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A Biblical Focus On Prayer - Part 4
Praying for Ourselves

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Greek mythology is full of fanciful tales of gods, goddesses, and heroes. One of the most thought-provoking stories was about a man named Narcissus. Narcissus, according to the myth, was the son of the river god Cephissus and nymph named Liriope. He was an extremely handsome young man. One day he looked into a pool of water, saw his reflection, and was so taken by his own beauty he fell hopelessly in love with himself! Since such self-love of his image could never be reciprocated, Narcissus fell into great despair and died of a broken heart.

Centuries later psychologists gave his name to a personality disorder called Narcissism. It is manifest when a person is totally fixated on themselves and their own desires. Christians, of course, know that such an obsession is contrary to Jesus' teachings. Nonetheless, we are instructed in Scripture to pray for our own personal needs and concerns. Not with a narcissistic preoccupation, but humbly seeking God's blessings for us in accordance with His will.

Jesus, in His model prayer, says first to give God the Father His rightful glory and praise (Matt. 6:9-11a). Only then are we in the right mindset to approach Him in prayer about the issues of our daily lives. Our finances, job security, our health and welfare, our personal safety, and so many other matters fill our lives and necessitate going to God for His help. In this installment number four we will examine how, and what, Jesus taught His disciples to pray for themselves. We will also examine the curious case of Hezekiah, an Old

Testament king, whose story was recorded by Isaiah the prophet. Hezekiah, through the trials of facing imminent death and national disaster, learned the value of humble and sincere prayer for himself, a lesson we can learn as well.

In an earlier installment we mentioned how Jesus demonstrated His spirituality for His disciples and for us. Matthew's Gospel (chapter 6) mentions three specific spiritual practices of Jesus which He said can bless a believer's life. They included almsgiving (vss. 1-4), prayer (vss. 5-15), and fasting (vss. 16-18). In this article we focus on Jesus' teaching on prayer.

To read Parts 1-3 in this series click here: <http://www.marketfaith.org/?s=prayer&id=29>

We now continue our exploration of Jesus' Model Prayer, a template of sorts for our prayers. As we indicated earlier Jesus did not intend for His followers ritualistically to repeat His exact words. That would contradict what he had just said: "*And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition (babbling) as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words*" (Matt. 6:7 NASB). Rather Jesus prefers us to see what items should be included whenever or however we pray. The specific words are much less important that the sincerity in our hearts.

The other example of prayer we will analyze in this lesson is that of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:15-17). Hezekiah (760 - 687 BC) was King of Judah. The Hebrews were then divided into two kingdoms, Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Hezekiah succeeded his father, Ahaz, in 716 B.C. at age 25. He immedi-

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ately undertook a religious reform in Jerusalem. All idols were removed from the Temple, and the rituals and sacrifices for which it had been built resumed. During his reign, the Assyrian Empire, led by Sennacherib, rose to prominence and threatened Judah. As the crisis loomed, Hezekiah became very ill, even to the point of death. In this section of Isaiah's book, he recounts the story of how Hezekiah dealt with his personal health crisis, and that of his country, and how God miraculously intervened in both cases.

We should not hesitate to take our needs to God in prayer

"Give us today our daily bread." (Matthew 6:11)

In those days Hezekiah became terminally ill. The prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, came and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Set your house in order, for you are about to die; you will not recover.'"

Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD. He said, "Please, LORD, remember how I have walked before you faithfully and wholeheartedly, and have done what pleases you." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. (Isaiah 38: 1-3)

Have you ever been really hungry or thirsty? When I was a youth playing sports (no, it was not in the Roman Coliseum) our coaches were very careful about rationing how much water we drank during practice and in games. They kept us hydrated, but in the 90 degree heat of Florida, we never felt satisfied. As for food, I can't think of any time when I worried about my next meal. All we have to do is go to nearest fast food drive-in, supermarket, or convenience store to get all we need.

In ancient days, food was not so easy to come by. Most people were

constantly concerned about their daily meals. Thus, Jesus, in His model prayer, told His disciples that one of the primary subjects for petition was "our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11b). The word normally rendered here as "daily" (*epiousios*) is found nowhere else in Greek literature and is obscure to translate. Scholars believe it can also be "for tomorrow," "the coming day," or "necessary for existence." In this context, "daily bread" does not just mean baked dough, as we think of it, but food in general necessary for daily sustenance (see: Mark 3:20; 2 Thess. 3:12; James 2:15). More than even that, it suggests all provisions needed to live: water; clothes; shelter; exercise; sleep; even fresh air.

Jesus' point is for His disciples to realize that all good things come from God. As He indicated in another context, "So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'...but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (Matt. 6:31,33). If His followers keep their priorities in order, Jesus promises God will provide their material needs.

This does not mean, of course, that people should not work to earn a living. Jesus makes it clear that work is a responsibility, especially for those engaged in His ministry (vss. 34-35). Paul was even more emphatic, "If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). Remember, sloth is as much a sin as actively doing a bad thing.

So we have heard Jesus' teaching on praying for ourselves. Now let's turn to the story of King Hezekiah. Isaiah ("Yahweh Saves") was a prophet who ministered in Judah from about 740 BC ("the year King Uzziah died" - Isa. 6:1) until 701. He was born about 760 BC, probably in Jerusalem. His father was Amoz ("Strong"). He was well educated, as evidenced by the high

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quality of his writing, and was known in royal circles.

Isaiah's ministry began when he had a magnificent vision of God's throne room as recorded in chapter six. In that section of his book, Isaiah describes his experience of being in God's presence in all His majesty. Several significant points pop out in this account. First, the angels (seraphim) declare, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Armies (Hosts); His glory fills the whole earth*" (vs. 3). Their repeating "holy" (qdush) three consecutive times indicates the Lord (Yahweh) is the most holy of all things. Second, Isaiah confesses his own sinfulness, "*Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips*" (vs. 5). *And third is Isaiah's response to the Lord's call, "Here I am. Send me"* (vs. 8).

When we arrive at chapter 38, much has transpired in Isaiah's life, but now he is ministering in the court of King Hezekiah (see above). The chapter begins with, "*In those days.*" This event took place in the days before Sennacherib attacked Jerusalem (701 BC), so it was probably about 704 BC when Hezekiah was in his mid-thirties and in the prime of life. (Note: The events of chapter 38 actually occurred before the defeat of Sennacherib as told in chapter 37). Suddenly he is struck with what appears to be a terminal disease. The nature of the illness is not revealed (his physicians probably did not know). Isaiah does not say why God allowed the king to suffer this trial. However, 2 Chronicles suggests a possible reason, "*However, because his heart was proud, Hezekiah didn't respond according to the benefit that had come to him. So there was wrath on him, Judah, and Jerusalem*" (2 Chron. 32:25).

In any case, it was left to Isaiah to transmit the bad news, "*Set your house in order, for you are about to*

die; you will not recover." This statement could refer to the fact that Hezekiah did not have a heir to his throne, so he would need to designate someone immediately to avoid political chaos after his death. It also probably had spiritual implications for the king, he needed to get himself right with God before his demise. Note, Isaiah does not say Hezekiah will die "maybe," "if," "perhaps," or "might." He says, "*You are about to die.*"

What happens next is common in cases of terminal illness. Hezekiah realizes his life will soon end and "*turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord.*" He also wept bitterly. Years ago, Psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross discovered five usual stages of emotional responses to death and dying. They include denial, anger, bargaining (often with God), depression, and acceptance. The text does not indicate that Hezekiah denied his fate or was angry, but it is obvious he was depressed and tried to bargain with God. He prayed fervently that the Lord would remember how he had tried to be wholeheartedly faithful and do what He wanted.

Hezekiah had made some bad choices in his reign and did not always follow Isaiah the prophet's divine counsel. Nonetheless, he had instituted some needed reforms in the religious life of the country (2 Chron. 29-31) and did not do the wicked things some of the earlier kings had done (including his father). He genuinely and humbly hoped God would take these positive things into account and suspend his death sentence.

Anyone who has had a loved one face a terminal diagnosis can certainly understand Hezekiah's response. Nothing shakes the foundation of one's existence more than to know he or she is going to soon die, espe-

cially if they are young. (The death of one's child may be the most dreadful of all.) As most pastors know, even committed Christians find it difficult to accept and are driven to ask, "Why?" Pastors and loved ones know that in most cases there are no words that can be said other than what Jesus promised, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die"* (John 11:24-26). *"In my Father's house are many rooms; if not, I would have told you. I am going away to prepare a place for you. If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also"* (John 14: 2-3).

The point is that like Jesus said, and Hezekiah did, we should take our needs to God in prayer. There is no dishonor in praying for ourselves, God wants to know the desires of hearts. The key is to go to Him in humility and, as we will see, be willing to trust Him and abide by His will.

If we pray for ourselves God graciously answers our requests in accordance with His will.

Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: 5 "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the LORD God of your ancestor David says: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look, I am going to add fifteen years to your life. 6 And I will rescue you and this city from the grasp of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city. (Isaiah 38:4-6)

God hears prayers and He is gracious. This is shown in the next section. God again spoke: "the word of the Lord came to Isaiah." He instructed Isaiah to tell Hezekiah some great news. He was not going to die after all. God identifies Himself as "the Lord God of your ancestor David." God had promised that David's house would reign forever (2 Sam. 11-16). If Hezekiah died without an heir that covenant would be short-circuited. We know that did not happen because Hezekiah is listed as ancestor of Jesus in whom the prophecy was fulfilled (Matt. 1:9-10).

The Lord declares He heard Hezekiah's prayer and saw his tears. God said He would add an additional fifteen years to Hezekiah's life. It is important to recognize that God's miraculous remission of Hezekiah's sickness was not because of all the good deeds he had done. Rather, as is always the case, it was entirely because of His grace. God acknowledged Hezekiah's humility and repentance, but it was always in His plan to rescue him from death and despair.

But it was not only Hezekiah who would benefit from the Lord's grace. God promised He would defend and save Jerusalem from the attack by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. This was actually a precursor of what He spoke through Isaiah when the Assyrians began their siege. "Therefore, this is what the Lord says about the king of Assyria: He will not enter this city, shoot an arrow here, come before it with a shield, or build up a siege ramp against it. He will go back the way he came, and he will not enter this city. This is the Lord's declaration. I will defend this city and rescue it for my sake and for the sake of my servant David" (Isa. 37: 33-35).

Jerusalem was spared, the Assyrian army was decimated by the angel of the Lord, and Sennacherib was assassinated by his own sons (Isa. 37:36-38). God's plan in this case extended back from David, was present with Hezekiah, and projected forward to Jesus. It is likely Hezekiah did not even realize all the reasons God had for sparing his life. God was not finished with him yet.

The basic point in this portion of the Scripture is that when we pray we need to understand it is as Jesus said, *"Your will be done."* In the case of Hezekiah, it was clearly God's will that he survive another 15 years. Hezekiah did not comprehend it all, but he was definitely in line with God's purposes.

The Apostle John reiterated this principle in when he assets, *"This is the confidence we have before him (parresia echo pros - 'boldness toward God')"* (1 John 5:14a). When he says "confidence" he means that we stand assured that God always welcomes our communication. This allows us to speak freely whatever is on our minds. God is always interested in our needs and wants. The truth is, of course, He already knows.

Now, that does not mean He will always answer as we desire. It is sometimes not God's will for us to get what we want, including being healed. So how can we know? John presents a practical way of knowing that God

will answer, *"If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him."* He says if we pray *"according to His will"* we can be sure He will answer. As John R.W. Stott puts it, "Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or bending His will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to His. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it and align ourselves with it."

So how then do we know God's will? In PART 3, we discussed several ways we understand and do the will of God. Perhaps the best way to discern His will is to study His word. If the Bible says God wants something for us, we can assume He will provide it. This kind of confident praying in God's will is a product of being in consistent fellowship with God.

The Scriptures lay out conditions for maintaining our relationship with God and praying effectively. First, pray in Jesus' name. *"Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son"* (John 14:13). His "name" (*onoma*) means according to His authority and power. Second, remain (abide) in Jesus. (John 15:7). "Abiding" (*meno*) means fellowshiping with Him daily. Third, obey God's commands. John says, we *"receive whatever we ask from Him because we keep His commands and do what is pleasing in His sight"* (1 John 3:22). In every case, God's will is preeminent.

When we pray for ourselves God answers in ways that benefits and strengthens us.

What can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk along slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. Lord, by such things people live, and in every one of them my spirit finds life; you have restored me to health and let me live. Indeed, it was for my own well-being that I had such intense bitterness; but your love has delivered me from the Pit of destruction, for you have thrown all my sins behind your back. (Isaiah 38:15-17)

God provided a miraculous sign confirming His promise to Hezekiah (vss. 7-8). The sun's shadow, as the sun went across the sky, daily moved down a set of stairs in Jerusalem. They may have been used as a time piece like a sundial. In demonstrating His power God caused the shadow to go back up ten steps. We are not told how God did it. Some critical scholars try to explain it as some natural phenomenon like a solar eclipse. No natural explanation, however, is sufficient. The omnipotent God accomplished this feat easily. Remember He created the whole universe.

As soon as Hezekiah witnessed the miracle and recovered his health (also a miracle), he wrote a poem of thanksgiving and praise (vss. 9-17). The poem has four subsections addressing the stages of his ordeal.

Verses 10-13 relate the despair and sadness he felt when he thought his life was nearly over. Note, he writes this section in present tense, reliving his near-death experience as though it were still happening. His most productive years ("mid-life" or "the quiet time of my life," "noon-tide" [RSV]) would be cut short and he would be taken to the gates of *Sheol* (vs. 10). *Sheol* refers to the place of the dead, both righteous and wicked, in ancient Hebrew thought. It is variously pictured as a city with gates, a trap (2 Sam. 22:6; Ps. 18:5), a hungry beast (Prov. 27:20; Isa. 5:14; Hab. 2:5), and a place of dust, gloom, and darkness (Ps. 30:9; Job 10:21; 17:16). The New Testament provides much greater understanding of the fate of the dead: eternal life in heaven for the saved, and eternal separation in hell for the lost (Matt. 25:31-46).

Hezekiah recounts his plea to God in verse 14. Interestingly, he uses the colorful metaphors of birds to describe his cries. His eyes were so weak with pain he could barely look up to ask for God's support. He begged God to be his advocate, like a lawyer in a courtroom. He had humbly begged for mercy. As Christians, we know Jesus is our advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1).

In verse 15, Hezekiah dramatically changes the tenor of his poem. He asks a rhetorical question, *"What can I say?"* This implies that the king has no words to describe the deep sense of gratitude he feels. He rejoices that the Lord had spoken (through Isaiah) and delivered his healing. Nothing he could say was adequate. Sometimes we are blessed in ways we never imagine, and our praise seems almost trite. Only in our hearts do we express our love to God for His blessings.

In the next line Hezekiah says he will *"walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul."* This is not some punishment God inflicted on him, but rather a reflection of Hezekiah's humble desire to slow down and live each day to its fullest. *"Bitterness"* (*mar*) refers to the depth of despair he had endured in his near death experience.

Verse 16 is difficult to interpret precisely. The first phrase reads, *"Lord, by such things people live, and in every one of them my spirit finds life."* But what is meant by *"such things"* and *"them"*? In the context, they probably refer to the positive deeds of God in this critical situation. They have restored Hezekiah's spirit and zest for life. The other question concerns how to translate the next phrase. The CSB says, *"you have restored me to health and let me live."* In the Hebrew *"restored"* (*uthchlimni*) is an imperative verb, so it may be stated as *"Restore me to health"* (NASB). Some versions see a future event, *"You will restore me to health."*

Hezekiah, in verse 17, admits that the crises he faced were essentially for his own well-being (*shalom* - wholeness, peace). He had suffered pain and depression in his illness. But he has come to the realization that God loves him and was gracious to him. He had been saved from the *"Pit of destruction."* More important is that God forgave his sins, *"You have thrown all my sins behind your back"* (*achri guk* - literally "behind your body"). In other words, on the basis of His grace God had turned away from Hezekiah's transgressions. As a result, in contrast to the dead, the king will sing the Lord's praises and worship in His house for the rest of his days. (vs. 18-20).

God's love was ultimately made manifest in Jesus Christ. His grace has given us liberation from the burden of our sins and puts us under His providential care. As Paul confidently remarked, *"We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters"* (Rom. 8:28-29). God wants us to pray for ourselves. There is nothing narcissistic about that!

In light of what we have studied how would you answer these questions? Do you believe, as some popular TV preachers assert, that if you pray in faith without doubting, God must heal you and make you prosperous? Why or why not?

Why does praying for specific requests help you know how and when God has answered it? Why is saying grace before a family meal a good way to express thanks and praise to God for His blessings? What's the best way to do it? Who should do it?

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