

WHY BAPTISTS BELIEVE WHAT BAPTISTS BELIEVE, PART 21

GOD'S WORD AND PRAYER

Prayer is an important part of the Christian life. In fact, it is our source of strength. We Christians need strength, don't we? The Christian life is tough. Life in general is tough. We have a lot of important decisions to make. We have relationships and situations that require wisdom. We need God's help. The only power, wisdom and understanding we have comes from the Lord working in us and through us. We get that through His Word and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit; and prayer is part of that.

So, what do Baptists believe about prayer? The only thing the Baptist Faith and Message says about prayer is that we should pray. Under the heading "The Kingdom" it says, "Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth." Under the heading "Peace and War" it says, "Christian people throughout the world should pray for the reign of the Prince of Peace." But there are no profound theological statements made about prayer in the Baptist Faith and Message.

We know prayer is important to us Baptists based on our practices. Our church has a regular Wednesday night Prayer Meeting. We have a prayer room ministry. Each worship service includes prayer – several times throughout each service. If you ask our Pastor why he feels like Sunday School is so important, one of the things he will tell you that it is in these small groups where we get to know people, learn about their needs, and can pray with each other about them. So, we know prayer is important to Baptists just based on how they practice.

But for us to get answers as to why prayer is important, we need to turn to the authority, which is God's word. We have already established that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God. So, let's see what the Bible has to say about prayer.

Prayer must be very important because we read in the Bible often of people praying, including Jesus Himself. Here are several verses about prayer from the Gospels about Jesus's prayer life... "And after He [Jesus] had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone" (Matthew 14:23). "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, He [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there He prayed" (Mark 1:35). "But He [Jesus] would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16). "In these days He [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and all night He continued in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). Can you imagine praying all night? Prayer was obviously very important to Jesus.

So, what exactly is prayer? It's talking to God. Prayer is a two-way communication between us and God. Think about it. The Creator of the universe desires to have intimate fellowship with US. He wants to talk to US and reveal Himself to US. The conduits of communication between God and ourselves are His Word and prayer. God's Word, the Bible and prayer - they go hand in hand.

[Question 1] Let's make this personal. In His Word **God** speaks to **me**. In prayer **I** speak to **God**. If there is to be true communication, GOD and I must both take part.

Let me give you my own personal experience regarding prayer. When I am by myself praying in private, in my mind, I let my thoughts pray for me. I often pray in pictures and thoughts, not always putting things into words. God knows what I am trying to say through the Holy Spirit. I can just let my thoughts be my prayer. So, I pray differently when I am by myself than I do in a group praying out loud. When I am praying in a group I have to put things into words. Prayer is communication, but it doesn't necessarily have to be in spoken words. God knows our hearts and minds.

The Bible places certain conditions on prayer. I don't mean to be flippant about this, but God is not some sort of a cosmic genie who exists just to fulfill our every wish. To have an effective prayer life we must meet certain conditions. Consider the following passages:

[Question 2] "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). **D.** "Ask... seek... knock..." What is the condition placed on prayer? We are purposeful about your prayer and have a hopeful expectancy.

Jesus is speaking: "Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). **C.** "Whatever you ask in My name..." What does it mean to ask something in Jesus's name? What is the condition? We are yielding to His will, His purposes and desires for us.

Again, Jesus says, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). **B.** "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you..." What is this condition all about? We are abiding in Jesus, connected to Him. We pray in agreement to the words, the teachings of Jesus that have been recorded for us in His word. We want to please God and so we are striving to be obedient to what He says.

"And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him" (1 John 3:22). **E.** "Because we keep His commandments..." What is the condition here on our prayer life? We must do what God says to do. We must be living in obedience to God.

"And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:14-15). **A.** "If we ask anything according to His will..." What does "according to His

will” mean? What is the condition? We pray with confidence because we are asking what He wants us to, consistent with His desires for us. There is a connection, then, between our prayer life and the word of God, isn’t there?

This question ends by asking “If we do all of these things” – we ask purposely, we are yielded to Him, we are being obedient to His word, we are relying on Him, we are trusting Him, we want to please Him and are submitted to His will – “what can we be confident of?” God hears your prayers and will answer you. We may not get exactly what WE want and we will talk more about that later.

Prayer is all about a relationship. Remember that relationships are a two-way street. If the other person doesn’t want a relationship with you, it will not go very far. I don’t care how much you want it. It must be both ways. I can tell you, based on His word, God wants a relationship with us. He sent His Son Jesus to die for us so that we could have a relationship with Him! The question is, “Do we want a relationship with Him?”

[Question 3] makes a series of statements and you are asked whether the statement is True or False. This is based on the scripture shown.

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to Him” (Proverbs 15:8). Like many of the proverbs there is a contrast going on. Here the contrast is between the “wicked” and the “upright.” The wicked is defined as someone who is living in sin, has some sin in their life. The upright is someone who is doing what God wants him or her to do. Both are doing religious activities, but one is an abomination to the Lord and one is acceptable. This reminds me of the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis Chapter 4. Both offered sacrifices to God. One was accepted while the other was not.

True or false? The Lord delights in our religious activities. The answer is... **it depends!** That sounds like a cop-out but it really isn't. If your heart is right then your religious activities, such as sacrifices or prayers, will be acceptable to God. On the other hand, if you are not, if you are living in sin, then He will not take delight in whatever activities you do, religious or otherwise.

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

True or false? We must worship God in spirit and in truth That is obviously **True**. What does it mean to “worship in spirit and truth.” God is spirit. Worshipping in spirit means that the Holy Spirit helps our spirit to worship. Worshipping in truth could mean a couple of things. First, the truth of God's word. Based on God's word we know that He delights in our worship of Him. Second, truth can be OUR honesty with God about how WE are feeling. If our feelings are not compatible with worship, then we need to confess that to Him and let God work on us.

Jesus is getting ready to tell a parable. It's the one about the unrighteous judge. This lady keeps nagging and bothering the judge and he says, “Go away, lady!” Finally, he relents and says, “OK, what do you want?” He listens to her trying to get her out of his hair. So that is the parable Jesus is about to tell. But Luke begins with this statement about Jesus: “And He [Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

True or false? Prayer helps us to not become discouraged. That is **True**. If that judge, who was not a good guy, finally listens to the lady, how much more is God who loves us going to listen to us? If God doesn't answer your prayer, keep going! God is going to answer you. Job did that. Read the book of Job. You have 30 chapters of Job wrestling with God before God finally answers him. How many years did Joseph in prison in Egypt pray to God about

delivering him from that prison? Twenty years! Joseph kept praying and God finally answered him. But again, sometimes God's answer will not be what we want or in the timeframe we want.

“The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth” (Psalm 145:18). Remember, we have to be honest with God.

True or false? The Lord hears anyone who calls to Him. This one is a tough one. The question says, “The LORD hears...” But the verse says, “The LORD is near...” It says nothing about hearing him. The answer is **True**. God DOES hear. However, based on the conditions we talked about before, in order for God to regard a person's prayer, their prayer must be made with the right attitude and “in truth.” In other words, one must be completely honest with God. Jesus taught that God will not regard the prayer of a spiritually proud person (Luke 18:10-14). James says, “You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly...” (James 4:3). We must pray with the right motives. So then, while it is true that God hears our prayers, there are some stipulations as to whether or not He will regard, consider them.

“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling” (1 Timothy 2:8). True or false? Effective prayer has nothing to do with feelings of anger. The answer is **False**. Having the proper attitudes toward others directly impacts our fellowship with God and, therefore, our prayer life. Jesus taught that “if you are offering your gift at the altar [religious activity] and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). Get things right with your brother or sister first.

“If you then, who are evil, know how 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!” (Matthew 7:11). True or false? God desires to give good gifts to His children. That is **True**. Aren't you glad?

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18). True or false? Unconfessed sin hinders our prayer life. That is absolutely **True**.