

PRAYER

"The Summer I Learned to Pray"

MOVING TOWARD
MATURITY IN CHRIST:

Hebrews 6:1

This article is part of an in-depth series on vital aspects of living and growing in Christ. This month we present the last of three articles on prayer: "Wanting what God wants." We trust that these articles on prayer have helped you to move toward maturity in your walk with God.—ED.

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Home from university where I was studying undergraduate chemistry and mathematics, I spent my time earning money and learning to pray.

Earning money was the easy part. The praying part became possible because of the arrival in town of a new pastor, freshly minted from seminary, single as I was, and happy to renew a friendship that we had struck up two years earlier. He invited me to meet with him every Monday evening so that we could pray together.

The first few Mondays were tough. I found myself running out of things to say after the first few minutes. So many of my prayers sounded like wish lists. I had had the good fortune to be reared in a godly home, and I knew the "language." But after three weeks or so, this pastor quietly suggested that the following Monday he would start to teach me how to pray.

At our next meeting, after a half-hour of Bible reading and

praise, he asked, "What shall we pray for tonight?"

It so happened that I had just received a letter from a young woman whom I will call Jane. The pastor and I both knew her from our time in another city. Jane's life had been in a mess before God saved her. Now, three years later, she was dying of cancer and was not expected to live more than a few weeks longer. Her letter was full of bitterness, hurt and fear.

What, then, should we pray for her? "Lord, heal Jane"? "Lord, rebuke Jane for her bitterness"? "Lord, take her home quickly; she has already suffered so much"? Or how about the usual prayer: "Lord, bless Jane"?

The pastor helped me to think through these and other options. Certainly we could ask that God would heal Jane, just as children ask their fathers for something. God could heal her, and we should ask. But God hasn't pledged to bring instant restoration to all who ask for it.

Was there not something that we should pray for Jane that was in line with God's own promises for his people, something that we could claim with confidence on Jane's behalf?

As the pastor led me through Scripture after Scripture, I was struck by the number and the beauty of the passages promising that God will keep his own people, and that he will bring fruit from their lives. We may be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."¹ The pastor and I were both convinced that God had genuinely begun a "good work"¹ in Jane's life. Now we would petition God to keep his promise

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and carry it on in the life of Jane.

In a similar way, the pastor led me through several other matters for prayer, trying to get me to think biblically about what we should be praying for in each case. We read passages from Scripture that we thought relevant to each issue at hand. Then we set ourselves to pray through the list that we had generated, quoting God's promises back to God. I left believing that I had begun to learn how to intercede before the throne of God.

That was Monday evening. On Thursday I received a letter from Jane, written on Tuesday morning. She had awakened that morning, she wrote, deeply ashamed of her doubt and her ingratitude. It was wonderful that God had saved her, and now if he wanted to take her Home, why, that must be the best and the wisest thing—and she would praise him in her homegoing. The entire letter was a hymn of praise. Jane died six weeks later.

Of that original list of specific matters for prayer that the pastor and I had compiled that Monday evening, two others were answered as dramatically as the first, though over a longer period of time. Two or three others were long-term requests that Christians should constantly pray for—"Ask the Lord of the harvest . . . to send out workers into his harvest field."² The remaining two or three changed gradually in subsequent weeks as our knowledge of what God said about such things sharpened and improved.

This took place 30 years ago. Years later I myself became a pastor, and eventually a teacher of pastors. In time I learned more facets of prayer, including the intense times when we do not know what to pray for, "but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."³

But my first experiences of trying to pray in line with Scripture,

however awkward or immature my attempts were, came about because someone took the time to teach me the rudiments:

Read and re-read the prayers of Scripture. Study them; turn them over in your mind. There is enormous diversity in them, and they all have something important to say. Copy the prayers of Moses; memorize David's psalms; medi-



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tate on the prayers of Hannah, Nehemiah and Daniel; read through the Apostle Paul's Letters and commit his prayers to memory.

What did these believers pray for? When did they pray? (Was it a crisis? Was it part of their regular prayer life?) What forms of worship did they use? What was their passion like? Our prayers will gradually be reformed and transformed when we bring them into line with the Word of God.

Grow in your knowledge of the mind of God. We must read and re-read the Bible. That will help us to know and to love what God thinks, what his priorities are, what his character is like, what he values, what he wants for us.

The Bible tells us, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."⁴ Elsewhere God tells us, "Be holy, because

I am holy."⁵ The Bible tells us that God wants this. Should we not therefore be praying that we might be perfect and holy? Should we not grieve when we fall into sin? And should we not immediately rush to the cross and ask for forgiveness, assured that "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin"⁶?

We pray about our mortgages, the education of our children, our illnesses, our disappointments—and so we ought, for God is our heavenly Father who cares about each aspect of our lives. But if the burden of our praying is always focused on ourselves, we are like little children whose horizon is limited to themselves and to their wants. By contrast, to confess that "Jesus is Lord"⁷ means that we want what he wants. That in turn means that we will pray actively that his "will be done."⁸

Apply the lessons learned to both praise and intercession.

As we come to know the prayers of the Bible and the mind of God better—as he has disclosed himself in the Bible—we can carefully apply what we have learned to the way that we praise God in prayer, and to the way that we pray for ourselves and for others. It will transform our praying.

I started down this track 30 years ago. I wish that I could say I always live up to the lessons that I have learned, but I can't. What I can say is that I am grateful for those Monday evenings that summer and for the firm foundation that I received from the lessons on prayer. ☪

(1) Philippians 1:6, NIV. (2) Matthew 9:38, NIV. (3) Romans 8:26, NIV. (4) Matthew 5:48, NIV. (5) Cf. Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16, NIV. (6) 1 John 1:7, NIV. (7) 1 Corinthians 12:3, NIV. (8) Matthew 6:10, NIV. Bible verses marked NIV are taken by permission from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado

NEXT MONTH:
"Faith—Having a Childlike Faith," by Calvin Miller.