

Prayer

1. Why do we pray?

Statistics show that people in general pray more as our physical safety or our financial security is challenged. It is quite obvious that also believers turn to God more in times of distress. In Christianity we do not boast about our praying, but rather say that we are poor petitioners. This is based on God's word. We teach, diverting from the teaching of many other churches, that prayer is not the way to become righteous or to have sins forgiven. Thus prayer is not necessary for salvation. Many unbelievers pray because they want to establish connection to God through prayer, or they may pray because they believe that God forgives their sins in prayer. Believers tend to follow Luther's attempt to free prayer from all formal rituals. Luther, however, never meant that prayer in itself is a formal ritual. Why do then we who are God's children pray, and why did Jesus and the apostles ask us to pray? It is faith that we are saved by. It is faith that our relationship with God is based on. For the strengthening of our faith we have sacraments. Confession of sins serves as a grace privilege for believers. Through confession of sins we become released of the burdens on our conscience. What is then prayer for? What is prayer?

2. The essence of prayer

Jesus taught us the Lord's Prayer. The first petition reads: "Our Father who art in heaven." Jesus himself used the word "father" in his prayers. The very familial form of the word in Aramaic is "abba," daddy. Jesus used this word once in Gethsemane. "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). The apostle uses the word as he says that our spirit says "abba," dear father, as we are not under the bondage of the law but children and heirs of the father (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

Turning to the dear father as his beloved children, saying "abba" is the essence of prayer. Little children often turn to their father. They may have found something interesting and want to tell their father about it. They may have hurt themselves and crying look for the safety of the father. They may just want to express their gratitude of being able to be with father. They may protest the will of the father. They may bring their siblings distress to the attention of the father. Christian Doctrine defines prayer as "a humble and sincere conversation with God" (CD 78). We may also define prayer as uplifting our heart unto God.

In the light of the following picture we can form an understanding of what a humble and sincere conversation with God would look like. A father stands in the house. His own children dwell in the same room. Some children play. Yet, even then, they have father in their minds. One child walks to the father in excitement. Another child has a grief and holds unto the father for comfort. One child is in the father's lap. One of the children wants the father to pay attention to the child in the corner. A neighbor's child may look through the window and make a petition to come in.

Another neighbor may express his gratitude to him for his neighborly love. While the illustration of prayer with a picture of a human family may help us understand some principle characteristics of prayer, we have to be aware of the limitations of the picture as well. In the picture we are looking at a human father and human relationships. A father may or may not know what the children need. He may or may not listen and understand. He may or may not answer. God, however, always knows what we need and he always hears and understands. He will answer us.

In this introduction we mostly consider personal prayer. I do not touch on praying together very much. That may be a topic for another introduction. In discussion we can feel free to bring up any aspect of prayer.

3. The Spirit prays in us

Jesus reminds his disciples about the true prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus warns not to pray like hypocrites and gentiles. Hypocrites pray because they want recognition of their praying from people. Gentiles think that they are heard because of many words. Jesus teaches us to pray in private and expect God to answer in public. Then Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer, which begins with the words "Our Father who art in heaven..." (Matt 6: 5-9). Speaking to the woman at the well of Sychar Jesus speaks about true prayer in the spirit: "God is a spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). The apostle Paul joins in Jesus' thoughts about a private and humble prayer, when he writes "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26-27).

Going back to our picture, the children do not feel that only when they have a formal speech to their father are they connected to him. They are constantly aware of the presence of their father. The love between father and children guide when and how the beloved children approach and speak to their dear father.

In Hebrews, the writer defines faith as the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). God is unseen and the one upon whom we lay our hope. When a child of God turns to God in prayer, it is evidence that he believes in a God to whom he can speak. While in the storm, the disciples doubted for a long time before turning to Jesus. In their doubt they failed to believe that Jesus can help. Finally, they cried for help. Jesus rebuked their unbelief. He also took their cry for help as a prayer of a distressed child unto God, and he calmed the sea. In our picture, the father expects the children to always turn Him as needed. Although God knows all our needs, He still expects us to pray and let our needs be known unto him.

4. Petitions with thanksgiving and in humble faith

The Apostle Paul writes to Philippians, "Be careful for nothing but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known unto God" (Phil 4:6). The psalmist writes, "And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Psalm 50:15). We have worries and needs. Jesus instructed us not to carry worries:

“Therefore take no thought, saying what shall we eat? Or, what shall we drink? Or, wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your heavenly father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (Matt 6:31-32). In the parable of the sower, Jesus warns about dwelling in the cares of this world because they may choke faith. Peter instructs us to cast all our cares upon him who careth for us (1 Pet 5:7).

Again, what would a child do in need? He would not sorrow by himself but run crying unto the bosom of the father with all his cares. And there the father comforts him with the assurance that he is a dear son of the beloved father.

In writing to the Philippians, the apostle makes another point as he says, “With thanksgiving let your request be known unto God.” When you are in need, how then do you pray with thanksgiving? When making our request known unto God, we need to keep in mind that God already knows what we need. Secondly, we need to keep in mind that we cannot control God. He has the right to say no to our request. The point the apostle makes by “requests with thanksgiving” is a prayer in humble faith. “Thank you God that you already know what I need, thank you for taking care of me.” The children turn to their father with trusting hearts. The psalmist writes: “I lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1,2). More important than receiving what we pray for is that the prayer is said in faith. “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). The privilege of approaching God in prayer in itself is a matter of thanksgiving.

5. God hears and answers

We defined that prayer is reciprocal, a humble and sincere conversation with God. Sometimes it may seem like God doesn’t hear us. The reason is not in God’s poor hearing or our unclear message. God has promised to hear, and He always keeps His promise. He will also respond, but maybe in a different way than what we expected.

We already discussed one immediate way of God responding to us while we pray. God answers with peace in our hearts. “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:6,7) This is what the father does when a child comes to him in distress, “O, dear child, I hear you crying.”

Another immediate benefit of a prayer may be that we are protected from temptation at the very moment. Jesus said to his disciples in Gethsemane, on the night in which he was betrayed, “Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). Prayer is a way of fleeing from temptations of this world and our flesh. Many believers have experienced this in the times of temptation. “And the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). Again going back to our picture, we can imagine a child being tempted in secrecy will be less tempted if he turns to the Father for a conversation.

God may not answer immediately. Maybe, over the years we realize what was best in our life. Maybe, finally in heaven we will realize why certain things happened in our life. For one thing we can be sure that the Heavenly Father knows our needs and provides what we need. Sometimes children come up with requests that the father does not feel comfortable fulfilling at that point. We need to practice patience and trusting as the Apostle Paul teaches us in Romans, “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8: 28). When in tribulations with no immediate deliverance, we may believe like the Apostle Paul did, “Tribulations worketh patience, and patience experience; and experience hope” (Rom. 5:3). Our faith may be tried but God will never forsake us.

In Jeremiah 31:9 we can read a promise that God will lead and guide our life when we journey prayerfully. One of God’s answers to our prayers is the blessing that He has given us in our life. Our life may look different in the eyes of God than it looks in our own eyes. When we discuss the needs and wants of life with our own children, we realize how different our perspectives may be. Children may have all kinds of needs and cares, but in the eyes of the parents everything is fine. In his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer, in the petition of the every day bread, Luther reminds us to count our blessings. With the help of the Holy Spirit we may at times just pause to reflect in amazement how much God has blessed us.

The most evident answer God gives for our prayer is in the voice of the gospel. This is how we have understood Jesus’ words when he says that God will answer openly (Matt 6:6). We hear the Father’s voice in the gospel preaching in His kingdom. Applying this to the family picture we can imagine when the children hear the voice of the father they rejoice, knowing that this is our dear father speaking to his beloved children. The essence of the gospel is the message of the Lord Jesus who died on behalf of our sins. Through faith we can be God’s children.

6. Examples of those who have prayed in the Bible

Moses prayed to God when the Egyptian armed forces approached the people of Israel dead-ended by the Red Sea. Moses received an answer to raise his staff. The waters opened for the people to walk to the other side of the Red Sea. Pharaoh’s troops drowned in the sea. Often, the staff of the gospel is God’s answer in situations that look impossible to us.

In Babylon, Daniel kept on saying his daily prayers despite the law of King Darius which had illegalized praying to any other god but the king. Daniel’s praying was reported to Darius by Daniel’s jealous fellow officers. The king was bound to his decree and therefore ordered Daniel to be thrown into the den of lions. God protected Daniel in the den. The next morning, as the king came to the den, Daniel shouted to him: “O king, live forever!” From the OT time both unbelievers and believers have prayed on behalf of the authorities as God-given means of keeping order. The apostle writes to Timothy, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior” (1 Tim 2:1-3).

While in the hands of his persecutors, Stephen prayed on behalf of his executioners: “Lord lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60). According to the example of Jesus and the apostles the believers have endeavored praying on behalf of their enemies.

The Apostle Paul prayed that God would take away the thorn that was in his flesh. Not knowing what he meant by the thorn, we learn what the apostle learned from God, “My grace is sufficient to you” (2 Cor 12:9). Many times we as believers have to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and just continue to believe our sins forgiven in Jesus name and blood, and not think why certain trials are given to us.

The apostles often mentioned praying on behalf of other believers. God’s children yet today often request of each other, “Remember me and my family in your prayers,” “When you converse with God about your own matters, please add myself in your prayers,” and “I will remember you in my thoughts and in my prayers.” We may remember each others in prayer without asking. Sometimes some family members may cease wanting to listen to us speaking to them about faith matters. Even then, we still have the privilege of speaking to God about those family members. Even when our intercessions fall short, Jesus prays on behalf of us in heaven. “He ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebr 7:25).

Church history relates that Martin Luther spent a lot of time praying during his time of distress fighting the powers of the Catholic Church. In prayer we may leave matters in God’s hands. We do not always know what the best thing to do is. Nevertheless, when we leave our matters in God’s hands, we can trust that He will bless and guide us as we do our best.

When comparing our praying to some of the believers mentioned in the Bible or Luther, we may feel inferior. However, we need to remember that the essence of prayer is not the outward, conscious practice of prayer. The essence is the spiritual, sometimes subconscious groaning of the spirit and turning to the heavenly Father. In this way the spirit in us prays constantly. A couple of weeks ago I learned about a car accident in which our dear brother and sister were seriously injured. I called to the father of the dear injured sister. I listened to what the current status of the patients was. I promised to keep the family in my thoughts and prayers. “Thank you for remembering us,” was the response. I never consciously took time to pray for them. However, the same day on my walk I noticed that I am constantly thinking about the family groaning something to this effect, “O, dear heavenly Father what happened to the family. Thank you for taking care of them.” The words of God encourage us to “pray without ceasing,” and “giving thanks in every circumstance” (1 Tess. 5:17,18).

7. Unbelievers’ prayer

God’s word does not teach that God justifies man in prayer. This means that an unbeliever cannot reach God through his own deeds in prayer. God needs to reach out to the unbeliever. This happens when the gospel of forgiveness of sins in the name and blood of Jesus is preached from God’s kingdom to a penitent sinner. The Bible, however, records many examples how God heard the prayers of unbelievers when they prayed for their salvation. The Ethiopian Eunuch, Saul of Tarsus and the centurion Cornelius exemplify unbelievers whose prayer God heard and answered publicly by allowing his kingdom come to them (Acts 8,9 and 10). This was their hearts’ humble and sincere speaking with God.

God's word does not teach that prayer is a merit. Of those who pray in order to gain merit the word of God warns, "I will hide mine eyes from you, yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear" (Isa 1:15). We already discussed Jesus' comment on the hypocrites' prayer on the streets. They have received their reward (Matt 6:5).

Humble prayer of those outside of God's kingdom is a good matter. In many circumstances we may be invited to situations where a prayer is said by an unbeliever. Joining in prayer with unbelievers does not mean that we unite with their faith or their spirit. The spirit of humble faith will guide us how to conduct ourselves in each situation.

8. Always pray

Although God is high and holy, in Jesus' name we are allowed to approach Him. Although God knows what we need we are encouraged to let him know of our needs. Although God is almighty and decides what he does and what not, we are asked to pray for our matters, the matters of other people and those of the authorities in our country. Prayer is neither a means to salvation, nor a sacrament. Prayer is a privilege of God's child and a sign of that connection that has been established through faith. Prayer is part of our endeavor in faith. Through prayer we gain strength, prayer gives peace, and prayer protects in temptation. Although we may ask the forgiveness of sins in a prayer, we receive the forgiveness through faith in the gospel from God's kingdom. More important than the formal aspect of prayer is that prayer is the heart's humble and sincere conversation with God. Prayer does not necessarily need words. The spirit in us says unuttered groanings. God hears our prayers and provides us with spiritual needs and temporal needs. The apostle writes, "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2).

Questions

1. Why do you pray?
2. What makes a prayer a true prayer?
3. How have the former believers prayed?
4. How has prayer helped you or someone you know?
5. How were you taught to pray?
6. A prayer that I will always remember.
7. How do you teach your children to pray?