

The Promise of Prayer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Col. 4:2, Rom. 12:12, Matt. 26:34–44, Heb. 11:6, James 4:2, John 14:15, 1 Thess. 4:3.

Memory Text: “Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice” (*Psalms 55:17, NKJV*).

Key Thought: In numerous places in the Bible, the Lord calls us to pray because prayer is an essential component of our walk with Him.

Ellen White gave us these words on the issue of prayer: “Our heavenly Father waits to bestow upon us the fullness of His blessing. It is our privilege to drink largely at the fountain of boundless love. What a wonder it is that we pray so little! God is ready and willing to hear the sincere prayer of the humblest of His children, and yet there is much manifest reluctance on our part to make known our wants to God. What can the angels of heaven think of poor helpless human beings, who are subject to temptation, when God’s heart of infinite love yearns toward them, ready to give them more than they can ask or think, and yet they pray so little and have so little faith? The angels love to bow before God; they love to be near Him. They regard communion with God as their highest joy; and yet the children of earth, who need so much the help that God only can give, seem satisfied to walk without the light of His Spirit, the companionship of His presence.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 94.

That about sums it all up, doesn’t it?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 10.*

The Power of Prayer

One day, a young man received a letter from a former co-worker, someone who had retired a number of years earlier. The two workers, to put it mildly, hadn't gotten along; the one who had left, had from the start, treated the other one badly. Anyway, the remaining worker opened the letter and started to read. Among the words were the following: "You know, I don't understand how prayer works, never did, at least intellectually. I do know, however, that we have been told to pray and over the past few weeks, as I've been praying, I've been greatly convicted about how I treated you all that time. I see that I was wrong, un-Christlike, and a horrible witness for my faith. I know I should have done this a long time ago, but I do sincerely apologize. I have to claim Christ's forgiveness for what I have done, no matter how unworthy I am, and now I ask for your forgiveness as well."

In many ways, this story exemplifies the power of prayer. It's not so much to get God to move mountains, although that can happen. Instead, it can cause something even more miraculous: it can change the human heart.

As the person wrote, prayer isn't always easy to understand. Why ask God for something if He knows about it already? Will God not do something unless we ask for it first? Can our prayers really change what the Creator God will do?

Whether we understand how prayer works or not, one thing is certain: without it, our walk with the Lord is destined to failure.

Read the following texts. What main point do they all have in common? *Matt. 26:41, Luke 18:1, 1 Tim. 2:8, 1 Thess. 5:17, 1 Pet. 4:7, Col. 4:2, Rom. 12:12.*

No question, as Christians we are told to pray and to pray often. That we might not understand how prayer works is, really, beside the point. Most of us don't fully understand how anything works, be it secular or sacred. If we waited until we fully understood all the issues regarding our faith, then it would hardly be faith, would it? The very word *faith* itself implies that there are elements beyond our intellectual grasp. One thing, though, that anyone who prays consistently and fervently—and according to the will of God—can testify to is that prayer can, and does, change our lives.

What is your understanding of prayer? How has it impacted your life? Where would you be in your Christian walk without prayer?

Jesus, the Praying Messiah

What do the following texts teach us about Jesus and prayer? What is the context of each verse?

Luke 3:21, 22 _____

Luke 9:28, 29 _____

Luke 6:12, 13 _____

Heb. 5:7 _____

Matt. 14:23 _____

Luke 22:31, 32 _____

Matt. 26:34–44 _____

Jesus, the spotless Son of God, the One who was without sin, without fault, the One who lived in perfect harmony with the will of the Father, obviously had a powerful prayer life. (The above verses don't even include Jesus' prayer in John 17.) If Jesus needed to pray in order to deal with the things He faced, how much more do we? Christ's example of prayer makes it abundantly clear how central prayer needs to be in our walk with the Lord. It's hard to imagine anyone having any kind of relationship with God without that person praying. If communication is crucial to maintaining relationships with other people, how much more so in a relationship with God? Jesus gives us an example. It's up to us to make the choice to follow it.

How consistent is your prayer life? How distracted are you from praying? Do you pray consistently or when you are in trouble? How can you make prayer central in your walk with the Lord?

The Prayer of Faith

“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (*Heb. 11:6*). What important principles does this text teach us in regard to what is required for prayer and what it means to us?

In a sense, prayer is a way of coming to God, of opening oneself up to Him. We don't pray so that God will know the things that we need. After all, Jesus Himself said, in the context of prayer, that “your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (*Matt. 6:8, NKJV*). We pray because prayer is a way of exercising our faith in God. It's a means of making our faith stronger, more real, and practical. Who hasn't experienced how fervent, unwavering prayer, offered with a sense of dependence and need, has increased one's faith and deepened one's relationship with God?

Prayer is a way of helping to empty self of self. It's a way to die daily. It's a way to reconnect with God on a very personal level. It's a way to remind yourself that you are not your own, that you have been bought with a price, and that left to yourself you would crumble and die in a world full of powers and forces that could, in an instant, trample you into the dirt.

So often we hear the phrase “seek the Lord in prayer.” What does that mean to you? See *Dan. 9:3, 4; Zech. 8:21*.

To a great degree, every prayer is an act of faith. Who can see their prayers extend to heaven? Who can see God receive them? Often we pray without seeing immediate results; yet, we go on faith that God hears and will answer in the best way possible. Prayer is an act of faith in which we reach out beyond what we see or feel or even fully understand.

How much of your prayer life is rote and static, as opposed to deep and heartfelt? How can you move away from the former toward the latter?

Because You Do Not Ask

One of the questions that those who pray often ask is, “Can my prayers really move God to do something that, otherwise, He might not do?” That’s a logical question. To answer it, all we can do is go to the Word of God and see what it says.

Read James 4:2; Luke 11:9, 10; James 5:16–18. What do these texts say about our prayers and the actions of God?

However much prayer changes us and impacts our relationship with God and others, the Bible is very clear that our prayers influence what God does. We ask and He responds, one way or another.

Read Genesis 18:22–33. How do we see this principle at work here?

Again, whatever the philosophical difficulties associated with understanding this truth, God does respond to human prayers. He said that He does, and so we have to take Him at His Word.

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14, NIV). What does this text teach us about prayer?

Notice, however, that God isn’t going to heal their land just because they ask. They are called to pray, but prayer is only one aspect of a general revival on their part.

Perhaps the most important example of this principle is here: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NIV). Here, we see a powerful link between prayer (in this case, confession) and God’s action in our lives. We confess our sins, and He forgives them, a process that also results in His cleansing us from our unrighteousness. The clear idea implied here is that if we don’t pray, don’t confess, we aren’t forgiven. No question, in these cases, God acts in response to our prayers.

Complying With Conditions

Someone sits in a restaurant, consuming a large meal, filled with fatty food that he or she washes down with a soft drink. He or she then finishes off with a large bowl of chocolate ice cream covered in hot fudge. That night, before going to bed (and having a little snack before then, too), he or she kneels to pray. Part of his or her prayer is, “O Lord, please help me lose weight.”

What’s wrong with this picture?

The fact is, we can expect God to answer our prayers, but there are things we need to do in the process. It has been said that we need to live out our prayers; that is, we need to do all that we can, in our power, to see them answered. This isn’t humanism, nor is it showing a lack of faith. On the contrary, it’s part of what living by faith is all about.

“If we regard iniquity in our hearts, if we cling to any known sin, the Lord will not hear us; but the prayer of the penitent, contrite soul is always accepted. When all known wrongs are righted, we may believe that God will answer our petitions. Our own merit will never commend us to the favor of God; it is the worthiness of Jesus that will save us, His blood that will cleanse us; yet we have a work to do in complying with the conditions of acceptance.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 95.

She’s not saying that we have to be perfect in order to have our prayers answered. She’s clear, too, that our acceptance with God is not based on us, or on our merit, but only on the merits of Christ for us. She is saying that we have to be in an attitude of faith, humility, and surrender to God’s will in order for Him to be able to work in our lives.

How do the following texts help us to understand what it means to “comply with the conditions”? See *Heb. 10:38, Deut. 4:29, Luke 9:23, John 14:15, 1 Thess. 4:3*.

Perhaps, of all the conditions necessary for us to have an effective prayer life, the central one is our own sense of need, our own sense of helplessness, our own sense that we are sinners in need of grace, and that our only hope exists in the Lord who has done so much for us. To be arrogant, self-assured, and full of oneself is a recipe for spiritual disaster.

What are the things you’re praying fervently for? As you pray, ask yourself, What could I be doing differently that could help bring about the answer that I so desperately want?

Further Study: “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved. Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Well-spring of life, and strengthens the sinew and muscle of the religious experience.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 254, 255.

“When we do not receive the very things we asked for, at the time we ask, we are still to believe that the Lord hears and that He will answer our prayers. We are so erring and shortsighted that we sometimes ask for things that would not be a blessing to us, and our heavenly Father in love answers our prayers by giving us that which will be for our highest good—that which we ourselves would desire if with vision divinely enlightened we could see all things as they really are. When our prayers seem not to be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most. But to claim that prayer will always be answered in the very way and for the particular thing that we desire, is presumption. God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold any good thing from them that walk uprightly. Then do not fear to trust Him, even though you do not see the immediate answer to your prayers.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 96.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What do you say to someone who asks, “Why pray, if God knows all things in advance”?
- 2 Who, at times, doesn’t struggle with the question of answered and unanswered prayer? For instance, someone prays that their car not break down on a trip and, when the car doesn’t break down, they attribute the happy circumstances to answered prayers. This is fine. But what do you say to the person who also prayed, in this case that their child wouldn’t die, and yet the child dies? How do we understand these things? Or can we?
- 3 What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our prayer life?
- 4 Imagine that someone new arrives in class and he or she asks, “Can you teach me what it means to pray? How should I pray? Why should I pray? And what should I expect when I do pray, and what should I not expect?” How would you answer?

Summary: No question, there are a lot of things about prayer that we don’t grasp. But those who pray do know one thing for sure: prayer will change your life, and for the better, as well.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 55:17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Explain the role of prayer in the Christian's life as modeled by Christ and others in the Bible.

Feel: Open up to God in humble prayer, acknowledging his or her utter need and dependence on Him.

Do: Pray without ceasing.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Living by Prayer

A How does Christ's prayer life inform us in regard to our great need for prayer?

B For what kinds of things did Christ pray? Were His prayers always answered with a "Yes"? Why, or why not?

C What part has prayer played in the lives of other Bible heroes and heroines?

II. Feel: With All Our Heart

A What are the attitudes with which we need to approach God in our prayers?

B How did Christ model these attitudes?

C What part does obedience play in our prayer life?

III. Do: Determined Prayer

A What stories did Jesus tell that illustrate the importance of persistence, determination, and faith in prayer?

B How has your prayer life improved your faith?

C Are there some things that God will not give unless we ask Him? Why, or why not?

► **Summary:** Prayer is a way of communing with God and as such should be engaged in as much as possible. In His prayer life, Christ demonstrated attitudes that will greatly aid our prayers, including humility, submission to the will of God, and persistence.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Prayer is the most intimate gift that God has given to humanity. It is much more than a means of communication, however. Prayer represents our opportunity to draw close to the Lord in a special way.

Just for Teachers: In this opening section, help your students to think about how closely their lives resemble that of Jesus Christ. Prayer is one of God’s ways of binding us close to Himself so that we look, think, and act in our sphere as He does in His. If you can bring a picture or two of pygmy seahorses to class, please do so.

These tiny creatures rarely grow to be more than one inch. Living most of their lives in one place, they are one of the most well-camouflaged species in the ocean, so much so that they were discovered only when scientists examined a piece of host gorgonian coral in a lab. They bear the same color as the coral in which they live and have large, bulbous tubercules on their bodies similar to those found on the coral. Pygmy seahorses are known to inhabit coral reefs in the tropical western Pacific, including Australia (Queensland), Indonesia, Japan, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines.

These exotic creatures so resemble the coral in which they live that it is nearly impossible to detect them with the unaided eye. Their exotic looks are surpassed only by the perfectly choreographed morning dance, performed by pygmy seahorse couples.

Consider This: As you explore these beautiful undersea creatures, ask the class to consider our resemblance to our host, Jesus Christ. What insights can the symbiosis between seahorse and coral reveal about the intimate interplay between God and humanity? In the same way that the pygmy seahorses live in and resemble the gorgonian coral, the Bible tells us that we “live, and move, and have our being” (*Acts 17:28*) in Jesus. What role should prayer play in our spiritual lives in light of the preceding verse?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Jesus prayed. He believed in the power of prayer. He believed that prayer could move the hand of God and bring peace in times of distress. More than that, however, prayer was to Him as essential as breathing.

Bible Commentary

I. Stay With It (*Read Psalm 55:17 and Luke 18:1.*)

This week's lesson makes it clear that we should pray more often than just those times when we find ourselves in crisis (but what a blessing it is to talk to God at these moments). A fleeing David found deep solace in communion with God through prayer. Perhaps when one's life is constantly at risk, one becomes comfortable in the presence of God. Even in these circumstances, David was confident that "[God] shall hear my voice" (*Ps. 55:17, NKJV*).

As Jesus told His disciples of the coming of the kingdom of God (*Luke 17:20–37*), the picture He painted frightened them. Read these verses again and place yourself there. Notice that the context here is one of fear. The disciples are afraid, uneasy, and unsettled.

Jesus could have spoken words of encouragement. Indeed, He did (*see John 16*). Prominent in Jesus' arsenal of peace is a call to prayer. He told the disciples the parable of the persistent widow because He wanted them to know that they needed to seek God persistently. He also wanted them to know that His Father, the Judge, was more inclined to grant their petitions than the judge of the parable was. However, deep soul-searching and earnest, persevering prayer were the keys to these special blessings.

Consider This: If prayer is one of God's means of bringing us peace when our hearts are anxious, why do we often give up praying when situations fail to change according to our time frame?

II. Running on Prayer (*Read 1 Thessalonians 5:17, 2:9, and 3:10.*)

We can sense in the Bible that Jesus was in constant communication with His Father. We see this in the fact that many times Jesus is not recorded praying before performing a miracle or some otherworldly display of divine power.

In Luke 8:22–25, Jesus does not pray that the winds and the waves be still; He simply commands them to do so. In Luke 5:18–25, Jesus does not pray for the paralytic to walk. He sees the faith of the paralytic's friends and the disbelief of the religious leaders who feel He was blaspheming God for claiming to forgive sins, and He acts.

How could Jesus act in such a bold way? The easy answer is: He was God in human flesh. But if Jesus was accessing some power to which we are not privy, why were the disciples able to exercise this power? (*Matthew 10*). The secret to Jesus' power was knowing the will of His Father. How did He know it? He prayed.

Examine the decision Jesus makes in Mark 1:35–38. How many of us would have known to leave that place of obvious ministry opportunities and head somewhere else? Because Jesus received His daily plans directly from His Father, He could simply act in their behalf when He came upon people in need. Why? He was acting in accordance with God’s will, a will He knew firsthand through constant prayer.

Consider This: Jesus was not alone in this penchant for unbroken communication with God. The apostle Paul was known for the same. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, it is said that he labored “night and day” for the cause of God. What was his secret? Read 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Prayer promises us life-change and the opportunity to move the Hand of Omnipotence. Explore these two concepts with your class by responding to the following questions.

Thought Questions:

- 1 Tuesday’s study lets us know that prayer helps us to empty self of self. What is the connection between this emptying of self and the dying to self written about by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:31?
- 2 Is there a connection between praying and knowing what to pray for? The lesson makes clear that we should not wait until we are experts at prayer before we begin to pray. Why is this? In what ways does God teach us when we choose to spend time with Him in prayer?
- 3 Many people hesitate to pray because they are afraid that God will not accept them after the wrongs they’ve done. What are God’s criteria for communing with us? Does He have any? Explain.

Application Questions:

- 1 Which prayers in the Bible speak most to you? Do you have a favorite prayer on which you model some of your prayers? What do Bible prayers teach us about praying?
- 2 If God knows our needs and desires and how best to meet them, why then does He summon us to pray? Is God out to simply meet our needs, or are our wishes an invitation to closer fellowship with Him?

3 What do you do when God does not answer your prayers? How do you cope?

Questions for Witnessing:

1 Second Chronicles 7:14 tells us that if God's people humble themselves and pray, seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways, He will hear their petitions and heal their land. What would you say to a non-believer who feels excluded from the blessings offered in this verse?

2 Wednesday's study reminds us that we must ask God to supply our needs (*Matt. 7:7, James 4:2*). What should we ask from God? What is unacceptable? How do we help a friend who may be asking God for something that may not be in his or her best interest?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Share the following true situation with your class. Have the class members respond to this person's need.

One friend shared the following struggle with another. He was a believer in God, but an occurrence in his life had greatly discouraged him. As a pastor, he knew intimately the power of God. He had seen God work in the lives of countless people. He had seen God heal people in situations that seemed dire.

So, when a dear member of his church grew sick, he did what he had always done: he prayed. He knew that God had the power to heal this member, and, given God's track record in His life, he presumed it would be done. He fasted for the dying member and waited on God. God didn't answer right way, but he continued to pray for the church member and her family. He even anointed her. Yet, to his utter dismay, the member passed away.

The seeming arbitrary nature of this failure of God to heal the woman left him speechless. Within a few short months, he had lost His faith in God.

If you were the friend listening to this tale of sorrow, what would you say to help your friend recover his faith in God and the power of prayer?