

PRAYER IS OUR FAITH IN ACTION

Some of you may have made telephone calls to people overseas. It is amazing how from a long distance you hear a familiar voice. The call may involve a local operator, a radiotelephone connection, a satellite transmission, then wires to the place you are calling. You may even be able to dial direct. If man by his ingenuity can invent such a marvellous way of talking almost anywhere in the world, how much easier it is to communicate with God!

Prayer is just as real as communication with someone else by phone, and worth a great deal more, even though God doesn't talk to us in prayer, but through His Word. Many Christians fail to appreciate what a privilege prayer is and how effective it can be, through their ignorance or slackness. Far too often prayers are a kind of SOS, or just saying formalised sets of words without much attention to what they mean. If someone said, in a nonchalant way, "*Lord God, heavenly Father...*", and God were to answer, "*Yes, what is it?*" imagine the shock!

Known sins that are not forsaken, wrongs for which no restitution has been made, and refusal to forgive block prayer. Yet we don't have to meet levels of personal holiness before prayers are heard. Remember the tax-collector's prayer, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*"

In prayer we shouldn't only make our requests to God, but include thanksgiving, adoration, and praise. We honour God in our hearts, for He is so powerful that He can answer any prayer. Therefore we know that He can see ways out of trouble when they make us numb. He is so wise that He often gives us better than we ask, even though we may not realise it at the time; and He is so merciful that every sin has been atoned for through Jesus His Son. Yet, as great as God is, we can pray to Him with confidence, as to a loving Father.

Our reasons for praying don't have to be only spiritual blessings. Our prayers are also very practical, in our everyday experiences of life, and not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of others.

When we pray, we should be open to the Lord's guidance. Sometimes God indicates His will by blocking off paths we expected to follow. Every day we face situations that need decision and action. We don't know the future, and we don't understand the implications of present problems. Though we suffer from these limitations, we can ask the Lord to control and direct us and our lives.

The person who prays regularly cultivates a continued awareness of God, of His presence, love, wisdom, power, goodness, and mercy. God isn't far away, but close by our side. He is fully aware of His elect, and cares about them. He knows their temptations, and their weakness, and wants to be asked for help. This continual awareness of God is basic to Paul's instruction, "*Pray without ceasing.*" In prayer we are like the priests of the Old Testament who served right at the tabernacle, in God's presence. Through Christ's perfect sacrifice we have direct access to the Father, and our prayers are like the incense that those priests offered before the veil of the Holy of Holies.

A large part of prayer ought to be claiming the Lord's promises, taking His promises, and throwing them back to Him, in faith. It follows that for prayer we ought to know His Word well, and make a practice of turning verses of Scripture that we have memorised into prayers. The more we know parts of God's Word that apply to particular circumstances of life, the more confidence we have as we speak prayers that are based on His own Word. The psalms are so good to use, because they are both prayers and Word of God at the same time. So we know they are pleasing to Him

As we pray we should remember that we never pray alone. Even if no one else in the world prayed for us, Jesus our Saviour prays for us (Rm 8:34), and the Holy Spirit also prays for us, supplementing our prayers where they need it, and interpreting them in terms of the Spirit (Rm 8:26-27). These are strong incentives to pray. Even more than a long distance telephone call for help, in prayer we can confidently expect God to hear. We wait on His "*Yes.*" We sometimes accept His "*Wait*", and we trust that He never really says "*any.*" Jesus assures us, "*I*

tell you the absolute truth, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you.”

People who pray regularly become more certain that things don't just happen. They happen because God controls them, in power, wisdom, and love. He can even turn what seems to be a disaster into useful training and solid benefit.

Another witness to God's power and wisdom is His answer to prayers before we utter them. God promised, *“Before they call I shall answer. While they are yet speaking I shall hear”* (Isa 65:24).

We often find ourselves in situations that require earnest prayer. To thank God for prayers He has answered before we have seen the answer is pleasing to God, and brings great peace to our hearts. Notice the things that Paul links together in Ph 4:6-7, *“Do not worry about anything, but in every concern thankfully make known your requests to God in prayer. And the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*