

Hartford Bible Students

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"Ask in Prayer"

"And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." Matthew 21:22

We have often heard people use this Scripture to prove that the "good" thing they received was due to their faith in praying for it, whether it was a singer or movie star gaining the fame they so desired, an athlete whose team was victorious in a game, someone who won the lottery, or a person whose disease was healed.

Is this true, that whatever we pray for, having enough faith, we will receive? How do we explain the fact that Apostle Paul prayed three times to have his poor eyesight restored, but he did not receive his request and suffered this "thorn in the flesh" throughout his lifetime? (2 Cor. 12:7-8; Acts 9:18; Gal. 4:15) Or how do we explain the fact that Jesus prayed to his Heavenly Father the night before he was crucified that "if it be possible, let this cup [shame of dying as a blasphemer against God] pass from me" (Matt. 26:39) but he did not receive his request, as it states in Isaiah 53:12, "he was numbered with the transgressors?" Certainly, Apostle Paul and Jesus Christ had sufficient faith to have their prayers answered, if this is what answer to prayer is based upon!

The Purpose of Prayer

Prayer is a general term for a variety of petitions, whether a request, a hymn, or an expression of thanksgiving and praise. One poet has expressed it: "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed." In James 4:8 it encourages all to "draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

However, there is a special privilege of prayer during the present Gospel Age, beginning at Pentecost, that has been given to all who have made a full consecration of their lives to God. Those who have

become a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17) have an advocate -- Christ Jesus. As their advocate, Christ covers their imperfection with the robe of his own righteousness and presents them justified [made right] to the Father. Then these "new creatures" are given the special privilege of prayer, that they may "come boldly unto the throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16).

Should We Pray For Anything We Want?

Christians have received the privilege to come boldly to God in prayer. But does this give those who are in a covenant relationship through Christ license to pray for anything? Apostle James teaches that we cannot when he says, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3). The word "lusts" in this verse signifies desires. We are not to ask God to gratify our fleshly desires. God will not answer any petition that would not be for the spiritual good of His children.

We should not tell the Lord what we would like to have Him do for us; He knows best what we need. Our prayers should be along higher lines than these. We should strive to be thankful for whatever His providence may give us -- whether much or little. He knows what we have need of along earthly lines.

Jesus did not pray to God in a mandatory fashion. With his petitions, he said, "Not my will, but thine, be done." This prayer of Jesus indicates that he had no will of his own; he had given up his will and desired to have God's will done. His was a prayer of full submission. It did not mean that Jesus did not pray in faith, nor that he would not get what he desired. It meant that he desired to learn the Father's will; and he learned that the Father willed that he should drink the cup of suffering to the very dregs.

What Should We Pray For?

Matthew 7:7-11 states, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

These Scriptures are often misunderstood to mean that God is happy and willing to give us anything we ask for. But it says God will give good things to his children who ask. What are the good things we should pray for? We should first ask: What do "new creatures" in Christ need? We are told in Luke 11:13, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" New creatures are on trial for the new nature -- for glory, honor, and immortality. And this reward is promised them only if they are found worthy unto death. The terms upon which new creatures enter into spiritual relationship with God are that they shall mortify [deadened] the earthly impulses and seek to have the spiritual impulses quickened [made alive]. (Romans 8:10-14) So what consecrated Christians especially need to strengthen them is the holy spirit of God.

God's plan is that his children should walk by faith and not by sight. Therefore, we should not only not ask for anything unauthorized by His Word, but as we grow spiritually, our petitions will be primarily for spiritual favors -- growth in love, patience, the knowledge of His plan, etc. And even in asking for these, we should not specify how they are to come. We should look for the answers to our prayer in natural rather than supernatural ways, since God's usual method is to use supernatural means only where the natural means are inadequate.

Answer to Prayer Conditional

John 15:7, "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." This is a conditional promise -- "If ye abide in

me." In other words, prayers that are made according to God's will shall be answered, but those contrary to His will shall remain unanswered. To abide in God means we have entered into and remain in spiritual relationship to God as a member of Christ's body, the Church. And to have His words abide in us implies that we have a knowledge of God's Word. This requires study of God's Word so we may know what to pray for. It is only after the Christian has come to this position that he may continue to make his request, nothing doubting. But very likely we will then find that our requests will be more for spiritual increase instead of earthly increase.

Today God may lead us by the still waters and in green pastures; tomorrow the pathway may be thorny and lead us through rough places. But day by day we may grow in knowledge and in love, and we should be ready for whatever experiences may come to us -- "Content whatever lot I see, Since 'tis God's hand that leadeth me."

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