

Why Are We Required to Pray?

The appropriateness of giving prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God are much easier to understand than prayers of petition, our need to ask for things, because why should we really expect to get what we ask for? Doesn't God already know what we want and, more importantly, what is best for us? Yet, it is a fact that in the Gospels Jesus emphasises the need for persevering in prayer (Luke ch.11 and 18 above) and tells us to pray with total assurance that what we want will be granted:



'ask and it shall be given, search and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened' (Matthew ch.7)

'if two of you agree on anything it will be granted to you ..' (Matthew ch.18).

Yet this raises many questions, because we know from our own experiences, that our prayers are not always granted. Even when we pray for others, perhaps for someone dying or for other matters generally accepted as worthwhile, we are often disappointed. But do we really expect to influence God's Will and change the course of His providence? I think in our hearts we know this can not be done. Jesus made us aware of this when he said not to worry about life, as God knows what we need already (Matthew ch.6):

'do not worry ... look at the birds of the sky, they do not sow or reap or gather, yet your Heavenly Father feeds them'

So, why was Jesus so explicit about prayer and what is its real value?

Jesus often taught in hyperbole, that is, in an exaggerated way that he did not mean to be taken literally. He did so to make people think and to add emphasis to the message he wanted to make. So, for example, let us look at what Jesus said about faith:

'if your faith is only like that of a mustard seed you can tell a mountain to move and it will' (Matthew ch.17)



Should we think that because we can not move a mountain that our faith is weak? Does it mean the Pope's faith is weak? No, it is just Jesus' way of recognising our weaknesses and emphasising the need for us to truly trust in God.

Perhaps the real value and purpose of prayers is the way they make *us* realise our dependence on God, help us become genuinely humble, give us an indicator to what is really important in life, and enable us to show our love of others. Perhaps the message Jesus wanted us to appreciate is to recognise that what happens *really* has a much greater dimension than what *our* individual preferences might be for what *should* happen to us. When God grants our prayers it is because he already knows that our prayer is meant to be *part* of what He has *already* determined would happen. Our successful prayer is part of the mystery of grace.

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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Can Prayer Bribe God?

Examining the role of prayer



Question for Reflection

1. Are there some things we should not pray for?
2. Why is that some prayers seem to be answered and others not?
3. Why did Jesus Pray?
4. Why do you think the Disciples asked Jesus how to pray when, if you think about it, all Jews were brought up in prayer, particularly with the Psalms, and with the Temple rituals and the various feast day celebrations?

What is Prayer?

Prayer is essentially a conversation with God. It can take different forms, not just verbal or silent thought as we usually think of it, but it can also be made by action and movement, dance and mime.

When we pray we **ASK, THANK or PRAISE**, but, if we are honest with ourselves, it is usually to ask for something, and if it is granted, do we really thank with equal intensity?

A Summary of Prayer in the Old Testament

In English, we only have the word 'prayer' to express communication with God. If we wish to be more specific about prayer we have to add something, so we say, for example, 'prayer of thanksgiving' or 'prayer of praise'.

However, in Hebrew there are several words for prayer to reflect the different ways we can approach God. So, there are special words for 'intercede for someone', 'ask for something for yourself', 'ask for forgiveness', 'pray aloud', 'prayer of praise' ('hallal' from which we get hallelujah), and others.

Before the exile, prayer was very personal, between Israel, as the people of the Covenant, and Yahweh (God). A particular feature of prayer in this period is its anthropomorphic view of God, and petitions for material goods and earthly happiness. As we have seen already, this reflects the theological attitude of the time for, without any concept of afterlife, requests for what we would call 'spiritual' blessings had no meaning.

Famous examples of OT prayer are: the song of victory, thanks and praise made by Moses and the Israelites after the crossing of the Reed sea (Exod. ch.15), the petition of Hannah for a son (1 Sam.ch.1) and her prayer of thanks (1 Sam.ch.2), David's prayer of thanks (2 Sam.ch.7). Prayer in this period also has a strong social context, with cultic prayer at the different sanctuaries and, after the collapse of the northern kingdom, in the Temple in Jerusalem. This is reflected in the Psalms.

The classical prophets criticised insincerity and hypocrisy in prayer, both individual and cultic (Amos ch.3, 4, 5, Hosea ch.4, 6, 8, 10, Isaiah ch.29, Jeremiah. ch.7, 11)

In the post-exilic period, a change can be seen in both the content and emphasis of prayer. The developed understanding of Yahweh as a universal God, combined with their sense of guilt over incurring God's wrath, led the Jews to adopt more formal and longer prayers (Ezra ch.9, Tobit ch.3, Judith ch. 9) together with a much greater emphasis on prayers of forgiveness.

Prayer in the New Testament

Like the classical prophets, Jesus is highly critical of insincere and hypocritical prayer (Matt.ch.6)

'when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites ... pray in private'

He is particularly critical of the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocrisy in prayer e.g. Mark ch.12

'beware the scribes who walk in long robes ... take the front seats ... these who devour widows and, for show, offer long prayers'



Jesus seems to respect short sincere prayers, like the prayer of forgiveness of the tax collector e.g. Luke ch. 18:

'God be merciful to me a sinner'

This episode again also shows Jesus' contempt for the hypocrisy of many of the Pharisees.

Jesus stresses the importance of perseverance in prayer, with his stories of the man who badgered his friend for three loaves (Luke ch.11) or the widow persisting in wanting justice from the judge (Luke ch.18).



The Importance of the Lord's Prayer

At the request of the disciples (Luke ch.11) Jesus taught them the Our Father (Matthew ch.6). We all say this prayer often and it takes central place in the Mass but how often do we really reflect on its different components? Because Jesus Himself taught this prayer it must be particularly important and illuminating both for our lives and for knowing what the content of prayer should consist of. In my view, it is important to see the Lord's Prayer as a **Prayer of Wisdom**: more so than one of petitions for our needs, as it summarises the whole Law, as stated in Matthew ch.22:

'Love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul... and your neighbour as yourself'

Pray the Lord's Prayer and Think Its Depth

- *We must recognise God as OUR father, OUR creator (the key revelation).*
- *There is a Heaven, a dimension outside our universe in which God reigns.*
- *God deserves to be loved, praised and obeyed (the greatest commandment).*
- *God's kingdom, His rule, is in one sense amongst us now, thanks to the coming and sacrifice of His son, Jesus, but in another sense we have it to look forward to in its fullness.*
- *God's power and Will preside over everything, in all places and at all times.*
- *We should ask God for our basic needs, although He already knows them, because it shows our humility in placing our reliance on God who is our caring father*
- *We can always ask for the forgiveness of our sins, no matter how serious they are or how ashamed we might be of them, provided we have genuine sorrow for having hurt God*
- *We are obliged to show love to others and forgive them for any sin they may have committed against us (the second greatest commandment).*
- *We must recognise that our life is subject to forces that can cause us to be led astray and sin against God, but equally recognise that God will help us against those forces if we have a proper heart and pray in the right spirit for his guidance.*
- *Bad things can and do happen to us in life, suffering of all sorts, but when they do we must pray to God for strength to cope with them and not give up hope.* Amen