

LEARNING TO PRAY

Many people acknowledge the importance of prayer. Most also admit that they don't pray very often. Yet prayer is one of the most *basic* elements of life in Christ.

A Christian *cannot* live (survive and grow) without prayer. Communication and fellowship with God is more important than any other "basic necessity" of life, for it has *eternal* consequences.

For a person who has died to himself and who is now alive in Christ, prayer, united with consistent, diligent Bible study, is the basis for *all* of life. Without these, he cannot know God's will; he cannot know how to live. *He cannot know God.* Who would ever think of neglecting his body to the extent that many who call themselves "Christians" neglect their souls? Let us encourage each other, and pray that we will not be found guilty of such a sin!!

The Bible says much about prayer, and a serious study of this topic will yield many discoveries. Some of the discoveries may be disturbing, if they point to a need for a major change in one's habits or life-style. Yet, the person who desires to be more like his "Father in heaven" will be *thankful* to discover how he needs to change, though it forces him to come face to face with his weaknesses and failings. He has no need to go on a "guilt trip." Instead of self-pity, he can give thanks for what God has already done in his life, and trust Him for what he will do in the future. He can look to God for the strength needed to improve in his prayer life, and thus strive to reach the final goal that the Bible has revealed for God's people.

Learning about prayer: What is prayer all about?

Here are some suggestions of possible topics or issues you could use in your own study of the concept of prayer. There is no need to do them all at once. You may also choose to simply read through the Bible (especially the New Testament, which has a lot to say on this topic), and see what you find.

1) **Words** - There are many words used to communicate the concept of prayer. A few of these include: *prayer, request, ask, supplication, vow, entreaty, thanksgiving, praise, worship, beg, confess, beseech, intercession, and appeal*. Each of these words describes various aspects of the diverse topic of prayer. A study of some of these concepts could be very rewarding.

2) **Techniques and motivations** - People always seem to have questions about the "mechanics" of prayer, or *how* they should pray. There are many verses which give examples of people praying, as well as some which give specific commands. When such verses are found, one can examine the "technique" described, such as position, time of day, method, etc. But it is more important to look for the *reason* for that method of praying, as well as anything about the person's attitude and motivation for praying. These are a lot more important than a technique or the position of one's body!

3) **Types of requests** - It can be very helpful to study the *types* of things people prayed about - the content of their prayers. A good place to begin might be the example given in Matthew 6, often called, "the Lord's prayer." (Some have suggested that, if viewed as a broad outline, this prayer covers nearly everything that can be a legitimate part of prayer.) Or you could begin with the prayers of Paul - the short summaries of what he prayed about, given in several of his letters to the churches. It might be helpful to compare *your* emphasis - the types of things you pray about - with *their* emphasis. And as you examine these things, consider also the context in which the prayers occurred. (This could also be very instructive.)

4) **Results** - Another thing to consider would be the results of prayer. Were there immediate results? (What were they?) Were there results that did not come immediately, or were perhaps left "unanswered"? (Actually, "unanswered" prayers *do* have an answer, though not necessarily the one we want.) Did an "unexpected" or "wrong" (undesired) answer ever occur? (Why?) Remember also that "requests" are just one part of prayer. Many aspects of prayer are not intended to have an "answer."

5) **Related Issues** - Finally, you could look at other things that are in some way associated with prayer. Are there promises and warnings associated with prayer? What was the responsibility on the people's part? Were there conditions that needed to be met before God answered? Are there times when a person should *not* pray? What is the relationship of prayer to other areas of one's life? How does it affect one's relationship with other people or with God? How does prayer fit into the supreme command to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love one's neighbor as one's own self?

Putting truth into practice: Pray!

It is our hope that these thoughts will encourage you to examine the concept of prayer, as it is portrayed in the Bible. *But do not stop there!!* Learning facts about prayer (though important) does not turn a person into a "prayer warrior." Learn to *practice* prayer! Make prayer an increasing part of your life!!

Do not for a moment expect praying to be easy. Expect to need plenty of "self denial," if you want to learn to pray. Don't be surprised if you frequently need to confess to God attitudes of disinterest, a wandering mind, or a desire to do anything *except* pray. Do you think that Satan is going to let you pray without a fight? (The same holds true when you try to study the Bible.)

You will be *forced* to make value judgments. There will be other things that scream out, "Urgent, urgent!!!" whereas prayer quietly whispers, "This is more important." Remember this: There are only 168 hours in a week - and you already have 10,000 hours worth of things you would like to accomplish. You cannot do everything. You will have to make choices; and your choices will be a reflection of your values. (If you have difficulty in the area of priorities, you might wish to study the life and teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels.)

As you grow in your prayer life (and in your study of the Bible), you will see changes in your life. Such changes may be slow; you may at times experience "defeat." In fact, it may seem that you fail quite often. But you must learn to keep your eyes on the goal. When you "fall," you must get up again and continue to follow Christ. You must keep a focus on what he wants you to be, rather than on your failures.

As you grow in your prayer life, you will grow in your trust in God. You will learn how he works, as you experience it in your own life. You will see how he controls all the things in your life (both good and bad) so that, in the end (not always now), they will all accomplish good. (See Romans 8:28 and the verses surrounding it.) You will find it easier to recognize the display of his mighty power, making changes in you that you could never do on your own. You will learn to rely more and more on his promises, for you will see that he does not fail. You will increasingly view God as a Friend and Father, rather than an impersonal "Supreme Being" - as someone you *know*, rather than merely *know about*.

Yet it must be emphasized that it will not be without struggle. There will be "victories," but there will also be times of anguish. Learn this at the start, and you will not be as distressed and bewildered when it happens. God uses all these things to accomplish his goals in our lives, to develop within us the qualities of the godly life that he desires. And if we are his followers - children of "our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9) - isn't this what we sincerely desire?