

The Promise of Prayer

2020-06-28

The promises of God's response to prayer are staggering. In John's Gospel Jesus says to his disciples, "I ... am giving you the same work to do that I've been doing. You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I'll do it. That's how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request in this way, I'll do" (John 14:12-13).

That sounds like a blank cheque. Just tell God what to do and he'll do it. But is that any way to talk to God? Is this only for the eleven apostles Jesus was talking to that night, or does it mean something for us today? First of all, I want to say from the beginning that prayer is a mystery. It has to be. We are connecting this world with heaven and asking heaven to act here in our sinful muddle of a planet. You're not going to hear all the answers to the questions you have about these passages. The more you think about them, the more questions you come up with. But I want to encourage you to pray anyway, I think this is the bottom line Jesus is emphasizing to his disciples.

A little later in that talk with the disciples Jesus again sets prayer in the context of God's mission in the world. "You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you" (John 15:16). "This is what I want you to do: Ask the Father for whatever is in keeping with the things I've revealed to you. Ask in my name, according to my will, and he'll most certainly give it to you. Your joy will be a river overflowing its banks!" (John 16:23-24)

So the promise of God's response to our prayer is set in the context of bearing fruit for God. Bearing fruit means two things 1) having the presence of Jesus within you transform your character, and 2) playing a part in God's mission in the world. Jesus then gives us a hint at how we learn our part in God's plan and how we are transformed. He says, "But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon" (John 15:7).

Spending our time learning from Jesus by reading and memorizing his words is a key pathway to growth in our relationship with God. Prayer is a conversation with God that grows out of and sustains our relationship to Jesus. Prayer involves relationship and conversation. All the promises about prayer assure us that God is listening to us and will respond to our requests.

Sometimes we treat prayer and God like a cosmic drink dispensing machine. You know, you put in your coins and press the button for which drink you want. We treat God like this. We put in the right words, tone of voice, inner conviction or faith, and then press the button for

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what we want this time. And when nothing happens we conclude that we've not put in the right "coins" or that God's all out of that flavour. The issue here is not only about our request or about God's will, but about our whole approach to our relationship with God. Prayer flows out of our relationship with God.

Prayer is not primarily about getting things from God or even gaining God's help in our lives. Prayer is a conversation between a child and a loving parent, or between a grandchild learning to paint and a grandfather who is master artist, or between a nephew city kid who is curious about life in the bush and an uncle hunter-tracker with a lifetime of experience. You get the idea. This is a conversation between two people who love and care for each other but the knowledge and capacity levels are incredibly different.

When we ask for something from God we ask as those who don't have a clue what's really going on. We ask as someone who views life through a very thin crack in the boards of the fence. So we ask knowing that God, who sees and knows all, will take our request and give us His best even when we don't understand what we're getting. It's another promise he's given us, "God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans" (Rom 8:26-27).

How does this work its way out in our lives? We hear some of the answer in John's letter to the church,

My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

And friends, once that's taken care of and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before God! We're able to stretch our hands out and receive what we asked for because we're doing what he said, doing what pleases him. Again, this is God's command: to believe in his personally named Son, Jesus Christ. He told us to love each other, in line with the original command. As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us. And this is how we experience his deep and abiding presence in us: by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:18-24).

Prayer flows out of a loving relationship with God. As God fills our lives with his love, that love overflows into our relationship with others. That sense of God's love within us overcomes our self doubt and our sense of inadequacy and we can start living as free children of our heavenly Father.

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In fact, John says this is his whole reason for writing to his fellow believers.

“My purpose in writing is simply this: that you who believe in God’s Son will know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you have eternal life, the reality and not the illusion. And how bold and free we then become in his presence, freely asking according to his will, sure that he’s listening. And if we’re confident that he’s listening, we know that what we’ve asked for is as good as ours” (1 John 5:13-15).

Prayer is a path to freedom and delight in our relationship with God, not something that should induce guilt and shame. When we think that way we are twisting God’s intent for prayer.

Prayer isn’t about living up to God’s expectations. It’s not about saying the right thing so he won’t be mad at us. Prayer is simply talking with Jesus about life, sometimes that involves asking for things, but often it doesn’t. Sometimes you can sit and view the wonder of colour and light in an evening sky and simply enjoy the handiwork God has made, that too is prayer.

Sometimes we feel we have to jump hoops or else we won’t get what we want from God. We feel like God is reluctant to give us the best he has. When Jesus was physically among us, he assured us of God’s responsiveness to our prayers. He taught,

Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn’t a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we’re in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing. You’re at least decent to your own children. So don’t you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better? (Matthew 7:7-11)

The point is that God longs to give you his best. He won’t hold out on you. He loves to respond to his children’s requests.

Let me summarize these promises, God delights in hearing us talk to him. He loves honouring requests that honour his Son. When we are acting in the power and purpose of Jesus, the sky’s the limit in terms of what we can request for accomplishing God’s purpose on the earth.

God does respond to our needs. When Gwen and I were in school - me studying and Gwen keeping me sane while caring for two preschoolers - we had a dental issue that needed to be fixed and were without the resources to pay the bill. Before the bill was due we received an unexpected cheque within a couple of dollars of the amount. God knew what we needed and provided for us in a surprising way. And he’s continued to provide for us in unexpected ways.

If you can find one of the biographies written about a man named George Mueller you’d be encouraged by the read. He had a vision to provide a home for children on the street without a mom or dad. He started simply taking them into his home. He simply prayed that God would provide for their needs. One incident I remember from the book was a morning when there was nothing for breakfast for the fifteen of them. Then came a knock at the door. The milk wagon had stopped just outside the house because his horse went lame. The driver had to

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unhook and tend to the horse, but the milk would spoil by the time he got back, so he knocked and offered it to Pastor George and his wife. Shortly after, a similar situation happened to the baker, so he offered his bread to the pastor and his wife. That was not an isolated occurrence. George Mueller had hundreds of orphans in his care and never once asked a soul for money. God simply provided for their needs in response to prayer.

God is committed to hearing us and responding with what's best for us.

How do we respond to his incredible generosity? Love is the ground of prayer, the soil out of which prayer grows. We respond to God's love for us poured out through Jesus and his death and resurrection, and so we talk to God. Our love grows and as we get to know God better our conversations become deeper. As our conversations deepen our love grows even more, and on the cycle goes.

It is out of love that we respond to Jesus' commands with willing obedience. It is out of love that we make it our goal to do what pleases him. It is out of love that we declare our allegiance to Jesus. It is out of love that we pray. As we pray, we connect more deeply with God and sense his love pouring over us. Even when we don't sense it, it is still happening. God delights in loving us. Sometimes life has blocked our receptors that sense his loving presence, but God is present with us and loves us nonetheless.

It is out of love for Jesus that we live in reverent submission to God. It is out of love that we lift up even our enemies to God in prayer. It is out of love that we forgive those who have wronged us, knowing how much we have been forgiven by our loving heavenly Father. It is out of love that we reconcile our relationships with one another. It is out of love that we forgive even those we see as enemies. Prayer both causes us to live a life of loving relationship with God and increases in strength as we live out of God's love for us.

So how do we put all these pieces together. What does it mean for our praying? Here are two ideas which I think are important and relevant for us. Both you and I need to be reminded of these regularly.

First, prayer is about our relationship with God, not about asking God for things. We pour out our hearts to God, we tell him our fears and troubles, we acknowledge our failures, mistakes and sins. We talk as deep friends talk, baring our souls to each other. We thank God for all he does for us. We look with grateful eyes and see the world and this day as a gift from his hand. Even when much around us is broken and tainted with evil, God's goodness shines through his creation, including humans. We worship God as our creator and redeemer. He deserves our praise and adoration. All of this is the heart of prayer, it's what gives any asking we do meaning and puts our requests in perspective.

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Second, prayer is a conversation. A conversation begins with one person talking and the other person listening. If that's all that happens, it's not a conversation, it's a monologue, like a sermon. For it to be a conversation one person talks and the other person listens, and then they trade roles and the other person talks and the first person listens. How much time do we spend listening in prayer?

Listening to Jesus doesn't have to be complicated, there's no magic to it. Some people find they stop to listen and after a while a thought will come to them that just seems 'right' somehow. Others have an inner voice they discern through which God speaks to them. Still others have a feeling of peace or security that comes when they pause in prayer to give God time to speak. Sometimes that sense of God talking to you comes through a portion of scripture or a devotional reading.

If this all seems too abstract for you, try this. Read a favourite portion of scripture, something like Psalm 23. Then take a pen and paper and ask God to speak to you. Imagine God writing you a letter and simply write down what comes.

What does God sound like? If the thought that comes sounds like Jesus would say it, then take it as the voice of the Spirit. To know what Jesus sounds like, keep reading the gospels. We need to be reminded over and over of the words of Jesus. If the thought is more in the line of old guilt, that voice that tells you you're useless or hopeless, the voice of "what's the use?" then that's not the Holy Spirit. Tell that voice to go back to the pit where it belongs.

So, prayer is relationship and conversation, not just asking for things. We learn to pray by praying. Prayer flows out of a life of love for Jesus. Prayer involves listening to God. All the promises in Scripture about God responding to our prayers are based on this foundation. These promises are a tremendous witness to God's loving care in our lives. They encourage us to trust and not give up when something we ask for gets delayed. They are an assurance that our heavenly Father wants the best for us. Relationship and conversation - think of these things as you talk to God this week.

I'll repeat what I said earlier, God delights in hearing us talk to him. He loves honouring requests that honour his Son. When we are acting in the power and purpose of Jesus, the sky's the limit in terms of what we can request for accomplishing God's purposes on the earth.