

Why pray?

Introduction

Anthony told me that I should make try this talk “more engaging for the youths.” I think he meant I should dumb it down, but I’m not going to do that. I believe that God gave each of us a brain, and I want you to use yours.

I want you to think! In my opinion, most adults have stopped thinking, but it’s not too late for you.... yet.

I’m going to introduce some important teachings to you. I want you to try to stretch your minds around these teachings. These are the eternal truths of God, and I have confidence that the Holy Spirit will shine his light into your minds, so that you will be able to understand.

I will be using a lot of Bible verses, because I want you to know that what I am going to say is not dreamed up by myself. God Himself said it, in His word. The Bible is the most important book in your life. Study it! Remember that God is trustworthy and that what He tells us in His word is true. Believe it and rejoice. Let us pray.

Father, thank you for the privilege of prayer, and that you commanded it so that your name may be glorified. I pray that you will fill me now with your holy spirit, so that I may rightly divide your word of truth, and teach it faithfully. Amen.

What is prayer?

Prayer is simply asking a favour from God.

Of course, prayer also includes worship, thanksgiving, confession of sins and pouring out our hearts to God – these are all very important. But for today I just want to concentrate on one aspect of prayer – asking God for help.

Why pray?

God commands it; It glorifies God; It strengthens our faith; God is our father!

This is a summary of the four main points I will be covering in this talk. We are to pray because God commands it; It glorifies God; It strengthens our faith; God is our father!

*Can prayer change God's mind?
God does nothing except in answer to prayer.....?*

You have probably heard or read this saying somewhere before:

God does nothing except in answer to prayer. It sounds very spiritual, and gives us a great motivation to get down on our knees and pray.

But is it really true? Is it the real reason why we should pray? Let's look at what the Bible says.

God is sovereign

Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. (Psa 115:3)

Well, the Bible tells us that God is sovereign. That means he has all ultimate authority, and decides everything. He rulez.

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" (Dan 4:35)

I'm now going to read a key passage from Ezekiel, that gives quite a good insight into God's motivation for all the things he does. Listen to what it says:

The context of this passage is that the Israelites had sinned against God after they had entered the promised land, by indulging in idolatry and sexual immorality and sacrificing their children as human sacrifices to Molech. God had punished them by allowing them to be conquered and carried away to Babylon. Yet he decided to forgive them and restore them to their own land, and he did it for the sake of his own name. He says:

"But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name.

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.

It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.

"Thus says the Lord GOD: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their people like a flock. (Eze 36:21-37, excerpts)

This very important passage speaks of our salvation - deliverance from the bondage of sin, being given a new heart so that we may willingly obey God and be his holy people.

Take note especially that God does all of this for the sake of his own glory, which he is passionate about. He also does it on his own initiative, and not in response to a prayer!

Notice, in fact, that it is only at the very end that God says he will let the Israelites ask him to do something for them – after he's already gone ahead and done all those great and marvellous things for them.

I think these passages show quite clearly that to say God will not do anything until and unless we ask him, is an unbiblical view of God. We must realize that everything revolves around God and his will, not around us.

Although God does want us to pray, he is certainly not restricted if we refuse to obey his command! He can and will jolly well do what he wants to do, otherwise he wouldn't be God!

God does not change his mind

For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal 3:6)

God does not change – he says so explicitly in this verse. And the fact that he does not change is something we should take comfort in. It means that he will continue to love those he has set his heart upon to love, even though they act wickedly and sin against him, as in the context of this passage. God is telling the Israelites that no matter what they do, he will not change. He will continue to love them and not destroy them as they deserve.

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)

God does not change his mind. If he says he's going to do something, he's going to do. He is a God who keeps his word.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Heb 13:8)

Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will. (Eph 1:4-5)

God is the one who initiated our salvation, and he did it for the sake of his own glory.

If any part of salvation depended on us, we would all be lost. The Bible tells us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

God chose us – all of us who are in Christ - from before the foundation of the world! And he does not change his mind!

I don't know about you, but that's a very comforting thought for me – that my salvation does not depend upon myself but purely upon the grace and faithfulness of God.

Paul declares that “he who started a good work in you will bring it to its fullest completion!” (Phil 1:6)

God has done everything that is necessary for our salvation, and he did it for the sake of his own glory, to show forth his marvellous grace.

BUT wait a minute!

Elsewhere in the Bible, it seems that God indeed changes his mind.

And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” (Gen 6:6-7)

And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Exo 32:14)

How do we explain this?

How do we explain this seeming contradiction in the Bible? On the one hand, God assures us that he does not change his mind. On the other hand there are verses like the ones I have shown.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55:8-9)

We need to understand that God is not like us. There is none like him. He is infinitely over and above every created thing. There is only one God, and there is no other being who comes anywhere close to being like him.

It is true that man is made in the image of God, but that is like saying an image in a mirror is as real or as substantial, as “3D” as the man standing in front of the mirror. He is the creator, we are the creatures, and his ways are infinitely higher than our ways.

God takes on human characteristics to help us understand him .

Since God is infinitely greater than we are, it is sometimes difficult for our finite minds to comprehend an infinite God.

And so God must stoop to describing his ways to us in terms we can understand, and he does this by taking on the characteristics of a human being, including the ability to change his mind.

All throughout the Bible are references to God having eyes, ears, arms – but of course we know these are not literal. This is called anthropomorphism – anthropo means human, and morph means form. God takes on human form. The ultimate revelation of God to us is, in fact, Jesus Christ being made man.

God, being perfect, does not change his mind, because you only change your mind after being presented with some new information which you did not possess before. God, being all-knowing and in possession of all possible knowledge, will never face this situation.

But we live in a timeline. We learn new things as we grow, and our minds – our ideas and attitudes - continuously change as we receive and process new information. This is what it means to be human.

In the Bible, God is given human attributes (such as being sorry he made man, and relenting from sending disaster) so that we can understand him a little better, even though, in reality, God is not a man like we are.

Let me elaborate a little on this...

God is above and beyond time

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1)

Think about this verse for just a moment. What does it tell us about God? It tells us that he exists outside of time. In the beginning, before time began, God already existed! He was the one that started the clock ticking and created the heavens and the earth.

We, on the other hand, exist within time. We live in a timeline, which moves in one direction only (except in the curious case of Benjamin Button, but we won't go there). For us, there is the present, there is the past, and there is the future. But for God, there is no such thing! He sees all the events of all of time simultaneously. That is why we are told that a day is to the Lord as a thousand years.

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2Pe 3:8)

God interacts with us within time, but he himself is above time, and beyond time. We see his actions along a timeline, and they seem to change. From our point of view, God seems to sometimes change his mind about certain things, because we don't see the big picture!

But God has the helicopter view, so to speak. He sees everything at once, and he knows what he's doing. Everything that happens does so according to his purposed will. He is in charge, and he is in full control of every event that happens in this universe.

He did not set things in motion, and then intervene every now and then to tweak events here and there. Every position of every single atom in the universe throughout the history of time was determined by God. As Paul Washer once said: There isn't a maverick molecule in the universe! Every event that happens to you happens according to the will of God, and will eventually work itself out to God's greatest glory.

It is like how we can see a mouse trying to find its way around in a maze to get to a piece of cheese. We know where the cheese is, and we can see the mouse getting frustrated at certain seeming dead ends, in fact we can predict which ones the mouse is going to encounter and have to turn back. But we can also see that there is indeed a way through the maze to get to the cheese, and we know that the mouse will eventually find its way to it. But the mouse does not know that!

And so in 2 Kings 20, God tells Hezekiah he is going to die, and Hezekiah prays to God, and God then tells Hezekiah: OK you've got fifteen more years to live. And he does.

How is this related to what we just discussed? God seems to have changed his mind in response to Hezekiah's prayer. But I believe that although God knew all along that he intended Hezekiah to die 15 years later, he also chose to intervene miraculously in answer to Hezekiah's prayer, to make that happen. And God, being all-knowing, could see from outside of time and know that Hezekiah would pray to him when told of his impending death, even before Hezekiah did it!

In other words, as C S Lewis put it, it's like a drama, in which the playwright already knows the whole play and how everything will turn out, but those watching the play do not. They may think a character is going to die, and then see that character miraculously saved from death. But the playwright, the one who wrote the play, already knew that, because he was the one who wrote the script!

Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear. (Isa 65:24)

Think of the implications of this verse: God is outside of time, and sees and knows everything before it is going to happen - even what we are going to pray for – because he willed it!

So why pray?

So what do we have? We know that God is sovereign, that he does whatever he wants to do. And we also know that he never changes his mind, and that whatever he wishes will come to pass. This is what the Bible clearly teaches.

You begin to see that this is indeed a good question: Why pray? Why should we bother praying, if God has got everything planned out, and is going to do what he wants to do anyway?

Waste of time, right? Just sit back, relax, let him do everything he wants to do.

But we know we should pray. So why should we pray?

We should pray because:

*God commands it
It glorifies God
It strengthens our faith
God is our father!*

1. God commands us to pray

God commands us to pray, and, if nothing else, we should obey his command.

Thus says the Lord GOD: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their people like a flock. (Eze 36:37)

The King James version has it this way: “I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them.”

I was very struck by this verse when I first read it. As I said earlier, it comes right at the end of a very long passage where God declares what he intended to do for the Israelites for the sake of his own name and his own glory. AFTER doing ALL those things for them, he makes a very curious statement and says that he wants them to make a request of him in this one last thing: to increase the people like a flock.

It is almost like God saying: “OK lah – this one I want you to ask me for it.”

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess 5:17)

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. (James 5:13)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

I think it's very clear that God commands us to pray. We are to pray when we are sick, and when we need anything from God. The Christian life is one of total continuous dependence on God, not just for bodily and material needs, but also for spiritual needs.

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. (Col 4:2)

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mat 26:41)

More verses telling us that God commands us to pray. We are to watch and pray, particularly in the area of temptation. When faced with temptation, flee to God! He will help you! Don't try to resist in your own strength, but ask God for help!

And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Luke 10:2)

Finally, we are exhorted to pray specifically for labourers to gather the harvest. The labourers are not just people like Chai Hwa. "Lord, send him!" The labourers are you and me. The great commission – to be witnesses of Jesus Christ – applies to every believer who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour.

2. Prayer glorifies God

Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. (Psa 50:15)

This is one of the verses that struck me when I first read it. It lays out so clearly the reason why God wants us to pray – for his glory! It was the first verse I thought of when Anthony first asked me to share on this topic, and it just speaks so clearly for itself.

God commands us to call on him in the day of trouble. He promises he will answer our prayer and deliver us. And the outcome of all this is that God will be glorified. We will glorify him.

It sounds so simple and yet, if you think about it, it's the heart of

the gospel. We are all in trouble, because we have sinned against an almighty God and face his righteous wrath. But while we were yet sinners, he sent Jesus, his only begotten son, to die for our sins, and then he sends his apostles to proclaim the gospel – that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved!

And the great outcome of the gospel story, the final reason for the world being created, man falling into sin and the entire plan of redemption - is that God will be glorified!

God is greatly concerned for his own glory

For my own sake, even for my own sake, will I do it. For how should my name be polluted; and I will not give my glory to another. Isaiah 48:11.

Remember that passage from Ezekiel? Let me just repeat out some of the important verses here:

But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name.

It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it. "Thus says the Lord GOD: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their people like a flock. (Eze 36:21-37, excerpts)

Can you see very clearly just how concerned God is for his own glory?

Understanding God and his glory

Why is God such a "glory-seeker"? Is he insecure?

I will now try to explain WHY God is so concerned about his glory.

When we talk about the glory of God, we are referring to his worth. The Hebrew word for the glory of God is "kabod", which means weight. We are talking about something that has substance, just like gold is nice and heavy and weighty, compared to plastic trinket jewellery. We talk about men and women of substance, meaning that these people have some great worth.

Why is God so concerned about the recognition of his glory? Is he an insecure, egotistical old man who needs the approval and

applause and praise of men before he can be happy? Why doesn't he just do all his wonderful works and then humbly stay in the background, rather than trying to bask in glory all the time? Isn't that very contemptible? After all, we all know people who are "glory-seekers", and we instinctively dislike them. So why does it seem that God is like those people?

Why do we dislike glory-seekers? We dislike them because they are usually people who seek glory and praise which they do not deserve. And they usually do it because they are insecure and seek affirmation. They are not WORTHY of the applause which they seek. But they just like taking credit which does not belong to them, and they enjoy people saying good things about them, even though they have their imperfections.

God deserves all admiration and respect

God is TRULY WORTHY

But, you see, God is different. First of all, he is completely self-sufficient and certainly does not need the praise of men to be happy or to feel secure.

But most importantly, he is TRULY WORTHY. By definition, being God, he is perfect in every way. He knows everything, has infinite power, and is perfectly just and holy and righteous. He is also perfect in love and mercy and kindness, and he demonstrated this by sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins.

To put it in your modern, youthful vernacular: God rocks. He's very pro. He rulez. He's imba (I think that's the latest one). He pwns you. If you're slightly older, you would say: All your base are belong to him.

Call it what you will. God, the one who created you and this whole universe, deserves your admiration and respect. Totally. More than that, he deserves your worship. And rightfully so.

God deserves all admiration and respect and worship

Think of someone you admire greatly. For my son Joel, it would be the programmers who created Maple Story. He thinks that they are really fantastic to have created this online game that he really enjoys playing. For others, it could be one of your teachers, or, for those who watch American Idol, it could be Kris Allen or even Adam Lambert. I understand that they're both fantastic singers with great voices. For me, it would be people who are good at teaching and preaching the word of God – people like John Macarthur, or John Piper, or Jonathan Edwards, or Phil Johnson – or even John Wesley.

Hmm, maybe I should have named my son John instead of Joel. Anyway...

Now, it's perfectly right and proper for you to admire and respect these people, for the qualities that you admire in them. Nothing wrong with that at all. And in the same way, it is right and proper for us to worship God and give him all the glory, because he is infinitely worthy of our respect and admiration and worship, and indeed, we should delight in glorifying him.

I think we can all agree on that.

Why God seeks his own glory

"Imagine a disinterested third party..."

But that does not answer the question we asked earlier – isn't it egotistical for God to be seeking his own glory?

In 1765, Jonathan Edwards wrote a book entitled: "The end for which God created the world" (which basically means: "Why God made the world"). His answer to that question was basically this: God created the world for his own glory.

To resolve the question of whether it is right for God to seek his own glory, he suggested imagining – apart from God and all creation – the existence of a disinterested third party – someone totally wise and totally good, and not created by God – who would act as a judge and impartially decide how much glory should go to whom – how much glory God should receive, and how much glory each and every one of his creatures should receive – for their goodness or beauty or virtue or what not.

The conclusion, of course, would be that God should receive all the glory, because he deserves all of it. Whatever good is in any creature comes from him, because he created that creature. He alone is the creator, and he alone deserves all glory.

Now, no such third party exists. Only God, who fits the description of such a wise and impartial and all-knowing judge of who glory should go to. And who can he possibly give glory to except himself, if he were to be perfectly wise and fair and good?

Do you begin to see why God is so concerned for his own glory? It is the only right thing for him to do, as God! Will not the judge of all the earth do right? He most values the most valuable thing in the universe, and that is himself. He is the one and only who deserves all glory, and he will make darn sure that he gets it – and magnifies it – because that is in his nature – to do the right thing.

I want to point out here that it is a very good thing for us that God seeks to magnify his own glory.

When we honour the top athlete in the Olympic Games, all the rest of the athletes, although they respect the champion, will feel a sense of sadness and loss, that they did not win the gold medal. It's a zero sum game, meaning that for every winner, there will be a loser.

Where God's glory is concerned, on the other hand, the more God is glorified, the greater our happiness is. There is no such thing as God getting more glory, so we will be getting less glory, and we will be less happy. All glory belongs to God.

God's holiness, righteousness and justice

For instance, one aspect of God's glory is his holiness and righteousness and justice.

Our happiness rests in God's holiness. If God were not holy and just and righteous, what hope would we have in this world?

Hitler was a very powerful man, and with that power, he managed to do a lot of evil, because his character was evil. Yet Hitler's power was nothing compared to God's power.

Can you imagine if God's character was like that of Hitler? Life on earth (and in heaven) would be a living hell.

But because we know and rejoice that God is holy and righteous and just, we know we can trust that he will do the right thing. The more righteous God is, the greater our happiness.

God's mercy and compassion

Another aspect of God's glory is his mercy and compassion as well as his justice.

Then Moses said, "Please let me see your glory." (Exo 33:18)

Then he passed in front of Moses, calling out, "The LORD, the LORD, a compassionate and merciful God, patient, always faithful and ready to forgive." (Exo 34:6)

If it were not for God's mercy and readiness to forgive, we would not have the hope of the gospel. And so we rejoice in this aspect of God's glory. It is manifested for our greatest good and our greatest happiness. The more God's glory is magnified in his willingness to forgive us our sins, the greater our happiness.

God's great love for us

God is love. (1 John 4:8)

Finally, God's glory is manifested in his father heart of love for us. He desires our greatest good, He loves us. This love he has for us originates from within himself, because he is love, as this verse tells us. It does not originate from any loveliness within ourselves. In fact, we are all monsters of iniquity.

Let's say someone could look into my heart, and take a video of all the thoughts that go through my mind 24 hours a day. All the dirty little horrible things that I think of, that I would like to do but don't do simply because I know I could not get away with it.

All the proud thoughts about how good I am, the ways in which I justify myself even though I know I am just being dishonest with myself.

Imagine if someone put that video up on this screen here, and everyone could see it and know exactly what goes on in my mind and heart.

Do you think I would hang around until that video is finished? I would probably run out of here the moment it started, and never dare to show my face here again, because of the shame, even though I know, from the Bible, that the same description applies to each and every one of us here.

The Bible tells us that God looks into our hearts and sees all the evil that is in there.

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb 4:13)

And yet he loved us enough to send Jesus to die on the cross for us while we were yet sinners. He does not love us because there's anything in us that is lovely. He loves us because he is love.

Such love is the glory of God, and the more this is magnified, the greater our happiness.

Do understand – and this is a very important point - that God's MAIN aim is his own glory, and not our happiness. But it is a win-win situation - the more God is glorified, the greater our happiness will be, because the more of his love and his goodness we will get to enjoy.

Summary of the glory of God

*God deserves all glory
God always does the right thing
The right thing is to give glory where it is due
Therefore God seeks his own glory
He commands us to pray so that he may be glorified
The more God is glorified, the greater our happiness*

To summarize, God deserves all glory. Since God always does the right thing, and the right thing is to give glory where glory is due, therefore God will seek his own glory, and one of the ways he does this is to command us to call to him in the day of trouble, so that he may deliver us, and we may glorify his name. And the more God is glorified, the greater our happiness, because we enjoy the blessings for which we glorify God!

3. Prayer strengthens our faith!

Obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:9)

When we pray, and God answers our prayers, he is proving to us that he is trustworthy, and loves us with an everlasting love. He reveals his character to us in this way. Our salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Do note that all of salvation is a free gift from God, including our faith by which we can lay hold of the promises of God! Remember the man with the epileptic son who cried out – Lord, I believe, help my unbelief! Our faith should not be in our faith, but in God.

I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. (2 Tim 1:12)

How was Paul able to say that with such confidence? I think it came not just from a personal encounter with the Lord, but by a lifetime of seeing God answer his prayers for even the smallest things he needed.

Building a relationship of trust with anyone is a matter of seeing their faithfulness first with little things, and then with bigger and bigger things. The same applies to our relationship with God.

Our salvation depends on only one thing – our faith in Jesus Christ. The stronger our faith is, the greater our assurance of salvation, which is a great blessing.

4. God is our father

Understanding God's character

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jer 31:3)

This sovereign, all powerful God is also a loving father to his children. We need to understand God's character – how he feels towards us who are in Christ Jesus.

Although God loves all his creatures – the Bible tells us he sends his rain on the just and the unjust – he reserves a special love for those whom he calls his children, whom Jesus Christ died for.

I will protect you because you know my name. When you call to me, I will answer you. I will be with you when you are in trouble. I will save you and honor you. I will satisfy you with a long life. I will show you how I will save you. (Psa 91:14-16)

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. (Jer 29:11-12)

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. (1Jn 5:14-15)

Who are God's children?

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)

Jesus told Nicodemus: “You must be born again.” The new birth, or what theologians call regeneration, is a work of God which I described earlier in that passage from Ezekiel. God himself will take out our old heart of stone and change it to a heart of flesh, one that loves him and willingly obeys him.

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Gal 3:26)

The promise of being God's children, and of God being a father to us, only applies to those who are IN Christ – those who believe in Jesus Christ with a saving faith, who have had their hearts transformed and have repented of their sins.

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal 4:6)

As true Christians, we have the gift of the holy spirit in our hearts, by which we can address God as an intimate, loving father.

Are you a child of God?

At this point, you might be starting to wonder – am I God's child? Am I one of these privileged ones whom the father loves with a special love?

The Bible encourages us to think about these things. 2 Cor 13:5 says: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? - unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

What are some of the signs that you are indeed a true Christian?

Well, have you repented of your sins? Do you truly believe in Jesus Christ and confess him as the Lord of your life, and trust in him alone for your salvation? Do you love God with all your heart? Do you seek only to please him? Do you hate sin? Do you love fellow Christians with a love you can't explain? Do you find your life becoming progressively more holy?

And - as this verse says - do you have the witness of the holy spirit – a voice speaking to your heart that you indeed belong to God, and you can call him Abba father?

All these are evidences (found in the book of 1 John) that can assure you that you have indeed passed from death to life, and that you are a child of God.

How to be saved

If not, then cry out to God. Call upon him to save you, because the Bible promises that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom 10:13). Whoever believes on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16). If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom 10:9)

From here on, I will assume that you are indeed a child of God, because these things only apply to children of God.

The father heart of God

Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 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! (Mat 7:9-11)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (Jas 1:17)

God is a loving father, who delights to give good gifts to his children. Notice that here is another verse that tells us about the unchangeable nature of God. This is designed to comfort us, because then we can be sure that his love for us never wavers. As someone has said, there is nothing we can do that can make him love us more, and there is nothing we can do that can make him love us less. He has set his love on us.

My experience with my own father was a very happy one. He was a very indulgent father, and because of that I have never had any problem understanding the concept of God as a loving father. I remember he was very fond of me, and once, he brought me to the department store and told me to pick whatever toys I wanted. I also remember waking up one morning and deciding that I wanted to drink Nestle fresh milk, so he drove me to the neighbourhood provision store just to buy that for me. He also tapau'ed Hokkien mee home for me quite often, which is why I became quite fat as a child.

For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in. (Psa 27:10)

My father died when I was about 10 years old, so I never grew old enough to rebel against him and develop an antagonistic relationship. I only have fond memories of my father. My mother died a couple of years later, when I was 12 years old, and, even though I did not know it then, God remained faithful to the promise he made in this verse.

I don't recall ever being very worried that I had become an orphan by the age of 12. I just figured that life would go on, and it did.

God has never failed me, even though I remember having to survive on instant noodles for a period of time, which I supplemented with cheap protein like tofu, fishcake and eggs.

God's loving discipline

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Heb 12:5-6)

Although my father helped me understand and appreciate the loving father heart of God, this is only one side of the story.

You see, I can remember only one single time that my father ever disciplined me. That was when he was already very ill and about to die. It was over a very small matter, and I think he was

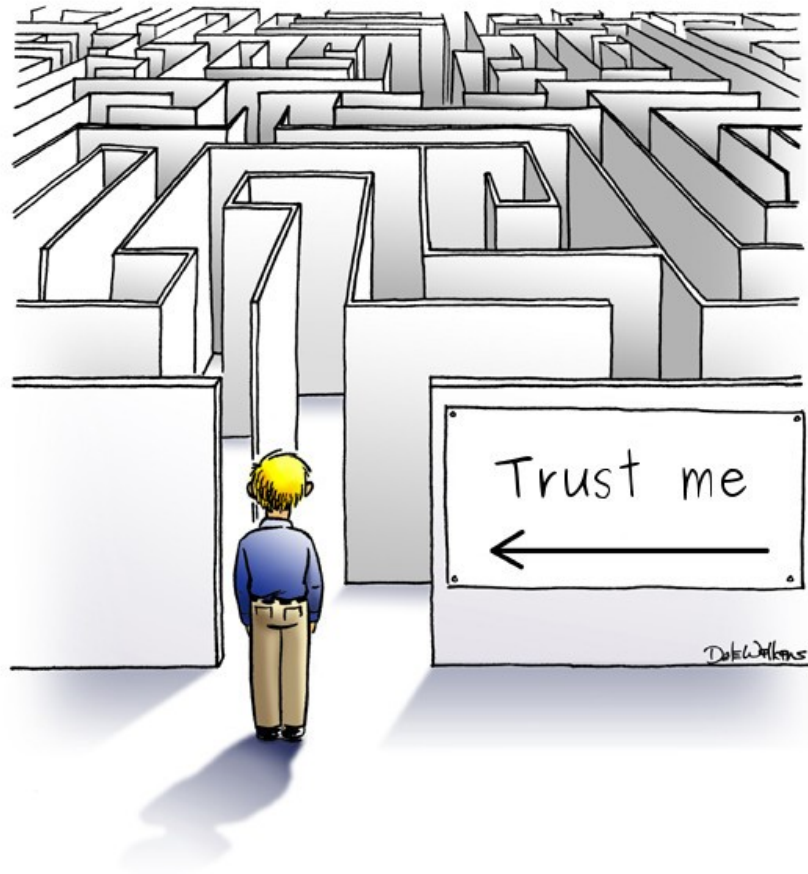
frustrated with his ill health more than with me. He tried to hit me with his walking stick, but he only managed to do so quite feebly, and I can say honestly that it did not hurt physically at all (but I was crying anyway as I tried to understand what had made him so angry with me).

God, on the other hand, loves us enough to discipline us, and part of that discipline is saying no to some of our requests. He also sends us trials to strengthen our faith.

Let me give you an example. If my son asks me for an apple, or anything that will delight him and is good for him, I will take great delight in giving it to him. If, on the other hand, he asks me for, say, a pack of cigarettes – do you think I will happily give that to him?

I have young patients who are allergic to peanuts and chocolates. I strictly warn their parents never to let the child have these two things, and they enforce this strictly. Then the grandparents visit the home, and give the child some chocolates, and the child ends up in the hospital with an asthma attack. Who do you think showed real love to the child?

Another example. Many young children come to the clinic to have vaccinations. Some of them scream and beg and plead with their parents to be spared. Some even turn violent. Some parents will beg and cajole the child and simply prolong the child's agony. Other parents will just grab the child, hold the child still, and everything will be over before the child knows it. Which parent is being more kind? No matter what, the vaccination is for the child's own good. But which child is ever able to see that when faced with the needle?



Remember that illustration about the mouse in the maze trying to find the cheese? From God's perspective, he can see things which we cannot. He can see mousetraps lying in wait at certain turnings, and gently guide us away from those. He can see a better way to reach the cheese, and guide us in those ways. He does this by sometimes not answering our prayers in the way that we would like, but we can trust that he knows what he is doing.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:16)

Why am I telling you all these stories? What's it got to do with the topic – why we should pray?

The point I am trying to make is this: As God's children, we can approach God with full confidence knowing that he delights to answer our prayers and that he knows what is best for us.

We also know that there will be times he does NOT answer our prayers, but we can rest in the assurance that he withholds his answer to our requests for our own good.

And finally, we can be assured that everything that happens to us, all the good things as well as all the seemingly bad things – ALL things work together for good to those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

The key to this confidence is to understand and appreciate the father heart of God, as revealed to us in the Bible, as well as in our own experiences, and the witness of the holy spirit in our hearts.

As I share this, I am aware that some of you may not have been blessed with fathers who mirrored the love of God the way mine did. My word to you is this: whether your earthly father was good or not, your heavenly father most certainly is a good father. If he gave you a bad father, you can sure of one thing – it was for a good reason.

Summary

So why do we pray?

We pray because God commands us to do so, and we should obey his commandments.

We pray because it glorifies God (and glorifying God is right and good and leads to our greatest happiness).

We pray because it will strengthen our faith. How will it strengthen our faith? By helping us understand who God truly is – a God who rules the universe, yet loves us as a doting father, who knows everything and disciplines and guides us according to his great wisdom and power, and who is both willing and able to save us to the uttermost from our sins through faith in Jesus Christ.

And finally, we pray simply because God is our father, and we are his children. He loves us and delights to answer our prayers.

You notice I have not even touched on HOW we should pray – in faith, according to the will of God, not according to our own desires, with clean hands and a pure heart, boldly, with confidence, and in submission to God's will. Maybe I can deal with that in another session, God willing.

Let us pray:

Father, thank you once again for the tremendous privilege of prayer. We know that it is only through the blood of Jesus Christ that we may boldly come into your presence to place our petitions before you. Thank you for being our father, and making us your children. May your name be glorified when we call upon you, and you deliver us. Amen.