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Prayer / Psalm 66:16–20

Prayer is one of the greatest privileges God has given His children. Few blessings in the Christian life compare with the privilege of speaking to the living God. At any moment, from any place, every believer has been invited into the very presence of the King of kings. Imagine that for a moment. We, who were formed from the dust of the earth ([Genesis 2:7](#)), have been granted an audience with the One who simply spoke the words, "Let there be light," and the universe came into existence ([Genesis 1:3](#)). The One to whom we pray is not merely greater than us—He is infinitely greater. He is the eternal, holy, all-powerful God who created all things visible and invisible ([Colossians 1:16](#)), who holds all things together by His power ([Colossians 1:17](#); [Hebrews 1:3](#)), who calls His own sheep by name ([John 10:3](#)), and whose kingdom rules over all ([Psalm 103:19](#)). Yet this sovereign Lord lovingly invites His children to bring before Him every burden—from our greatest fears to our smallest concerns ([Philippians 4:6–7](#)). As the One who knit us together in our mother's womb and knows us completely ([Psalm 139:13–16](#)), nothing is too great for His power and nothing is too small for His fatherly care ([1 Peter 5:7](#)).

What makes this privilege even more remarkable is that it was purchased for us by Jesus Christ. Because of His sinless life, sacrificial death, victorious resurrection, and ongoing ministry as our Great High Priest, the barrier of sin has been removed. We no longer need an earthly priest or repeated sacrifices to approach God. Through Christ we have direct access to the Father ([Ephesians 2:18](#)). The veil of the temple has been torn, and the throne that once represented judgment has become for every believer a throne of grace, where we may "obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" ([Hebrews 4:14–16](#)). Think about what that means. Whether we are gathered with thousands in

worship, sitting alone in the quiet of our home, driving down a lonely highway, or lying in a hospital bed, we can lift our hearts to heaven knowing that the God of the universe hears us. No appointment is required. No waiting room exists. His ear is always open to His children, and His love never grows weary.

Because prayer is the language of our relationship with God, believers pray for many reasons. We worship and glorify Him ([Matthew 6:9](#); [Psalm 95:6](#)). We enjoy fellowship with Him ([Psalm 27:8](#); [Psalm 63:1–8](#)). We confess our sins and receive cleansing ([Psalm 32:5](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). We seek His wisdom and guidance ([James 1:5](#)). We thank Him for His countless blessings ([1 Thessalonians 5:18](#)). We present our needs, intercede for others, resist temptation, and experience His peace that surpasses all understanding ([Philippians 4:6–7](#); [Ephesians 6:18](#)). From beginning to end, the Christian life is sustained through prayer.

Yet all of this raises an important question. If God has graciously opened the door into His presence, does that mean we may approach Him in any manner we choose? Does every prayer automatically receive the answer we desire simply because we are God's children? Many Christians treasure the wonderful promise of Jesus:

"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." ([John 14:13–14](#))

These words have comforted believers for centuries. Yet they have also been misunderstood. Some have treated them almost like a blank cheque from heaven, believing that if they simply add the words "in Jesus' name" to the end of a prayer, God is obligated to grant every request exactly as they desire. If that were true, sickness would quickly disappear, every financial burden would be removed, every broken relationship would be restored, and every prayer would end with an immediate "Yes."

But our experience—and more importantly, the whole counsel of Scripture—teaches otherwise. Living in a fallen world means that, as Solomon

observed, "time and chance happeneth to them all" ([Ecclesiastes 9:11](#)). Even faithful believers experience suffering, disappointment, loss, unanswered requests, and seasons when God's answer is not "Yes," but "Wait" or even "No." So why is that? If God delights in hearing His children, why do some prayers seem to receive different answers? Is effective prayer simply a mystery, or has God revealed principles that shape how His children are to approach Him? Over the next two weeks we will discover that the Bible not only commands us to pray, but also teaches us how to pray effectively. This series is not about discovering a formula that persuades God to do our will. Rather, it is about learning the attitudes and characteristics that enable us to draw near to God in faith, pray according to His will, and experience the joy of seeing Him answer in His perfect wisdom and love.

This morning we begin by examining the heart of effective prayer.

Reverent Submission to God's Will

The first characteristic of effective prayer is reverent submission to the will of God. Before prayer is a list of requests, it is an act of worship. Before we ask God to accomplish our plans, we must first surrender ourselves to His. Too often, however, our prayers become little more than a list of requests. We come before the Creator of the universe already knowing exactly what we think should happen. Rather than quietly seeking God's wisdom, we sometimes approach Him as though He were there simply to approve our plans. Like someone ordering a meal exactly to his own specifications, we present God with our preferred outcome and ask Him to make it happen.

When we see someone suffering from illness, struggling in marriage, facing financial hardship, enduring injustice, or grieving the loss of a loved one, we naturally think we know what the solution should be. We ask God to remove the illness, restore the relationship, provide the money, stop the persecution, or take away the pain. These are loving prayers, and Scripture encourages us to

bring every request before Him ([Philippians 4:6](#)). Yet we often assume that the answer we desire is also the answer God should give. The problem is not that we bring our requests to God; He invites us to do exactly that. The problem arises when we assume that our understanding is equal to His. Effective prayer begins by acknowledging that God knows infinitely more than we do.

There are at least three reasons why humble submission must characterize every prayer. First, we do not fully know what we ought to pray for. Paul writes,

Romans 8:26 NIV

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

God alone sees the beginning from the end. Through the prophet Isaiah He declares,

Isaiah 55:8-9 NIV

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways my ways,”

declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Like Job, we cannot comprehend the vastness of God's wisdom or the complexity of His purposes ([Job 38-41](#)). We do not know what tomorrow holds ([James 4:13-15](#)), much less how today's circumstances fit into God's eternal

plan. What appears to us to be the obvious solution may not be God's best answer.

Second, our own hearts are not always trustworthy. Jeremiah reminds us,

Jeremiah 17:9 NIV

The heart is deceitful above all things

and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?

Even sincere believers can mistake personal desires for God's will. This is why Paul exhorts us to put off the old self and be "made new in the attitude of your minds" ([Ephesians 4:22-24](#)). Effective prayer is not asking God to sanctify our desires; it is allowing God to transform them until they reflect His own. Third, God's purposes are always better than ours. Solomon writes,

Proverbs 19:21 NIV

Many are the plans in a person's heart,

but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

Prayer, therefore, is not presenting God with a list of preferred futures for Him to choose from. Prayer is placing our lives into the hands of a perfectly wise and loving Father, trusting that His purposes are always better than our own. This is why Jesus taught His disciples to pray,

Matthew 6:10 NIV

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Before He taught us to ask for daily bread, He taught us to submit to the Father's will.

The greatest example of this principle is found in our Lord Himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the agony of the cross, Jesus prayed,

Luke 22:42 NIV

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

If the sinless Son of God approached the Father with humble submission, how much more should we? The prayer that God delights to answer is not merely the one offered with the greatest passion, but the one offered in harmony with His perfect will. As John reminds us,

1 John 5:14–15 NIV

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

The goal of prayer is not to persuade God to embrace our will, but for our hearts to be transformed until we joyfully embrace His.

To know and embrace God's will, then, becomes essential to praying effectively. The primary means by which believers discern God's will is through the study of His Word. The more we read, meditate upon, and obey the Scriptures, the more our minds are transformed, our faith is strengthened, and our hearts are conformed to His will [1]. The Bible reveals God's moral will for our lives, and because God never contradicts Himself, His specific leading will always be consistent with His written Word. Many decisions, therefore, do not require a special revelation from heaven, for God has already spoken clearly through the Scriptures.

Alongside the Word of God, prayer itself is indispensable in discerning God's will. Yet prayer is not merely speaking to God—it is also listening to Him. In our

hurried lives we often rush into God's presence with our requests and leave before taking time to quiet our hearts before Him. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that God guides those who wait upon Him, and He often speaks most clearly when we are willing to listen [2]. Even then, there are times when we simply do not know what to pray. In those moments, we are not left to ourselves. The Holy Spirit graciously bridges the gap between our limited understanding and God's perfect wisdom. Knowing both our deepest needs and the Father's eternal purposes, He intercedes on our behalf according to the will of God ([Romans 8:26–27](#)).

As He works within us, He not only directs our prayers but also reshapes our desires until they increasingly reflect the heart of God [3]. This is why reverent submission must precede effective prayer. We cannot sincerely pray, "Thy will be done," unless we truly desire God's will above our own. Nor can we desire His will until we have settled in our hearts that we will obey Him—even before we know what He may ask of us. Surrender always comes before understanding. As we yield ourselves to God, saturate our minds with His Word, and listen to the leading of His Spirit, something remarkable begins to happen. God's thoughts increasingly become our thoughts, His priorities become our priorities, and His desires become our desires. Our prayers cease to be attempts to persuade God to accomplish our plans; instead, they become the joyful expression of hearts that have come into agreement with Him. It is then that we pray with true confidence, knowing that "if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" ([1 John 5:14](#)).

Faith in God and His Promises

The second characteristic of effective prayer is faith in God and His promises. Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly calls His people to approach Him with believing hearts, trusting both His power and His goodness. Once we know the will of God then Jesus teaches us that we should pray with the belief that we

have already received what we have asked for ([Mark 11:24](#)). When God has clearly revealed His will in Scripture or has impressed it upon our hearts through His Word and Spirit, we may pray with confident expectation that He will accomplish His purposes. When we lack faith either that can or will perform the miraculous then this decreases the effectiveness of prayer because it fails to trust the God to whom we are praying. For instance, Jesus states in [Mark 6:5-6](#) that He could not perform miracles in Nazareth except to heal a few sick people due to the lack of the people's faith. This gives us insight into the way God answers prayers. A lack of faith does not limit God's power but .may result in God withholding blessings that He delights to give to those who trust Him [5]. Mark's statement makes sense in a context where Jesus has been performing miracles in response to faith, and when faith is the prerequisite for spiritual blessings, there can be no miracles without it [6]. James warns that those who ask without belief—doubting like waves tossed by wind—should not expect to receive anything from the Lord ([James 1:6-7](#)). Hebrews declares that without faith it's impossible to please God, since anyone approaching Him must believe He exists and rewards those who earnestly seek Him ([Heb 11:6](#)). God is sovereign and knows best; He gives us the faith to pray for what aligns with His will and wisdom [4]. The Holy Spirit strengthens our faith as we trust God's promises. Upon knowing and praying in Jesus' name and according to His will one can stand on the promise of "ask and you shall receive" ([1 John 5:14-15](#)).

Faith in Scripture is never portrayed as a force that compels God to act, nor is it confidence that we can obtain whatever we desire. Biblical faith is confidence in God's character, His promises, and His wisdom. It rests not in the strength of our belief but in the faithfulness of the One in whom we believe. Genuine faith says with Abraham, "Is any thing too hard for the LORD?" ([Genesis 18:14](#)), with the three Hebrew young men, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us" ([Daniel 3:17](#)), and with Jesus Himself, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" ([Luke 22:42](#)). Faith trusts God even when His answer is "No," because it believes that His wisdom is always greater than our own.

Faith is essential not only in the heart of the one who prays, but often in the heart of the one for whom prayer is offered. Throughout Scripture, God frequently responds to the faith of both the intercessor and the recipient. At the same time, we must never forget that God is sovereign. He is not dependent upon the strength of human faith in order to accomplish His purposes [7]. There are occasions when God graciously performed miracles for recipients whose personal faith is either absent from the biblical record or could not have been exercised at the time. Jesus raised the widow's son at Nain and later called Lazarus from the tomb, though neither man could express faith before being restored to life ([Luke 7:11-15](#); [John 11:43-44](#)). Likewise, Jesus healed the servant of the high priest after his ear had been severed, yet the recipient's faith is never mentioned ([Luke 22:50-51](#)). In the account of the centurion's servant, Jesus commended the extraordinary faith of the centurion, but Scripture says nothing regarding the faith of the servant who received the healing ([Matthew 8:5-13](#)).

These accounts, however, should not be viewed as the normal pattern by which God works. Rather, they highlight His sovereign freedom to act according to His own purposes and grace. Neither should we conclude that the recipients were necessarily without faith, for Scripture simply does not tell us. Instead, the biblical writers intentionally draw our attention to Christ's divine authority and compassionate mercy rather than to the recipient's response. Indeed, many of these miracles undoubtedly resulted in faith being awakened or strengthened in those who witnessed them and in those who received them. The overwhelming pattern throughout Scripture remains that God calls those who seek His help to believe Him. Thus, while God is free to work apart from the expressed faith of a recipient, He ordinarily delights to honor those who come to Him in humble, believing trust, always answering according to His perfect wisdom and sovereign will.

A Clear Conscience Before God

The third characteristic of effective prayer is self-examination and confession. Before presenting our requests, we should first invite God to search our hearts, exposing attitudes, motives, and actions that hinder our fellowship with Him [8]. Sin does not diminish God's ability to hear; rather, it disrupts our fellowship with Him. As the man born blind declared, "God does not listen to sinners; He listens to the godly person who does His will" ([John 9:31](#)). This should not be understood to mean that God never hears the cry of a repentant sinner seeking His mercy. Rather, it expresses the consistent biblical principle that those who knowingly persist in unrepentant sin should not expect God to bless or honor their prayers while refusing to walk in obedience to Him. Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly warns that cherished, unconfessed sin hinders effective prayer. The Bible identifies several ways this occurs. "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" ([Psalm 66:18](#)). Those who reject God's instruction find even their prayers detestable ([Proverbs 28:9](#)). Prayer offered with selfish motives goes unanswered ([James 4:3](#)). Husbands who fail to honor their wives ([1 Peter 3:7](#)), those who ignore the cries of the poor ([Proverbs 21:13](#)), and those who refuse to forgive others ([Matthew 6:14-15](#); [Mark 11:25](#)) place barriers between themselves and God [9]. By contrast, "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" ([James 5:16](#)), and "if our hearts do not condemn us... we have confidence before God" ([1 John 3:21-22](#)). Sin that God has revealed but we refuse to forsake will always hinder our prayers [10].

Scripture provides sobering examples of this principle. Through Micah, God declared that He would not answer those who persisted in evil ([Micah 3:4](#)). He instructed Jeremiah not to pray for Judah because the people continued in idolatry, oppression, and empty religion while refusing to repent ([Jeremiah 7:1-15](#); [14:10-12](#)). Zechariah warned that because the people refused to listen to God's Word, God likewise refused to hear them when they cried out ([Zechariah 7:11-13](#)). Isaiah declared that God hid His eyes from their prayers because their hands were stained with injustice as they neglected the oppressed, the widow,

and the orphan ([Isaiah 1:15–17](#)). In every case, the problem was not the absence of prayer but the absence of repentance. For this reason, confession should always precede petition. Before asking God to change our circumstances, we should ask Him to search our hearts [11]. The Holy Spirit often reveals that what appears to be an outward sin is actually rooted in pride, bitterness, unbelief, or selfishness. Confession brings these hidden sins into the light. As someone wisely observed, if God is to cover our sins, we must first uncover them. Refusing to acknowledge sin allows it to retain its power [1]. But when we confess and repent, God graciously forgives, restores our fellowship with Him, cleanses our conscience, and removes obstacles to effective prayer [13][14]. Beginning prayer with humble confession reminds us that we are entirely dependent upon God's mercy. Only then are we rightly prepared to bring our requests before Him with confidence, knowing that we come not on the basis of our own righteousness but through His abundant grace [15].

The Right Motives

As we conclude this first part of our study on effective prayer, we discover that all three characteristics we have examined ultimately lead to one final truth: God is most pleased to answer prayers that seek His glory rather than our own. Throughout Scripture, God responds to prayers rooted in righteousness, humility, faith, and hearts that are aligned with His character. The issue is not whether we pray for our needs—our heavenly Father delights in providing for His children. Rather, the issue is why we desire what we ask. Are our requests born out of dependence upon God and submission to His will, or are they driven by selfish ambition and personal gain? Scripture reminds us, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" ([James 4:3](#)). This does not mean that every prayer must involve great acts of ministry or world-changing events. We rightly pray for healing, daily provision, wisdom, protection, restored relationships, and countless other personal needs. Yet even

these requests should ultimately flow from a heart that longs to see Christ honored. Every answered prayer should lead us to worship the Giver rather than merely rejoice in His gifts.

Prayer, therefore, is not primarily about persuading God to accomplish our plans; it is about allowing God to transform our hearts until our desires increasingly reflect His own [16]. The more we know Him through His Word, the more we trust Him in faith, the more we confess our sins, and the more we submit ourselves to His will, the more our prayers become expressions of His purposes rather than our preferences. This is why prayer must remain Christ-centered. When our attention becomes consumed with our requests, we subtly begin treating God as though He exists to fulfill our desires. But when our eyes remain fixed upon Jesus Christ, our greatest desire becomes not simply that our circumstances change, but that Christ be glorified through whatever answer He gives [17]. Whether His answer is "Yes," "Wait," or "No," faith rejoices because it knows that God's wisdom is perfect, His love is unfailing, and His purposes are always good. Jesus not only purchased our access to the Father, He also perfectly modeled the very attitudes we have studied this morning. He submitted perfectly to the Father's will, trusted Him completely, lived in perfect holiness, and sought above all else the Father's glory. As we become more like Christ, our prayers increasingly reflect His heart.

So, what have we learned this morning? Effective prayer begins long before we ever utter our requests. It begins with a heart that is humbly surrendered to God's will, confidently trusting His promises, honestly confessing its sins, and seeking above all else the glory of Jesus Christ. When these attitudes characterize our lives, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that "if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" ([1 John 5:14](#)). Next week, we will move from the heart of effective prayer to the practice of effective prayer as we examine several practical biblical principles that help us persevere in prayer and confidently bring our requests before our heavenly Father.

Footnotes

- [1] David L. Allen, *1–3 John: Fellowship in God’s Family*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 237–238.
- [2] Wilfred Graves and Ph D. Wilfred Graves Jr., *In Pursuit of Wholeness: Experiencing God’s Salvation for the Total Person* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011).
- [3] Tony Evans, *The Power of the Holy Spirit’s Names: The Names of God Series* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023), 133.
- [4] Dilwyn Price, *Is Any One of You Sick?: The Biblical Basis for Healing the Sick* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 1997), 53.
- [5] Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020)
- [6] Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 244.
- [7] Norman L. Geisler, *Signs and Wonders* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 89.
- [8] Cheryl Taylor, *Prayer and Worship: An Independent-Study Textbook* (Springfield, MO: Global University, 2006), 60.
- [9] Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor: A Field Guide for Word-Driven Disciple Makers* (B&H Academic, 2016), 109–110.
- [10] Joyce Meyer, *How to Talk with God* (New York, NY: FaithWords, 2023).

- [11] Cheryl Taylor, *Prayer and Worship: An Independent-Study Textbook* (Springfield, MO: Global University, 2006), 60.
- [12] Dick Eastman, *Talking with God: A Practical Plan for Personal Prayer* (Chosen, 2021), 35–37.
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] Edward Andrews, *Unshakable Beliefs: Strategies for Strengthening and Defending Your Faith* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2023).
- [15] Chester Tolson and Harold Koenig, *The Healing Power of Prayer: The Surprising Connection between Prayer and Your Health* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003).
- [16] Paul D. Weaver, ed., *Surveying the Gospels and Acts, Surveying the New Testament* (Learn the Word Publishing, 2019).
- [17] James P. Gills, *The Prayerful Spirit: Passion for God, Compassion for People* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2012).