

## Faith and Prayer

### Prayer

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Does it seem as logical to you as it does to me that as faith in the invisible God begins to form and actually becomes a reality, that its first reaction will be to talk—that is, to pray—to this God? Now I say this because as faith begins to rise, the person becomes aware of what he is in relation to an awesome and holy power. Out of beginning to see his need and out of sheer helplessness, the person cries out to God.

I am talking here about real faith, not the unconverted kind as based on a childish superstition and a mere immature acceptance that there is a God, but the faith of an adult who has studied, who has meditated, and who has become firmly convicted that God is. And the intimate reality of that God has begun to intimately affect, or as we might say "touch" you.

In Hebrews 11:6 is an interesting statement in regard to this, where the apostle writes:

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

It is not *difficult* to please God without faith; it is *impossible*. The demons believe that He is and they tremble. The statement "must believe that He is" is of a stronger faith than the mere assent to His existence. This statement in verse 6 follows on the heels of the illustration regarding Enoch. It says back in Genesis 4 that Enoch walked with God. It means that God was an every day reality to him. It is the kind of faith that those who had it would seek Him out. That is the kind of faith that Enoch had.

It says in verse 6 "he who comes to God." The *Revised Standard Version* has an interesting deviation on the translation of this. It says, "he who draws near to God." That may not sound too much stronger to you than "he who comes to God" but I think that it is a far more appropriate interpretation or translation of that phrase because of the book in which it sits. I am talking about the book of Hebrews, because in the book of Hebrews this is very important. In fact, Hebrews views this drawing near to God as the goal of life.

I think that this is right because is not the goal of life to be born into the very family of God? Will we then really be near to God? Can we get any closer to God than being like God is? Can we get any closer to God than actually being a part of His family?

We are not there yet. We are still in the flesh but we are expected to draw near to God. Those who draw near to God are going to have to believe that He is and they are going to have to seek Him out. It is part of our life. In fact, we find in the book of Hebrews that the very priesthood of Jesus Christ is shown to have the very purpose of enabling us to draw near.

Unless there is a firm conviction of the reality of God we will not even budge toward drawing near to Him—toward getting to know Him. People who really believe that He is, they seek Him out. They search Him out. That has to include talking to Him.

What prayer does is it projects faith on God, but it is a faith that we would not have unless God had acted to reveal Himself to us. This is not the belief in the existence of God; but it is belief, it is faith in the God. There is a great difference between believing in the existence of a god and believing in the existence of *the* God.

Unconverted people all over the world have human faith, and they are praying in what amounts to nothing more than a generalization, a traditional "something" that they receive from their culture. Every single one of us have been victims of this. The true God must reveal Himself as a distinctive personality and His revelation is something that we did not deserve, but it was freely given as a gift in order to establish a relationship in which there can be mutual trust.

In order to really know this wonderful personality we must talk to Him. We must walk with Him as a way of life, the way Enoch did. That is why Enoch is given as an illustration here. Enoch walked with God. *The* God was an every day reality to Enoch, and even though that God was an every day reality, Enoch sought God out and he did it diligently.

This was written for our admonition that even though God has revealed Himself to us, it still falls upon us to use our time and energies to continue to seek God out. If we do that then it says He is going to be a rewarder of those who do it. Do you want to be rewarded by God? You are going to spend your time and energy seeking Him out even though He has revealed Himself to us.

Let us go back to the book of Mark.

Mark 11:20-24 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. [It seems to have nothing at all to do with the cursing of a fig tree.] For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."

Obviously this kind of faith about which Jesus is talking is something that very few people have ever had. The apostles who were with God (God in the flesh, Jesus Christ) for three and one-half years were not going around cursing fig trees, nor were they casting mountains into the sea. So they did not have it, and neither do you or I.

"Removing mountains" is an idiom of the people of that day that is the equivalent of saying "removing or solving great difficulties." A person of faith can solve, as it were, great difficulties. This faith is not something that can be worked up. It is not a sudden surge of feeling that one

has, because we can look at Jesus as the epitome of this kind of faith and we know that Jesus' faith was solidly anchored in the fact that God is ruling. He is involved in ruling His creation all the time. He has not gone off somewhere.

God hears our requests. His involvement is so great that He sees the sparrows fall. His involvement is so great, Jesus described it that He knows every hair on our head. He knows what is going on. The Psalms say that He knows our thoughts from afar off. Is our faith in a God who is that involved in our lives? That is the kind of faith that leads to the kind of answers in which great mountains or great difficulties are removed.

A person who sees God in this manner and is surely growing and maturing in this kind of faith would make a request to God that would be consistent with God's purpose—I mean the very purpose that God is always working on. It is certainly not the kind of faith that would make a request that is merely a wish. Incidentally, that kind of request runs the risk of being utterly immoral, selfish, totally self-centered.

We can also see this in Jesus' life. He resisted every temptation to use the power of God for His own personal advantage. When He was tempted by Satan, He did not turn the stones into food. When He was tempted by Satan, He did not leap off the parapet simply because the Word of God said that God would not allow His foot to be dashed against a stone.

God, in Jesus Christ, never used the power of God in order to satisfy Himself. He always used the power of God in a way that was consistent with the purpose of God, in a way that would glorify God. The reason He did that was He was so attuned to God that He would always make a request He knew—and He knew that He knew—what God would do in a similar situation. When He asked God, God always responded because it was what God was thinking too.

This faith is of a quality that is a combination of growth in closeness to God and God's will. A person of real maturity would never make the kind of request that I just described. He would never make a request like casting a mountain into the sea unless He knew it was God's will and He would know His request was God's will because he was so close to God. The two work hand-in-glove.

A person who is close to God does not request things from God on a whim or merely for personal gratification or satisfaction. One of the beautiful things about what Jesus is talking about here—the kind of faith that He is talking about—is that He is setting absolutely no limit to the power of prayer because the answer hinges on God's limitless power and on making a request that is consistent with the will of God.

One of the reasons that we have difficulty with this is because all too often our faith is in the reality of the mountain rather than in the reality of God. I once read a story of two men who were walking on a street in London. One of the men happened to be a minister. The other man was a man of considerable attainment in society. He was a graduate of a prestigious university who had gone on to the business world. He had done exceedingly well in the business world. He was recognized socially and politically.

As they were walking along the street they happened to come across a house that was being renovated. You know how things are there in England where the house is built right out almost

against the street. It was right up butting against the sidewalk. There was no yard, at least in the front of the house, maybe there was a yard in the back, but the front of the house was right up against the sidewalk and then the sidewalk went into the street.

The house was being renovated, and the renovators, the builders, or whoever, had put a ladder against the house. So there it was. The bottom of the ladder was well out into the sidewalk. The top of the ladder was leaning against the house. This man of great attainment was walking on the inside and when they got to the ladder he stopped and purposively walked around the outside of the ladder. You see, you do not walk under ladders. That is bad luck. And the preacher said to him, "Well you don't believe in that superstition, do you?" And the man replied, "No, but I never throw away the chance."

Some people pray according to this same principle. They do not really believe that they are going to get an answer, but they never throw away the chance of praying. So they pray, but they do not really pray expecting that they are going to get an answer, just like the man went around the ladder even though he did not believe in that superstitious bad luck.

Jesus said to "pray, believing." We can believe with all the positiveness in the world, with all of the conviction in the world, if we are asking according to God's will. God promises, and God cannot go back on what He says He will do. It is impossible for God to lie.

Unfortunately many, many of us do not have the conviction, do not have the faith, do not believe that God is true to His Word, and the reason we do not have the faith that He is true to His word is because we do not really know Him. We do not trust Him because we are not really walking with Him. We are not really diligently seeking Him, so we do not know Him. The whole thing goes together hand-in-glove.

Let us look Luke 22: 31 just to show you how important faith is. It undergirds everything in our relationship with God. Here we are drawing to the close of Christ's ministry.

Luke 22:31 And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail; [Notice this confidence.] And when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

Jesus Christ asked His Father to strengthen Peter's faith. But notice the perception of Jesus. He could see that Peter was going to stumble and he was going to stumble very badly. Jesus had such confidence that God would turn Peter around He said "When you return, when you are converted and you come back to Me, strengthen your brethren." That is how confident that Jesus was that God would hear His prayers.

Faith is the foundation of Christian character. Without it we have no access to God. He that comes to Him must believe that He is. Satan was out to destroy Peter's trust in God, and Jesus acted to guard him. When it says "that your faith fail not" it means not come to an end or not disappear completely. Peter did stumble badly. But he also got up and he went on. It is entirely possible that the over-confident Peter (because remember verse 33, "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.") had a lot of confidence, but that confidence was in

himself.

In order for Peter to have the right kind of faith, God had to almost smash that man where his faith, his confidence in himself, could easily be seen by him as to be absolutely nothing, and that if he were going to really have a good relationship with God, it was going to be on the basis of his confidence in God, not in Peter. Peter had to stumble in order to have true faith in God. When faith is broken down, the foundations of true spiritual life give away. That is why Satan wanted to destroy Peter's faith. If he can do that, the entire structure of our relationship with God collapses.

Do you remember I used the scripture in II Peter 1:5 in which the same Peter used faith as the starting point on which the other virtues or qualities of Christianity are built? Peter said add to your faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, and godliness. There is a divine order and that order begins with faith. If we proceed from that point then we make our calling and election sure.

It is constant earnest praying which keeps faith alive and makes certain the receiving of every one of the qualities which make us in the image of God. Do you know how I can say that? Because God says He is more willing to give us of His Spirit than we are to give good gifts to our children. Let us turn to that place back in Matthew 7. Jesus said,

Matthew 7:7-11 Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to [or are able to] give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

If there is faith and we are seeking God, in seeking God we begin to find out what His qualities are. He is not just a Being of power, He is the Being of consummate love, mercy, sympathy, kindness, generosity, control, goodness, every good quality that we think He has in super abundance, and it is His very intent to give these things to us. He is a Creator and He builds them within us by means of His Spirit working in the experiences of our lives. As we begin to find out what His qualities are and we ask Him for those qualities, He will give them. It is a request that is according to His will.

The faith which creates powerful praying then is the faith that centers on a powerful person who is willing to do what we ask according to His will. Faith in Christ's ability to do and to do greatly is the faith that gets answered.

Mark 1:40-42 Then a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." And Jesus, moved with compassion, put out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." As soon as

He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

Notice the man's faith. "If You will, You can do it." God had revealed to the man Christ's power to do this. See, You can do it. He was confident that Christ had the power to do what he was asking Him to do. The only question that remained of the man was, "Was he willing to do it?" That is why he worded his request, "If You will, You can do it." "If You will, I have the confidence that You can do it." It was an appeal that Christ found within His will and within the will of God. Christ reached out and He touched him.

There was a lot in that act. One of the things that was in that act was that the very act of reaching out and touching the man was an indication that it was going to be done because the very law that He gave to the Israelites back in the Old Testament forbid a person from touching a leper. In a sense He was moving to violate the very law that He gave to the Israelites, but you see His mind was already made up He was going to do it. That quickly He reacted to the appeal of this man. The important thing right here is that the man clearly believed that the power was there.

Matthew 9:27-29 When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" And when he had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you."

Christ's statement here is both an inspiration and a challenge to faith. It says we will receive according to faith. I think in many cases we misunderstand what He said. He does not mean that we will receive in proportion to our faith; but rather we will receive because we believe.

Why did He ask whether they believed? It is interesting to note that when this took place was immediately after restoring a young girl to life and there were a lot of people there milling around, undoubtedly abuzz at what they had become aware of that occurred. In verse 25: "But when the crowd was put outside...."

In verse 26, there was a report. Then Jesus left the area. Undoubtedly there was a crowd that followed after Him because even if it were just out of curiosity, they wanted to see what the next thing was that was going to occur. It is interesting that Jesus took these men inside the house and away from the crowd before He did what He did. Why? It does not say exactly but I think that there is enough here so that we can speculate and come pretty close to why He did what He did. It has to do with the question, "Do you believe?" I think that Jesus wanted to see what their response was going to be like. What kind of conviction was really there. Was it something that they were asking merely out of curiosity?

There is another part of this that I think is very important. They are called men, so undoubtedly these were not children. These were adults. Were these men going to be able to carry the responsibility of being able to see? Whenever God does something for us, even though it is a freely given gift, it is not something that He is obligated to do except as a result of His own

promise. Yet when He does something for us it does put us under obligation.

I think that He wanted to see whether these men's conviction was of a magnitude that was going to be great enough to carry through with what He was about to bestow upon them and make good use of it. When He asked the question about their faith, I think it was a test not just to see whether they believed He could do it right at this moment, but whether they were going to be able to carry the conviction over into their life that was going to result from their being healed.

How many people do you know that God has given a great gift to—maybe of healing—and then later on they leave the church or they completely dissipate the gift that was given to them? I do not think that God begrudges it to them at all. That is not the point. But the gift turns out to be something that is not taken advantage of in the service of God and I think that that is part of the reason here why Christ did what He did.

If there is anything that we get out these three verses is that God does not heal in proportion to our faith. He heals because we believe Him.

Matthew 28:18 Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority [or as the King James version says, "All power"] has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

Christ has the power to do whatever we ask, and in order for us to have confidence we have to have confidence, or belief, or faith, in His ability to do what we are asking Him to do. Now if all authority has been given to Him, then there is all the power of God in Him, therefore He can do more than we ask. Can we then ask Him in faith, in conviction, understanding this very important point?

Even though we are praying to a very powerful being who could do more than we even ask, faith also responds by being obedient. You might recall these things from some of the examples Jesus gives us of His ministry in the New Testament. Faith goes to the pool of Siloam to wash when it is told to go. Do you remember the occasion where Christ told the man to go dip himself in the pool and the man obediently went and did what Christ told him to do? Faith cast the net wherever Christ tells the person to cast the net, just like Peter did. Christ said, "Cast your net here." Peter did what Christ said and he got a lot of fish as a result of it. Christ once told the nobleman, "Go home. Your daughter is healed." The nobleman turned on his heels and went home. His daughter indeed was healed.

The faith that God is looking for keeps the commandments of God and does things that are pleasing in His sight. It says to God, "Lord speak, for your servant hears." It says, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

There are also times when faith is called upon to wait in patience before God because frequently there are delays and sometimes there are long delays before God answers. True faith will not grow discouraged and disheartened because the prayer is not immediately honored. Why will true faith do this? Why will it wait patiently, continuing obediently to submit to the will of God? Because it knows God. The answer is that simple. Because a person of that faith has that

conviction because that person has been diligently seeking God. He has been walking with God. He has been talking with God. He understands the mind of God. He knows why God delays. He knows why God does things quickly. It will wait patiently whenever God wills it to be done in that way.

That faith knows that God has the power and it knows whether a request is according to His will. It knows that it is impossible for God to lie, and that He will fulfill His promises. But it also knows and accepts (this is important) that he is not the only person or event that God is working with and therefore that kind of faith accepts without question the conditions for answered prayer. Such delays are times of testing in which faith is privileged to show its mettle.

Let me show you an example that has powerful meaning. John 11:1 is in regard to the resurrection of Lazarus.

John 11:1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.

These two wonderful ladies did what anyone with faith in God, with knowledge of God's desire to heal, and God's promise to heal would do. They called upon the Lord Jesus Christ (their friend, God in flesh) to come over and heal Lazarus. Verse 4:

John 11:4 When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

To add a little bit more to the plot, Jesus loved Martha and her sister, and Lazarus. The indication is that it was not just a normal passing friendship He had with these people but rather something that was more intimate and closer. There are indications in the scriptures that whenever Jesus traveled to Jerusalem that it was probably at the home of these three people that He stayed. He slept in their place. He ate with them. He undoubtedly had a lot of conversations with them.

Think of this in terms of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus being that close to Him, walking and talking with Him, eating with Him. They had a closeness that other people (maybe people other than the apostles) did not have. They really knew Him and they trusted Him. They relied upon Him in a way that few people could. Verse 6-7:

John 11: 6-7, 11 So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was. Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." These things He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."

They misunderstood what He was talking about. They thought he was literally sleeping. Jesus was saying that he was dead and He was going to resurrect him. Let us drop down to verse 17.

John 11:17, 21-27 So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days....Then Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

You can see by that that Jesus and Martha were talking on two different levels. She understood but she did not really understand. Jesus was talking about a resurrection that was going to occur in just a few moments. She was talking about a resurrection that was going to occur when God would resurrect the firstfruits. They were on the same subject, but slightly different wavelengths.

Mary came along and she was on the same basic wavelength as was her sister, Martha. Verses 38-43:

John 11:38-43 Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. [He had already talked to God about what He was going to do.] And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!"

That could be said, incidentally, "This way, Lazarus!". You can understand why it could be that way, because Lazarus was still in his burial clothes and his face was covered. He was telling Lazarus to follow the sound of His voice. "This way, Lazarus! Come on here." So he came out of the tomb.

Here we have a case where the faith of two good women was very sorely tried. The sisters requested healing, but without any known reason Jesus delayed. He delayed going to His critically ill friend. It was urgent to those people involved. But Jesus seemed to be unconcerned.

Have you ever felt the same way about God? That your request was urgent, but He seemingly was not hearing? He seemingly had gone off somewhere? Remember Jesus is God. If you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. They react with the same mind. They act with the same mind. They think the same way. Jesus was so attuned to God that He would do things even as the Father did. In this case, the Father would have delayed too. In this case, the Son did delay.

A lesson needed to be learned, and a mighty sign needed to be given. The first lesson that we can get from this is that when we make a request to God, we always have to understand that God's purpose comes first, not our request. God's purpose comes first. We do not have to be concerned that God will go back on His word. It is impossible for Him to go back. He is God. We always have to pray with the understanding that God's purpose comes first and God sees all things. God knows all things. God knows what He is working out.

Martha and Mary did not understand what Jesus was working out. Jesus' tardiness allowed Lazarus to die, but the delay brought about the greater good of the display of God's power through the resurrection. Listen to this: a major lesson here is that if we have made a request that is according to God's will, He will not fail to answer, even though a person die.

Think about that. Is God going to heal the people who have died in faith even though the request has been made? Even though a prayer of faith has been lifted up? Even though these people have been anointed with oil in the name of the Lord? Is God going to follow through with His promise? Yes He is! He will resurrect those people. The only difference between that circumstance and Lazarus is a matter of time. With Lazarus it was a matter of four days. With us it may be a matter of a thousand years or whatever. A thousand years to God is the blink of an eye and God never forgets a promise that He made.

Part of this principle that we are talking about here about why faith is willing to wait (and sometimes there are long delays) is because it understands that the purpose of God is being worked out and we are not the only person that He is dealing with. We are not the only one that He has to take into consideration whenever we make a request because we have to understand that God loves others just as much as He loves us. He is working out things in their lives as well. When we make a request to God, we always have to understand that we do not stand alone.

Consider Jacob and Esau. Jacob became estranged from his family as a result of his deceitfulness. Jacob was not a man without feeling. Jacob undoubtedly wanted to be reunited with his family. He wanted to be reunited with his father. He wanted to be reunited perhaps especially with his brother Esau. Esau was his twin. I do not know whether there is a closer relationship than twins. Brothers and sisters are more closely related than children are to their parents, and maybe with twins there cannot be a closer relationship. Surely Jacob wanted to be closely associated once again with his brother, but there was bad blood between them.

Jacob undoubtedly lifted up prayers to God as we can see as the story unfolds. Before God could answer, do you know what had to happen? Jacob had to be converted to God. Esau had to be converted to Jacob. He had to turn to Jacob where he was willing to face him in a spirit of peace. Jacob had to be converted to God. He had to turn to God. He had to repent to God so that there could be peace between him and God, and then Jacob could be at peace with his

brother. It took twenty years for this to unfold. God answered the prayers, but it took twenty years for God with all of His power working through the free moral agency of human beings to bring to pass what might seem to be a simple request to Him, "Lord, let there be peace between me and my brother."

Somebody who knows God can wait because He knows that God will not turn, will not reject a request like that. God is going to work it out in His own way. He is going to work it out in a way that is going to be for the good of all concerned, not just that we be at peace with our brother. Because God is concerned that that brother also be in the Kingdom of God and grow through the experience as well. God loves him too.

Sometimes, brethren, we make requests to God that almost seem as though we are tying His hands. But His hands are not tied. God in His wisdom has to move in His way. A person of faith, a person who is diligently seeking God knows that, understands that, and is willing to accept that as a condition.

James 1:2-8 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. [Notice the testing of your faith produces patience.] But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. [What if God had intervened in Jacob's life in under twenty years? The same things would not have been produced in Jacob, nor in Esau.] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Brethren it is entirely possible for us to be so distracted and anxious looking forward to an answer from God that we lose sight of the importance of the present. I mean the "now." I mean where we are living in the time continuum that will not end until our death maybe.

I once heard John Bulharowski, the father of our daughter-in-law, Beth, give a speech in Graduate Club in which he used an illustration that really helped me to understand this point. John liked to target shoot with a pistol. He felt that the scores that he was making were not really adequate. He wanted to get them higher. Somehow or another in the course of target shooting either someone told him of a procedure that became the illustration in this sermonette or he read of it (I am not really sure) but basically it consisted of this. He learned that if he did not concentrate on the target but rather concentrated on the end of the barrel with his eye also picking up the target in the distance that he would get better scores. And so he said he tried it and immediately his scores became significantly better.

Then he applied this principle to Christian living. Far too many of us keep our eyes on the Kingdom of God and forget about the times in which we are living, forget about the experiences that we are going through. We concentrate on the goal so strongly, so acutely, that we forget

about the importance of the present. If we forget about the importance of the present and what we are doing on a day-to-day basis, we may never get to the goal.

I recently had this confirmed in a book that John Reid gave me to read about a Marine sharpshooter (a marksman, a sniper). In the course of describing this man who was so good at shooting a rifle that it is almost beyond my understanding how accurate this man could be, I found out that when this man was shooting at a target, that far from just concentrating on the target, the man was aware of everything else that was going on around him, because he came to understand that those things are going to affect whether or not he was going to hit the target.

[It proved to be a] very interesting thing because I would tend to be so focused on the target that there would be many, many things that I would not be aware of that was going to disturb my aim, even things like the heat of the day, or the windage. So he was aware of the movement of the trees. He was aware of the temperature. Very interesting.

That is what we are dealing with here. James, in writing this, had a trial of some length in mind, the kind that we must persevere through. What he is saying is in order to persevere through it, in order to get to the end, we have to exercise patience. And he said in addition to that we better be asking God for wisdom to get through this trial. It is not just a matter of setting our will. It is a matter of going through it with the greatest amount of wisdom so that we learn as much as possible on the way through, because a person of faith understands that God has decreed that we wait. God in His wisdom has set up the answer in such a way that He is making us wait. He has made a test of our faith out of this. Therefore He wants other things to be accomplished while we are waiting for the answers. That is why the need for wisdom. As you are going through the trial James said you better ask for wisdom in going through this.

Wisdom here is not some kind of philosophical system, but rather it is the kind of wisdom that appears in the book of Proverbs, practical common sense on how to make the most and the best out of this thing that we are going through. What he is saying is, Ask God for insight on how to manage the trial that you are going through so that you understand as much as you possibly can of the direction that God is taking this in so that you can cooperate to the fullest extent. I will tell you, when you do that, the pressure of waiting is going to dissolve because you are going to be concentrating on making the most out of the present. There is so much wisdom in this.

Let us go back, in order to reinforce this, to the Lord's prayer. They ask Him to teach them to pray.

Matthew 6:9-11 In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.

I think that is far enough because I want to concentrate on one principle here. When Jesus was teaching them He said, "Give us this day our daily bread." This was the first personal request in this prayer. I want you to think about the practical wisdom that is here. Without saying so

directly, Jesus is telling us to shut out tomorrow and concentrate on today. Give us this day our daily bread. Why? Because we are not living in tomorrow; we are living in today. We will see the importance of this in just a bit. In order to successfully get to tomorrow, we have to meet today's challenges or tomorrow will be of no value.

He is telling us not to seek tomorrow's gifts or tomorrow's bread because we are going to thrive best if we concentrate on living in the present. Why? One of the most obvious reasons is we may not even be around tomorrow. We may be dead. We do not like to think about that.

Jesus is very practical. If we take care of today, and make the most of today, then when tomorrow comes, if God blesses us with a tomorrow, we apply this same principle and we are going to grow the most. Because rather than procrastinating, we are going to move today, right now, because that is the important one. We will take advantage of what today's challenges are.

If we do die, then the prayers that we made about tomorrow are going to be redundant and really unnecessary. Bread for today is bread enough, is what Jesus is saying. Do not think here that the word "bread" simply means food, but rather it symbolizes everything physical that we might need such as bread, clothing, water, housing, you name it. Everything is covered by this word "bread."

The first part of this prayer "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name." takes care of the future. I want you to notice that every one of these requests is in God's province. He is the only One who can really do anything about them. He is the only One who can really hallow His name. He is the only One who can bring His government on earth. He is the only One who can send His Son. He is the only One who can enforce His will being done on earth. When it gets to us and our requests, Jesus quickly shifts the focus to the present. What He is saying then is that we must trust God today and leave tomorrow in His hands. The present is ours. The future is God's.

Another part of this is (the implication is) that prayer is a task, a duty, for each day. Even as each day demands its bread, so does each day demand its prayer. No amount of praying today will suffice for tomorrow. When tomorrow comes, you pray in it.

Where in the world do you think that Jesus got this idea? Did He get it out of the Old Testament? Yes He did. Where is it? It is in the wilderness experience of the children of Israel. God gave them manna every day. He only gave them enough for that day. If they tried to save it over to the next day, it spoiled. God was setting a pattern. He is teaching us a lesson. Concentrate on the day in which you are living.

No, you never quite lose sight of the great and awesome future, but you do not concentrate on it because you are going to grow the most if you concentrate on today, and then when tomorrow comes, God will give you the manna for it. And when the next day comes, God will give you the manna for that. And when the next day comes, God will give us that manna for that. God will supply all of our needs but He wants us to focus on the present, not the future. The future is a part of our vision, but the focus is on today.

There is no storing up what God supplies today any more than we can store up what He is going to give tomorrow because we do not have it yet. God expects that every day we will pray to Him and we will recharge our spiritual batteries in that prayer.

Matthew 6:34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

We cannot eat today what God will give tomorrow. The pattern that is set in the wilderness is so clear.

My concern in this sermon is both for faith and prayer, but I am more concerned with faith's relationship to prayer than anything else. Faith is not an abstract belief in the Word of God. It is not a simple assent or understanding the will. It is not a passive acceptance of facts about God. Faith is an operation of God. We have what we have only because we have been divinely enlightened. God operating through His Spirit has implanted an energy, a power, enabling us to respond in faith to His word, and God and His Son, Jesus Christ, are the objects of that faith.

You might remember the time that Peter tried to walk on water in the Sea of Galilee, and as long as he focused His mind on Christ, he actually succeeded in walking on water. But when he focused on the wind, the waves, the water, it forced doubt into his mind and he sank and had to cry out for help. The objects of our faith are the Father and the Son.

Real faith enables us to see them as Creator, Father, Sustainer, Healer, Son, Savior, High Priest, and Elder Brother, but not merely in an academic sense but in reality to such an extent that they are a part of our lives, more real than the world around us. But we must grow in this.

This faith responds to the Word of God by accepting it wholeheartedly as truth and therefore makes every day use of it. It seeks God's Word in the same zeal and concern as a person on a desert seeks water. In fact this faith rests its entire weight on the veracity of God's Word. Faith gives birth to prayer and in fact prayer has no real existence outside of faith. On the other hand this relationship is not entirely one-sided because prayer sustains faith and it plays a large measure in keeping faith growing.

One final scripture before we close for today is back in Hebrews 3:12-14. This is just a cautionary note. God has implanted this (what I have called an energy) power enabling us to respond in faith to His Word, but it does need to be exercised. It does need to be nourished or nurtured.

If it is not, then like most other things in life it will begin to dissipate, degenerate, and eventually it will fade away. That is because this faith is dependent upon a relationship. You know that if you do not nurture a relationship with another person (you might have been at one time very fast friends with them, but if the relationship gradually becomes broken off) they become further and further away from you, and you think less and less of them until the time that you hardly even know them or would recognize them.

I am thinking here of the people we have gone through high school with. It is very difficult for me to think that I have been out of high school over forty years. When I graduated from High School it never entered my mind that some of these people I would never see again. Yet most of those people that I graduated with, I have never seen them again. A small number I saw five years later when I attended a high school reunion, but some of those people I have not seen for over forty years, others thirty-five years, and I know that we have become so distant that I

could pass most of those people on the street and I would never even recognize them. The thing that bound us together is gone.

The same thing can happen with God. The thing that binds us to God is faith. It binds us into a relationship. That relationship has to be nurtured and if it is not nurtured we begin to drift apart and we become less and less alike, less and less attuned to one another. That is what the apostle is talking about here in Hebrews 3.

Hebrews 3:12-14 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; [the friendship widens rather than narrows] but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.

All of us need to guard against unbelief as we would against an enemy. Paul is not talking here about a heart in which unbelief is merely present, but rather a heart that is controlled by unbelief, the kind of heart that will drag a person down even as Peter was dragged down into Galilee's water. The peril of unbelief is that it breaks the trust on which our relationship with God is based. Unbelief leads to falling away which is just the opposite of drawing near. Drawing near is one of the major themes of this book.

Falling away is its antonym, its opposite, and falling away, brethren, is the supreme disaster of life, the ultimate defeat because it completely thwarts God's purpose for creation. It is essential to remember that when a person falls away he is not merely falling away from a doctrine or even a set of doctrines, but he is falling away from a living, dynamic personality. Faith needs to be cultivated. It grows by reading, studying God's Word, meditating upon it. It grows in an atmosphere of trial because it is exercised through use.

It also grows, as we find here in these three verses, in an atmosphere of exhortation, exhortation that comes from others who are fellowshiping with us. Exhortation is a preventative of falling away and this is a major reason why fellowship is so needful. Without it, brethren, you may hold your own and maybe your faith will not slip very much, but a person who is not fellowshiping with others of like mind will rarely ever grow.

We need to keep asking God to increase our faith because it is capable of growing.