

Communication with God

Those who are following Jesus are *growing* in their salvation (1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18). If some of the responses described in the section about prayer *don't* describe what your prayer life is like, find out why. If you are a *genuine* follower of Jesus, you will grow in these areas. If you aren't, then you won't grow.

Some sections include a selection of Scripture references. Other sections may have few references, but were covered in previous studies in this series.

We communicate with God (prayer)

Prayer is made possible because of what God has done in and for us. It is our response of trust and loyalty to him. In prayer, we come to God, expressing our needs, as defined by the Word of God. Abandoning any techniques and attempts to manipulate God, and without making demands, we place ourselves in God's hands, and allow him to decide the outcome.

Made possible because of what God has done

Below are just a few of the things God has done in and for us. Many of them happened "behind the scenes"; and if God had not told us, we would have never learned about them. Yet they influence our very *ability* to pray.

Getting to know God

- The Father chose to adopt us into his family, and sent the Son to make it possible (Ephesians 1:5). The Spirit testifies to us that we are sons of God (by adoption), and puts within us the desire to call out to the Father in prayer (Romans 8:15-16).
- The Son has revealed the Father to us, so that we are now able to know him (Matthew 11:27).

The work of Christ

- Jesus took on human flesh (Philippians 2:6-8) and became our substitute, to bear God's righteous wrath for our sin (Hebrews 2:14-17; Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21), so that we may share in his righteousness (Romans 3:22-24). By his blood, he redeemed (purchased) us for God (Ephesians 1:7; Revelation 5:9).
- Jesus' resurrection, the victory that sealed this redemption, brought us into the New Covenant (Luke 2:20; Hebrews 9:14-15), and made us recipients of the covenant promises of God (Ephesians 2:12-13).
- By his resurrection, Jesus conquered death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57), brought us into the kingdom of God (Revelation 1:6, 9; Colossians 1:13), and has made us participants in the covenant community of believers (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19-22), which is the "church" (Ephesians 1:22-23), the "body" of Christ (Colossians 1:18).

Living for God (a new set of values)

- The Spirit teaches us the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:9-16), leads us into a righteous life as God's children (Romans 8:13-15), and helps us in our prayers (Romans 8:26).
- God puts his laws in our hearts (Hebrews 10:16), so that we begin to have a *desire* to obey him (which also means we are willing to pray - Philippians 4:6; Matthew 6:6-13). He gives us both the *desire* to obey him, and the *ability* to do so (Philippians 2:13). This is why we are able to "abide" in Jesus (John 15:4-10, 16), and why we desire for God to be glorified "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Our response of trust and loyalty to him

Because of what God has done in and for us, our lives are characterized by an ongoing response of trust (faith) and loyalty (allegiance) to God. The God who created all things has become *our* God, and we have come to realize that we can trust him.

- Faith does not mean "believing the impossible," but is an expression of *trust*. Our faith is based on the solid foundation of what God has done.

Prayer is one of the ways we express our trust and loyalty to God.

- In our prayer, we can talk to God about *anything* in the full range of life experience. We can do so at any time, and from any place (even though there are special places where the presence of God is manifested - such as, "where two or three are gathered together," Matthew 18:20).

Expressing our needs, as defined by the Word of God

Because of what God has done to and for us, our purpose and goals in life have *changed*. Now our ultimate goal is not *human*-centered (personal needs or fulfillment), but *God*-centered. Rather than demanding that God "meet my needs," our greatest desire is for God to be glorified - not just in eternity, but also in this present world.

Need is just one aspect of prayer; but it's an important - though often distorted - part of it. Our need is genuine and heart-felt; but it goes much deeper than personal issues such as health, food, jobs, etc. We discover this as we go to Scripture to find out what our needs really are.

- Scripture defines the nature of our needs - and this is to influence our *thinking*.
- Scripture also teaches us the moral will of God - and this is to influence our *actions*.

In Scripture, we discover that "need" is not same as "desire"; and knowing this will influence the types of things we pray about. There are many things we *need*, whether or not we *desire* them!

- Two examples of needs that people do not always have a desire for: All people *need* repentance, even though few *desire* it! / All of us are in constant need of God himself.
- Knowing this fact, we give up the making of demands based on *our own limited perception* of need, and ask *God* to determine what we need, and bring it to pass.

Abandoning any techniques and manipulation; not making demands

We know we have a Father who cares for us, and has promised to cause all things to work together for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). We know that he is *eager* to do this, so why would we want him to do less? Why would we want him to *change* what he is doing?

Because of this, we don't try to manipulate God with means, techniques and a grab bag of tricks, in hopes of controlling how he responds. Rather, we go to God without demands, simply laying before him our needs, and submitting ourselves to his will, based on the content of Scripture.

Placing ourselves in God's hands, allowing him to decide the outcome

Since our goal is to want what God wants, we place ourselves in his hands and allow him to decide what is best, and to accomplish it the way he determines, based only on his mercy and grace. By observing what he does, we can interpret his response to our prayers, and in this way, understand his will for our lives.

God communicates with us (special and general revelation)

All the ways we can learn about God and his will for us, and about how to interpret his answers to our prayers, can be grouped into two basic categories: Special Revelation and General Revelation.

Special Revelation

This refers to God's self-disclosure through the Word of God - a term used to describe both the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. Regarding Scripture:

- This revelation is *objective*: It exists as eternally true and reliable, whether or not we accept it (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). It is perfect, precise and accurate, and *not* affected by sin. It does not submit itself to our opinions; rather, we are to submit our opinions to it.
- This revelation is *redemptive*: It is the only means used by the Spirit, by which a person can be brought to repentance and salvation (Romans 10:17).

Jesus Christ, the "Word of God," is the *fullest* revelation of God, God in human form (Jn 1:1-3, 14, 18).

However, Jesus is temporarily absent from the earth; so at this time, the only special revelation we have is Scripture, also called the "Word of God." In his absence, Jesus has sent his Spirit to use the Scriptures, and to enable us to accept what it says (1 Peter 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6).

General Revelation

This refers to all other means by which God reveals himself, or something about himself, to humans. This includes God's revelation in creation (Psalm 19:1-3; Romans 1:20), and in us as humans created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). It also includes his works, as demonstrated in history (a concept called "providence"), and *any other way that may exist*.

God has put his mark in creation so that we encounter revelation of him in *all* that we do, not just when we are involved in worship or prayer. But this revelation has limitations.

- This revelation is *not objective*: Because of sin and its effects in the world, it *cannot* be understood by itself. It is subjective and easily misunderstood. *We need special revelation, in order to understand it correctly.* (Even before sin entered the world, Adam needed special revelation, God's instructions, to know how to interpret the world around him - Genesis 2!)
- This revelation is *not redemptive*: We can learn *about* God, his nature and his power. But we do not, and *cannot*, learn about salvation. (It was never made for this purpose.) General revelation cannot *save* us, though it may be used by God to *lead* us to Christ, the one who can save. (This "leading" would be similar to the idea expressed in Romans 2:4, "God's kindness leads you to repentance.")

Because of sin, we by nature, *suppress*, this revelation, distorting it in a way that results in worship of the creation rather than the Creator. We interpret the world based on our own interests, and influenced by the views of society around us. Even if we *do* have a "God concept" (as most people do), it will be distorted, until the Spirit uses the Word of God to open our eyes.

- We cannot begin to interpret the world rightly, until the Spirit has used the Word of God to open our eyes and change our perception. Then, to whatever degree the Word has influenced our thinking, we will stop suppressing this revelation. However, until then, our suppression of it brings only judgment and wrath (Romans 1:18-23+).

More about providence

The concept of "providence" refers to God's active role *now*, in what happens in the world. Though once a widely acknowledged concept, it has become largely ignored (especially with the corrupting influence of naturalism and atheism within the realm of science). Today, our tendency is to *ignore* God's active work in creation, and to focus on creation *without God* - and even to live as though everything revolves around ourselves and other created entities! (See Romans 1:25.)

- Consider these statements in the Bible: The Father is always at work, even on the Sabbath (John 5:16-17) / Jesus upholds or sustains all things (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17 - an *ongoing* action).
- Another example of God actively at work in our "daily life" is seen every time someone receives salvation. Scripture reminds us that *he chose us* (John 15:16, 19), and that his power is at work in us (Ephesians 3:20)!
- *This is why Romans 8:28 can exist.* God is actively working all things together for the good of those who love him.

Scripture teaches us that God is active *now*, revealing his purposes and accomplishing them in what happens. This would even include the accomplishing of his purposes by means of the sin and injustice that are in the world - though *indirectly*.

- An example of God using people's sins to accomplish his purposes can be seen in the death of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:25-28). God accomplishes his purposes in the evil that people do; but to be understood correctly, such events *must* be viewed along with the end results, when the justice will finally be attained.

ALL people respond to God's revelation on a regular basis

Do not forget this fact. All people respond, in one of two ways... and it affects their attitude toward prayer.

Response #1 - People who have *not* repented and are unwilling to humble themselves before God:

- They *suppress* the truth. They are not filled with thankfulness and praise to God; so they don't pray - at least not in the way the Bible defines prayer!
- Most who claim to be "religious" belong to this category. They either have a false concept of God, or (if they have been exposed to the truth) they simply ignore him most of the time!
- Those who claim to be "*not* religious" may say there is "no evidence of God"; yet they are face-to-face with revelation every time they see a human being (including themselves) or anything else in creation! But they *suppress* this knowledge, and their awareness of it (Romans 1:18-20).

Response #2 - People who *have* repented, and with faith (trust), have humbled themselves before God:

- They pay attention to the Word of God. They accept God's revelation of himself in the Word (special revelation) - accepting not only the "set of facts" about God, but also the *person* revealed in those facts.
- They accept Scripture's interpretation of general revelation, and respond to that revelation appropriately.
- They begin to have a relationship to God that involves trust and loyalty to the one they have come to know.
- Based on this, prayer becomes a person-to-person relationship, between two people, one created and one divine (uncreated).

Understanding this revelation enables us to know how to pray, and how to interpret God's response

- How to pray: God's Word and his moral commands show us how to pray. Examples of prayers, scattered throughout the Bible, teach us about values and priorities. Scripture defines the nature of our needs, and helps us to interpret the circumstances we face in life.
- Interpreting God's response: We have asked that God's will be done. God providentially brings events and circumstances into our lives, as *answers* to our prayer. We observe what happens (general revelation), and interpret it based on God's Word (special revelation), and then respond in whatever way is fitting.