



Prayer

week 6





Introduction

Prayer, for Christians, is a term as familiar as it gets; it is an essential component of our life of faith. There are various interpretations of what prayer is, but according to the answer to Question 98 in The Westminster Shorter Catechism, we can understand prayer in the following way.

As we pray, we need to have a good understanding of our relationship with God. We acknowledge that we are sinners, and yet God shows mercy on us. Therefore, when we pray to God, we come with a heart of confession and thanksgiving. The very reason why we can come boldly before God's throne of grace and have God's attentive ear to our prayers are not because we are worthy; rather, it is because of Jesus, God's beloved Son. To acknowledge that our access to God in prayer comes only through Jesus, we pray in Jesus' name. Prayer is not a tool for us to demand God to meet our needs; on the contrary, it is a means for us to listen to God. While we can express our desires to God, everything we ask for must align with His will.

Among the countless verses in the Bible teaching us how to pray, the focus is not on the use of elaborate language or captivating forms. As seen in the Lord's Prayer which Jesus taught His disciples, the core of prayer is God and His kingdom. Even in our requests for daily necessities, at its core, it is inseparable from our relationship with God, and with His help and guidance, how we can live as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

Some say that our prayer is like breathing. This imagery vividly expresses not only the importance but also the necessity of prayer for Christians. Indeed, through prayer, we draw near to God, listen to God, and submit to God. Let's learn to pray in our prayers!



Devotion 1: Genesis 32:9-12

When Jacob, with his family and possessions, was about to return to his homeland of Canaan, he was shrouded in apprehension and fear which robbed him of his homecoming joy. Jacob couldn't help but worry if Esau might be coming to seek revenge when approached by his brother, who was leading hundreds of people. In this dilemma, he spoke to God. Speaking to God in times of distress is something we probably have experienced, but do we really seek "help" straightway? Let's dive into Jacob's prayer and see what's worth noting.

Firstly, the way that Jacob addressed to God alludes to the revelation God gave him at Bethel as he was fleeing (Genesis 28:13-15). Such an address reflects Jacob's knowledge of and trust in God. Furthermore, Jacob grasped God's promises firmly. Not only did Jacob mention the personal promises God gave him but he also placed such promises into a broader context of God's greater purpose, specifically the covenantal promises made to Abraham (Genesis 22:17). In his prayer, Jacob also counted God's blessings by remembering how God had transformed him from rags to riches. He didn't forget how he was once a lonely individual and then he became the head of a family with great wealth. Last but not least, Jacob prayed for God's help to get over his trepidation.

In Jacob's prayer, there is little emphasis on one's own difficulties, but rather, how God has already fulfilled what He promised. As such, Jacob did not immediately express his pain, fear, nor worries but he first focused on God's will, His promises and His attributes.

Devotion 1: Genesis 32:9-12

Questions:

1. In Jacob's prayer, what essential elements are useful to us in our prayer?
2. How did Jacob place God's work in his life as a part of a bigger picture?
3. When you pray, what do you focus on?
4. Anxiety and fears are real. While they are part of our normal life, how should we face them?

Prayer:

Loving, never-changing and faithful God, I thank you for what you have done in my life. I believe that you will be with me and care for me till the end. Increase my faith, Lord; as I look up to you, I may face any difficulties without fear. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Genesis 32:9-12

9 Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' 10 I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. 11 Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.

Devotion 2: Matthew 15:21-28

Does this passage have any connection with prayer? Perhaps we can contemplate the theme of "persistence" in it. In a fast-paced era, even in prayer, we often expect God to listen quickly and act swiftly. Mentality as such breeds impatience and even doubt about whether God has heard our prayers.

The Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus for mercy for her demon-possessed daughter. Did Jesus not hear? Of course, He did, but He responded with "not a word." When the woman continued to cry out, Jesus still did not directly address her. The woman, however, did not cease her pleading, not even when faced with what seemed like an "inhumane" rejection, until her request was fulfilled.

From the passage, we not only learn about the woman's persistent prayer, but we also witness God's wisdom. If Jesus had granted the woman's request immediately, she might have left satisfied but not have grasped the depth of God's grace. Jesus' repeated "indifference" or "coldness" was, in fact, full of mercy and love, gradually leading this Gentile woman into the presence of God.

Prayer should be persistent. It is neither because God cannot hear, nor God needs to be moved by us; it is through this process that God trains our trust in Him. Do not challenge God's sovereignty or attempt to manipulate Him into responding to our prayers in the timing we want or the way we desire. Remember, God is the Lord!

Devotion 2: Matthew 15:21-28

Questions:

1. How does the passage convey the Canaanite woman's persistence in her prayer?
2. Is Jesus' silence and rejection due to His indifference toward the Gentiles?
3. What do you do when you are waiting for your prayers to be answered?
4. What are the practical ways to help you pray persistently?

Prayer:

Dear God, I know that you are our God who hears prayers, and you will surely accomplish the best for me in your time and according to your will. Grant me faith to pray persistently and wait patiently. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Matthew 15:21-28

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

27 "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

28 Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.



Devotion 3: Romans 8:26-27

When Paul says, "We do not know what we ought to pray for," the emphasis of our prayer is not on our skills and methods, but on our inability to fully perceive God's will in prayer. That is what Paul refers to as our "weakness".

While it is true that we need to continually pursue maturity to draw closer to God and know His will, we must acknowledge that our limitations in prayer are objective and may even be insurmountable. In the previous verses, Paul talks about how it is in God's will that all creation "groans" within the present world which is tainted by sin, and yet they are awaiting future glory. Such tension of "the already but not yet" arises because we are caught between the already realised salvation and the not yet fully realised salvation. On one hand, we are saved and have become the children of God; on the other hand, we recognise that we have not severed all ties with the world of "sin and death". Thus, we are still incomplete. Therefore, we cannot assume that our requests are necessarily aligned with God's will.

However, we do not need to be troubled or afraid. Through prayer, we can still intimately interact with God and listen to His guidance as "the Spirit helps us in our weakness", and the Holy Spirit intercedes for us according to God's will. What a beautiful promise and assurance!

Devotion 3: Romans 8:26-27

Questions:

1. What does "weakness" mean to you, in light of Paul's reflection on his "weakness"?
2. Would you worry that your prayer may not align with God's will? Why or why not?
3. When you are assured that the Holy Spirit dwells within you and intercedes for you, how do you feel?
4. Recall a time when you experienced the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, thank you for leading me in my prayer and filling in my weaknesses. Please continue to assist me, and let every prayer be pleasing to God, and so I would be able to accomplish your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Romans 8:26-27

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

Family Discussion Point

How many ways of communication can you think of? Talking over the phone, sending a text message, writing an email, making a video, drawing a picture, and posting on social media. Which one is your favourite way to share your thoughts and stories with others? Do you know God wants us to communicate with him too?

Could you imagine trying to have a best friend, wanting to share with him or her everything you can, but without communicating with them? It is not possible! Similarly, if we are to follow God, to love him and to obey him, we need to talk to him through praying to him. God has designed prayer as a way for us to communicate with him. Through prayer, we can praise him, ask him for forgiveness, thank him for all he has done, and let all our requests be made known to him.

Throughout the Bible, we see people of God praying to him in all kinds of situations: Moses prayed to God when he had to face Pharaoh; Samson prayed to God to restore his strength; the Book of Psalms is filled with David's prayers to his God; Prophets like Jonah & Daniel, they all prayed to God for his guide; Even Jesus himself spent lots of time alone to pray to God his Father in heaven. God wants us to pray to him all the time, in whatever situations we face.

Read Romans 8:26-27.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

But sometimes prayer isn't so easy, there will be times when we are too tired to pray, too sad to pray, or we cannot find the right words to say to God. Paul assures us in this passage, that we have the Spirit of God in us, that in times when we can't pray, the Spirit prays for us. And God knows our heart, that is if our heart is connected and willing to communicate with him.

Question:

1. What could be some of our "weaknesses" that stop us praying to God?
2. Who is able to search our heart and know our mind?
3. Do you think you can set aside some time each day to pray and talk to God?

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you that I can talk to you in my prayers and that you are always there to listen. Please help me to talk to you more. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.