

WHO DO YOU THINK ABOUT WHEN YOU PRAY?

Acts 7:59-60 ... “And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Today’s Scripture is from the account of Stephen the Martyr who testified to the Jews that Jesus, who they killed, was indeed their Messiah. His words so angered the mob that they threw him out of the city and stoned him (an act still practiced in parts of the world today, where people have large rocks thrown at them until they die). From the language of the last verse, “he fell asleep,” some scholars believe God may have spared Stephen the horrible pain that stoning inflicted, by taking him home before the stones did their job. There is no way to be certain of that.

Our discussion today is really not about the Jews, or Stephen, or stoning. It is about what or whom you focus on when you pray. When you pray, you probably pray to God and end your prayers “in Jesus’ name.” But I am asking you what you think about during your prayers. Stephen’s prayer – at the most awful moment of his life, when he was about to die a painful death – was for his attackers, that their sin would not be held against them. Jesus prayed similarly when he was on the cross. So, we must ask ourselves, what are we thinking about when we pray? Ourselves or God?

If, when you pray, you ask God to forgive and bless you, provide something for you to eat, heal you, give you a job, bring more fish into your nets or multiply the rice in your fields, you become the focus of your prayer. God has, indeed, instructed us to pray for the things that concern us. So, praying for forgiveness, food, health and more is not wrong. However, if that is how you pray every day and every time you speak to God, God is not the focus of your prayers. You are. And that can lead you to believe that God is your servant. Over time you can begin to feel that God exists only to satisfy your desires. In some ways, you are actually making yourself an idol of more importance than God himself. To be sure, we have all done this. It is easy to get overwhelmed by the challenges of life and reach out to God begging for help and the things we need. But, if that is what God hears most often from you, I’m afraid it must disappoint him greatly.

God prefers that you worship and adore him. That you celebrate his role in your life through praise. That you study his Word to learn about his character and his instructions for you. When you spend time studying his Word and realizing how richly he blesses you, you will naturally feel more grateful and pray accordingly. If you pray in that manner, and ask only for things that are God’s will for you, he promises to meet your needs even before you ask. When you live obediently to his instructions and pray with God as your focus, you will probably face far fewer overwhelming challenges in life. Your feelings of desperation that you formerly begged God for help, will be fewer and less likely to make you panic. Try it. Try making your prayer time a celebration of God’s love for you, a cascade of thankfulness for his blessings and provision. See what happens when you make God and thankfulness the object of your prayer life.

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