

Do you believe in the power of prayer? I've heard people talk of the amazing power of prayer and given my own experience, I believe wholeheartedly in the power of prayer. Prayer works! I know of people who have made recoveries from illnesses in such a way that can only be described as miraculous. I am convinced from experience that God answers prayers! Have you prayed lately? And when you pray, do you expect your prayers to be answered? I know that God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we expect but I believe that God answers prayer. There's an interesting incident in Acts 12 that affirms that God answers prayers.

Herod Antipas was persecuting Christians and he was the son of Herod the Great, who massacred the new born boys while attempting to kill the baby Jesus. Herod Antipas was like his father and he was an insecure ruler who was trying to gain political popularity with the people. As Antipas' people were Jewish he persecuted Christians to gain popularity. It's against this background that Peter found himself imprisoned and he knew that Herod planned to put him on trial, although these trials were a sham and only one outcome was expected; death for Peter!

Peter wasn't the only one who was worried about his situation. The early Christians were concerned about their leader and Acts tells us that they prayed unceasingly for his release. A group of Christians gathered together in someone's house to pray for Peter release, and this pattern has continued. We still meet to pray for deliverance or healing for each other and there's times when we all need prayer when faced with problems, and most of us have had to face challenges at some time in our lives. But back to Peter in prison; Christians were praying for their leader and friend and verse 5 tells us that *the church was praying earnestly to God for him*. This is in imitation of Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke 22 tells of Jesus praying earnestly to God before his arrest and passion. If we read Luke 22:44 we'll note an important aspect of Jesus' prayer: Jesus prayed *thy will be done*.

When we pray we tend to pray asking for our solution to our problem. We have the answer to our problem and we need God to deliver. We don't allow God to do the unexpected and so we limit God!

In Peter's case, God had done the unexpected! The church was praying for Peter but they were praying that God's will be done. And as they were praying, Peter was freed and was making his way across the city. He came to the place in which the Christians were praying and knocked at the gate. One of the Christians, Rhoda who was a servant girl, crossed the courtyard to answer the door but before she opened it, she recognized Peter's voice on the outside asking to be admitted. She was so excited that she didn't even open the door. She ran back to the others and said *it's Peter!* The Christians gathered told her she was mad and then instead of letting Peter in, they had an argument about whether it was Peter or not. Meanwhile, Peter was standing outside waiting patiently to be let in. Finally, they decide to go to the door and then the words of the account are revealing: *They opened the door and were amazed to see him.*

They were amazed to see him; does that not sum up our approach to prayer? We pray faithfully to God over an issue and then the answer finally stands at the door, trying to get through to us and often in vain, and then we are amazed! And why are we amazed? We're amazed because underneath our faithful and earnest prayer, we didn't really have an expectation that our prayer would be answered! That's what's wrong with much of our praying. Far too often we pray with an attitude of *didn't expect much, didn't get much!* Our prayer can be superficial because it lacks expectation and it's only by God's grace that prayers are fruitful. We must believe in God's grace when we pray!

Jesus warns us about praying prayers of repetition, and we can improve our praying by following two principles. These two principles of prayer go together like the two sides of an arch. **First: Pray for what you have a right to expect. Secondly: Expect what you a right to pray for!** It only takes a moment of reflection to make clear that there are things for which we have no right to pray.

The ancient Greeks said: *When the gods punish us, they answer our prayers.* Some prayers if answered, would do unjust harm to other persons. Some prayers are inconsistent with the character of God. Prayers that would harm others, prayers for unearned wealth, prayers that your team wins a match! These are among the things we have no right to pray for in Christ's name. The answer to our prayers should always demonstrate the wellbeing of all, and grace and love expressed in God's nature.

What do we have a right to pray for? There's an inexhaustible wealth of things. Certainly, we should pray for that which fulfils the marvellous possibilities that God has created within us. When we pray we should have an expectation of God because of the great possibilities he has created for us and in us. That's why we pray for recovery of the sick that their lives may be fulfilled. That the purposes of God may be fulfilled in their lives is why we pray for their recovery.

A mother praying for strength and wisdom to raise her children. A soldier praying for courage. A leader praying for wisdom and humility. A person praying for the strength to overcome that temptation: These prayers share in what God's purposes are for us. ***When we are praying for a quality that will make us mature and godly in character then we are praying: Thy will be done. Our Christian faith is not that God was the Creator, it is that God is the Creator.*** God has given Christians the power to share in His own creation, so when we pray for that which makes us better, stronger and humbler human beings, then we are exercising what is our sacred right, our sacred privilege.

Certainly, we have a right to pray for those things which will improve our relationships with others. Any prayer for harmony, reconciliation or understanding is surely saying; *Thy will be done.* To pray *Thy will be done* is the most effective and sustaining power for love and understanding that we may know. God is love and if we sincerely pray for *His will to be done* in our lives, then what a transformation we would see. An end to conflict and strife, an end to relationship breakdowns, an end to violence, greed and exploitation.

When we are in conflict and we pray that God's will be done, God mediates in our conflicts. He brings love into our situation. And it's through this love that we forget to who was right or wrong. When God becomes the third party in our disputes, then strangely enough it's never necessary to decide who is right or wrong. Pray and let God in the middle of our arguments, and then see how small our opinions begin to seem in the light of His will.

Certainly, we have the right to pray for that which will increase and improve our fellowship with God. This is something that we have the right to expect and this prayer is **always** answered, absolutely and immediately when it is prayed. Don't tell me that you've never had prayers answered! Let's try something: Pray this prayer: *Lord God, draw me closer to you. May I feel and understand your fellowship and your love.* Read this over two or three times and then pray that prayer, and it will always be answered even while you are praying it. It never fails! This miracle of fellowship, this wonder of communion with the majestic God of the Universe: It never fails!

Read over Acts 12 and recognise that Peter was freed from persecution and certain death through prayer. And learn from these early Christians who prayed that God's will be done. Consider what you pray for and then expect what you have a right to pray for. Expect it. The Apostle Paul warns *Watch ye therefore, and pray always*. Pray with real expectation. Perhaps our greatest need in prayer is our belief in what we are praying for. The problem is that so often we pray with the attitude: *I doubt if anything will come of it, but it won't do any harm*. We must pray with an attitude of faithful belief.

Does prayer work? All I know is that I came to faith through the prayers of others. I came through my ministry training through the prayers of others. I stand here today through the prayers of others. I heard a man who was a recovering alcoholic say that he got his strength to stay sober through one word: Faith. He said it was impossible for him to go through one day of sobriety without the strength that God gives him through prayer. Many of life's challenges are impossible to overcome without prayer.

The testimony of millions of Christian people, over centuries of time is too great to be discounted. I can honestly tell you that every time I have ever prayed for something that was in God will and something I had the right to expect, I've had my prayer answered. Not always in the manner I had expected and sometimes the answer had not been what I'd hoped for! But the prayer was answered nevertheless. May we start using the greatest gift that God has given us? The promise of our Heavenly Father is that whatever we ask for in His name, will be given. He promises that our prayers will not fail!

May we follow the example of Peter and the early church: *Watch ye therefore, and pray always. Pray for what we have a right to expect; and then expect what we have a right to pray for. Amen.*

(1740 words)