

The Promise of Prayer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Col. 4:2, Rom. 12:12, Matt. 26:34–44, Heb. 11:6, James 4:2, John 14:15, 1 Thess. 4:3.

Memory Text: “Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice” (*Psalm 55:17, NKJV*).

Key Thought: In numerous places in the Bible, the Lord calls us to pray because prayer is an essential component of our walk with Him.

Ellen White gave us these words on the issue of prayer: “Our heavenly Father waits to bestow upon us the fullness of His blessing. It is our privilege to drink largely at the fountain of boundless love. What a wonder it is that we pray so little! God is ready and willing to hear the sincere prayer of the humblest of His children, and yet there is much manifest reluctance on our part to make known our wants to God. What can the angels of heaven think of poor helpless human beings, who are subject to temptation, when God’s heart of infinite love yearns toward them, ready to give them more than they can ask or think, and yet they pray so little and have so little faith? The angels love to bow before God; they love to be near Him. They regard communion with God as their highest joy; and yet the children of earth, who need so much the help that God only can give, seem satisfied to walk without the light of His Spirit, the companionship of His presence.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 94.

That about sums it all up, doesn’t it?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 10.*

The Power of Prayer

One day, a young man received a letter from a former co-worker, someone who had retired a number of years earlier. The two workers, to put it mildly, hadn't gotten along; the one who had left, had from the start, treated the other one badly. Anyway, the remaining worker opened the letter and started to read. Among the words were the following: "You know, I don't understand how prayer works, never did, at least intellectually. I do know, however, that we have been told to pray and over the past few weeks, as I've been praying, I've been greatly convicted about how I treated you all that time. I see that I was wrong, un-Christlike, and a horrible witness for my faith. I know I should have done this a long time ago, but I do sincerely apologize. I have to claim Christ's forgiveness for what I have done, no matter how unworthy I am, and now I ask for your forgiveness as well."

In many ways, this story exemplifies the power of prayer. It's not so much to get God to move mountains, although that can happen. Instead, it can cause something even more miraculous: it can change the human heart.

As the person wrote, prayer isn't always easy to understand. Why ask God for something if He knows about it already? Will God not do something unless we ask for it first? Can our prayers really change what the Creator God will do?

Whether we understand how prayer works or not, one thing is certain: without it, our walk with the Lord is destined to failure.

Read the following texts. What main point do they all have in common? *Matt. 26:41, Luke 18:1, 1 Tim. 2:8, 1 Thess. 5:17, 1 Pet. 4:7, Col. 4:2, Rom. 12:12.*

No question, as Christians we are told to pray and to pray often. That we might not understand how prayer works is, really, beside the point. Most of us don't fully understand how anything works, be it secular or sacred. If we waited until we fully understood all the issues regarding our faith, then it would hardly be faith, would it? The very word *faith* itself implies that there are elements beyond our intellectual grasp. One thing, though, that anyone who prays consistently and fervently—and according to the will of God—can testify to is that prayer can, and does, change our lives.

What is your understanding of prayer? How has it impacted your life? Where would you be in your Christian walk without prayer?

Jesus, the Praying Messiah

What do the following texts teach us about Jesus and prayer? What is the context of each verse?

Luke 3:21, 22 _____

Luke 9:28, 29 _____

Luke 6:12, 13 _____

Heb. 5:7 _____

Matt. 14:23 _____

Luke 22:31, 32 _____

Matt. 26:34–44 _____

Jesus, the spotless Son of God, the One who was without sin, without fault, the One who lived in perfect harmony with the will of the Father, obviously had a powerful prayer life. (The above verses don't even include Jesus' prayer in John 17.) If Jesus needed to pray in order to deal with the things He faced, how much more do we? Christ's example of prayer makes it abundantly clear how central prayer needs to be in our walk with the Lord. It's hard to imagine anyone having any kind of relationship with God without that person praying. If communication is crucial to maintaining relationships with other people, how much more so in a relationship with God? Jesus gives us an example. It's up to us to make the choice to follow it.

How consistent is your prayer life? How distracted are you from praying? Do you pray consistently or when you are in trouble? How can you make prayer central in your walk with the Lord?

The Prayer of Faith

“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6). What important principles does this text teach us in regard to what is required for prayer and what it means to us?

In a sense, prayer is a way of coming to God, of opening oneself up to Him. We don't pray so that God will know the things that we need. After all, Jesus Himself said, in the context of prayer, that “your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (*Matt. 6:8, NKJV*). We pray because prayer is a way of exercising our faith in God. It's a means of making our faith stronger, more real, and practical. Who hasn't experienced how fervent, unwavering prayer, offered with a sense of dependence and need, has increased one's faith and deepened one's relationship with God?

Prayer is a way of helping to empty self of self. It's a way to die daily. It's a way to reconnect with God on a very personal level. It's a way to remind yourself that you are not your own, that you have been bought with a price, and that left to yourself you would crumble and die in a world full of powers and forces that could, in an instant, trample you into the dirt.

So often we hear the phrase “seek the Lord in prayer.” What does that mean to you? See Dan. 9:3, 4; Zech. 8:21.

To a great degree, every prayer is an act of faith. Who can see their prayers extend to heaven? Who can see God receive them? Often we pray without seeing immediate results; yet, we go on faith that God hears and will answer in the best way possible. Prayer is an act of faith in which we reach out beyond what we see or feel or even fully understand.

How much of your prayer life is rote and static, as opposed to deep and heartfelt? How can you move away from the former toward the latter?

Because You Do Not Ask

One of the questions that those who pray often ask is, “Can my prayers really move God to do something that, otherwise, He might not do?” That’s a logical question. To answer it, all we can do is go to the Word of God and see what it says.

Read James 4:2; Luke 11:9, 10; James 5:16–18. What do these texts say about our prayers and the actions of God?

However much prayer changes us and impacts our relationship with God and others, the Bible is very clear that our prayers influence what God does. We ask and He responds, one way or another.

Read Genesis 18:22–33. How do we see this principle at work here?

Again, whatever the philosophical difficulties associated with understanding this truth, God does respond to human prayers. He said that He does, and so we have to take Him at His Word.

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14, NIV). What does this text teach us about prayer?

Notice, however, that God isn’t going to heal their land just because they ask. They are called to pray, but prayer is only one aspect of a general revival on their part.

Perhaps the most important example of this principle is here: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NIV). Here, we see a powerful link between prayer (in this case, confession) and God’s action in our lives. We confess our sins, and He forgives them, a process that also results in His cleansing us from our unrighteousness. The clear idea implied here is that if we don’t pray, don’t confess, we aren’t forgiven. No question, in these cases, God acts in response to our prayers.

Complying With Conditions

Someone sits in a restaurant, consuming a large meal, filled with fatty food that he or she washes down with a soft drink. He or she then finishes off with a large bowl of chocolate ice cream covered in hot fudge. That night, before going to bed (and having a little snack before then, too), he or she kneels to pray. Part of his or her prayer is, “O Lord, please help me lose weight.”

What’s wrong with this picture?

The fact is, we can expect God to answer our prayers, but there are things we need to do in the process. It has been said that we need to live out our prayers; that is, we need to do all that we can, in our power, to see them answered. This isn’t humanism, nor is it showing a lack of faith. On the contrary, it’s part of what living by faith is all about.

“If we regard iniquity in our hearts, if we cling to any known sin, the Lord will not hear us; but the prayer of the penitent, contrite soul is always accepted. When all known wrongs are righted, we may believe that God will answer our petitions. Our own merit will never commend us to the favor of God; it is the worthiness of Jesus that will save us, His blood that will cleanse us; yet we have a work to do in complying with the conditions of acceptance.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 95.

She’s not saying that we have to be perfect in order to have our prayers answered. She’s clear, too, that our acceptance with God is not based on us, or on our merit, but only on the merits of Christ for us. She is saying that we have to be in an attitude of faith, humility, and surrender to God’s will in order for Him to be able to work in our lives.

How do the following texts help us to understand what it means to “comply with the conditions”? See *Heb. 10:38, Deut. 4:29, Luke 9:23, John 14:15, 1 Thess. 4:3*.

Perhaps, of all the conditions necessary for us to have an effective prayer life, the central one is our own sense of need, our own sense of helplessness, our own sense that we are sinners in need of grace, and that our only hope exists in the Lord who has done so much for us. To be arrogant, self-assured, and full of oneself is a recipe for spiritual disaster.

What are the things you’re praying fervently for? As you pray, ask yourself, What could I be doing differently that could help bring about the answer that I so desperately want?

Further Study: “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved. Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Well-spring of life, and strengthens the sinew and muscle of the religious experience.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 254, 255.

“When we do not receive the very things we asked for, at the time we ask, we are still to believe that the Lord hears and that He will answer our prayers. We are so erring and shortsighted that we sometimes ask for things that would not be a blessing to us, and our heavenly Father in love answers our prayers by giving us that which will be for our highest good—that which we ourselves would desire if with vision divinely enlightened we could see all things as they really are. When our prayers seem not to be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most. But to claim that prayer will always be answered in the very way and for the particular thing that we desire, is presumption. God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold any good thing from them that walk uprightly. Then do not fear to trust Him, even though you do not see the immediate answer to your prayers.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 96.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What do you say to someone who asks, “Why pray, if God knows all things in advance”?
- 2 Who, at times, doesn’t struggle with the question of answered and unanswered prayer? For instance, someone prays that their car not break down on a trip and, when the car doesn’t break down, they attribute the happy circumstances to answered prayers. This is fine. But what do you say to the person who also prayed, in this case that their child wouldn’t die, and yet the child dies? How do we understand these things? Or can we?
- 3 What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our prayer life?
- 4 Imagine in class someone new arrives and he or she asks, “Can you teach me what it means to pray? How should I pray? Why should I pray? And what should I expect when I do pray, and what should I not expect?” How would you answer?

Summary: No question, there are a lot of things about prayer that we don’t grasp. But those who pray do know one thing for sure: prayer will change your life, and for the better, as well.

The Noisy Neighbor

by BOBBY WAGH

Raju heard the singing coming from the neighbor's house and turned his music up as loud as possible. Sometimes he could still hear the singing, and he shouted abuses at the little group of Seventh-day Adventist believers who worshiped next door.

Other neighbors avoided confronting Raju about his actions. They left the handling of the troublesome neighbor to the Seventh-day Adventists. The believers visited Raju and offered to pray for him and his family. But their kindnesses only irritated Raju more. He purposely chose the believers' worship time to bathe his idols and pray to them.

Raju's first child died shortly after birth, but the man refused to let the believers pray with him. When his second child also died shortly after birth, Raju worshiped his gods with renewed vigor. But then his third child died, and Raju felt desperate. He ceased worshiping his idols and stored them inside his house.

When Raju's wife became pregnant again, Raju was filled with fear that he might lose both his wife and the child she carried. Once more the Seventh-day Adventists offered to pray with Raju and his wife about the unborn child, but still Raju refused.

The child was born apparently healthy, but soon he developed jaundice, just as his older siblings had. The doctors told Raju that only a full blood transfusion would save the baby. Raju felt powerless and desperate.

The Seventh-day Adventists learned of the baby's illness and visited the family in the hospital. Raju was distraught over his tiny son's fragile condition. Desperate, he allowed his Seventh-day Adventist neighbors to pray for his wife and son. The group gathered around the bed and earnestly petitioned God on behalf of mother and child.

As the baby grew stronger, Raju and his wife rejoiced. They realized that their son was alive because the God of the Seventh-day Adventists had shown mercy on them. Raju and his wife began attending the church next door to their house, and in time, they gave their hearts to the Lord. They threw their idols into the river and asked to be baptized.

Now, instead of raising a ruckus with loud music during the believers' worship service, Raju sings God's praises loud and clear. He is sharing his love for God with others and helping the little group grow. Our mission offerings help raise up congregations in areas such as Raju's, where few believers live. Thank you for helping to share God's love through your mission offerings.

BOBBY WAGH is treasurer of the South Maharashtra Region of Western India Union.