



Prayer for all physical and spiritual needs

James 4:1-3, Luke 11:11-13

Proper in prayer

Our needs, especially our physical needs, usually receive the most attention in our prayers. Although these needs are not first in order, yet they have a proper place in the prayer of the believer. It is good that we receive instruction from the order which our Lord has taught us in the perfect prayer. He begins with the praise of God. But, the bodily needs also get their turn. They are in a later petition, but it is a petition which comes *before* the petition dealing with spiritual matters! Our physical and material needs are important. We are dependent creatures and must therefore look to Another for all the things we need. A person may slave all his life and still not have the necessities. He may take very good care of himself and still not be able to ward off illness. The author of Psalm 81 puts it beautifully: "*Thou openest thy hand and satisfiest the desire of every living thing*" (Psalm 145:16). There is nothing to it! All He has to do is to open His hand and all the needs of His creatures are satisfied.

When we come to our God in prayer we must also come in the realization that He alone is able to satisfy every need. We may not look elsewhere. Israel did this time and again and suffered as a result. We are to come to the God Who is the Owner and Distributor of all things. We are to come to this God in faith — in that kind of faith which expects everything from Him and will give Him the praise for all that is received.

We are also to realize that prayer is proper. Its propriety has been questioned again and again. If he knows everything, including our needs, why must we still ask? Because He wants us to!

A reason for unanswered prayer

Although we have been taught in so many places in Scripture that God takes care of His people and will satisfy every need, this is not always the experience of the believer. James makes a point of this. This fact makes the book of James very practical. He lays his finger on what is often the sore spot in the life of believers. In the first place, he says, there are all manner of ills in their fellowship. They have fightings and wars among themselves. This is not the picture of the true and living church of Christ. In that church and among its members there ought to be harmony. Each one is seemingly seeking his own welfare at the expense of his fellow-believer. James uses very strong language to describe the kind of a life they are living. They do not have the things which are most important because they don't ask for them. If it is that easy — only ask for these things — then why don't they do it?

They do ask, but even then they do not receive. Had it not been promised them that whatsoever they would ask they would obtain? Why, when these people to whom the Apostle is writing ask do they not receive? Listen to the reason he gives. It is not because God does not hear the petitions of His people!

Improper petitions

They ask, but they ask "amiss!" That's the trouble. There is a proper and an improper way of asking. There are many people who have asked for a long time for certain things and have never obtained them. Why? Often they asked amiss. God has not only counseled us to ask, but also how to ask. We are to ask in faith. We are to ask humbly. We are to ask in confidence. These things are

made known to us on many pages of Scripture. We are to be instructed thereby. We must ask for the right purpose. What are you going to do with that for which you ask when you receive it? Will you use it to glorify the Giver? The people to whom James is writing planned to use that for which they asked for their own pleasures. God does not give for this purpose. Although He has given us all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17), this does not mean to use them for the pleasures of this world. He will not give His good gifts for wrong purposes.

Proper petitions

The question often arises: What may we pray for? May we pray for anything that comes to mind? May we pray for the most insignificant things? There are certain indications in Scripture which could lead us to draw this conclusion. We are to pray without ceasing. We are always to give thanks. Does this mean that we are also always to ask? It seems to me that the answer to this question is very simple. We may ask for everything that He has promised us! Does this limit the scope of our prayers? By no means. The promises of God are more than anyone is able to count. The promises of God include all things necessary for both body and soul. When we ask for those things which have been promised, we can indeed pray confidently. Then we can also be thankful when we receive them. We must realize that we are to pray for our *needs*. Many are not satisfied when needs are supplied. They want more. That "more" has not been promised. This important point is also taught in the Heidelberg Catechism in L.D. 45, Q. 117.

A lesson learned

Sometimes our needs seem to be urgent. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 12. He was given a thorn in the flesh. Whatever this may have been, it seemed to hinder him in the work which he was called to do. Three times, he says, I prayed that it might be taken away. What was the answer? The thorn will not be taken away, but he will be given sufficient grace to bear its pain! What an answer! How does Paul respond? *"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."* That is the language of faith. This is the same man who can say in Philippians 4:11: *"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content."* Whether there is a thorn in his flesh or whether he is enjoying all the good things, as men would count them good, from the hand of his Lord, he is content. He has *learned* that! This is not our natural reaction. Martyrs have been able to go singing to the stake. The terminally ill can still rejoice!

Neglected priorities

A man's spiritual needs are not as easily recognized as the physical needs for food, clothing and shelter. Yet, who would deny that a man also has spiritual needs? What are they? How can we tell if the spiritual needs have been met or whether the needs still exist? Many, seemingly, cannot tell. Many think that spiritually all is well while they are really perishing. Jesus often cites the example of the Pharisees to make this clear to us. They thought that all was well with them while they were walking on the edge of the precipice.

Our spiritual needs are often recognized in our prayers only in a very perfunctory way when we ask God to forgive us our sins. In the perfect prayer Jesus also taught us to pray that we might not be led into temptation. That petition is usually the farthest from our minds. It would not do to skip the request for the forgiveness of sin because we would then be dealing only with the material things and that just doesn't seem right. We often do skip the petition not to be led into temptation because we intend to use the things for which we have asked to enter the field where temptation lurks.

The spiritual need of man is great. It is a need which he must feel and which can be supplied only by the God to whom he prays. Man's need is desperate. In many places spiritual life is no longer nurtured in the places where that nurture is supposed to be given. Many churches have forsaken the Scriptures and are *"giving stones for bread."* The trouble is that people love to have it so! Accordingly they are never admonished and their sin is never unmasked. The result is spiritual starvation and death.

The church of Christ must be reawakened. This will only occur when men again realize their own deep spiritual need and will not be satisfied with anything but the true word of life! Only in this way will reformation come.

Reformation by the Holy Spirit

Jesus spoke to the people of His day about these things when He taught them to pray. He used the example of a father's dealing with his children. A father will not give his children things which cannot profit them but will be harmful. When they ask for bread they will get it. When they ask for fish they will get it. When they ask for an egg they will get it. If a father does not give his children the things they need for their livelihood but gives them the opposite so that they will perish, such a man is not worthy of being a father. His children will have to be taken from him because their lives are endangered. *"If you, who are basically evil, know how to give good gifts to other children, how much more will your heavenly Father give **good things**"* as in Matthew 7:11? — No, here we read *"how much more shall your heavenly Father give the **Holy Spirit** to them that ask Him?"* But, who asks for the Holy Spirit? Very few. That is not the *felt need*. We will ask for a *blessing* at times. What does such a blessing contain? What does it mean? Do you get a blessing out of the preaching of the word? Do you see God's blessings in your life? This blessing comes from His hand, indeed, but He supplies these blessings to us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's indwelling is our greatest spiritual need. Only if the Holy Spirit dwells within will the work of Jesus Christ for our redemption be of any value for us.

We do not learn our spiritual need out of our own experience; we learn it from the word of God. Our prayers must be guided by that word. Only then will we rightly know our own needs. Only then will we know where to go with these needs. Only then will we know how to approach God with all our needs. He will give his Holy Spirit to those who ask. That is our basic need. When we have the Spirit of God we have everything. Then we will be content. Then can we rejoice even in tribulation.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Do you think many of our prayers follow the pattern which Christ has given us in the Lord's Prayer? Do we consider the hallowing of His name, the coming of His kingdom and the doing of His will the most important?
2. Do we often ask amiss? How?
3. Our daily bread and water are promised us. Are we satisfied when we receive these things? May we pray for more? How does the command not to covet fit into our prayer life?
4. Are many people dissatisfied with their churches because they receive no spiritual food as much as they are dissatisfied for other reasons?
5. Do you think Pentecost would mean more to us if we really felt our spiritual needs?