

The secret of prayer

“Please pray for me!”

“God, if you’re there, help!”

When facing a problem which feels out of control, many people pray. It is almost an instinct in us - and it’s a good instinct, for the Bible says a lot about prayer, and makes many wonderful promises.

But before we see what those are, we must honestly face a couple of problems.

Two problems

For one thing, many people *don’t know who they’re praying to*. “To God”, we say, of course - but who is he? What kind of God is he? Is he really there? What is he like? Normally in life, the best people to ask for help are people we know, and who know us. Because we know them, we trust them and know how they might help. When you stop and think about it, it’s very odd to cry desperately to someone we don’t really know.

A second problem is this: *how can we be sure we deserve to have God answer?* Think for a moment: if there really is a true God, who made us and watches over us, do we really bother with him? Think for a moment of the young person who never bothers with their parents except to get money off them - we all know that’s a terrible way to live, but do we treat God like that? When we enjoy all he gives us, but don’t thank him; when we deliberately ignore what God says about how we are to run our lives. What must he think of that? Why should he answer our prayers? The worst of it is that we’re quick to blame him

if he doesn’t - without pausing to think if, in fact, the problem lies with us!

Two false solutions

Some people realise they are unworthy to pray, or realise that they don’t really know God. Answer: find someone who does, and get them to pray! It could even be the Vicar that they ask!! For sure, it’s great to share our burdens. But just to do that doesn’t deal with the root problem: here we are, in God’s world, each individually made by him, but out of touch with him.

Others think the answer is to get religious. “If I just go to church, do religious duties, try to be better than others, then God will accept me.” That sounds sensible - till you think it right through. What if God’s standards are perfect? What about the things I’ve done in life which are wrong? How can I possibly make up for them? (I can’t use my good deeds to offset my bad ones, because I should have done the good ones anyway!) When we actually examine our lives a bit more seriously and stop kidding ourselves, we all have a lot to be ashamed of - not just the things we have done, but the things we have said and even thought. How could being religious ever deal with that?

The Bible’s wonderful answer

The Bible has an answer to all this which is surprising to many, even to some in churches. In John’s Gospel, chapter 3, verse 16, we read “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” There is a

real God - and he loves the world! But there is also a terrible problem: the danger of "perishing", which means dying on the wrong side of God, and facing his punishment for leading our lives without reference to him and ignoring him. (If God is totally right and fair, he can't just ignore that.) It's because we are "perishing" that we find we're out of touch with God and maybe realise, deep down, our prayers aren't being answered.

BUT "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son"! We couldn't sort out the problem between us and God, but God did. In the greatest act of love in all history, he gave his only Son, Jesus, to deal with the problem. The word "gave" here is not just about the coming of Jesus into the world, which we remember each Christmas, but in fact his dying on the cross, which we remember each Easter. When Jesus died, he took the punishment for our wrongdoing, so that all our moral debts to God could be cancelled. That opens up the possibility of a real, personal friendship with God in which we really do know the God we pray to! This is what is called "eternal life". It's a whole new quality of life - knowing God as our Father and Jesus as our friend. It means being back in friendship with our own Maker; living as we were made to live! That opens up the way to answered prayer! That's why, in the Bible, Jesus is called our Saviour.

How can we have this?

The same verse says "Whoever believes in him" - that means, trusting Him as our Saviour and Lord. It means actually wanting to be in friendship with Him - no longer in a "hit and miss" way, with occasional prayers at times of desperation, but nothing else! (There is tons of evidence in the Bible as to why we

should trust Him: all the amazing things he did, his wonderful teaching, his resurrection from the dead, the extraordinary way loads of prophecies from centuries before were exactly fulfilled in his life, and so on: read a gospel and see for yourself.)

We start this new relationship with a prayer! It doesn't have to be in any special religious language. It might sound something like this: *"Lord, thank you that you love the world so much that you sent Jesus to die for us. I'm really sorry I've lived in the world either ignoring you or trying proudly to be my own Saviour. But because you sent Jesus to die for me, I see that there is now a way open to you, because he came to clear the debt I owe you. Please forgive me, and give me this eternal life. Help me to know you and trust you and live with you as my Lord from now on."*

Assurance

If you pray this prayer, ALL your other prayers will now be in the context of a relationship with the God who made you. You can call him "Father". That does not mean that he will automatically guarantee to answer every prayer, for he knows better than we do what we need. But it does mean that every time we pray, we are talking to someone whom we know and love - and who knows and loves us! Prayer is no longer a far-away thing, but part of a relationship.

If you have prayed this first prayer, tell a friend, and start to read the Bible - the best place to start is one of the four gospels, the accounts of Jesus' life. There, on every page, you will meet and get to know the one you are now able, freely, to pray to.

Alasdair Paine