

Three Misconceptions about Prayer

by Dr. Henry Oursler

If you could ask God for one miracle in your life, knowing that He would grant your request, what would you ask Him? Would it be to put your marriage back together? . . . to change something about your job? . . . to bring home a straying son or daughter? . . . to heal your body? to straighten out your finances? . . . to bring a loved one to Christ? Whatever your request might be, do you *regularly* and *diligently*, every single day, bring it to God in prayer, trusting that He will intervene in your situation? If not, why not?

Most of us have to admit that we don't pray that often about our deepest needs. We get faint-hearted. We begin to pray, but we soon find our minds wandering and we realize we're using empty phrases. Our words sound hollow and shallow and we start to feel hypocritical. We give up. Why don't we pray? I believe it gets back to a series of misconceptions about the way we think about God Himself. In fact, I believe our problem is not so much with prayer – it is with our view of God Himself. When we straighten out our view of God, we'll pray much more effectively!

1. God is Not Reluctant – He is Willing!

The first misconception many have is that God is *reluctant* to answer our prayers. Remember the story from Luke 18:1-8, where the woman goes before the unrighteous judge. She nags and pesters him until he finally relents, saying, "*Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection.*"

We've interpreted this allegory wrongly. We've taken it to mean that we humans are like the widow: impoverished, powerless, with no connections and no status, we have nowhere to turn. God, then, must be like the judge. He's busy, unconnected with us, and has a universe to run. It's best not to bother him. But if we do need something desperately enough, we can pester Him. We can bang on the doors of heaven. We can ask our friends to pester Him, too. And after a while, He might wear down and we can wrench a blessing from His tightly closed fist.

But if we think clearly, we realize first, we are nothing like the woman. She was poor and powerless, with no rights. We are children of God, with thousands of promises from our heavenly Father. Second, we realize God is nothing like the unjust judge. He has covenantally promised to give us abundant blessings. ¹ The Father delights in giving us a rich inheritance. Ephesians 1:5 states that "*in love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ.*" Romans 8:16-17 tells us,

The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.

If we are ever going to learn to pray effectively, we must begin to relate to God as a Father who takes *delight* in us. He is a gracious, loving Father who longs to bless His children. Zephaniah 3:17 tells us,

The LORD your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with his love, He will rejoice over you with singing.

2. God is Not Impotent – He is Able!

A second misconception is that God would *like* to answer our prayers, but that He is *unable* to do so. Do we really believe God is all-powerful? Or are we practical atheists, doubting His power, His sovereignty and omnipotence?

I want to launch an all-out assault on our lack of convictions in this area. The truth is that God is all-powerful over nature. When God decided certain seas or rivers needed parting, He parted them.² When His people were hungry, He dropped food from heaven or multiplied bread and fish.³ When a storm endangered the lives of His disciples, Jesus stilled it.⁴ When Israel's troops needed more time to consolidate their gains, He extended the daylight hours.⁵ And when the nation of Israel was about to die of thirst in the wilderness, God sent water right out of the side of a dry rock, so that no one would be tempted to believe that they stumbled across an artesian well.⁶

We see God's power over circumstances in Acts 12. Peter was imprisoned and scheduled for execution. The church prayed for his release – and God sent an angel to escort him out.

Most importantly, we see God's power over human hearts. God has the power to make a shy Moses into a leader.⁷ God has the power to soften cruel Pharaoh's heart.⁸ God has the power to keep a discouraged Elijah from quitting.⁹ God has the power to turn a fanatical Saul into a faithful apostle.¹⁰ And God has the power to turn a faltering disciple like Peter into a bold and confident apostle.¹¹

3. God Does Not Vacillate – He is Unchanging!

Finally, some have the misconception that God can't be counted on because He changes. We reason that because we change so frequently, God must also. Yet over and over, the Bible says that God is consistent. He is faithful. God

says, "I the Lord do not change."¹² Jesus Christ "is the same yesterday and today and forever."¹³

Do you remember the scene in *Chariots of Fire* where Eric Liddell has chosen to drop out of the one-hundred meter race because it was to be run on a Sunday? The movie finds him preaching at a church that Sunday morning where he read these words:

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*¹⁴

Prayer energizes us because we realize that we can count on an unchanging and faithful God. He invites us into His presence to ask and pray. Would you do that today? Read these three prayer promises – and then record three or four specific requests that you are asking of God today. Claim His promises – and see what He will do!

God's Promises

Matthew 11:28-29 *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

Philippians 4:6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Hebrews 4:16 *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

My Requests

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

¹ Leviticus 26:3-6; Deuteronomy 28:2-6,12. ² Exodus 14; Joshua 3. ³ Exodus 16:1-21; John 6:1-13. ⁴ Mark 4:35-41. ⁵ Joshua 10:12-14. ⁶ Exodus 17:1-7. ⁷ Exodus 3-4. ⁸ Exodus 11. ⁹ 1 Kings 19. ¹⁰ Acts 9:1-31. ¹¹ Luke 22:31-32. ¹² Malachi 3:6. ¹³ Hebrews 13:8. ¹⁴ Isaiah 40:28-31.