

Course on Prayer - AVBC, 2005

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Session #3 **How Prayer Works - Who Is Involved**

INTRODUCTION

- As usual we will begin with a mini review.
- In the first two units of this course we have explored the origins and foundations of prayer.

- In surveying the history of prayer in the Bible, we saw that prayer was invented by one or more of the grandchildren of Adam and Eve, and it was prompted, almost certainly, by human need of some sort.
- The Scriptures encourage us to pray; but to think of prayer as an imposed duty, is to miss a key point.
- It is, first and foremost, a privilege and a blessing *to us*.

- We also explored just why we believe prayer is worthwhile.
- It is a mistake to think that prayer works because we believe in it or in God, or because we do it in the right way.
- Prayer is worthwhile because of God's nature which inclines Him to be receptive and responsive to prayer.
- He does this because he is a personal God who cares about the children He has created.
- Because of His omnipresence and omniscience, He hears every spoken word and every whispered thought.
- Because He is affectionate and generous, He is attentive to every sincere prayer addressed to Him.
- He is also wise enough to respond appropriately to every prayer, and mighty enough to be able to respond effectively as well.
- He cares about our needs and hurts, and is so willing to respond to our prayers that He teaches us how to pray, and encourages us to be confident of His attentiveness and loving response to our prayers.

- Now we come to our third prayer topic:
HOW PRAYER WORKS - WHO IS INVOLVED.
- The obvious and simple answer to this question is that unless two or more people are praying together, there are just two persons involved in prayer, the individual praying and God who hears the prayers and decides how to deal with or respond to each person who prays.
- There is a lot of truth to this summary, but there is also a lot that is missed by it, and that

is why I have prepared this study.

- As we work through it, I am hoping that you will really come to appreciate how important our prayers are to God, as you better understand the many dimensions of His involvement in our prayer life.

- But before we begin to examine God's involvement in our prayer life, let's think for a few moments about our part in prayer.

- We are completely free to approach God at any time in any place or situation and speak to Him about whatever is on our minds.

- It would be very pleasant to believe that our typical approach to Him is motivated by love, adoration, thankfulness, appreciation of our Father and a desire to please Him, spend time with Him, and intercede for others.

- But what we find in many of the prayers recorded in the Scriptures like the prayer of Hannah for a son, and probably in our own prayers, if we stop to examine them, is that most human prayers are a series of "gimmies" in which we inform God of our latest needs and problems.

- I am not suggesting that such prayers are necessarily bad or wrong.

- People are very seldom criticized or scolded by God in the Scriptures for the things they choose to include in their prayers, even when we might think that what they are asking is unworthy.

- Isn't that a good thing!

- If we understand that our requests are improper we might hesitate to ask for them.

- But God wants us to appreciate our dependence on Him for everything, every day.

- And bringing Him our problems and hurts and asking Him for everything under the sun does express our dependence on Him.

- But it is important to appreciate that from God's point of view our attempts to communicate with Him may be disappointing.

- He is well aware of the shortcomings and defects of our prayers.

- But God also understands our limitations and weaknesses, and the way they affect our prayers.

- And there are Scriptures that indicate that God really appreciates and values our prayers (Pv 15:8).

- Nevertheless, He knows that, like immature selfish children, we need to be taught how to communicate properly with Him (Mt 6:5-8, 14f; Lk 18:10-14).

- God sees our prayers as the product of our weakness, because we don't know how to pray as we should and need His help with what to pray about (READ: Rom 8:26f).

- He knows when our prayers are selfishly motivated and pleasure-oriented, and such prayers are deliberately unanswered (READ: James 4:3).

- The Scriptures have a lot to say about the conditions on which God will answer our prayers, yet at times we forget the most obvious things, such as unconfessed sin.

- We may not appreciate the extent to which sin in our lives hinders our prayers (READ: 1 Pe 3:7; Isa 59:2).

- From His point of view our prayers may also be lacking in persistence, so that we give up too soon and so do not get what we are asking for (READ: Lk 11:5-10).

- We need to be reminded when we need to pray and what we should pray about (**READ: Mt 26:41; Lk 21:36**), and especially to pray for others who need our prayers (**READ: Mt 5:44; James 5:16; 2 Thes 3:1; Col 4:3**).
- We even need to be reminded to pray about our problems lest we try to carry them alone (**READ: Jas 5:13**).
- Sometimes we get ourselves in such a state that we feel close to despair, because we lack the protection of ongoing prayer (Lk 18:1) .
- How many of us have learned to pray, as we should, without ceasing (1 Thes 5:17; 1 Cor 7:5).
- How do we compare to the example of believers like Epaphras who laboured earnestly in prayer for fellow believers (Col 3:4)?
- When we pray our faith, like that of the first disciples, may be fragile (Lk 21:32) and weak (Mk 11:24; Mt 21:22).
- When we think about our part in prayer, it is easy for us to see our deficiencies, failures, forgetfulness, and lack of simple trust.
- All the failures and defects of our prayer life are obvious to God all the time.
- If everything depended on our prayers being all that they should be, where would we all be now?
- Would we still be in the faith, would the Kingdom have survived to this day and would the work of the Church continue to advance?

- Now let us think about God's many-sided involvement in our prayers.
- Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each actively involved in your prayers and mine.
- This message could have been entitled, *THE PATH OF PRAYER*, because all three persons of the Godhead participate in it.
- We will see that we pray in the Spirit, through the Son and to the Father.
- Let's consider their roles one by one in greater detail.
- There is far more to their roles than we might suspect.

- First the role of God the Father in our prayers:
 - He did not begin by commanding His creatures to pray, but designed us in such a way that we needed Him and would be inclined to reach out to Him, in spite of our rebellious nature.
 - That is why people first began to call on His name.
 - It may be true that none of us, on our own initiative, is inclined to reach out to God out of love for Him.
 - But still we do call out, if only selfishly, for what we hope He will do for us.
 - But having sinned, we have no right to access to Him or fellowship with Him.
 - God could have left us in our unholy state and ignored all our pleadings.
 - But in His mercy He made a way for us to approach Him in His holiness.
 - Salvation's plan was His grand design for our cleansing, restoration to His favour, and adoption as beloved children.
 - It was the Father who sent Jesus for our instruction and salvation and the Holy Spirit for our daily assistance and protection.

- It is He who listens to our prayers, appreciates and values them with all their faults and defects, and lovingly considers every word and longing.
 - His responses are in keeping with our best interests, even when our requests are not.
 - How unloving it would be if He always gave us what we asked for rather than what is good for us.
 - If He didn't edit our prayers in love, but just granted every request, we would likely find ourselves in as much trouble as toddlers in an unguarded candy shop.
- Gave us instruction through the prophets and His Son as to the conditions on which He is willing to answer our prayers.
- We will explore those conditions in unit #6 of this course.
 - Through His Son He invites and encourages us to ask Him for things. "Ask and you will receive, - for he who asks receives".
 - He also encourages us to pray with the many promises that He has given to those who approach Him.
 - He encourages us by showering us with examples like Abraham, Moses and Daniel whose prayers were honoured and mightily rewarded.
 - He further encourages our prayers by answering them (Gn 35:3; Ho 2:21,23).
 - Usually His answers are unremarkable and capable of explaining away as co-incidence.
 - If it were not so, there would be little need for faith in our relationship with Him.
 - But now and then His answers are so remarkable and memorable that we are assured that they come from His hand.
 - At times His answers are very clear and dramatic, especially when He is responding to the prayers of children or new believers or individuals with urgent needs.
 - At times His answers take the form of external or material help, on other occasions they come as an inner assurance of His love, protection and presence with us.
 - And if we should have any doubts about His willingness and eagerness to answer us, we have His word through the prophet Isaiah that He will answer even before His people call (Isa 65:24).
 - God gives us life experiences that illustrate this truth.
 - A number of months ago my son Timothy called me to tell me about such an answer to prayer.
 - Timothy supports his family by building and selling harps.
 - But many months had gone by without a single sale and the situation was getting serious. so he and his wife prayed for a sale.
 - They prayed out of real personal need.
 - While they were praying the phone rang, but they let it ring and kept praying.
 - Afterward they checked their messages and found that the caller had ordered a harp.
 - Then he checked their e-mail and found that another order had just come in. - Later that week a third order came in.
 - We address our prayers to the Father, but it is He who makes it possible for us to approach to Him and gain a hearing, and He makes prayer profitable for us.
- Next we come to the role of Jesus in our prayers.
 - He made possible our approach to a holy God in prayer, by cleansing our spirits with His

shed blood.

- He is the supreme teacher who tells us how to pray effectively, and Himself modeled the vibrant living sort of prayer life that we can all aspire to.
- Jesus' own prayer life is especially well described in Luke's gospel.
- Luke had a special interest in investigating Jesus' prayer life and recording what he learned.
- I recommend it to you for further study.
- With one breath, Jesus accomplished the greatest prayer revolution in history, when he authorized His followers to approach the Father using His name as their passport to receptive consideration.
- And so Jesus provided us with His personal status when we come before the Father.
- In John chapters 14, 15 and 16 Jesus makes 3 very important points about requesting things in His name.
- First, He twice promises to personally do anything that we ask Him in his name [READ Jn 14:13f].
- Most prayer in the Bible is addressed to the Father, but Jesus appears to allow us the special privilege of direct access to Himself as well.
- And furthermore, He says that He will personally respond to such requests, so the Father is not the only one who answers our prayers.
- There is a good example of a prayer addressed to Jesus in Acts 7:59. [READ]
- Incidentally, I have not been able to find a single reference in scripture to praying the the Holy Spirit, so we are on safe ground if we avoid that questionable practice.
- Second, Jesus tells us that the Father will give us whatever we ask in His name (15:16; 16:23f).
- This is a brand-new privilege that Jesus personally granted to His disciples.
- Some have compared this privilege to the right to sign Jesus' name to cheques.
- But God is not a bank, and this comparison makes Him into an it rather than a personal God.
- What Jesus is doing when He speaks to His father is not making a withdrawal from an unlimited chequing account.
- He is living out an intimate relationship with His Father, a relationship in which He is dearly loved and valued.
- So what Jesus shares with His followers is the intimacy and affection that He enjoys when He speaks to His Father.
- We can count on the kind of warm loving reception that Jesus enjoys in His Father's presence, so that our requests are regarded as though they come from Jesus.
- This does not mean that God will fail to recognize a selfish, un-christlike request when I make one.
- What praying in Jesus' name means is that when my requests are true to the character of Jesus, whose status I claim, they are treated as though they come from Jesus' own lips, as though they were requested by Him.
- Third, Jesus tells us that this privilege, the privilege of having Him ask for things on our behalf when we pray in His name, will become less important in the future, because we will understand that the Father is pouring out His love on us directly, rather than through

Jesus (READ Jn 16:26f).

- In other words, we will have the status of beloved children because that is what we have become, in our own right, and not just because of our connection with Jesus.
 - We know that Jesus prayed for His disciples while He was with them (Jn 17), but He has not stopped praying for them.
 - Hebrews tells us that He ever lives to make intercession for us (7:25).
 - Why does He do that? we may ask.
 - He does it because He knows and cares about our truest and greatest needs.
 - He personally and continually speaks to the Father about them, and in that way He adds His voice to ours when we pray, and makes up for important omissions in our prayers.
 - Jesus also sent us the Holy Spirit, to be our ever present companion and helper.
 - This includes helping us in our prayers.
 - Clearly there is a great deal to Jesus' involvement in our prayer life.
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- Finally, we come to the Holy Spirit's role and involvement in our prayer life.
 - We do not speak a lot about the Spirit in our church.
 - Some would fault us for this, but we have an excellent reason for it.
 - The Scriptures don't say a great deal about Him.
 - There is a very good reason for this.
 - Jesus said the Spirit would testify concerning Him, rather than bring attention to Himself.
- [READ: Jn 15:26]**
- Jesus said we were better off without His visible presence with us, because that would mean that His Spirit would be present with us. (Jn 16:7)
 - Jesus asked the Father to give us the Spirit (Jn 14:16f) whom He would send as our Paraklete.
 - This Greek word is hard to translate into English, because it expresses a range of ideas.
 - It names someone who is called along side you or me by Jesus.
 - But why does Jesus call Him along side us? we may ask.
 - He calls Him to my side to provide *whatever sort of help I need*.
 - It would be accurate to say that the Spirit has an all-purpose role.
 - That's why the translation "Helper" is appropriate, as well as the translation "Comforter" because sometimes the help we need most is comfort, so that is what He gives.
 - On other occasions what we need most is encouragement to pray, and the Paraklete helps by bringing prayer to mind.
 - Sometimes in our praying it seems that the Spirit brings certain needs and requests to our minds.
 - Occasionally they surprise us by appearing, uninvited and unexpected on our lips, and we may be right to suspect that He is at working in us again.
 - Jesus promised the disciples that the Spirit would bring to their memory all the things that He had said to them (Jn 14:26), and He likewise brings to our minds things that we have learned and need to be reminded of.
 - When I need protection, He protects me although I am not aware of His efforts.
 - When I need correction, He pricks my conscience or prompts someone to rebuke me, although His ministry is undetected by me.

- ***This should not surprise us***, because those of us who have received Jesus as personal saviour are indwelt by the Spirit of God.
 - And if we know what is good for us, it is our earnest hope to have Him living in and through us and breathing life into our prayers.
 - We can try to be sensitive to His gentle promptings and follow His leading in our prayers.
 - That is surely a part of what Paul means when he says to pray "*at all times in the Spirit*" (Eph 6:18; cf. Jude 20).
 - He will not shout in our ears, but we can become more sensitive to His promptings and respond more submissively to His rebukes.
 - There are times when God's love and comfort and presence are very real in our lives, especially when we are praying, and this is likely another evidence of the Spirit's presence in us.
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- We will end this unit by examining one very precious passage that pulls back the curtain a little bit on the Spirit's involvement in our prayers.
 - The passage is **Romans 8:26-28** [READ].
 - The Spirit's involvement in our prayers has a low-profile, like most of His labours in us, but His help is very important.
 - It is difficult to describe in words, because we are not ordinarily aware of it as we pray, and so we do not know its precise extent or nature.
 - This passage reminds us that we are weak, but there is no sign of weakness in the Spirit's prayers for us.
 - They are all that our prayers should be.
 - Verse 26 makes clear that He supplements and corrects the deficiencies or weaknesses of our prayers.
 - He makes up for any lack in our enthusiasm and sincerity by accompanying our prayers with groans of yearning and concern that mere words cannot adequately express.
 - The Father hears His groans, but we don't.
 - The Father understands exactly what the Spirit means.
 - The Father who knows our every thought also knows the Spirit's mind.
 - Often we do not know what God's will is, and at such times we may pray for the wrong thing, or be reluctant to pray at all in case for fear of being out of harmony with God's will.
 - Verse 27 assures us that *the Spirit intercedes for the saints in keeping with the will of God*.
 - In other words, if our prayers leave out important things or are misguided, the Spirit prays the way we should have prayed.
 - He knows the Father's will, and so the prayers He prays alongside ours are better than ours.
 - The result is a prayer duet, in which one voice is often a bit off key.
 - Of course, we cannot hear His requests.
 - If we could, we would always know God's will.
 - But we can rely on His helping our prayers in this way.
 - This confidence in His inaudible accompaniment may be another part of what is meant by praying in or through the Spirit.

- It should be a very precious encouragement to us amid life's many uncertainties to know that His prayers continually supplement and correct ours even though we cannot hear them.

- The next verse, verse 28, is a favourite of many believers.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

- Please note the obvious link between the Spirit's interceding for us in accordance with God's will, and God's causing of all things to work together for good for those who love Him and are His.

- The context here seems to suggest that the Spirit's involvement in our prayers encourages the Father to keep our best interests in mind in every circumstance of life.

- Summing up then, our prayer lives are much more complicated and many-sided than a new believer would ever suspect.

- Our prayers may have many weaknesses and deficiencies.

- But God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do a God-sized job of welcoming them, guiding them, accompanying them and correcting them to keep them in harmony with His will.

- No Christian ever prays alone.

- Whenever a believer prays, at least three other persons are involved.

- The Father listens lovingly and attentively.

- The Spirit prays along side us and through us.

- And Jesus continually intercedes on our behalf with the Father.

- This involvement of the Godhead is not something we can perceive directly, but by faith we can know that it is so because the scriptures assure us that it is.

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, OR INSIGHTS TO SHARE ABOUT THE PROCESSING OF PRAYER OR WHO IS INVOLVED IN MAKING IT EFFECTIVE?

- Questions or comments about points made by Hunter in the fifth chapter of his book ?

- Did he make any points that struck you as particularly insightful or questionable?

- I appreciated his remark about praying to God whom we cannot see while we are with people who we can see, and wording our prayers more to impress them than to speak to Him (p68f, 71).

- This seems to fit with Jesus' teaching about praying alone in your room with the door shut (Mt 6:6).

- I liked his point about how God's personal name, Yahweh, reminds us of His self-conscious, self-determining and personal nature. A personal relationship with Him is possible because He is not an 'it' or an impersonal intelligence(p69).

- On the other hand, Hunter cautions us that emphasis on God's personhood can lead to the error of thinking of Him as just a big version of what we are, rather than appreciating Him as God almighty (p70).
- People who try to make deals with God may be in danger of falling into this trap; The same is true of people who judge or condemn God.
- Do you agree with Hunter's suggestion that God is really the only one with whom we can truly bare our souls (p73)?
- What do you think of his suggestion that we pick a prayer time that we can look forward to?
- Did you like his ideas for focusing our attention while praying: praying out loud, using notes or lists, praying on an empty stomach (he calls it fasting) and singing to God in the shower (p74).
- Do you agree with him that, "God's response to prayer generally is not extraordinary."(p77)
- Did you agree with his concern about saying, "God has given me peace about so and so." (p77f)
- Did you agree with his idea that developing a relationship with us seems to be God's motive for encouraging and valuing prayer. (p79)
- Do you think Christians sometimes use prayer as an excuse for procrastination or doing nothing? (p80)

Assignment: Please re-read chapter 1 in preparation for the next unit.