

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

HANDOUT B

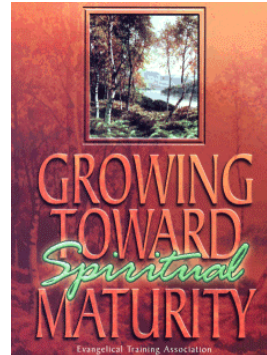
Developing Intimacy with God

Chapter 5 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

Published by Evangelical Training Association

It would be hard to imagine having a healthy marriage relationship without a husband and wife talking to one another on a regular basis. Yet it is even more impossible to comprehend how people could claim to know God, without talking to Him regularly. The key to intimacy with God is through a disciplined, regular pattern of communication with God through prayer.



Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity
By Gary C. Newton
Published by Evangelical Training Association

While godly people in Scripture approached God in prayer in various ways, the one common characteristic of each was that they put a priority on prayer. Daniel made it his practice to pray three times a day. David prayed through psalms and music. Jesus, even though He was fully God, made communication with His Father an absolute priority. His pattern was often to rise early in the morning, before dawn, to talk to the Father. Before all major decisions, He spent lengthy times in solitude and prayer. Paul continues this priority in both his practice and teaching. He is an example to all of us in his practice of continually praying for people and situations. His letters include some of the richest prayers in Scripture.

The biblical record indicates a variety of postures in prayer. Kneeling, laying prostrate, raising arms, and even dancing before the Lord reflect the diversity of expression in prayer. People pray loudly, quietly, in unknown languages, through musical instruments, and in singing. The issue in prayer is not necessarily how it is done, but rather where the source of the communication comes from. While communication from the heart of man seems to touch the heart of God, external prayers that have no personal meaning do not seem to make any connection. God desires His children to draw close to Him through prayer. Through prayer, we tap into the resources that God has for us to grow into His likeness.

Purposeful Prayer

Knowing why we need to pray may spark us to become more deliberate and passionate in our prayer life. But why pray? Since God is all knowing, all powerful, and all loving, what purpose does prayer serve? Certainly, prayer is not needed to inform God about personal circumstances. God knows what His people need before they ask (Matt. 6:32). Likewise, it is not necessary for

people to try to change God's attitude toward them. God is not a cosmic bully intent on harming people. Although pagan prayers often were designed to appease a hostile deity, the true God does not desire this (Matt 6:25-34). After all, God gives only good gifts (James 1:17).

Furthermore, prayer is not talking God into something that He does not want to do. The Christian's proper attitude in prayer is submission to God's will, not achieving his/her own (Matt. 6:10). Jesus' prayer as He awaited His impending crucifixion makes this clear, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). The believer's assurance in prayer is, "if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14).

The purpose of prayer is not to change God's mind. Rather, it is to align one's will with God's will. Passages where God appears to modify His stated plans in response to prayer probably were learning experiences designed by God to teach valuable lessons to His children (Gen. 18:16-33).

If prayer does not do any of these things, it seems like a complete waste of time and effort! Why pray? Pray because God has willed to work in answer to prayer. Prayer makes a difference. "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). Prayer becomes a powerful means by which the follower of Jesus Christ utilizes the resources of God to further His kingdom here on earth.

Someone has well said, "Prayer is for our benefit, not God's." Being sovereign over everyone and everything that exists, God did not need human prayer to accomplish His eternal purposes. Yet He chose prayer to be the vehicle He would use to deliver His blessings to His children. Prayer unlocks the door to the storehouse of God's riches.

Components of a Rich Prayer Life

When we study Scripture as a whole, we find several aspects of prayer that characterize godly men and women with rich prayer lives: worship, confession, adoration, praise, thanksgiving, intercession, and requests.

Worship

Entering God's presence should impress believers with His worth. A sense of awe and reverence is the natural response to the presence of the greatest being there is. When believers meditate on who God is, a feeling of esteem for God fills their hearts. By concentrating on the perfection of God's being, believers clear their minds of the clutter from daily life that distracts them from sensing God's presence. Because God is spirit, He desires that His children worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23,24). God must be valued above all else as we approach Him in prayer.

Confession

Recognition of God's holiness naturally leaves people with a sense of sinfulness requiring confession. Experiencing how utterly holy God is, the prophet Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isa. 6:5). Every believer needs this cleansing that comes

from acknowledging guilt. “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). This means that God is absolutely right in forgiving sin every time believers truly confess. People often stop growing spiritually because they fail to accept God’s forgiveness. A healthy prayer life is an antidote to spiritual paralysis.

Adoration

Reassured by the loving forgiveness of the heavenly Father (1 John 4:10), believers need to tell God how much they love Him. An atmosphere of adoration and affectionate warmth marks a good prayer time. Expressing love to God by word and obedient actions is the only appropriate response to one who loves believers so much (1 John 3:1; 4:16). Jesus taught that your first responsibility is to love God with your whole being (Matt. 22:37). This love is no empty sentimental gesture. It reflects the resolve of the will as well as emotional feelings.

Praise

Whereas worship appreciates who God is, praise pays tribute to what God does. He deserves praise “for his acts of power ... for his surpassing greatness” (Ps. 150:2). Believers should speak highly of His great goodness and gracious compassion (Ps. 145:4-9). Because “the Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made” (Ps. 145:9). God is honored and Christians grow when they credit Him. Praise projects a positive outlook on life by remembering God’s favors.

Thanksgiving

No aspect of prayer is more essential than thanksgiving. Having received God’s forgiving grace and sustaining strength, Christians owe Him a deep sense of gratefulness. Ingratitude lies at the heart of rebellion against God (Rom. 1:21). In arrogant pride people ignore God, choosing rather to credit themselves for the blessings of life. This ungrateful attitude has no place among believers. Thanksgiving is an attitude for all seasons. Hard times are as much an occasion for gratitude as good times (1 Thess. 5:18). Even experiences that normally cause tension are to be faced with thankful prayer anticipating inward peace (Phil. 4:6, 7). Knowing that God is in control and will use this hardship to promote spiritual growth is sufficient reason to pray thankfully (Rom. 8:28; James 1:2-4).

Intercession

Prayer is also a time to ask God to meet the needs of others. The phrase, “God first, others second, self last” applies well to prayer. Paul regularly prayed for the spiritual maturity of believers (Phil. 1:9-11; Eph. 1:16-23, 3:14-21) and asked them to pray for his consistent witness (Eph. 6:18-20). Through prayer you can contribute positively to the lives of others way beyond the limits of your personal resources and capacities (Phil. 1:19).

Requests

Finally, prayer is telling God all the details of everything that concerns you (Phil. 4:6). Seeking help from God for personal challenges, problems, and opportunities is not selfish. Jesus

encouraged His disciples to take their requests to God in His name (John 16:23, 24). Through prayer you receive divine help for daily needs.

Prayer Results

Prayer played a vital part in the lives of God's people in biblical times. The Old Testament leaders Abraham, Moses, Nehemiah, and Ezra, godly Job, and Hannah, the prophets Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Daniel, and Jeremiah, and the kings David, Solomon, and Hezekiah all witnessed God's direct involvement in their lives through prayer. Although Jesus was God, during His life on earth He prayed regularly to His heavenly Father. Following His teaching, the apostles and later the early church, placed a priority on prayer. In all these cases, God followed no single pattern in responding to His people's requests. Whether the loving divine answer was "Yes," "Wait," or "No," prayer greatly affected their lives and the lives of others.

Granting of Requests

In the Old Testament numberless examples of how God grants requests are found.

Israel's early leaders knew the power of prayer. When Abraham prayed for Abimelech, king of Gerar, the king's life was spared and his family was able to have children again (Gen. 20:17, 18). Several times during the wilderness wanderings Moses prayed for the rebellious Israelites and God spared them from threatened destruction (Num. 11:2; 14:12-16; 21:7).

The history of the nation Israel was one of recurring defection from God, divine discipline, and prayer secured deliverance. After the people repented for their idolatry, God broke the Philistine dominance over them in answer to Samuel's prayer (1 Sam. 7:5-13). Later, when Saul became Israel's first king, Samuel showed God's displeasure at their wanting a king like other nations by praying down a thunderstorm. In spite of Israel's sin, Samuel also prayed for their well being (1 Sam. 12:16-23).

When David and Solomon reigned over the united kingdom, Israel was led by men of prayer. Many Psalms are prayers of David (Ps. 17; 72:20; 86; 142). David's confession concerning his sin with Bathsheba is a pattern for all subsequent generations (Ps. 51). Solomon's prayer for wisdom at his coronation (1 Kings 3:7-9) and humility in his prayer dedicating the temple brought divine blessing on the whole nation (1 Kings 8:22-53).

In the New Testament prayer continues its crucial role. During His earthly ministry, Jesus' prayers were directly connected with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him at His baptism (Luke 3:21-22), times of heavy ministry (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), the selection of the disciples (Luke 6:12), the confession by Peter that He was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Luke 9:18-20; Matt. 16:16), His transfiguration on the mountain (Luke 9:29), and His betrayal and crucifixion (Luke 22:40-44). Through prayer the early church received guidance in the choice of an apostle to replace Judas (Acts 1:24), courage to witness during times of persecution (Acts 4:31), the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Samaritan believers (Acts 8:15), God's orders to reach out to Gentiles (Acts 10:9-23), divine initiation and enablement for Paul's missionary journeys (Acts 13:1-3), the appointment of local church leaders (Acts 14:23), and release from

prison (Acts 12:12; 16:25-40). God guided, equipped, and enabled the early church for effective ministry in response to the prayers of godly disciples.

Delaying Until a Better Time

Even in biblical times God did not always answer His people's requests immediately. Sometimes God waited for His right time. The heavens seemed closed to the cries of Job as his family's circumstances went from bad to worse. But God's answer was not "No." By delaying the end of Job's suffering, God taught His servant valuable spiritual lessons which could only be learned in adversity. Ultimately Job emerged as a more mature child of God with restored health and doubled finances (Job 3:11-23; 7:20; 42:8-10; James 5:11). Married couples unable to have children waited and yearned and waited again, despairing of ever having a family. In God's perfect time Hannah conceived her son Samuel (1 Sam. 1:5-7, 20) and Elizabeth and Zechariah bore John the Baptist (Luke 1:13).

Affirming a Superior Way

At times the believer's wiser heavenly Father lovingly denies a request because He knows what is best for His begging child. Only a cruel parent would have granted Elijah's (1 Kings 19:4) or Jonah's (Jonah 4:1-10) prayers for death. Being depressed, the prophets were not thinking clearly, so God said, "No." Death was no solution for prophets who had just been God's instruments for revival.

Often God denied a specific request not because it was foolish or bad, but because He had something better in mind. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is an example of this. On three separate occasions Paul "pleaded with the Lord to take it away." God refused but assured Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Paul discovered that the spiritual blessing supplied by God's grace in times of adversity far surpassed any inconvenience or pain.

Definite Answers to Prayer

Testimonies abound to God's faithful answers to the requests of His children. Believers imprisoned for their faith report receiving courage and spiritual strength when they prayed. Some suffering from serious life-threatening illnesses have been miraculously healed because God's people prayed. The church has grown in nations where Christianity is illegal or suppressed in answer to the prayers of foreign believers not even allowed in those countries. Lives wrecked by sin and drugs have been transformed by a conversion experience that has come after years of faithful prayer by a relative or close friend. Many rejoice in the multitude of daily needs that God specifically provides through the prayers of the saints.

Realistic Expectations in Prayer

Believers often experience frustration when they do not see direct results from their prayers. Some accuse God of not keeping His Word, when in reality they have misunderstood His promises concerning prayer. Jesus' promise that the Father would give "whatever" His disciples asked (John 16:23, 24) must not be taken to mean that God will always do precisely what believers want. Prayer is a request to God for help, not a demand for action. This is a proverbial

type promise that states a general truth without indicating any qualifications or exceptions. Other passages make it clear that requests motivated by selfish desire (James 4:3) or opposed to God's will are not answered (1 John 5:14). Answers to prayer are not some kind of demand performance by God. He is not under any contractual obligation to give everything His people want. God evaluates every prayer by His infinite wisdom and unfailing love. He gives only what He knows is best.

Some believe that the answer is guaranteed when two people agree, failing to realize that this promise has to do with church discipline, not prayer for things (Matt. 18:19). This passage deals with reconciliation and forgiveness. The agreement concerns the kind of discipline that God should bring upon an unrepentant guilt party. It is dangerous to give false expectations based on misunderstanding Scripture. When prayers are not answered positively, people feel that God has failed them. They become disappointed in God for something He never promised to do.

Confident Assurance in Prayer

From a limited human perspective, there seems to be no value in experiencing disease, hardships, adversity, and persecution. Given the option, Christians would veto having these experiences invade their lives. Yet, these problems are a part of the sinful, fallen world in which both believers and non-believers live out their Christian faith. God hates these terrible results of the fall and has acted decisively defeating Satan who has the power of death (Heb. 2:14). Knowing that God "is able to do immeasurably more than all that we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Eph. 3:20), believers should pray with confidence. Nothing is too hard for God.

Yet, while God promises to come to the aid of His children in these hard circumstances, He never promises us freedom from such difficulties. In fact, Jesus clearly warns His disciples that they will have tribulation in this world. He offers peace within these crises, not immunity from them (John 16:33). As in biblical times, God sometimes chooses to glorify His name by miraculously removing the problem, at other times, by strengthening believers so that they can persevere to God's glory. Anytime God chooses not to heal sickness or remove a difficult problem, His children should rest in confident assurance that God is working His plan out under His ultimate control. The fact that we do not understand does not mar either God's love or His character but simply reflects the fact that we see things from a limited, earthly perspective.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, some of our most valuable learning experiences happen within the context of challenge, suffering, and stress. The key to passing the test in these situations is in the depth of our trusting relationship with Jesus Christ. While such crises can draw us into a more intimate walk with the Lord, it is much wiser to be prepared ahead of time for the inevitable storms in life, by fostering an intimate prayer life with the Father during the good times.

—Gary C. Newton serves as the Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Christian Ministries and Associate Professor of Educational Ministries at Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana. His passion has been to help the church become a training ground for building disciples of Jesus Christ.

Summary

Prayer is the catalyst in growing toward spiritual maturity. Through prayer, the believer draws on the riches of God's blessing and power. Yet God has no desire to live up to our image of a spiritual Santa Claus. While God listens to the prayers of His children, He does not always answer us in the way that we might want. His highest purpose of prayer is to usher us into His presence. For this reason a rich prayer life should include all of these elements: worship, confession, adoration, praise, thanksgiving, intercession, and requests. A preoccupation with merely using prayer as a means to get what we want is a sign more of carnality than spirituality. Spiritual maturity is evidenced by both an intimate prayer life and a humble submission to the sovereign will of God.

For Further Discussion

1. Name three things which prayer does not do and explain why in each case.
2. Since prayer does not do these things, why pray?
3. If Jesus was fully God, why did He have to spend so much time in prayer?
4. Why is it wrong to think that prayer guarantees you will get everything you request?
5. How can "wait" or "no" be viewed as positive answers to prayer?
6. Discuss definite answers to prayer that you, your family, or church have received this past month.
7. Identify some false expectations which people have concerning prayer and discuss why these are a serious problem.

TO ORDER COPIES OF *GROWING TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY*,
PLEASE GO TO: http://www.etaworld.org/cat/gtism_book_cti.htm
OR CALL TOLL-FREE: 1-800-369-8291

© 1999 by Evangelical Training Association. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. ISBN: 0-910566-45-3.