

# Purpose of Prayer

*"I've tried praying. It doesn't help."*

*"Prayer changes things."*

*"The more you pray, the more opportunity you give God to work in your life."*

While the above three statements each have a different view of prayer, they each come from a rather simplistic idea about prayer. Man is naturally superstitious, and prayer is one of the main victims of man's superstitions.

## Definition

English: *prayer* – from the Latin *precare* which means to ask, request, beg

Greek: *proseuxesthe* – to wish for something good (presumably of God)

Hebrew: *palal* – to intervene, mediate (between God and man)

Notice how in both the Latin and the Greek, the idea is very similar, which is to make a request/wish for something. In the Hebrew, however, the basic idea of the word excludes oneself in the request. Prayers in Old Testament times were predominantly offered by the priests on behalf of the people. They would serve as mediators between God and the people. Since Jesus is our true Mediator, the Old Testament picture gave way to the New Testament reality that we have direct access to God through Christ.

## Prayer is Worship

Throughout the world, in every religion, people pray. This reveals that prayer is part of the natural law which God placed in the heart of all people (conscience). Luther correctly placed prayer in the Second Commandment when he wrote:

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

*What does this mean?*

We should fear and love God that we do not curse, swear, practice witchcraft, lie or deceive by His name, but call upon Him in every trouble, **pray**, praise, and give thanks.

Yet, because of sin corrupting our understanding of God's Law, prayer, like all forms of worship, has been distorted into its various forms of superstitions, effectively turning it into a magical incantation and God into nothing more than a genie in a bottle. This violates not only the Second Commandment, but the First Commandment as well. Consider the following example from the life of Elijah:

*Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." (26) And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. (27) And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (28) And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. (29) And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:25-29)*

Notice how the prophets of Baal not only prayed to Baal, but along with their prayers they cut themselves in a vain attempt to get Baal to respond. Of course, Baal couldn't respond since he didn't truly exist, but in their distorted understanding of natural law, they figured that inflicting harm on themselves would make their prayers more acceptable. This is superstition.

Another form of superstition in connection with prayer is addressed by Jesus in Matthew 6:7:

*And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.*

Neither going through the motions or speaking emotional words is true prayer. God isn't swayed because of how many times we offer a prayer or because we "pour ourselves" into our prayers. Such "prayers" are an attempt to approach God on the basis of what originates from man, which is not true worship. True worship, and thus true prayer, flows from what originates in God.

### **An Exercise of Faith**

Since worship flows from what originates in God, prayer, being a form of worship, is an exercise of faith. This faith is not the kind that simply believes whatever it happens to believe. That, too, is superstition and idolatry. This faith is the faith that believes what God Himself has said in His Word regarding sin, redemption, forgiveness, and salvation; in other words, this faith is founded upon God's grace toward us in Christ. Thus prayer flows from that grace that originates in God and comes to us in the person of His Son.

The various qualities of faith are integral aspects of prayer. They include: *humility, repentance, selflessness, trust, love, submission*. Consider Psalm 64:

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (2) So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. (3) Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. (4) So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. (5) My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, (6) when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; (7) for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. (8) My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. (9) But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth; (10) they shall be given over to the power of the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals. (11) But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped.*

Pay attention to how David relies completely on God to accomplish His will in His steadfast love. He doesn't make demands of God or seek his own earthly desires. His desire is for the glory of God and for the grace to uphold him throughout his earthly trials.

### **Communion with God**

Prayer is a special work of God in the life of the believer. It is both a good work and, at the same time, a deeply personal outpouring of one's dependency on God for mercy. Through prayer, God gives the individual direct access to Himself for comfort and encouragement. In prayer, we are given an opportunity to reflect and rely on the source of our salvation and the intimate relationship we have with the God of the Gospel.

So intimate is our relationship with God that Christ Himself teaches us how to pray, i.e. *"Our Father, who art in heaven..."* As Christians, we aren't just creatures of God who owe Him worship. We do owe Him worship and therefore ought to pray as the Law teaches us, but we are also sinners, separated from God so that He will not hear our prayers apart from the atonement of sins obtained in Christ. Through Christ, we become more than creatures – we become children of God, adopted into His family with full rights of sons.

Prayer is not a sacrament. It does not save, does not bestow the forgiveness of sins, does not open heaven to sinners. Those who think of prayer as a sacrament have an erroneous view of the sacraments and their purpose. We must not think of prayer as a means of grace, but simply as the plea of the heart and mind of the Christian who looks to God for all things good according to His will.