

Answered Prayer
Genesis 24:10-27; Galatians 4:1-7
7/6/08

Last Monday the Tennessean ran an article on whether God answers prayers. Their information was gathered from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life. According to the survey 70% of people living in Tennessee pray at least once a day and more than 90% pray at least a few times a month. However only 38% of those people say God does not answer their prayers. Sorry to say mainline Protestants (us, along with Methodists, Lutherans); Catholics and Jews are least likely to pray or believe that their prayers will be answered. I am curious why so many people say they pray but don't expect an answer from God.

I know one person who believes in answered prayer – Abraham's servant. We find his story in Genesis 24. He is told by Abraham to go back home to find Isaac a wife. The Abraham – Sarah story is about to end and the Bible will focus on the next generation. Abraham is now old, Sarah has died and Isaac will carry the blessing of God into the future. However he has no wife.

Abraham comes to his top servant who has been entrusted with everything. An agreement is made between them. Abraham wants a home-town girl and not one from Canaan. This woman will bear the son who will continue the blessing of God. The unnamed servant packs up for the trip and heads back home.

This is a wonderful story of trusting God in prayer. The servant arrives in the city of Nahor. He rests his camels at the place where the women come to draw water. It is evening, the women will soon arrive. Can you imagine the pressure this servant feels? He is supposed to pick the woman who Isaac will marry, love and produce children. The whole future depends on him choosing the right woman. No pressure! The servant prays.

He basically asks God for a sign. "Lord, I am going to need your help. I will ask the women for a drink of water. Please direct me to the right woman by her response of, "I will draw water for your camels too."

That reminds me of the hunter who was also very desperate for God to answer his prayer. In the middle of a forest, there was a hunter who was suddenly confronted by a huge, mean, bear. In his fear, all attempts to shoot the bear were unsuccessful. Finally, he turned and ran as fast as he could. The hunter ran and ran and ran, until he ended up at the edge of a very steep cliff. His hopes were dim. Seeing no way out of his predicament, and with the bear closing in rather quickly, the hunter got down on his knees, opened his arms, and

exclaimed, "Dear God! Please give this bear some religion!" The sky darkened and there were lightning in the air. Just a few feet short of the hunter, the bear came to abrupt stop and glanced around, somewhat confused. Suddenly, the bear looked up into the sky and said, "Thank you God, for the food I'm about to receive..."

As the women arrive at the well, the servant meets a beautiful woman we later find out is Rebekah. "Please let me sip a little water from your jar." She responded, "Drink and I will water from you camels until they have finished drinking." Once she gave water to the servant and camels, he knew she was the one. He gave her a nose ring (I guess instead of an engagement ring!). She is a perfect choice. She is from Abraham's family. The servant bows and worships God giving him thanks for making his strip successful.

This person not only believed in prayer but also in a God who answered prayer.

I would like to use this servant from the Abraham story to teach us more about prayer.

1. Why do we pray?

We pray for others. This servant of Abraham prays for someone who he loves. He loves Abraham. He is not praying for himself but for someone he is committed to and loves very much.

What is the content of your prayers? He prays, "Please give me success today." The answered prayer, the success, would benefit Abraham and Isaac and honor God. This whole prayer is moving God's blessing along, God's plan.

Who benefits from our prayers?

Too often our prayers are about us. Help me with my feelings, my hurts, my doubts, my weaknesses. I am not saying do not pray for you! I am saying there needs to be a balance. Our prayers should not be selfish – like the boy who wanted a bike and was willing to threaten God to get one.

A Young boy wanted a bicycle pretty badly, but his mother told him they couldn't afford one right now. She suggested he pray about it. She, then, gave him a small statue of the Virgin Mary to help him focus his prayers. He went upstairs and got a piece of paper and pencil and began to write:

Dear God, if you will give me a bicycle, I promise to help my mom clean the kitchen every night.

He stopped mid-sentence and scratched through what he had written and thought real hard before beginning again:

Dear God, if you will give me a bicycle, I promise to keep my room clean every day.

He stopped mid-sentence again and scratched through what he had written and started thinking again. Then he got up, got the small statue, wrapped it up in several towels hid it in the bottom of his dresser drawers. He then went back to the paper and pencil and began again:

Dear God, if you ever want to see your mother again...

2. What is the basis of our prayers?

This servant is depending upon God's faithfulness – his steadfast love (prayer begins and ends with it). "Please grant success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham." He relies on God's love for Abraham. He is relying on God's reputation and God's promise of love. Basically – if you do not love Abraham or not faithful, I will be unsuccessful today.

How about us? What are we relying on when we pray? How do we get access to God?

Usually once a week I workout with my buddy John Jastrow. He works at Lifeway. We usually meet in the parking lot, swim several miles (only about $\frac{3}{4}$) and eat in the cafeteria in Lifeway. There is a security desk at the front entrance. I do not have access. John is my access. He has his badge and I sign in under his name. Once the security guard recognizes John, I have access to food!

You and I have access to God through his son Jesus Christ. Jesus gets us into to see God. Jesus takes our prayers into the presence of God. This is the power of the Gospel. You and I pray in the name of Jesus Christ not our own name. We do not rely on our abilities, accomplishments or status to get God's attention. This servant used Abraham's name. God answers prayers because he loves us in Jesus Christ. You are an heir of God – a son, a daughter.

3. Ultimately God benefits from answering our prayers.

I am intrigued that the first thing this servant does after God answers his prayer is worships God. He bowed right in front of Rebekah and praised God for his steadfast love and faithfulness.

How often do you thank God after prayers are answered? Do we celebrate and praise? I wonder how people who took that survey recorded in the paper understood prayer is a circle. God answers prayer and we end up praising God for answering our prayers. God actually benefits from answering our prayers, if we do it right.

4. Prayer is equal to relationship

Ken Locke put it well when he said in the paper, "Prayer isn't just asking for things; it's more like a marriage. If the only time I talked to my wife was when I wanted something, what kind of relationship would we have?"

Prayer may be more about offering ourselves to God. It is about setting our desires aside and following Jesus Christ. I think that sometimes God uses the Holy Spirit in our prayers to help us change, redirect and become more committed to what God is doing in our community, families, workplaces and friendships.

I think God answers prayers clearly. We just don't listen very well. This is what Ken Locke said in the article mentioned above. Prayer is a matter of listening to God not just getting my answers. He quoted a Baptist preacher, "Prayer is not me talking to God. It is me tuning my receiver into God's frequency."

I imagine I could hear God much clearly if:

I was not selfish (sinful) trying to get what I want
Wasn't so busy, preoccupied and in a hurry
Did not allow so many insignificant concerns crowd my mind and grab my attention

Why is it that I can hear God much more clearly while on mission trip in Guatemala than in my routine here in Nashville? Does God speak more clearly in Guatemala? I see my life from a different perspective. I come back more centered and focused on what is important and what is not. However over time my busyness and preoccupation crowd my heart.

What crowds your heart?