

LEARNING TO PRAY

The Initiative for Prayer

PRIMARY TEXTS: John 15:16; Psalm 50:15; Daniel 9:14

INTRODUCTION: **We have observed throughout our study that our praying puts us into partnership with God.** While the Bible repeatedly affirms this truth, the principal may be difficult to understand. **John MacArthur** admits candidly:

“I never will fully understand the relationship between God and man. I don’t understand how God can work together with man on anything. For example, how God can write the Bible using men as instruments; how God can become a man and still be God at the same time; how I can be saved by my own choice and yet be chosen before the foundation of the world by God’s sovereign will; how God can do sovereign work while allowing my prayers to play a part. But it is not necessary, let alone possible, for me to understand these things.”¹

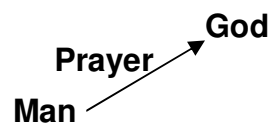
There is probably little that we can do to understand why God created such a partnership in the first place, but we can do more in seeing how the partnership should operate. Therefore, in order to make such an examination, let me ask, “Who initiates prayer?”

I. WHO INITIATES PRAYER?

If prayer is a partnership between man and God, then obviously our choices are either man or God.

A. Does man initiate prayer?

I would think that a common answer to this question would be “yes.” Prayer is often viewed as a straight line that ascends from man to God.



There is nothing essentially wrong with that pictorial representation. It depicts man as asking and God as receiving the petition. But I would suggest that the picture is incomplete, representing only a part of the prayer process.

Consider instead:

B. God as the initiator of prayer

Who initiated the events below

Creation

Gen. 1:1-3 ¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

John 1:1-3 ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

Abrahamic Covenant

Gen. 12:1-3 ¹ Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. ² I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Davidic Covenant

2 Sam. 7:4-17 ⁴ But it happened that night that the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying, ⁵ "Go and tell My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: "Would you build a house for Me to dwell in? ⁶ For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle. ⁷ Wherever I have moved about with all the children of Israel, have I ever spoken a word to anyone from the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'" ⁸ Now therefore, thus shall you say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "I took you from the sheepfold, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel. ⁹ And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and have made you a great name, like the name of the great men who are on the earth. ¹⁰ Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously, ¹¹ since the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused you to rest from all your enemies. Also the LORD tells you that He will make you a house. ¹² "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set

up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. ¹⁵ But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took *it* from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.””” ¹⁷ According to all these words and according to all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David.

Redemption

Eph. 1:3-14 ³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵ having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace ⁸ which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, ⁹ having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, ¹⁰ that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. ¹¹ In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, ¹² that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. ¹³ In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

It is no idle claim that God makes in Revelation 1:8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega, *the Beginning and the End*,” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John 15:16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

The truth that **God is the initiator** is here applied to prayer. Ralph A. Herring wrote a book entitled The Cycle of Prayer in which he said:

“The divine initiative in the realm of prayer is strikingly stated in **John 15:16**. Here emphasis falls upon God’s choice or ‘election,’ another term by which theologians describe this same doctrine.” Again Dr. Herring offers a helpful rendition, “It was not you (who) chose me (as you might think), but I (who in my sovereign grace) chose you, and I placed you (in such circumstances) that you might go (i.e., be at ease, feeling free to go and come) and bear fruit and that your fruit might abide (all with the further purpose) that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give it you.”

“In this passage we see that prayer forms both climax and conclusion to one of the strongest statements on election to be found in the Bible. God’s sovereign choice, therefore, does not impair or paralyze man’s initiative. Rather it honors that initiative as the quality in man which most strikingly marks him as being created in God’s likeness. Prayer is made up of interplay between the divine will and the human, and for that reason it faithfully shows how man’s will becomes freed and fulfilled in God’s. Man gains the mastery for which he was originally created through the exercise of prayer, and the highest inspiration for him to gain this mastery is God himself.”

S.D. Gordon offers an analogy which may help us to understand that God is the initiator of prayer.

“We seem to learn best about God by analogies. The analogy never brings all there is to be learned. Yet it seems to be the nearest we can get. From what we know of ourselves we come to know Him.

Will you notice how men give? Among those who give to benevolent enterprises there are three sorts of givers, with variations in each.

There is the man who gives because he is influenced by others. If the right man or committee of men call, and deftly present their pleas, playing skillfully upon what may appeal to him; his position; his egotism; the possible advantage to accrue; what men whom he wants to be classed with are doing, and so on through the wide range that such men are familiar with; if they persist, by and by he gives. At first he seems reluctant, but finally gives with more or less grace. That is one sort of giver.

There is a second sort: the man of truly benevolent heart who is desirous of giving that he may be of help to other men. He listens attentively when pleas come to him, and waits only long enough to satisfy himself of the worth of the cause, and the proper sort of amount to give, and then gives.

There is a third sort, the rarest sort. **This third man** a stage farther on, who **takes the initiative**. He looks about him, makes inquiries, and thinks over the great need in every direction of his fellow men. He decides where his money may best be used to help; and then he offers to give. But his gift may be abused by some who would get his money if they could, and use it injudiciously, or otherwise than he intends. So he makes certain conditions which must be met, the purpose of which is to establish sympathetic relations in some particular with those whom he would help. An Englishman's heart is strongly moved to get the story of Jesus to the inland millions of Chinese. He requests the China-Inland Mission to control the expenditure of almost a million dollars of his money in such a way as best to secure the object in his heart. An American gives a large sum to the Young Men's Christian Association of his home city to be expended as directed. His thought is not to build up this particular organization, but to benefit large numbers of the young men of his town who will meet certain conditions which he thinks to be for their good. He has learned to trust this organization, and so it becomes his trustee.

Another man feels that if the people of New York City can be given good reading they can thereby best be helped in life. And so he volunteers money for a number of libraries throughout that city. And thousands who yearn to increase their knowledge come into sympathy with him in that one point through his gift. In all such cases the giver's thought is to accomplish certain results in those whose purpose in certain directions is sympathetic with his own.

Any human illustration of God must seem crude. Yet of these three sorts of givers there is one and only one that begins to suggest how God gives. It may seem like a very sweeping statement to make, yet I am more and more disposed to believe it true that most persons have unthinkingly thought of God's answering prayer as the first of these three men give. Many others have had in mind some such thought as the second suggests. Yet to state the case even thus definitely is to make it plain that neither of these ways in any

manner illustrates God's giving. The third comes the nearest to picturing the God who hears and answers prayer.

Our God has a great heart yearning after His poor prodigal world, and after each one in it. He longs to have the effects of sin removed, and the original image restored. He takes the initiative. Yet everything that is done for man must of necessity be through man's will; by his free and glad consent. The obstacles in the way are not numberless nor insurmountable, but they are many and they are stubborn. There is a keen, cunning pretender-prince who is a past-master in the fine art of handling men. There are wills warped and weakened; consciences blurred; minds the opposite of keen, sensibilities whose edge has been dulled beyond ordinary hope of being ever made keen again. Sin has not only stained the life, but warped the judgment, sapped the will, and blurred the mental vision. And God has a hard time just because every change must of necessity be through that sapped and warped will.

Yet the difficulty though great is never complex but very simple. And so the statement of His purpose is ever exquisitely simple. Listen again: "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee and shew thee great things and difficult which thou knowest not." If a man calls he has already turned his face towards God. His will has acted and acted doubly; away from the opposite, and towards God, a simple step but a tremendous one. The calling is the point of sympathetic contact with God where their purposes become the same. The caller is beset by difficulties and longs for freedom. The God who speaks to him saw the difficulties long ago and eagerly longed to remove them. Now they have come to agreement. And through this willing will God eagerly works out His purpose.²

Since God rather than man is the initiator of prayer, it leads us to ask, "How does He initiate prayer?"

II. HOW DOES GOD INITIATE PRAYER?

There are many ways that God initiates prayer, more than we could examine in a single sermon. I merely want to give two ways which He often uses. These two ways also often intersect – in other words, God uses them together to initiate prayer.

A. God uses needs to initiate prayer.

B. We often joke about praying only in time of trouble, but we all know that trouble brings us to our knees and causes us to pray. This is not a modern phenomenon.

Listen to the testimonies of the Psalms:

Ps. 20:1 May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble; May the name of the God of Jacob defend you;

Ps. 22:11 Be not far from Me, For trouble *is* near; For *there is* none to help.

Ps. 77:2 In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; My hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing; My soul refused to be comforted.

Ps. 81:7 You called in trouble, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah

Ps. 86:7 In the day of my trouble I will call upon You, For You will answer me.

Ps. 143:11 Revive me, O LORD, for Your name's sake! For Your righteousness' sake bring my soul out of trouble.

Calling out to God during the time of trouble is certainly nothing new. Nor is such a practice bad. Psalm 50:15 encourages it.

“Sooner or later trouble overtakes us all.” We have been warned in the Scripture of this fact. We should not be surprised or distressed when the Scripture proves again to be true. **Troubles render a significant service in the providence of God – they bring us to Him in prayer.** They articulate the inadequacy which previously we had only vaguely felt. The divine initiative, or God's call, is more frequently communicated to man in his awareness of need than through any other medium.”

“**Jesus... chooses the point of need as His most likely meeting place with man.**” It is vital “that we grasp the full significance of need in God's great purpose. He wants us to interpret our need in terms of its final resolution in our need of Him... Let us learn,...then,... to glory in adversity, knowing that God's power is made perfect in our weakness!”³

C. God uses His Word to initiate prayer.

1. What prompted Daniel to pray?

Dan. 9:1-4 ¹ In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— ² in the

first year of his reign **I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.** ³ Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. ⁴ And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, “O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments,

If prayer is partnership with God, then **reading God’s Word will prompt us to pray because it shows us what God desires.** Daniel read from Jeremiah what God wanted to do so he became God’s partner to intercede.

2. What did Daniel ask God to do?

Dan. 9:19 O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name.”

Daniel did not ask God to add to God’s program or to alter it in some way. **He asked God to act and not delay** – to do exactly what God revealed He purposed to do as Daniel read in His Word.

In commenting on Psalm 119, **John MacArthur** said,

“The Psalmist said, ‘Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counselors’ (v. 24). In other words, “When I read Your Word (testimonies), they become the counselor which instructs my mind.” Such instruction is utterly necessary. Verses 99-100 says, “I have more understanding than all my teachers; for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Thy precepts.” The Psalmist is simply saying, “If I want to get in on Your plans and understand Your precepts, I have to commit myself to Your Word.” **In prayer, it isn’t that I’m praying for God to change what He’s going to do; it’s that I am identifying myself with His plans.** Prayer and the Word are inseparably linked together, for I cannot pray intelligently about His plans unless I understand what His Word says.” ⁴

D. God often uses a combination of our needs and His Word to initiate prayer.

We can pray what God wants us to pray when we pray His Word. **Jack Taylor calls praying from God's vantage point praying from the ground of redemption.** Hear one of his testimonies concerning such prayer.

"I am praying at this moment for a very dear loved one who has a broken heart. Last night she wept and sobbed and sobbed and wept until the only thing I could do was weep with her. I went to my room to pray for her with great inward pain. I asked the Father how He wanted me to pray. I saw it! If I chose to pray from the ground of conditions as I saw them, I would weep with her in hopelessness. Most prayer would mean more despair. I must pray for her from the ground of redemption. She is God's child! He loves her! Christ has died for her and lives in her. He prayed for her and still prays for her. One of the prayers that he has prayed for her is that His joy might be fulfilled in her. God will answer that prayer! The psalmist said, "Weeping endures for the night but joy comes in the morning." From this ground I can even thank God for the heartache and heartbreak. Character is being developed. Integrity is being strengthened. Enlargement through distress is coming to pass. Again from this point of view I remember that the psalmist said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes. I know...that thou in faithfulness have afflicted me. This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me." (Ps. 119:50, 71, 75)

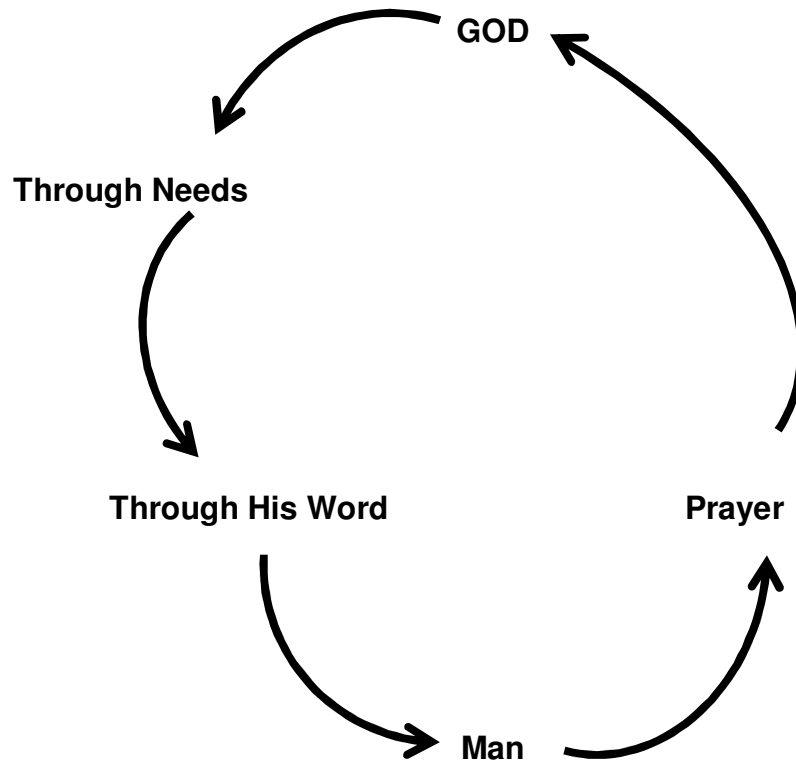
After praying in this manner and at this level, my heart, still heavy in human sympathy, has soared to the heavenlies. I have prayed from the ground of redemption!

Praying from the ground of redemption gives us heaven's point of view and we can then pray with authority toward changes in the situations of earth. We pray from the fresh point of view of the will of God."⁵

If we not only habitually read the Word of God but also memorize it, hide it in our hearts, then the promptings of God through needs and through the Bible can intersect more often.

However, if we spend little time in the Bible and have precious little of it stored in our minds and hearts, we may be prompted by need to pray often; but we will not know what to pray.

Conclusion: Below is a diagram representing how prayer is initiated and received. Add appropriate words to label and explain your work.



1. An Uncompromising Life, p. 77
2. Quiet Talks on Prayer, pp. 50-53
3. Ralph A. Herring, The Cycle of Prayer
4. An Uncompromising Life, pp. 77-78
5. Jack Taylor, Prayer: Life's Limitless Reach, pp. 142-143