

Discover Bible Studies

#14: The Secret of Answered Prayer

Anatoli Levitin, a Russian writer and historian, spent years in the Siberian Gulag where petitions to God must have seemed frozen to the ground. But he came back quite spiritually fit. "The greatest miracle of all is prayer," he wrote. "I have only to turn mentally to God and at once I feel a force that pours into me from somewhere, into my soul, my whole being. What is it? Where would I, an insignificant old man and tired of life, get this strength which renews and saves me, elevating me above the earth? It comes from outside me-and there is no force in the world which could ever resist it."

In this guide we will see how prayer can help us build a stronger relationship with God and a robust Christian life.

1. CONVERSATION WITH GOD

How can we be sure God hears us when we pray?

"Then you will call upon me and come and PRAY TO ME, and I WILL LISTEN TO YOU. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." -Jeremiah 29:12, 13. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

What assurance did Jesus give that He will hear and answer our prayers?

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." -Luke 11:9.

Prayer is a two-way conversation. That's what Jesus promises:

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." -Revelation 3:20.

How is it possible to sit down and have a nice evening of dinner conversation with Christ? First, by telling Him everything that's on our hearts in prayer. Second, by listening carefully. As we meditate in prayer, God can speak to us directly. And as we read the Word of God devotionally, God will speak to us through its pages.

Prayer can become a way of life for the Christian.

"PRAY CONTINUALLY; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." -1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

How can we "pray continually"? Do we have to stay on our knees all the time or constantly repeat phrases of adoration or petition? Of course not. But we are to live so closely in touch with Jesus that we feel free to speak to Him anytime, anywhere.

"In the crowds of the street, in the midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God and plead for divine guidance. . . . We should have the door of the heart open continually and our invitation going up that Jesus may come and abide as a heavenly guest in the soul."- Steps to Christ, p. 99.

One of the best ways to develop this kind of intimate relationship is to learn to meditate as we pray. "May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD." -Psalm 104:34.

Don't just rush through a list of requests when you pray. Wait. Listen. A little prayerful reflection can greatly enrich your relationship with God.

"Come near to God and he will come near to you." -James 4:8.

The closer we come to Jesus, the more we're able to experience His presence. So keep within speaking distance of Jesus, and don't worry about saying the right words. Just talk honestly and openly. Talk about everything. He's gone through the agony of death itself in order to become your Intimate Friend.

2. HOW TO PRAY

When we engage in prayer, we may wish to follow the outline of the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer

Jesus taught His disciples in response to their request: "Teach us to pray."

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." -Matthew 6:9-13, margin.

According to the pattern Jesus provided in His prayer, we are to come to God as our heavenly

Father. Ask that His will take charge in our hearts just as His will prevails in all of heaven. We seek Him for our physical needs, for forgiveness, and for a forgiving attitude.

Remember that our ability to resist sin comes from God. Christ's prayer concludes with expressions of praise.

On another occasion Jesus instructed His disciples to pray to the Father "in my name" (John 16:23) that is, to pray in harmony with Jesus' principles. That's why Christians usually close their prayers with the words: "In Jesus' name, Amen." Amen is a Hebrew word that means "Let it be so."

Although the Lord's Prayer gives guidelines on what to pray for and how to formulate a prayer, our communication with God works best as a spontaneous composition of the heart.

We can pray about everything. God invites us to pray about forgiveness for our sins (1 John 1:9), increased faith (Mark 9:24), the necessities of life (Matthew 6:11), healing from suffering and disease (James 5:15), and the outpouring of the Spirit (Zechariah 10:1). Jesus assures us that we can take all our needs and cares to Him; nothing is too small to pray about.

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." -1 Peter 5:7.

Our Saviour is interested in every detail of our lives. His heart warms when our hearts reach out to Him in love and faith.

3. PRIVATE PRAYER

Most of us have things we hesitate sharing even with our closest friends. So God invites us to unburden ourselves in private prayer: one-on-one with Him. It's not that He needs any information. The Almighty knows our secret fears, hidden motives, and buried resentments better than we do ourselves. But we need to open up our hearts to the One who knows us intimately and loves us infinitely. Healing can begin when Jesus can touch our wounds.

When we pray, Jesus, our High Priest, is near to help us:

"We have one who has been TEMPTED IN EVERY WAY, JUST AS WE ARE-yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." -Hebrews 4:15, 16.

Do you feel anxious, stressed-out, and guilty? Lay it out before the Lord. He can then supply our every need.

Should we have a special place for private prayer?

"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who . . . will reward you." -Matthew 6:6.

In addition to praying when walking in the street, working on the job, or enjoying a social gathering, every Christian should have a time set aside each day for personal prayer and Bible study. Make your daily appointment with God at the time when you feel most alert and can concentrate the best.

4. PUBLIC PRAYER

Joining with others in prayer creates a special bond and invites God's power in a special way.

"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." -Matthew 18:20.

One of the greatest things we can do as a family is to develop a prayer life together. Show your children that we can take our needs to Him directly. They'll get excited about God as they see Him respond to prayer in the practical details of life. Make family worship a happy, relaxed time of sharing.

5. SEVEN SECRETS OF ANSWERED PRAYER

When Moses prayed, the Red Sea parted. When Elijah prayed, fire came down from heaven. When Daniel prayed, an angel shut the mouths of ravenous lions. The Bible presents us with many exciting accounts of answered prayer. And it recommends prayer as the way to tap into the mighty power of God. Jesus promises:

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." -John 14:14.

Yet some prayers seem to go unheeded. Why? Here are seven principles that will help you pray more effectively:

(1) Keep close to Christ.

"IF YOU REMAIN IN ME and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." -John 15:7.

When we make our relationship with God a priority and keep in touch with Him, we'll be listening and looking for answers to our prayers that, otherwise, might go undetected.

(2) Keep trusting God.

"If you BELIEVE, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." -Matthew 21:22.

To believe, or have faith, means that we're really looking to our heavenly Father to supply our need.

If you're troubled by a lack of faith remember that our Saviour performed a miracle for the man who pled in desperation:

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" -Mark 9:24.

Just concentrate on exercising the faith you DO have; don't worry about the faith you

DON'T have. (3) Surrender calmly to God's will.

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything ACCORDING TO HIS WILL, he hears us." -1 John 5:14.

Remember that God wants to teach us, as well as give us things, through prayer. So sometimes He says, "No"; sometimes He turns us in another direction. Prayer is a means of getting more and more in touch with God's will. We need to be sensitive to God's responses and learn from them. Keeping track of specific requests and what happens as a result is a great help.

The Holy Spirit will help you zero in on the right mark: "The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (Romans 8:27). Remember that our will would always coincide with God's will if we could see as He does.

(4) Wait patiently on God.

"I WAITED PATIENTLY for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry." -Psalm 40:1.

The main point here is to keep your focus on God, keep your focus on His solution. And don't ask God for support one minute and then try to drown your troubles in pleasure-seeking the next. Wait patiently on the Lord; we badly need that discipline.

(5) Don't hang on to any sin.

"If I had CHERISHED SIN IN MY HEART, the Lord would not have listened." -Psalm 66:18.

Known sin short-circuits the power of God in our lives; it separates us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). You can't hang onto sin with one hand and reach out for divine help with the other. Sincere confession and repentance solves the problem.

If we're not willing to allow God to free us from evil thoughts, words, and deeds, our prayers won't be effective.

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." -James 4:3.

God isn't going to answer "yes" to selfish prayers.

Keep your ears open to God's law, His will, and He will keep His ears open to your petitions.

"If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable." -Proverbs 28:9.

(6) Feel the need of God.

God responds to those who ask for His presence and power in their lives.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." - Matthew 5:6.

(7) Persist in prayer.

Jesus illustrated the need to persist in our petitions by telling the story of a very persistent widow who kept coming to a judge with her request. At last the judge said in exasperation, "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice." Then Jesus concluded: "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?" (Luke 18:5-7).

Discuss all your needs, hopes, and dreams with God. Ask for particular blessings, for help in time of need. Keep seeking, and keep listening, until you learn something from God's response.

6. ANGELS MINISTER TO THE NEEDS OF THOSE WHO PRAY

The psalmist rejoiced that through the ministry of the angel of the Lord his prayers were answered:

"I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. . . . The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them." -Psalm 34:4-7.

When we pray, God sends angels to answer our prayers (Hebrews 1:14). Each Christian has an accompanying guardian angel:

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that THEIR ANGELS in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." -Matthew 18:10.

Because of our prayers:

"The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." - Philippians 4:5-7.

7. THE CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

The Bible describes a distinct Christian lifestyle. According to Ephesians 4:22-24, the Christian is to "put off" the old lifestyle that resulted from "deceitful desires," and "put on" the new lifestyle that is "created to be like God." In this scripture and in Guide 6 we discovered that at the new birth we are "re-created" to be a different kind of person in Christ.

This guide and the six guides which follow, showcase the Christian lifestyle; they reveal the secrets of a happy Christian life. They will help you build a stronger relationship with Christ that will result in a distinct Christian lifestyle. So fix your eyes on Jesus today and you can be part of that final victory celebration when Christ's peace reigns unchallenged.

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