

Prayer Considered

John 16:23-33

Simply reading the Bible is insufficient in the Christian life. It must be studied, but even more: it must be *prayed*. We don't listen to the Bible like we listen to the radio. No, but it's as though the Bible has a microphone that is God hearing you speaking and singing His words back to him. The Bible is more than a mere book, more than a mere 66 books, but is a transforming experience every time it's opened...*and prayed*.

Praying the Scriptures is especially important when we come upon a challenging text. It allows us to confidently wrestle with God, and ask Him for help with *His own* words. For we're often tempted to not take His Word seriously when He speaks something that our limited minds find confusing or rubs against a cultural norm.

But, what we're tempted to simply overlook or outright deny, God speaks, and so it *has* to be true, and so God invites us to speak to Him in prayer to simply *ask* Him to "open my eyes to see how you, O God, are right, and my limited thinking is wrong. Correct me, dear Lord, for the sake of your Word that you *want* me to hear and believe. No matter how wild this saying seems to me right now, help me to doubt my doubts and instead trust that this, your Word, is true, and beneficial for me."

"But, Pastor," you might say, "there's never anything that I doubt in the Scriptures as true. If He says it, it's true." I commend your faith, but let's be honest, when you pray, you don't always get what you ask for, at least not right away. And yet, Jesus says in our text, "**whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.**" And God wants us to register this saying of His so badly, that our Gospel text is actually the final of four times in the last three chapters of John that He says this same thing in different ways. In fact, if you were to cut and

glue the verses all together in John, it would sound something like: “Whatever you ask I will do. Ask anything, whatever you wish, and it will be done. Whatever you ask the Father in My Name, He will give you. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

So, to this difficult text, let us pray, “Lord Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, you speak a hard thing here with how it fits with my daily experience, for I often lift many requests to you that I don’t see fulfilled when I ask them. Help me to think what is right about what you’ve said and take comfort in it. Amen.”

Let’s now work to unravel this. As students of all kinds of literature all your life, from *Animal Farm* to the dishwasher manual, you know that lesson number one is always read the context. You can read and obey “hit the start button to begin the dishwasher,” but if you didn’t read and obey the instruction to first “select the wash cycle,” you might find yourself lost with why the dishwasher isn’t starting. With Scripture, we always want to first look to the surrounding verses, then keep zooming out, to how the verse fits into the chapter, to how it works with the themes of the book, and in the whole story of salvation. Scripture interprets Scripture. With this text, though, we don’t need to look too far, but actually find the context we need in the very following verse, Jesus says, “**I have said these things to you in figures of speech.**” In other words, take the main point, but don’t *over-read* it. Clearly, our Lord wants us to know of His generous promise of the Lord to hear and *answer* prayer. That’s the main point.

And let us consider, that you *do* actually have every prayer answered, for when you pray “in the name of Jesus,” you’re praying as one submitting to His care and provision to provide what is best for you, *even if* what is best is different than what you prayed for. I’ll say this another way, in your prayers you might at times include “Lord willing,” or “if it be your will.” “If it be your will, please do this and that.” “If it be your will, please heal my beloved in the

hospital. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done, and if your will is to let my beloved enter into your eternal kingdom, then so be it. I will continue to trust.” While it’s good to have “if it be your will” in the occasional prayer, when you are a Christian praying with faith in the name of Jesus and even saying “in the name of Jesus,” those words “if it be your will” are *automatically* attached to your *every* prayer.

So when we don’t get what we ask for, the problem is not in God’s promise, the problem is in our not being God. The all-knowing King of All Creation is forming all the pieces of this world together in order to save many, including you, and to give out abundant blessings, including to you, but according to how He sees best in order to care for all. If we ask that God harm our brother because he doesn’t deserve God’s love for how he has hurt us, God will not do it. And praying in faith in Jesus, in the name of Jesus, He forgives you when you might even pray for something that’s directly opposed to His Law.

This is pretty easily grasped. But consider the devil’s temptation now. If God so often answers “no” or “not yet” to your prayers for what He says is good, this can tempt us to think that God will do what God darn well pleases to do and it doesn’t matter if I pray. We say in our heart of hearts it doesn’t matter if I pray for relief from this illness or for that promotion or for a new boss, what have you, for God has predetermined all things, *so what’s the point*. And no matter what He transports us believers to heaven in the end anyways, so does He *really* care what we go through in *this* life?

The temptation is to think what you might have seen on a bumper sticker, or even have said yourself, “prayer is not for God, but for you,” that is, “prayer is not for God to hear and consider on the basis of your prayer, but simply just for your own benefit by your speaking, that you spend time in a healthy contemplation.” It’s tempting. Well-intentioned. But...Jesus said,

“whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you...Ask, and you will receive,” or what about the examples in Scripture, that it was through prayer that Joshua lengthened the day in battle, or that when Hezekiah was sick, he prayed for an extension for his life and was granted 15 more years on this earth strictly *because* he prayed, or that through prayer Daniel closed the jaws of the lions, that through prayer the fire couldn't harm Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. No, God often gives what we ask *because* we prayed for it. He even at times changes circumstances and hinders others who would oppose our prayer. Not always, but He does. He doesn't just hear your prayer, but desires to grant it if it doesn't conflict with what He sees as better. Now God is not a divine vending machine, granting your every wish at the push of a button, but He isn't cold to your requests either. There's a middle way.

What about God doesn't change no matter what? His promises. His Word and death and resurrection is firmly set in the heavens. But your prayer in faith is a key to God's Fatherly heart that *can* cause Him to change course in the details. This truth that prayer actually isn't just heard but also considered doesn't destroy God's foreknowledge and predestination. We're the shortsighted ones. God has also foreseen from eternity if and what we would ask of Him, and includes the hearing of our prayer in His eternal counsel; with incomprehensible wisdom He has woven it into the plan of the world and His Church.

So to our doubt that God hears and considers our prayer, Jesus says, “Try me. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” Ask, and you will receive either that which you asked for, *or even better*. Even help delayed is often better than immediate relief. Moses begged to be let into the promised earthly land of Canaan, but instead was taken up into the heavenly Promised Land. Was Paul not heard when He was afflicted with his thorn in the flesh? He was heard. Three times Paul pleaded with God, but instead God gave Him the assurance that He

would never leave or forsake Paul, saying “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” But what would’ve happened if Paul had been granted His petition the first time, to have the thorn removed immediately? He wouldn’t have prayed the second or third time. God often wisely delays His help, perhaps to awaken our earnestness in prayer, or any other countless good reasons. He alone knows the hour in which the help or the good things we ask for are the *most* beneficial.

So never tire of prayer, and take great comfort in it, knowing that your Lord will provide. Pray in the church with your brothers and sisters together. Pray at home with your families. Pray in the quiet solitude of your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

He rewards you, because He first rewarded His Son in the Resurrection, and now rewards you by faith through His sacrifice, His redemption. Prayer is the family privilege of a child of the heavenly Father. By Baptism, you are such a child, united to your brother, Jesus. Prayer is a learned skill, but pray with confidence, for your Lord is not angry with you, but has accepted the payment of His Son on your behalf. He gave us the petition, “forgive us our trespasses,” because He is good and ready to not look at your sins, nor deny your prayers because of them, but wants you to ask despite your unworthiness, all because of His grace, through the self-giving blood atonement of the Son of God, all for you. Pray, for He loves to hear you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.