



THESE THINGS I PRAY

This five-week series will be an exploration of the power of prayer, using the book of Psalms as a guide. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms the “Prayerbook of the Bible.” While we don’t necessarily pray for everything the Psalms pray for, we do learn from the Psalms the mode of prayer – how to come to God in prayer. Through this series we’ll explore the simple acronym for prayer – ACTS – which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Prayer changes things and every prayer has power. Our hope is through this series you’ll be better connected to the power of prayer.

SUPPLICATION • Psalm 86 • Tim McConnell • November 13, 2016

Are the Christmas lists coming out yet? I remember when Jack was about eight or nine, and he was ready to get his Christmas list off to Santa. I told him, "You know, Jack, Santa's doing a lot of this online now. There's a website where you can submit your list. You don't have to write it out and mail it anymore." Jack thought about that for a while. "But how do I know he got it?" he asked. "And does he like email or letters?" He wanted to know how Santa processes these lists, and if there was any way to ensure he would get the top requests. I told him what I knew, which wasn't much. Jack figured Santa was a pretty old-fashioned guy. We put the list in the mail.

How do I know he got it, and how do I know what answer I will get? Today, remember we are switching the last two parts of our acronym: ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. We want to have Thanksgiving next week, with our annual Thanksgiving service. So today we talk about Supplication—an odd word that hardly exists anywhere outside of church these days. Honestly it would probably go away entirely except that we need it for this acronym, ACTS! This is the part of our prayer life when we lay our requests before the Lord. I said early on that prayer is not about laying our list of demands before God, as though God were our divine butler. But this is the part where we lay our list of demands before God, as though God were our divine butler! Knowing who God is through adoration, recognizing who we are through confession, giving thanks and praise to God (as we will talk about next week), this is the moment to lay our heartfelt desires and needs before the Lord and we ask Him to respond. A suppliant is one who expresses need and appeals for mercy before a powerful benefactor. They don't walk into the room proud and demanding, but humble, with hat in hand. We put our needs and the needs of others before God. God wants us to express our needs and cry out for what we want, and somehow, in some mysterious way, God has chosen to include us in His work. No, God is never submitted to our mastery or lordship...God is not and will never be our divine butler. But in the mysteries of God our prayers make a difference. There is power in prayer.

Psalm 86 is a prayer of supplication. David makes his requests known before God, and he begins with that most honest of cries, that most honest

question: Will God hear me, and will He act? "Hear me, Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy." (Psalm 86:1) This is the honest cry of the heart—"Hear me, God." Can God hear us? Will He listen? There's a common saying in leadership circles, "People need to have their say, even if they can't have their way." Hear me, Lord. I need to know You hear and not only hear me, but "answer me." You who answer prayer, answer my prayer. There is a time to plead with the Lord, to "wrestle in prayer" with the Lord as Epaphras is described in Colossians 4. "Hear me, Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy." That's an interesting thing for David to say. We are not sure when David wrote this prayer, and maybe it was when he was in desperate straits. But whether he was out in the wilderness running from enemies, or in the palace in Jerusalem reigning as king, the phrase is just as true. Before the Lord, we are all poor and needy.

The Psalm continues into open and honest requests. God delights in our open hearts before Him. Can you hear David's appeals in this Psalm? "Guard my life," "bring joy to your servant," "have mercy on me," "teach me your way," "turn to me," "give me a sign of your goodness," "show your strength" and "save me." The Psalm teaches us to open our hearts before the Lord, to say openly and without embarrassment, "This is what I want; this is what I need." Better to show the Lord your heart in open prayer than to come to the Lord with pretend noble desires. C. S. Lewis said, "It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with desire for B. We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." (*Letters to Malcolm*) Open your heart and make the appeal, honestly. That's where we start.

David's confidence is in the character of God as he prays: "You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to You... Among the gods there is none like You, Lord; no deeds can compare with Yours. All the nations You have made will come and worship before You, Lord; they will bring glory to Your name. For You are great and do marvelous deeds; You alone are God." (Psalm 86:5, 8-10) David is not the hero. God is the hero. When we pray, we must recognize that the whole affair is dependent on God. We can trust God with our innermost desires and longings, with our needs and our wants, because we know God is real—this is not some

solitary exercise of wish-fulfillment. God is actually there, and actually hears. We can pray to God because God is real. We can trust God with our desires because God is good. God is abounding in love. He will neither give us what is bad for us, nor refrain from bringing His blessings into our lives in due course. Sometimes that is hard to believe, but we can pray for strength to believe it! David prayed for "an undivided heart," so that he could pray believing: "Teach me Your way, Lord, that I may rely on Your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name. I will praise You, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify Your name forever." (Psalm 86:11-12) We want to pray believing, not as those with divided minds, divided hearts, double-minded motivations and no confidence in the Lord. We want to pray believing, "I will praise You, Lord my God."

Will He hear, and will He answer? Yes, God hears us when we pray. But what God answers is up to Him. We all so desperately want to know how to pray, how to properly submit our requests, to guarantee (or at least raise the odds) that our requests will be carried out by God's hand. But there is no such guarantee. Some prayers are answered and granted right away. I hope you have experienced that. I have known friends to keep prayer journals so they did not lose track of what they were praying for, and what had come about. One friend opened hers up to me once and showed me the prayer in the left column and the answer to prayer on the right. Page after page. But some prayers were crossed out. "What about these?" I asked. "Those I don't pray for anymore." We all have times we have seen God move, but we also have times when our prayers have seemed ineffective. I know how painful that can be. Every failed business, every divorce, every sick child, every grave is a witness to the reality that not all petitions are granted. Still we must remember that God has been good in the past, we must believe that God is good today, and we must trust that His promises are true for the future.

It might be more about the process than the results. Tim Keller in his book on prayer teaches it is best to think of prayer as a process, it is a process in which our will is submitted to the divine will. The prayer is "Thy will be done," not "My will be done." We pray our heart's desires, and openly and honestly appeal to God that these things would happen, but we must simultaneously be aware that God will not

answer or do or intervene or perform contrary to His own will. So, when we open our desires before the Lord, we are actually asking God to take our requests and either grant them because they are indeed good and right and holy—or, we are asking God to look over our desires and remove or change the things we desire that are not good, not what we think they are, not part of God's designs, not part of "Thy Kingdom come." So then, look at your prayers of supplication not so much as a laundry list or a to-do list, but as an indicator of the state of your heart. "These are the things my heart wants, O Lord. Please give me holy desires." If we look at our requests to the Lord, our prayers of supplication, as a process of growth, that really changes what we are doing when we lay our requests before God. We are not trying to corner God into executing our will, but we are asking God to respond in a way that will submit our will to His will and make us more into the likeness of Jesus.

Another great scholar, J. I. Packer, taught we can accelerate this process of transformation in our prayer lives if we do three things. First, don't just drop a list of demands, but take time to argue why you believe these are good requests according to what you understand to be God's will and nature. The Psalms are filled with that. "But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." (Psalm 86:15). That's why I'm asking for your deliverance. This exercise will deepen our understanding of who God is—and that's what we need most anyway. Second, Packer says to acknowledge in prayer that if God does not grant what we request, we will still trust Him. We know that God loves us and wants what is good for us, so we need to acknowledge when we pray that if it doesn't go the way we want it to go, we will trust that God has better intended for us than what we had thought up for ourselves. Third, it is important as we express our deepest longings and desires to remember that what we want, what we need, is God Himself...not what we want Him to do for us. As Tim Keller writes, "we know as we pray for good things that we already have the ultimate good thing. In God himself we have the headwaters and source of all we desire." (*Prayer*, p. 228)

It isn't easy, and I feel that we have only scratched the surface on how to pray for what we want and need, and how to intercede for others. There is great power in prayer. We know it to be true. But

there is no secret incantation to make God jump to our requests. Prayer is not a commercial transaction with God; it is a process of growing in deep intimacy with God. It's a process in which our hearts and minds and wills begin to love and think and want more and more what God wants. And we grow in trust and love of God.

I don't remember where I picked up this illustration, but I think of prayer in this way. Imagine a father and a son walking down the beach, and along the way the boy is collecting things. After a while, the father says, "Show me what you have there, son." But the boy is afraid to show him. He knows he has picked up good things and other things that are not so good. But with reluctance the boy opens his palm up to the father. Sure enough, there are some great things in the boy's hand. A beautiful shell. A colorful rock. But also some broken glass and a smelly bit of crab shell. The boy is sad to watch the father pluck those things and toss them away. For a minute he regrets showing the father his collection. But then the father, who has also been collecting, puts a gold coin in the boy's palm. That's how I see prayer. We lift our hands up to the Father in Heaven, from Whom every good gift comes, and we allow Him to do the sorting—because we know, we believe, He wants what's best for us. And when there is a "No" from God, we keep our faith, knowing that God can only put His best gifts in an empty hand.

© 2016 Timothy Parker McConnell

STUDY GUIDE "Supplication" • Psalm 86

Start It

- Are we allowed to ask? Are we allowed to ask God for what we want? Supplication is the moment in prayer when we lay our requests and needs before the Lord. The best way to enter into this time of prayer is with genuineness, honesty, openness and trust. I don't know if what I want is the right thing to want or not, but in open trust and faith, I will ask of the Lord. Richard Foster teaches that we just need to be honest with God: "For now, do not worry about 'proper' praying, just talk to God. Share your hurts, share your joys—freely and openly. God listens in compassion and love, just like we do when our children come to us. He delights in our presence."

Study It

- Read Psalm 86. What is the theme of this Psalm?
- What does David want God to do for him? Are these selfish motives or desires?
- What basis does David have to make these requests of God? Is he basing his requests on his own character or performance, or God's character and performance?
- Read Mark 11:22-24 and James 1:6-8. What does it mean to "pray believing"? Does David pray believing it will happen? I want you to dismiss the idea that this is a secret key to force God to act according to your will. So, then, what does it mean to "pray believing"?

Pray It

Heavenly Father of Lights, from whom every good and perfect gift comes down to me, I give You and You alone all glory and praise. Hear the desires of my heart, for myself..., for my family..., for my business..., for my neighbor..., for my nation..., for this world... You know, O Lord, what is best for me and for all. In Your mercy and grace, grant my petitions in accordance with Your will and purpose, change my petitions to meet Your will and purpose, and deepen my love and trust for You. In the name of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Live It

Our petitions are for us and for the world. "Thy Kingdom Come"—fix this world. "Thy will be done"—fix my heart. Write down your prayers for the week, balance them between these two poles, and take note when the Lord moves to answer prayer.