

Why Do People Pray?

Is prayer part of your life? It is for many people, even some atheists. But why do people pray? According to a poll in France, half of French citizens pray or meditate at times “simply to feel better.” Like many Europeans, they do not pray in a religious sense. Rather, they seek “the soothing effects of prayer.” On the other hand, some believers turn to God only when they are in need, expecting immediate answers to their requests. —Isaiah 26:16.

What about you personally? Do you think that prayer is just a way to sort out your thoughts? If you believe in God, do you see the effects of prayer in your life? Or does it seem to you that your prayers go unanswered? The Bible can help you to view prayer, not as a feel-good therapy, but as a precious means to draw close to God.



Should You Pray?

“Draw close to God, and he
will draw close to you.”

—James 4:8

‘If God knows everything, including my thoughts and needs, why should I pray?’ you might ask. That is a valid question. Did not Jesus say that God “knows what you need even before you ask him”? (Matthew 6:8) King David of ancient Israel realized this, and he wrote: “There is not a word on my tongue, but look! O Jehovah, you already know it well.” (Psalm 139:4) Why, then, should we turn to God in prayer? To answer that, let us consider what the Bible says about the prayers of God’s worshippers.*

* If we want God to listen to our prayers, we must sincerely endeavor to meet his requirements. If we do, then we may experience the power of prayer, as discussed in this article. For more information, see chapter 17 of the book *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* published by Jehovah’s Witnesses, or visit www.jw.org.



“This is the confidence that we have toward him, that no matter what we ask according to his will, he hears us.”

—1 John 5:14

PRAYER DRAWS US CLOSE TO GOD

Although the Bible says that Jehovah* God knows everything, it also shows that he is not interested in merely collecting facts about his worshippers. (Psalm 139:6; Romans 11:33) His limitless memory is not like that of a computer that impersonally stores data about individuals. In fact, God is keenly interested in our innermost thoughts because he wants us to draw closer to him. (Psalm 139:23, 24; James 4:8) That is why Jesus encouraged his followers to pray, even though his Father well knows our basic needs. (Matthew 6:6-8) The more we share our thoughts with our Creator, the more we will draw close to him.

At times, we may find it difficult to know precisely what to ask for in prayer. In such cases, God can even look beyond our unexpressed feelings and use his perfect knowledge of our circumstances to respond to our needs. (Romans 8:26, 27; Ephesians 3:20) When we realize that God has intervened in our personal life, even in very subtle ways, we feel drawn to him.

DOES GOD ANSWER ALL PRAYERS?

The Bible assures us that Almighty God answers the prayers of his faithful servants, but it also gives reasons why he does not listen to some prayers. For example, at a time when violence was rampant in ancient Israel, God directed his prophet Isaiah to tell the people: “Although you offer many prayers, I am not listening; your hands are filled with blood.” (Isaiah 1:15) Clearly, those

who show contempt for God’s laws or pray with improper motives cannot expect to be heard by God.—Proverbs 28:9; James 4:3.

On the other hand, the Bible states: “No matter what we ask according to his will, he hears us.” (1 John 5:14) Does that mean, though, that God will automatically grant his worshippers every request? Not necessarily. Consider the case of the apostle Paul, who begged God three times to remove “a thorn in the flesh.” (2 Corinthians 12:7, 8) It may be that Paul suffered from a chronic eye affliction. How frustrating that must have been for him! Paul had been given the gift of healing and had even performed a resurrection, yet he had to endure his own illness. (Acts 19:11, 12; 20:9, 10) Even though the answer to his petitions did not take the form he wanted, Paul accepted God’s response with gratitude.—2 Corinthians 12:9, 10.

True, some Bible characters did receive miraculous answers to their prayers. (2 Kings 20:1-7) But such answers were hardly the norm, even in Bible times. Some believers were disturbed when it seemed that God had not responded to their prayers. King David asked: “How long, O Jehovah, will you forget me? Forever?” (Psalm 13:1) But when that faithful man realized how often Jehovah had come to his rescue, David reaffirmed his trust in God. In the same prayer, David added: “As for me, I trust in your loyal love.” (Psalm 13:5) Just like David, God’s worshippers today may have to persevere in prayer until they perceive God’s response to their petitions.—Romans 12:12.

* Jehovah is the name of God as revealed in the Bible.

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.”

—1 Peter 5:6

HOW GOD ANSWERS PRAYERS

God responds to our genuine needs.

For good reason, caring parents do not always give their children *what* they ask for *when* they ask for it. In like manner, God may not respond to our requests in the way we think he should or at the moment we expect. But we can be confident that our Creator, like a loving father, will respond to our genuine needs at the right time and in the right way.—Luke 11:11-13.

God may answer in subtle ways.

What, though, if we pray to find relief from an ongoing problem? Should we conclude that because there is no miraculous answer, Jehovah has not answered at all? On the contrary, we would do well to consider whether God has supported us in more subtle ways. For example, perhaps a caring friend did what he could to help us at just the right time. (Proverbs 17:17) Is it possible that Jehovah moved that concerned friend to reach out to us? In addition, God’s answer to a plea for help may come through the pages of the Bible. In it we may find the insight needed to cope with a challenging situation.—2 Timothy 3:16, 17.

Instead of removing a personal problem, God often gives his people the strength needed to cope with it. (2 Corinthians 4:7) For example, when Jesus begged his Father to remove an ordeal, fearing that it would bring reproach on God’s name, Jehovah dispatched an angel to strengthen his Son. (Luke 22:42, 43) Similarly, God may use a close friend to give us a word of

encouragement when we need it most. (Proverbs 12:25) Because this kind of answer is subtle, we may have to be more alert to the way God responds to our prayers.

Some answers must await God’s timetable.

The Bible says that Almighty God shows favor to humble individuals “in due time.” (1 Peter 5:6) So if there seems to be a delay in his answering our sincere requests, we need not see this as a lack of interest on Jehovah’s part. Rather, with his vastly superior perspective, our caring Creator no doubt evaluates our petitions in the light of what he knows is best for us.

To illustrate: Imagine that you have a young son who asks you for a bicycle. Will you automatically grant his request? If you feel that he is not yet responsible enough to ride a bicycle, you might decide to postpone the purchase. In time, however, you may grant his request when you know that doing so would be in his best interests. In like manner, God may grant the proper “desires of [our] heart” in due time if we keep praying.—Psalm 37:4.

BE CONFIDENT THAT JEHOVAH LISTENS

The Bible urges true Christians not to lose confidence in the value of prayer. ‘That is easier said than done,’ some might say. True, if we have been enduring a nagging problem or some sort of injustice, we may find it hard to wait for God’s answer. We do well, though, to remember what Jesus taught about persistence in prayer.

Jesus gave the illustration of a needy widow who kept going to an unfair judge to obtain jus-

tice. (Luke 18:1-3) Although the judge at first refused to help her, he finally said to himself: “I will see that she gets justice so that she will not keep coming and wearing me out with her demand.” (Luke 18:4, 5) According to the text in the original language, the judge paid attention to the widow so that she would not “strike [him] under the eye,” or figuratively, “damage [his] reputation.”* If even an unjust judge, out of fear for his reputation, will help a poor widow, how much more so will our caring God grant justice to those “who cry out to him day and night”! As Jesus said, God “will cause justice to be done to them speedily.” —Luke 18:6-8.

Though we may at times get weary of asking for help or favor, we should not give up. By persevering in prayer, we show the genuineness of our desire to see God’s hand in our life. We also learn to recognize God’s answers to our petitions and, as a result, draw closer to him. Yes, we can be confident that Jehovah will answer our proper prayers if we keep asking in faith.—Luke 11:9. ■

* In Bible times, God expected judges in Israel to show special consideration for widows and orphans.—Deuteronomy 1:16, 17; 24:17; Psalm 68:5.

“Keep on asking, and it will be given you.”—Luke 11:9



God’s answer to a plea for help may come through the pages of the Bible



God may use caring friends to help us at just the right time