

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 12

Responding to the resurrection: praying with confidence

How do we respond to the risen Jesus? The book of Hebrews tells us: Since Jesus has risen into heaven as our great high priest, then we can have *confidence* to enter God's presence, and because of that, we *should* enter his presence (Hebrews 10:19-22).

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16). In other words, since Jesus has risen from the dead, we should pray, and we should do it with confidence.

The risen Jesus makes a difference in our lives *through prayer*. Because he is now in heaven, we have the guarantee that our prayers will be heard. We pray "in Jesus' name" — as if putting his signature at the end of our letter. He intercedes for us, prays for us! God listens to us just as well as he listens to Jesus himself.

Prayer: a cry for help

Some people make prayer sound like a duty, as a work that faithful Christians must perform. Some make it sound like we ought to pray seven times a day, or three times a day, or all night long, or rise before dawn, or spend at least two hours every day, following the example of this or that famous person.

I think Christians should pray not as a duty,

but out of *need*. After all, prayers are requests. There are no biblical commands for us to pray at certain times or in certain ways. We are not told to follow Jesus' example in praying all night, or Daniel's example of facing Jerusalem.

But Scripture everywhere assumes that God's people *do* pray. We are not told to pray for specific amounts of time, but *all* the time (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18). We are not told to kneel or stand or lie on the floor when we pray. Rather, we are told to do everything while praying (Philippians 4:6).

Why so much prayer?

Prayer is, in its simplest sense, a request. The most common Hebrew and Greek words for prayer mean "ask." Whenever we ask God for anything, we are praying—and it is right that we ask. Paul told the Philippians to ask for whatever they wanted (Philippians 4:6).

That is why we should pray: We are to ask God for the things we need. The better we know ourselves, the more we will know that we are incredibly needy people. Of ourselves, we can do nothing. If we want to accomplish anything worthwhile, we must seek God's help. We must depend on him. Prayer is a cry for help. And since our needs never end, our prayers should never cease.

Rely on God

Self-reliance is sin. It is arrogant for us tiny

creatures to think that we can do whatever we want, that we can control our own destinies, that we can decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. Humans have neither the wisdom nor the power. The universe exists only because Christ is upholding it by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3). We exist only because our Creator supplies our needs (Acts 14:17).

Yet (I speak from experience) even believers sometimes forget about our minute-by-minute need for God, and we may go through the day with scarcely a thought, scarcely a thanks for what God is doing for us. He is upholding us even as we ignore him.

Even when we face problems, we sometimes struggle on and on, trying to solve the problems with our own strength, with our own strategies, instead of realizing that needs and desires should be shared with God in prayer (Philippians 4:6). We act as if everything depends on us, when everything actually depends on God. He knows our needs, and he wants us to trust him.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, especially when we are too unthinking to ask for ourselves (Romans 8:26-27). The Holy Spirit stands in the gap and helps us in ways that we do not know. So when we fail to pray constantly, the Holy Spirit steps in. Even so, we cannot turn all prayer over to the Holy Spirit and let him do all the talking while we go through life unawares.

We *need* to pray. We will be happier, less stressed, more fulfilled, if we keep in mind that we live in the presence of God, that in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). The more we are aware of God, the better our understanding of life will be, for God is the frame of reference that we need. When we see life in his context, we see it accurately.

God is not a genie who grants our every wish. That is because we often do not

understand what we really need. We may pray for escape from a trial, but God is using that trial to teach us something far more important than temporary comfort. We may pray for a neighbor to come to Christ (and we *should* have that desire), but God knows this may not be the right time. God may want *us* to be more involved in the person's life.

Frankly, there are so many things wrong with this world that we should have many desires, for ourselves, for our churches and for this world. We have much to pray about.

Prayer is our cry for help. In prayer, we admit that we are not self-sufficient, that we cannot handle everything on our own. In prayer, we acknowledge a relationship between God and us, a relationship in which God has promised to provide our needs and to bless us in ways he knows are best. Prayer is an act of worship, for it acknowledges that God has power and that he is dependable.

Thanks

God supplies our needs, and it is appropriate for us to thank him for doing so. Every breath we take is a gift from him. All the beauty in nature is a gift from him. The wonderful variety of sights, sounds, smells and textures is a gift from him. Our conversations with God should include thanks as well as requests. This is a form of praise, to acknowledge that he is the giver of every good thing.

As we thank God, we remind ourselves of our place in the universe—a place of great honor as a target of God's affection, and a place of dependence on his graciousness. Giving thanks is a way to know who we are and why we exist; it reminds us that the universe functions only through his gift.

Some may say: "I already know that. Why do I have to keep telling God something he already knows?" I think it is only through saying it that we are really mindful of it; it is

too easy for us to go through the day without really being aware that life functions best if we remember it as a gift. This is supported by the biblical commands for us to be thankful, and to continually give thanks to God in our prayers (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

The Bible similarly tells us to pray with persistence, giving the same request again and again. We know by faith that God heard us the first time, and that he knows our earnestness even without our persistence, so I conclude that his command for our persistence is really for our own good. We need to tell ourselves again and again what the desires of our heart are, and that we trust God with them.

This does not mean that prayer is just a means of talking to ourselves, or of reminding ourselves of abstract truths. No, Scripture assures us that prayer is a genuine conversation with God. Our requests really go to heaven, and are really heard and answered by God. Our thanks really go to God; we must see him in the picture. Often, it is in prayer that God speaks to us, when we grow in our understanding of what he wants us to think or do.

We have never-ending thanks for what God does for us day to day, thanks for the promises he has made for our future, and thanks for what he has already done in Christ to ensure that future. Our thankfulness for Jesus Christ turns naturally to dedicating ourselves to doing God's will. We eagerly want to respond with faithful allegiance to one who loves us so much.

Our existence, our joy, our pleasures our sanity, are all dependent on God's day-to-day favor toward us through Jesus Christ. We have much to be thankful for — indeed, everything we have and ever hope to have is a gift for

which we need to be thankful.

Our thanks should include our appreciation for who God is — and here our prayers blend thanks and praise. We exalt his power, his wisdom, his mercy, the beauty of his love. We praise him for who he is, not just for what he gives us, for in actuality, he gives us himself.

My cry for help

Finally, my friends, I ask you to pray for your local church. It takes God's strength for your congregation to make a difference for the kingdom in your community. You need divine help to work together and to tackle the impossible. You need to pray. Pray for your local leaders, too. Those who lead worship music need divine blessing. Those who speak should speak the words of God (1 Peter 4:11), and this cannot be done from human wisdom.

And pray for me, too. Even the most talented human could not do the work God sets before me. I need divine help, and I pray for it, and I receive it. And just as Paul asked his churches to pray for him (Colossians 4:2-3, etc.), I ask you to pray for me, too. The difficulties I face personally, and the difficulties I face in serving the church, mean that I need God's help. We all need help. We all need to pray.

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