



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"I am a little confused regarding prayer. Does God show partiality when answering prayer?"

The sister who asks this question is of an enquiring mind; she wants to learn. This is a commendable attitude of mind and should not be stifled. Whether or not we who are older can always supply satisfactory answers is a debatable point, but I believe we can point the thinking mind in the right direction, and if we can do that then we are accomplishing something.

There is one thing which is absolutely clear from the Bible; Christians must pray; it is enjoined on us. The poet has said, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire". How, then, can we foster this 'earnest desire' and use it for our advantage?

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Prayer is the Christian's way of communicating with God, our Heavenly Father. It

can be carried out either audibly or silently; in either case it would seem to be - unless carried out perfunctorily - the result of some sort of inner pressure on the heart or the mind of the one praying. If we can accept that prayer, audible or inaudible, can be 'heard' by God, then audible prayer, such as in worship services, would seem to be designed solely for the benefit of those who can hear. The objective here would seem to be to focus the thoughts of others to things being prayed for, or to comfort those who are depressed over something, by their knowing that God's help is being invoked on their behalf.

When we pray we must have faith in the God to whom we pray. Faith is absolutely necessary because the finite mind cannot understand how God can deal with thousands of prayers ascending to Him at the same time, and yet give each one His individual attention. Unbelievers, who say that this is impossible, are giving a finite response to that which is Infinite; they are limiting, by their finite reasoning, the Omnipotence and the Omniscience of God. The believer must not make the same mistake by trying to limit the illimitable power of our heavenly Father. We carry on praying because we **must**; once we break our lines of communication with our Creator, we are nothing.

There are two main types of prayer; the petitioning prayer, and the prayer of thanksgiving. Petitioning and thanksgiving should complement each other. It is not sufficient to thank God when things seem to be going our way; He is due our thanks for strengthening us in times of adversity, and supplying us with the help to bear those things which may have to be borne. When we petition God, we must not imagine His realm as some vast 'casualty clearing centre' in the sky; there are other things to petition God for in addition to our well-being healthwise.

WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY FOR?

The teaching of Paul is that we do not know. In Rom. 8:26 he says, "**Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered**" (A.V.) I like the rendering in the Jerusalem Bible which says, "**For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit Himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words**".

At this point we must bring into play our understanding of some points of metaphysics, i.e., our understanding of the nature of 'being'. The Bible speaks of the Godhead which is comprised of three Persons; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is reasonable to assume - nay, we are told - that the Son and the Spirit know the mind and will of God. When Christ was on earth He was, among other things, the Comforter to those who needed Him. His promise was that when He returned to Heaven He would send **another** Comforter, the Holy Spirit. With the seeming reversal of roles, we now have the Son who pleads on **our** behalf with the Father (1 John 2:1), and the Spirit who, in-dwelling us, pleads **God's** cause with us. There is, however, more. In the light of what we are studying, the Holy Spirit intercepts and interprets our prayers to God and "**makes intercession for us according to God's will**". He can do that because **He** knows God's will.

We must take our reasoning a stage further. In Rom. 8:28 Paul tells us that "**all things work together for good to them that love God**". Immediately we read that, we **naturally** conclude that it means **our good** while we are still here on earth; e.g., we pray for health, and we get it; we pray for peace, and we get it, and so on. What we forget, however, is that even though God always works for good, what He always has in mind is our **ultimate** good, and this takes in not only our **earthly** lives but embraces the whole cosmos. What I am saying is this: our **earthly** good may not always coincide with our **ultimate** good. Realising this, I think we can appreciate that our prayers may

not be answered in the way we want them to be. Every child understands that the parent will sometimes say 'no'; the child may not like the answer given, but it does not understand, because it is a child, the very valid reasons which make the parent say 'no'; to say 'yes' may not be for the child's ultimate good. Dare we say that God exercises the same sort of restraint on His children? Therefore we are left with the sometimes unpalatable fact that so far as our prayers are concerned, 'no' is as good an answer as 'yes'. God's will is paramount, and when the Spirit interprets to God the words that we speak in prayer, He presents them to God according to God's will. The Spirit knows our ultimate good; we don't. We must, however, always have faith in God. He is always working for our good.

IMPARTIALITY

To be 'partial' means to be 'biased' and unfair; I feel sure that no Christian would view God like that. It is quite easy for many to see partiality in answer to prayer, e.g., some prayers seem to get a 'yes' answer, while others get an unqualified 'no'. When we pray for some brother or sister to recover from some illness and that person **does** recover, we say that our prayer has been answered; if the person **doesn't** recover, I personally have not heard people say "Our prayers have been answered". We are, of course, presuming that God has directly intervened in one case, and not in the other. Is this true?

We believe in the Omniscience of God, and quite rightly so. What if God, knowing the end from the beginning (our lives included) has no need or reason to intervene? Now before you start reaching for pen and paper, I am not trying to **limit** the power of God; I am stating a general principle. God can always act in any way which is necessary, of course; otherwise He wouldn't be God. But **knowing** what will take place in any situation, He doesn't have to make 'yes' or 'no' by divine intervention; by the very nature of things it **will** be 'yes' or 'no'. The Holy Spirit will also know.

Of what value, then, is prayer? It avails much in many ways. The Holy Spirit, taking the anguished prayer of what the saint **wants**, and knowing the mind of God, petitions God for what the saint **needs** at the time when, perhaps, non-recovery of a loved one takes place; things such as patience, faith, hope, acceptance of unpleasant things, and also continued belief and trust. It may be much later when the praying saint actually appreciates what God has accomplished in his or her life; things which might never have been accomplished if the initial answer of 'yes' had been seen to come because of God's intervention. The patient endurance of chronic sickness, or the wrench of parting with a loved one, can be somewhat mitigated by the realisation that it is not God - in whom we have placed implicit trust - who has done this to us. Isn't it the same when we pray for peace in the world and the answer seems to be 'no'? Perhaps the Holy Spirit petitions God for courage in us to take out the Gospel of peace. Only **changed people** can bring about changed actions. Let's not blame God for the evil that exists in men's hearts.

Well, I've said some things which some might find difficult to 'swallow'; It's your prerogative to reject it out of hand. Prayer, however, is a very difficult concept to understand, particularly answers to prayer. We must, however, keep on praying constantly; perhaps our prayers will become more defining as to what we expect from God, and what blessings we, in fact, receive. Let us rely on our Comforter and Helper who is ever at hand. He will not **quit** us if we don't **quench** Him.

(in the meantime, all questions, please, to Ian Davidson, 21 Glen Lyon,
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