

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

by Dan Trygg

What is prayer? Prayer is conversing with God. It is a communion with Him, both listening and speaking. It is a time of worshipping Him, of petitioning Him, and listening for His response. **Prayer is *not* informing God of our needs.** In Mt. 6:8, Jesus plainly declared to us, "...your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Therefore, the methodology of the prophets of Baal (I Kg. 18:20f.), who were attempting to get the attention of their pseudo-god, is completely ridiculous for the one who knows the true God. Such methodology is rightly described as meaningless repetition (Mt. 6:7). Their increasingly wild and dramatic efforts to reach their god, who apparently was preoccupied elsewhere, were appropriately mocked and scorned by Elijah, the prophet of God Almighty (I Kg. 18:27). Our all-knowing God, who can discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart (I Chr. 28:9; Heb. 4:12,13; Jer. 17:10) and understands the contents of our minds from a distance (Ps. 139:2), even He who sees in secret (Mt. 6:4,6,18), has no need to be informed of anything. He knows it all in advance (Ps. 139:4).

If prayer is not to inform God of our needs, then why is it necessary to pray? If God knows everything, why does He not give what is needed without our intercession? We are definitely commanded and encouraged to pray (Col. 4:2-4; I Thess. 5:17; Eph. 6:18; I Sam. 12:23; I Pet. 4:7), and there are many promised advantages that come from prayer, but why does God require it and expect it of us? The answer to this question is, as we have seen before, that **there is a partnership relationship which God desires to develop and maintain with humankind.** He created us with free will and intends for us to exercise it in every aspect of our lives, in order to confirm His will and affirm our dependence upon Him. In that regard, prayer is essentially an expression of faith and worship.

Prayer is an expression of a heart of faith in several ways. Faith is a confident trust in the veracity of God's revealed truth. Toward God, **faith is expressed by prayer in that it is, at bottom, an *action* of the belief that: (1.) God is *able* to meet the need of my petition (Rom. 4:23); and, (2.) God is *willing* to act on my behalf.** Without these two ingredients, in at least seed form, we would not consider praying at all. If we did not think that God could make a difference, we would not bother to pray. Furthermore, if we thought that He might be able, but that He was uninterested in puny, little us and our insignificant concerns, we would likewise not waste our breath. **The fundamental, bottom-line ingredients to both prayer and faith are, in the words of Heb. 11:6, "He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."** Can there be a more pure expression of that faith than in the action of prayer? How ridiculous, at least to the unbelieving observer, for us to speak into the air about things which we feel we cannot do ourselves, or to be asking for the direction and ability which are beyond ourselves. For the outside observer, there is no immediate reward for prayer, nothing tangible to be gained, unless there is a God and He does truly answer those who seek Him. Without faith, prayer is unexplainable; and prayer is the purest expression of faith.

Prayer is worship. It is an acted choice, an investment of life, effort, and energy, designed to develop, maintain, and express our relationship of dependence upon God. It conveys our trust in His ability and willingness to come to our aid. It exalts Him as God. It lifts Him up as our confessed source of life and provision, our All in all (I Cor. 15:28). It honors Him as the One whom we envision as worth our attention and time. It is the heartfelt expression of our faith that the unseen things are more "real", more powerful, than this seen world of daily experience. It recognizes that there is more to reality and existence than what we see, smell, hear, taste, or touch. God is given praise and honor, both by the direct verbal expression of His worth and His glory, and by our coming to Him and presenting our needs to Him in an acted-out expression of our dependence. **It is an acknowledgment of our dependence upon Him for life.** In that regard, the essence of abiding in the Vine is to be found in the place of prayer, since abundant fruitfulness finds its beginning, support, and maturity in our communion with Him.

The Partnership of Prayer

We have seen that prayer is an expression of faith, a response to the Biblical picture of humanity in relationship to God. **On the one hand, prayer is the ultimate expression of our dependence upon God. It is**

the admission that we cannot deal with life by ourselves. We cannot go through a day successfully without waiting upon God for guidance and power for living. Can there be a more pure expression of faith in the reality of our need than to cease all activity and in silence, in secret, to come before God in the expectation and appeal of prayer? Is there an action that more clearly and obviously portrays Jesus' comparison of the branch's dependence upon the Vine to the life of the believer than prayer?

On the other hand, prayer is an expression of faith in another important teaching of God's Word, i.e., that

we play an important part in getting things done in this world by the impact of our involvement in prayer.

Unless we believed that we make a difference, either to God or in our world, we would never be motivated to pray. **The sovereignty of God is never presented as a monolithic determinism in Scripture. God has privileged us with sharing the responsibility of the outpouring of His grace upon this world.** The assumption behind every passage on prayer is that our investment in prayer will bring about, by God's grace, changes in the outcome of certain events or His dealings with certain people. This is not because we manipulate God, or that there is any "power" in our prayers themselves. It is because God has given to us the high calling and privilege of being intercessors. It is a gift, an office which He has called us to by His grace. It has pleased Him to exalt us to have a place in the outworking of His kingdom. **Where we act on this privilege, the results can be dynamic. Where we ignore this office, the impact can be devastating.** This is not because *we* are anything, rather God has given us the privilege of asking Him to act. This brings glory to God by: (1.) revealing His benevolent desire and pleasure to exalt us as His children; (2.) causing His people to seek Him with a dependent heart for their various concerns; (3.) motivating His people to pursue maturity and the revealed qualifications for effectual praying; (4.) clarifying His power and concerned involvement in the lives of people through His answers to specific needs; and, (5.) generating praise and thanksgiving in response to His answers to particular requests.

Both sides of this place of human privilege and responsibility in prayer are presented to us in the book of Ezekiel. In 22:30,31, we find the tragic revelation that because there was no one to intercede, to "stand in the gap" before God for the land, its destruction would not be turned back (Cf. Isa. 50:1-3; 59:15-19; 63:5,6). We see, in this example, the tremendous potential impact that one person's prayers can have (Cf. I Kg. 17:1; Jas. 5:16-18). We see, also, that **God searches for individuals to intercede, to ask Him to act on behalf of His people.** There are times when, as in Jer. 7:16; 11:14, and Ezk. 14:12-23, the judgment for sin is already set in motion, and the intercession of the godly will only deliver themselves. The effective ministry of the intercessor, however, comes *before* the moral state of a nation sinks that low. **If a moral and spiritual decline is addressed early enough, a calling out to God for mercy and revival can be very effective in not only putting off judgment** (e.g., II Chr. 34:1-28), **but also in stimulating renewed spiritual interest among a wandering, ignorant people** (Isa. 63:15-64:7; cf. I Jn. 5:14-17). Thus, there is a responsibility to be a watchman, or sentry, who not only warns by the spoken word (Ezk. 3:16-21), but one who also waits before God in intercession on their behalf (Isa. 62:1-7).

The positive privilege for the intercessor is illustrated in Ezekiel 36:37,38. Without a doubt, **God is the One who is in control, yet He graciously condescends to allow His people to ask Him to increase their numbers.** We also see, in the New Testament, the value of interceding for ourselves and for others to be strengthened against sin (Lk. 22:40,46), and/or be restored from its effects (Lk. 22:31,32; I Jn. 5:14-17). Glimpses into the apostle Paul's life of prayer open to us a wealth of possibilities, areas which he felt were under the influence of prayer. We find, as he intercedes for the people he writes to, examples of **prayer for growth in spiritual understanding in order to know God's will and be enabled to do it** (Col. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-22). We find **prayer for the abundant outflow and maturation of genuine love** among believers, and its resulting fruitfulness (I Thess. 3:11-13; Phil. 1:9-11). He mentions the need for intercession so that boldness and clarity of speech would be given in the sharing of the Gospel (Eph. 6:19,20; Col. 4:2-6). He thought that **even opportunities to share our faith come in answer to prayer** (Col. 4:2,3). He asks God to encourage and strengthen the hearts of His people for every good work and word (II Thess. 2:16,17). In fact, Paul's heart was in prayer, with the worship of joy and thanksgiving before God, always and in every circumstance. He, furthermore, saw that as God's will for us all (I Thess. 5:16-18; cf. I Sam. 12:23).