



## Our Response to God

Psalm 124 & James 5:13-18  
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Confronted with the awesome responsibility to preach upon the Christian practice of prayer, I did what every self-respecting pastor might do: I “googled” the word prayer. I can tell you that it wasn’t really that helpful but it did net these two items:

First, a prayer that was rendered by someone who thought it was immensely funny. Let’s see what you think:

**Dear Lord, so far today, I have done all right. I haven’t gossiped, haven’t been greedy,**

**grumpy, nasty, selfish or over-indulgent. I’m very thankful for that. However, in just a few minutes, I’m going to get out of bed. From then on, I’m going to need a lot more help. Amen.**

Secondly, a simple single-paneled cartoon with a middle-aged man dressed neatly in pajamas kneeling next to his bed with the simple caption: “Please RSVP.”

The first one is certainly funny and meant to cause a chuckle, the other, though also humorous, gets more to the heart of the matter for most folks when it comes to prayer: we expect an answer, an RSVP from God when we address the Almighty with knees bent and humble hearts. We approach God in prayer for any number of reasons, mostly it seems when we perceive that we are in some kind of trouble, confusion or lack. We seek from God peace in this world, ends to conflicts, love amongst humankind and resolution to our own personal conflicts, problems and conundrums. But by whatever means or situations that prompts us, most of the times when we pray, we are seeking a response from God.

If we take the witness of scripture seriously and the teaching of the church over the long centuries intervening between ourselves and the close of the canon, we would have to say that this seeking a response is putting things a bit backwards. If our goal in prayer is to seek a response from God, we have missed the basic and essential element of prayer: our response to God’s address. That is right, prayer is meant for us to engage in a conversation that we have not started or initiated, but rather one that has been begun by God and God’s address to us and to this world in his Word, in his Son Jesus Christ.

Think about that for a moment. Prayer is our response to what God has already done in Jesus Christ ... or at least it should be. God has initiated a conversation with his action in creation, providence and redemption. He has placed before us his work on our behalf and for the world in Jesus Christ and it is only right or seemingly somewhat natural that we would respond. The witness of scripture seems plain to me that prayer has been intended by God as our response to his goodness directed toward us.

Eugene Peterson, retired Presbyterian minister and biblical scholar puts it this way:

**The foundational presupposition of all prayer is that God reveals himself personally by means of language. The word of God is not placarded on a billboard, an impersonal notice posted to call our attention to something God once said or did while we are driving down the road to somewhere else. God creates the cosmos with words; he creates us with words; he calls to us, speaks to us,**

**whispers to us using words. Then he gives us, his human creatures, the gift of language; we not only can hear and understand God as he speaks to us, we can speak to him – respond, answer, converse, argue, question. We can pray.**

Peterson puts it all in the right perspective: prayer then is our response to God's initiation of a conversation. Prayer is our response to the proclamation of the Good News that is at the heart of the gospel and of our faith. In prayer, we bring to God our response of thanksgiving for this life that we have received, our acknowledgment of our standing as his children and our gratitude for the grace that we have received. In this conversation we certainly can unburden our hearts of all the things that cause us pain and anxiety in human life for we have been assured with confidence that God does love us and God does hear when we pray.

At the heart of a faithful life is this call to prayer: a confidence or trust that this God whom we address in prayer has already addressed us and all humankind in Jesus Christ with the good news of his love and care for us. Without this foundational understanding we are merely listing things that we would like to have changed about our lives or, on our better days, about the lives of others and the world. Without this foundational trust and assurance, we are just bringing a laundry list of human situations that might plague us today or tomorrow or that have plagued us in the past.

Karl Barth, great theologian of the last century, said it best when he wrote:

**To hold to God is to rely on the fact that God is there for me, and to live in this certainty. ... Because He is for us, we may also be for Him. Because He has given Himself to us, we may also in gratitude give Him the trifle which we have to give. To hold to God thus always means that we receive everything wholly from God and so are wholly active for Him.**

This certainty that Barth writes so well of is not born out of a certainty in our ability to pray rightly or with some kind of prescribed secret formula, but rather with the trust of one who has realized that he or she is loved by God; convinced that what God has accomplished and proclaimed in Jesus Christ. And this that God has done for that one along with the rest of the human family. This confidence born actually in the fact that God has addressed us in Jesus Christ is what should fuel our ability and our urge to respond to God in prayer; to take to God the very things that we must with a confidence that we have been heard and whatever the outcome of a particular trouble or concern, we hold that God is indeed with us. We hold this for we have seen this in Jesus Christ.

Allow me to close with one final quote from Karl Barth on all this ... something for us all to ponder a bit:

**And then I learn that by thinking of Him and looking to Him, my interests are always best provided for.**

This too is prayer ... to learn to trust that in Him, we are all best provided for ...