

“HOW TO PRAY ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS”

Prayer Can Change Your Life - Part 3

Romans 10:14-17; James 1:2-6

May 2, 2010

Prayer can change your life. Over the past couple of weeks we've looked at the four purposes for prayer and the five conditions to have our prayers answered. One of those conditions is that we must pray in faith, believing that God can and will act. Faith is the key that unlocks the door of prayer. But sometimes the situation is so big; the problem so overwhelming that it's hard to have faith. The question is how do we find faith in a faithless situation? Romans 10:17 says that "... *faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*" We get faith by listening to the word of God. If we want to build our faith, we simply have to fill our life with scripture. The more Bible knowledge we have, the more faith we're going to have. The less we know about the Bible, the less faith we'll have.

Okay. So we get faith by knowing the word of God, but how do we use that knowledge in our prayer life, especially as we look at our problems, or try to make tough decisions? Well, the keys to prayer are the promises of God. There are over 7000 promises in the Bible. If we want to have a dynamic prayer life, we claim a promise, grab onto it, lift it before God, and expect an answer from God. There is a verse for every need, for every problem. The more promises we know, the more powerful our prayers will become.

But what if the promise doesn't work? I read about a diabetic man who read the verse, "*If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.*" (John 14:14.) Then he said, "God, I'm going to ask that You cure me of diabetes," and he threw away his insulin. Three days later he died. What happened? God promised. Why didn't it work? Why didn't God fulfill the promise? Well maybe the problem wasn't with God, but with our understanding. You see, we cannot automatically claim a promise that's been given to somebody else. The Holy Spirit has to first give that promise to us. Some promises are given to everybody, and some are not. God speaks to us in two different ways. One is Universally, to everybody. And the second way is Personally, to individuals. These are specific messages for specific situations at specific times. How can we know the difference?

The NT was written in Greek. And in the Greek there were two terms that were translated as "word". "Logos" and "*rha-ma*". Logos is the word of God for everybody. In John 1 we read, "*The Word was God.*" That refers to Christ, who is for everyone. And the Greek word behind that is Logos. Logos is for everyone. But *rha-ma*, which is really a Hebrew word used in the Greek, is the word of God given to a particular person at a particular time. We can only claim a promise when it is a *rha-ma*, a specific word to us.

Sarah was 89 when God told her that she was going to get pregnant. That was an incredible promise, but it was only meant for Sarah. God didn't say, "Every 90 year old woman can have a baby." How scary would that be? But this was not for everyone. It was *rha-ma*, a specific word of God to her and her alone. We cannot take that word to Sarah and claim it as our very own. In John 15:7 it says, "*If you continue to abide in My word, then you can ask for whatever you want and then it will be yours.*" But the term "word" is *rha-ma*, not Logos. Which says, if I continue in God's specific word for me, then my prayer will be granted.

The disciples are out on the sea Jesus is seen walking toward them. The always impulsive Peter says, "Lord, call me and I'll come!" Jesus gives Peter a *rha-ma*, a specific word for a specific situation. He says, "Peter, come!" Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking across the water. Notice that no one else was anxious to get out of the boat. Why? Because it wasn't a word to everybody. It was a word to Peter, only Peter, and only for then and there. The next day, Peter didn't get up and say, "I'm going fishing, but I think I'll walk." It was a specific promise for a specific time. We cannot take that promise and walk across a filled swimming pool.

Often we have trouble grasping that concept. People will read a verse on healing and declare, "God healed them, therefore God must heal me." So they pray and believe and have tremendous faith but in spite of their faith, nothing happens. Then they get mad and say, "God! Why didn't You heal me?" They begin to argue with God,

without ever realizing that that promise was not meant for them. It was a specific word to someone else, and not the general promise.

In the wilderness Satan said to Jesus, “Go ahead and jump off the temple because the Bible says God will take care of You.” Now that is a general promise. “God will take care of you.” And it is true. But remember that if you jump off the roof, God might take care of you in the hospital, or maybe even in heaven, but God will take care of you. It’s a general promise, but not a personal one. Logos, not *rha-ma*. So how does God speak to me personally? Through the Holy Spirit. John 14:26 “*But the counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*” And then in John 16:13 “*But when He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.*” Jesus said that the Holy Spirit will do three things in our life: teach us, remind us, and guide us. The Holy Spirit’s job is to make the scriptures apply to our personal lives. Logos, the general promise is turned into *rha-ma*, a specific promise. It’s called illumination, and it happens all the time.

Have you ever been in worship when all of a sudden you feel like the preacher is speaking directly to you? Like there’s nobody else is in the room. You wonder, “How does he know that? How does she know I’m dealing with that right now? How does he know that’s exactly what I needed to hear?” Regularly people tell me that I was talking about them again. Now I try to convince myself that it is because of my superior knowledge of human behavior. But it has very little to do with me. I proclaim the logos to the world. But the Spirit transforms it to the *rha-ma* to you. I say it to everyone, but God makes it specific for you. That is the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe you’re talking to somebody about a personal problem and you’re thinking about what to say. Suddenly a scripture pops into your head at just the right time. Just exactly what you needed to say. How did it happen? It is a *rha-ma*. The Holy Spirit gave you a specific word, for a specific time, in a specific situation. Or you’ve been worrying about a major decision or struggling with an issue and all of a sudden you remember something that was said in a sermon or a Sunday School class three months ago. It fits perfectly. God gave you a *rha-ma*. He spoke to you personally. That’s the way God works in our lives. The Holy Spirit takes the general word of God and makes it come alive.

But how do we know that those sudden inspirations are really from God? A couple of reasons. **1. It will always agree with the Bible.** God never contradicts what He’s already said. So if you get an impression that is not in harmony with the Bible, it’s not from God. I’ve had people tell me that they believe it was God’s will for them to have an affair. No. That contradicts the Bible, and so it cannot be from God. God doesn’t deal with situational ethics. He never contradicts His word. So we can know it is from God if it is in harmony with the Bible.

2. The Scripture becomes alive and takes on new meaning. It becomes dynamic, exciting. Suppose I say, “I love you.” That’s true. I love our church. But that is a general word to a large group of people. If Nancy were here rather than on retreat and I said, “I love you,” would that include my wife? Of course. But it didn’t do anything special for her because it’s a logos, a general word to everybody. However, if I go to my wife, lean down close and whisper, “I love you,” I get a different reaction, a more exciting reaction. All of a sudden logos became *rha-ma*. I didn’t say anything different. But all of a sudden, it got personal and took on new meaning. That’s what happens when we come to Christ. God says to everyone, “I love you.” But then a day comes when we sense God speaking only to us, only to me. With all my faults and weaknesses, with all my problems and fears, God still loves me. And in that moment, lives are changed. God’s general word, His logos becomes *rha-ma*, a word for me alone. Then that word comes alive within me, and makes all the difference in the world. My faith grows. My spirit grows. Because faith comes by hearing the *rha-ma* of God; from hearing God speak personally to me. So I get answers to prayers through *rha-ma*’s. But how do I get a *rha-ma*? When I’ve got a difficult decision to make, when I’ve got a problem, how do I get that *rha-ma*, that word? There are seven steps we need to take. These are the Steps on How To Pray About A Problem.

1. Confess Any Known Sin in Your Life.

We don't want anything blocking our relationship with God, and sin blocks that relationship. So we examine ourselves honestly and openly in the light of God and we confess our sins. We even ask God to show us those things in our life that are outside His will. What are we doing that we have to stop? What are we not doing that we have to start? We clean up our spirit through confession, because as it says in 1 John 1:9 *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us.”* We confess our sins and make sure the channel to God is open.

2. Commit the Decision to Christ.

Proverbs 3:5-6 *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will bring it to pass.”* We don't play the martyr card and try to believe that everything depends on us. If that is the case, then we don't need God. But we are told, *“Trust in the Lord ... don't lean on your own understanding.”* Sometimes we have to get out of the way to allow God to come in. So rather than charging into a problem in full battle gear, slide your engine into neutral and pray, “Lord, whatever You want is fine with me. If You want it, I want it. If You don't want it, I don't want it.” That is the attitude that Christ had in the garden before He went to the cross. “Not My will, not my way, but Yours.” We need to put ourselves in neutral and engage the power and presence of God. Commit it to the Lord.

3. Ask God to Reveal His Will by Giving a Desire.

After we've gotten out of the way, then we can pray, “God, help me to know what You want by giving me a desire one way or the other.” Often when facing a decision I tell people to pray an increase/decrease prayer. Say, “Lord, I have these options. Increase my desire for one until I can't help but see it, and decrease my desire for all other options.” You see, if we let God come into our lives, He can direct us with Spirit-controlled desires. Psalm 37:4 *“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”* If we're really trying to do what's right, our desires are going to be in line with His. Mark 11:24 *“Whenever you pray, whatever you desire, believe that you've received it and you shall have it.”*

How do I know? James 1:5 *“If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask God and God will give it to him generously.”* We pray for the right desire. And we get there by first confessing our sins so we are in harmony with God. We commit the decision to Christ by allowing God to enter and act. And then we ask God to reveal His will by giving us the desire to do the right thing. How do I know if the desire is from God? That's where the increase/decrease prayer comes in. “God, increase my desire for your will. Decrease my desire for all else.”

4. Compare Your Desires with Scripture.

We turn to the scriptures to make sure that our desire is in tune with God's Word. God's Spirit never leads us contrary to the Bible. If my desire is in opposition to the Bible, then my desire is wrong. Call it scriptural screening. That's why it's important to know the Bible so we can check things out. And if we don't know God's word, ask someone who does. Check it out. Are my desires in tune with the written Word of God. In James 3:17 we find eight tests that we can use to know if an idea is from God. *“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive [to God's will] full of mercy, full of good fruit. It is impartial and it's sincere.”* These characteristics tell us if our desire, if our thoughts and ideas are right.

5. Listen for God to Give a Personal Promise, a *Rha-ma*.

Listen for God to speak to you. What we don't do is just open the Bible and pick some random promise. People wonder how I became a preacher. One day in prayer I asked, “Lord, what do you want me to do with my life?” And I opened the Bible and pointed to Numbers 22 and read, “The Lord opened the mouth of the donkey.” And I've been preaching ever since. No! We don't do it that way. We listen for God. We prayerfully read the word of God and wait for God to speak to us. But how does God speak to us? There are many ways.

Sometimes it comes through the scriptures. We read a passage that we've read a hundred times before but this time there is a word, a phrase, a line that we never remember seeing before. And miraculously, it talks about our life. Or we're sitting in service and all of sudden something is said that hits us between the eyes. It may just be a

word in a song. And God says, “That word’s for you!” Maybe it happens in Bible study, which is why we need to be involved in Bible study, because we get more of the word. Our prayer life is never stronger than our understanding of Scripture. God sometimes speaks to us through tapes, radio programs, or even TV shows. We never know where God’s word might come to us. Maybe from a friend, without the friend ever realizing it. But God is using them to speak to us. So wait for God to speak to you and then...

6. Claim the Promise with Confidence.

Claim it. Believe it. Know it’s going to happen. And begin to thank God for the answer that may be yet to come. Back in school, sometimes in math, answers could be found in the back of the book. With great joy we would work diligently on those problems and then turn with excitement to see if we’re right. Only it didn’t happen that way. We started with the answers and then tried to find the right formula or equation to get us there. That’s the way prayer works. God gives us a promise and says, “Yes, I’m going to answer.” So we know how it’s going to end up and we need to go back and wait while the equation or formula is being worked out.

Early in 1986 Nancy and I were trying to adopt a Korean child. We had already been waiting over a year, and some things going on in Korea made us wonder if we would be able to get a child. In prayer, word came to me that a child for us would come in 1986. We felt better. But then 1986 passed without a word. And then 87 went by, and still no child. Finally in February of 88 we were told that a child was coming to us. His circumstances were a little unusual. Normally a child would be under six months or over 4 years. But Joe was then 15 months old. He was born in November of 1986, just as the Lord had said. On that day I learned again that we thank God for the answer even before the answer comes, for when we do that, we are claiming the promise that has been given to us. And then, one last step,

7. Move into Action When God Says, “Go.”

Not when we think so, but when God says, “Go.” When God gives an idea, He gives it in three parts. First He says what He’s going to do. Then He says how He’s going to do it. And then He tells us when. The biggest mistake we often make is that when we get the first part we rush ahead, forgetting that there are two more parts coming. So we try to do things our way and end up falling flat on our face. We have to wait for God’s timing. And I will know that it is God’s timing when things start falling into place.

At one church we had plans to build a new youth center. I was ready to start digging the foundation three days after the plans were drawn, but the timing wasn’t right. Things were not in place. We’d go a little farther down the road and I’d be ready to build, but the timing wasn’t right. There were things that needed to drop into place. Then, after waiting for what seemed to be forever, suddenly money came from here, and donations from over there. God told me that it was going to happen, and it did happen, but it happened according to God’s time table, not mine. It works that way all the time. And as we wait, we continue to pray and listen for God to say, “Go.”

Some of you are facing some pretty big problems. For you, and for all of us, God has a word. 2 Timothy 1:7 *“God has not given to us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind.”* Even though the problems and worries may stand before us, our spirit is not one of fear. For our Lord is able and willing to make a difference in our lives and in our world. And we can make sure that difference will come by confessing our sins before God that the channels of communication might be open; by committing our decisions to Christ that His will might be done; by asking God to give us the desire to do what is right; by making sure our desires are in harmony with God’s scriptures; by listening for God to give us a personal promise; by claiming the promises of God with confidence; and by stepping out in faith when God says it is time to move. In this way, we will find ways to move beyond our problems and into the joy where God created us to dwell. That’s where we need to be. And in your life, may it be so. Amen.