



How can we be sure that God will answer our prayers? It is not enough that we affirm our belief in prayer. Thousands of mothers, for example, have believed in prayer and have asked God to protect their sons on the battlefield, only to receive a message that they had been killed. Nor does affirming our belief in prayer explain why, when a whole nation prays for peace, it often finds itself caught in a whirlpool of war.

On the other hand, there are thousands who are eager to testify that God has answered their prayers for the safety of their boys. Other thousands will testify of the wonderful manner in which God has given them other special blessings they asked for. On the basis of experience alone, therefore, it may seem that God answers the prayer of some, yet does not answer the prayers of others.

But this is not in keeping with what the Scriptures tell us about God. The Bible says that he is "no respecter of persons." So, there must be some good reason why God answers some prayers, and not others. If we can find that reason, it should help restore the faith of some whose prayers have seemingly gone unanswered.

Prayer is a very important phase of Christian experience. It is also practiced widely by the adherents of all the heathen religions. The desire to pray is an acknowledgment of our dependency upon a Higher Power, the expression of a realization that we need help from some source outside of and higher than ourselves. Doubtless God is pleased with the sincere desire of all who try to contact him in prayer, because to this extent at least it is a recognition of his sovereign power.

The almost universal urge to pray is due to the fact that originally man was created in the image of God. As a result of man's fall into sin and

death the divine image in his character has been much blurred, in many cases almost erased, yet remnants of it still remain, and one of its manifestations is the urge to pray. There may be millions who never pray, yet often feel that they should, and have a sense of guilt because they do not.

Yes, God is pleased with the spirit of prayer on the part of his creatures. But why does he hear the prayers of some, while apparently other prayers go unheeded? Jesus hints at the answer to this question in his observations about the prayers of the scribes and Pharisees. They prayed to be seen and heard of men, Jesus explained, and thought God would hear them for their much speaking. By this we are reminded that there are proper and improper attitudes of prayer, as well as correct and incorrect methods. The heathen who spin their prayer wheels may be sincere, but their method is inappropriate.

The Scriptures also indicate that there are proper and improper things for which to pray. St. James wrote: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss." (James 4:3) It is vitally important to ascertain what we have the privilege of asking God to give us in the way of favors. We cannot expect to ask God for things which our fancy dictates, and have our prayers answered.

The Purpose of Prayer

There is a divine purpose in prayer, and it is highly important that we keep this in mind if we are to understand why some prayers go unanswered. God did not design prayer as a means of finding out how he should manage his affairs here on earth. He is not looking to us to tell him what he should do. He has his own fixed plans and purposes, and if we are to receive the riches of his blessing it is essential that our prayers be in harmony with these. To use the language of James, we ask "amiss" every time we petition God for blessings which he has not designed to give.

In the Scriptures various types of prayer are brought to our attention. Foremost among these are prayers of thanksgiving. God is undoubtedly pleased when his creatures recognize him as the source of their blessings, and because of this lift up their hearts and voices to him in thanksgiving.

Then there are prayers of adoration, prayers which give recognition to the glorious attributes of the Creator's character—his wisdom, his justice, his love, and his power. The desire to glorify God should be the motive for much of our praying.

Prayers for God's mercy are also appropriate. The Scriptures urge all Christians to seek divine forgiveness of their sins through the medium of prayer. Paul speaks of this as going "boldly to the throne of grace," there to obtain mercy and find grace to help in every time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

Then, of course, there are the prayers which are requests for certain blessings, or favors from the Lord. It is with these that we are particularly concerned at the moment. Some pray for health, either for themselves or for others. Some pray for wealth. Some pray for protection while on a journey. Millions pray for peace. It has often happened that citizens of countries which are opposing each other in war pray that their respective armies will be victorious. We will assume that all who go to God in prayer are sincere, and of course they ask him for the things which to them seem the most important at the time. But does the Bible justify us in the belief that all these prayers should be answered?

It might be that God would answer a mother's prayer for the safety of her boy on the field of battle. Or it might be that prayers for the peace of a nation might be answered. But if and when such prayers are answered, it simply means that it was in keeping with his will to do so. God has a fixed plan, in keeping with which he is mindful of the human race. That plan was not made to satisfy the whims and wishes of his human creatures, nor will any amount of praying change his plans.

"Prayer changes things," they say, but it does not change God's plans. God is not looking to us, nor to the nations—not even to the United Nations—to learn what changes he should make in order to better conditions for us or for the world in general. How little confidence we would have in a god whose opinions could be swayed or plans changed by the eloquence of his people's prayers!

"Thy Will Be Done"

In their prayers, God's people should have uppermost in mind and heart the desire that his will be done in all their experiences. We have an outstanding example of this in the case of Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the Master was facing arrest and death, "anguish and dismay came over him, and he said to them [his disciples] 'My heart is ready to break with grief' ... he went on a little, fell on his face in prayer, and said, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet, not as I will, but as thou wilt.' " (Matthew 26:38,39, N.E.B.)

It was God's will that Jesus suffer humiliation and death as the Redeemer and savior of men. This important feature of the divine plan had been foretold by the holy prophets of the Old Testament. And Jesus wanted above everything else to have the divine will accomplished, regardless of what it meant to him. He affirmed this later, when he was about to be arrested. Peter drew his sword to protect his Master, who said to him, "Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:10,11)

The followers of Jesus have the privilege of suffering and dying with him. Paul spoke of being "crucified" with him, and he also wrote, "To you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." (Galatians 2:20, Philippians 1:29) We are called upon to follow in Jesus' footsteps, so we know that it is not God's will to spare us

from all hardship. Thus, as with Jesus, our chief concern should be that the Lord's will might be done in our mortal bodies. The Lord's will might be that for a time we enjoy certain earthly blessings, but the burden of our prayers should not be for these, but for his will to be done.

Jesus enlarged upon this point when he said to his disciples that as long as they were abiding in him and his words were abiding in them, they could ask in prayer for whatever they desired, and it would be granted unto them. (John 15:7) This might seem like an assurance that we are privileged to ask God for anything which we may happen to think of and want. But not so!

Note the condition attached to this statement by the Master—"If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you." To abide in Christ means to be a member of his body, he being our Head. This means that his thoughts become our thoughts, and his plans our plans. If our wills have thus been wholly surrendered to God, through Christ, we will have no will of our own, hence our prayers will not be requests for what we want, but only for those things which are in harmony with the will of our Head. By thus praying in harmony with the Lord's will, we can be assured of favorable answers.

This is in harmony with another statement made by Jesus to his disciples in which he informs us that the Heavenly Father will be pleased to give the "Holy Spirit to them that ask him." (Luke 11:13) To be filled with the Spirit of God means to have his thoughts dominate our thinking, and for our lives to be conformed to those thoughts. Then we will not be asking God for blessings except those which he has promised to give, and so there will never be any question about one's prayers being answered.

"Thy Kingdom Come"

In response to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus gave them what is now familiarly known as "The Lord's Prayer." In this model prayer we are given a guide to what we may pray for.

An important part of this brief outline of prayer is the proper method of approach to God—"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." (Luke 11:1,2) In the Scriptures, Adam is styled a "son of God." (Luke 3:23,38) But when he sinned he lost his sonship, being alienated from God and sentenced to death. Adam's children, the entire human race, are likewise aliens and strangers to God, so they cannot properly address him as "our Father which art in heaven." This is a privilege which belongs exclusively to those who have repented of their sins, accepted Jesus as their personal Savior, and devoted their lives to God in full consecration to do his will. Such are represented as having received God's Spirit of sonship, and thus have become his children.

As the children of God, these will desire above all else to honor the name of their Father. So by word and by action their attitude will always

be, "Hallowed be thy name." To properly hallow our Heavenly Father's name implies that when we approach him in prayer we will do so in the manner outlined for us in the Scriptures by Jesus. He explained that our prayers should be offered in his name. (John 15:16)

There is a reason for this. As members of the justly condemned race, we have no standing at the divine throne of grace except through Jesus, our Advocate. But in his name, and through the merit of the shed blood, we are privileged to go "boldly" to the throne of grace to seek forgiveness, and all the other blessings which our loving Heavenly Father has promised to give. (Hebrews 4:16) If we properly hallow his name we will never presume to approach him except through Jesus.

When we follow the example of The Lord's Prayer, our requests will not be so much on our own behalf as they will be for the blessing of others. This is indicated in the opening petition: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10) The answer to this request will be an answer to much for which people have prayed throughout the centuries. That answer will satisfy the legitimate desires of all people. It will mean peace, and health, and everlasting life for all who conform themselves to the righteous laws of the Lord's kingdom.

The blessings which the human race craves, and for which millions pray, were all anticipated by God and provided for through the kingdom which he has promised by all his prophets. In these promises we find many details of the blessings which it will guarantee to the people, including the restoration of those who have died. No, God has not been unmindful of the suffering of the people, nor has he turned a deaf ear to their cries for help; and his answer to their prayers, when in his due time it comes, will be far beyond anything that they have ever dared to hope.

Take the case of a mother who prays for the safety of her boy on the battlefield. She loves that boy, and nothing could mean more to her than his safe return to the family home. But he does not return, and her first thought may be that God doesn't care, that he has no pity. How differently she would feel if she could believe that God has provided a homecoming far more satisfactory than ever entered her mind when she prayed!

How little does a mother sometimes know of the hardship and suffering her boy may be saved by falling asleep in death. After all, both the mother and the boy are members of a dying race, and the difference between dying on the battlefield and dying a few years later of old age is only a momentary one when compared with the endless stretch of eternity. It is from this standpoint that we must learn to view the subject of prayer and the manner in which God answers our petitions.

The very fact that we pray to God is acknowledgment of our belief that his wisdom and power and love far exceed our own. Yet we often forget this, and feel that he has not honored our prayers because he has not

answered them as we would have, through the exercise of our own puny abilities. The length of our condemned life is very short. We judge accomplishments by whether or not they reach maturity within this short time of which we have knowledge. But we should not judge God's works from this standpoint.

The Scriptures speak of God as being "from everlasting to everlasting." (Psalms 41:13, 90:2) He is under no necessity to complete any particular phase of his plan within our short lifetime, not even if it has to do with our individual requests. If we prayed to God today for some special blessings which would be in keeping with his will, and the answer did not come until tomorrow, or even the day after tomorrow, we would not lose faith in him, but would rejoice when the answer did come. Well, God has his "tomorrows" also. His days are not measured by hours, for they are ages, and in his "tomorrow" age, the thousand-year period of Christ's kingdom, all those blessings which the world has legitimately craved, and for which millions have voiced requests to God, will be abundantly showered upon humanity. In recognition of this, the people will then respond: "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Isaiah 25:9)

"As It Is In Heaven"

We have already learned that God will answer no prayer which is not in harmony with his will. In the greatest of all prayers, The Lord's Prayer, this principle is clearly set forth. It asks God for blessings upon the people of earth—not any sort of supposedly good things which they may crave, but things in harmony with his will. "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."

What great latitude he has given us about things in harmony with his will! God's will is done in heaven, and it is his purpose it shall be done in earth to the same degree. We do not know, of course, all the ways God's will is done in heaven, but we can be reasonably sure that the evils which now exist on earth do not plague the lives of those in the spirit realm we call heaven.

There is no war in heaven. War is an evil which is not in harmony with the divine will. Should we, then, pray for peace? Certainly! Indeed, we could not pray for God's will to be done in the earth as it is in heaven without praying for peace. But our prayers for peace should be in keeping with God's plan to establish peace, and that is his kingdom plan. He has promised to set up a kingdom, to establish a government. Jesus will be the King in that government. "The government shall be upon his shoulder," wrote Isaiah, and "of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end."—Isa. 9:6,7