

The Essence of Prayer.

Most human beings on the planet pray at least some time during their lives. When difficulty or changes threaten, the immediate response of many people is to pray.

As Christians we know that prayer should be in the centre of our lives, yet we often find it hard to be consistent in prayer. We know that prayer is not easy!

Prayer is the interaction between us and God. It takes place between two parties who have a relationship. True prayer only takes place because of our new relationship with the Father, through the Son and by the Spirit. Prayer is simply this relationship in action.

Prayer consists of words spoken from us to God which may seem obvious. Christians today have differing views of prayer however: an attitude; mystical meditation, contemplation, listening; even action – doing something as a ‘prayer’. However prayer in the Bible is always simply speech from us to God. God for His part, has spoken to us at many times and in various ways through the prophets and in these last days through His Son (Heb 1:1) We, in return, are given the unspeakable privilege of speaking in return. Of pouring out our souls before God : Asking; Thanking; Crying out; Confessing; Interceding.

God is not a force or an idea. He is a person and so we relate to Him by listening and speaking. We pray to the Father, through the Son and by the Spirit. God is our Father (Mat.7 :7-11). Just as our relationship with the Father can only be through the Son, so also prayer can only take place through the Son. Through His cleansing sacrifice we are granted access to God’s throne, even though we are sinners. And when we kneel before God to make our requests, we see the same Son at the Father’s side pleading our cause.

The Holy Spirit is also essential for Christian prayer. He lives within us, aiding and abetting our prayers. (Rom. 8:26-28) Because of our weaknesses and our struggles, our prayers are plagued by ignorance and imperfection. Yet the Holy Spirit helps us by making up for our weaknesses and ignorance by interceding to the Father on our behalf. It is hard to put this process into words. But in some way, He makes up for our weaknesses and ignorance.

This speaking to the Father takes place in the context of our lives. It happens we live with the tension of being members of God’s family, and yet still residents of a fallen world. As we speak to God our Father, we do not do so in the comfort and rest of eternal bliss. We speak to Him in weakness and suffering, as we battle our own continued sinfulness, the temptations and hostility of the world. And the animosity of the devil.

This is why prayer is often a struggle. When Paul mentioned to the Colossians that Epaphras was working hard ‘wrestling in prayer’ for them, we can understand what he meant. Prayer can be a great struggle!

Often in the Bible, God commands us to pray, which on the face of it would seem to be unnecessary, given who God is and what He has done for us! For example Eph 6:18 “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep praying for all the saints” It seems we need more than the promise and a privilege. We need the call of God’s command as well, to drive us to our knees and speak to Him.

At times, prayer can seem pointless to us. If God is the sovereign ruler of the universe, what can we ask Him that He doesn’t already know? There is a part of us that sees prayer almost as

a waste of time. It seems relatively useless compared with actually *doing* something for someone. What we are really asking is ‘Does prayer have a real purpose?’

By talking to God we grasp hold of the blessings He offers and make them our own. The Reformer John Calvin expressed this truth so well, “To know God as the Master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of Him, and still not go to Him and ask of Him – this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him... It is therefore by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the heavenly Father... We dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lords Gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon”

We receive God’s blessings by asking for them. The whole of the Christian life is one of constant repentance, of turning back to the Holy One and away from our sins. Calvin goes on to say: “The beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt. Nor should anyone, however holy he may be, hope that he will obtain anything from God until he is freely reconciled to Him; nor can God chance to be favourable to any but those whom he has pardoned.

One cannot read the prayers of the New Testament and especially those of Paul, without being struck by how full of thanksgiving they are. It is not surprising that this is the basic shape of Christianity in the New Testament. Our only possible response to God’s mercy in Christ, is thanksgiving. That is the only possible response to grace. Eph1:15-16: Phil 1:3-6.

In prayer we grow and persevere. In prayer Paul is never content to simply thank God for where His people have come to. He always wants us to go further. E.g. Phil 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12.. In the context of our weakness and struggle, prayer is our ongoing contact with God. Prayer is part of the way we keep our eyes fixed on what is to come. It is striking how often in the New Testament prayer is talked about in connection with watching and being on the alert. Mat 26:41; Lk. 21:36; 1Pet 4:7.

Prayer is not only how we ask God to help us persevere but it is one of the key ways by which we persevere. As we devote ourselves to prayer, to talking regularly with the Father, we keep our minds on the job. We stay “focused” as modern athletes like to say.

In prayer we are God’s fellow workers. We participate with Him in his plan to save His people and bring them into His eternal kingdom. God uses our prayers as part of His work in the world. God does not need us to do anything for Him – that goes for everything we do as Christians, whether teaching, preaching, evangelising, helping, serving or praying. The amazing thing is that God lovingly includes us in His plans all the same. God graciously includes our prayers (and our actions) in His purposes. He remains in sovereign control and He will achieve what He wants in the end. Yet our prayers, and His answers to them, form part of how He does this.

From the talk given to the L.A.M.P. group by:
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