

## CHAPTER THREE

# PRAYER: DIRECT DIAL TO HEAVEN

JOHN LOFTNESS

**M**y wife Nancy and I are well known among our friends for the amount of time we spend talking. We don't do it because someone at a marriage seminar told us to. We do it because we love conversation with each other. It's been that way for seventeen years now and began long before we were married. Hardly a day goes by without some time of stimulating, usually intimate, discussion.

As I write this, Nancy has the flu. She's been sick for about ten days now. Five days ago she lost her voice. She can't talk beyond a whisper, and when she does whisper, it causes a painful cough.

Last night we sat on the couch after the children were in bed—a typical time to talk—and both of us ended up frustrated. She whispered, “Tell me what's been on your mind.” So I told her. It took three minutes. She wanted to respond with a question or some thoughts of her own, but the coughing wouldn't allow it. We ended up reading the newspaper.

Our love and commitment for each other haven't diminished through Nancy's illness, but we miss the intimacy of conversation. Our relationship with God is the same. We can have a commitment *to* him without an inti-

mate relationship *with* him. But if we want our relationship to grow, we must converse. The Bible calls such conversation with God prayer. Without this conver-

sation our experience with God becomes similar to what Nancy and I have gone through during her bout with the flu: we love each other, but our lack of communication creates a sense of distance.

Still, we can't take our love for granted and ignore

““ When there is little awareness of real need there is little real prayer.<sup>1</sup> ””

— Donald Whitney

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prayer. With the distance of non-communication, love can be tempted to wane. Ask anyone who's been through a marital crisis. So prayer is essential to our life with God.

Prayer is perhaps the simplest yet most profound of the spiritual disciplines. When we pray, we are simply communicating with God. No exotic spiritual hoopla, no mystical rituals—just dialogue. And yet it's a dialogue with the exalted Lord of the universe. We have the amazing privilege of speaking directly to Almighty God! More remarkable still is the fact that he listens, and speaks to us in turn.

To keep us from getting tongue-tied or intimidated, Jesus took great pains to show us how to relate to God. He could have emphasized God's role as Judge or King. Instead, Jesus presented him as Father—the kind of Father who welcomes his children with open arms (Mk 10:13-16). And while some of us may have bad memories of our own dads, our Father in heaven loves nothing better than to sit with us and hear everything that's on our mind.

### **Meditate on Psalm**

**34.** Does David's fear of God hinder his love for God?

**1** You've been given the privilege of selecting "History's Greatest Answered Prayer" to be featured in heaven's Hall of Fame. The list has been narrowed down to six contestants. Who would you pick?

- Elijah: Called down fire and rain (1 Kings 18)
- Moses: Saw God clear a path through the Red Sea (Exodus 14)
- David: Killed the giant Goliath with nothing but a sling and a stone (1 Samuel 17)
- Jesus: Prayed Lazarus back to life (John 11)
- Paul: Was sprung from jail by a supernatural earthquake (Acts 16)
- You: When you repent and ask God to forgive you, he does

### **Why Pray?**

Prayer changes us as much as it changes the situations for which we pray. This is usually unexpected. There I sit, praying for someone who has a bad attitude toward me, and suddenly I realize that the Spirit is playing his flashlight along the walls of *my* heart. "You seem very concerned about that speck in your friend's eye," he whispers, "but have you noticed the log sticking out of *your* face?" We rarely appreciate this information at first until we realize that God *is* answering our prayer.

Prayer also increases our faith. As I write this, my church is involved in a building program. When I think about the amount of money and effort still needed before our facility is built, I can get discouraged. As I pray, though, and

affirm the fact that God is in control of the situation, my perspective changes. Not only do I gain faith that God can pull it off, but I get excited about the part *I* can play in making it happen.

**Meditate on James 5:13-18.** What did Elijah, “a man just like us,” accomplish through his prayers?

Thus far we’ve not mentioned the most obvious benefit of prayer: It works. When we pray, God unleashes his power. Are you sick? Pray. Need a job? Pray. Want your family to know Jesus? Pray. Facing conflict with someone? Pray. We’ll be amazed to see the things our Father does when we ask for his help.

But is this work of prayer really necessary? If God is sovereign and controls the whole world, why do we need to pray? Couldn’t God do a far better job without our help?

There are certain things our prayers will never change. For example, Jesus will come back whether we pray or not. He will judge the living and the dead. These are fixed events in God’s purpose. However, our prayers do have an impact in other areas. There are things God just won’t do unless we ask. When we pray for a fellow believer to overcome sin, or for a child to be healed of cancer, our prayers are helping fulfill God’s will.

Not that God can’t accomplish his purposes without us. As John the Baptist noted, God can raise up stones to do his will if we refuse (Mt 3:9). But our involvement mat-

““ What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer.<sup>2</sup> ””

— E.M. Bounds

ters to God. He invites us, through our prayer, to help usher in his coming kingdom. Why? I’m not sure we can know beyond the fact that he’s chosen for it to be that way. Who am I to question him? The fact of the matter remains that though our efforts be sloppy and

often weak, he’s chosen to accomplish much of his will through us: an amazing privilege.

## The Power of Example

Reading about prayer can be helpful, but watching others pray is even better. I spent 15 months serving a church in Southern California in the late 1980s. Every Tuesday through Saturday the pastoral staff invited anyone who wanted to join them for prayer between 6:00 and 7:00 in the morning. No schedule conflicts there. When the church hit a crisis time, we decided to meet as pastors for an additional hour of prayer on those days *before* the other folks arrived.

I can’t say I always came freely. It was part of the job, and my attendance wasn’t always exemplary. But God

used this imposed discipline in my life. I was praying with men committed to intercession. Not that they did anything fancy. And I could tell they were as tired as I was. Yet their fervency and perseverance made a lasting impact on me. By their example, these men taught me more about praying than any lecture or book ever could. Today I count those prayer sessions among my most precious memories of our time in California.

Jesus' example had an impact on the disciples. The Gospel writer John noted that if everything worth recording about Jesus were put on paper, the world couldn't contain the books they would fill. John had to be selective as did the other Gospel writers. When you consider this, it's remarkable how often Jesus' commitment to prayer gets notice.

**Jesus prayed early in the morning (Mk 1:35).** I personally find this the best time of day to pray. I've got no appointments. Rarely am I interrupted. The house is quiet. Even the air is still. For those who begin work early in the morning, this may not be practical. But there's no better way to start a day.

**Jesus prayed in solitary places (Mk 1:35).** From what I've read, the ancients didn't know you could pray silently. The Pharisees felt no inhibition in praying aloud in the marketplace. But Jesus seems always to be looking for a

“ If I should neglect prayer but a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith.<sup>3</sup>

”  
— Martin Luther

solitary place where he could pray out loud. Do you have a solitary place where you can seek God without distraction? I usually pray in my basement before the children are up (though they love to discover me). When I

have more time I like to go to a “lonely” place. In California my lonely place was the Altadena Crest Trail high above Pasadena in the San Gabriel Mountains. Here in Maryland I head for the banks of the Potomac River. Any place where you feel comfortable talking out loud to God will work. (I would caution you, however. Make sure your lonely place is also a safe place.)

**Jesus prayed after work (Mk 6:45-46).** He wasn't driven by a “this is my time to relax” mentality. I'm sure he knew how to kick back and enjoy down-time with his fishing buddies, the disciples, but he also knew that sometimes the end of the day was best spent alone with his Father. At a time when most of us feel we've earned the right to a little leisure, Jesus could be found up on a

**2** When do you feel the most desperate need to pray?

- Before going to the dentist for a root canal
- After getting a huge salary increase
- During labor and delivery
- While being honored for service in the church
- When a tire blows out in the middle of rush hour traffic
- While driving a new car off the lot

**Meditate on Psalm**

**130.** Do your prayer times include waiting on God so that he can communicate with you?

mountain praying. He knew the difference between relaxing and being refreshed. Those hours spent in communion with his Father renewed him from the pressures of a demanding day.

**Jesus prayed in the midst of success and popularity (Lk 5:15-16).** The best of times can be the worst of times—at least for our prayer life. Success deceives us into thinking we can get along without God for a while. That's why it's critical for us to acknowledge daily our dependence on him.

"Who's responsible for this success, God? You are! Please reduce my head back to its original size."

**Jesus prayed before making a major decision (Lk 6:12-13).** When he chose the twelve apostles, Jesus knew he was choosing the future of the Church. He also knew he was choosing a traitor. He needed God's guidance and grace. During an all-night session of prayer he found both.

If you're facing a major decision—a job change, major purchase, move to another city, or marriage—nothing will clear your mind and straighten your priorities like withdrawing to a lonely place to pray. Before my wife and I were engaged, all our friends seemed to think we were perfect for each other. But I needed to know that God himself was confirming the relationship. So I spent a winter day in a New Jersey state park, sitting by an open fire and praying. By the time I left, I was confident God was giving us the go-ahead. Our marriage has been relatively stress free, but if it is ever severely tested, I know I will find tremendous assurance in remembering that snowy day when God made his will known as I sat and waited and prayed.

A night watch with God can be amazingly fruitful. There's something about the stillness and sense of expectancy we experience in the wee hours that make us very alert to God's voice. So instead of taking a dose of Nyquil next time you find yourself sleepless, consider watching for a while with God.

**Jesus prayed with regularity (Lk 22:39).** As Luke interviewed Jesus' disciples before writing his Gospel, they must have emphasized the frequency of his prayers. That's why Luke says, "Jesus went out *as usual* to the Mount of Olives," one of his favorite solitary places.

**Jesus prayed honestly (Lk 22:39-44).** As Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion, he was in anguish. Not only was he going to suffer excruciating pain, but his own

“ The only alternative to frustration is to be sure that we are doing what God wants. Nothing substitutes for knowing that this day, this hour, in this place we are doing the will of the Father.<sup>4</sup> ”

— Charles Hummel

Father would reject him as the object of his wrath for the sins of the world—an experience totally alien and horrible to him. If he prayed like some prayers I've prayed under pressure, he could have said: "Well, the big day is almost here, Father. I'm really looking

forward to being flogged and nailed to the cross. Thanks for the privilege of serving you in this small way."

But Jesus was honest, and so Luke records what could seem like a feeble prayer: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Jesus felt free to express his deepest emotions in a prayer prayed through blood, sweat, and tears. He wanted his Father to understand the intensity of his struggle. But in the same breath he expressed his submission to his Father's will.

It's easy to fall into the trap of telling God what we think he wants to hear even though our fine-sounding words don't agree with reality. It's no use lying to the One who knows everything about us (even things we don't know). Are you honest with God when you pray? Do you go to him and express your deepest desires? Your struggles? Your failings? "Yes, Lord, I snapped at her again. I knew it was wrong, but Lord, I was angry! Did you hear what she said? I'm sorry. Forgive me. Give me power to change."

As we pray honestly, God changes us. And by expressing our emotions in prayer we release them to God, making us far less likely to vent them sinfully in some other context.

When my children were younger, they didn't know how to hide their emotions from me. They were free to laugh and giggle in a way that adults would find embarrassing. They were able to cry deeply without the least concern for what I thought of their tears. That's how we should be with God. He's not impressed with our pious platitudes and our many words. He wants honesty—total honesty. He accepts us even when we're angry, apathetic, or afraid. As long as we're not disrespectful or disobedient, we can express the full range of our emotions without worrying that God will get upset.

**For Further Study:**

The psalmists were surprisingly honest about their emotions when speaking to God. For examples, see Psalm 22, Psalm 38, and Psalm 88.

Some people have real problems with this. Years of bringing one emotion to God—a kind of bored solemnity that pervades so many church services—seems to inhibit

**3** Which of the following emotions would be hardest for you to share with God?

- Doubt (“Do you really care?”)
- Anger (“Why did you let this happen to me?”)
- Fear (“Can you really accept me in spite of my sin?”)
- Grief (“How can I cope with the death of this person I so loved?”)
- Envy (“When will I own a house like everyone else in the church?”)

them. To get over this, I recommend reading the Psalms aloud. These are the Church’s prayers and they contain honest expression of every emotion known to man: from giddy joy to deep discouragement, from furious anger to intimate affection.

### **Praying the Disciples’ Prayer**

The disciples found their inspiration to pray by watching their Lord pray and then making the connection between his public power and private

prayer. But fortunately for us, Jesus left more than his example. He gave his disciples a clear model which has been preserved for us in Matthew 6:9-13. Though commonly called the “Lord’s Prayer,” I like referring to it as the “Disciples’ Prayer,” because that’s what it was: a method Jesus recommended to his disciples for making their prayers most effective.

Before looking at the prayer itself, remember that Jesus was instructing us *how* to pray, not *what* to pray. This was meant to serve as a pattern, a set of principles—not a mindless ritual. Just before outlining this prayer, Jesus urged his disciples not to pray like the pagans who “keep on babbling for they think they will be heard because of their many words” (Mt 6:7). I find it incredibly ironic that for countless Christians, the disciples’ prayer has become exactly what Jesus warned against: meaningless babble. Let’s take a careful look at it so we can learn to pray the way Jesus intended.

#### **“Our Father in heaven”**

Jesus starts us off by reminding us that our prayer is based on a special relationship. We’re praying to our *Father*. This sets a tone of love and intimacy, not guilt or fear. If we don’t begin with this reality in mind, all our other prayers will be skewed with a wrong perspective. The Pharisees thought Jesus was blasphemous for being so presumptuous in designating God as Father. But Jesus wants us to think aright about God. Our God is not “up there” somewhere, distant and aloof. He’s near to all who

**Meditate on Romans 8:15-16.** Express your thanks to God for this amazing and totally undeserved relationship.

call on him. He's our Father, and he wants to meet our every need.

Yet he is our Father in *heaven*—omnipotent, omniscient, and majestic. He is the King. Our intimacy must be matched by respect.

**“Hallowed be your name”**

With our relationship firmly established in our minds, we next come to worship. To hallow something means we treat it as holy. Our first motivation in prayer should be God's glory. Before we reel off our list of needs and desires, let's give honor to the Lord and worship him. His interests should come before our interests. Pray that throughout the world his name will be respected, magnified, and treated as

holy, precious, and pure.

This should be our pre-eminent concern prior to any thought of our own needs.

**“Your kingdom come”**

God is the Creator, the sovereign Ruler, and the eternal Owner of the universe. Yet the majority of his would-be subjects have followed Satan in rebelling against their true King. Consequently, when we come before God and appeal for his kingdom to come, we are asking that the fact of God's authority be recognized and honored in a particular situation.

This is where I bring most of my requests before God. This is where I regularly cry out for him to change situations that are not yet submitted to him—issues in my own life first, then issues in the lives that I touch, and then issues in larger arenas. “Father, root out my selfish attitude toward time. Help Steve to grasp what the gospel is all about. Bring justice for the unwanted and unborn in our land.”

**WILL YOUR PRAYERS BE ANSWERED?**

Effective prayers are prayers that get answered. Here are five biblical criteria that will ensure effective prayer:

■ **They line up with scriptural truth (Jn 15:7)** *Example:* “God, you desire all men to be saved (1Ti 2:4), so please help my neighbor to hear your gospel.”

■ **They seek results that will glorify God (Jn 14:13)** *Example:* “God, provide for my family's financial needs so that my brother won't mock us for tithing.”

■ **They are intended to bear good fruit (Jn 15:16)** *Example:* “God, appoint the man or woman who will uphold your standards of justice on the Supreme Court.”

■ **They spring from a right motive (Jas 4:3)** *Good Example:* “God, help me find a bigger house so I can take care of my aging parents.” *Not So Good Example:* “God, help me find a bigger house so I have plenty of room for my model train set.”

■ **They are in agreement with the will of God (1Jn 5:14)**

Note: Even if a prayer request meets the first four criteria, it may not be God's will. With time and practice you will gain greater confidence in discerning the will of God.



In any place or situation where man's kingdom is exerting influence that is contrary to the purposes of God's kingdom—whether that be one individual's decision or a vote in the United States Senate—we can ask God to come and rule.

**“Your will be done”**

This petition is really a twin to the preceding one. Here we are asking not that our will be done, but that God's will be done—even if we're not sure precisely what his will may be in a particular instance. It is at this point in prayer that I take the opportunity to bring before God any significant decisions I am presently facing. Once I discern what his will is—through meditation on Scripture and waiting before him—I ask that that desire (which was always God's desire and now, by his grace, is also mine)—become reality.

Our prayers should never be selfish or demanding, but at the same time they should be bold. Although it is obvious that we can never command the Sovereign God to do anything, the twin phrases “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” signify that we are to make the strongest possible entreaty. Thus we see from Scripture that there should be nothing apathetic about our request to see God's kingdom and will fully accomplished.

**“On earth as it is in heaven”**

Instead of settling for compromise, we should consistently seek God's best. In heaven God's kingdom exists in absolute perfection. Here on earth, as we're all too painfully aware, is another story. Until the day when Jesus comes and establishes a new heaven and a new earth, we pray and work to establish outposts of the coming age. “Lord, as I wrestle with this habit, I don't pray that I could cut down. I pray that I could overcome it and defeat it! Your will be done. Rule in my body and soul just as you rule in heaven.”

**“Give us this day our daily bread”**

The Greek word for “bread” in this phrase is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. For centuries scholars have debated exactly what Jesus was implying.

**4** This question has three parts:

■ Write down your biggest practical need (new car, better job, etc.) in the space below. Include today's date.

■ Read and meditate on Jesus' teaching on prayer found in Mark 11:23-24. What is pre-eminent in this prayer: the mountain, your faith, or God's ability? Which of these three makes the most difference in how we pray?

■ Before continuing with the chapter, take a minute to submit your need to God. (When the prayer is answered, return to this page and write the details in the margin.)

Augustine, writing in the fourth century, believed this reference to “bread” included three things: physical life, the Lord’s supper, and the Word of God. Thus, he saw this as a request for physical needs (clothes, shelter, food), forgiveness of sins, and revelation of God’s Word. However, Martin Luther and John Calvin felt Augustine was being overly spiritual. They argued that Jesus was referring only to earthly provision.

Regardless of whose interpretation is most accurate, it’s clear that God cares about practical things. He knows we have to pay for housing, for clothes and for food, and he wants us to ask for his help. Here we can come to God with our most basic needs. And here we can meditate on what is truly a need and what is a want that falls outside of God’s plans for us for the moment.

It’s revealing that Jesus tells us to pray for “this day.” Take it as a hint that God expects to communicate with us more than once or twice a week! We need him each day, whether the refrigerator is full or empty.

**“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”**

So often when I come to God, I think first about what I’ve done wrong and begin by confessing my sins. But

that’s not how Jesus teaches us to pray. In his prayer we begin with relationship, move to the establishment of his kingdom and will, bring before him our basic needs, and *then* come to search our hearts and confess our sins. As the Spirit searches our hearts, we can confess any sins honestly, humbly, and specifically. I find it helpful to confess my sins out loud—then, rather than thinking about what I’ve done, I’m making a vocal, conscious acknowledgement. That seems to take more humility, and I need all the humility I can get.

Confessing our own sin softens our hearts to forgive those who have sinned

### **A FIRE AND A FORCE**

Prayer is no petty duty, put into a corner; no piecemeal performance made out of the fragments of time which have been snatched from business and other engagements of life; but it means that the best of our time, the heart of our time and strength must be given...

The praying which gives color and bent to character is no pleasant, hurried pastime. It must enter as strongly into the heart and life as Christ’s “strong crying and tears” did; must draw out the soul into an agony of desire as Paul’s did; must be an inwrought fire and force like the “effectual, fervent prayer” of James; must be of that quality which, when put into the golden censer and incensed before God, works mighty spiritual throes and revolutions.<sup>5</sup>

— E.M. Bounds

**Meditate on Matthew 18:23-35.** What treatment can we expect from God if we refuse to forgive others?

**For Further Study:**  
Memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13.

against us. Sometimes renouncing bitterness begins with a commitment but entails a process, too. Once a mortgage loan officer misled me in such a way that we almost lost a house we were to buy. I had a difficult time forgiving him. I certainly couldn't work the offense out with him in a biblical manner since he refused to even consider that he caused a problem. He hardly returned my phone calls. I had daydreams of punching the guy out. But as I repented for my bitterness and kept confessing that I forgave him, I eventually got beyond a commitment to forgive to a genuine experience of forgiveness. Sometimes it will be a battle, but we must prevail.

Jesus adds commentary to this part of the prayer by warning about the grave results of unforgiveness. If we persist in bitterness, we no longer have a problem with another person; our problem is now with God himself (see vv. 14-15).

**“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one”**

Our spirits may be willing, but our flesh is weak (Mt 26:41). Each of us knows the temptations that master us. It's wise to focus on them first, particularly if you know that you'll be in situations during the day that provide opportunity for sins common to your flesh.

One good way to search your heart for unconfessed sin and to pray for protection from future temptation is to inventory the Ten Commandments: pray through issues of idolatry in your life; of using God's name to lie or manipulate; of resting not in Christ's work on the Cross but in your own works; of not honoring parents and other family relationships; of anger, sexual lust, stealing, lying, and desiring things that God has not provided. My list here doesn't quote the commandments directly, but instead represents principles of living I've drawn from them—areas in which I have a tendency to fail and need God's help to overcome.

Sadly, most of the people who pray the disciples' prayer finish in about 18 seconds. Prayed thoroughly, the way Jesus intended, it can take 18 minutes or an hour or more. I've prayed the disciples' prayer this way ever since I was a boy, and except for those times when I lacked faith or concentration I've always been rewarded. Not only does this model give me a sense of direction as to how to pray, but when I'm done praying, I know I'm done. I can walk away from my solitary place of prayer feeling satisfied that I've covered the major points with God in preparation for my day.

## Frustrated Still?

Most Christians know that prayer is important. That's why it's so common to feel frustrated or condemned when the topic comes up. We just don't do it. Or when we do, we're left dissatisfied. It's discouraging to wake up at the end of my prayer time with crease marks on my face from where I've fallen asleep on my Bible, or to realize I've spent more time contemplating a fishing trip (yes, I admit it) than contemplating the Lord of the universe.

We can take heart, for we're not alone. Our Father in heaven longs to meet with us. He has sent the Holy Spirit to help us know how to pray and how to increase our motivation. If the following three obstacles remain, recognize them for what they are—lies—and get down to the wonderful business of dialogue with God.

**“I don't feel like it.”** If you wait until you feel like praying, you'll probably never pray. Prayer is work—satisfying work, but it still requires real effort. If your emotional state determines when you pray, consistency will never be a part of your experience.

I used to think people would pray once they mastered certain time management skills, but that theory flopped. Unless prayer is a top priority, people just won't pray. Why isn't it our top priority, then? I think I can answer for all of us: pride. We get the foolish idea that we can get along fine without God. We deceive ourselves by thinking that his loving sovereignty is enough to get us through this life. And it is, if all we want to do is “get through.” The Holy Spirit has placed in us the desire to please God, and pleasing him requires knowing his will and doing it. This demands humbling ourselves by worshiping, listening, and petitioning our Lord in prayer.

**“It's discouraging.”** Prayer can force us to face sins or problems we'd rather avoid. That can be discouraging. But as saints from the turn-of-the-century holiness movement described it, we're called to “pray through” our problems, to wrestle with them until we have faith that God is in control and will fulfill his purposes.

**“I've failed before.”** The longer we've gone without consistent or effective prayer, the harder it is to start. Rather than moan over the last fifteen months, we should start by simply evaluating the past 24 hours. “Did I pray yesterday? No? Fine—but I'll change starting today.” With daily evaluation comes daily motivation which results, without our even realizing it, in a lifestyle of prayer.

**Meditate on Genesis 32:22-30.** Why did God wrestle with Jacob before granting his request for a blessing?

## Never Give Up

I've never been tried for a crime or involved in a lawsuit, but I've been in enough courtrooms to know that judges can be frightening people. Once you are in their courtroom, they have a power to control your life that you'd rather someone so impersonal not have. They also have a tendency to be cold and cynical. They've seen the worst society has to offer and have often been the subjects of manipulation.

To teach us about how to encounter God in prayer, Jesus told a story of a woman who encountered a judge. She was a widow and so occupied a position of little power, certainly not enough to get a judge's attention. Her neighbor was harassing her in some way, and since she didn't have a husband to defend her, she turned to the local judge. This may have been a move of desperation because this judge had a reputation: he "neither feared God nor cared about men" (Lk 18:2). In other words, he didn't judge based on absolute standards of justice. Equal justice under law was not the guiding principle of his court. He judged as he pleased, and this insignificant woman didn't please him. So he sent her away without even considering her case.

But this widow was the plucky sort, and knowing that she had to choose between living in an oppressive situation or antagonizing a judge, she kept coming back. Finally, she got the better of the judge. Her persistence wore him out. He ruled in her favor, and reluctant justice was done.

What was Jesus trying to teach here? Not that God is cold, cynical, arrogant, and arbitrary, but just the opposite. If a bad judge responds to persistence, how much more a kind, loving, personal judge who rules on perfect standards of justice? If a widow can get justice before a tyrant, how much more will we get what we need from a

“ Unless in the first waking moment of the day you learn to fling the door wide back and let God in, you will work on a wrong level all day; but swing the door wide open and pray to your Father in secret, and every public thing will be stamped with the presence of God.<sup>6</sup> ”

— Oswald Chambers

loving Father? So don't stop asking. Never give up until you have your answer.

Of course, our prayers don't always seem to work out so neatly. We pray and we pray and end up with what seems to be a partial answer or no answer at all. Jesus promised "justice quickly" in the parable but

our results often seem muddled at best. Jesus implies an answer to this paradox by ending the parable with a question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” God wants to build us into a people who don’t rely on circumstances but who rely on him for their very lives. If every prayer were answered as soon as we asked, there would be no need to trust.

We began this chapter by noting that prayer is the means of communication in our relationship with God. When prayers are yet to be answered, we either give up or we trust. When we trust, our relationship grows, and in the multi-faceted wisdom of God, we change, other people and circumstances change, and finally our prayer gets answered. But best of all, we grow in love with a mysterious God whose ways we cannot fathom, yet who daily invites us to come to him as Father. ■

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Why is it that we’re nervous about being honest with God?
2. Does God rely on our prayers to accomplish his will?
3. Where is your solitary place for prayer?
4. What’s the difference between relaxation and refreshment? (See page 25)
5. Our dependence on God can be measured by the consistency of our prayer. Assuming total dependency measures 6 feet, how “tall” is your prayer life?
6. Are you motivated or intimidated by Jesus’ example in prayer?
7. Do you understand the Disciples’ Prayer well enough to try using it as a model for your own prayer?
8. What common obstacles keep you from praying effectively?

**RECOMMENDED READING** *Teach Us to Pray*, D.A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990)

*Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996)

*George Mueller: Delighted in God!* by Roger Steer (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1981)

#### NOTES

1. Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), p.65.
2. E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), p.12.
3. Quoted in *Martin Luther's Quiet Time* by Walter Trobisch (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975).
4. Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967).
5. E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer*, p.26.
6. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1935), p.236.