes from the desert, tempted by the temple treasury, could swoop upon the unwalled town. Furthermore, this was God's town. For the city and its people to be downtrodden was a disgrace, not only against them but against the Lord.

When Nehemiah heard the report, he was driven to his knees. He says, "So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4). Nehemiah was deeply disturbed and greatly grieved. He wept. He mourned. He fasted. He prayed. His burden bowed him before the Lord. Out of a burdened heart, he cried to the God of heaven. John Bunyan said, "When you pray, rather let your heart be without words than your words without heart."

The prayer that follows naturally falls into three parts.

Nehemiah Confessed Sins

With reverence and respect, Nehemiah addresses God, saying, "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments" (Neh. 1:5). By calling the Lord the "God of heaven," Nehemiah acknowledges God's government of the world, which, of course, would include His sovereignty over the pagan king who ruled over Nehemiah, the Jews, and the city of Jerusalem. As the God of heaven, the Lord is great and awesome. The word translated "awesome" comes from the Hebrew word "fear" and means "to inspire reverence, godly fear, and awe." This phrase is borrowed from Deuteronomy 7:21 (Keil).

At the same time, Nehemiah recognized the covenant relationship that God had with the children of Israel. In terms of the Mosaic covenant, God keeps the covenant for those who keep His commandments. The concept of keeping God's commandments is perhaps borrowed from Deuteronomy 7:9 (Ryle).

Jesus taught us to address God as "Our Father" (Mt. 6:9). That was a new revelation. It was not done in the Old Testament. While it is perfectly appropriate to address God as great and awesome, don't forget that we come to Him as our heavenly Father.

Identification with Sin The first part of Nehemiah's prayer is a confession of sin. He says, "Please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You" (Neh. 1:6).

Rather than having his eyes and ears closed, as if slumbering or sleeping, Nehemiah asks God to look at him and listen as he prays constantly before Him. Then he confessed the sins of his father's house, as well as himself. His confession was national, as well as personal. He spelled "we" with an "I." His own sin was part of the whole.

Though there is no doubt that Nehemiah was sincere and correct in confessing his own sin, in a sense, this confession is identification with the nation of Israel. He could have indicted them for their sin, for after all, their sin caused captivity. Instead, he identified with them. Nor did he blame the enemy for conquering them. Rather, he acknowledges that the problem was Israel's sin.

Indication of the Sin Nehemiah continues, "We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:7). Israel in general, and Nehemiah in particular, had sinned against God (cf. "You") and against His commandments. Their sin was against the character of God and the commandments of God.

The commandments, statutes, and ordinances are not a division of the Old Testament Scriptures. Rather, Nehemiah is simply saying, "God, we've broken Your law—all of it!" (Fensham). It would be like people today confessing their sins of commission and omission, so as to cover all their transgressions. When asked to define the difference between sins of omission and sins of commission, a little boy in Sunday School said, "Sins of commission are sins we commit. Sins of omission are sins we meant to commit but forgot."

The Word is a light that reveals spiritual dirt. I remember having hard feelings toward someone and finding in the Word that I am to be tenderhearted (Eph. 5:32). That prompted me to confess.

Nehemiah Cited Scripture

The Tenor of Scripture After confessing sin, both his and the nation's, Nehemiah reminds God of what He Himself had said. He states, "Remember, I pray, the word which You commanded Your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:8a). The problem with what follows is that Nehemiah does not quote anyone verse or even follow one passage. Rather, he draws from several verses and several passages, including Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 4, and Deuteronomy 30 (Ryle; Kidner). In other words, he is not so much quoting a particular verse as he is referring to the tenor of Scripture.

The Covenant of Scripture More specifically, he is citing the covenant of Scripture. He says, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations" (Neh. 1:8b). This is an allusion to God's covenant in Leviticus 26:27-45 and Deuteronomy 30:1-5 (Keil; Fensham). God had promised the nation of Israel that if they disobeyed the commandments given in the Mosaic covenant, He would scatter them among the nations of the world. He had promised that and He had performed that. In fact, Nehemiah himself was born in Persia, a pagan nation, because of God's fulfillment of this promise.

As Nehemiah goes on to say, "But if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name" (Neh. 1:9). God had promised that if the nation of Israel returned to Him in obedience, He would re-gather them in the land. Nehemiah is arguing that God had

promised that, so He must perform that. This is the issue of the whole prayer. Nehemiah addressed God as a covenant-keeping God. He confessed sin because the covenant said to do that. Now he holds God to His covenant to return Israel to the land.

The Intent of Scripture Nehemiah does more than just quote the outline of the Mosaic covenant. He refers to the fact that God had promised to return the nation of Israel to Palestine. In a sense, that had at least to some degree been accomplished (cf. the book of Ezra with Neh. 1:2).

Nehemiah, of course, knew that. It is apparent that Nehemiah is not just viewing God's covenant in a superficial way. Rather, he viewed the promises of God in the full depth of their intent. For him, the aim was not just the return of the people to the city, but the restoration of the community. That's why he says, "And bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name" (Neh. 1:9). Nehemiah puts his finger on the ultimate *intent* of God's covenant. It was not just to return the people to a place but to return them to a place where God would establish His name. For that to be accomplished, much more needed to be done. Thus, while it was true that some had returned, and even true that the Temple had been rebuilt, the fact remained that the wall was in ruin and the people were in reproach. In that sense, Jerusalem had not yet been restored. In that sense, God's name was not yet respected.

So, while Nehemiah cited Scripture, he did not just haphazardly put his finger on a verse. He put his finger on the essence and the intent of the Scripture. That is the key to getting an answer to prayer. From the Scripture, the believer determines what God wants to do, and asks Him to do it.

We look at our situation and we see sickness, financial need, joblessness, marital problems, etc. and that is what we pray about, as if God is the Healer, Fat Cat, Career Consultant, and Marriage Counselor. As I pointed out in the last chapter, we can pray about anything that concerns us. The problem is, that's all we do. Does God have things that concern Him about which He wants us to pray? For example, when we look at the situation just mentioned from God's point of view, we see trials. In a trial, God, wants us to pray for wisdom (Jas. 1:2-8).

Nehemiah Claimed Specifics

The Prosperity of the People Nehemiah has been talking to God about His covenant with His people. Now he gets specific, saying, "Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand" (Neh. 1:10). In the next verse, Nehemiah refers to "Your servants who desire to fear Your name" (1:11). In other words, Nehemiah is saying to God, "Fulfill the essence of the covenant with these people ... at this time." That's specific.

Permission for Himself Nehemiah gets even more specific. He not only is asking for God's favor on His people; more specifically, he is requesting permission for himself to return to Jerusalem. He says, "'O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.' For I was the king's cupbearer" (Neh. 1:11).

He was asking that he be permitted to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and restore the community. Nehemiah had the comfort and convenience of a royal palace, yet

he asked for the grit and grind of a tedious journey to Jerusalem. He had position and prosperity in Persia, but asked for permission to do God's work. Unlike Nehemiah, when many believers have material prosperity, they often get spiritually indifferent.

Nehemiah's prayer was specific. It is at this point that believers so often fail. Their prayers are like arrows shot indiscriminately into the air, like a letter with no address. Prayers need to be specific. In Luke 11:5-8, the man who was calling to his friend at midnight did not ask for bread in general, but for three loaves. If you pray for \$99.33, it's more exciting to see God bring in not only the \$99.00, but also the pennies.

Summary: Nehemiah confessed his sins, cited Scripture, and claimed some specifics based on what God said in His Word.

What Nehemiah did reveals that the key to prayer is the Word of God. He confessed sins, because the Word said that was the problem. He cited Scripture, because the Word said that God would fulfill His promise to bring back Israel to the land. He claimed specifics based on what he knew from the Word of God that God wanted to do. His prayer was answered (cf. the rest of the book).

The key to answered prayer is to look at any given situation and ask, "What does God say in the Scripture that He wants done in this situation?" and ask Him to do it. The purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth (Mt. 6:10). That explains New Testament verses like John 15:7 and 1 John 5:14: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you" (Jn. 15:7); "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 Jn. 5:14).

So, 1) Look at the situation. 2) Look at Scripture. 3) Then ask, "What do I know from the Scripture that God wants to do in this situation?"

Let me illustrate. I know of a Christian father whose daughter was dating an unsaved fellow. The father was deeply concerned that it might get serious and that she might end up marrying an unbeliever. So, he began to pray that they would break up as a couple. The more he prayed, the more their relationship progressed. Finally, one day as he was struggling in prayer with the Lord, it dawned on him that technically there was nothing in the Scripture that said that a teenage girl couldn't date an unsaved fellow, only that she should not marry him. Furthermore, he realized that the will of God in that situation was for the fellow to get saved. That would solve everything. He liked the young man; his only complaint was that he was not a believer. So, he began to pray that the young man would trust Christ.

A short time after that, the young man trusted Jesus Christ as his Savior. Then the couple broke up!

YOU CAN PRAY LIKE PAUL

If you want to learn to do something well, you need to learn from someone who is a master at it. That goes for praying.

In this brief study on prayer, we have looked at the greatest authority on prayer, Jesus Christ. We have looked at His instructions in such passages as John 15:7 and Mark 11, and along the way we have looked at the example, He gave us in what we call the Lord's Prayer. We have also looked at an illustration in Nehemiah 1. If I were to summarize what we have seen thus far, I would say the purpose of prayer is not to get my will done in heaven, it is to get God's will done on earth. That includes praying for things that concern us, but it also includes praying for things that concern God. What are the things that concern God? Paul demonstrates that in his prayer life. We need to pray like Paul.

I once did a survey of all the recorded prayers in the Bible. I isolated 215 recorded prayers. In preparation of this study of Paul's prayer life, I revisited Paul's prayers. Here is what I found. In Paul's 13 epistles, there are 38 recorded prayers. Four are prayers of praise (Rom. 16:25-27; 2 Cor. 1:3-4; Eph. 3:20; 1 Tim. 1:17). Eight are prayers of thanksgiving (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:4-5; Col. 1:3-5; 1 Thess. 1:2-3; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:3-5). Three are prayers for some special spiritual situation, such as unity (Rom. 15:5-6), peace (2 Thess. 3:16), or mercy (2 Tim. 1:16-18). Two are prayers for an opportunity to visit believers so he can minister to them (Rom. 1:9-10; 1 Thess. 3:11). Those total 17.

Thirteen prayers are for the recipients of the epistle to experience God's grace. Paul wrote thirteen epistles and at the end of each one, he prayed for grace for them (Rom. 16:20, 24; 1 Cor. 16:23; 2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 6:24; Phil. 4:23; Col. 4:18; 1 Thess. 5:28; 2 Thess. 3:18; 1 Tim. 6:21; 2 Tim. 4:22; Titus 3:15; Phlm. 25). The 17 mentioned above added to these 13 totals 30.

There are eight left. Those eight prayers are prayers for God's will to be done in the lives of believers. For what did Paul specifically pray?

Pray for Spiritual Knowledge

Illumination Paul prayed "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power" (Eph. 1:17-19).

Paul prayed that they would have knowledge (cf. "knowledge" in verse 17 and "know" in verse 18). The knowledge he has in mind only comes by revelation (Eph. 1:17). It is "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened that you may know" (Eph. 1:18). Teachers talk about a "teachable moment." Theologians speak about illumination. We have all said, "It dawned on me. I see it." We have all had an "ah-ha" experience.

Beginning in the middle of verse 18, Paul explains the three specific things he wants them to know, namely, the "hope of His calling" (Eph. 1:18), "the riches of the glory of

His inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18; italics added), and “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:19). Paul prays that they would understand their calling (to be in Christ in the church), God’s inheritance (believers are God’s inheritance!), and power (resurrection power). What Paul is praying for is foundational to spiritual growth. In Romans, when Paul explains the foundation of the spiritual life, he starts by saying we need to know who we are in Christ (Rom. 6:1-14).

I was teaching this passage in a Bible study when a lady blurted out, “Hey, this does not say I have an inheritance. It says I am God’s inheritance. Wow!” That is illumination. That is what Paul prayed for, and if we pray that for believers, we will be praying like Paul.

Insight Paul says, “For this reason, we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col. 1:9). Paul is praying that they be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. Knowledge of the will of God comes from the Word of God.

Furthermore, Paul’s desire was that this knowledge of God’s will would be “in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” The word “insight” sums up the essence of these words. In other words, Paul is not just praying for information, but insight. This insight is to be spiritual, that is, it is to be the insight into the will of God, which comes from the Holy Spirit. It is possible to have information about the will of God and not have insight into how to apply that knowledge.

Let’s suppose that you knew two believers who were living together outside of marriage. How would you pray for them? In a sense, they know they should not be living together. What they need is, “It dawned on me” Pray for that kind of insight.

Here is a starter kit on spiritual insight. It is not about you; it’s about others. Jesus said He did not come to be served but to serve (Mk. 10:45). It’s not about externals; it’s about internals. Jesus said it’s not what goes into a person, it is what comes out that defiles us (Mt. 15:16-20). It is not about getting; it’s about giving. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35). It’s not about the temporal; it’s about the eternal things (2 Cor. 4:16-17).

Pray for Spiritual Power

Power Paul’s second prayer for the Ephesians is, “That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man” (Eph. 3:16). Paul piles one word on top of another to emphasize the power he desires believers to experience. “Strengthened with might” means “to wax strong with power.” This power is to be in the inner man through the Holy Spirit. When we pray for believers, this request should be at the top of our prayer list.

Grace Earlier, I mentioned that thirteen times, Paul prayed for people to experience the grace of God. That is another way of saying he wanted them to know, first-hand, the power of God.

Paul told the Corinthians, “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure

in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Notice that God told Paul His grace was sufficient and explains that (cf. "for") as His strength (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul understood that when God spoke about grace, He was talking about His power (2 Cor. 12:9).

God's power is not just in miracles. Paul describes God's power in our lives when he prays for believers to be "strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy" (Col. 1:11). God's power enables us to be patient with people (the meaning of the Greek word translated "longsuffering") and to endure difficult situations (the meaning of the Greek word translated "patience")—*with joy*.

To understand what God told Paul, we need to look at life from God's point of view. *God allows trouble to teach us spiritual truth*. Our attitude is, "Get me out of this trouble." We need to understand what God is doing. If we did, it would change our attitude and our prayer life.

When I was a young Christian, I heard a song that expresses this concept. It touched me deeply.

Don't Spare Me Audrey Mieir

Don't spare me trouble, if it will bring me close to Thee
Don't spare me heartaches, You bore a broken heart for me.
Don't spare me loneliness, for I recall Gethsemane.
Don't spare me anything that you endured for me.

Don't spare me failure, if this is best for me.
Don't spare me sickness, if this will make me call to Thee.
Don't spare me suffering, for I recall your agony.
Don't spare me anything that you endured for me.

But give me strength to follow thee.

Pray for Spiritual Maturity

Established Paul prayed, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work" (2 Thess. 2:16-17). Paul's prayer for comfort looks back to 2 Thessalonians 2:2, where they were shaken and troubled. Paul's prayer for them to be established goes back to 2 Thessalonians 2:3, where he told them not to be deceived, and to 2 Thessalonians 2:15 where he told them to hold fast to traditions. If they held fast to the truth, it would have the practical effect in their lives of producing good works instead of instability.

Instability is a sign of immaturity (Eph. 4:11-15). Paul is praying for their spiritual maturity. Add spiritually unstable believers to your prayer list. Pray that they be established in the faith.

Maturity "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ"

(1 Thess. 5:23). This prayer consists of two requests. The first request is for complete sanctification. The word “sanctify” means “to set apart for God.” “Many are satisfied with a partial Christianity. Some parts of their life are still worldly” (Lenski). The second request is for blameless preservation. It is a restatement of the first request from another point of view. The entire preservation of which Paul speaks is defined as preservation in “spirit, soul, and body” (1 Thess. 5:23). Every part of the believer needs to be set apart to the Lord and preserved blameless.

This is another way of talking about spiritual maturity. This should be our prayer, not just for backsliders and babes, but for every believer who names the name of Christ.

“Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:11-12). This prayer consists of two basic requests (cf. “that” in verse 11 and “that” in verse 12). The first request asks God to do three things, all of which amount to spiritual growth; namely, that they would grow in their calling to the point that God would count them worthy of it, that they would grow in goodness, and that they would grow in works. The second request is that they would glorify the Lord. “To glorify” means “to manifest, reflect, display.” So, to glorify the name of the Lord Jesus is simply to manifest all that He is. Again, this is another way of praying for spiritual maturity.

When we pray for each other, let us pray that we grow spiritually and glorify the Lord.

Love “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ” (2 Thess. 3:5). This is one of the rare instances of a prayer addressed directly to Jesus. Paul prays that the Lord would direct their hearts into the love of God. In Revelation 2:4, the Lord Himself laments that the Ephesians had left their first love. In 1 John 2:15, John commands the believers in Ephesus not to love the world. It is possible for believers to lose their love for the Lord and latch onto some love for the world. Or, to say the same thing another way, an undue attachment to things on this earth soon chills our affection for God. For us, the ever-present danger of materialism can do that. For the Thessalonians, persecution could have done that. If we are to grow in our love for the Lord, we must not allow possessions or persecution to cause us to fail.

Let us pray for believers we know to fall in love with the Lord and patiently wait for His return without flirting with another possible lover.

When we hear that, we think, “I’ve got that. I am a loving person. I certainly am not filled with hate.” Paul has something to say to you: “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment” (Phil. 1:9). Paul prays their love will increase, which indicates their love already exists. He also prays that their love will increase in knowledge and discernment. A person could have a great deal of love that is misdirected. The Word of God gives us the knowledge we need to have the kind of love Paul has in mind.

Discerning love discriminates between good and evil. Paul goes on to say, “That you may approve the things that are excellent” (Phil. 1:10a). The things that are excellent are spiritual things over the material, internal things over the external, and eternal things over the temporal (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Love is the ultimate in maturity (Eph. 4:15).

Summary: Pray for spiritual knowledge, power, and maturity.

The problem with the church is that we do not pray. An article entitled “What Happened to Prayer Meeting” (*Discipleship*, October 1999) tells of an evangelist from India who visited this country: “East Indian evangelist K. P. Yohannan says he will never forget one of his first prayer meetings in an American church. He had come to the United States eager to meet some of its spiritual giants and leaders. One man, in particular, held his interest, a preacher known even in India for his powerful sermons and uncompromising commitment to the truth. “More than 3,000 people attended services on the Sunday Yohannan visited his church. The choirs were outstanding and the preaching was everything he’d hoped it would be. But he was especially taken by an announcement the pastor made about the midweek prayer meeting. He said there were some things lying heavy on his heart. Would the people come and pray about them? Then he announced the name of a certain chapel on the church campus. Excited, Yohannan determined he would attend.

“When he arrived later that week, he brought with him some definite assumptions. The most basic was that prayer meetings are essential, of primary importance. In India, and in many other parts of the world where Christians are persecuted, the prayer meeting is the centerpiece of the church’s life. Everyone comes, the meetings often last long into the night, and it is not unusual for believers to arise daily before sunup to pray together for the work of the church.

“Fearing a huge crowd, he came early to get a seat. But when he arrived, he was surprised to discover a chapel with a capacity for only 500—that was empty! A few people eventually came in, but there was no leader, no songs or worship, just chit chat about news, weather, and sports. Forty-five minutes later, an elderly man, the leader, but not the pastor, walked into the chapel to offer a few devotional thoughts from the Bible and give a brief prayer. The meeting was over, and as the seven attendees filed out of the chapel, Yohannan sat in stunned silence, his mind filled with questions: Was this it? Weren’t they going to stay and wait upon God? Where was the worship? The tears? The cries for guidance and direction? Where was the list of the sick, and the poor, and those in need? What about that burden the pastor said was heavy on his heart? Weren’t we going to intercede for a miracle? And where was the pastor?

“That meeting became a paradigm for his experience of prayer meetings in America. In all his travels here, Yohannan saw the same pattern repeated in hundreds of midweek meetings. Almost anything happens but prayer. There are announcements, singing, homilies, but few prayers and that’s in the churches that actually have prayer meetings in their schedules. Many more make no pretense.”

We not only do not pray, but when we do, we fall short of the kind of prayer we should be praying. The man who led me to Christ said, “We pray for Joe’s toe, and Jack’s back, and James’ pains, because they asked us to pray that and that is fine, but we must pray for what God asked us to pray daily, not once a year” (C. Sumner Wemp). As C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*: “We are far too easily pleased.”

The article from *Discipleship* added, “We have become satisfied with mere church, mere religious exertion, mere numbers and buildings, the things we can do. There is nothing wrong with these things, but they are no more than foam left by the surf on the ocean of God’s glory and goodness. There are things way out in the depths that only God can give us. They can be ours only if we launch out in our little prayer boats and learn to sail, even one day walk, on those waters.”