

PRAYER

by Mr. Jewel Love

National Day of Prayer 2011 was on Thursday, May 5, 2011

The **National Day of Prayer** is an annual day of observance held on the first Thursday of May, designated by the United States Congress, when people are asked "to turn to God in prayer and meditation". Each year, the president signs a proclamation, encouraging all Americans to pray on this day. The modern law formalizing its annual observance was enacted in 1952, although it has historical origins to a mandate by George Washington, the first president of the United States.

On April 17, 1952, President Harry S. Truman signed a bill proclaiming a National Day of Prayer must be declared by each following president at an appropriate date of his choice. In 1982 a conservative evangelical Christian organization called the "National Prayer Committee" was formed to coordinate and implement a fixed annual day of prayer for the purpose of organizing evangelical Christian prayer events with local, state, and federal government entities. In his 1983 declaration, Ronald Reagan said, "From General Washington's struggle at Valley Forge to the present, this Nation has fervently sought and received divine guidance as it pursued the course of history. This occasion provides our Nation with an opportunity to further recognize the source of our blessings, and to seek His help for the challenges we face today and in the future." In 1988, the law was amended so that the National Day of Prayer would be held on the first Thursday of May. Two stated intentions of the National Day of Prayer were that it would be a day when adherents of all great religions could unite in prayer and that it may one day bring renewed respect for God to all the peoples of the world.

Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush each hosted special events for the day only once during their administrations, President Bill Clinton did not hold any such events during his time in office, George W. Bush held events on the National Day of Prayer in each year of his presidency, and President Barack Obama did not hold a formal event for the NDOP on May 7, 2009.

On April 15, 2010, Judge Crabb ruled that the statute establishing the National Day of Prayer was unconstitutional as it is "an inherently religious exercise that serves no secular function." Judge Crabb stayed her ruling pending the completion of appeals.

The U.S. Department of Justice filed a notice to appeal the ruling on April 22, 2010, and on April 14, 2011 a panel at the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously overruled Crabb's decision, stating that "a feeling of alienation cannot suffice as injury." They further stated that the President is free to make appeals to the public based on many kinds of grounds, including political and religious, and that such requests do not obligate citizens to comply and do not encroach on citizens' rights. The same day, the Freedom From Religion Foundation announced that it would seek an en banc review of the ruling by the full Seventh Circuit court.

"Prayer is made even more critical by the times in which we live," said Jim Bevis, coordinator of this year's prayer observance. "The earthquakes in Japan, the tornadoes, the unrest in the Middle East ..."

What is prayer?

PRAYER 1a (1) : an address (as a petition) to God or a god in word or thought <said a *prayer* for the SUCCESS of the voyage> (2) : a set order of words used in praying b : an earnest request or wish 2: the act or practice of praying to God or a god <kneeling in *prayer*> 3: a religious service consisting chiefly of prayers —4: something prayed for

Prayer, the act of petitioning, praising, giving thanks, or confessing to God; it is expressed by several different words in both the OT and the NT. Prayer can be individual or corporate, audible or silent. It is conditioned by the biblical understanding of God as a personal being who hears the prayers of his people (1 Kings 9:3; Pss. 34:15; 65:2; Matt. 7:11; 1 John 5:15).

In the OT: The earliest instances of prayer in the OT are conversations between persons and God. Such conversations take place between God and Adam (Gen. 3:9-12), Abraham (Gen. 15:1-6), and Moses (Exod. 3:1-4:17). It is said that God spoke to Moses 'face to face, as a man speaks to his friend' (Exod. 33:11). Kings and prophets are also portrayed as conversation partners with God (frequently the divine presence was by way of visions or dreams).

In the NT: Jesus is portrayed as a model and instructor in prayer in the NT, especially in Luke's Gospel, where he prays at decisive moments: **his baptism (Luke 3:21)** ²¹ **When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened** ²² **and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."**, **the calling of his disciples (Luke 6:12)**, **transfiguration (Luke 9:29)**, **Gethsemane (22:39-46)**, and **crucifixion (Luke 23:46)** ⁴⁶

Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.) The major prayers attributed to Jesus, however, are in Matthew (6:9-13, the Lord’s Prayer; cf. Luke 11:2-4) and John (chap. 17, the High Priestly Prayer). Jesus teaches that prayer should not be ostentatious and verbose but in private and with brevity (**Matt. 6:5-8** ⁵ **“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**), **earnest** (Luke 11:5-13), **in faith** (Mark 11:23-24), **and in a forgiving spirit** (Mark 11:25). **God is to be addressed as ‘Father’** (Matt. 6:9; 7:11).

Within the early church, prayer was addressed directly to God (1 Cor. 1:4; Col. 1:3) or ‘through’ Christ (Rom. 1:8). That prayer should be ‘through’ Christ is based on the prior concept that God’s grace and love come ‘through’ Christ (Rom. 1:5; 5:1; 8:39) and that the reigning Christ is Lord and is accessible as mediator (Rom. 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 1:9). Christ and the Spirit take on special roles in the prayers of the NT. Prayers are offered directly to Christ (Acts 7:59; 1 Cor. 1:2), although not frequently. Not only, however, are prayers offered ‘through’ Christ or to him; Christ also prays as intercessor for the saints (**Rom. 8:34** ³⁴ **Who is he that condemns? **NO ONE** Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also **interceding for us.****); Heb. 7:25). Likewise, the Spirit’s role in prayer is manifold. Prayer is ‘in the Spirit’ (1 Cor. 14:15; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 3:3), who prompts and guides believers in prayer. On the other hand, **the Spirit intercedes for believers** (**Rom. 8:26-27** ²⁶ **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 with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.**), because the Spirit knows their weaknesses and the mind and will of God (Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 2:10-11).

Responding to Jesus With Prayer

How do we respond to the risen Jesus makes a difference in our lives *through prayer*. Because he is now in heaven, we have the guarantee that our prayers will be heard. We pray "in Jesus' name" — **he intercedes for us**, prays for us! God listens to us just as well as he listens to Jesus himself.

Hebrews 4:14-16 ¹⁴ **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, (Or *gone into heaven*) Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.** ¹⁵ **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.** ¹⁶ **Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence**, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. **Hebrews 10:19-22** ¹⁹ **Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,** ²⁰ **by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,** ²¹ **and since we have a great priest over the house of God,** ²² **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.**

There are many misconceptions about prayer. The following article sheds more light on **what prayer is**, and **how we pray**.

Prayer: a cry for help

Some people make prayer sound like a duty, as a work that faithful Christians must perform. Some make it sound like we ought to pray seven times a day, or three times a day, or all night long, or rise before dawn, or spend at least two hours every day, following the example of this or that famous person.

I think Christians should pray not as a duty, but out of *need*. After all, prayers are requests. There are no biblical commands for us to pray at certain times or in certain ways. We are not told to follow Jesus' example in praying all night, or Daniel's example of facing Jerusalem.

But Scripture everywhere assumes that God's people *do* pray. We are not told to pray for specific amounts of time, **but all the time** (**1 Thessalonians 5:17** ¹⁷ **pray continually;** ¹⁷ (KJV) **Pray without ceasing.**; (NLB) ¹⁷ **Never stop praying.**; (The Message) **pray all the time;** **Ephesians 6:18** ¹⁸ **And**

pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.). We are **not** told to kneel or stand or lie on the floor when we pray. Rather, we are told to **do everything while praying (Philippians 4:6⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.)**

Christians are not to be filled with anxiety and tossed with care. They are rather to bring their problems and needs to the Lord with the confidence that he cares for them and his care is sufficient. They are to do so with thanksgiving, remembering how very gracious God has been to them. An ungrateful child always seeks more from his parents without giving thanks for what he has received. **We are not to be ungrateful children.**

Believers who carry their burdens to the Lord will find peace and rest in their spirits. This peace will stand at the door and guard the hearts and minds of believers so that anxious care and worry cannot enter. It is a glorious peace from the Lord that unbelievers cannot find and cannot explain, and it is a peace that believers themselves cannot fully understand.^[1]

Paul exhorted the Philippians to prayer instead of anxiety. Praying with thanksgiving involves trusting God. Four words are used here to describe a believer's communion with God. **Prayer** (*proseuchē*) describes a believer's approach to God. **Petition** (*deēsei*) emphasizes requesting an answer to a specific need. **Thanksgiving** (*eucharistias*) is an attitude of heart which should always accompany one's prayers. **Requests** (*aitēmata*) speak of definite and specific things asked for.^[2]

That is why we should pray: We are to ask God for the things we need. The better we know ourselves, the more we will know that we are incredibly needy people. Of ourselves, we can do nothing. If we want to accomplish anything worthwhile, we must seek God's help. We must depend on him. Prayer is a cry for help. And since our needs never end, our prayers should never cease.

Thanks

^[1] Ellsworth, R. (2004). *Opening up Philippians* (84). Leominster: Day One Publications.

^[2] Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Php 4:6–7). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

God supplies our needs, and it is appropriate for us to thank him for doing so. Every breath we take is a gift from him. All the beauty in nature is a gift from him. The wonderful variety of sights, sounds, smells and textures is a gift from him. Our conversations with God should include thanks as well as requests. This is a form of praise, to acknowledge that he is the giver of every good thing.

As we thank God, we remind ourselves of our place in the universe—a place of great honor as a target of God’s affection, and a place of dependence on his graciousness. Giving thanks is a way to know who we are and why we exist; it reminds us that the universe functions only through his gift.

It is too easy for us to go through the day without really being aware that life functions best if we remember it as a gift. This is supported by the biblical commands for us to be thankful, and to continually give thanks to God in our prayers (**1 Thessalonians 5:17-18** ¹⁶ **Be joyful always;** ¹⁷ **pray continually;** ¹⁸ **give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.**).

The Bible similarly tells us to pray with persistence, giving the same request again and again. We know by faith that God heard us the first time, and that he knows our earnestness even without our persistence, so I conclude that his command for our persistence is really for our own good. We need to tell ourselves again and again what the desires of our heart are, and that we trust God with them. Our thanks should include our appreciation for who God is, and **here our prayers blend thanks and praise**. We exalt his power, his wisdom, his mercy, the beauty of his love. We praise him for who he is, not just for what he gives us, **for in actuality, he gives us himself.**

This does not mean that prayer is just a means of talking to ourselves, or of reminding ourselves of abstract truths. No, Scripture assures us that prayer is a genuine conversation with God. Our requests really go to heaven, and are really heard and answered by God. Our thanks really go to God; we must see him in the picture. Often, it is in prayer that God speaks to us, when we grow in our understanding of what he wants us to think or do.

My cry for help

Finally, *Joseph Tkach*, says, my friends, I ask you to pray for your local church. It takes God’s strength for your congregation to make a difference for the kingdom in your community. You need divine help to work together and to tackle the impossible. In other words, you need to pray. Pray for your local leaders, too. Those who lead worship music need divine blessing. Those

who speak should speak the words of God (1 Peter 4:11), and this cannot be done from human wisdom.

And pray for me, too. Even the most talented human could not do the work God sets before me. I need divine help, and I pray for it, and I receive it. And just as Paul asked his churches to pray for him (Colossians 4:2-3, etc.), I ask you to pray for me, too. The difficulties I face personally, and the difficulties I face in serving the church, mean that I need God's help. We all need help. We all need to pray.

To conclude I would like to quote three verses from the song "What a Friend we have in Jesus":

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.

Therefore, don't ask have you prayed about it, but ask what are you praying about it?

Bibliography Fisher, Fred L. *Prayer in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964.
Harrington, Wilfrid. *The Bible's Ways of Prayer*. Wilmington, DL: Michael Glazier, 1980.
McFadyen, John E. *The Prayers of the Bible*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1906. ^[3]

^[3] Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary* (1st ed.) (816–817). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

