

Introduction the Means of Growth

Before we begin to look at prayer as a means of growth, let's take a moment to remember where the means of growth fit into the bigger picture of us walking with Christ in the power of his Spirit. Participation in the Means of Growth is only one of three elements of *walking by the Spirit*.

- *Setting your mind on the things of the Spirit.*
- *Sow to the Spirit (regular participation in the "means of growth")*

The Means of Growth

1. Prayer
2. Word
3. Body Life (Fellowship and Ministry)
4. Suffering

- *Keep in step with the Spirit (Responsiveness to God's personal leading)*

In unit 2, we extensively study "who we are in Christ." In other words, at the moment we receive Christ, our very identity changes; God views us as adopted sons and daughters, forever accepted, secure in Him, etc. Therefore, it is on the basis of what he has done for us on the cross that we are to respond in certain ways in order to develop depth in our relationship with him. These responses include our involvement in God's provisions for growth — the means of growth. Unlike the discipline of the Holy Spirit, which God initiates, these means of growth are our responsibility.

Qualifications:

1. **Beware of participating in the means of growth legalistically!** They don't procure or maintain your acceptance with God. They don't make God more willing to bless you. Rather, they are (as the title of Unit #3 suggests) *provisions* for spiritual growth. They are God's prescribed channels through which we receive his life-changing power (NUTRITION & EXERCISE).
2. **But on the other hand, we must feed ourselves spiritually!** The Means of Growth require *consistently seeking* the Lord by faith. God will lead us toward spiritual growth in a variety of ways and we are responsible to respond to his leading. Therefore we should prioritize our spiritual growth.
 - The most common reason for spiritual problems is right here! **In our pride, we want to believe that our spiritual problems have some exotic cause, when the real reason is usually embarrassingly simple.** Like the man who complains of chronically feeling weak, hungry, vulnerable to sickness, etc., but doesn't eat or exercise consistently, so are many of us. When we realize we're not doing well spiritually, this is the *first* place we should look! (ALSO WHEN COUNSELING OTHERS)
 - **Beware also of the temptation to look for dramatic, quick-fix spiritual cures!** The means of growth (like sowing) are not super-stimulating most of the time, but they yield stable, solid, and rich spiritual vitality and maturity over time.
3. **You need consistent participation in all of them** (BALANCED DIET). They are not like spiritual gifts, which we may legitimately specialize in. Habitual neglect of any means of growth can lead eventually to a complete spiritual breakdown (EXAMPLES) Most of us tend to gravitate naturally to some means of growth, and to avoid others. So we say "I've never been a student, people-person, etc." Be aware of this tendency, and *cultivate* a taste for the ones you tend to avoid. There is also an interconnectedness to the means of growth in which they each make the others more effective (EXAMPLE: Word helps us to pray more effectively; prayer helps us minister more effectively). Take note of the charts at the end of each chapter on the means of growth in [Walking in Victory](#). **Acts 2:42** is a memory verse in Unit Two because it has all three of these means of growth, and emphasizes consistency (" . . . they *continuously devoted* themselves . . . "). This is a great verse to share with new Christians, to help them get started on the right foot.

Prayer as a means of growth

Prayer is the privilege of personal communication with God.

The Bible says that one of the greatest benefits of justification through the finished work of Christ is that we have access to God—the privilege to come into his presence and commune personally with him at any time. In ancient times, coming into the presence of a king unannounced was potentially a capital offense. By contrast, though our king is far more righteous and powerful, we can approach him with confidence of his acceptance and delight to fellowship with us!

(Esther 4:11) "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days."

(Jer. 30:21) 'And their leader shall be one of them, And their ruler shall come forth from their midst; And I will bring him near, and he shall approach Me; For who would dare to risk his life to approach Me?' declares the LORD.

(Rom. 5:1,2) Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace.

(Heb 10:19) Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us *draw near* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Communication is the gift God gives us to cultivate personal relationships with other persons—other humans and himself. Imagine a MARRIAGE in which the two spouses never speak to each other, or only speak in impersonal, memorized phrases and at certain set times! Yet many of us have been raised in church backgrounds that emphasize this way of communicating with God (Matt. 6:7ff.). In this passage Jesus instructs his disciples in personal prayer. What an irony that many have taken The Lord's Prayer as a ritualistic approach to God!

(Matt. 6:7) "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words . . . Pray, then, in this way . . ."

In spite of this incredible privilege, most Christians struggle with their prayer-lives. I know I do.

(Oswald Sanders) "If you want to humble a man, ask him about his prayer life."

It's easy to become defeated about our prayer life so we need to remember a couple of things:

- *The desire to pray reveals God's presence in our lives.* Our concern for our prayer lives is evidence that God is at work in our lives and that we are (to some extent at least) responsive to him. How many of us were concerned about our prayer lives before we came to Christ? Thank God for this evidence of our regeneration.
- *Expect aversion to prayer due to our sin nature.* We should not be surprised or fall under accusation when we feel extreme aversion to prayer. This shows us that our sinful nature is still operative, and is not a reliable indicator of our spiritual health. We should disregard such feelings and choose to communicate with God (Gal. 5:17).
- *God accepts us fully in spite of our poor prayer lives,* and he is committed to patiently teach us how to pray (Rom. 8:26,27).

(Rom. 8:26,27) And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; (27) and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

(James 4:8) Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

- *Respond to God's initiation with prayer.*

(Oswald Sanders) "You are as close to God right now as you habitually choose to be."

Explain the areas we will cover tonight: TYPES OF PRAYER, REASONS FOR UNANSWERED PRAYER, & PRACTICAL GUIDELINES.

Books: D.A. Carson: "Spiritual Reformation" and "Teach Us to Pray"; O. Hallesby, "Prayer"; Bill Hybels, "Too Busy Not to Pray"; E.M. Bounds, "Power Through Prayer"; Mark Bair, "Mobilized Weakness."

Types of Prayer

The Bible discusses different kinds of prayer which represent ways we can grow in our relationship with God. **Prayer is verbalized, propositional communication.** In other words, there is solid content serving as the basis for our prayer and it stems from God being a personal infinite God. This is in marked contrast to prayer stemming from a pantheistic or occultic world view which respectively seek to empty the mind or to use the spirit-world to accomplish what you want. The way we pray reveals the way we view God.

NOTE: *Remember to listen in prayer.* One key element in a rich prayer life pervades each type of prayer — *listening*. Since communication is two way, it is illogical and even more, unbiblical, to assume prayer is one-way — me talking to God. Whether praying alone or corporately, while we are praying or meditating in silence or listening to another person pray, God will often provide guidance through thoughts, impressions, and leading of His Spirit. We should not expect to hear an audible voice and we must test spiritual leadings by scripture before we consider them valid. We need to cultivate a sensitivity to His speaking through each of these forms of prayer. The book, *Too Busy Not To Pray* by Bill Hybels (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 107ff. — devotes an excellent chapter to listening in prayer.

1. Praise & Thanksgiving:

These two are closely related because they focus on God and his provision—but they are distinct: PRAISE- appreciating who God is- his attributes. When we praise God we contemplate the reality of God's dealings with us and the world. What will occur if our prayer life does not include praise? Psalm 147:1 Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; For it is pleasant and praise is becoming.

(See also Psalm 100 and Revelation 5:9)

THANKSGIVING- appreciating what God has done. We must remember and express gratitude for what God has given us—primarily the great blessings of salvation (e.g., [IDENTITY TRUTHS](#)), and then also the temporal blessings he grants us (e.g., MATERIAL PROVISION, MINISTRY SUCCESS). This is a big emphasis in the New Testament letters. There are about 47 uses of "thanks", "gratitude", and "thanksgiving"; 84 "blessed"; 28 "praise", etc.

Col. 3:15-17 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. (16) Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (17) And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Why is this type of prayer so important?

- Not because God needs it. This idea is pagan, and is the result of anthropomorphizing God: God is insecure and will be more inclined to grant our requests if we stroke his ego. God *is* in fact pleased when we praise and thank him— because it shows that we are maturing. I will be glad if one day my children thank me for doing my job as a parent. I don't need their thanks to validate me, but I will be glad for them because their thanks will demonstrate their own maturity.
- Rather, it is primarily for *our* benefit because our perspective changes. Praise reminds us of how powerful and loving God is, and thus counteracts our tendency to reduce him to our butler. We realize through prayer that we are not a prisoner of circumstance and we are no longer a victim. Thanksgiving keeps us "sane" because we are in fact lavishly and incredibly blessed even though we are sinners who deserve God's wrath. (KID ON CHRISTMAS DAY WHO DOESN'T GET THE RIGHT COLOR BIKE AND COMPLAINS or PARDONED DEATH-ROW CRIMINAL WHO COMPLAINS ABOUT HIS LIVING CONDITIONS)
Praise and thanksgiving also increases our passion for the things of God.
- "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation ...the delight is incomplete till it is expressed...the

worthier the object the more intense this delight would be." (C.S. Lewis. *Reflections on Psalms*. 95-96.)

This is why Phil. 4:6,7 connects the peace of God with thanksgiving. It is as we not only present our requests to God but also thank him for his loving sovereignty and faithfulness that our hearts come to rest. Unless we temper our petitions with this, we tend to become more self-absorbed, envious, and anxious.

Some Christians utilize scriptural songs for this purpose (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)! Scriptural truths on God's greatness and love, combined with music that you enjoy, has a special ability to lift your mind and heart and restore your perspective.

2. Petition: asking God to meet our personal needs (cf. Matt. 6:11)

(Phil. 4:6) Be anxious for nothing, but in everything . . . let your requests be made known to God. Since God already knows what we need before we ask him (Matt. 6:8), why must we ask him (Jas. 4:2)?

- Because this is the most basic and practical way in which we express *dependence* on God. When we pray in this way, we acknowledge that we are helpless to do the most important things in life (John. 15:4,5), and affirm that he is adequate.

This is the form of prayer which comes most naturally to us, but it needs to be tempered by other forms—and trust in God's loving sovereignty (NEXT SECTION).

3. Intercession: Praying for others; PAUL AS EXAMPLE (Col. 1:9ff)

Through intercessory prayer, we ask God to help people in ways that we cannot (ENCOURAGE; CONVICT; PROTECT; ACROSS THE WORLD). All lastingly fruitful ministry begins with and is sustained by this kind of prayer.

(Col. 4:12,13) Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondslave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. (13) For I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Why is intercession so important?

- God works through *human agency*, and human agency begins with prayer.

(Oswald Sanders) "The goal of prayer is the ear of God. Prayer influences men by influencing God to influence them. It is not the prayer that moves men, but the God to whom we pray."

(Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, p. 133).

(Hudson Taylor) "It is possible to move men, through God, by prayer alone."

- Through intercession we *cultivate* and *express* an other-centered perspective, which the Bible says is so crucial for spiritual growth (Col. 4:12,13).

We receive insight into how we can serve others as we pray for them.

4. Confession: Agreeing with God about our specific sinful attitudes and behaviors (Ps. 51; 32).

(Ps. 51:3, 4) I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. (4) Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

Why is confession important?

- It helps prevent hardness of heart. Heb 3:7,8,13 warns against developing an attitude of unresponsiveness to God's leading. Instead, the believer is to cultivate a sensitive and responsive attitude toward God's moral correction (Ps. 32:8,9).
(Heb. 3:7, 8, 13)"TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, (8) DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS...(13) But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.
- It is an indicator of growth. The growing Christian is receiving this kind of correction from God, talking it over with Him, and able to articulate their convictions, rather than reacting only when others point out their sin.

Qualifications:

- Confession is not necessary for God's forgiveness or acceptance (If time, cover 1 Jn. 1:9 misinterpretation - this verse is about *experiencing* God's forgiveness).
(Heb. 10:22) let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
- Avoid morbid introspection (self-focus vs. God/others-focus; cynical investigation of your motives; beating self for sins). Confession should be in response to God's correction through the Word (Heb. 4:12), prayer (as per Ps. 139:23,24), and other Christians (Psalms 32:9, Heb. 3:13) Some of us are more temperamentally disposed to morbid introspection—while others are just the opposite, and need to take time to pray as per Ps. 139. If we focus on continuing to move forward with the Lord, he will show us what we need to see when we need to see it (Phil. 3:15).

(Psalm 139:23,24) 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. As we grow in Christ, God continues to point out our sinfulness. As we agree with him, our appreciation of his grace deepens and we find ourselves in thanksgiving and praise. See Jesus' comment about the woman who washed his feet with her tears and hair (Lk. 7:41-47). The woman loved God more because she was more aware of her sinfulness and therefore appreciated God's forgiveness more.

5. Warfare: battling against spiritual forces of evil

Watchman Nee points out that whenever we pray, we should always pray *to* someone, *for* someone, and *against* someone.

(Eph. 6:18) With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view (previous context is spiritual warfare), be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints . . .

Key aspects of prayer warfare

- We should pray for alertness and insight into Satan's tactics in our own lives and in others' lives (Eph. 6:18 — see context). (MORE ON SATAN'S TACTICS IN [UNIT #4](#))
- It also involves remembering and appropriating Christ's authority (Matt. 28:18-20) over him and of our authorization to advance Christ's kingdom in specific situations (before witnessing, teaching, etc.).

Qualifications:

- Don't get more focused on Satan/demons than on God.
- Don't view this form of prayer as a panacea for your own sins/flesh.
- Don't think that you can avoid all satanic attack by simply praying for protection (Lk. 22:31,32).

Practical Guidelines for Prayer

1. We need to maintain balance in different *types* of prayer (REVIEW)

Petition/ Praise & Thanksgiving/ Confession/ Intercession/ Warfare

Consider using scriptural prayer as models/structure

Matt. 6 (Praise-thanks; petition; confession; intercession)

Eph 1 (Praise/ thanksgiving for what God has done—then intercedes for the people along same lines)

2. We need to maintain balance in different *modes* of prayer

- **Spontaneous prayer** (alone and with others): 1 Thess. 5:16-18; Neh. 13:14,22,31

(1 Thess 5:16-18) 16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

- **Planned private prayer** —

(Luke 5:15,16) 15 But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and great multitudes were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 But He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.

(Luke 11:1) And it came about that while He was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (Hybels - *Too Busy Not To Pray*); other models from authors

It takes time for anything to become a habit, so we must persevere!

Emphasize frequency over duration of prayer.

Do whatever works for you: POSTURE; PLACE; TIME; OUT LOUD/SILENT/WRITING

"Pray until you pray" (CARSON):

"What is meant is that Christians should pray long enough and honestly enough, at a single session, to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality that attends to little praying. We are especially prone to such feelings when we pray only a few minutes, rushing to be done with a mere duty. To enter the spirit of prayer, we must stick to it for a while. If we 'pray until we pray,' eventually we come to delight in God's presence, to rest in his love, to cherish his will."

Draw near by faith, asking God to help you, and keep praying until you are communing freely with God (vs. constantly trying to sense God's presence).

Combine with scripture reading; try to consciously tie requests to scripture (PRAISE & THANKSGIVING; BIBLICAL PRIORITIES).

Write down what you need to pray for (prevents mental drift), and insights that come to you during prayer.

- **Corporate prayer** — Advice

Corporate prayer appears to be more effective than individual prayer — perhaps because we have a better chance of discerning God's will this way. We should expect to hear from God in corporate prayer.

(Mat 18:19*) "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.

Mat 6 (implied w/ the beginning of the Lord's prayer - "OUR Father..."; Acts 1:14ff., 4:23-33, 12, 20; 1 Cor. 14:13ff.

Break this barrier as soon as possible! Find some Christian friends and pray together.

Unique combination of horizontal and vertical: communicating to God together; unity of the Spirit.

Accountability helps build consistency (GETTING IN SHAPE PHYSICALLY).

Work into your schedule several times per week.

Learn how to pray from more mature Christians. Teach younger Christians how to pray. This is an important aspect of discipleship.

Be concise to increase the interactive nature of corporate prayer and be sensitive to others; remain focused on edification *not education*.

Have a strong prayer life with your spouse and children.

Agree with others' prayers—Say the "Amen." This affirms others' prayers and demonstrates the community effect of prayer.

1 Cor. 14:16 Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?

Reasons For Ungranted Requests

We often struggle in our prayer lives because many of our prayers are not granted.

We must also remember that God is sovereign and good. He has our best interests in mind.

Romans 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Let's examine some of the scriptural reasons for ungranted requests.

1. Our request was not according to God's will. (God always answers. But sometimes his answer is "No.")

(Matt. 6:10) " . . . your will be done, your kingdom come . . . "

(Matt. 26:39b) " . . . not my will but yours be done . . . "

"Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will on God, or for 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. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme 'your will be done.'" (John R. W. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), p. 185.)

We can be confident that God will grant our requests *only* when our requests are according to his will (1 Jn. 5:14,15*). We are free to ask for whatever we wish, but unless scripture explicitly states that our request is God's will, we cannot be confident that God will answer the affirmative.

(1 Jn. 5:14,15*) This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. (15) And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

To pray in Jesus' name is not a magical incantation that makes God grant our request. It means to pray as Jesus' representative (GOVERNMENT AGENT REQUISITIONING SUPPLIES). In Jn 15:7, He makes this very clear.

(John 14:13,14) And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (14) If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

A child who knows his father is both powerful and loving will feel the freedom to ask for anything—but he will trust that his father will answer in the best way — including "NO." Note that the context before and after this passage is loving others.

(Matt. 7:7-11) Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. (8) For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. (9) Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? (10) Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? (11) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

This is the problem with positive confessionalism (name it, claim it). It teaches that what matters is the amount of one's faith. Therefore God's denial of a prayer request indicates unfaithfulness in the petitioner. Realize that this is another form of magic because it tries to manipulate God to do our will, and is not grounded in trust in his goodness and commitment to his will.

Are we to conclude Paul lacked faith? In 2 Cor. 12:8,9 Paul asks the Lord to heal him and is refused.

(2 Cor. 12:8, 9) Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. (9) And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore, in our prayers, we should focus on issues about which we know God's will. When we turn to the Bible, it gives us quite a lot of knowledge of God's will in many areas of life. There are specific promises that God makes to all believers. There are direct statements of his will for our lives. There are inspired examples of what the biblical authors prayed for. These are the things that should become the focus of our prayer lives.

Biblical Prayer Priorities:

"Most of us . . . get bogged with down with trivia: Jane's sinus trouble, Ben's discouragement, Mary's problem with her mother-in-law . . . All of these may be important, but prayer, like warfare, calls for strategy. It is said of Napoleon that he would watch the development of his battles from a vantage, quietly analyzing the situation while he watched. His key general would watch with him. 'That farm,' he once said to Marshall Ney, 'that farm that you can see on the ridge there. Take it. Seize. Hold it. For if you can, the battle is won.' In praying for the Ephesians, Paul was aware that if the key to the whole battle was won, lesser skirmishes would sort themselves out rather easily. Smaller problems are so often symptomatic of larger issues . . . Prayer must be directed to that which is the key. It concerns itself with strategy, not with tactics . . . If therefore one thinks that Paul's prayer is spiritual and not practical, it is a sign of how blind he is to what life is all about . . ." (John White, *Daring To Draw Near* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 137.)

- More practical insight into scripture so that you can apply it to your life (Col. 1:9,10).
- Better understanding of what God has given you in Christ (Eph. 1:16-19) and how much God loves you (Eph. 3:18,19).
- Greater love for other people (1 Thes. 3:12) and better discernment on how to love them effectively (Phil. 1:9).
- Opportunities for witness and the courage and wisdom to make the most of those opportunities (Col. 4:2-4*; Eph. 6:19,20).

- Spiritual empowering and protection for ministry (2 Thes. 2:16-3:3).
- Exposure of attitudes that are counterproductive to your spiritual growth (Phil. 3:15; Ps. 139:23,24).
- Wisdom to understand what God wants to teach you through adverse circumstances that are in your life (Jas. 1:5).
- That God may raise up more workers (Matt. 9:36-38).

Recommend: D. A. Carson, "Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers"

Note: Of course, these are the very same things that we should be praying for other people as well!

2. The request was answered, but not according to our expectations.

Especially if we don't know God's Word very well, we may be surprised when he answers biblical requests in ways we had not anticipated.

Examples:

Sometimes we pray for symptom issues, and then God answers by revealing and working on more root issues (WE FIND THAT OUR ANGRY OUTBURSTS ARE REALLY THE RESULT OF TAKING OUR ACCEPTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE FROM PEOPLE'S VIEW OF US).

Sometimes we pray for good root issues, but don't realize that God often deals with them by engineering breaking (PAUL IN 2 COR. 12: God granted his request for power in ministry by giving him a thorn in the flesh).

(2 Cor. 12:7-9) To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

3. God's timing for answering our request is different than ours.

Especially in our "instant gratification" culture, we expect quick answers to our requests. We tend to equate value with something's ability to bring quick and powerful results. But God's perspective is very different from ours. He is working from the perspective of eternity, and he is concerned with quality. "If God wants to make a squash, he takes three months; if he wants to create an oak tree, he takes a lifetime." He knows when we are ready for the good things that we ask for—and we need to trust him.

Examples: marriage (CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION NEEDED); having children (SAME); more ministry responsibility

Praying for instant deliverance from sin-problems sounds appealing, but God usually works a slow transformation that lasts.

[(Packer) ". . . The Spirit works through means - the means of Growth . . . The Spirit shows his power in us, not by constantly interrupting our use of these means with visions, impressions, or prophecies, which serve up to us ready-made insights on a plate . . . but rather by making these regular means effective to change us for the better and the wiser as we go along . . ."]

This is one reason why we need to be persistent in prayer. See Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8.

The point is not that God is like the judge or neighbor. Rather he is unlike them in key ways.

Judge	God
unrighteous & unjust	righteous & just
no concern for the widow	concerned (Lk. 12:7)
grants grudgingly	delights to answer (Jas. 1:5)
puts off until worn down	grants as soon as appropriate ("speedily")

This is an *a fortiori* argument (i.e., "all the more" - a conclusion drawn of greater necessity than something already accepted.): If persistence is effective even with people like this judge and neighbor, how much more will it be effective with the God of the Bible?

Why does God sometimes delay answers?

- He may be waiting for us to fulfill certain conditions (e.g., Matt. 6:33; Luke 16:11).
- The timing may not be right (MARRIAGE; Interstate-270 LAND?).

- He may be cultivating character qualities (e.g., dependence; perseverance) that require delay.

4. We have a legitimate request — but asked with wrong motives.

(James 4:3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Examples:

Praying to be a leader (Jer. 45:5 contrast to 1 Tim. 3:1); witnessing opportunities so I can be recognized; teachers who ask for empowering so they can be praised; pray for spouse to change so you can avoid your own sins.

Qualifications:

- Act while God works to clarify motives. This can be blurry, but God can make it clear to you if you ask him (Ps. 139:23,24; Phil. 3:15). If we are doing the right thing with wrong motives, the answer is not to stop doing the right thing. Rather, it is to ask God to do whatever is needed to purify your motives.
- Distinguish between needs and wants (Mt 6:32,33). God promises to meet our needs, but we frequently define wants as needs. Refer back to James 4:3.

5. We have a legitimate request — but we have a controversy with God.

(James 1:6-8) But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. (7) For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, (8) being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

"Doubter" here is not talking about someone who experiences contradictory thoughts or feelings welling up within him—we all have this at times, and God does not hold this against us (Mk. 9:24).

The "doubter" in this context is the "double-minded man"—the person who presents an outward show of concern for God's will, but who inwardly loves the world (note Jas. 4:8 context).

(Ps. 66:18) If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear;

"Hearing" here means answering. "Regarding wickedness" does not mean being occasionally assaulted by temptations while basically being responsive to God's moral leadership. Rather, it means to choose rebellion against God's moral will.

(1 Pet. 3:7) You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Peter singles this out as a common controversy with God. If you choose an unloving, unforgiving, scornful, etc. attitude toward your own spouse ("Heal my marriage - but I won't forgive my wife!"), this is such a serious issue that God may have to discipline you. One way he does this is to stop answering your prayers.

Example: Should a consistent fornicator expect revelation when asking for guidance on career choice? Can a man immersed in pornography expect his depression to lift?

In other words, this is a form of loving discipline to get our attention in the area of controversy.

6. God will not normally violate a person's free will to grant a request.

Since part of God's will is for humans to have free choice, praying for God to make people do things against their will is probably against God's will. Rather, we can pray to God for him to influence them.

Examples:

It's fine to pray for people to come to Christ because this is aligning our hearts with God's will for them. But it seems better to focus our prayer on things like God showing them their need, convicting them of their sin, bringing Christians into their lives, empowering us to share the gospel to them, etc.

This would apply also to Christians who need to repent of wrong attitudes, behaviors, etc. We should focus our prayers on things like asking God to discipline them, enabling us and others to do our parts in confronting them, etc.

Conclusion

We are *not* saying that we can always determine why God has not granted our requests. God will not always reveal (in this life) the specific reasons for this. He chose to explain to Paul why he wouldn't heal him (2 Cor. 12), but he evidently didn't explain to Job why he lost everything. We

should evaluate the possible reasons on our part, do our best to eliminate those reasons or amend our prayers—and then trust him with it and go on. The better we know scripture, the more answered prayer we'll see and the better we'll understand why some are not answered.

Prayer as it relates to the other other means of growth

Fellowship	Jesus gave corporate prayer a special place when he said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 18:19). Based on this promise, we may fairly conclude that corporate prayer is more powerful than individual prayer, if only because when two or more agree, they have a better chance of truly discerning the will of God. The prayer ministry of the church is one of its most important.
Ministry	A ministry weak in prayer will tend to be overly strong on human effort. What we cannot accomplish via the power of God, we will try to supply through our own power. As we lose faith in the effectiveness of prayer, we may succumb to the temptation to use force and compulsion on people in an effort to bend them to our will.
Word	We need to pray that God will take scriptural truth and apply it to our lives in a living way. If we have learned the scriptures in good measure, God will find it easier to bring us understanding about what he is doing in our daily lives.
Suffering	Cultivating the vertical perspective through abiding in Christ is a prerequisite for making the Lord's discipline effective in our lives. As we shall see later, those who will not take their trials to God in prayer—not just asking that the trial go away, but that they understand what he is teaching—will not benefit from the suffering they undergo.

Charts from, Dennis McCallum, "[Walking in Victory](#),"

Memory Verses

1 Jn. 5:14,15* - We can be certain God will answer our requests when they are according to his will.

Col. 4:2-4* - We should be consistent, alert, and thankful in prayer. We should pray for opportunities to share the gospel with non-Christians.

Matt. 18:19* - Corporate prayer may be more effective than individual prayer (NEXT WEEK)