

Prayer, an act of reverence

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Have you ever had a time that you have been praying really hard and it seems like God is not listening? You know what you want. You are asking clearly and yet it seems like you are not being heard. Today we are going to look at a key scripture that gives us insight into the kind of prayers that God hears. For the best example of prayer, we have to start with Jesus.

The Bible tells us that Jesus raised a man named Lazarus from the dead, after Lazarus had been dead for three days. Jesus calmed a storm, when even the disciples thought surely they were going to drown. Jesus healed a blind man who had been blind since birth. Jesus cast out demons. He made the lame to walk. He made the lepers clean. He fed 5,000+ people with five loaves and two fish. John 21:25 even says about the things that Jesus did, ***“If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”***

How were Jesus’ prayers heard in such a powerful way? Is that how prayer works in your life? Some of us would give testimony to the fact that God has answered our prayers in the past. We also have probably heard stories of God working in the lives of others. But what about those times when we have prayed, and we have encountered what we think is silence.

Does prayer really make a difference? The One who can best answer that for us is Jesus. In Matthew 6:10, Jesus prays, ***“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”*** How could He pray that? He could pray that prayer because He alone has been in heaven and on earth. The angels don’t have the full perspective, and neither can mankind. Only Jesus has seen prayer from both ends. He knows the purpose and the power of prayer. He understands how prayer works and how God works through it. With this in mind, what did Jesus do when He was on earth? He prayed . . . a lot.

We can look in the book of Hebrews to see why Jesus’ prayers were heard so powerfully. Hebrews 5:7 says, ***“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”***

This verse is primarily pointing us back to Jesus' prayers in the garden of Gethsemane, right before His arrest and crucifixion. We first see that Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with **"loud cries and tears."** I am not pointing that out to say that we all have to now pray with loud cries and tears. I am just pointing out the fact that Christ was deeply moved in prayer. Prayer for Him was not just a mental exercise or a religious ritual. The word used here for cry is not a cry that one chooses to produce, but a cry that cannot be held in. It is a cry that is wrung out of a person because of over-powering tension or suffering. We also read in scripture of other times that Jesus cried. We see it at the death of Lazarus in John 11:35, and in Luke 19:41 when Jesus cries over the unbelief of Jerusalem. It is not telling us that we always need to be super emotional when we pray. The example of Christ is calling us to be deeply vested in, moved by, broken over, the things of which we pray. That prayer will be an activity of the heart, not just of the mind. Prayers that overflow from a heart of a love for God and for others. Oh, that we would understand how weak we are and how desperately we need God.

Jesus not only prayed with loud cries and tears, but He also prayed, **"to the one who could save him from death."** Jesus knew the ability and character of Him to whom He prayed. He prayed to God the Father, the sovereign King, the Holy One, the Almighty One, the all-loving One, the all-knowing One, the all-present One, the all-powerful One who could save Him from death. Jesus had faith that God the Father could deliver Him from death, so Jesus prayed according to that faith. Jesus knew the ability and character of the One to whom He prayed. Do we? It is a great help to know the character to whom you are praying. Do we understand the power of God? The love of God? The promises of God? The discipline of God? The priorities of God? The faithfulness of God? Only then can we pray with full confidence, knowing that regardless of God's response to our prayers, the results can be trusted.

Let me give you an example of a person who does not know the character of God: *"God, I pray that you will let my child get into that university, because it is well respected. It will make me look good and will allow her to make a lot of money in the future and have an easy life."* That person is not aware of the character and priorities of God to whom they are praying. Instead, they might pray like this: *"God, first of all I know that my daughter is not mine. She is yours. We desire that she love you with all of her heart and that she be used in this world as you will. You know that she has applied for this university. We pray that if it is your will and if it will prepare her to accomplish your purpose in her life, that you allow her to be accepted at this school. If not, we pray that you would redirect us to your will and give her peace in the process of finding where you would have her be."*

Here is an example of someone who does not know the power of God: *"God, you know I sin a lot. I pray that you will endure my sin and not be too angry since I can't help it. Please help me at least not be as bad as I used to be. Sorry."* This person does not know the power of God. They should be praying more like this: *"God, I have failed again, but I know that you love me. I know that your Spirit lives in me. I know that you have promised to make me like Jesus and give me a heart that obeys your word. Based on your Word and your promises and your Spirit who lives in me, I surrender my areas of sin to you, trusting that in your way and your time you will make me into the person that you want me to be. Please bring about holiness in my life."*

Even in Jesus' most difficult moments of agony and fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, His knowledge of the Father was so certain that even desperate emotion did not sway the direction of His prayers.

Hebrews 5:7 then concludes with these words: ***"Jesus' prayers were heard because of His reverence."***

The idea of reverence in the Old Testament was formed by bringing two Hebrew words together, *yare'* and *shachah*. The first word had the root idea of fear or awe. The second Hebrew word that contributed to the idea of reverence in the Old Testament meant literally "falling down". When combined with the idea of awe and fear, this is a bowing down or falling down at one's feet as a sign of utter surrender and submission. It is similar to how one might bow down to a King. This is in agreement with the idea of reverence in the New Testament that had to do with realizing that one is in a position of inferiority to another. It is an attitude of worship and submission.

When Jesus prayed in reverence, He was humbling Himself before God the Father and submitting to the Father's will. It is different than the demons who showed their fear of Christ every time they came face to face with Him, but never bowed their hearts in reverence. Reverence is us taking our rightful place of submission and inferiority, and bowing our hearts before God's will in the midst of prayer.

When Jesus prayed, He humbled Himself before the Father. That might seem confusing to some when they think about the Son and the Father being one and about the divinity of Christ, but while Christ was here on earth, He humbled Himself and submitted to the Father reverently. We see this in Philippians 2:6-7: ***"Though he was in the form of God, (he) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."*** That is what He is doing here. His reverence in prayer is an expression of relating to the Father from a place of submission.

Jesus reverently submitted to the authority of the Father in prayer, and because of that His prayers were heard. Many times our prayers are the opposite of those of Christ's. We start with our own ideas, our own perspective, our own desires, and ask God to bless our plans when we have no idea what He is truly doing in our situation and no understanding of what is really best for our lives.

We pray in this way often. We pray that God will give us the job, give us the spouse, change our coworker, fix our health, get us our legal papers, move our neighbors, get us into a good school, and then we say amen, with no second thought if our request is really God's plan. We must remember that God has very clear priorities in our lives. The purpose of our lives is to glorify God in all that we do. He wants to make us like Christ. He wants to grow our faith. He wants us to know Him personally. Because of this, there will be many times that He wills something totally different than we would ever choose. This also affects the way that we pray for others and pray for the world.

Jesus prayers were heard because of his reverence. The Father's ears were turned towards Jesus' prayers because of His reverent submission. Our prayers being heard is not based on volume, position, or eloquence. It is based on the reverence of our hearts.

One of the clearest pictures that we have of Jesus' **reverence** is in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is praying to the Father, knowing that in the next hours He will be arrested, beaten, falsely accused, and eventually crucified. We see that His struggle in prayer is overwhelming. In Matthew 26:38 Jesus says, ***"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."*** Luke 22:43-44 tells how ***"An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."***

But even in the midst of the struggle Jesus still chose the way of the Father: ***"My Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours, be done."***

Jesus was wrestling with God the Father in prayer. Do you ever do that? There is an important decision that you need to make and you really want God to agree with what you want. You pray out of emotion not wanting to let go of your plans. We see King David starting prayers in this way in Psalms. He prays out of his sincere emotions and desires for deliverance, justice, judgment, or even condemnation but eventually arrives at the place in his heart that He once again recognizes, "but you are God." Jesus was doing the same thing. He knew that his human desire was to avoid the pain and the wrath of God that He was about to experience, but He knew that His ultimate loyalties were with the Father. ***"My Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours, be done."***

It was not easy, but it also was not a forced or cowering submission. It was a reverent submission. He chose to submit to the Father. Even though many hours of torture and brutality were to come, the real battle was in the prayer. Once the reverent submission was in place, Jesus set his heart, soul and mind on the purpose of the cross . . . and the Father empowered Christ to endure.

The reverent submission was not ultimately about the type of prayer, but the condition of the heart. God desires a heart that is fully dependent on Him. Those are the lives, the hearts and the prayers that God will use to accomplish mighty things. Prayers may be said with a loud voice and a lot of emotion, they may even be with great words and ideas, but if the heart is not in a place of reverent submission, a place of ultimate surrender, the prayers will lack the power of God. Is your heart in the neutral place where you will obey whatever God directs? That is what is required.

One phrase that should characterize our prayers is this: ***"Your will be done."*** May we give control of our lives and our prayers to the Father who knows what is best for us. Even when life is difficult and the future is unclear, may we be willing to surrender our plans and rest in the love of the God who hears our prayers.

Discussion Questions:

1. What of this sermon on Hebrews 5:7 did you find most helpful?
2. Have you had a time that you prayed, and it seemed like God was not listening? Explain.

3. Our prayers are greatly affected by our understanding of who God is? In what areas might you need to better understand who God is? How might one improve their knowledge of the characteristics of God?
4. Jesus' prayers were heard because of His reverence. From this verse and its explanation, how would you write this verse in your own words?
5. Many times, our prayers are the opposite of those of Christ's. We start with our own ideas, our own perspective, our own desires, and ask God to bless our plans when we have no idea what He is truly doing in our situation and no understanding of what is really best for our lives. Why do you think we do that? Give an example of a prayer that is seeking one's own will, and then change it so that it is seeking God's will.
6. What do you need to remember from this teaching and this verse about the way Christ prayed?
7. How will you apply this to your life this week?