

Prayer

Psalms 66:16-20

Key Verse 20

"Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!"

When I asked some folks about what direction should we plan for the new year everyone had some idea. I too of course had my own as well. One of the suggestions was prayer. However I was not so moved by that suggestion and continued to look on. But as I meditated and sought God in prayer he began to work and inundate me with the topic of prayer. As I rode to work the messages that I heard on the radio were focused on prayer. And as I came home from work the messages I heard on the radio were focused on prayer. When I was surfing the web I ran into topics on prayer. And then another co-worker emailed me suggesting the topic of prayer. It came to the point where I could no longer ignore the topic of prayer. I believe that God was telling me to pray. So I asked God to show me what he wanted us to learn about prayer. So as we close out 2011 and begin 2012, I ask that God may be merciful and reveal himself all the more to us when we seek him in prayer.

As I meditated on the topic of prayer and studied the Bible I was lead in a deeper understanding of prayer. However I didn't have one all encompassing verse that described what God was showing me. So I chose what I think best represents God's leading for our fellowship key verse this year Psalm 66:20, "Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!" In this Psalm, the writer is praising God for his answer to prayer which is most likely for being saved from an enemy's threat. He is singing a song of praise and thanksgiving for God's deliverance, power and faithfulness. In his distress he cried out to the Lord but instead of complaining to God about the situation, he sang praises to the Lord (v17) who has heard his prayer and delivered him from his enemies. He thanks God for not rejecting his prayer or withholding his love. This is what I think is so beautiful about this passage. Even though we have sinned against our heavenly father, he doesn't reject us or withhold his love from us.

Way back in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And on the earth he made a beautiful garden and in that garden he placed mankind. At that time man walked with God in the garden and had a wonderful relationship. They worked together naming all the animals that God made and man enjoyed the incredible world that the Lord had made. But then everything went bad. Man sinned against God and was kicked out of the garden. Man lost the opportunity to walk with God as he once did, their relationship became strained as man had to live under curse because of the choices he made. But thank God that he didn't cut man off completely. Although we can not communicate with God like we once could, still God enables us to communicate with him. In the past, God spoke to certain people called prophets who then in turn gave out his word to the people. But these days it is done now through prayer and reading God's word. These are the primary methods we have to communicate with the one who created us. As I thought about prayer, a few questions came to mind, why do we pray, how do we pray, does God hear our prayer and what do we pray for.

Why do we pray?

The most basic answer to this question is we pray as part of our relationship with God. The prophet Isaiah said, “We pray because we are God’s people.” (Isa 64:9) And the Psalmist wrote, “all who are godly pray to God.” (Ps 32:6) (duh makes sense) If we are God’s people then we should be praying to God. Imagine if someone visited your house. And the whole time they were there you talked to them but they never said a word to you. What kind of relationship would that be? A broken one. Or at the very least a one sided relationship. If we claim to be God’s people and we don’t pray what does that say about our relationship. You probably wouldn’t want to keep them in your house very long. If you think about one of your close friends or loved ones, do you like to spend time with them? Of course you do. And why do you do it, because they are someone you care about and you want to be with. That’s why we pray. This is our personal time with God when we can share everything with him, our deepest thoughts, concerns and desires with him. If we are part of God’s family and we don’t talk with him, how can we expect him to answer our prayers? We pray so that we can know God’s heart and receive his grace. Our prayer shows that we care about him and want to have a relationship with him. Also from verse 20 we see that God will never reject our prayer when we are sincere and truly seek him. Job 33:26 says, “He prays to God and finds favor with him, he sees God’s face and shouts for joy; he is restored by God to his righteous state.” Just like talking helps resolve confrontations we have with others, prayer helps restore our relationship with God.

Not only do we pray as a way to deepen our relationship with God but we also pray for others. Abraham prayed for Abimelech and then God healed his wife and all the women in his house so that they could have children again. (Gen 20) Isaac prayed to God for his wife because she was barren, the Lord answered his prayer and his wife Rebekah became pregnant with twins. (Gen 25) When king Hezekiah found out that he was sick and going to die, both him and Isaiah the prophet prayed to God. God responded to Isaiah, “Go and tell Hezekiah, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.’” (Isa 38:5) The list goes on and on, Joshua, Daniel and the believers in the new testament. When they prayed and earnestly poured out their hearts to God, he heard them and answered their prayers. There are some people who think prayer is a waste of time, but the previous cases reveal that this is untrue. Martin Luther was so dedicated to prayer that whenever he knew that he was going to have a tough or real busy day ahead, he felt the need to get up extra early and pray more.

How do we pray?

Is there some specific method that we have to follow? Not really. However Jesus did give his disciples a pattern for how to pray. Jesus taught them to pray, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.”³ Give us each day our daily bread.⁴ Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.” (Lk 11) In Jesus’ example he taught us to pray first for God and second for us. When we pray, we are first to acknowledge God and for his name to be honored and for his kingdom to come on earth. What a blessing and privilege we have to be able to pray to God. Dt 4:7 says, “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?” God is the creator of all and yet he is willing to listen to our prayers. What a blessing we have. Secondly we are to pray for our needs. God knows our needs, yet we are to bring our petitions and requests to him and entrust them to him then he will meet our daily needs.

People wonder, “does God really hear my prayer?” The short answer is yes. For our benefit, the Bible gives many examples of when God heard people’s prayers. For example, when Abraham’s servant was sent on a mission to find a wife for his son Isaac, the servant prayed “O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham.” Imagine being given the task of finding a wife for someone else. There is a lot of pressure there. You don’t want to make a mistake and ruin that person’s life by making the wrong choice. But we see that Abraham chose the right person for the job because this servant was a believer and he asked God for help. And God didn’t let him down. Amazingly before he had finished praying, God answered his prayer by sending Rebekah out to him. (Gen 24) Another time Elisha the prophet was surrounded by his enemies. Those with him were terrified. As his enemies were closing in around him what could he do? He prayed to the LORD, “Strike these people with blindness.” God heard his prayer and struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. (2 Ki 6:18) And Elisha and those with him walked away without having to lift a sword. Here is another example. There was a wicked king named Manasseh (who happened to be the son of Hezekiah) who had been king since he was 12 years old. He did so many detestable and evil things before God even sacrificing his own sons in the fire while practicing sorcery and witchcraft. The Lord spoke to Manasseh but he wouldn’t listen. So God sent the Assyrian army to attack them. The Assyrian army commanders captured Manasseh and took him prisoner. They put shackles on his feet and a hook in his nose and dragged him off to Babylon. In his distress, Manasseh sought the favor of God and humbled himself greatly before God. “And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty (his appeal) and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.” (2 Chronicles 33) What’s amazing about this example is that God heard even Manasseh’s prayer, who was so wicked, but more than that, the Lord was moved by his plea. This shows the tender mercy of our Lord. God heard even Samson’s emergency prayer as he prayed for the Lord to give him strength one last time so that he could punish his enemies. (Jud 16) And God heard Jonah’s emergency prayer when he was stuck in the belly of the whale. (Jonah 2) (do you think you have last minute prayers) From these examples we can be sure that God hears our prayers and sometimes even his heart can be moved by them like with Manasseh.

What do we pray for?

The short answer is anything. We have the freedom to pray to the Lord about anything. We don’t have to worry about upsetting him or shocking him because he has seen it all. So we can be free to pour out anything to our Lord in prayer. And we don’t have to worry about if it is too big or too small. However we need clear specific prayer topics, otherwise how can we know if God has answered them? Here are but a few examples: Jesus’ brother James teaches us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5) We can pray to God and ask him for wisdom when we need it. When Ezra was rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, he fasted and prayed to God for wisdom in how to rebuild the walls. (Ez 8) And those who didn’t want the walls to be rebuilt opposed them and tried to frighten them by making them think that “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But Nehemiah sought the Lord and prayed for strength, “Now strengthen my hands.” (Neh 6) The apostle Paul when he was in prison prayed for courage so that he could declare the gospel message fearlessly. (Eph 6) The early Christian church prayed earnestly that they might receive the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8) Paul prayed that he would be able to

proclaim the gospel clearly. (Col 4) Again Paul said, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.” (Rom 10) James teaches us that prayer offered in faith will make a sick person well and if you are in trouble, you should pray to God. (Ja 5) But most of all when we pray, Jesus taught us that we must believe, for “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Mt 21:22) We must come to God with faith and believe that he is able to grant what we need.

However this brings up a good topic, is there anytime when God doesn’t listen to our prayer? Take a look at verse 18 in our passage. It says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” If our heart is not right, then the Lord will not listen to our prayers. Proverbs says, “The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.” (15:29) And “If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable.” (Prv 28:9) The Lord will always give his attention to the righteous over the wicked. Therefore, we must repent before the Lord and make sure our heart is right before him. Another thing we have to think about is making sure our prayer is in line with God’s desire. God told the prophet Jeremiah, “So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.” (Jer 7) If we offer selfish prayers that are not in line with his desires, then he will not answer them. (Lord grant me a new mercedez)

As we begin a new year we have many things that lie before us. Now is the time we need to pray. Once when two men visited Spurgeon, they wanted to see what the secret was to their fruitful ministry. So when they got there Spurgeon asked if they wanted to see the church’s heating room. Confused they wondered why the heating room. Spurgeon then took them to the basement and showed them 500 people praying before the service. Spurgeon was showing them the secret of why their ministry was so fruitful, it was because of the power of prayer. Prayer is what drives our ministry. Because we can’t do it alone. We need God’s help. We too need God’s help. We must pray and thank God for his blessing upon us throughout the last year. He has been so gracious to us. He granted us a Bible house that we have been praying for, for many years. Now we need wisdom and his help in how to remodel it. We have to thank God for his blessing in sending many new people to our worship service. The average number of attendants to the worship service last semester was 26, but the semester that just ended God blessed us to have an average of 36. Now we need to pray for wisdom to serve all those who came and help them. Many of our students are graduating, they need God’s wisdom and blessing as they go to the next stage of life. The Bible club is in a state of flux so we need to pray for God’s mercy to raise up one person who can take stewardship of it for the next year.

We have a lot to pray for. That’s why we should praise God, who does not reject our prayers and he has not withheld his love from us. He sent his one and only son, Jesus to die for us, paying the price for our sin, just so that we can be restored in our relationship with our heavenly father. “Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!”