

IN THE GARDEN OF PRAYER

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Genesis is a book of “firsts.” Starting with the creation of the world and of humankind, it documents some significant firsts in early human history. Curiously, it omits what modern science deems significant firsts, like the discovery of fire and the creation of the wheel. Instead, it focuses on things related to the creation of a people of God and the restoration of relationship with God, which had been lost when Adam and Eve first sinned. It mentions the first murder (Cain and Abel), the first nomadic rancher (Jabal), the first musician (Jubal), and the first blacksmith (Tubal-cain).

Adam had three sons. The first, Cain, killed the second, Abel, out of bitter jealousy. The third, Seth, from the emotional standpoint of Eve, became the replacement son — for Abel, who was killed, and for Cain, who was lost. More importantly, from God’s perspective, Seth became the heir, the son of promise, through whom reconnection with God would be established. So, when Seth had grown up, it was recorded:

“Then men began to call upon the name of the LORD.” (Genesis 4:26)

This notation signifies a major transition of the human heart: people began to reach out to God. We may think of it as the first religion, but it is so much more than that, for it stands without form or ritual or authority. It represents the spontaneous heart cry of people for connected relationship with their Maker.

People want to know their God. And the way to do that is to call on Him. Prayer and worship. In their most simple, spontaneous forms, worship expresses wonder and joy for the good things of life — sunrise, fresh water, harvest of crops, good friends — and prayer expresses dependence and expectation in the difficult circumstances of life — need for preservation, safety, guidance, strength.

And this is where it all began — and where it all begins for you, too — *“Then men began to call upon the name of the LORD.”*

Last Sunday, I spoke to you about hearing God’s voice through His Word, the Bible. Reading alone can only inform you (tell you *about* God). It is reading *with prayer* that inspires (acquaint you *with* God).

If you never pray, you will never know God personally. If you pray only infrequently, you will know God very little. If you pray often and much, you will get to know God well.

That’s why I have titled this message “In the Garden of Prayer (Learning to Know God’s Heart).”

God, Creator of all, invites us, mere creatures, to pray, and He assures us He will hear. He is holy, separate from sinners and undefiled, and we are rebellious and sinful, but as a Father, He invites us to ask favors and promises help. *“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for... For everyone who asks, receives... If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.”* (Matthew 7:7–11). Amazing!

Prayer changes things. The Bible says, *“The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”* (James 5:16). Prayer for the sick is not a substitute for medicine, prayer for daily bread is not a substitute for work, and prayer for the lost is no substitute for the gos-

pel, but those things are no substitute for prayer either. Because Christians pray, some are well who would still be sick, some alive who would be dead, souls are saved that would be lost, doors of opportunity are open that would still be closed, some are wiser than they were. "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." And many more things yet would be wrought by it, if we prayed more: "*You don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.*" (James 4:2). How amazing!

God commands us to pray. "*Never stop praying*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). "*Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.*" (Colossians 4:2). "*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.*" (Philippians 4:6). The greatest of all privileges is not only allowed, but is even enjoined upon us. To let us pray would be marvelous, but He commands us. Amazing indeed!

God urges us to be persistent in prayer. If at first we do not get what we ask for, we are to keep asking. If God, who hears all things, appears deaf to our cries, we are to cry longer. Jesus told a parable about an unjust and uncaring judge, who finally ruled in favor of a poor widow simply because she wore him out with her persistent pleas. He told that parable, He said, to teach us that we "*should always pray and never give up*" (Luke 18:1). God is not unjust and uncaring, like that judge; but we are to be persistent, like that widow. God never wearies of our asking, even when it appears He is not hearing. Astoundingly amazing!

We are invited to pray and God has promised to hear. Great things happen because of prayer. We are commanded to pray by the One who loves us, and reminded that we show Him our love by keeping His commandments. We can "*come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.*" (Hebrews 4:16). Yet, believing all of that, many of us pray so little! That is most amazing of all!

PRAYER'S PURPOSE

So men began to call on the name of the Lord. What was significant about this is that they were beginning to fulfill God's purpose for their lives. Not that His purpose was for them to hide themselves away in prayer as the hermits did. But that people should dwell in relationship with God; that they should live out their day-to-day lives in the universe of which He is the center, always relating their lives, in one way or another, to Him.

[Jesus] said to them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves!" (Matthew 21:13) (See also Isaiah 56:7)

The psalmist recognized the liturgy of the Temple as symbolic of the liturgy of the human heart: *Accept my prayer as incense offered to you, and my upraised hands as an evening offering.* (Psalm 141:2)

Let's turn to the words of Jesus regarding prayer to find what He, the Master of prayer, taught on the subject.

Luke 11

¹ *Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, "**Lord, teach us to pray**, just as John taught his disciples."*

² *Jesus said, "This is how you should pray:*

PRAYER'S CONTENT

This is how you should pray. He didn't mean "use these words," but "in this manner." Let's see what He meant.

Luke 11

² *"Father, may your name be kept holy.*

May your Kingdom come soon.

³ *Give us each day the food we need,*

⁴ *and forgive us our sins,*

as we forgive those who sin against us.

And don't let us yield to temptation."

Prayer's Direction

Jesus' sample prayer first directs us to God, the Father. Elsewhere, He instructed, "Pray to your Father in private" (Matthew 6:6). He told His followers that the day would come when they would no longer ask Him for anything, but would enjoy a direct line of communication with God the Father: "At that time... you will ask the Father directly" (John 16:23). The content of proper prayer is directed godward, to our Heavenly Father.

Prayer's Context

Jesus' instructions and promises have context; they were not given in a moral or theological vacuum. This example clearly defines the context for prayer: "May Your name be kept holy. My Your Kingdom come soon." The world of prayer does not revolve around the one who prays but the One to whom prayer is made. Our lives are not insignificant, but their significance is found in our relationship with God, not apart from it. Our role in prayer is to partner with God to see His Kingdom realized. Everything else is secondary.

And even though secondary to *His* purpose, our needs and desires find their highest possible value and meaning in relation to God's purpose. Thus, when we bring all things *under* His purpose, those "things" find their reason for being.

Apostle John taught, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). This is the divine context of the privilege of prayer.

Prayer's Authorization

"If we ask... according to His will." This is the meaning of the phrase "in the name of Jesus Christ": it is what Jesus would want were He the one who was praying. This is the source of our confidence when we pray; all else is vain hope.

In the way that Jesus taught us to pray, I pray first about my life's impact on God (His honor). I pray second about life's impact on me (my needs). I pray third about my life's impact on others (my behavior). This is prayer's proper content.

PRAYER'S METHOD

Luke 11

⁵ Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this story: "Suppose you went to a friend's house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, ⁶ 'A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.'⁷ And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can't help you.'⁸ But I tell you this—though he won't do it for friendship's sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your **shameless persistence**.

Prayer's method is simple — having nothing to do with tone or volume of voice, or eloquence of speech. It is bold persistence, never giving up, never caving in.

Luke 11 (AMP)

⁹ "So I say to you, Ask and keep on asking and it shall be given you; seek and keep on seeking and you shall find; knock and keep on knocking and the door shall be opened to you.

¹⁰ "For everyone who asks and keeps on asking receives; and he who seeks and keeps on seeking finds; and to him who knocks and keeps on knocking, the door shall be opened."

When once we have the context right ("according to the will of God"), we must press through every reluctance, every apparent delay, every inclination to quit. Just keep on asking. It's not that God is deaf, or disinterested, or distracted. It is *through our persistence* that He removes every boulder, pulls down every barrier, and arranges every circumstance.

When prayer pulls the rope below, the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely move the bell, for they pray so unenergetically. Others give only an occasional tug on the rope. But the person who wins with heaven is the one who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might.

When you want to quit — and we all do at times — pray for the grace to continue.

French surgeon and biologist, Alexis Carrel, said, "Prayer is the most powerful form of energy one can generate. The influence of prayer on the human mind and body is as demonstrable as that of secretion glands. Prayer is a force as real as terrestrial gravity. It supplies us with a steady flow of sustaining power in our daily lives."

Isaiah 40:31

Those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.

They will soar high on wings like eagles.

They will run and not grow weary.

They will walk and not faint.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed—The motion of a hidden fire,
That trembles in the breast.
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.
(by James Montgomery)

Today, we have rediscovered prayer's purpose: to make a place for God in the hearts of people.

Jesus has taught us prayer's content — its direction, context, and authorization — and also its simple method: shameless persistence (in the context of God's revealed will).

Now, will you do it? Will you pray? Frequently and persistently?

Recommit yourself today to begin to call on the name of the Lord as never before. It will be as significant in your personal history as it was in the history of mankind during the days of Seth.