

Teach Us to Pray



By Jack W. Provonsha

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The first thing we must learn about prayer is that prayer is not a means of maneuvering God, but the possibility of more adequately allying ourselves with God. It makes no sense in a moral universe to ask God to move mountains when those mountains belong precisely where they stand at the moment. What kind of a universe would it be if people were able to make $2 + 2 = 5$ all over the place simply by repeating prayer formulas? Undoubtedly those intrusions into the natural order would come into conflict with each other at least on occasion.

Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* wrote, "There they are, down there every night at eight bells, praying for fair winds—when they know as well as I do that this is the only ship going east at this time of year, but there's a thousand coming west—what's fair wind for us is a head wind to them." You've probably heard of the English clergyman who intoned at prayers during World War II, "Dear Lord, we English are praying for victory, and the Germans are praying for victory. It seems the best you can do is to keep out of it." The moral universe itself would be in jeopardy if God gave an affirmative answer to all the prayer requests sent his way.

"Whatsoever ye ask" includes, according to John, "in my name." We read in Ellen White's *Desire of Ages*, "But to pray in Christ's name means much. It means that we are to accept His character, manifest His spirit, and work His works"—and not our own (668). Which means that not all our prayers will be answered in the way we wish—God not only knows better than that, he is better than that.

Jesus asked whether good earthly parents would give their children stones when they asked for bread or serpents when they requested fish. "How much more shall your father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him" (Matt. 7:11), good things like giving us bread even when we ask for stones—and fish when we ask for serpents, and good things like being able to be responsible.

When we come to Him we should pray that we might enter into and accomplish His purposes and that our desires and interests might be lost in His. We should acknowledge our acceptance of His will, not praying Him to concede to ours. It is better for us that God does not always answer our prayers just as we desire, and in just the manner we wish. He will do more and better for us than to accomplish all our wishes; for our wisdom is folly.¹

Jean Ingelow once wrote, "I have lived to thank God that all of my prayers have not been answered."

There is one kind of prayer, however, that God will always answer just as we wish, and that is the sincere prayer for forgiveness and for the grace of his acceptance—because that's his will too. "When we pray for earthly blessings, the answer to our prayer may be delayed, or God may give us something other than we ask; but not so when we ask for deliverance from sin. It is His will to cleanse us from sin. It is His will to cleanse us from sin, to make us His children, and to enable us to live a holy life."²

God is not in the business of making tricks, but of making people. George Meredith in *The Ordeal of Richard* says, "Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered." Wrote Walter Mueller, "Prayer is not merely an occasional impulse to which we respond when we are in trouble. Prayer is a life attitude."

(You may have heard of the atheist roofer who was nailing shingles on the top of a high-rise apartment when he lost his hold and started to slide toward the edge. He had been loud in his denial of God's existence but was now heard to utter a prayer for help. Fortunately his trousers caught on a nail before he reached the edge and he was pulled back to safety. His friends, however, taunted him. "What was that we heard you say as you were sliding down the roof? We thought you didn't believe in God." "Well," he replied, "if there is no God there ought to be one to help a fellow out of a fix like that.")

Prayer is not so much something you say (even when sliding off a roof) or do, as it is something you are. When you've said the words the larger prayer begins. The words are, for the most part, the way one strengthens and reinforces that larger reality. Prayer is a life—a life lived out not just in practicing the presence of God, but in realizing that presence and behaving appropriately.

The prayer of magic is essentially idolatrous. It assumes that man can make the Almighty God con-

form to man's wishes. The prayer of faith, on the other hand, involves a life lived out according to the divine will—a life that takes hold of God's hand and employs those small whispered moments throughout a day for remembering that God cares very much and is very near to each one of us. And perhaps sometimes prayer may even send an expression of gratitude heavenward for the fact that we live in a moral universe where $2 + 2$ always equals 4, where you can depend on God because he is running an orderly ship, and because you can always trust him to answer the true prayer of faith—for cleansing, for forgiveness, and for strength to live the life of prayer.

Finally, prayer is the possibility of community. People as well as families who pray together stay together. This is the primary meaning of intercessory prayer. People who become concerned about each other and express that concern in praying for each other belong to each other in very special ways. Man who was made for community was also thus made for intercession. These are the real mountains that prayer moves—those that separate us from each other. In response to the disciples entreaty "Teach us to pray," Jesus began, "Our Father which art in heaven." No man can pray that prayer without discovering that he is a part of every man for whom he prays because God is in fact our Father.

In a world where people not only need God but desperately need other people, never was it so important that we all learn to pray. "Lord, teach us to pray."

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Notes and References

1. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health: And Instruction to Medical Missionary Workers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1923), 378.
2. Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1925, 70.

