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It was, as they say in the classics, a dark and stormy night. My wife gently nudged me, and then after a time not-so-gently nudged me again. It was 4 am and water was dripping onto our bed. In the dark and cold, I tried to move the bed. It was then that I remembered the SUFM team across the lake and, in an act of complete selflessness, prayed for the rain to stop...until I remembered also that there was a drought on and that the farmers desperately needed the rain.

What should I have prayed for? For the rain to stop (for the SUFM team, of course), or for the rain to continue (for the farmers), or perhaps for our bed and the SUFM team to be preserved dry, like Gideon's fleece, while all around was drenched. Knowing what to pray for can be hard. Is it right to pray for our physical needs – for a job, a car, a husband? Or should we only properly pray for 'spiritual things'?

In this article, we will examine the question under two headings: **the Aspirations of God** and **the Anxieties of Life**.

1. The Aspirations of God

If we could discover what God wants, what his aspirations and plans are, then we could pray for those things and expect a positive reply. God is generous and only too willing to give us every good thing:

“If you, then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him”

(Matthew 7:11)

What are the good things that God wants to give us? What is on God's 'agenda'? Here are some of things that the Bible tells us.

a) The Lord's Prayer

If any prayer is acceptable to God, then the Lord's Prayer would certainly be it. It tells us things that God wants us to pray for: for the honour of his name, for his will to be done on earth, for our daily bread, for forgiveness, and for rescue from temptation and evil. We cannot attempt a detailed exposition of the Lord's Prayer here, but like the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (in which it occurs), the Lord's Prayer focuses on the inbreaking kingdom of God. We would do well to study it and make its concerns ours.

b) The Promises of God

Where God gives a clear promise, we can call upon him to fulfil it because he is faithful, thus putting our faith in God's faithfulness. For example:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”

(Romans 10:13)

“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 plead with God in prayer on the basis of the promises he has made in his Word. This in itself is a very biblical thing to do, as when Moses reminded God of his promises to Abraham and begged him not to destroy the rebellious Israelites (Ex 32:11f).

c) The Commands of God

The commands of God reveal his character and will. If we pray that we might keep his commands, once again we know that we are praying for things that God wants. For example, God wants us to honour our parents (Eph 6:1-3), to seek first his kingdom (Matt 6:33), and to think about whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable (Phil 4:8). Our natural, sinful tendency is to do the opposite in each case, and we can pray that God would strengthen us to do these things, and know that he will help us.

i. d) The Revealed Plan of God

God has told us of his plans and we can pray to him to take action and bring them into effect.

Jesus says, for example:

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”

(Matthew 9:38)

Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray that

“the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you”

(2 Thessalonians 3:1)

and he prays for them that they might be

“sanctified through and through” and “kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”

(1 Thessalonians 5:23)

When we understand the plans of God (e.g., for the salvation and sanctification of his people) we can pray confidently and expectantly for a positive response from God.

i. e) Take up the Prayers of the Bible

Similarly, by reading and absorbing and studying the prayers of the Bible, we can gain an appreciation of the things that matter to God. The Apostle Paul begins each of his letters (except Galatians) with a summary of his prayers for that particular church. His prayers for the Colossians, for example, are marvellous illustrations of what to pray for someone you have never met. The book of Psalms can also stimulate us to pray for things that matter to God. All of these aspects of the ‘aspirations of God’ can be very helpful for our prayer lives. We can pray for these kinds of things in the confidence that God wants to grant our requests. They are his stated priorities, his desires, the things he wants to give us.

But what about those areas on which the Bible is silent. These may press upon us more urgently than the grand vision of God's plans in the world. We may be unemployed, or have a sick child, or (cliché of clichés) we may be looking for a parking spot! We may acknowledge, in the wider scheme of things, that these concerns aren't as important as the things on which God has spoken. We know that the Scriptures contain all the necessary information for a godly life and that God's chief concerns should be our chief concerns. All this we may fully acknowledge and seek to implement in our prayer lives. But what about when my child is sick? What about ...

2. The Anxieties of Life

Where God's Word is silent – when we are given no indication of what God's intentions are in a particular circumstance – then we can only pray “if it be thy will”. In some cases, this may demonstrate a lack of faith – that is, where God has revealed his aspirations. If God has promised wisdom in the face of trials to those who ask for it (James 1:5), then it is faithless to doubt it. But when we are ignorant of God's will in a situation, then we can only pray, like Jesus, for God's will to be done.

a) The Importance of the Christian Mind

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

(Romans 12:2)

We find God's will by testing it and proving it; by having a renewed mind. We should not expect flashes in the dark, nor even the gentle surfacing of the knowledge of God's will onto the calm lake of our minds (which is what I was taught as a young Christian). We are still sinful, and even with a renewed mind we cannot have the same certainty about God's will that we can have with the ‘aspirations of God’. Nevertheless, we can approach situations with a Christian mind and make Christian decisions about what we will pray for. For example, at 4 am on a rainy night in a leaky cabin, it might be more godly to pray for the rain to continue for the sake of the drought-stricken farmers. Making unselfish decisions is a mark of a renewed mind. Even with our renewed minds, we need to pray with an ‘if it be thy will’ attitude.

b) Don't Worry, Turn to God

Consigning our cares to the goodness of God's will is an antidote to worry. As Paul writes:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

(Philippians 4:6-7)

We need to be careful, however, as we apply this command, for when the adrenalin is pumping and our stomachs are knotting, it is very difficult to suddenly cease being anxious. The positive emphasis of these verses is to turn to God. As we take our eyes from the things that concern us, and turn to God in prayer, calling to mind all that we are bound to thank him for, then our spirits are lifted from their self-pity and despair. By thanking God for all his mercies to us in the past (and

the present), our perspective changes. We can see the bigger picture of God's sovereign care for us, and be assured that he has heard our prayers and will answer them, preserving our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

c) Everything

We can pray about anything and everything we are concerned about, not just great and lofty matters. We are encouraged to cast our cares upon God because we know he cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). Specific prayers, even those which to our minds seem trivial, give God glory because they testify to his total care of us, his complete knowledge of our lives, his all embracing sovereignty and love.

d) He will Give me what is Good for me

In all of this, we can take great comfort from the knowledge that God is the giver of good gifts to his children. Will a father whose child asks him for a fish give him a snake (see Matt 7:7-11)? The generosity and goodness of God gives us a great assurance in prayer: that God will not accede to our requests if he can see that it would not be for our good.

e) The Promise

In the Philippians passage quoted above, God promises us that his peace will "keep our hearts and our minds in the knowledge of Christ Jesus". Peace here is not simply a feeling of tranquillity; in fact, it is not primarily a 'feeling' at all. 'Peace' in the Bible is a more positive concept, involving good health, harmony, prosperity and victory. We are not being promised feelings of peace (e.g., as a method of guidance), but that God's peace – the harmonious victory he has won – will guard and keep us in Christ. He will protect us as the cares of this world press in and we are tempted to stop trusting Christ. As we pray, God keeps and guards us, and in the end we may receive tranquillity (even though it is not what is being promised).

f) Godly examples

We can see some examples of this godly model of prayer elsewhere in Philippians. In Chapter 1, Paul is unsure whether he is about to be released from gaol or released from life, but either way he's a winner. In fact, he can't make up his mind which he would ultimately prefer – to die and be with Christ or to live and continue his work. This is a 'renewed mind' at work. He entrusts himself and his cares to God and thinks about his situation from a Christ-centred perspective. In Philippians 4:11-13, we see this perspective at work again:

"I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to be in plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

In need and in prosperity, God gave Paul the power to be content. When we are in need and we pray for money, God may not give it to us – his will may be otherwise – but we can be sure that he will not allow our financial situation to drag us away from Christ Jesus. He will "guard our hearts and minds". His strength will give us contentment, as it did for Paul.

The famous 'thorn in the flesh' incident (in 2 Cor 12) teaches much the same lesson. Paul pleaded

for it to be removed. God heard him, but left it there. God did what was best for Paul, teaching him about power, weakness and sufficient grace, and enabling him to stay Christian through it all.

And there is Jesus. His Gethsemane experience is perhaps the ultimate paradigm of the godly man submitting to the Father's will. Jesus hated the prospect of crucifixion, with its corollary of being separated from his Father. He sweated blood praying about it, but he remained determined to submit to the will of the Father. In the end, prayer consists of far more than getting a 'good' answer. It has to do with our entire relationship with God. Jesus was 'kept' through praying so that when the time came he did not flinch but continued on his agonizing course of obedience.

His disciples, on the other hand, failed to watch and pray. When temptation came, they fled, leaving Jesus in the hands of the soldiers.

Conclusions

Let us look back over the four articles in this series and summarize our findings:

1. We should pray because God is who he is.
2. We do not pray because of our sinfulness, which is preyed upon by the Devil. We must resist him (Jas 4:7-8).
3. The only way we can pray is as children of God, adopted into God's family through our relationship with Jesus.
4. As God's children, we pray for the things that are dear to our Father's heart, confident that he will grant our requests. And we also pray for any and everything else, knowing that God will give us what we need, that he will protect us from the cares of this life, and that he will grant our requests if they are according to his will.

These are the principles. It is up to each one of us to work them out in our own prayer lives.