

## ABIDING IN CHRIST: THE KEY TO ANSWERED PRAYER

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At no time in history was prayer more a priority of the American people than when the Supreme Court ruled against it with respect to the classrooms of our nation's schools. Yet, careful examination reveals that most people --even most "Christian" people-- have little or no understanding of what constitutes Biblical prayer.

The word prayer occurs more than 200 times in the Bible. It occupied a place of supreme importance in the lives of the patriarchs and the prophets, and was fundamental to the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the lives of His apostles. Such occupancy of importance --especially in the life of Christ-- thus constitutes it as vital to the maintenance of our spiritual lives.

Of the multiple passages addressing the subject, none have so gripped my heart and life as that of John 15:7, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you" (NASB).

It seems strangely appropriate that our Lord would address this subject with His disciples during an era that was increasingly hostile toward Him and His message. Surely, that is His word for believers today: in the midst of trial and tragedy, resort swiftly to prayer.

And we do that; yet, our problem lies in the failure to understand that it's not sufficient to go merely through the motions of prayer, however intense the hurt; rather, His teaching requires that our lives be in spiritual order before we pray. In all truth, His teaching clearly is that unless our lives know a perennial fellowship with Him, we cannot pray, the utterance of words notwithstanding.

The most important word in any sentence is the verb because the verb denotes the action of the subject. The key word that unlocks the meaning of John 15:7 is verb abide. An aorist, active, subjunctive, second person plural, it renders *μεινητε* (abiding) potentially available to all believers. "If you all are continuing to remain and make your home in Me..." Abiding is not available for a privileged few; it is available for all, who are privileged to be in Christ. The subjunctive mood of the verb indicates that it is possible for every believer to be all that Christ intends him to be. Additionally, He has given us the Scriptures to this very end (cf. II Timothy 3:16-17).

Without question, *in Me* (*ἐν ἐμοί*) constitutes the precise place of our abiding.

Edersheim highlights the spiritual significance of Christ to us when he notes that Jesus' question regarding His true identity, as recorded in Matthew 16, was issued to the disciples outside the area of the Promised Land, as had been settled by the Hebrew tribes. There, away from the Holy City, away from the temple, the priesthood, the Scriptures, Jesus asked them plainly, "Who am I to you?"

A modern context further clarifies the meaning: Away from the home church, away from the pastor, the Sunday School teacher, the literature, the hymnbooks --cut off even from the Bible-- who is Jesus Christ to you? While I am studiously unmoved from my pretribulational, premillennial position on eschatology, should the Church be required to encounter severe persecution prior to the Rapture, we may have opportunity to test the significance of who Jesus Christ is to us and whether we are truly abiding in Him!

The Greeks were far more explicit with language than we. They had four possible responses to their "if" questions. They are called "conditional sentences." The first-class is *if, and it is so*; the second-class is, *if, but it is not so*; the third-class reads, *if, maybe it is and maybe it's not*; and fourth-class, *if, and I wish it were so, but it is not*. Differentiating these "ifs," is accomplished from within the language; yet in this verse each *if* reveals a third-class conditional sentence: If you abide in Me ( maybe you will, maybe you won't)... If My words abide in you (maybe they will, maybe they won't).

The second significant verb, *ask* (*αἰτησασθε*), is a Greek aorist, middle, imperative. The aorist tense denotes action occurring in a point of time, decisively and with finality. The middle voice carries the idea of personal involvement. And the imperative mood connotes a command. Thus, His Holy Spirit commandingly initiates prayer through those who are consistently living in the Lord.

What remains to be said in the verse is logically axiomatic. Still, we must never allow that truth will be automatically understood. Jesus is saying that when we abide in Him, we are in the right position for the Holy Spirit to use us as a corridor through which He (the Spirit) communicates with the Father. Now, how is it possible for the Holy Spirit to request from the Father something that the Father's cannot allow? Or, how can the Father reply negatively to what the Spirit Himself asks? The answer to both questions is the same: *He cannot!* To allow either would be to place the unity of the Godhead in jeopardy. Such is a theological and practical impossibility (II Timothy 2:13).

The key to answered prayer, therefore, is for us to abide in Christ, moment-by-moment, that we might be useful to the Spirit when He desires to address the Father through the medium of our mortal spirits. It's not the words we use, not the physical position we assume, not even how much time we take; it's whether we are living daily in a moment-

to-moment yieldedness to Christ. I cannot help but wonder whether Wesley knew this when he said, "God does nothing but in answer to prayer."