

# **Bible Studies for Life for February 1: Pray confidently**

January 19, 2009

I heard a story recently about a holy man who visited a temple with his disciples. The holy man tried to enter, but a force prevented him from even being able to touch the door handle. As he turned away, he explained to his disciples, "The temple is too full of prayers for us to enter."

"Too full of prayers?" asked his disciples. "Isn't a temple supposed to be filled with prayers?"

"Prayers should soar through the air to our Creator, not hover beneath the temple's roof," the holy man said. "No, these prayers are not sincere. There is no faith or purpose to give them wings. So instead they fill the temple and crowd me out."

How often do we feel our prayers fall lifeless to the ground, never reaching the ears of God? This month, we study prayer, both how to pray and what to pray for. This week, we discuss the need for confidence in prayer.

What is confidence? Isn't it the assurance that something will happen? When we jump, we know we will fall back to the ground. When we sit on a chair, we know it will hold us up. Or if we doubt its strength, we'll replace it with a stronger chair.

Prayer should be no different. When we talk to God, we should know he hears us. We also should know we don't have to worry about how we express our prayers, because the Holy Spirit will interpret them for us. We only need to pray in faith, out of faith.

What do I mean by that? In faith, we pray confidently. Out of faith, we pray

for God's will rather than our own. It requires we know God so we can pray with full confidence in his ability to hear and respond. It also requires we know his heart so we won't ask for things that would go against his will.

As Christians, our work is to facilitate God's Spirit here on earth, not hinder it. Our prayers can facilitate his kingdom if we pray in line with the work he already is doing. But we can hinder his work if our prayers are selfish.

Selfish prayers do become too heavy to fly. "If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable" (Proverbs 28:9).

It's a harsh statement, but it bears examination. Think about it. If our prayers grow selfish, we likely aren't in the middle of God's will. Like Cain, we have stepped out of fellowship with God, and we aren't trying to honor him or his law. Instead, we are trying to meet our own needs through our sin nature. Selfish prayers dishonor God, so of course, God doesn't listen to them.

When we pray out of faith, we are praying from a position of fellowship with God. If we are in fellowship with God, our prayers will reflect it. Jesus instructed the disciples to pray for God's kingdom and his will to be accomplished on earth. Though he tells us God already knows our needs and intends to meet them, Jesus tells the disciples to pray even for basic needs such as food and protection from temptation. All of these requests honor God. They are in line with his will. But we rarely are able to pray for such things if we aren't right with God.

David is called a man after God's own heart. His prayers serve as a model of right requests that grow out of faith. As we read Psalm 86, notice David's confidence. His faith is unwavering because he knows God's character, response and ways.

## **God's character**

The psalm is peppered with David's statements of faith. In verse 5, he says, "You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you." Then in verse 13, "For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths of the grave." And in verse 15, "But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."

David knows God loves us and wants to bless us. This knowledge steadies him, giving him peace even while his enemies attack. "Guard my life, for I am devoted to you. You are my God; save your servant who trusts in you" (v. 2). This isn't a frantic prayer. It's a prayer of faith, swelling out of a heart that knows God's character. We don't have to persuade God to bless us. We only need to ask.

### **God's response**

David knows he is in fellowship with God; therefore, he knows God hears him. "In the day of my trouble, I will call to you, for you will answer me" (v. 7). Then throughout the rest of his prayer, David speaks as if he knows the answer is coming. He says, "For you, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me" (v. 17), assuming he will soon see the deliverance and sign of goodness he has asked for.

Paul calls faith "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). This kind of faith believes the answer is there before it can be seen. It says thank you before saying amen. It waits confidently, without fretting, because the problem has already been presented to the One who's in control.

### **God's ways**

As we discussed earlier, this kind of faith can only be achieved through right relationship with God. If we aren't in fellowship, we won't be able to rest in the knowledge God is with us. We won't have peace in the certainty

of his love for us. And we won't have the courage to leave our problems in God's hands for him to answer as he sees fit. Instead, we'll be tempted to take measures into our own hands, circumventing God's answer and shortchanging his blessing.

David doesn't rely on his own abilities, though. Even as he presents his problems to God, he prays for help in his faith walk. "Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (v. 11).

He also acknowledges his own answers are not sufficient. In verse 1, he opens his prayer with, "Hear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy." And in verse 10, "For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God." David understands his need for God's power. He makes himself both vulnerable and transparent. There's no trace of selfishness here or of a desire to manipulate God's will. He is merely a man with a need, and he trusts God to meet that need.

When we pray, we need to come before God's throne in confidence. We can trust God to hear and answer our prayers. As the writer of Hebrews says: "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:22-23).

### **Discussion questions**

- *Have you ever felt your prayers didn't make it past the ceiling? What made you feel that way?*
- Looking back over your Christian walk, were there times in your life you felt God wasn't listening to your prayers, but looking back, you realize God was indeed at work?

- Without faith, we can't obey God. And without faith, we can't believe He will answer our prayers. Could this be why faith is so important to prayer?