

Why We Don't Pray More

A Message Delivered to Tikkun Congregations on 3/21/04

by Michael Rudolph

"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

This was spoken by God to Solomon, who was told that God would give special attention to the prayers of his people who prayed at the site of the Temple – in the sanctified place where God's Name would dwell forever. If you go to Jerusalem today, you will find the place of the Temple, but not the Temple itself. And so, reliant on the promise of this Scripture, many Jews and Christians alike gather regularly at the remaining Temple wall to pray.

But what of the rest of us who are not in Jerusalem? Or those of us who go there only for a season? Are our prayers destined to fall to the ground, unheard by God or heard less frequently? None of us here thinks that, because we understand that in the change of Covenant we have been blessed with new and better promises:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

"But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises" (Hebrews 8:6).

One of the better promises of the New Covenant is the relocation of the Temple of God's presence to our own bodies – a most convenient place to pray from:

"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own" (1 Corinthians 6:19)?

To assure us that our prayers do not need an edifice of brick and mortar – that prayers emanating from our bodily Temples are completely effective, we are given Scriptures such as:

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:19-20).

"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do *it*" (John 14:13-14).

"... for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

None of these things are new to us, so why are some of us so resistant to regular prayer? And if we as leaders are praying, why aren't more of our people? We know that more prayer is needed in our communities because we do not see the power of God manifested as promised, and when we call meetings for intercessory prayer, the response is often abysmal.

I would like to hypothesize some of the reasons for ambivalence to prayer:

Possible Reason 1. We are unwilling to give God the time.

Prayer takes time, and time given to prayer is a sacrifice because if we give it, it is no longer available for our personal use. Prayer, then, is a selfless act of giving:

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:15).

As with any sacrifice, prayer is a choice. Do we use our time for God, or for self?

Possible Reason 2. We do not fully believe the promises of Scripture about prayer.

I have already mentioned some of the Scriptures that describe the power of prayer (e.g. Matthew 17:20; John 14:13-14). But we have all prayed for things, some of which have come to pass, and some of which have not. In the absence of our knowing why, we have taken our eyes off of God's promises, and have become doubters. Instead of attributing our disappointment to lack of understanding, we have retreated in faith to accepting our experiences as being more true than God's Word.

Possible Reason 3. We are confused about how to pray.

Some people become paralyzed to inactivity when they receive too much instruction on a subject. This may apply to prayer as well. For example, we have all received or given instruction on:

- How much time we should pray
- How often we should pray
- To whom we should pray – God? Yeshua? The Holy Spirit?
- What time of day we should pray – Is early morning a requirement?
- With what intensity we should pray
- With what specificity we should pray – Remember Paul Yonge Cho?
- In what posture we should pray
- In what languages we should pray
- In how much isolation we should pray – Do we need a prayer closet?
- For whom we should pray
- For what things we should pray
- With what faith we should pray

These are all legitimate subjects with Scriptures that speak to each of them. The problem comes when those who are predisposed to legalistic thinking try to be perfect in all of these, and begin to approach prayer as a procedure in which to excel, rather than as a natural and intimate communication of the heart. They wear themselves out with their effort, prayer becomes burdensome, and their time spent praying gets less and less.

Possible Reason 4. We doubt that our prayers are effective because we do not consider ourselves sufficiently righteous.

We recall James 5:16 that says:

“Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16).

“For the eyes of the LORD *are* on the righteous, And His ears *are open* to their prayers; But the face of the LORD *is* against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:12).

When we begin to pray, we remember these Scriptures, and become distracted by thoughts about our spiritual flaws and imagine how unacceptable our prayers are likely to be. So what’s the point of praying if God isn’t listening? So we stop.

Possible Reason 5. We doubt that our prayers are effective because we do not consider ourselves gifted in intercession.

We all know people in our congregations who look forward to long sessions of prayer and, when they pray aloud, they are eloquent beyond our poor performance. We recognize such people’s special gifting, and prefer to leave the praying to them. Of course, this is wrong.

Possible Reason 6. We have had the experience of praying for something we really wanted, and were disappointed that it did not come to pass.

We know the Scriptures that promise the effectiveness of prayer, so because our prayers have not seemed to “work,” we either admit a lack of faith, or we rationalize why we have failed. In any case, we are not anxious to repeat the disappointment, so we shrink back from praying.

Possible Reason 7. We find praying to be boring and tiring.

We talk to God, but we don’t sense that He is talking back. So it is like speaking to a wall; we run out of words, and can’t wait to stop and go on to something else.

How many of these possible reasons for not praying touch a cord? Very likely some of them. If not, you’re an exception, but your sheep – those for whom you are responsible – are almost certainly having difficulty with some of these.

So far, we have dealt with the negatives, so let’s get positive. There are some common misconceptions about prayer that, if we correct them, would go a long way toward solving some of the problems we have noted.

One misconception comes from misunderstanding a certain category of Scriptures; here are three of them:

“Then the disciples came to Yeshua privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ So Yeshua said to them, ‘Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you’” (Matthew 17:19-20).

"Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*" (Mark 11:24).

"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do *it*" (John 14:13-14).

The first Scripture, Matthew 17:19-20, teaches that if we only had faith, we would be able to do seemingly impossible things. The second Scripture, Mark 11:24, teaches that we must believe that we already have (or will have) what we are praying for, and if we do believe this, our prayer will be successful. In other words, it is teaching that successful prayer requires having faith for the success. And the third Scripture, John 14:13-14: Is it saying that we can choose to pray for anything we want, simply tack onto the prayer “in Yeshua’s name,” and Zaap! We will have it?

Actually, this last Scripture holds the key to proper understanding. Anyone who claims anything in Yeshua’s name, claims to be his agent – that is, claims to be acting and

speaking for him. So anything that is truly in Yeshua's name must be something that Yeshua would endorse as his own. And similarly, anyone who declares something to be in his name that is not in accordance with his will, misrepresents his agency and commits fraud.

"Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:22-23)!

So how do we know what Yeshua (or God) would or would not endorse? Simple! We either see it clearly in Scripture, or we ask him. But you say, "Doesn't Scripture teach that all we need is faith? Well yes, and knowing what God wants, and believing Him for that and nothing else is exactly what faith is. Squinting your eyes, gritting your teeth, and saying over and over "I believe! I believe! I believe!" is not faith.

Here is what Scripture tells us true faith is:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

The first clause in the verse says that to have faith for something, (1) that "something" must be substantial enough that it can be hoped for, and (2) we must be hoping for it. But that's not the whole of it. Without the second clause, the Scripture would be saying that any selfish, unwise or sinful thing one may hope for can constitute faith. Of course that's not right, so let's now focus on the second clause: "... the evidence of things not seen."

Evidence is that which points to truth. Most evidence is perceived or "seen" through our natural senses. This "seeing" can, but doesn't only have to be through our eyes; it can also be through our ears, our sense of smell, touch, taste, and even through measuring instruments. But what kind of evidence can there conceivably be that points us to the truth, yet is physically "unseen"? There is only one possible answer. The only way that we can be absolutely sure of something that we cannot see in the natural, is if God reveals it to us.

So, according to Hebrews 11:1, we cannot have faith for anything that God has not revealed to us, and similarly, praying for anything that God has not revealed to us or told us to pray for, cannot possibly be a prayer of faith.

If you're with me so far, it is obvious why the Matthew, Mark, and John Scriptures work. It is because anything that God wants to do, he can and will do. So, if you pray for what God wants, success is a certainty. On the other hand, if you pray for what He doesn't want, you may be sorry because God may give it to you anyway.

Now this has profound implications that go even beyond effective prayer. It means that we cannot be people of faith if we do not seek to hear (or at least be led by) God's voice.

Hearing God is even necessary to properly understand the Scriptures, so without hearing God, it is conceivable that we do not even know Him.

Now let's get back to our subject, which is prayer. Why is it that God has decided to work through men's prayers? He certainly doesn't have to, since God can do whatever He wants to do. Also, it seems so unnecessarily inefficient. God wants something done, so he first tells someone, who then prays for it, so that God can hear the prayer, and finally do it.

I cannot prove it, but I think I know why God has decided to work through prayer.

Man was created to have fellowship with God, and fellowship requires walking together. When God created man and placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, He conversed with Adam, and Adam responded. In Genesis 3:8, we even have an image of God walking in the garden, and later on we are told how various men sought God's face and walked with God – for example, Enoch in Genesis 5:24, and Noah in Genesis 6:9. We are also told how “the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11), and how Abraham was called “the friend of God” (James 2:23).

But according to Amos 3:3, “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” So God must have created man with the intention that man should agree with Him – that they should walk together with one mind – God's mind. But the nature of that terrible sin in the Garden was that, although man knew God's mind, he disregarded it, and so he became separated from God, and could no longer hear God's voice clearly as an everyday experience.

We know the rest of the story – that instead of destroying man as man deserved, God allowed man a path back to Him that required Messiah's sacrifice, but also required that man seek God's face – to be of one mind with God once again:

“Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD!
Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face evermore” (Psalm 105:3-4)!

“For ‘who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?’ But we have the mind of Messiah” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

So as I see it, prayer is not only a way of getting things done, it is an exercise in getting re-aligned with God and restoring fellowship with Him.

Being of one mind with God through prayer is also the surest and most powerful way for man to serve God by contributing to Satan's ultimate defeat:

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*” (Ephesians 6:12).

“Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you ...” (James 4:7-8).

Scripture tells us that we have the mind of Messiah (1 Corinthians 2:16). Now it is up to us to fill it with God’s thoughts.

To summarize:

1. Our people are not praying sufficiently, nor are they sufficiently in faith, and the evidence of it is that we are not seeing the power and the miracles coming from prayer that Scripture promises. A major reason is that many do not know that praying in faith requires hearing from God, and many need our help in learning how to hear God’s voice.
2. Some of the reasons for our not praying sufficiently are attitudinal and selfish, and God would have us disciple our people to repent in those areas.
3. One of the reasons for our not praying sufficiently is disbelief in its effectiveness. This is either a faith issue, or an issue of unbiblical self-deprecation. Either or both must be addressed through teaching and discipleship.
4. One of the reasons for our not praying sufficiently is confusion about what prayer consists of and how it ought to be conducted. Some of us think of prayer as always having to be stylized and intense, so it becomes burdensome and exhausting. We must teach our people how to walk with God and pray in natural and relaxed ways.
5. One of the reasons for our not praying sufficiently is a lack of understanding of why prayer is important in our relationship with God. Most of our people highly value their relationship with God, so once they see the connection, they will increase the frequency and quality of their prayer.
6. Finally, a reason for our not praying sufficiently is that we either do not know or have forgotten, that being of one mind with God in our prayers is the most powerful and effective weapon that can be used against God’s adversary. That is why God instructed us:

“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet

of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; **praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints – “ Amen** (Ephesians 6:13-18).