

# Notes on "Prayer that works"

## R H Johnston

### What is the reality for us concerning prayer?

- - I mean the kind of prayer where we are asking God to do something specific, not adoration, praise or confession of failure.
- - do we find it difficult, don't want to do it, feel guilty about our failure?

### Why? - when we happily do other things which are difficult

- - we do everything we inwardly believe is important or essential.
- - we make time for what we think is worth doing.
- - but for most Christians prayer is a reluctant burden

### What does this tell us about our experience of prayer?

- - most of the time, prayer - as we know it - doesn't work.
- - doesn't "work" often enough to make the effort worthwhile.
- - so the results don't justify the effort required.
- - no point doing something which doesn't work!

### But biblically

- - prayer a privilege, not burdensome.
- - Jesus offers 100% success: "*if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name*" (John 16:23; Matthew 18:19; &c. compare also James 5:16)
- - Does God give us, individually or corporately, everything we ask for?

### If not everything, perhaps we need a new beginning

- - we must be doing something wrong, or something is missing.
- - there must be a better way, for Jesus is not a liar.

### Need to acknowledge depth of failure

- - As with all our problems, must start by acknowledging the full extent of our failure. It is no good trying to struggle on, trying to summon our own powers, trying to overcome our reluctance to pray, and going on repeating a way of working that in our hearts we don't have the confidence that it will work.

- - Jesus said "*All things are possible to him who **believes***". Until we overcome the "*believing*" problem, we can make no progress.

## Prayer needs

- - need to be honest - acknowledge extent of our true weakness - we do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26).
- - Echo the disciples' request "*teach us to pray*".
- - Empower us to pray.
- - Deliver us from the things which prevent us from praying, which destroy our faith.

## Jesus' and the disciples' experience of prayer

### Jesus prayed a great deal

- - gospels suggest real prayer was the basis of His ministry - the meaning of "*abiding*" (John 15:1-11) revealed to us in Him.
- - little detail given because the disciples did not understand what he was doing when He prayed !
- - in the garden is a very limited account which records only the beginning of his praying on each of three occasions (Matthew 26:36-46) - he takes a long time to deal with each one of the issues in succession - very focussed - clear conclusions - reaching a full conviction that enabled him, with joy (Hebrews 12:2), to face the trial, purging and crucifixion, and the last phase seems to have included a cry to be raised from death (Hebrews 5:7, Luke 22:44)
- - the longest record of Jesus praying is in John 17, which took place before the prayer in the garden, and this prayer appears to be the declarative prayer, the conclusion prayer that is prayed when the will of God is known (Mark 11:20-25 - see later). Jesus had probably already discussed the issues involved with God in private.

### The experience of the disciples before Jesus died

- - they asked Jesus to teach them to pray - will consider this later
- - but, no record in the gospels of them praying as Jesus/Christian prays
- - confirmation: at the last supper Jesus says (John 16:24) "*Hitherto you have asked **nothing** in my name; ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*"
- - so, no evidence that they were really able to do so! - they lacked the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:26), revealed as the helpful lawyer (advocate)

who teaches all things (John 14:26) - including especially how and what to pray

- - they fell asleep in the garden when Jesus had commanded them to pray they might "*not enter into temptation*" - echoes an element of the "Lord's Prayer" (see below) - they needed to get prepared so they'd know how to face or avoid the temptations to come.

### **Disciples after the resurrection and receiving the Spirit in John 20:22**

- - Jesus "breathed" His Spirit "into" the disciples in John 20:22 on the day of the resurrection (compare 1 Peter 1:3), and thereby gave them authority characteristic of the prophet (John 20:23)
- - result - Acts 1 - they are praying now - clear guidance - clear conclusions - like Jesus did! Prayer becomes a core element of Christian activity (Acts 2:42; 6:4 &c)

### **Who taught us to pray?**

- - men or God? - telling new Christians to "pray every day" may create bad habits - "saying prayers" not the same as praying
- - confidence in "power of prayer", or in God? "prayer" does not "change things" Only God changes things. Prayer is no use in itself, though it can be psychologically comforting, but praying of this sort is no defence against man's greatest fear, death. That is how Gentiles (false religions) pray - they think they will be heard for their much speaking (Matthew 6:7).

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### **Jesus' teaching on prayer**

#### **John 15:1-17**

- - the need for ongoing "abiding" in Jesus, just as Jesus was abiding in the Father, in order to be fruitful in prayer - abiding requires obedience to Jesus' commandments (not the Law, but what He is telling us individually) & especially loving the brethren - only thus are we Jesus friends - this yields fruit - primarily here the fruit of asking in prayer - leads to joy which can cope with everything (Jesus for the joy before Him endured the cross and all that entailed (Hebrews 12:2)) - so powerfully strengthening.
- - all this must be real experience not "theory", and a present ongoing reality, not a reliance on a "new birth" experience long ago.
- - Matthew 28:20 and the repetition of these teachings and promises in 1 John show these commands apply to all Christians not just the 12.

#### **Matthew 6:5-6**

- - prayer but never be an act but real - hypocrite is Greek for an actor, someone pretending to be someone else.
- - easy to put on a show for other people with any spiritual activity and try to impress them. Pretence to ourselves is possible in private but usually we get fed up with that, and are more inclined to "get real" - and get results

### Matthew 6:7-8

- - don't heap up "*empty phrases*" like Gentiles. Let your words before God be few (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Compare Pharisee's empty phrases and Publican's realities (Luke 18:9-14).
- - God already knows what you need - but maybe you don't! - if God knows our need, this suggests real praying is not presenting our catalogue of needs.
- - If God knows what we need before we ask him, is it not wisest to discover from Him what that is before we ask? (See relationship of prayer & prophecy below.) Our judgement of our needs is confused and twisted by our desires. And we may not realise we have a need that God wants to make us aware of so He may grant it.
- - otherwise, if we rely on our own insight (contrast Proverbs 3:5-6), we may ask amiss to spend on our passions - and not receive (James 4:3).
- - as with parents and their children, there are things God wants us to ask for, things He will grant fairly neutrally if the request seems to be deep, and things He will not give at all. Parents take note too, of the depth of a child's request before considering whether to grant it, and, with older children, how well they argue their case.
- - We do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26) - so need the benefit of a lawyer to create and present our case in God's court. Holy Spirit revealed as *parakletos* in John 14-16 = one brought alongside to help - this was the legal term for lawyer.
- - Warning: If we persist in praying for what we want, we may get what we want, but not to our benefit (Psalm 106:15 - "*he gave their request, but sent leanness into their soul*") - God has to do this, though unwillingly, so that we can be loosed from our idolatry, our obsession with the thing in question - human parents sometimes have to work like this - e.g. the prodigal's father

### Matthew 6:9-15

- - so-called "Lord's Prayer" - not a "set prayer" to be endlessly repeated but a set of headings of issues to be resolved - done properly, it provides a good basis for getting oneself eventually into the right state to then begin real praying. (This is more obviously revealed in Luke 11:1-13, where the

character of real petitionary prayer starts at v5 with the parable of the friend at midnight - see below)

- - Recognise Who God is - Father in heaven - no over-familiarity but a God and mighty King to be feared (Malachi 1:6) - modern monarchy gives wrong idea
- - Hallowed by thy name - God is separate from everything else - his name, or authority, is incomparable - above every other name (Ephesians 1:21) - which is why He can promise to provide everything we ask.
- - Thy Kingdom come - must firstly rule in me if I am to receive in prayer - keep Jesus' commandments (John 15)
- - Give us this day our daily bread - recognise that our needs are only supplied on a daily, "as needed", basis
- - Forgive us our debts as we forgive others - a hard one this - we must never bear grudges or unforgiveness in our hearts - we must be inwardly forgiving even when this cannot be expressed to others because they are in no position to receive it. Repeatedly in Jesus' teaching on prayer, prayer success is linked to forgiveness. Note especially, that when praying with other people any failure of this sort in our relationship with them will certainly prevent our corporate prayer being heard.
- - Lead us not into temptation - need, through prayer, to recognise where temptation is likely to arise so that we can avoid it or take steps to minimise risks - 1 Corinthians 10:13 emphasises the importance of knowing there is a means of escape from temptation - through prayer God prepares us so we are aware of the ways of escape - this insight was what Peter lacked when he denied Jesus.
- - Deliver us from evil - can come in many forms - need protection from the unexpected - again the purpose of this preparation stage is to develop our defences - prayer involves risk of deception, so preparation is vital in this area.
- - v14-15 re-emphasise the need for forgiveness as a preparation for prayer (v16-18 deal with fasting - beyond the scope of this study - see supplementary reading)
- - with these attitude preparations completed we are then in a state to start to pray - we have cleared the lines of communication, as it were.

### **Luke 18:1-8 The Unjust Judge**

- - this parable is a contrast not a parallel
- - unjust judge willing to delay in principle - that way, he gets more fees/bribes
- - woman must have a case to argue - repetition will be instantly dismissed by the judge
- - woman's attitude is one of focussed intensity

- - God not willing to delay but deals speedily (Luke 18:8) - this is the key point
- - Translations of Luke 18:7 misinterpret, by not translating to suit entire context. Should read "*And God will by no means (thus - like that judge) make vindication of his elect, who cry to him (whether) by day or night, and (will by no means) be prepared (like that judge) to delay over (vindicating) them.*" (It is not easily translated because the significance of "by no means" is difficult to make sense of) - God will answer immediately any time - not restricted to "court hours"!
- - God commands us not to delay delivering others if it is in our power (Proverbs 3:27-28) - so will He delay? Certainly not.
- - conclusion is that prayer should not involve repetition of the same prayers over long periods, but getting a quick vindication in response to a "cry" - the cry must be real and from the heart, and be of a depth that will not be willing to be fobbed off. (There are circumstances where something does need praying for over a period of time, but this is like the phases of a building project, and different work and objectives apply to each stage. Each stage in prayer is a single cry, and often God commands us to rest from praying about the issue between the phases, so revealing their distinctness. Repeating a prayer for something you've have already received with faith will undermine your faith. Prayers of intercession for other people, where their cooperation is involved in the fulfilment, often involves delayed delivery. Patience is required, and in such circumstances it can be appropriate to remind God of what he has already granted in prayer but has not yet been delivered (compare Isaiah 62:1). These issues are beyond the scope of this present study.)
- - this understanding is confirmed by Luke 11:1-13.

### **Luke 11:1-13 - The friend at midnight**

- - bread needed now - in this case inconveniently at night (compare Luke 18:8) - tomorrow is too late
- - supplicant won't "go away" - importunity
- - he is focussed & specific - three loaves
- - God revealed as more willing than the friend - especially to give Holy Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13). All Christian prayer must be in the spirit (John 4:24; Ephesians 6:18)
- - in the Old Testament is it the desperate with specific problems who get answers - e.g. Hannah (1 Samuel 1), Hezekiah (2 Kings 19), Jonah in the whale (Jonah 2)

### **Mark 11:20-25 (compare Matthew 21:21-22)**

- - text of Mark 11:22-24 should read: "*And Jesus answered them "Have God's faith. Truly I say to you whoever says to this mountain 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he is saying is happening, it shall be to him. Therefore I tell you whatever you are asking in prayer be believing that you have been receiving and you will".*
- - amazingly, this promise works for all - not just Christians - if they have "God's faith"
- - again it is a highly specific - focussed - command/ request
- - when praying already have the faith that you've got it already, before you ask - don't act beyond your faith (to act beyond our faith is sin (compare Romans 14:23)). Better to have declared "mustard seed" faith for something small, than pretend to go for something big/difficult without faith. Effective prayer must start with praying for small things which have no difficulty in "believing for". It is like crossing a bridge: you must have the faith that it will not fall down before you cross it - if you think a rickety bridge won't bear your weight, you don't have the faith that it will stand up, and you will not cross it.
- - modern materialist, scientific-law-based thinking is a huge barrier to our faith - need to recognise that "scientific laws" are at best only our way of expressing what God usually does. He can do differently, and often does so in answer to faith.
- - must be completely doubt free in the heart (cannot receive anything from God otherwise: James 1:3-8)
- - Compare: "*The effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous man has great power in its effects.*" (James 5:16)
- - prayer effectiveness is again linked to issues of forgiveness (v25)

### **Matthew 18:19-20**

- - Principle of two or three being agreed about what they ask
- - much misunderstood - the agreement must be spiritual - i.e. that God revealed it to the two or three independently
- - a very powerful feature in praying with other people - requires stillness - and for each person to openly and honestly reveal what they have faith for in their heart. Implies need to focus on one prayer item at a time - no "world tours".

### **In Jesus' Name (John 15:16; 16:23-24 &c.)**

- - this is to use Jesus' authority - very powerful - need to be sure we are using it as he would (otherwise breaks third commandment) - need to know not guess when we use Jesus name/authority (compare Matthew 7:22-23).

## Shop analogy

- - you go into shop to buy something or have something made to order – you discuss with salesman what the issues are in selecting features you want in the product - you take care in your decisions - you have discussed all the details before you make a contract - you know exactly what you are getting - then you make the contract - you leave the shop with the product or there is a definite delivery date.
  - - You don't go into the shop, speak a vaguely formulated list of possibilities beyond your requirements (and which you maybe can't afford!) into the air and walk away - you get nothing however often you repeat the process.
  - - If two or three people go together who disagree about what they want they too will fail to make a contract because they can't develop a well-defined order they agree on, so they get nothing. If we pray together like that it will be accidental if anything arrives.
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## Relationship of Prophecy and Prayer

### A Prophet is primarily a man of prayer

- - the first Bible usage of the word prophet is of Abraham: a prophet is a man who prays and gets certain results (Genesis 20:7). If a man is a prophet he can intercede (Jeremiah 27:18) - prophetic revelation is essential for effective prayer. A prophet is primarily a person who prays. He knows what to say/do because he spends time with God, like Enoch (Genesis 5:22), the first prophet (Jude 14).
- - Moses wanted all God's people to be prophets and to have God's spirit upon them (Numbers 11:29) (this is the second biblical reference to a prophet of God (Aaron is described as Moses prophet in Exodus 7:1))
- - this condition was prophesied at Joel 2:28, and had been fulfilled by Pentecost (Acts 2:14-21) - "prophecy for all" is a defining characteristic of the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 2:10-16)
- - effective praying - knowing God's will and knowing you have obtained the requests you have made of God (1 John 5:14-15) - is impossible without revelation
- - Amos 3:7 Lord God does nothing without revealing it to his prophets first.
- - this explains why prophecy is essential for building up the church (1 Corinthians 14) and why God gives such men to build up the church and bring us to maturity (Ephesians 4:11-14).



- - explains why Jesus, Paul etc. spent so much time in prayer - essential to get correct prophetic message, but also time is spent interceding for people (e.g. Colossians 1:3,9)

### **How prophets receive their revelation**

- - God has a council chamber just like earthly kings had (Job 1; Jeremiah 23:18-22); 2 Chronicles 18:18-22). Anyone of a certain status had a right to enter the king's presence - even Satan retains his right of access to God! (Job 1)
- - King's counsellors spend most of their time listening, not talking - let your words be few (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2)
- - The prophet enters God's council chamber with counsellors surrounding Him (Jeremiah 23:18)
- - in principle, anyone may enter & get the message and so become a true prophet (Jeremiah 23:22) (they will have to have a right attitude to God if it is to be to their own spiritual benefit (Job 1:6ff). Balaam is an example of a man who got true revelation but came to a bad end.(Numbers chap 22-24, 2 Peter 2:15, Revelation 2:14, compare Matthew 7:22-23))
- - Not a one way process - the counsellors discuss possibilities with God (2 Chronicles 18:19-20; Job 1:8-11; Job 2:2-5), just as they would with any human king who can give favours (Esther 5:1-8; 7:1-10; 8:3-8)
- - God eventually sends them with message or to do job etc. (2 Chronicles 18:21; Job 1:12; 2:6)
- - relevant in personal prayer - we are a counsellor before God
- - even more obviously relevant when praying as a group of Christians - we are all to be God's counsellors - bouncing proposals off each other and off God.

### **More helpful to us modern image - business meeting or company board meeting**

- - Greek word fellowship (*koinonia*) is a "business partnership" - as Christians we are on God's board
- - consider how a board meeting works - someone presents issues, problems, a variety of possible solutions - they are discussed - tentatively at first - disagreements occur that need to be resolved (constructive conflict is essential, and should not be avoided or evaded. "*As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another*" (Proverbs 27:17)) - ideas firm up to a definite proposal as discussion develops - chairman finally sums up what has been discussed - a decision for action is made if possible, or it is noted what more is required before a final decision can be taken - may need to get more information/ do more background work before it can be taken further - item is minuted - only then is it possible to proceed to next

business. Everything is focussed, one thing discussed at a time, limited amount covered per meeting, don't need to repeat what happened last time, items are prioritised according to their importance. (Note much background work has been done by individuals before meeting, and people have work assigned to them to do afterwards.)

- - consider our prayer meetings in this context - what is decided? - is a situation where each person presents a whole list of personal concerns without checking with others whether they have God's Amen (agreement) going to work? Does the business get anywhere. Are the prayer "decisions" minuted?
- - unless everyone - including the women (1 Corinthians 11:5; Acts 21:9) - takes an active part in the prayer meeting it will be hard to know whether there is real spiritual agreement (Matthew 18:19). Silent people tend to shut real prayer meetings down. Don't be afraid to stop and discuss issues - this is part of the praying - if necessary asking everyone "what do you believe God is saying about this?" (the prophet's job is often to verbalise the things already on everyone's mind - direction is often lacking without it - but such prophecy needs to be tested, of course (see supplementary reading on prophets & prophecy) - if all are actively seeking to know the mind of God in a prayer meeting this usually presents no difficulties (1 John 2:26-28, John 10:5) if authoritarianism is avoided)
- - the board deals only with items relevant to the business - I must put my own private agenda and personal ambitions aside. Am I just praying out my natural concerns or are we getting God's mind? (Natural concerns - e.g. natural feelings for our relatives - are not a sound basis when the Bible says we are to know no man "*after the flesh*" (2 Corinthians 5:16).) - sometimes may have to pray a situation gets worse - e.g. how did the father pray for the prodigal son? How would you? Often we only start to truly pray when we have exhausted our own "good ideas", because only then are we prepared to listen to what God wants.
- - need to be sensitive to the Spirit - He may not want us to pray about something at all. May not be our job, or may not be right time now - may need to get to a deeper level of understanding of a situation first. Prophecy and the gift of tongues (see supplementary reading) are important determining priorities and in overcoming barriers to progress when we get "stuck". God gave these gifts because we need them in order to pray - we deny them or ignore them at the cost of an ongoing pattern of ineffectiveness in prayer.
- - This way of working needs a lot of self discipline and practice - such prayer is undoubtedly difficult for most people even at the best of times - but you do make real progress. It is important to handle the disagreements which arise honestly and see them as showing there is a problem somewhere that needs to be resolved spiritually with God. Majority

solutions should never be imposed. Even after much consideration and review, unanimity may be impossible in some circumstances, but the true causes need to be carefully identified - unforgiveness can be an underlying cause, but residual dissent may reveal that the proposal really is wrong or deficient in some way.

- - Forgiveness and right relationships with other Christians are absolutely imperative. You cannot pray with people you have a grudge against, or have an attitude of unforgiveness towards because the "peace of God" will not be ruling in our hearts as an umpire.
- - Praying in twos or threes (they must be the ones drawn together by God rather than men) is therefore generally far more effective than large numbers, because agreement in the Spirit is more quickly secured.

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## Conclusions

- - need to know God's mind
- - need attitude of forgiveness
- - need to be abiding in Christ - living in the middle of his will - Holy Spirit is only given to the obedient (Acts 5:32)
- - need help of the Holy Spirit as a lawyer to present an argued case (John 16:5-15)
- - need to come to the point where we are focussed, detailed & specific
- - need to declare result when we know we have got it.
- - need to have God's faith when we make specific requests
- - God acts speedily - though sometimes later delivery is possible
- - no need for endless return to same subject - vain repetition - implies conditions for effective prayer are not being satisfied - stop & review why
- - wrong persistence may lead to God giving something He would rather not give.
- - prayer is the primary ministry of the prophet.
- - prayer with others needs to seek to discover what we have spiritual agreement between us to receive - need to use the ministry of prophets (1 Corinthians 14; Ephesians 4:11-14) for efficiency in prayer. But the gift of being able to know God's mind is available to all, since "prophecy for all" is a defining characteristic of the New Covenant.(Acts 2:18)
- - Need to review our whole approach to praying together, recognising that it is a business-like activity, and should be undertaken with the same sort of thoroughness, discussion, debate, orderliness of argument, intensity, persuasion, honesty and integrity and all other disciplines that we would use if we were making those same requests of someone we could see and had to persuade in business, the law court or the family.

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## Supplementary reading

### Prayer Issues:

Introduction to intercessory prayer R H Johnston:

interces2\_An\_Introduction\_to\_Intercessory\_Prayer\_RH\_Johnston.pdf

A Guide to good order when Christians pray together R Hardy:

([www.amen.org.uk/studies/rh/corppray.htm](http://www.amen.org.uk/studies/rh/corppray.htm))

Prayer & Fasting D G Clark:

[http://denisgclark.pbworks.com/w/file/128359503/Prayer\\_and\\_Fasting.pdf](http://denisgclark.pbworks.com/w/file/128359503/Prayer_and_Fasting.pdf)

### Related issues which impact on effectiveness in prayer:

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit R H Johnston:

binhs2a3\_The\_Baptism\_in\_the\_Holy\_Spirit\_RH\_Johnston.pdf

The Gospel liberates woman to fulfil her creation role R H Johnston:

women4\_The\_Gospel\_of\_Christ\_liberates\_woman\_to\_fulfil\_her\_creation\_role\_RH\_Johnston.pdf

Taking God's Name in Vain R H Johnston:

3rdcomm2\_Taking\_Gods\_Name\_in\_Vain\_RH\_Johnston.pdf

The Gift of Tongues R H Johnston:

tongues2\_The\_Gift\_of\_Tongues\_RH\_Johnston.pdf

Assessing today's prophets and prophecy R H Johnston:

assespr92\_Assessing\_Todays\_Prophets\_and\_Prophecies\_RH\_Johnston.pdf

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These notes, prepared to support ministry at Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship, Camberley, Surrey, August 2000, are intended to stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author: (email: [rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk](mailto:rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk)). (Preliminary version 7 August 2000, revised version 14 August 2000; 4.9.2018)

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