

## ***Towards A Deeper Understanding Of Prayer***

A sermon series by Rev. David Johnson

Any time a detective sets out to solve a crime he begins by asking himself some very basic questions. Some of them can be resolved rather easily. Others take time and a bit of research to answer.

Likewise, a writer who wants to compose an article or book must do their homework answering similar questions. Shortcuts just won't do if the author wants a thorough, effective, and compelling story.

But in either case, the questions asked by the detective or the author are similar: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How (*the 5 W's and 1 H of investigation*). The challenge is to solve as many questions as possible, knowing that more answers mean a more comprehensive analysis.

In the area of prayer, much has been taught and written over the centuries of Biblical and church history. My goal in this brief series is not to come up with a new or contemporary approach to prayer, but rather, answer some oft-asked questions and motivate you to pray. To this end we will use those same 6 questions in our own investigation, beginning by answering "*What is prayer?*"

### **A. What**

Many believers over the millennia have sought to define this thing called prayer. Some have referred to it as a noun (*a prayer*); a structured statement such as the Lord's Prayer. Others use the term as more of a verb (*to pray*); a spiritual discipline to be pursued by a spiritual person to God or a god. Still others discuss prayer as more of a mental, emotional, or psychological exercise (*to pray/meditate/self-speak*); a type of mystical "non-directed missile pointed anywhere" (*positive energy*).

In reality, any of these could be true, in the broadest sense of the word. After all, Webster's dictionary defines prayer as "*An address (such as a petition) to God or a god in word or thought, a set order of words used in praying, or an earnest request or wish.*"

Even for the Christian, we may struggle for a specific meaning, since there is no concise definition of prayer in the Bible. Oh, we have numerous examples of prayer - but no simple definitions. Therefore, we must construct a definition based on the principles we learn from these Biblical cases. Let's begin by looking through the eyes of several committed men of God.

At the beginning of Martin Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer, in his Small Catechism, he poses the questions, "What is prayer?" and "What should be the content of our prayers?" His simple answers are:

*"Prayer is speaking to God in words and thoughts...In our prayers we should ask for everything that tends to the glory of God and to our own and our neighbor's welfare, both spiritual and bodily blessings. We should also praise and thank God for who he is and what he has done."*

O. Hallesby (*Scandinavian revivalist preacher and author*) in his classic book, *Prayer*, draws a correlation between Revelation 3:20 and a basic definition of prayer.

**Rev. 3:20 '... I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.**

*"To pray is to let Jesus into our hearts. This teaches us, in the first place, that it is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus. It is Jesus who moves us to pray. He knocks. Thereby he makes known His desire to come in to us. Our prayers are always a result of Jesus' knocking at our hearts' doors...Yea, verily, before we call, he graciously makes known to us what gift he has decided to impart to us. He knocks in order to move us by prayer to open the door and accept the gift which He has already appointed for us."*

Hallesby continues...

*"From time immemorial prayer has been spoken of as the breath of the soul. And the figure is an excellent one indeed. The air which our body requires envelops us on every hand. The air of itself seeks to enter our bodies and, for this reason, exerts pressure upon us. It is well known that it is more difficult to hold one's breath than it is to breathe. We need but exercise our organs of respiration, and air will enter forthwith into our lungs and perform its life-giving function to the entire body...The air which our souls need also envelops all of us at all times and on all sides. God is round about us in Christ on every hand, with His many-sided and all-sufficient grace. All we need to do is to open our hearts."*(*Prayer*, pg. 13-14, O'Hallesby)

Another famous author on the topic of biblical prayer was the Methodist preacher, E.M. Bounds, who wrote in his book, *The Essentials of Prayer*:

*"PRAYER has to do with the entire man. Prayer takes in man in his whole being, mind, soul and body. It takes the whole man to pray, and prayer affects the entire man in its gracious results. As the whole nature of man enters into prayer, so also all that belongs to man is the beneficiary of prayer. All of man receives benefits in prayer. The whole man must be given to God in praying. The largest results in praying come to him who gives himself, all of himself, all that belongs to himself, to God...No double-minded man need apply. No vacillating man can be used. No man with a divided allegiance to God, and the world and self, can do the praying that is needed."*

(*The Essentials of Prayer*, ch.1, E.M. Bounds)

**John 9:31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him.**

**James 5:16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.**

Every athlete knows that if a person wants to improve at a sport, they need to commit themselves to practice. If you only practice 15 minutes, you'll only get 15 minutes' worth of improvement. If you practice 3 hours, you'll get 3 hours' worth of improvement. Similarly, if you want a little power in prayer, then only give Jesus a little of you, and a little of your time. But if you want to

see lasting power and victory in prayer, then He must have all of you.

When J. Wilbur Chapman was in London, he had an opportunity to meet General William Booth, who at that time was past 80 years of age. Dr. Chapman listened reverently as the old general spoke of the trials and the conflicts and the victories he had experienced.

Chapman then asked the General if he would share his secret for success. "*Booth hesitated a second,*" Dr. Chapman said, "*and I saw the tears come into his eyes and steal down his cheeks,*" and then he said, "*I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me. There have been men with greater brains than I, men with greater opportunities; but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart, and a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with the poor of London, I made up my mind that He would have all of William Booth there was. And if there is anything of power in the Salvation Army today, it is because God has all the adoration of my heart, all the power of my will, and all the influence of my life.*" Dr. Chapman said he went away from that meeting with General Booth knowing "*that the greatness of a man's power is the measure of his surrender.*" That, in a nutshell, is **Prayer - the complete surrender to the will and prompting of God.**

Compelling stuff I know. But we're still lacking the concrete information some may be looking for. So for those who want specifics, let's go to another source.

### **Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary**

1. "*PRAYER is to converse with God; the intercourse of the soul with God, not in contemplation or meditation, but in direct address to him. Prayer may be oral or mental, occasional or constant, (spontaneously-suddenly) or formal.*"

Prayer **is** talking to God. As you read this excerpt, you can't help but sense the intimacy implied in prayer. This requires a deeply personal and cherished relationship. It puts us in mind of the term "*Yada - to know*" introduced early on in Scripture.

**Genesis 4:1** Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "*I have gotten a manchild with the help of the Lord.*" (ESV - *knew Eve*)

**Genesis 18:17-19** The Lord said, "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...<sup>19</sup> For I have chosen (known) him...*

The idea of knowing the mind and heart of God through prayer, or God knowing us, is not a matter of simple intellectual acknowledgement or understanding. Nor is it only a formal interaction. It's a deeply personal relationship which is open, enduring, and highly interactive. It is both cognitive and experiential.

2. "*Prayer presupposes a belief in the personality of God, his ability and willingness to (communicate) with us, his personal control of all things and of all his creatures and*

*all their actions. ...Acceptable prayer must be sincere (Hebrews 10:22), offered with reverence and godly fear, with a humble sense of our own insignificance as creatures and of our own unworthiness as sinners, with earnest importunity, and with unhesitating submission to the divine will. Prayer must also be offered in the faith that God is, and is the hearer and answerer of prayer, and that he will fulfill his word, "Ask, and ye shall receive" (Matthew 7:7-8; Matthew 21:22; Mark 11:24; John 14:13-14), in the name of Christ (John 16:23-24; John 15:16; Ephes. 2:18; Ephes. 5:20; Col. 3:17; 1 Peter 2:5)."*

Prayer **is** a declaration of trust. At the root of prayer is a belief that God is, and that He is able to intervene in the lives and circumstances of man. We must be convinced that we are not simply speaking to the wind, in hopes that this spiritual exercise called prayer will somehow pacify a fearful, or sin-sick soul. Prayer, by definition, is an act of faith, a reaching out to a personal, powerful, loving heavenly Father. It is the humbling of self and the bold declaration of confidence in a God who loves His creation so desperately that He died to redeem and care for them.

**Hebrews 11:6** And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

3. *It is a "beseeching the Lord" (Exodus 32:11); "pouring out the soul before the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:15); "praying and crying to heaven" (2 Chron. 32:20); "seeking unto God and making supplication" (Job 8:5); "drawing near to God" (Psalm 73:28); "bowing the knees" (Ephes. 3:14).*

Prayer **is** active and emotional. Prayer is not the cold, detached, recitation of a memorandum. Prayer should be passionate; an honest exchange of feelings and longings. In prayer, God infuses his heart and passion to the believer, and the disciple is open and bare before his Lord. Prayer is also active; often creating a physical response. Prayer should be something that draws us, body and soul, into union with our holy and sovereign God.

**Ephes. 5:18-20** And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup>speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; <sup>20</sup>always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;

**Philip. 4:4-6** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! <sup>5</sup>Let your gentle *spirit* be known to all men. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And with this understanding of *What* prayer is, we can then move on to the question of *Who* is allowed to participate in this wondrous discipline.