

# “The Questions of God: 3) Does Prayer Make a Difference?”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

November 7, 2004

Text: He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples’” (Luke 11:1).

Elie Wiesel, a Hungarian Jew, who witnessed firsthand the Holocaust, and lived to write about it once told the story of the beadle of a small synagogue in Eastern Europe, who would rush to the synagogue each morning before the services there and shout, “I have come to inform you, Master of the Universe, that we are still here.” The Jews began to be massacred, but he would still rush into the synagogue and cry at the top of his voice, “You see, Lord, we are still here.” After the last massacre, he found himself all alone in the deserted synagogue. The last living Jew, he climbed the bimah one last time, stared at the Ark and whispered with infinite

gentleness: “You see, I am still here.” He stopped briefly before continuing with his sad, almost toneless voice: “ But you, where are you?”

The question, “But you, where are you?,” often arises from those who find themselves separated from God. But one does not have to go through a Holocaust to experience this. Sometimes the death of a loved one, a domestic tragedy, an illness, some great disappointment or loss--all of these things can place us in a situation in which our deepest prayer is that one that utters, “God, I am still here. But you, where are you?”

## I.

There is nothing more central to the life of faith than prayer. It is the means by which we have access to God. It is asking, but it is also listening.

In the New Testament there is only one thing that the disciples specifically asked Jesus to teach them--how to pray. Now in some ways that seems strange. After all, these people knew how to pray. They had prayed all their lives. However, when they came under the influence of Jesus and saw what prayer meant to him, it dawned on them that although they had prayed from the time they were children, they did not really know how to pray. “It came to pass,” says the Gospel of Luke, ‘as he was praying in a certain place, that when he ceased one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples.’”(Luke 11:10).

When we speak of prayer, we are very close to the heart of the Christian faith.

## II.

But let’s be honest. Many people struggle with certain forms of prayer. After all, we do live in an ordered world. How do we expect God to intervene in the order of the universe? If each of us prays with our limited vision, our fragmentary understanding, our persistent sin and self-centeredness, how could all our prayers be answered without causing real chaos in the world? Too often to ask God to grant what we ask would require that God play special favorites. Sometimes God has to refuse our requests lest in giving that which would be good for us, he bring harm to someone else.

Abraham Lincoln, in his magnificent Second Inaugural Address, expressed a profound understanding of this. Lincoln observed of the North and the South: “Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered, that of neither has been answered just as they intended...Yet still it must be said, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

So how does a person pray without doing an injustice to our heart’s desires or an injustice to a God who is both loving and just?

### III.

One of the ways we do this is by acknowledging the distinction between the creator and the creature. The Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century often used a Latin expression to express this notion: *Finitum not est capax Infiniti* (“The finite cannot contain the infinite.”) Karl Barth once noted that the distance between God and man is an “infinite qualitative distance.” God is both imminent and transcendent. That is found in the Lord’s Prayer. It is intimate. We pray, “Our Father.”

But God is also transcendent. He is not our “buddy” nor our “pal.” He is the creator of the universe and all that is. That is why we approach God with reverence and awe. This was brought home to me this week in an article by Hughes Olds in *Theology Today* in which he spoke of worship in the Presbyterian Church. Olds notes that Presbyterian worship traditionally was celebrated with reverence and awe. For generations, he notes, a sense of solemnity was characteristic of Presbyterian worship. Then he notes, some were accused of being the “frozen chosen” and we have hung our heads in shame and traded simple dignified forms of worship for more giddy forms of godliness. So today we have Presbyterian Churches in Charlotte who offer worship on Saturday evening so that people are free to spend all of Sunday watching football games. Our forefathers would not recognize us.

Olds goes on to point out that in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century, when revivals were sweeping this country, many old school Presbyterians argued that a person could become a Christian by being born in a Christian family, being Baptized, learning the Catechism, receiving the regular preaching of the Word each Lord’s Day, and finally making a profession of faith and being received into the communion of the church. They argued that a person could be a Christian without having to attend a revival meeting or having a conversion experience.

### IV.

Another way that prayer makes a difference in our lives is when we open others and ourselves to the working of God’s Spirit in our lives. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that “God’s ways are not our ways and his thoughts not our thoughts.” The great and essential mystery of prayer is that in prayer we actually share in God’s sovereign governance of the world. As Karl Barth has put it, “God’s sovereignty is so great that without abandoning his control of the universe, God allows himself to be influenced by his creatures.”

Here again a word of caution is in order. While affirming that God does hear and answer prayer, we must also state that his answer may not be at all what we expect or desire at any given moment. God is not at our beck and call.

In one of the most moving scenes of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* he pictures his mother, Monica, praying all night in a seaside chapel on the coast of Africa, that God would not let her son sail for Italy. More than anything else Monica wanted her son to be a Christian, but she

feared that if he went to Italy, with all its temptations, he would be lost forever. Even as his mother prayed, Augustine set sail for Italy. But there, something remarkable happened. Augustine came under the influence of a great Christian, Ambrose of Milan, and became converted to Christianity. Augustine later reflected that he was converted to Christ in the very place from which his mother's prayers would have kept him. He believed that God had to deny his mother's specific request to grant her deepest desire.

## V.

Then, too, if prayer is to make a difference in our lives, we must understand that God is active in our lives. There is a great divide in the Presbyterian Church and its seminaries between those who believe that God is active in human history and those who do not believe that it is possible for God to be active in human history. If we do not believe that God is active in human life, then prayer is to no avail. Dr. Thomas Torrance, who taught at the University of Edinburgh for many years, once said that he would not allow a graduate degree to be granted to a student until he had heard that student pray.

John Calvin understood that prayer was a discipline and needed to be treated as such: He believed that there were certain times of prayer that were essential to Christians: 1) When we arise in the morning, 2) Before we begin our daily work, 3) When we sit down at a meal, 4) When by God's blessing we have eaten, 5) When we are getting ready to retire for the day.

One of the ways that we affirm God's activity in our lives is by praying affirmatively. The trouble with much of our prayer is that it is little more than begging. It conceives of God as a universal organized charity and of ourselves as impecunious applicants, saying, "Give me! Give me!"

One does not find that kind of prayer in the Old or New Testament. True prayer is affirmative. It turns its back on our wretched, miserable needs and stretches a taking hand to appropriate the divine grace. It says,

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul."

Everyone knows that at the Diet of Worms Martin Luther defied the German Emperor at the risk of his life, but most of us do not know what Luther was praying at the time. Here are his words:

"O Thou my God, stand by me, against all the world...Do it. Thou must do it, Thou alone. It is indeed not my cause but Thine." That is affirmative prayer. It does not so much ask as take. It does not so much beg for living water as it sinks its shafts into it and draws from it. It starts as Jesus did: "Our father who art in heaven."

## VI.

Then, too, if prayer is to make a difference in our lives, it will be because we have learned to pray dangerously. So often we think of prayer as a safe refuge, but the prayers of the New Testament are often dangerous prayers. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but thy will be done." He might have escaped crucifixion if he had trimmed a little, but did not and he went from Gethsemane to the cross. That was true also of the great prophet Jeremiah, whom one person called "the father of true prayer." Often he wanted to escape the difficult compulsions of his duty, but he was always prevented from running away by the habit of prayer. As Jeremiah himself put it, God said to him, "Call unto me, and I will answer you, and will show you great things, and difficult."

Several years ago I visited Oxford, England. As we came to the square in the middle of the town, I noted a monument that had been placed there in memory of Hugh Latimer, one of the early reformers of England, who was burned at the stake for his faith. Before his death he prayed that he would not approach death as a coward. Then he turned to his companion Ridley and said, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle that by God's grace in England, shall never be put out."

I wonder what would happen in this church if we were to pray dangerously, asking God to use our lives to make a difference in this city.

There is nothing more important for our lives and for our city than that we place prayer at the center of all that we do. Prayer does make a difference. It can change your life. It can change this church. It can change this city.

