

# On Prayer and Fellowship

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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What did the First Christians believe about prayer? Did they believe that prayer mattered and that it really changed outcomes? Or did they believe that God carried out His will regardless of how they prayed? That He's like a great steamroller that just crashes through all barriers and just does what He wants?

Sometimes I sense a conflict in Christian folk about such things. On the one hand, they believe God is sovereign, He knows what is best. He will just do what is best and even has our lives written out for us. On the other hand, they believe that prayer changes things. I've seen that on bumper stickers.

The First Christians were people who turned the world upside down but it isn't always easy, looking back 2000 years to be certain what those people actually thought, believed and practiced. We do have their writings though, and those writings tell us a lot. Sometimes what they wrote tells us more than we even realize. A lot of time has passed and we are not only foreign to their language, we are also foreign to their culture, and thus we don't quite see things that they saw plainly.

Even the best of the modern versions of the Bible are influenced by the old King James version and even when they change the archaic words they still sometimes miss the point.

## **Fellowship**

But what did the First Christians believe about prayer? I want to start by clarifying a related and very dominant idea that profoundly influenced everything those First Christians thought and did.

The operative word is 'fellowship,' 'koinonia' in the Greek. It comes from the root word that means 'common' and it carries the idea with it of sharing or partnership. Thus, we share our food in a church social, a potluck dinner, a covered dish supper and we sit around and talk.

This is what we call 'fellowship' or we change it into a verb and we call it 'fellowshipping.' Actually it's more of a manifestation of fellowship than the real meaning of the word from the Bible.

Now I have an idea that in the language of the court of King James, fellowship was a perfectly good translation of the Greek, but in the course of time, things changed. Let me see if I can explain what I'm driving at.

Here's how the great apostle John opened his first letter. First John chapter 1 verse one, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, our hands have handled, of the Word of life."

He's emphasizing heavily the reality of Jesus Christ, {2} "(For the life was manifested. We saw it, we bear witness, and we show you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested or shown to us,) {3} That which we have seen and heard we declare to you," and then he says, We do this with an objective in mind, "That you may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

Now John wrote this in Greek and obviously expected it to be understood by people who read Greek. To them the word 'fellowship' was a description of a relationship, not an activity. It was not just a potluck. It wasn't just eating together, sharing coffee and doughnuts. It was an existing relationship. It is a word that they used for a partnership in business, as a matter of fact, a shared relationship. Now it should be clear enough that the relationship between slave and master is very different between that of friends or family. The master dominates every aspect of the slaves life. What the slave wants doesn't matter in the least. Only the will of the master controls the relationship.

Now there is a statement made by Jesus, that's relevant to this. At the Last Supper (last Passover) He said this in John 15 verse 13, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. {14} You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you. {15} Henceforth I call you not servants." (Okay, from this day forward. I'm not calling you my servants,) "for the servant doesn't know what his Lord is doing. I have called you friends for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known to you."

What Jesus is here saying is, "I have shared everything with you, masters don't do that with slaves. You are not merely my servant, you are my friends."

Okay, well I would say, "Yeah we are His servants. Yes, we call Him Master, but you understand this, Jesus does not look upon us as slaves. He looks upon us as friends. This is the relationship described by the New Testament writers when they speak of fellowship."

When we go to church, we are among friends. When we talk to God in prayer, we are talking to a friend.

### **Abraham was a Friend of God**

Now if you track this back through your Bible, you will come upon a man named Abraham, who is called the friend of God. The story is found in Genesis 18 and is the one that preceded the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. One day Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent, and he sees three men standing opposite him under a tree and he looks at them and knows immediately who this is. He prepares lunch for them. It seems that God is accompanied by two messengers, we call them angels, and they have stopped off at Abraham's tent for lunch, on their way to Sodom.

That's the sort of thing that friends do. After lunch, the men rose up and walked toward Sodom and Abraham went with them to bring them on their way.

In this country this would be a southern custom, you walk your guests to the door and when they go out and get in their car, you don't go back inside and slam the door. You stand out on the porch and may walk down on the driveway and you may even walk out to the street and wave at them until they're out of sight. This is what Abraham was doing.

And as they walked the Lord said, as though to himself, in Genesis 18 verse 17, "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do, {18} Seeing Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation. All the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. {19} I know him, he will command his children and his household after him and they will keep the way of the LORD to do justice and judgment, that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what is spoken of him."

What is this all about? Well Abraham is God's friend. He knows him very well and He realizes that it's important that his friend know what He's about to do and the reasons for it, because Abraham will then pass the word on to his children, his household, his servants and everybody else and therefore people will understand that God did this in good judgment. That's the sort of thing that friends do, they share their plans and they even accept suggestions from their friends.

### **Sodom and Gomorrah**

Well, the LORD said in Genesis 18 verse 20, "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grievous. {21} I will go down now and see whether they have done all together according to the cry of it, which is come to me and if not, I will know."

Now this really runs counter to what we may think about God and our relationship with Him. Why did He have to go down to Sodom and see for Himself? If what He had heard, the cry was truth, didn't He know? Well I would think He did, He certainly had every way of knowing if it was true, but there's a difference between being told the truth and seeing it with your own eyes. I mean, we have been told about the Holocaust. We have actually seen the stacks of bodies in films and pictures that people took at that time. We have actually heard the testimony of the people who went through it, but it's not the same as one who actually smelled the smoke coming from the crematorium. It is not the same as the one who actually wielded a wheelbarrow full of bodies out be dumped in a mass grave, who saw them, who felt them, who actually loaded them up and unloaded them. It's not the same.

Well, God is not one who judges in absentia. He had to go down. He had to see it and here's the question. And I have thought of this many times. What did God mean when He spoke of the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is come up to me? I used to think He got regular reports from angels, maybe that they were His source. They came and said, "LORD, you should see what they're doing, well no, you shouldn't see it, but what they're doing down there in that city, well we cannot talk about it, it is very bad now." I think this sort of thing happens with Angels reporting, but in this

case there was someone else involved. Abraham had a nephew, his name was Lot and he had taken up residence in Sodom. He lived there.

Peter, in his second letter, wrote about this. Second Peter two verse six, he spoke of how God turned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, he condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example to those that afterward would live ungodly. I can find myself wishing more people would pay attention to that example that He delivered, Peter said, in verse 7, "He delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked, {8} (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds).

### **Lot's Prayer**

Well, of course, Lot lived there in Sodom. He hated what was going on in that town and he talked to God about it. I think you can count on it every day. I think a good case can be made, it was Lot's prayer, that led to God's immediate judgment of the place. Do you see what that implies. It implies that if no one had asked, God might not have done anything about Sodom and Gomorrah. They could've been left alone to destroy themselves which they surely would have done. The implications of this for prayer cannot be overstated.

### **Abraham's Debate With God**

But I want to go back to the story of Abraham, Genesis 18 and verse 22, "The men turned their faces from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham stood still before the LORD {23} And Abraham drew near and said, "Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? {24} Perhaps there be 50 righteous people within that city, will You also destroy the city and not spare the place for the 50 righteous that are therein? {25} That would be far from you to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, and that the righteous should be like the wicked, that's far from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"

The boldness of this exchange is breathtaking! Does Abraham know who he's talking to here? He's talking to God. God could slap him down or hit him with a flyswatter and turn him into roadkill.

But Abraham knew Lot and Abraham knew his character. He didn't want him to die with that awful city, so he asked, not selfishly and not just for Lot by name. He said, "That's not like you," he knew what God was like, "shall not the judge of all the earth do right."

Do you realize that what Abraham is trying to do here is to change the outcome, to arrange the results, to head off a destruction of men, women, children, the whole city and everything else down there.

This is a classic of all literature of how Abraham reasoned and bargained with God from 50 all the way down to 10. God said, "No, no, I will not destroy for the 50." Well how about 40? How

about 30? And they kept working their way down and finally in verse 32, Abraham said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry. I will speak one more time, perhaps ten shall be found there." And God said, "I will not destroy it for the ten's sake." {33} And the LORD went away, as soon as He had left communing with Abraham and Abraham returned to his place."

It occurred to me that communing is a good choice of words for what happened here. This is not just the conversation, this is a meeting of the minds of friends, because Abraham is the first man in the Bible ever to be called a friend of God and God shared the decision-making process with His friend. That's what happened here. It seems so contrary to what we oftentimes think. We think of ourselves as well, are just worms down here and God doesn't really worry one way or the other about what happens to us. He would just as soon swat us down as look at us and He's got His plans and we will just go along with Him and whatever it is, that's fine.

No, that's not the way it is. God was talking it over, sharing the decision-making process with His friend and He allowed Abraham to have an influence on the outcome.

### **Toughest Decision of my Life**

For me, there was a time, a moment in time, when I came to understand the relationship in a way I had never had understood it before. I was facing one of the toughest decisions of my life. I was praying daily, even fasting and every day I ask God to show me what to do, show me what is right. Show me. Help me, make the decision for me, I want you to work it out God, to narrow things down to where I really have no choice, then the decision would be made for me.

I got no answer. This went on in crisis for about three weeks. No answer. And then one morning as I was praying that God would show me what to do, it became as clear as crystal. I heard no voice. I saw no vision. I had no dreams but suddenly, one moment I didn't understand, and the next moment I did, that God had shown me all He was going to show me, all He needed to show me. What he wanted from me was a decision! It was odd, but once I understood that, the decision I needed to make was as clear as crystal. I was muddying the waters because, I didn't want to make the decision. It wasn't easy, but it was clear.

There is this little short verse in Romans from the apostle Paul, where he says in Romans 8 verse 28, "All things work together for good to those that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

Now I want to emphasize, that doesn't mean everything that happens to you, if you love God, is good. It means everything will work for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. Okay, that meant to me that I could make either one of two decisions at this point and either one of them, God was capable of making it work for my good and possibly even for the greater good, as well. I don't know. All I know is that at this moment in time, my friend, Jesus, was not going to impose a decision on me. He wanted to share the decision-making process with me, in a small way like He shared the big decision over Sodom with Abraham.

Now I think this is what John was driving at when he wrote in 1 John 1 verse 3, "That you may also have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

We share the work and the responsibility with Christ and one of the primary ways we share this is in prayer, and the assumption that, in the course of bringing matters to God, we actually are able to have an influence on the way things go. We are actually able to change outcomes. We are able to come to understand what God is doing better than we otherwise might. And we become partners with God.

We want you, John said, to have a partnership with us and truly our partnership is with the Father and with His son Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer Wheel**

Jesus said in Matthew 6 verse 7, "When we pray, do not use vain repetition like the heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their much speaking."

I remember once in a movie I saw, it was something taking place up in Nepal or Tibet, of where people would write their prayers out on a little piece of paper and they would stick it into this prayer wheel and the wind blowing or the water running, would turn this prayer wheel and their belief was that every time their prayer came up, it ascended before God one more time, or whatever they believed in was God.

I thought, "Oh, I could program my computer to pray for me and I wouldn't have to get my knees dirty, my knees would never get sore, I wouldn't have trouble getting up, I wouldn't have to spend time, my computer could do it. NO, we are God's friends, we are His partners in this work. We are those who carry out His program. We are His ambassadors who act on His behalf in the world and who make requests and suggestions regarding things we think ought to be done, and that we can't do.

I have a sense that the First Christians understood prayer in this way. Prayer to them made a difference. God was not one who bulldozed over everyone and wanted them to do his will, regardless of their desires, regardless of their hopes, nor was He one who stood aside and didn't care what happened.

### **Prayer Is Work**

Somewhere in the process of thinking my way through this, it dawned on me, prayer is work! It is as much work as carpentry or bricklaying. It is as much work as the American Ambassador to Germany who works to represent the United States' government. He persuades his German counterparts. He sends recommendations back to Washington. He sends advice and information. He has his job to do.

Paul said, "We are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). How does this play out with the First Christians? Did the First Christians think their prayers made a difference? Do you think that they thought it would work better if 100 people pray about something than if only one person prays? Frankly, I'm not sure, but there is one thing James wrote that might inform us.

### **Prayer of Faith**

It's in James five, verse 13, he says, "Is any afflicted? Let them pray." Feel bad, got a headache? Are you sick? Pray! "Is any merry? Let him sing psalms. {14} Is any sick among you? Let them call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. {15} And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he has committed sins, he shall be forgiven."

Hey, how big a difference is that, and did James believe that the failure to pray would leave the marvel undone? Well, it's hard for me to see it any other way. The prayer of faith would save the sick, the prayer without faith would not? I can only conclude, James meant what he said!

Now I am going to shift to the NIV here, in verse 16, because it makes a little difference, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so you may be healed."

Now what a wonderful thing. You know, self-disclosure is one of the real foundations of friendship. You have to be willing to let people know who you are. You have to be willing to let your friends know what you're afraid of. You have to let them know what you're sick of. Confess your sins one to another, and pray for each other. If you don't, you are not healed. Do it so you can be healed.

### **The Prayer of a Righteous Man**

Then James says this, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Now the King James version seems to imply that the prayer must be fervent, that is delivered with feeling. The NIV gets it right, you don't have to pray with furrowed brow and a loud voice. You don't have to do that. There is no need to shout at God, all you have to do is qualify for the description of a righteous man. The prayer of a righteous man, delivered in any kind of voice, is powerful and effective.

And folks, you can't put it on. You can't pretend, you can't make it sound right. You have got to be right, unless we misunderstand, James goes on with an illustration which makes it clear.

James 5 verse 17, "Elijah was a man just like us." That is hard for me to get my mind around, but that's what he said, "he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain in the land for 3 1/2 years. {18} Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

Now there's not a word in the Old Testament or the New Testament that tells us whether that was God's idea, or Elijah's idea. We don't know, but if I understand James here, he sees Elijah's prayer as determinative! Elijah made it happen.

James went on to say in verse 19, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back. {20} Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his ways will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

Who does that? Well, it turns out that we get to be God's agent in saving lives, and that implies, if we are negligent, people may get hurt. I think it's fair to say that the First Christians believed that the prayer of one man could have far-reaching effects. That's not to say that 100 people praying is not a good thing, only to say, it really only takes one who is a friend of God.

### **God Wants To Share With Us**

Now this is a bit of a mystery. Why would God do this, because He knows well enough how to manage the world without any help from us. Well, it would seem to be His desire to share with us. Isn't that why we like to talk to our friends. It is not a matter of divine neglect, but a willingness to let things go on, if we aren't willing to ask, as the Scripture says, "You have not because you ask not" (James 4:2). "You lust, and have not. You kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain. You fight and war, yet you don't have because you don't ask." {3} You ask and you don't receive because you ask amiss."

And so it is, that we who serve Christ participate in His work. Prayer is work! Just as feeding the hungry in His name is work. I think the First Christians thought of prayer in a rather different sense than many of us moderns do and I think they may have seen themselves as participating partners in the work of God.

As Paul said, "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

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