

CHAPTER 2 THE HOTLINE TO GOD

By their hard work, Alexander Graham Bell and his assistant Thomas Watson put all telephone users in their debt. In 1876, little did Bell and Watson know the effect their invention would have on the world. The telephone, and now email, stand as amazing creations; regardless of the miles separating two people, they can communicate with one another. While high-tech devices make contact with friends and family possible, prayer makes talking with the Heavenly Father possible.

The Importance of Prayer

As the previous chapter noted that God's Word serves as a means through which the Lord communicates with you, this chapter discusses prayer as a means through which you communicate with God. Prayer provides you with the opportunity to fellowship with God. You do not need a priest or a pastor to talk with your Heavenly Father (Hebrews 7; 1 Peter 2:4-10). You can speak directly to God (Hebrews 4:16).

Prayer is so important that even Jesus Himself prayed (Mark 1:35). King David prayed at least three times a day (Psalm 55:17). You too should pray daily (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Matthew 6:8 reveals that God knows what you need before you ask Him through prayer. So why pray if God already knows what you will say? Pray because only He holds the power to ultimately help you, and because He *wants* you to pray to Him.

Although some respectable Christians would disagree with me, I believe prayer does not change God's mind. Instead, prayer helps you draw closer to Him. God has designed us to pray so we can then see Him act.

The telephone and email are not ends in themselves. You use them as devices to communicate with others. In a similar way, prayer is not an end in itself but a means through which Christians tap into God's power. Biblical prayer deepens and expresses your faith (Matthew 21:22) by allowing you to see God's goodness in answering your prayers (Matthew 7:7-12; Hebrews 4:16). Prayer also develops perseverance through difficult times (Luke 11:9-13; 18:1-8).

As much as possible, make prayer a natural part of your daily life. Prayer is more than something to do every once in a while but something you can do throughout the day (Luke 21:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). "Be glad for all God is planning for you. Be patient in trouble, and prayerful always" (Romans 12:12, Living). Philippians 4:6 says ". . .with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." You can pray quietly as you sit at your desk at work, or push your shopping cart down the grocery aisle. Prayer need not be loud in order to be valid. You can utter it in your heart.

If you pray out loud during public worship, remember, your goal is to talk with God, not to impress people. Jesus warned against praying with wrong motives:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-7)

Effective Prayer

To pray effectively, be specific when you talk to God. Do not merely ask God to "bless" you or other people; reverently tell God precisely what you desire so that you will know when He answers your prayers (Philippians 4:7).

You might want to journal your prayer requests so that when God answers them you can record the date. Imagine how encouraging this will be after God begins to answer your prayers. Think what your journal will look like in 20 years.

In what physical position should you pray? The Bible gives no specific position. You do not have to kneel or close your eyes while praying, although it may be appropriate in certain settings. You also do not have to pray verbally, though sometimes doing so may help you concentrate.

How should you pray? What pattern or outline should you follow, if any? In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus offered a prayer for His disciples (followers) in what Christians often call The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven, we honor Your holy name. We ask that Your kingdom will come now. May Your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. Give us our food again today, as usual, and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. Don't bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One. Amen. (Living)

Weekly, many Christians pray this prayer together during public worship services. That's fine, but you don't have to pray this model prayer. Jesus prayed it to give believers an idea of how to pray more effectively. Let's look at a few aspects of prayer that could help you pray more effectively.

Aspects of Prayer

Praise is the facet of prayer during which you reflect upon the attributes or characteristics of God (holy, good, all-powerful, etc.) and express adoration to Him. Think of praise as your compliments to God. Try using Psalms 145-150 as your own personal prayers of praise to God. Also, Revelation 4:8, 11 and 5:12-13 can be helpful in directing your praise time. Ponder who God is, and declare your love for Him.

Praise is not merely a segment of prayer; praise should characterize your life (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Like Philippians 4:4 says, "Always be full of joy in the Lord; I say it again, rejoice" (Living).

Giving thanks is another important part of prayer during which you express your gratitude to God for what He has accomplished. Think of His goodness and how it affects you. "No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, Living). Pause for a few moments now to thank God for as many things as you can think of. The next time you prepare to eat, stop and thank God for providing for your needs.¹¹

¹¹ Matthew 15:36; 26:27; Mark 8:6; 1 Timothy 4:3.

Confession functions as a vital component of prayer, too. When you confess your sin to God, you agree with your Creator that your sin is rebellion against Him. "But if we confess our sins to Him, He can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. And it is perfectly proper for God to do this for us because Christ died to wash away our sins" (1 John 1:9, Living). Confessing sin goes hand-in-hand with repentance. Repentance pictures the idea of turning from your immoral behavior and following God's ways.

Since you sinned specifically, you should confess your sins specifically. Some people wait until their day concludes before they confess and repent, but you'll live happier if you confess and repent immediately after realizing your sin. Never embrace the attitude, "I'll sin now and confess it later." Such an approach to sin will harm you and others.

Ezra 9:5-15, Nehemiah 1, Psalm 51, Daniel 9, and Isaiah 6 provide a few examples of men confessing their sin to God. Consider Proverb 28:13 which states, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Also, see Psalm 32:3-5 and 139:23-24.

When you confess sin to God, you are *not* persuading Him to forgive you. If you are a Christian, God has already forgiven you (1 John 1:7). Then why confess your sin to God? Confession expresses to God your disappointment for your sin, just as you should confess to your family or friends for offending them. It keeps you humbly submitted to God.¹²

Be aware of the difference between feeling guilty about your sin and confessing your sin with the intention of abandoning such acts (2 Corinthians 7:9-11). Confession consists of more than feeling guilty; confession is about hating your sin and living in obedience, joy, and peace with God.

Confession conveys your desire to abandon your sin. You can confess your sin to the Father while knowing that through Christ you have fellowship with God (1 John 2:1). Your sin does not sever your *relationship* with God, but sin does hinder your *fellowship* with Him. If a son offends his dad, the offense might cause friction between the two, but it will not destroy their father-son relationship. God's relationship with you stands on securer ground than mere earthly relationships (Romans 8:31-39).

¹² Commenting on 1 John 1:3, 8 and 10, two scholars make some noteworthy statements about confession: "John really means that we must confess our sins in an ongoing way to be forgiven by God.... The stubborn refusal to admit such sins is lethal. What are we to make of the objection that our sins are already forgiven? The already-but-not-yet dynamic of New Testament-thinking helps us here. Yes, we are already forgiven. But we have not yet arrived in the Heavenly city.... We are already forgiven, yet we must continue to confess sins in order to be forgiven. The Scriptures teach both truths, and we ignore either of them to our peril." Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 77.

You need to confess your sin because God hates sin.¹³ He doesn't hate you, but He does despise your sin, which will hinder your prayers if left unconfessed.¹⁴ When you harbor unconfessed sin, your prayers lose their power. Even unresolved conflict with someone will hinder your spiritual life (Matthew 5:23-24). In fact, unrepentant sin in your life may be an indicator that you aren't really a child of God. This isn't to say that Christians never sin, but they can't sin and be happy about it because God's presence in believers lets them know they rebelled, and provokes them to confess their sin and change their behavior. (For more details on habitual sin, see section entitled "Freedom and Limits" in chapter 8).

When confessing your sins to God, don't hide your feelings from Him. If you are angry at God or someone else, reverently confess it to Him. Unconfessed sin can cause sickness, but confession and the passionate prayers of maturing believers, can lead to healing (James 5:13-18).

Intercession is prayer on behalf of someone else. The Holy Spirit and Jesus talk to God the Father for you (Romans 8:26, 34; 1 Timothy 2:5). Follow their example and pray for others. Make a list of people to pray for, and perhaps divide this list in order to pray for certain people on specific days. Even Paul the Apostle,¹⁵ ca. A.D. 63, requested prayer (Ephesians 6:18-19) and he made it a point to faithfully pray for others (Romans 1:9; Colossians 1:3).

You can start your list with the following suggestions: the peace of Jerusalem or Israel (Psalm 122:6); more workers for spreading the gospel and making disciples throughout the world (Matthew 9:38); all people and the governments (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Petitioning consists of making requests to God for your own needs and wants. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). You can talk to God about anything, so don't fear asking Him for big or small requests.

Listening to God is also important. Psalm 4:4 declares, "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent." Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Listening might be the most difficult part of prayer. Start with small chunks of time (5 minutes) and increase gradually. Although God can speak audibly, it does not appear to be His usual way of communicating with us, so don't expect to hear an audible voice. He has chosen to speak through the Bible.

¹³ Hebrews 12:5-11; 1 Peter 1:16; 1 John 5:16.

¹⁴ Psalm 66:18; Isaiah 59:2; 1 Peter 3:7.

¹⁵ An apostle is a follower of Jesus. Sometimes the Bible used the term to refer to those in the first century who saw Jesus with their own eyes, and at other times to refer to certain key Christians, such as Paul, who never saw Jesus (in the sense the other 12 disciples did) but nonetheless followed Him.

Nevertheless, during this listening time, ask God to provide thoughts that will help you live a healthy Christian life. Ponder what God wants you to do with the truth you have gleaned from His Word. Consider what should change or remain the same in your life. If need be, confess any previously overlooked sin. Then, attempt to be still and quiet while you reflect on God's Word. Possibly, you will want to write down the thoughts that come to mind.

Unanswered Prayer

Does God always answer prayer? Certainly, but sometimes He answers "No." Why would God say no to His own children? The ultimate answer may be a mystery, but let me offer a few considerations. For instance, you might not need what you want, or what you want might hurt you. In fact, you might be asking for something less than God's best for your life. In some cases, you lack something simply because you have yet to ask God for it (James 4:2-3). But God does sometimes say "No."

At other times, His response may be "Not now" because He wants you to wait until you mature more (Psalms 25:3; 27:4; 37:7). We don't receive everything at the moment we ask for it. And sometimes we don't get it, period.

Some Christians teach that you can have whatever you want--just pray for it with faith and God will give it. God never promises, however, to give us everything we request. The Apostle Paul asked the Lord to remove something very painful, something Paul called a thorn in his flesh, but God did not grant the request (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). God will not give you everything you want, yet He delights in giving you that which serves your good *and* His glory.¹⁶

The Bible says that Christians should pray according to God's will as 1 John 5:14-15 instructs, "And we are sure of this, that He will listen to us whenever we ask Him for anything in line with His will. And if we really know He is listening when we talk to Him and make our requests, then we can be sure that He will answer us" (Living).

But how do you pray according to God's will? Does it mean to end your prayers with the phrase "In Jesus' name"?

Not necessarily. Just ending your prayer by saying "In Jesus' name" or "In the name of Jesus" does not guarantee that you have prayed according to God's will or that you will get what you want. Praying according to God's will, and praying in Jesus' name, means, among other things, that you should pray with Jesus' attitude toward the Heavenly Father, "Not my will but Yours be done" (Matthew 26:42; John 14:13). We must always pray realizing that God has the prerogative to give or withhold.

When God Seems Distant

You will sometimes feel like God has forsaken you. David said in Psalm 22:2, "O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent." In fact, David and other biblical writers frequently felt distance between themselves and God (Psalms 10:1, 22:1, 43:2, 44:23, Isaiah 8:17). You will also travel through this valley,

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 23:5; Psalm 20:4; 21:2; 36:8; 37:4; 145:19; Proverbs 10:24; 13:4; Matthew 7:7; 21:21-22; Luke 11:1-13; John 10:10; Romans 8:28-29; Ephesians 1:3; 2 Peter 1:3; 1 John 5:14-15.

this "dark night of the soul" as some label it. Listen to the words of Richard Foster on this issue: "It is true that those in the first flush of faith often are given unusual graces of the Spirit, just like a new baby is cuddled and pampered. It is also true that some of the deepest experiences of alienation and separation from God have come to those who have traveled far into the interior realms of faith."¹⁷

Most Christians who have walked with the Lord a number of years can attest to such an experience in which no matter how much they prayed and read God's Word, the Lord still felt far away. I walked through this valley when I was 25 years old and studying in seminary. I wasn't hiding any major sin in my life, nor was I ignorant of God's Word. But I remained stuck in this spiritually dark time for more than a year. I spoke about it with friends, prayed concerning it, searched the Bible for that one verse to set me soaring once again in the fresh air of God's joy, but not much happened. Instead, God let me dwell there for a while, following Him just on faith, with little spiritual or emotional feeling to back it up. On numerous occasions I burned with anger against God for not letting me feel what I had once enjoyed when I prayed and read the Bible. Why would God not answer me? Silence!

After numerous months, the gloom lifted and my heart once again began beating with joy. I remember that moment vividly. I was praying with several other Christians, and my awareness of God's presence began to reemerge. I was so glad to sense God's presence again, I wept with delight.

You are likely going to encounter similar times, feeling God has abandoned you. What should you do when facing these dry seasons of life? While no easy answers exist, Pastor Rick Warren lists some good principles to keep in mind: 1). Tell God exactly how you feel; 2). Focus on who God is--His unchanging nature; 3). Trust God to keep His promises; 4). Remember what God has already done for you.¹⁸

Prayer and Fasting

Fasting refers to consciously abstaining from anything, usually food, for a specific span of time for the purpose of focusing special attention on God concerning certain issues. The Bible often links fasting with prayer (Luke 2:37; Acts 14:23). Jonah 3:5 connects fasting with repentance.

The New Testament does not so much command fasting as it assumes that believers will fast (Matthew 6:16-18; Mark 2:18-20). When you fast, try not to let anybody know about it, unless someone asks you directly or you need to tell someone not to cook for you. Otherwise you might be tempted to fast to impress people. The Bible teaches that those who fast and pray to impress others gain only applause from humans; God does not smile at these vain efforts (Matthew 6:16-18). So, if possible, keep your fasting endeavors to yourself.

Determine the duration of your fast before you start. The Bible does not mandate official time limits for fasting. In Matthew 4:2, Jesus fasted 40 days and nights without

¹⁷ *Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 19.

¹⁸ *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), 110-112.

food. Exodus 34:28-29 says Moses went 40 days and nights without food or water. God supernaturally sustained him, since we can't naturally go many days without water.

Beginners should start reasonably (i.e., 3 to 5 hours). When breaking a fast of 12 or more hours, do not eat too much for your initial meal. Your stomach may not be ready for much food, so don't overdo it. Consult your doctor before fasting, especially if you are elderly, or have health complications.

If the situation that you're fasting about changes, it might affect the duration of your fast. For example, King David fasted so his child might be healed, but then he ceased fasting when his baby died (2 Samuel 12:16-22). You may fast for a few hours, days, or, for those with more experience at fasting, weeks.

The first few times you fast will be difficult, but don't give up. Ask God to give you endurance during this period of fasting. If you fail, move on and try again. You might want to fast with a friend so you can encourage one another.

Let your hunger pangs serve as reminders to pray more about whatever provoked you to fast. When you willfully abstain from things that are necessary for survival (food) or permissible to enjoy (television), such discipline can draw you closer to God. Occasionally resisting necessary or permissible things might even give you a greater ability to resist sinful things. (See chapter 9, the section entitled "The Danger of Legalism.")

Clarify specifically *why* you want to fast (i.e., what do you desire God to do?). Know specifically *what* you will abstain from. You might fast from television, the Internet, food, sodas, sleep or a combination of several. The Bible allows for creativity concerning fasting. Fasting need not become a burdensome duty or a magic formula. By itself, fasting will not make you a stronger Christian. Remember, even Buddhists and Muslims and Jews fast, but that doesn't make them right with God. A relationship with Christ makes us right with God.

For those of us following Christ, we fast not because it makes us right with God, but because it, if conducted with the right attitude, can help us draw closer to God. Fasting is not the goal, but simply a means through which we fellowship with God.

What a privilege to fast and fellowship with the Lord who changed us from the wicked and dirty people that we were to the pure and clean people He is making us into.

Summary

Prayer is the means through which believers talk to God. Prayer is not just something you can do while gathered with other believers, but rather, you have the privilege of praying alone throughout each day. Prayer does not inform God of your needs in the sense that it gives Him information He didn't already have; rather, prayer allows you to trust God with your needs. The Bible often links prayer and fasting--both permit believers to experience the seriousness and intimacy of talking with God.

Assignments

1. Memorize Mark 1:35, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed."
2. Start your daily prayer time today. Try to incorporate it into your Bible reading time. In other words, read your Bible and then pray, or vice versa. Use the above six concepts under "Aspects of Prayer" as a guide. Make a list of concerns to pray for.

3. Sometime throughout the next seven days, set aside three to five hours for fasting. Obviously, this should be done in place of a meal, or something else that you really like to do on a regular basis. Try spending this time praying, singing praises to God, and reading the Bible.

Discussion Questions

1. Will God always answer your prayer with a "Yes"?
2. What are the six aspects of prayer?
3. What things can hinder your prayers?
4. Should you fast?

Answers to Chapter 2 Discussion Questions

1. Will God always answer your prayer with a "Yes"? *No. Scripture teaches that God loves to answer prayer, and He always does answer, but not always in the way we may expect.*
2. What are the six aspects of prayer? *Praise, Thanksgiving (giving thanks), Confession, Intercession, Petitioning, Listening.*
3. What things can hinder your prayers? *There may be several answers, but unconfessed sin, like a grudge against your spouse, will definitely hinder your prayers.*
4. Should you fast? *There are no biblical passages that say all believers should definitely fast, but it is my opinion that Christians do well to fast occasionally.*