

Live the New Life (4): Prayer

John 15:7 (New American Standard Bible)

If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Philippians 4:6-7 (New American Standard Bible)

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Introduction

Testimony: It's about my New Year's Eve prayer in 1975. I still vividly remember what I prayed to God that night. By then, I have been a Christian for two years. I was a senior in high school and was about to apply to my dream college. I was a promising student all through the high school years except the last semester which was very critical: I wasn't doing well in academic tests. For instance, my Korean SAT scores didn't turn out good. Unlike in America today where you can take two or three tests and choose the best scores, back then in Korea, it was a one-time deal. I wasn't doing well in school tests, either. Based on my two low scores, my guidance counselor (also my home room teacher) decided not to allow me to apply to the top college in Korea. I was crushed. The hope to get into my dream college was slipping away from my hands.

You see, that's when my loving mom came in. Knowing her son was struggling with the counselor, she stepped in to help. She went to the counselor and tried to reason with him that her son was well qualified to apply to the best college. If not, she argued, at least he deserved to give it a try. Well, he wouldn't budge. For about a week in December, a tug of war was going on between the two. In the meantime, I was frustrated. So, I decided to go to the Lord in prayer.

You see, I learned from the church that we Christians are supposed to pray to God in our hardships, right? Up until that point, although I prayed every day, like anybody else, I didn't truly understand what the prayer was all about. My prayers were lukewarm and nominal, not meaning much, and all the words that were cut and dried.

Anyway, that night, around 11 o'clock, I walked into the prayer room of my church. It was New Year's Eve. Normally, there would be a curfew after midnight, but that night was special, no curfew, so I didn't have to worry about rushing home before midnight.

So, I prayed to the Lord as follows: *"Lord, I am confused and frustrated. I need to hear your voice **right now**. All I care is to know what you want me to do. Just tell me which college: do you want me to apply to my dream college or the other college, the second best, that my counselor recommends? I really need to know tonight before I go home. If you don't tell me*

tonight, I won't believe in you anymore!" How foolish I was to give the Lord such an ultimatum! I will continue my story later in the sermon, because it is connected to Philippians 4:6-7.

This morning let's think about prayer. If God's Word is the food for our soul, prayer is the breathing to our soul. Our spirit needs prayer. Without prayer, our spirit will perish. If you think your spirit will be fine without prayer, you are gravely mistaken. Consider your body. It cannot survive, if you stop breathing even for 5 minutes. Neither can your spirit if you don't pray. Like our body would pant for the air, so do our spirits for prayer.

Consider all the people of God in the Bible. Let's learn from their examples. Did they pray? Yes, you better believe it. Every one of them prayed to God: Abraham did. So did Moses. So did King David. Isaiah did. So did Jeremiah. So did Daniel. All the prophets did. Even Jesus did. When they prayed, God revealed Himself and guided them in His will. He answers those who call upon His name (Psalm 99:6): "... *They called upon the Lord and He answered them.*"

Let's listen to what Jesus says about prayer. First, John 15:7. Let's read it together in one voice.

John 15:7 (New American Standard Bible)

"If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." In this verse, Jesus lays out two conditions to answered prayers. *Remain in Him and His words remain in us.*

Let me unpack the verse for you phrase by phrase.

If you remain in me: First, to have our prayers answered, we need to remain in Jesus. What's that mean? To remain in Jesus means to be in Him. Remember, my sermon points in the past three Sundays? The mark of a believer is to be in Christ. To be in Christ means that whatever happened to Christ also happened to you (remember the analogy of the bookmark?---Christ the book and we are the bookmark). When Christ was crucified, so were you. That means, your old self is dead when Christ was dead. When Christ resurrected, so did you as a new creation. Your old boss, that is you, is gone and the new master has come, that is, Christ. He reigns in you. As a new creation in Christ, you no longer live for yourself. Rather, you live for Christ to bring glory to His name. You no longer pursue your selfish desires. You rather serve Christ and others.

And My words remain in you: this is the second condition to answered prayers: let Christ's words remain in you. This means that when you pray, you must have His words to anchor your prayers. You must cling to the word of God and to the promise that God has given you.

Anchor your prayers to God's promises, and your prayer life will be more effective. What are Christ's words to prayer? They are like the nail on the wall to the clothes. Let's say you want to hang your coat on the wall, you need something to hang onto such as a nail. No sane person keeps trying to hang the coat on the flat surface. Same with your prayer. You pray to God with the backup of God's promise. For example, if I want peace, I can say, "Lord, give me your peace." That's a good prayer. However, if I say, "Lord, you made a promise that you will give me peace that the world cannot give nor take away from me (John 14:27). I claim that promise of Yours! Please keep Your promise. You are the author and giver of peace. So, Lord, please grant me that peace." Such prayer would have a much better chance to be answered, because God is faithful to keep His promises to us.

Ask **whatever** you wish, and it will be done for you: Wow! This is a powerful promise, isn't it? Whatever you wish. We should not get carried away, here! Some of us may want to ask for millions of dollars, right? Here's a reminder to you: If your prayer is based on selfish desires and motives, it will not be affirmatively answered. "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

Get this, instead. What Christ truly means here is this: *God can do anything beyond your comprehension.* Our Father in Heaven indeed does incredible things for His children within His will. Whatever He does for us must be in sync with His will. Within that frame, Christ wants us to expect and pray for great things in our prayers: ask for *whatever* we wish.

Here's one good example. During the time of Judges (1,500 B.C. – 1,000 B.C.), after Exodus and before King Saul, Israel was oppressed by the Midianites. So, people cried out to the Lord and God commanded Gideon to save Israel from the hand of Midian. So, he gathered the Israelites in the battlefield. Before he went to the battle, though, Gideon wanted to make sure he was doing the right thing. So, he prayed to God, "If You are going to save Israel through me, as You have spoken, ³⁷ behold, I am putting a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will save Israel through me, as You have spoken." ³⁸ And it was so. When he got up early the next morning and wrung out the fleece, he wrung the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Your anger burn against me, so that I may speak only one more time; please let me put You to the test only one more time with the fleece: let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground." ⁴⁰ And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground" (Judges 6:36-40).

When we seek God's glory and do what He is pleased with, and when we cling to His promise in the Word, we can ask whatever we wish, and it will be answered.

Let's go to the second verse. Once again, let's read it together in one voice.

Philippians 4:6-7 (New American Standard Bible)

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Many of us are familiar with this verse. This is my favorite verse as well.

Do not be anxious about anything: It literally means to stop worrying. Put a stop to your worries as soon as they arise in your heart. Also, remember this truth: worries won't change anything. These are the things, that worries do to us; They keep us awake at night; they block our prayers from reaching God's throne room. They also choke up our prayers. So, stop worrying. They are the enemy of prayers. They are like weeds in the garden. Pluck them out as soon as they arise in your heart.

But in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving: God's solution to our worries is prayer! You knew that, didn't you? Don't miss the key word here, though: thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a key to the answered prayers. Always wrap your prayers with thanksgiving to God. Many of us don't offer thanks to God in prayers and wonder why He doesn't answer our prayers. Worse, some of us even bring complaint and grumbling instead.

From now on, be sure to wrap up your prayers with thanksgiving and see how your prayers are answered. E.g., Imagine a child asking for her favorite candy from her mother. She wouldn't start with grumbling saying, "I don't like this house. I don't like school. I don't like this family." She will have a far better chance to get the candy if she starts with gratitude. "Mom, you're great. I love my family. Thanks for taking good care of me. May I have a candy, please?" It works the same way with our heavenly Father. Wrap up your prayers with thanksgiving.

Pleading: in your pleading, be specific. Too many a time, we make 'non-specific' prayers. Our requests are too general. Make them specific. Here's an example. Instead of saying, "Lord, help me today," how about saying, "Lord, I am overwhelmed with this project. Please give me clarity and guidance in my decision." Here's another example of non-specific prayer: *Lord, give me good health.* Well, a lot of people who don't say a prayer enjoy excellent health as well. So, here's my advice for you. When you pray, whatever you pray for, be very 'specific' so that once it is answered you cannot deny that it is from the Lord and so that you give a proper credit to the Lord. E.g., Blind men and lepers always asked for a specific healing from Jesus: "I want to see" or "I want to be cleansed."

The Peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus: Oh, I have tasted such Christ's peace once. That deep calmness in my spirit. Here's how it happened. E.g., The second half of my story "New Year's Eve Prayer." Remember I gave God a foolish ultimatum that night? Well, the two hours passed and nothing happened. I didn't hear anything from God saying either way. So, I said to God, "All right, then. This is it. I quit!" I went home and had a midnight snack. While I was eating, the Holy Spirit in me spoke to me,

like a mother coaxing her son, “My poor child, everything is going to be all right.” Then, right there and then, for the first time in my life, I had a peace overflowing in my heart that surpasses all understanding. I didn’t care any more about which college I go to. My prayer changed from, “Lord, I want to go to the top college” to “Whichever college I go to, I will serve You.” That peace lasted for the next two weeks until the entrance exam.

The end result? Thanks to my mom’s persistence, my counselor reluctantly agreed to let me apply to my dream college. Two weeks later, I passed the entrance exam and got accepted! Praise God! Folks, that’s not the end of the story. After being admitted, I visited my counselor to thank him for giving me a chance. I saw him working at his desk, as I entered his office. As soon as he saw me, he stood up and literally ran up to me. He was ecstatic! He grabbed my hands and said, “Congratulations! Kyewoon, you saved my face! Thanks a million!” Later, I discovered that out of 54 students in my home room who all applied to different colleges, I was the only one who got into **any** college. The others all failed. Praise God who does incredible things beyond our imaginations!

Action Point:

Start your own prayer journal today. Make three columns: first column is for the date when you start your prayer. Second column is for description of the prayer: what’s your prayer about and what you ask for. The third column is for the date when your prayer is answered. E.g., During my first year in college, I kept my prayer journal for six months. 96 entries were all answered in three different ways (Yes, No, and Wait). That convinced me that the Lord answers my prayers, but in accordance with His will and His time. Prayer is real.

Don’t be just skeptical about prayer. Never assume that prayer won’t work. God wants you to discover the power of prayer by yourself by experimenting with it.

Don’t expect that God will always answer your requests immediately. Sometimes He does. But, other times, He takes time. God answers our prayers in His time.

Don’t assume that God will always say yes to every request. Sometimes He says no, like any other loving parent, especially when He knows it’s not time yet, or not best for your well-being. Be patient and trust in God’s timing.

Don’t assume that God will say ‘No’ all the time, either. He will surprise you with answers beyond your imagination.

One thing is for sure: once you experience the power of prayers firsthand, you will never depart from it. We cannot live without prayer.

Start praying today. Amen.