

DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 26, 1954 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

One Sunday, after I had preached a sermon on prayer, I was startled to hear a man say, "I don't believe that prayer does any good, except in the heart of the man who prays." He said further, "Oh, it may make you feel better, but so far as their being any answer to prayer, there just isn't any." It was startling to me that this man who called himself a Christian did not believe that God answers prayer. He was the first man I ever met, one of the very few that I have met, who did not believe God answers prayer.

A Little Girl and A Wagon

I remember also a sermon that I heard the great preacher J. N. Armstrong deliver a few years ago. He was one of the best preachers that I have ever heard, for his sermons were the kind that you remember long after he has passed on. In that particular sermon he told of an experience of prayer. It happened in the family of Brother W. A. Hockaday who lived out in the western part of the state of Oklahoma. Brother Hockaday was a grand old man, a business man, and a great Christian. He lived in the days when you traveled not by car but by wagon, and on one occasion he was taking his family from their home town of Granite to a nearby town. They packed a picnic lunch, stopped somewhere on the way, and spread their lunch on the ground near by. While eating their lunch they looked up in horror to see that the team of horses had become frightened and was bolting down the country road. It was the more tragic because in the back of that flat-bed wagon their little three or four year old girl was standing upright. There was nothing that they could do except pray. They couldn't outrun the horses, now that they were frightened and in mad, runaway flight, so Brother Hockaday simply knelt and prayed.

As Brother Armstrong told the story, that wagon was going at high speed down that rutty, country road, but after a little while it began to slow down, and eventually came to a stop. The family retrieved the little girl, unharmed. The wagon might have turned over; there could easily have been a tragic accident or death. The Hockadays believe that God answered the prayers of that father for his child. The little girl has since grown up to be a fine and useful Christian. She is the wife of the nationally known president of Harding college, Brother George Benson. They believe that God answered the prayers of that father and saved the life of that little girl.

A Church Prays

I remember hearing a sermon in which Brother E. W. McMillan told about a woman who was ill, some years ago in Cleburne, Texas. He went by the home where this good Christian woman lived on a Sunday evening on his way to the worship services of the church. He was told by the special nurse that she was at the point of death and probably could not last out the hour. He immediately went to the church building and had a special prayer for her. An hour later when the service was over Brother McMillan went again to the home. The nurse came and said, "Brother McMillan, it's amazing." Then she told how the woman had rallied and was not only not at the point of death, but was sitting up and taking some nourishment. A few days later she was able to go about her work. Brother McMillan asked, "When did her condition change?" The nurse said, "I looked at my watch, it was about 7:30." That was the time when the congregation had prayed for her. They believe that her recovery was an answer to prayer,

Help On An Examination

I remember some years ago when I was in the toils of working for a doctor's degree that I came to the rather difficult hurdle of learning German. There was no special reason for it in the field in which I was studying, but it was one of the requirements of the university so I had to learn to read German. One summer I spent seven weeks learning German. I remember how fervently I prayed that when the examination came I might pass it. I didn't really have much hope of passing it with only seven weeks of study, for I am not an avid language student, but I prayed that God might help me over this hurdle that I might spend more time in his service, that I might spend my time where it would be more valuable.

In the course of the examination there were forty or fifty questions concerning German grammar, and most of the other twenty students had finished that section before I. Then the professor gave to each one of us a book from which we were to translate several pages of German text. I believe that the Lord helped him in selecting a book that I could read. There were many books I could not have read, but the one that he handed me I could read. A few days later I got the happy word that I had passed the examination. I could not prove it, but I like to believe that the prayers that I prayed helped in the passing of that examination.

Does God Answer Prayer?

It isn't possible to prove absolutely, finally, beyond the shadow of a doubt that any single event is an answer to a prayer. At least I know of no way to prove it completely, absolutely, finally. The skeptic stands off and says, "What you attribute to prayer was simply a natural occurrence. It was merely the working out of cause and effect. What happened is what would have happened anyway." Going

back to our wagon and the little girl, he would say that after a while the horses got tired. The woman who was ill eventually got better because her medicine took effect. I passed my German examination because I had studied enough, nothing more.

The Christian says, "I don't believe that; I believe that these were answers to prayer." There it stands. Neither is able to convince the other. In the absence of final, conclusive proof what can we do? It is rather obvious that the thing for us to do is to seek the testimony of those who are most likely to know. When we feel ill we seek the advice of a good doctor. In many fields we seek the help of an expert. In a sense that is what we need to do concerning the matter of prayer.

Jesus Believed in Prayer

Let us begin with the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, believed in prayer. Jesus was no mere man like we. He was there in the beginning of time when the world was conceived and created. Jesus had a part in that creation and so it is unusually significant that Jesus believed that prayers are answered.

One day when he was in Capernaum he had worked all day teaching people and healing them. Among them was Peter's wife's mother. There was a continual press of people who wanted their loved ones healed. He was tired when night came; he and the apostles slipped away for rest. "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose up and went out, and departed into a desert place, and there prayed." (Mark 1:35). Jesus got up early and went out to pray. A little later when he was on the opposite side of the sea of Galilee, from Capernaum, we read, "And after he had taken leave of them, he departed into the mountain to pray." (Mark 6:46). He left his disciples to cross the sea alone; later that night he joined them.

Concerning another occasion we read, "And it came to pass in them days, that he went out into the mountain to pray; and he continued all night in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12). When a man stays up all night in order to pray to God that man believes in prayer, he believes that something is going to come from that prayer. You may remember that the next morning after Jesus had spent all night in prayer he came down from the mountain and chose his twelve apostles. It is significant that he prayed before naming his apostles. Again we read, "And it came to pass about eight days after these sayings, that he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up into the mountain to pray." (Luke 9:28). While he and they were praying Christ was transfigured and the voice of God uttered that significant sentence, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him." In the seventeenth chapter of John we have an entire chapter devoted to the record of a prayer which Jesus prayed, the night before he died.

Matthew described the final night of Christ's life before his crucifixion in these words, "Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto his disciples, Sit ye here, while I go yonder and pray. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and sore troubled. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: abide ye here, and watch with me. And he went forward a little, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. And he cometh unto his disciples, and findeth them sleeping, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Again a second time he went away, and prayed, saying, My Father, if this cannot pass away, except I drink it, thy will be done. And he came again and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And he left them again, and went away, and prayed a third time, saying again the same words." (Matt. 26:36-44). In this intimate glimpse into the life of Jesus at the climactic hour of his betrayal we find him praying to God. Jesus believed in prayer.

The Disciples Believed in Prayer

The people whom Jesus left behind believed in prayer. In the beginning chapter of the book of Acts we read about Christ's ascension, then, after the names of the twelve apostles, we read, "These all with one accord continued steadfastly in prayer, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." (Acts 1:14). It is good to know that Mary also believed in prayer. These remained in Jerusalem waiting for the beginning of the church. Doing what? Continuing steadfastly in prayer.

In that same chapter we read about the selection of a disciple to take the place of Judas after his death. The apostles named two men: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. The scripture says, "They prayed and said, Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show of these two the one that thou hast chosen." (Acts 1:24). They expected an answer to that prayer and we believe they got it, for God chose Matthias to take the place of Judas.

After the church began and the three thousand had become Christians the scripture says, "They continued steadfastly in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42). A little later when a problem arose, the Grecian Jews were disturbed because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration of food. The apostles explained that they would allow the Grecian Jews to select seven people from among themselves to wait on tables, "But we will continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:4). They believed that prayer was more important than giving out food to hungry stomachs. Later on, in the same book of Acts the apostle Peter is described as being in prison, and the scripture says, "Peter therefore was kept in the prison: and prayer was made earnestly of the church unto God for him." (Acts 12:5). When Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the Christians at Antioch it was done in this manner, "Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away y." (Acts 13:3). They did it with prayer. Still later, after Paul had gone into certain areas and established churches, the record

says, "When they had appointed for them elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed." (Acts 14:23).

In the sixteenth chapter of Acts, Paul and Silas were out by a riverside where they supposed there was a place of prayer, in order to preach to Lydia and her household. In that same great chapter we read about Paul and Silas at midnight in the prison praying and singing praises to God. After Paul had preached a great sermon to the elders of the congregation of Ephesus, the scripture says, "And when he had thus spoken he kneeled down and prayed with them all." (Acts 20:36). Not only did Jesus believe in and practice prayer but his disciples also believed and practiced it.

The Bible Teaches Us To Pray

When we read the New Testament we find that the great writers not only believed and practiced prayer, they taught it to others. Paul said it this way to the Romans: "For God is my witness, whom I serve in my spirit in the gospel of his Son, how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers." (Rom. 1:9). It does something to a man to know that someone else is praying for him. When he wrote to the Corinthians he announced, "I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also." (I Cor. 14:15).

To the Thessalonians he said, "Pray without ceasing," which means to live continually in an attitude of prayer. In the same chapter he also said, "Brethren, pray for us." (I Thes. 5:17, 25). You don't say that unless you believe that prayers do good. You say, "Brethren, pray for us," only when you believe that prayer changes things. To the Thessalonians he also wrote, "To which end we also pray always for you, that our God may account you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire of goodness and every work of faith." (II Thes. 1:11). Later he added, "Finally brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run and be glorified even as also it is with you." (II Thes. 3:1). In Hebrews, he added, "Pray for us; for we are persuaded that we have a good conscience, desiring to live honorably in all things." (Heb. 13:18). If there is anything that stands out from these passages it is that prayers make a difference, that prayers are answered, that you and I as Christians ought to pray.

James, the Lord's younger brother, in that final chapter of the book of James wrote this, "Is any among you suffering? let him pray. Is any cheerful? let him sing praises. Is any among you sick? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, it shall be forgiven him. Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working. Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." (James 5:13-18). Peter also believed in prayer, when he went up on the housetop that day in Joppa and the men from Cornelius found him praying.

The Skeptic and the Christian

While it isn't possible to prove conclusively to a man who is a skeptic or a doubter that prayers are answered, when you turn to those who have every right to know, to Jesus, the Son of God and co-maker of the world, to his apostles, and to the inspired word of God, the answers are all one way. Prayer does change things. As we ponder one of the great features of Christianity, I admonish you to believe in prayer, and to pray more often.

When one of the members of your family is ill, get down on your knees and pray. When something good comes into your home or your life, get down on your knees and breathe a prayer of thanksgiving. When you face a problem, pray. It was Paul who wrote, "In nothing be anxious, (don't worry about anything) but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God which passeth understanding shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:6). It was Jesus who said, "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." (Matt. 7:7-8). It was Jesus who further said, "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer believing ye shall receive." (Matt. 21:22). And finally, "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will and it shall be done unto you. (John 15:7).

The Christian stands face to face with the skeptic and says, "You may doubt that the wagon stopped because of prayer if you wish, I cannot prove it to you. You may doubt the other instances that I have given, but I know that Jesus believed in prayer. I know that he not only believed in it, he practiced it and taught it. His disciples did likewise. So when illness or some other problem threatens my family, or when some crisis looms before our nation, or when some loved one or friend needs help, I'm going to pray.

There are three conditions of prayer. One that you pray as a Christian. "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7). The second condition is that you pray a believing prayer. "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." (Matt. 21:22). The third condition is that you pray according to God's will, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26:39). God doesn't always say yes, but he says something in answer to every Christian's prayer.