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Keys to Answered Prayer

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"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:31, 32). So spake the Apostle Paul nine hundred years ago. He lived in a complex age that watched the greatest empire in world history begin to crumble. But we live in an even more complex age than Paul's. And I hear that same question every day in one form or another: "What then shall we say to these things?" A cabdriver in New York City said almost those very words as he recounted some recent events in his town to me. A juvenile probation officer in Los Angeles asked the same question in somewhat different terminology.

Paul had an answer for the disturbing issues of his day — God's sufficiency. "If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?" And that same strength and power — God's sufficiency — is available to every one of us who will come obediently asking for His help. Christ is our one way to God and His sufficiency (John 14:6). And to know Christ as Savior is to obey Him (Hebrews 5:8, 9). Thus, Paul says to those who know God's sufficiency in Christ, "In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6, 7).

Carol Ann Miller, a twelve-year-old Maryland girl, faced radical and dangerous heart surgery. The biggest problem turned out to be finding a sufficient supply of her unique blood type, B-negative. Carol Ann took matters in her own hands and wrote the President of the United States, at that time, Dwight Eisenhower. "My Dear President: The surgeons want to close up a hole in my heart," she wrote President Eisenhower. "If you know anyone who has B-negative blood, please call my mother. It is very important!" The President's office immediately contacted the Red Cross and some twenty pints of B-negative blood was soon on its way to Carol Ann Miller. An important request regarding an imperative need had to be answered!

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews talks of the priesthood of Jesus Christ showing how Christ gives God's children the great assurance that they can "draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace," and "receive mercy," and "find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16). This is the promise of answered prayer that God offers all who obey Him.

Yet most of us have wondered about answers to our prayers. Some of us have even questioned whether God answers prayers at all! This is why I want us to consider the "keys to answered prayer."

The first "key to answered prayer" is humility. At the dedication of Solomon's temple the king prayed to God for the people. Whereupon God answered Solomon's petitions with these words, "If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people; if my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:13, 14). God directly enjoins humility upon His people as a part of their prayer life. The humility urged by God in this passage is that attitude of heart that motivates one to seek God and to repent of all his sins.

Solomon also has something to say about the need of humility on the part of those who pray. In blessing assembled Israel the king said, "Jehovah our God be with
us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us, nor forsake us: that he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and his statues, and his ordinances, which he commanded our fathers" (I Kings 8:57, 58). Humility, according to this blessing, is an "inclination" of one's heart toward God and His Word for man.

Humility prevents us praying to be seen of men as did the hypocrites of Jesus' day (Matthew 6:5). The exact difference between the praying of the Pharisee and the Publican in Jesus' story of Luke 18 centered in humility. Of the Publican Jesus said, "I say unto you, This man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

The second "key to answered prayer" is the proper attitude toward personal sin. By this I mean the willingness to recognize sin in one's life and to repent of it. "I acknowledged my sins unto thee, and mine iniquity did I not hide: I said, I will confess my transgressions unto Jehovah; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. For this let every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found; surely when the great waters overflow they shall not reach unto him" (Psalm 32:5, 6). Linked together in this passage from the Psalms is awareness of personal sin, the plea for its forgiveness, and prayer which results in the forgiven life!

Ezra, the scribe, had to deal with Judah at the time of her release from Babylonian captivity. During the seventy years in that strange land many of God's people forgot Him and His law. Even the priests and Levites refused to part with their paganism, wives and rituals when the time came to go home. Ezra prayed, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God, for iniquities are increased over our head, and our guiltiness is grown up into the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

Many of the people did heed God's call through Ezra and repented of their rebellious practices. Again we read, "Now while Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the throne of God, there was gathered together unto him out of Israel a very great assembly of men and women and children; for the people wept very sore" (Ezra 10:1). Ezra further urged the people, "make confession unto Jehovah, the God of your fathers, and do his pleasure; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the foreign women" (Ezra 10:11). Many heeded his plea and God listened to the prayer because He "hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). This causes the Hebrews' author to conclude, "Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help us in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Notice the significant relationship between Christ's work for our salvation and His efforts on behalf of our prayers. "Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). He is redeemer and high priest. He is saviour and intercessor.

This same relationship becomes a continuing source of strength for the Christian. Once Christ is our Savior we can also know Him as intercessor and advocate. To Christians John writes, "My little children, these things write I unto you that ye may not sin. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous" (I John 2:1).

Nowhere is our acceptance of Jesus more closely linked with the effectiveness of our prayers than by Jesus Himself in John, chapter fifteen. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall Peter's words in Acts 2:38. "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Part of this "proper attitude toward personal sin" is obviously the desire to experience cleansing or remission, which Peter says comes to every penitent individual baptized by Christ's authority.

When sin arose in the life of a new Christian in Acts 8, this same apostle instructed him to "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the thought of thy heart be forgiven thee" (Acts 8:22). Earlier in the chapter we learn of this man's baptism into Christ. Before that event in his life, prayer would have been ineffective because of his attitude toward sin in his life. But now having obeyed Christ in baptism and having come into a living relationship with God, the Apostle Peter counsels, "repent and pray."

So important is this "key" that John in his First General Epistle says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (I John 1:9, 10).

The third "key to answered prayer" is a vital relationship with God. Our discussion of the second "key" introduced this idea. This is what God meant in His words to Solomon noticed earlier in our lesson. "If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). Every phrase in this verse suggests a living, personal relationship with God for those whose prayers are heard and answered!

This is what Solomon meant when he blessed his people in another passage already noticed today. The king talks of God being with us, inclining our hearts toward Himself, and urging us to keep His covenant (I Kings 8:57, 58). All these phrases describe a vital relationship with God for those who pray to Him.

Nowhere is this "key to answered prayer" made clearer than in the three specific prohibitions God gave Jeremiah regarding prayer for Israel. In chapters seven, eleven, and fourteen God says to Jeremiah, "Do not pray for the people" (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). The people are in "wickedness" (7:12), idolatry (7:9), and rebellion (7:13). They do not respect God's covenant (11:3, 8) but rather persist in their stubbornness (11:8) and sin (11:10). God says to Jeremiah, "You cannot pray for them," or in other words, "Your prayers for them will not be heard." A vital relationship with God is a "key to answered prayer."

Jesus healed a man blind from birth in John, chapter nine. The entire chapter is a description of the hardships inflicted on this poor creature by his disbelieving Jewish community. Finally, in a last-ditch effort to establish Jesus as the Christ who could give blind men like himself sight, he said, "Why, herein is the marvel, that ye know not whence he is, and yet he opened mine eyes. We know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and do his will, him heareth" (John 9:30, 31). In that last statement the blind man summarized all Old Testament thought about prayer as an outgrowth of a vital relationship with God.

The acceptance of Jesus Christ is the fourth "key to answered prayer." With His death on the cross our Lord not only expressed Himself as our Redeemer, but with that sacrifice He also entered heaven as High Priest. Listen to Hebrews 9:11, 12. "But Christ having come a high priest of the good things to come, through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation, nor yet through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption."

But Christ is more than just another, or even the last, high priest. He is the "great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God" (Hebrews 4:14). He is the "high priest that (can) be touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews 4:15). This causes the Hebrews' author to conclude, "Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help us in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Notice the significant relationship between Christ's work for our salvation and His efforts on behalf of our prayers. "Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). He is redeemer and high priest. He is saviour and intercessor.

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Nowhere is our acceptance of Jesus more closely linked with the effectiveness of our prayers than by Jesus Himself in John, chapter fifteen. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall
be done unto you” (John 15:8). Thus when Christ urges that we believe in Him (John 3:16), repent of our sins (Luke 13:3), confess our faith in Him before others (Matthew 10:32), and surrender in baptism, He reveals heaven’s way for the removal of our sin and spiritual union with Christ for us (Mark 16:16; Galatians 3:27).

Harmony is a fifth “key to answered prayer.” Jesus says, “Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:19, 20). This harmony certainly includes all who worship God. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that our worship of God, including prayer, is acceptable on the condition that brethren are reconciled to one another (Matthew 5:23, 24).

Harmony as a requisite for effective prayer is strongly urged by Peter. He speaks with regard to marital harmony, “Ye husbands, in like manner, dwell with your wives according to knowledge, giving honor unto the woman, as unto the weaker vessel, as being also joint-heirs of the grace of life; to the end that your prayers be not hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). Strife-filled homes are not praying homes. Broken marriages stifle prayer. But prayer mends broken marriages! Harmony, among those who pray together, within a circle of worshippers, inside the home, is a “key to answered prayer.”

We do not have the time to discuss the need for constancy (Luke 18:1-8), forgiveness (Matthew 6:12), thoughtfulness (Matthew 6:6, 7), and awe (Matthew 6:8-10) in our prayers. All these qualities are taught in God’s Word as conditions for effective prayer.

Certainly we cannot close our discussion without restating the basic conviction that motivates all prayer, that is, our complete faith in the reality, nearness, and power of God.

Do you experience a “boldness” when you pray? If not, you should! That is, if your life obediently reflects the life of Jesus Christ. Have you obeyed Christ? Come to the faith in Him as God’s Son? Repented of all past sin and rebellion? Confessed before men that He is the Christ? Experienced the “new life” that comes from baptism into His death, burial and resurrection? John, the Apostle, assures us, “These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him” (1 John 5:13-15).