

KNOWING
GOD
THROUGH
PRAYER

JIM GEORGE



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A Word for the Journey

Have you ever thought about how privileged you are to be able to talk to the God of the universe in prayer? And, through the Bible, to listen in on the prayers of the men and women who followed God?

God's Word says, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34), and the prayers recorded in the Bible offer us a glimpse into the hearts of those who uttered them, not out of a sterile vacuum, but in the midst of real life. From these down-to-earth people, we hear:

- Prayers of people who simply enjoyed talking to God.
- Prayers filled with joy, anguish, and every emotion in between.
- Prayers that give insight into the character and desires of those praying.
- Prayers uttered from human beings who were honest, in need, and vulnerable.
- Prayers that reveal the strengths and weaknesses of those communing with God.
- Prayers that expose these men and women as people—just like you and me—who wanted nothing more than to *know God*.

As you listen to the prayers of men and women in the Bible, you will have the opportunity to examine the content of their lives and witness their pattern of prayer. You will discover what was occurring in their lives that gave birth to their heartfelt communications with God. You will also learn about the noble qualities that were nurtured because of their devotion to spending time with their heavenly Father.

Your journey in knowing God through prayer will help you grow in your faith in God and your understanding of the importance of prayer. Each chapter includes valuable “Lessons to Learn about Prayer” and capsulized “Prayer Principles” you’ll find helpful for your own communion with God. And finally, I have provided a sample prayer to stimulate your own quests in knowing God.

What will the outcome of reading this book be for you personally? I’m praying you will be...

encouraged to pray more regularly,
stimulated to know God better through prayer,
moved to intercede for others, and
challenged to become more of a person of powerful prayer.

My friend, what you will find in this book is information from the Bible—about real people and about prayer—that will transform your life. May God strengthen and bless you as you make the journey of your life—the journey to knowing God through prayer.

Prayers to God in Faith

He believed in the LORD, and [God] accounted it to him for righteousness.

—GENESIS 15:6

I have often heard that if you want to see the worst in people, go on a trip with them. Travel usually brings out a person's dark side, doesn't it? But not in everyone. Take my wife, Elizabeth, for example. Talk about a trooper! A dyed-in-the-wool homebody, Elizabeth's adventures all started in the middle of the night some 20 years ago. That's when I called her (collect, of course) from a pay phone at Changi Airport in Singapore, and asked her to start praying about doing missions work on that tiny dot of an island in the South China Sea.

Well, that was only the beginning! After much prayer and counsel, I uprooted Elizabeth and our two daughters, and off we went to Singapore...stopping in Taiwan for a week (and a typhoon!)...then two weeks in the Philippines in missionary guest housing...then on to Singapore for a year, living out of suitcases and relocating from place to place, never finding a place to call home...and finally, back to the United States...only to move four times before we could resettle into our former home. And our lives have been a little like that ever since.

Yes, travel can reveal the dark side of people. But, as in our case, it can also expose the best. I can't tell you how many times our faith in God and His plans for us were challenged during our many ministry travels through the decades. As we have learned to pray and trust God for His protection and His provision, our faith (especially during that year going to and back from Singapore) has definitely been tested...and strengthened.

The Testing of Faith

Some 4000 years ago, there was another man—and family—who experienced an even greater test of faith in almighty God. His name was Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation.

Just imagine hearing this directive: “Get out of your country, from your family...to a land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). With these words, God presented Abraham with a test of faith. He asked Abraham to pull up his tent stakes, leave his relatives, and go to a distant land—a land to be named later. Travel today is difficult and can be brutal, but imagine taking a trip 4000 years ago! At that time travel was a major undertaking. Very few people

ever left the safety of their local town, let alone trekked out across hundreds of miles of desert.

When God sends a test, His children have choices to make. And the same was true for Abraham. He could have said, “No thank You, God. Not enough assurances. Too risky, Lord!”—but he didn’t. He accepted the challenge. He “passed the test,” so to speak. He responded in faith.

Faith in God became a signature mark of Abraham’s life. From the beginning of his journey with God, whether he heard the Lord speak directly to him or in visions, Abraham listened, believed, trusted, and obeyed. Oh, he didn’t always understand. Often he “talked” things over with God through prayer. And sometimes he tried to interject his own reasoning into his prayer discussions with God. But in the end, Abraham “believed God” (Genesis 15:6) and became a channel of blessing to the nations (12:3).

I’m sure you are like me and most of God’s people who want to be a man or woman of great prayer and great faith. So in this chapter, let’s travel alongside Abraham as he takes his journey of faith—as he walks with God. Maybe...just maybe...we, too, can have our faith strengthened as we spend time on the road with Abraham, listening in on his remarkable prayers to God and eavesdropping on God’s talks with him throughout his life.

Prayer in the Life of Abraham

We know very little about Abram’s background. (Abram was Abraham’s name before God changed it to reflect His covenant with Abraham—Genesis 17:5.) We do, however, know that Abraham was a descendant of Shem, one of Noah’s sons, and that

he married Sarai (later renamed Sarah), his half-sister. By God's sovereign choice of Abraham, we are privileged to follow the life of a man who, for sure, had feet of clay, just like you and me. But Abraham was also a man who made prayer a vital and natural part of his relationship with God. Abraham's prayers, offered up to God under a variety of circumstances and at different times in his life, give us a special opportunity to learn from the growth process of this remarkable man of faith and his prayers.

Abraham answered God's call—The first recorded message from God to Abraham appears in Genesis 12:1. Abraham's father, Terah, had just died. In this initial instance of communication between God and Abraham, God did all the talking: "Get out of your country...to a land that I will show you," God commanded.

And what was Abraham's response? Although no vocalized answer is recorded, the Bible reports that "Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him" (verse 4).

Now fast-forward some 35 years to another test of Abraham's obedience. Abraham had prayed and waited for a son for 25 years. And at last God had provided the promised heir (21:1-3). Well, it's one thing to be asked to leave your country, but this time God gave a very different kind of command: "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him...as a burnt offering" (22:2).

What did Abraham do? (And what would you as a mother or father do?) Without a word, immediately and early the next morning, Abraham obeyed (verse 3). Talk about impressive faith and trust in God! Again Abraham demonstrated what the bottom-line response to God should always be—obedience. And, as you probably know from this ancient story, the Angel of the Lord

intervened as Abraham stretched out his hand to sacrifice his son (22:11-12).

On both ends of Abraham's life his obedience was tested. And on both occasions, Abraham did not resist God's direction. He did not verbalize any objection. By his actions he was saying yes in his heart. There may have been a few doubts as he packed up and moved out into the unknown, but he moved out in obedience. There were probably many fears and questions in Abraham's heart as he and Isaac climbed the hill where he was to sacrifice his son. But without a word and without hesitation, Abraham was willing to obey.

A Lesson to Learn about Prayer

What are your daily actions saying about your heart attitude? Is your attitude one of obedience? What evidence is there of your unspoken yeses to God's communication to you by His Spirit, and through His Word? What answers from God are you resisting? Ask God to increase your faith as you step out into an unknown future. Ask Him to give you a heart willing to obey. May this be your prayer, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10 NIV).

Abraham prayed to God and worshiped—From the start of Abraham's journey with God and throughout his life, Abraham built altars as he moved through the land God promised to him. He offered sacrifices on these altars and prayed to God (Genesis 12:8 and 13:4). These altars of worship, set up in the midst of a

pagan world, served as a public witness to Abraham's commitment to the one true God.

A Lesson to Learn about Prayer

Prayer testifies to our faith in God. Building an altar and praying were to Abraham what "giving a blessing" over our food in a busy restaurant represents for us today. Everyone sees you pray! By this one act you make a statement: "I owe my food to the providence and provision of God. I am one of His people, and I am acknowledging my dependence on Him, even down to the very food I eat." Have you built any altars lately? Have you publicly shown your devotion to God?

Abraham sometimes forgot to pray—There was a time in my life when I wasn't seeking God's guidance for anything. I had drifted far from God, and I knew it. Not only had I forgotten to pray, I didn't want to pray! And I refused to take any steps toward getting right with God. Naturally, during that time of failing to seek God's guidance, I made some wrong choices. So I can sure relate to Abraham during this next period of his life.

By faith, Abraham answered God's call and entered the land of God's promise, where he built an altar to the Lord. But something happened. A famine developed in the land. *What should I do?* he wondered. *I should go where there's food, right? That's just pure common sense!* This seems to be Abraham's reasoning, for he went off to Egypt during the famine in search of food.

It appears that Abraham reacted to his circumstances without

praying for God's guidance. Whatever confidence and spiritual maturity Abraham had developed during his brief time in the land of Canaan, it seemed to evaporate as he entered Egypt. What happened when Abraham relied on himself rather than God? He failed on these three counts!

- Abraham feared for his life (12:12). He thought he would starve to death. Fear is a good indicator that we have strayed away from God's will, for when we have fear, we are not trusting God.
- Abraham lied about his wife. He asked Sarah to join with him in lying about their relationship, and to say she was his sister (verse 13). Rationalizing our actions to justify doing something wrong is another sign that we are acting out of the will of God.
- Abraham chose a coward's approach. He opted not to defend Sarah when she was taken into Pharaoh's palace (verse 15). Failure to stand up for what is right is yet another mark of erring behavior.

How different the story might have been if Abraham had asked God for the wisdom to know what to do! Maybe if he had talked to God about the famine, God would have reminded him of His promise to bless Abraham and make his name great (verses 2-3).

Scripture tells us, God protected Abraham and Sarah from the consequences of their fear, lies, and wrong choices. But what about you? What happens if you go off in a direction without consulting God? God may choose to intervene, or He may allow

you to suffer the consequences of your actions. You and I must never presume God will bail us out of the messes we make or get into, especially if we elect to disobey Him.

A Lesson to Learn about Prayer

No issue or decision is too minor for prayer. Take nothing for granted when it comes to your concerns. What may have seemed like “no brainers” to Abraham (during a famine—go where the food is, right?...and when you’re about to die, lie!) were his opportunities to trust God. Take nothing for granted when it comes to seeking God’s guidance. No issue or problem should ever be seen as too small for seeking God’s input. The next time you are considering something “obvious,” something that seems to be so clear-cut as to not require prayer, think again... and quickly get down on your knees and cry out to God.

Abraham responded in faith—Prayer is how we communicate with God. And how does God communicate with us? Our prayers are answered as the Holy Spirit moves our heart when we read Scripture or as we experience events or circumstances, and also through the guidance of wise counselors. But Abraham didn’t have the indwelling Spirit. And he didn’t have the Bible. And there were no counselors. So Abraham went through life relying totally on his relationship with God.

But having only God was all Abraham needed! So through prayer he expressed his questions and concerns to God about His promises to give him a son. To Abraham, prayer was as natural

as talking with a friend or counselor. And on many occasions God, like a friend or counselor, answered Abraham's prayers verbally.

Here's how one such prayer session went.

After God gave Abraham a great victory in the rescue of his nephew Lot (see Genesis 14), Abraham refused the offer of wealth from the wicked king of Sodom. He insisted instead on trusting in "the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth" (14:22). Then, in a vision, God said, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward" (15:1).

In response to this encouragement from God and His promise of reward, Abraham voiced what seems to be a complaint. It's possible Abraham was thinking, *What could possibly have any real reward to me, seeing I still have no son?* When he asked, "What will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (verse 2).

Abraham continued the conversation, voicing what had been bothering him for years. "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" (verse 3). Unable to see how God would fulfill His promise, Abraham put forth Eliezer, his most trusted servant, as the potential heir. And God said, "No."

God then took this aged and sorrowing man outside and gave him this astounding visual promise: "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them....so shall your descendants be" (verse 5). It was then Abraham responded with total trust—"he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (verse 6).

In this prayer session with God, you and I can see how much Abraham had grown in his walk of faith. From a man who was fearful, hesitant, and uncertain about relying totally on God,

Abraham had been transformed. It wasn't an easy process. No, his fears for his life, his selfishness, his lack of faith all had to be dealt with. But slowly, his life was changed.

A Lesson to Learn about Prayer

Prayer is an act of faith. Prayer is talking to someone you can't see, about something you don't have, with no visible means of obtaining it. That's exactly what Abraham's life was all about—living a life of faith! He provides a wonderful lesson for you and me: Our trust at times may falter as it did with Abraham. But as the years go by and you see your prayers answered, as you taste more and more of God's goodness, your faith grows. Doubts and fears will fade, to be replaced by a steadfast confidence in God. You can most assuredly say along with King Solomon, "There has not failed one word of all His good promise" (1 Kings 8:56).

Abraham prayed for others—One of the greatest examples in the Bible of intercessory prayer appears in Genesis 18. On this occasion, God visited Abraham as the Angel of the Lord. God came to tell Abraham two things: First, He was going to fulfill His long-standing promise to Abraham of a son (18:10). And second, He was going to judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness (verses 20-21).

Abraham was extremely troubled by what God promised for Sodom and Gomorrah because his nephew Lot lived there. So he expressed his concern in a series of prayers, appealing to God's

justice. “Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (verse 23).

After a back-and-forth negotiation with God (“Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city...forty-five...forty...thirty...twenty...ten”), Abraham won a promise from God. “I will not destroy it for the sake of ten” (verses 24-32). In the end, God, of course, did what was right. Unfortunately, there weren’t even ten righteous men in either city. God saved Lot and his two daughters, and destroyed all the wicked people in the two cities.

A Lesson to Learn about Prayer

From this interaction between God and Abraham, we learn three lessons about prayer.

First, answers to our prayers are not always immediate. Abraham waited 25 years before God gave him a son. Could you wait 25 years for answers to your prayers? Could you be satisfied if one or all of your prayers were never answered to your satisfaction? We must come to God praying, “Your will be done” (Matthew 6:10), not ours.

Second, our prayers should be motivated by a desire to see God glorified. While Abraham was concerned about the fate of the people in the two cities, he was more concerned about God’s character, asking, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25).

Third, God’s love for the lost is greater than ours. God did not reprimand Abraham for his interest in sinners. It was God Himself who said, “I have no pleasure in the

death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11). As God encouraged Abraham, so He encourages us to pray for those without Christ. Never stop beseeching God for lost family and friends.

Abraham made a wrong decision—With all his wonderful qualities and his remarkable prayer life, Abraham had his weaknesses, too. Ten years after God spoke forth His covenant to make Abraham the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:2), Abraham had a huge lapse in his trust in God’s promise to provide an heir.

That’s a long time to wait. And apparently Abraham forgot that God had reaffirmed His covenant in the intervening years (Genesis 15:1-7). Abraham also seemed to forget that when he had prayed for an assurance and asked, “LORD God, how shall I know...?” (verse 8), God staged an elaborate visual ceremony to affirm his promises to Abraham (verses 9-20).

But after all those years of waiting, Abraham faced the same serious problem—he still had no son. True, he had believed God when He reconfirmed His promise to give him a son through Sarah (verse 6). But, with each passing year, the promise seemed further and further from becoming a reality. Both he and his wife were not getting any younger. *How could God’s promise be fulfilled?* he questioned.

While Abraham was thinking this problem through, Sarah made a suggestion that was common for the culture of that day: “Go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her” (16:2). And to make the proposal even more acceptable, Sarah used God to justify it: “the LORD has restrained me from bearing children” (verse 2).

Somehow it never seemed to enter either Abraham or Sarah's minds to consult with God about this plan they were cooking up. If they had prayed, God might have refreshed their memories with these facts:

- Had He not protected Abraham and Sarah as they crossed the desert into the land of Caanan? Yes.
- Had He not rescued them from their blunder in Egypt when they lied to Pharaoh about their marital relationship? Yes.
- Had He not spoken directly to Abraham in the not-too-distant past and promised (again) that He would give them a son? A resounding yes!

You would think that the man who personally knew “the LORD, God Most High, the possessor of heaven and earth” (14:22) would have continued to trust Him to cause Sarah to bear a son. You would think that the man who had heard God promise to be his “shield” and “reward” (15:1) would have never faltered in faith. Even after his long history with God, Abraham did not consult God about his options. Thus, he made a wrong decision, which was based on three false assumptions:

- Abraham wrongfully assumed Sarah's arguments were valid. The fact that she brought God into her reasoning clouded Abraham's thinking.
- Abraham wrongfully assumed Sarah's solution would make her happy and content. It was the old “end justifies the means” reasoning. But as the scenario unfolded, Sarah's

unhappiness produced further sadness as the pregnant servant came to despise Sarah, her mistress (16:4-6).

- Abraham wrongfully assumed the customs of the pagans surrounding him were acceptable. You don't have to read very far in the Bible to see God's ideal for marriage—one man for one woman (2:18-25)—quickly perverted (4:19). And here, Abraham goes against God's ideal. Without consulting God, he gave in to the social pressure of his day. (Does this sound familiar?)

What a disaster! Abraham was deceived by his own emotions and misled by his wife's less-than-pure motives. All he wanted was to do God's will. Even though he had the right motives, he went about the matter in the wrong way. He took things into his own hands and created a situation the world is still dealing with today—the ages-old turmoil between the Arabs (Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar) and the Jews (Isaac, Abraham's son by Sarah).

A Lesson to Learn about Prayer

What can help us make the right kinds of decisions as we seek to follow and do God's will? You and I should never assume on possible solutions in our situation. Seek wisdom from God and wise, godly counselors who can help you see all the options that are available. Then ask God to help you determine your best option—the one that will most glorify Him. Don't do what Abraham didn't do—don't fail to pray over your decisions. Prayer is the starting point for every decision you make.

The story of Abraham's growing faith should be a big encouragement to each of us. There were times when Abraham displayed very little faith. He had failures, and he compromised at difficult times in his life. Yet his responses show us that faith grows, not in the absence of struggle, but in the midst of it. Like Abraham, you and I will face setbacks and trials. The key to growing more mature in your faith and trust in God is to seek His wisdom. Pray and ask Him for direction. Then, when each trial comes (and come they will!), you can trust God to see you through.

Prayer Principles for You—Faith

Prayer guards you against taking matters into your own hands.

What is the first question you usually ask yourself when confronted with a decision? *What can I do?* This question looks at your capabilities. You may wonder, *Do I have the skills, money, power to make my decision a reality?* Or sometimes you may ask, *What should I do?* This deals with morality—doing what’s right, fair, just.

When it’s time to make a decision, the best question to ask is, “God, what do You want me to do?” This question shows a dependence on the Lord in any given situation. When it came to having a son, Abraham failed to pray and took matters into his own hands...and the world is still living with the disastrous results.

Prayer guards you against making quick decisions.

How often are you asked to make “spur of the moment” decisions? “We need an answer...right now!” is a statement we hear too often. And, in the heat of the moment and under the pressure of urgency, you might make a quick decision that requires months or even years to undo the consequences. Abraham made a bad decision and used his wife’s maidservant to have a child. If a quick decision is needed and there’s no time to pray about it, then the answer is *no!* No decision made without prayer!

Prayer guards you against being influenced by family and friends.

Sometimes it's hard to make good decisions based on the advice of close family members. You're just that—too close! Your relationship can color your judgment. And sometimes family members aren't as spiritually mature as they should be. Or they are so close to you and your problem that they cannot be objective. As a result, their advice is often tainted by emotion, sin, selfishness, or worldliness.

But when you pray, you're able to seek the mind of God rather than the mind of man. Sarah wanted a son, and came up with a humanistic and man-centered solution. Don't do what Abraham did—he listened to family instead of praying to God.

Prayer guards you against the influence of your culture.

To some extent, you are a product of your culture. Society has a powerful influence over everyone, and no one is immune to the world. Therefore it's possible for many of your decisions to be influenced by the standards set by your culture.

However, just because something is acceptable in society doesn't make it right. Prayer can keep you from looking at your decisions-to-be-made through culturally colored glasses...like Abraham did. Prayer forces you to ask, "God, what is Your standard? What does Your Word say I should do in this situation?"

Prayer guards you against missing God's will.

When you don't pray, your heart and emotions can dictate your direction and you can miss God's will. What does the Bible say about your heart? It is "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). To ensure that your feelings and desires don't hinder you from choosing God's will, make sure you pray. Pray until your heart and emotions are neutral. Then you can better "hear" God speak to you through His Word and through wise counsel.

A Prayer to Grow in Faith

God Almighty—El Shaddai! This is the name You used for Yourself when You promised Abraham he would have many descendants. Your name *El Shaddai* speaks of Your unlimited power to fulfill Your promises to Abraham...and to me today as Your child. May I find confidence in You, and in Your love in choosing me for salvation through Your Son, Jesus Christ. May I, with confidence, stand alongside Abraham of old, having faith to believe, no matter what is happening around me. I know that You, El Shaddai, Almighty God, are with me in all Your unlimited power, by my side, protecting me as You guide my every step along Your path for me. Amen.¹