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It was 6:54 am. Peter checked to make sure he had everything. It was all there: the bonded leather, cross-reference, chain-reference, words of Christ in green, NIV Eco-Bible; the note pad with personal prayer points arranged by day and subject; his church prayer diary; his missionary prayer diary; his worldwide student ministry prayer diary; his lectionary edition of 'An Anglican Prayer Book'; and in case all else failed, the 'Jesus Person Pocket-Book of Life- Changing Bible Promises'.

It was 6.59. Peter closed his eyes and tried to get in the mood. He tried to focus on the majesty and goodness of God and to thank him for all that he is and all that he has done.

It was 7.00 and Roger's digital watch beeped the hour. "I really must figure out how to turn that hour beeper off," thought Peter. "Come to think of it, I'm sure I didn't ever turn it on. I hope it's not one of those watches where you get an hour bleep whether you like it or not...Anyway, back to prayer."

Peter continued to think about his watch. "It's typical, really. So much for the technological society. You can't even spend a few minutes in quiet contemplation without the tyrant lashed to wrist sticking its nose in. It's a metaphor, thought Peter; a paradigm for our whole sick society."

It was 7.08. Roger's three-year-old bounded in to announce that the one-year-old had got the lid off the lanolin and was painting the cot with it and could he get her breakfast. "Dear God," prayed Peter, "would you mind if we left it until tomorrow morning?"

In the first article in this series ("Why do we Pray", Briefing #77), we saw how God himself is the reason for our prayers. His willingness, ability and holiness, and the relationship we have with him, all allow, no, demand-prayer. With these strong encouragements, with the clear command of God and with all the promises that our prayers will be heard, why is it, then, that we don't pray? Why do we find it so hard? Why do we end up, like Peter, with the frustrating experience of doing everything else but actually praying? We have begun to tackle this subject already ("Fire Extinguishers", Briefing #74), but let us take a closer look.

We will find that the reasons we don't pray correspond very closely to the reasons we do pray.

False Views of God

Often our lack of prayer is clothed with intellectual problems about the very nature of prayer. Questions spring to our minds: How does God deal with conflicting prayer requests? What if the farmer prays for rain and the brick-layer for sunshine? When we ask for something and don't (apparently) receive it, what are we to think? – that our faith or Christian lifestyle is deficient? And what of God's plan for our lives? How does prayer fit in with God's sovereign mind?

Many of the problems we have with prayer, including most of the intellectual difficulties, spring from false views of God. Just as prayer is driven by who God is, so prayer is stifled if we do not know the true character of the living God. Three errors, in particular, are worth noting.

God is Not Able

The ability of God to answer prayer is questioned in two ways. Firstly, there is a kind of 'fatalism' that sees prayer as a waste of time, since God has already predetermined what will happen. We must certainly affirm the sovereignty of God-that is clearly taught in the Scriptures-but we must also affirm that God is free to reveal himself as he will. And he reveals himself as one who 'responds' to human prayer.

Perhaps the starkest example is in Exodus 32:11-14. After the golden calf debacle, Moses intercedes for the people. He begs God, for the sake of God's own name and promises, not to wipe out the rebellious Israelites. God hears Moses' plea and acts:

"Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."

This leaves no room for a barren determinism. The language may be anthropomorphic; it may be talking in very concrete Hebrew ways; yet the clear implication is that God changed his intention because of Moses' prayer. James 4:2 is another example:

"You do not have, because you do not ask God."

This verse makes no sense unless God hears and responds to our prayers.

The second, and opposite, aspersion that is cast on God's ability is that of impotence. "Yes," it is admitted, "God does respond to human prayer. The trouble is, he is powerless to actually achieve very much on our behalf." This second false view assumes that the world is a fixed 'natural' order which has been set running by God but which cannot be changed or interfered with. It argues that God does not intervene to change the situation-he can only change us, to help us accommodate to our unalterable circumstances. Again, James 4:2 would seem to be fairly meaningless if God's power was prescribed within these limits. Yet this view has been held by some influential Christian teachers, among them William Barclay:

There is still another law of prayer which we must remember. Prayer moves within the natural laws which govern life. When we think of it, this is a necessity. The characteristic of this world is that it is a dependable world. If the laws that govern it were erratically suspended it would cease to become an order; it would become a chaos. Suppose a man was to accidentally fall from the 40th floor window of a New York skyscraper. Suppose him to be a good and devout man and a firm believer in prayer. Suppose him as he passes the 20th floor in his descent to pray, "O God, stop me falling." That is a prayer which cannot be answered.

from A Plain Man's Book of Prayers

God, says William Barclay, cannot do it, because the man is in the grip of a law which he cannot violate – in this case, the law of gravity: "Prayer does not normally promise to achieve release from some situation; it brings power and endurance to meet and overcome that situation."

Perhaps the best way to counter Mr Barclay's error is to suppose another story – in this case, a true story. A man fell from the top of a skyscraper and was on his way to certain death when a gust of wind blew him onto a window ledge. God saved that man. In this case, he did it by using

the 'ordinary', 'natural' means at his disposal. He needn't have done it that way – he could have suspended the laws of gravity if he had so chosen. But he chose to manipulate ordinary everyday means to achieve an extraordinary end. Not many readers may subscribe to Mr Barclay's view of prayer, but the assumption that lies behind it is much more widespread—that is, the separation of the world into the two categories of 'natural' and 'supernatural'. This is not a biblical schema. In the Bible, everything is under God's control; his powerful word sustains all things (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). The pagan separation of the world into 'natural' and 'supernatural' (i.e., weird, strange, inexplicable) turns God into merely the explanation for what modern Science does not yet understand. Christians who subconsciously adopt this way of thinking about the world tend to be pushed towards two extremes. They either end up prayerless (because everything is natural and God can't change it) or else they live in a fantasy-world where the 'supernatural' (i.e., weird, inexplicable) is the touchstone of truth and reality, and there is a demon under every bed. The Bible has the balance right: God miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea...by using a strong east wind (Ex 14:21).

God is Not Willing

Even if the effectiveness of prayer is granted, and God's ability to act is accepted, there is still the problem of his willingness to act. For the Christian, this at first seems like a blasphemous question. God not willing to act for our benefit? How preposterous! However, we all feel the emotional force of this question in the face of suffering. Why does God not intervene to stop the famines, earthquakes and wars? Why does he let my child die? What we're really talking about is the problem of evil. But it is really more than the problem of evil; it is the problem of sin. For right from the beginning, Satan has been tempting mankind to doubt the goodness and generosity of God. His strategy with Eve was to sew doubt in her mind about God's good intentions (Gen 3:4). And so it is with us. When things go wrong, our spontaneous reaction is to question the goodness of God towards us. However, the Bible points us back to the deeper, overarching truth:

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”

(Romans 8:18-19)

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

(Romans 8:32)

We doubt God's willingness when we don't receive an 'answer' for our prayers. Of course, what we mean here by 'answer' is 'our answer'. We didn't get what we were after, and it seemed like a fairly reasonable request, and so we doubt God's goodness, or at the very least, his attention. The Bible promises that God does hear and answer. It's just that he may not answer in quite the way we expect. His answer may be a firm, "No".

God is Not Holy

God, unlike a rose, is not by any other name the same. The name of God reflects his character, his very person.

In the ancient world, names were very important. They stood for the character of the person or the circumstances in which he or she was born. So it is with God. His name (YHWH) talks of his holiness or distinctness from his creation. He "is who he is" or "he will be what he will be". The name of Jesus is also full of meaning: it means "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation".

If our prayers are addressed to a holy God and prayed 'in the name of Jesus', then we are protected from two prayer-crushing errors:

- that sin does not matter-that God somehow has a duty to listen to us, regardless of our lifestyle or attitude towards him;
- that sin is so important and so lasting that, depending on the severity of the sin, it can nullify our prayers for long periods.

The first of these errors denies the holiness of God; the second denies the gospel of forgiveness. God dwells in unapproachable light. We must not think that we have automatic access to him, that our sinful lives somehow do not matter. In James 4:3, we don't receive what we ask for in prayer because we ask with wrong motives, that we may spend what we get on our pleasures. If we are friends with the world, how can we expect to be friends with God at the same time? We must confess our sin and fling ourselves on the forgiveness that is available in Christ. (1 Jn 1:8-2:2)

But we must not fall into the second error either. The fact of our sin (which we can't avoid) does not completely nullify prayer – otherwise none of us could ever pray. Psalm 66:18-19 has the balance right:

"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer."

False Views of the Relationship Factor

Our relationship with God is mirrored or expressed as we talk to him. We reveal what the relationship is like and how we think of it by how we pray (in form and content). Just as our relationship with God is one of the glorious reasons why we can pray (see the first article in the series), so a false understanding of our relationship with God can kill prayer. This problem comes in many forms. Let us look at just a few.

Faith and Disobedience

Our relationship with God is based on trust (i.e., 'faith'). God is faithful and dependable, and we rely on him-that his words are true, that he forgives us through the atoning death of his Son, that he loves us and is working at all times for our good. The opposite of this sort of trust is not necessarily doubt. In Hebrews 3, the opposite of faith is disobedience – i.e., a very demonstrable lack of trust in the truth and importance of God's words. Disobedience makes prayer virtually impossible, for when we are disobedient, our relationship with God is not functioning as it should. We should not think that our lifestyle and attitudes are somehow partitioned off from our prayer lives. When the relationship is foundering (through our disobedience) the only prayer left to us is one of repentance.

Receiving and Hearing

Many people think that we can only be sure that our prayers have been heard by God when we receive what we ask for. This is not so. Certainly, if we receive what we ask for, we know that God has heard us. But the converse does not hold. If we don't receive what we ask for, that does not mean that God has not heard! God promises that he hears us when we pray, whether or not he grants our requests. This again, is a matter of trust. Do we believe God when he assures us of his attention to our prayers?

If we link good 'results' with God hearing us, then we are on dangerous ground. It is only a short step to thinking that it must have been something about the way we prayed on that particular occasion that prompted God to listen and act. We pray again that way in the hope that it will again achieve a result. Before long, we have replaced genuine, open relationship with God with a mechanistic ritual designed to manipulate God into acting as we want him to. When we mention 'ritual', we immediately think of elaborate church services, robes and candles. But ritual comes in domestic versions too. It is sometimes tempting to think that our morning quiet time is an insurance policy against a bad day ("If your day is hemmed with prayer it is less likely to unravel" as the old poster put it). Or we invest particular postures or forms of words with special power for getting things done. Ritual is not wrong in itself. Using familiar structures and forms can be helpful. However, if we even start to think that our little rituals somehow impress God and ensure the success of our prayers, we have denied the true nature of our relationship with him. That relationship is all about his goodness and grace, and our humble trust, not about 'results'.

Faith in Feelings

We have also misunderstood our relationship with God if we think that feelings are its key barometer. Our relationship with God is an objective fact, but our feelings vary widely from hour to hour in response to all kinds of stimuli (some spiritual, some worldly, some dietary). Sometimes we will feel very much like praying. Sometimes, we don't. Sometimes, prayer feels great, but that is no indication of the quality of our prayers or the extent to which God has heard them. Indeed, if we wait until we feel like praying, some of us may never pray again.

If prayer is the vocal expression of our relationship with God, and that relationship is based on objective facts (like Christ's death and my decision to trust in it), then prayer, too, is to be an objective fact of our experience, not a subjective impression of our feelings.

God, Satan and Prayer

Why is it, then, that we do not pray? The real basis of our difficulty is not intellectual – it is moral and spiritual. We fail to pray, primarily, because of our sin and because the Enemy does not want us to pray.

Prayer, at its heart, is an acknowledgment of need. It expresses knowledge of our own frailty and our desire for help. This acknowledgment is hard for sinful human beings. It brings us low. It forces us to admit that we are not independent or self-sufficient – two lies that are very dear to us. And Satan, the Father of Lies, wants us to keep believing them. He wants us to stand tall and go it alone, not humbly kneel and express our dependence on God for everything.

There are two very interesting passages in the New Testament which refer to resisting Satan, and

even more interestingly, both are in the context of prayer:

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Come near to God and he will come near to you.”

(James 4:7-8a)

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

(1 Peter 5:6-8)

Every Christian has experienced this in some way. You sit (or kneel) down to pray and immediately the busyness of life seems to intensify. The phone rings, the children demand your attention, some pressing work commitments spring to mind, and your good intentions of prayer evaporate. We must act on the promise of God that if we resist the Adversary's attacks, Satan will flee and God will draw near to us.

The Garden of Gethsemane is a compelling illustration of all this (see Mk 14:32-51). Jesus tells the disciples to watch and pray so that they will not fall into temptation. They fall asleep, and when temptation comes (in the form of Judas and the soldiers) they deny Jesus and flee. Jesus, however, keeps praying. Temptation comes to him also, but he does not falter. He prays earnestly for deliverance from his impending death, but he does not get what he asks for. And yet through prayer he resists the Evil One and continues faithfully along the agonizing road to the Cross.

In seeking to emulate Jesus, the hardest part is starting. It is easier, in many ways, to keep praying than to start praying. Luke 18:1-8 (the persistent widow) and Luke 11:5-13 (the friend at midnight) are usually taken as exhortations to persevere in prayer. Both passages, in fact, are encouragements to start praying. If even sinful humans accede to persistent demands, how much more will our gracious God grant us every good gift – and speedily.

When we pray, we know that God draws near to us. We know it because he promises it, and his words are utterly trustworthy. The hardest part is starting.