

LESSON 2

GOD'S INVITATION TO PRAYER

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: What if God says no when I pray?

Growing: What should I do if I haven't received a clear answer to prayer?

Communication—or rather, failure to communicate—is a major problem in our world today. So often we don't say what we mean, have difficulty putting our feelings into words, and leave people with misunderstanding. We have problems communicating in the family, workplace, and the church. Many people also have problems communicating with God. They are uncomfortable speaking with Him, wonder if He has heard what they have said, or are confused or frustrated in their lack of ability to say what they mean.

However, the foremost problem is a failure to even try to communicate. Communication is stymied if we never open our mouths and hearts to others. Without an effort to start communicating, there can be no growth in our ability to communicate. This problem is not new. Repeatedly in the Bible, God invited His prophets to communicate with Him. He extends the same invitation to us. He asks us to start the process so that we can build a relationship.

In Jeremiah 33:1–3, we read, “Moreover the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still shut up in the court of the prison, saying, “Thus says the LORD who made it, the LORD who formed it to establish it (the LORD is His name): ‘Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.’ ” Jeremiah was in prison for disagreeing with the leaders of Jerusalem who wanted to align themselves with the Egyptians to defeat the Babylonians, who were invading Israel.

The Lord had told Jeremiah that His people would be taken into captivity by the Babylonians for seventy years. Jeremiah therefore recommended that Israel surrender voluntarily. From his perspective, God's word was already coming to pass, so there was no point in fighting against it. But the leaders responded by putting Jeremiah in prison.

1. What did God command Jeremiah to do? What did He promise to do in response?

2. When has the Lord shown you “great and mighty things” as a result of prayer?

“CALL TO ME”

There are three great messages in this word of the Lord to Jeremiah. First, God says, “Call to Me.” There is probably no better place to catch up on one’s prayer life than behind bars! We may not be behind physical bars, but we often are isolated through a series of events or problems and find ourselves feeling alone and captive to our circumstances. In those times, our attention often turns to God. Our cry is usually, “God, get me out of this situation!” Sometimes we may even attempt to barter with God, saying in effect, “God, get me out of here so I can serve You better and read the Scripture and pray more than I have in the past.”

In reality, however, the “prison” in which we find ourselves may be the very place that God has designated for us to learn better how to serve Him, read the Bible, and pray more. This is especially true when the prison is one of our own making—a prison marked by our sin, emotional problems, relationship problems, self-created financial problems, or self-inflicted health problems. Our healing lies not in our deliverance from the problem but in developing a relationship with God in the midst of the problem.

God made no mention of Jeremiah’s release from prison in this passage. He simply said, “Call to Me.” God is far more interested in establishing a relationship with us and communicating with us within our situation than He is in changing our circumstances or releasing us from our problems. The lessons that we learn within life’s problems are valuable for all eternity. They are greater than any lessons that we might learn from a miraculous deliverance from our pain or trouble.

God calls us to pray within the struggles of life. Prayer is the shortest distance between the problems and the solutions, difficulties and remedies, questions and answers. The distance between your knees and the floor is the shortest distance to seeing God actively at work in your life.

3. What is usually your first response when trouble strikes? How long does it usually take for you to turn to prayer?

4. What is usually your first response when blessings come to you? How often do you spend time in prayers of thanksgiving?

“I WILL ANSWER YOU”

God wants us to come to Him as His beloved children so that He might be with us in every moment of our lives. He makes Himself personally available to us at any time of the day or night, no matter what we are facing. He says, “Call to Me. I am here.” He promises, “I will answer you.” We may not always sense His presence, but He is always there. People will often fail us in their promises to be there for us, but God will never fail us.

God has three main answers to our petitions: (1) yes, (2) no, and (3) wait. Each is an equally valid answer, though we don’t always see them all that way. In truth, the only answer we often accept from God is yes. I frequently hear people say, “Praise God, He answered my prayer! He said yes to what I requested.” I have never heard a person say with exuberance, “Praise God! He said no to what I requested!”

We want God to give us what we desire. But when God answers no, or wait, it is usually because we have not fully waited on Him to discover His will or direction for our lives. In such times, these answers will spare us heartache, keep us from error, or bring us growth so we will be ready to receive the fullness of God’s blessing in our lives.

Of course, a yes answer is not guaranteed solely because we are living right. Sometimes, a no is necessary because God's answer to us affects another person who is not living right. What we can know with certainty is that God's answer is always for our protection and His motivation toward us is always love. He has our best interests at heart.

I know people who receive an answer from God they do not like and turn immediately to their Bibles in hope of finding another answer they like better. Some read aloud a verse of Scripture with the hope that God will change His mind. They are trying to get God to rethink His decision. This never works! God's answer is God's answer. We are wise to accept it.

If God says no, we are wise to ask Him if His reason for denying our request has to do with sin in our lives. We can ask Him to evaluate the desires of our hearts and show us which ones are not in keeping with His perfect plan. Likewise, if He tells us to wait, we are wise to be alert before God so that when the time is right, we can act to receive what God has for us.

In either case, we are submitting our lives to God, engaging in a process of communication, and opening ourselves up to a deeper relationship with Him. No and wait answers can be productive for our spiritual growth, even though they are seldom the answers that we want initially. Remember, God is more interested in our eternal future than in making us happy in the moment. God's answers are for our good, and He will not be swayed from giving us what is best for us. We simply do not have His perfect wisdom and understanding.

Our response to God's no and wait answers is critical. If we respond with submission, we are serving and relating to the Lord out of love. If we rebel, our relationship with Him and service to Him could be bound by duty, not love. God's desire, of course, is that His relationship with us be characterized by spontaneous love and devotion, not stubborn or prideful duty.

5. "My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him" (Psalm 62:5).

When has the Lord answered your prayer with wait? What insight does this verse offer in how to wait for God's answer?

6. “Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him” (Psalm 91:14–15). What is required of us when we make requests to God?

“SHOW YOU GREAT AND MIGHTY THINGS”

God invited Jeremiah to call to Him and then said, “I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things.” Many of our petitions to God involve other people and our decisions related to them. We often ask God to bless our family members and friends and to exercise judgment on our enemies. But then we go about our daily business without ever considering what God might want us to do or what He might want to teach us and show us.

Note the things that God said He would show to Jeremiah. *First, He would show him great things.* God alone is truly great, and there is nothing greater than seeing God with spiritual eyes, hearing Him with spiritual ears, and gaining an understanding of what He is able to do. God alone knows our past deeds and our future potential. He is the Holy One, the great Creator, Sustainer, and Lover of mankind. God wanted to show Himself to Jeremiah. He wanted to reveal what was possible for Jeremiah’s future and the future of all God’s people.

When we read the Bible, we see the greatness of God on virtually every page. When we look at the lives of great Christians through the ages, we see the greatness of God at work. When we reflect back over the experiences of our own lives, we have evidence of God’s greatness. God wants to show us His own greatness. He wants to communicate to us His vast love and power and wisdom—all of which He makes available to us.

Second, God said that He would show Jeremiah mighty things. He promised to reveal “mighty things, which you do not know.” The word mighty in our current English usage does not mean what it meant at this time. The term usually referred to great fortified cities—ones that were walled in. It was a reference to things that are hidden, secret, and secure.

God desires to reveal to us the things that are inaccessible through any means except prayer. It is through our communication with God that He reveals the secret treasures of understanding and discernment that are “hidden” in the Scriptures. It is through our conversations with God that He reveals the unknown answers to our questions and the solutions to our problems. When we come to the Lord with a pure and humble heart, He can trust us with the precious riches of His power.

I have gone to God repeatedly through the years to ask for guidance and direction. Many times, His answer involved things that had been hidden to me. God led me to ask questions that I would not otherwise have asked, to seek information that I would not otherwise have sought, to probe issues that I would not otherwise have touched, and to contact people that I would not otherwise have called. In the process of obeying God’s guidance, He has given me access to resources and ideas and solutions that were previously unknown to me. In every instance, what God revealed was for my ultimate and eternal good. I have no doubt that what God has done for me, He will do for you.

God’s revelation of mighty things may not come quickly. In some cases, we may not yet be able to receive the information or make full use of the resources revealed to us. But God will not keep from us anything that we need to know. He responds to our cries for help by revealing Himself as the source of all our help and also by supplying all the resources we need.

7. What is the difference between the “great things” and the “mighty things” that God reveals through prayer?

8. Spend time right now in prayer, asking the Lord to reveal to you the great things and mighty things that He wants to show you. What do you sense Him saying to you?

THE INVITATION TO KNOCK, ASK, SEEK

Jesus reissued God's invitation to "call to Me" when He said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Jesus' promise to His followers is just as sure as the one God made to Jeremiah: the one who asks, seeks, and knocks will receive His answer and supply.

Asking, seeking, and knocking are all aspects of our prayer life. *First, we are to ask for the things we need.* Some people seem reluctant to pray for the material goods and resources they need, but God invites us to do so. In fact, He tells us that we often don't have what we need because we haven't asked (see James 4:2).

Second, we are to seek understanding and knowledge so that we can develop relationships with others. The goal of seeking is to find someone, and our primary goal is to seek God. *Third, we are to knock on the doors of opportunity that appear before us.* We are to respond in faith to the potential for good that God places in our paths. God wants us to fulfill the potential that He has placed in us. He wants us to feel satisfaction and fulfillment in what we do for Him and through Him.

The basis for all answered prayer is God's love. He responds to our petitions for things, relationships, and fulfillment because He loves us. Our asking, seeking, and knocking are all to be done within the context of our ongoing daily communication with God. Our needs change daily. New opportunities come our way on a daily basis. Relationships are built day by day. Therefore, our communication with God must be daily.

Jesus referred to this daily intimate relationship as abiding in God. The communication of a person who is abiding is frequent, without barriers, and deeply personal and meaningful. As we develop that kind of communication with God, He will reveal to us and provide for us all that we can possibly desire, in part because our desires will be His desires for us.

9. "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:8). What are some examples of asking, seeking, and knocking as they apply to prayer?

10. What are your responsibilities in prayer? What would you say are God's responsibilities when it comes to prayer?

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Today: God sometimes asks us to wait for His answer, and He wants us to trust Him in that time.

Tomorrow: I will ask the Lord to show me great and mighty things through prayer.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank You for loving us enough to provide for us. We thank You for not only providing physical things and material things, but also for providing Your wisdom and Your knowledge. We need to know Your will in the decisions that we make and know Your sense of direction. Grant us the faith to be obedient to whatever You require of us, whatever the solution may be. And teach us how to talk with You. This we ask in Jesus' name.

NOTES AND PRAYER REQUESTS

Use this space to write any key points, questions, or prayer requests from this week's study.