

PHILLIP D. JENSEN AND TONY PAYNE



Prayer

and the voice of God

God's living word will transform the way you pray



We hear God speak to us in the Bible—but how do we speak back? And why should we speak to him? Does he hear us? And what does God do with what we say?

Prayer doesn't have to be a mystery or a burden. In *Prayer and the Voice of God*, Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne open up what God himself says to us in the Scriptures about prayer.

A readable guide for new Christians wanting to get started in prayer, or longer-serving Christians whose prayer-lives are wilting.

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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Prayer and the Voice of God

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Chapter 1

Prayer and God's voice

Prayer is just about the most naturally unnatural thing it is possible to do.

It is natural because anyone can do it, and most people do it at one stage or other in their lives. Even the most hardened atheist will throw a hopeful prayer skywards in his darkest hour. We know a man who did just this when caught on board a ship in a typhoon. He promised that if God would rescue him from the storm, he would find out more about God and how to serve him. God did and he did.

Desperate atheists can do it, children can do it, little old ladies can do it. 'Prayer' is not hard. It seems almost to be a spontaneous activity that simply happens to nearly everyone from time to time. It's natural.

And yet it is also very unnatural, almost by definition. When people pray, they are seeking an intervention in the natural course of events. They want their 'god'—whatever they perceive him, her or it to be—to do something for them that otherwise would not have happened. They want

super-nature to invade nature for their benefit: to heal sickness, to right an injustice, to perform a typhoon rescue.

It's unnatural in another sense, too, as anyone who has tried to pray for any length of time will tell you. The occasional desperate prayer in a time of need is not too taxing. But praying regularly, consistently and faithfully—that's another matter. Most Christians will testify to the *difficulty* of prayer. If the Bible is any guide, we have to be taught to pray, and then encouraged, exhorted and even commanded to continue doing it. When the Apostle Paul mentions that his good friend and colleague Epaphras has been 'wrestling' or 'struggling' in prayer (for the Colossians—see Colossians 4:12), we recognize the experience. Prayer often feels like a wrestling match—with God, with our circumstances, with our own weakness. Indeed, as we look more closely at prayer in this book, we will need to come to terms with not only why and how we should pray, but also why we *don't* pray, for prayerlessness is a common and besetting sin for many Christians.

Our first step, however, is more basic but no less important. Before we go any further, we need to take a moment to define what we mean by 'prayer', for there are a great many different activities in the world that are referred to as 'prayer'.

Prayer in some religious traditions is not so much asking the deity for something as simply reciting a set form of holy words (like the five-times-daily 'prayer' in Islam). In other cultures, prayer can be silent meditation, an exalted state of consciousness, the affixing of petitions to prayer wheels that spin in the wind, a wild

whirling dance of religious ecstasy, the offering of gifts or the lighting of candles.

Christians, too, can mean different things when they talk about prayer. In Christian circles, any of the following practices might be labelled as 'prayer':

- silent adoration of God, or silent meditation on his character or word;
- an action performed with God in mind (as in the Keith Green song, 'Make my life a prayer to you');
- giving thanks to God;
- praising God in song;
- confessing our sins to God;
- making requests of God;
- waiting or listening for God's voice to come to us.

The final item on that list—seeking to listen for God's voice in prayer—is a subject that we will think about more as we proceed. At this point, however, we need to focus on God's voice in a different sense. If we are going to understand true prayer, and pray how God wants us to, then our first step must be to *listen to what God has to say about prayer*. For it is not what we think about prayer that matters, but what God thinks about prayer. We must allow God, who created prayer, to tell us what prayer is, to shape our thinking about prayer, to fire our hearts with the motivation to pray, and to teach us how and when and what we should pray. We must turn, in other words, to God's living word in the Bible and listen humbly to what he has to say to us about this vital subject.

This, of course, is hard for us to do—not because the

Bible is very difficult to understand on this subject, nor because we lack the opportunity to listen to it, but because our natural sinful tendency is to ignore God's voice whenever possible. We would rather define prayer (or define God, for that matter) in a way that seems good to us—which suits us. We prefer to listen to the voice of our own reason, the voice of our friends or the voice of popular opinion, than to listen with trembling to the voice of God.

Yet this is what we must do if we are to pray in a way that honours the God who created prayer and who initiates our prayers by revealing himself to us and drawing us into relationship with himself.

When we do turn to listen to God's voice in the Bible, we discover a very interesting thing. People today may refer to any number of different activities as 'prayer' but when God speaks about 'prayer' in the Bible, he is really only talking about one thing. In the Bible, 'prayer' simply means "*asking God for things*".¹

This may seem like a rather simplistic definition—a definition that just states the obvious—but, given how

¹ In the New Testament, for example, the most common Greek word for 'prayer' is *proseuche* (and its verbal form *proseuchomai*, 'to pray'). In its different forms, it occurs 121 times in the New Testament. On some occasions, it is used without the activity being described or defined (e.g. "Jesus went up on the mountain by himself to pray"). But whenever the activity is described or defined in some way, or the meaning of the word is made clear by its context, *proseuche* and *proseuchomai* always refer to the act of asking or requesting or seeking something from God. The other two Greek words that are sometimes translated 'to pray' are the everyday words *aitew* ('to ask, ask for, demand') and *deomai* ('to ask, request, beseech, beg').

confused Christians can be about prayer, it's where we need to start. There are three important things to notice in this definition.

Firstly, 'prayer' in the Bible is *asking* for something. This is what the biblical words we translate as 'pray' or 'prayer' mean. In fact, many of these words are also used of asking humans for things as well—for example, the Greek word translated 'pray' in Acts 8:24 is the same word the Ethiopian eunuch uses just a few verses later when he 'asks' Phillip to explain the Bible to him (v. 34). To 'pray' is to present a request or supplication or petition to another person, and very often in the Bible that person is God.

Now there are lots of other verbal activities we engage in with people: we thank them, chat to them, inform them of things, joke with them or even tell them how good they are (that is, praise them). We also listen to what they have to say to us. But the word 'prayer' means to *ask* someone for something. It's the same with our talking to God. It is perfectly right—indeed obligatory—that we thank God for his many gifts to us, but strictly speaking we are not 'praying' when we do this, not in the way the Bible uses the word. It is also great to pause in the midst of our busyness and contemplate how good and wonderful God is, and to mull over in our minds his many perfections and merciful deeds—but this is not 'prayer'. It is also our privilege as Christians to praise God—that is, to tell each other and all the world, and even God himself, how glorious and mighty God is—how he has rescued us and showered us with

one blessing after another. We can ‘praise’ God in song, in poetry, in spoken words or even in print. But this also is not ‘prayer’—not in the way the Bible uses the word. Nor is prayer in the Bible ‘listening to God’. It is vital that we pay careful and obedient attention to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, but the activity of doing so is never called ‘prayer’ in the Bible.

It’s very helpful to get this clear in our minds. Thanksgiving ought always to accompany ‘prayer’ but it is not itself ‘prayer’. Meditating on God’s word and character is a marvellous thing to do, and, indeed, it can prompt us to pray, but meditation is not ‘prayer’. Prayer is asking God for something. If we are to avoid confusion as we seek to listen to what God has to say about prayer, we must make sure that we are speaking the same language as he does in the Scriptures. When God speaks about ‘prayer’, he is speaking about ‘asking for something’.

Secondly, ‘prayer’ is about asking *a person*—in this case, God—to do something. As we’ve noted, the words for ‘prayer’ in the Bible also mean to ask human persons for things. But when they refer to asking God for something, we usually translate them as ‘pray’ in English. To pray is to address yourself to a ‘somebody’—to a person. It’s a relational activity. It is silly to ‘pray’ to a rock or a tree in the way the Bible uses the word ‘pray’, because rocks and trees cannot hear and respond. They can’t be asked for things. But the God of the Bible, as we shall see, is a God that *can* be asked for things.

This brings us to the third and final point worth noticing in our little definition, which is that prayer

always involves *words*. Asking a person for something involves speaking to them—making a verbal request. That is why ‘prayer’ in the Bible is not silent contemplation or the babbling repetition of meaningless phrases or the flying of flags or the spinning of wheels. Prayer in the Bible is unashamedly and universally verbal.

So prayer is ‘asking God for something’. This very simple biblical definition of prayer may raise all sorts of questions in our minds. What is the place of thanksgiving? What about confession? What about meditation? We will return to these questions in due course.

Firstly, however, we need to continue what we have only just begun: listening to God’s voice and learning from him the foundations of prayer.