

Prayer and a Lost World

Sometimes it seems that prayer is the main thing that Christians are concerned about. We talk about it, ask others to do it, quietly boast about how much we do it and make ourselves feel guilty about how little we actually do. Anything you want or need? “Pray about it.” Any decision to make? “Pray about it.” Any opportunity to follow up? “Pray about it.” Christian service? “Pray about it.”

If things are not working out right, we think (and tell others) that something isn't right with our (or their) 'prayer life'. Perhaps not enough time has been put in, or not enough faith, consistency or persistence. We tell ourselves that “If I prayed more (or better), the situation would change.” When it doesn't, we either blame ourselves again or try to pretend that our prayer really *has* been answered, but not in the way we expected.

It is time to stop the pretence. Are we serving some sort of push-button religious system, or the living God? Have we given ourselves a dishonest understanding of real faith?

If we hear a child say to their father, “Thank you for giving me a bicycle next birthday”, we quite reasonably understand that the father has promised to give one, and that the child is just saying ‘thank you’ in anticipation. Those of us with children know that often a lot of effort goes in to try to make Mum or Dad promise to give something or do something that the child wants! Once we have agreed to it, our child trusts us to deliver - usually with a few reminders!

We should be rather surprised if our child started thanking us for a gift we had *not* promised, perhaps even telling their friends what was supposedly coming next birthday. Has there been a misunderstanding? Or is this a blatant attempt at blackmail, so that we will be shamed into giving what is wanted?

As Christian believers, we sometimes talk about ‘believing God’ for different things. As the example shows us, if our Father has not said ‘yes’ to our request, then we are simply fooling ourselves. Or do we think that we can twist God's arm?

Yes, *‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ (Romans 4:3 & Genesis 15:6)*, but see what happened before that, in **Genesis 15:1-5!** *‘The word of the Lord came to him’* in **v.4**, full of purpose and promises.

Sometimes our praying goes very much like the child who says, “I want this, and because you love me, you have got to give me what I want.” Parents will recognise this as a ‘nice try’, but one that reveals a completely wrong idea of the parent-child relationship!

We seem to have raised the stakes with prayer in much the same way. Because prayer and faith are so intimately linked, we feel pressure to always ‘have faith’ whenever we pray, compelled to *tell* our Father what he is going to do! The commonest word translated ‘pray’ in the New Testament is one that means ‘wish towards’, and maybe we should allow ourselves to simply express our wishes to Father and see what he has to say about them. Perhaps the most usual result is that we will find a growing conviction of the direction the Lord wants us to follow, one way or the other.

When he was asked what faith was, a little boy in Sunday School said, "Please Miss, it's believing what you know ain't true!" In fact, faith is the direct opposite, trusting in what we know is true, whether we exercise it in our own spiritual development or in believing prayer *for* things or situations.

Can we make sense of verses like **Mark 11:24**? It looks as though Jesus is asking us to indulge in wishful thinking or telling ourselves lies and calling it faith! **1 John 3:22** and **5:14-15** should help us to see more of how it works in reality, along with the amazing truth of **1 Corinthians 2:12**. Discovering what God wants to do, and then getting ourselves in line with that, are first essential steps. See also **John 14:13, 15:7, 15:15-16 & 16:23** (amongst others). We need to discover afresh what Jesus means by 'in my name'! There is a real sense of partnership here, our Father involving us in what he is doing. (More on this in **2 Corinthians 5:18-20, 1 Corinthians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 1:11, Colossians 4:12** and **Ephesians 1:18** onwards.)

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So, what about prayer and a lost world? Perhaps now we shall not assume that we can 'claim' great answers to prayer unless and until we are pretty sure that we know what God wants to do, and how he wants to do it. No better guide than the Lord Jesus in **John 17**!

At this point, Jesus is poised at the end of his earthly ministry of teaching, miracles and making disciples. He has spent three years with them, taking them as far as he can before they really enter the fullness of the New Covenant through his death, resurrection and glorification. He is only too aware of the enormous needs of the world as a whole, and this shines clearly through his words to his Father, but **it is the church that he prays for!** (**John 17:9**)

We could take weeks working through **John 17**, but let's just concentrate on those verses which show a direct relationship between believers and the world. He is talking about the 11 disciples but most of this applies to the church in general and ourselves in particular:-

v.6 The Father has given us to Jesus out of the world. Not removed from the practicalities of the world, but removed from the world system. This system includes all attempts to do things 'my way' (as opposed to God's way), including man-made religion and so-called 'self-help'.

v.9 Jesus' main concern is for us, his church, not the world. Does this surprise us?

v.11 We are here as substitutes for Jesus. He is not herein the world, but we are, intended to stay in his name and so be as united with each other as Jesus is with his Father. That was the power of his ministry - he did nothing apart from the Father (**John 5:19, 14:10**).

v.13 Have you noticed that Jesus says all this to the Father in the middle of talking with the eleven? He is saying these things in the world (with them listening) 'so that they may have my joy made full in themselves.' If you and I had been there and heard these things that Jesus was saying to the Father about us, wouldn't we be encouraged to know his plans for us? No doubt about it! How do we respond as we hear these same plans applied to us and our situation today? Joyful and

excited? (“God really wants to do this with us, with me!”) Or dismissive and pessimistic? (“It can never happen here.”)

v.14 - 16 We are living in enemy-occupied territory. The New Testament (and especially the Lord Jesus) is very clear about this. One of the most damaging misrepresentations of the Christian message is that we believe in the ‘idea of an all-wise, all-good and all-powerful God’. Michael Buerk, the well-known TV presenter, has recently gone on record as saying that he could not reconcile that ‘Christian’ idea with the evidence of his own eyes. From a practical point of view, God is not in control of what happens in the world on a day-to-day basis. (If we doubt this, see **John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11** and **1 John 5:19**) To say otherwise is to undermine the gospel and deceive ourselves.

v.18 We are sent into the world. The Greek here means ‘just as’, ‘in the same way as’ the Father sent Jesus into the world! There is much here for us to take time to examine on a personal and corporate level.

v.20-21 If we have tried to wriggle out of the points up to now, this one definitely includes us, and it may give us the greatest discomfort, especially as Jesus takes it further. He shows us a sequence here:- 1) We trust in him. 2) We are in him, and he in us. 3) We are one together in him. 4) The world believes that the Father sent Jesus because it observes our oneness with other believers. Cause and effect. If we see little of the effect, what is the cause? And what will we do about it?

v.22-23 More about oneness. What is this ‘glory’ that Jesus says was given to him and passed on to us? Perhaps ‘new life in the Holy Spirit’ sums it up, or ‘abiding in Christ’. Either way, the life of God in us by the Holy Spirit. Result, as far as these verses are concerned? Not just unity, but being ‘perfected in unity’ - more literally, ‘perfected into a unit’. Joined together as certainly as the Father and the Son. Before we dismiss this as ‘impossible!’, just ask ourselves these questions: “Who is praying here? Does the Father answer his prayers? Does he pray for things that will not happen?” Again the result is clear, “. . . *So that the world may know . . .*” If the world does not know, who is responsible?

v.25-26 Okay, so the world does not yet know the Father, but Jesus does, and he has passed that knowledge on. He has shown the Father’s name and nature, and will continue to show them by the work of the Holy Spirit (**John 16:12-15**). Result? The Father’s love for the Son will be in us, and Jesus himself living in us.

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In the light of this (all too brief) look at **John 17**, can we begin to see the Father’s plan for the world more clearly? Instead of dashing off ‘at half-cock’ to evangelise the world, or at least our little corner of it, perhaps we can start to see that his plan to evangelise the world is the church, and probably not ‘the church’ as we have often seen it! As A.W. Tozer wrote, “*The primary responsibility of the church is not to preach the gospel, but to be fit to preach the gospel.*”

A demonstration, something to show the world. This is right at the heart of Jesus’ prayer. Paul saw the same in **Ephesians 2:19 - 3:21**. (Please read it!) “*So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known **through the church** to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies*” (**v.10**).

We will do well to talk through with the Lord and with each other the implications of what Jesus prayed. One of the priorities must be the removal of the greatest obstacle to faith. Disunity between believers gives the world a reason not to believe - a reason that Jesus also recognises is genuine!

How are we going to tackle this, not just in our immediate sphere of fellowship, but in the wider sphere of believers in our city, town or village? Would the people in the surrounding areas respond as they did after Paul had proclaimed Jesus in Thessalonica? When he started preaching anywhere in Macedonia and Achaia, he only had to mention the Thessalonians and people said, "Ah yes, we know about them..." and proceeded to tell him all they had heard about what God had done in the church there! (**1 Thessalonians 1:6-10**)

Would they say the same about the church in Tiverton, Lapford, or anywhere else we may live? If not, why not? Have we confused 'our church' with the local church? Have we accepted disunity as an unwelcome but inevitable fact of life? Have we perhaps tried to increase denominational co-operation and told ourselves that this is 'Christian unity'? Perhaps we really do know what the church is, but know that to follow that path would jeopardise our own status and even the long-term future of 'our' fellowship?

Are we prepared to allow the Holy Spirit to 'lead us into all truth' (= 'reality')? Or will we settle for 'push-button' Christianity, where there is a neat system that we can follow without any threat to our comfort or security?

Is this all too theoretical, too 'spiritual'? No, it is essential that we start with inner realities, not try to tack them on to religious systems. See **Psalm 51:6** and **John 17:24**, where Jesus focusses on our seeing his glory. This is worship, appreciation of what is factually true, right at the heart of God's desire (**John 4:23**).

Tozer wrote: "*No one can long worship God in spirit and in truth before the obligation to holy service becomes too strong to resist. Fellowship with God leads straight to obedience and good works. That is the divine order and it can never be reversed.*"

One requirement of prayer in and for this lost world is to ask to see the situation more and more as our Father sees it. Another is to be prepared to respond honestly to what he shows us. He never promised that it would be easy, but the rewards are beyond description.

*"For no man can lay a foundation
other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
Now if any man build on the foundation . . . each man's work will
become evident . . . If any man's work which he has built on it
remains, he will receive a reward."
(1 Corinthians 3:11-14)*

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