

ABC of prayer – Part 6 - F

F is for Faith Expressed in Prayer

Jesus, in the passage known as the upper room ministry (John 13-17), effectively said five times "I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."

Faith expressed in prayer, with the goal of bringing glory to the Father, will bring God's answer. And Jesus' promise can be relied on. We can trust God because of what Jesus said and did. Jesus told his disciples that they would do greater works than he did, so we should expect more of the miraculous, and not edit out belief in God's supernatural working.

Faith is also a fruit of the Spirit or rather faithfulness. Faith in all its fullness is a fruit of the Spirit's work within and through us. As all the Spirit's fruit should be seen in each of God's children, this also means that ordinary Christians and children can be full of faith - not just the so-called stalwarts of faith. Hebrews 11 reminds us not only of many heroes of faith, but also of the unnamed ones who, through their faith, overcame extreme circumstances (v33-39). Incidentally, children - without the disadvantage of rationalist thinking - often have great faith levels!

Faith is in God, not in faith. Scripture talks about different measures of faith - small faith and great faith (see Matthew 17:20; Luke 7:9). We can ask for increased faith (Luke 17:5), so we can grow in faith. We shouldn't tell someone that they are lacking in faith; what about our own? Instead, we need to help one another grow in faith and grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I sometimes talk of 'stepping stones' of faith. When we wish to cross a stream, we use stepping stones. We step on to one, then another, and another, only to find we are in midstream; we have left the safety of terra firma, but haven't reached our objective - the other side.

Faith is like that. If we haven't the faith to jump right across to the ultimate, we need to build stepping stones of faith towards the final objective.

For example, if someone is terminally ill, do you have faith for an immediate healing and recovery? If not, don't pretend that you do. Instead, pray for steps along the way that will contribute to that person's health and well-being. As you see God work in small ways, then your faith will grow until eventually you are confident to ask God about the complete healing - in order to bring glory to him.

It's only as we see God work in small ways that we will have faith to trust him for big things - even to do with nations (Psalm 2:8) and moving mountains (Matthew 17:20-21), the ending of wars, and the transformation of whole communities. But start with praying for your neighbour, relative or friend. Then when God has answered, ask him "What next?"

F is for Forty Days of Prayer

Moses spent two periods of 40 days in the presence of God on "the mountain". The first time the cloud of God descended, the glory of God came down and Moses met with God. God gave Moses the tablets of stone containing the ten commandments (which were broken because of the children of Israel's idolatry). He also gave instructions for the tabernacle and the ark of God (see Exodus 24:12-18 onwards).

During the second time Moses was on Mount Sinai, he was hungry for the presence of God (Exodus 33:7-16); meeting with God was his priority.

Out of that experience God again gave him the ten commandments inscribed on two tablets of stone to replace the smashed ones. And this time when he descended, Moses' face was radiant with the aura of God's presence - something that was to be repeated when he came out of the tent of meeting with God (see Exodus 34:1-29).

Moses refers to these experiences in Deuteronomy 9:18 and 10:10. He prostrated himself before the Lord and he prayed; the type of prayer in which he engaged is regarded as deep intercession. He took neither bread nor water - what is known as a dry fast.

The temptation of Jesus in the desert also lasted for 40 days. Both Matthew and Luke record what happened (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). We know that he was full of the Spirit and led by the Spirit and ate nothing for the period - so making the temptation to change stones into bread very pertinent to his human need.

And it was at the end of the 40 day period, when Jesus was at his weakest physically, that Satan came to tempt him.

Jesus didn't need more power or authority - he already had it! But he showed that despite the physically weakening effects of fasting, he was still strong enough to withstand Satan.

These days many people all over the world have engaged in 40 days' prayer and fasting. Some are organised events, where individuals and churches allocate a day each so that between them 40 days are covered. Others are inspired by a growing problem or burden for outreach where the challenges are so great that God's children involved need to know that they are thoroughly and spiritually prepared. Yet others are entered into as a personal discipline.

Going without food but taking fluids is the usual advice for such fasts. Some will limit their food intake to soups or a light meal once a day. But going without both food and water is rare and should not be attempted without counsel from spiritual and medical leaders.

The references in Scriptures to 40 days of such fasting were clearly orchestrated by God and were exceptional. Both the receiving of the ten commandments and the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the desert were truly extraordinary and never-to-be-repeated events. Few 40-days fasts since can reflect such long-term spiritual impact and significance!

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