

Ask, Seek, Knock - The promise of His presence!

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[0 : 0 0] Fabulous to have a variety of instruments. Thank you very much for leading us in worship. Thank you too for the testimony. It's wonderful to hear the story of how God works in people's lives.

I'll put that down so you can see me. I wanted to start by telling you a story that I read in a book yesterday. And it's a difficult story. It's about a lady called Jenna, who I don't know.

She's an American, and she was sitting with her pastor trying to make sense of how God works in people's lives, particularly in her own life.

She was childless, and for a number of years had sought to have a child, eventually resorting to IVF. But in spite of lots of money spent and lots of medical interventions, nothing.

She was trying to make sense of that. But then part of the way she tried to make sense of that was to put together a small group in her church of women who were experiencing the same kind of fertility problems.

[1 : 1 4] She eventually befriended another lady whose name I forget now, but she prayed earnestly with her that she would have a child. And within weeks, the good news came that she was pregnant, this friend.

And so they were all delighted, and Jenna was trying to be delighted at the same time, grieving that she was still childless. Her friend gave birth to a very healthy baby boy, but then within a few weeks of that baby boy's first birthday, her friend discovered that she had inoperable cancer.

And they prayed that God would heal her, for why would God give her a child and then take the child's mother? So they prayed earnestly. But the lady died.

So now she's trying to make sense of two things. She's trying to make sense of how she remains childless, though she prayed earnestly. And she's trying to make sense of how this friend, very good friend of hers, had prayed.

God had answered the prayers, but then the mother was taken. Sometimes God doesn't make sense to us.

[2 : 3 9] Sometimes God answers prayers in very strange ways. We heard of Carol's testimony of Roger, and I was present with Roger at his deathbed.

And it was, and Carol will know what I mean, though it sounds odd, it was a wonderful experience. But Roger was pretty much glad to go on, was it the Tuesday or the Wednesday?

Yeah, he died on the Saturday, didn't he? But when he heard Eve was born, put his thumbs up. He wanted to know that Lisa had safely delivered her baby, and he was just so delighted with that.

God answers prayers in strange ways. But sometimes we think, don't we, that if God says no to something, that somehow he's let us down.

Somehow he's failed to come through. And we feel rather embarrassed about it, because we believe God answers prayer. And we're so happy when Andy got the plane this morning.

[3 : 47] That was a wonderful answer to prayer. Or, you know, you're looking for that car parking space in Whitby on a bank holiday. And you get one, and you think, what a wonderful answer to prayer. But what about when you've got an inoperable cancer?

Or what about when you can't have a child? Or what about when somebody you love dies? Has he somehow let you down? See, what happens is we forget that actually God doesn't always say yes.

I love Garth Brooks' song. Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers. So next slide, please. God doesn't always say yes. I want to read to you Matthew 7.

If you can see that, great. If not, get your eyes tested. Or make a bigger screen. Ask, and it will be given to you, Jesus says. Seek, and you will find.

Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?

[4 : 50] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

On the surface, Jesus seems to be saying prayer is simple. Just ask and you'll receive. You'll get it. He didn't tell us what we're going to receive. Not at first sight.

And we're tempted to think, well, we're going to receive the positive answers to our prayers. Including those kind of prayers that we pray so unselfishly. Like, God, please help Newcastle win the FA Cup.

He never answered that prayer. God, make me a multi-million heir. He never answered that prayer. God, make me six foot. He never answered that prayer.

The trouble is that we often feel we know what we need. And we wish that if only we got the thing that we so desperately wanted, we'd be happy and never ask for anything more.

[5 : 52] Now, if you've had children, that's never true. Just buy me that present and I'll never ask for anything again, says every child that ever lived. And they're never satisfied for very long.

The simple truth is, however, that Jesus does not promise us positive answers to every prayer. What he does promise us is his presence when we pray.

Let's look a little bit more closely here. The goal of prayer is not to get a positive answer. The goal of prayer is to get closer to God.

Jesus says prayer is asking, it's seeking, and it's knocking. Next slide, please. Mother Teresa famously said, prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself.

Ask and seek, and your heart will grow big enough to receive him and keep him as your own. I love that. I have found over the years that when I have been most grieved and disappointed in my Christian life, I have known God in a way that I have not known him through ease and pleasure.

[7 : 13] Somehow, he draws near the brokenhearted, and he gives peace to those who are so troubled in spirit. You see, when Jesus encourages us to pray, he says, ask.

That is to say, think about what you need from God and tell him what you need. Be specific about it. You know what you need and what you desire. Well, tell him all about it.

Bring it to him. And when you ask God for anything, it is a reflection of the thing you desire, the thing that you need. But James says, if you lack wisdom, ask God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

But let him ask in faith without doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. So when you're asking God, you say, God, this is what I want. I know you can do it because there's nothing impossible for you.

[8 : 16] But I don't know if you will do it because it might not be good for me. And that's just the way faith is. Faith accepts the will of God, regardless of whether we like it or not.

But that's what faith is. Seek. It refers to the process in which we engage in that praying. Jesus doesn't make it easy for us. He says, you've got to really want this, and you've got to really want this by seeking for it.

In Luke 11, Jesus tells a story about a friend who goes at midnight, sorry, a person who goes at midnight to a friend and says, friend, lend me free laws, for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him.

And he will answer from within and say, do not trouble me. The door is now shut and my children are with me in bed. I cannot rise and give to you. I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.

So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

[9 : 40] If a son asks for bread of any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Now, implied in all of this is that prayer sometimes is an inconvenience, and it's sometimes hard work, and sometimes you have to keep on knocking, and sometimes you feel you've got to be a bit of a pest to get God's attention.

And sometimes God will give you what you seek. If you seek it with all your heart, you labor for it. Incidentally, you know when Elijah prayed, when he went to see if rain was coming, it says that he bowed down with his head between his legs.

And you think, why did he do that? That was the traditional way for mothers to have babies in those days. You squat down. You push it out. You don't lie in a bed.

Squat down, push it out. Elijah bringing to birth his desired answer for prayer through painful labor. Paul says to the Galatians, I labored for you like a woman in childbirth.

[11 : 01] Sometimes we have to labor in prayer to bring forth that which we desire of God. And then Jesus says, knock. And I like this idea of knocking.

Knock at the door. You get to that point in prayer where you're seeking God, you're asking God for stuff, and you know you're at the right door. But he hasn't answered yet, so what should you do?

Well, you just wait there until he answers. Behold, I stand at the door and knock, Jesus said. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and be with him and he with me.

And that's the point about prayer. Prayer brings us into the very presence of God. Jesus is not saying, all you need is a good answer. No, he says, get to that door.

Let your heavenly Father open that door. And then there's a feast waiting for you. You think you need the answer to prayer. What you really need is the giver of the gift.

[12 : 04] And that is God. For on the other side of the door, there is Jesus. We come to get the gift, says Tyler Stanton. Stanton, rather.

And we get him. So next slide, please. What's on the other side of the door? Joyous feast. God is the goal. God is the goal.

The compensation for unanswered prayer is the presence of God. See, what Jenna discovered in the end was that whether or not God gave to her the desire of her heart, what she really needed was God.

She had been hurt by God. But she found her comfort in God. You see, the remarkable thing about little children, you know, I've got five children.

This is the bit that never ceases to amaze me. Sometimes when you have to speak harshly to your children and they get upset, they look at you and what do they do?

[13 : 12] They come crying to you. They come for comfort from you. You just upset them. But they come to you for comfort.

Sometimes God hurts us. But where do we turn? We turn to him for comfort. Sometimes God disappoints us. He doesn't answer our prayers.

Where do we turn? We turn to him for consolation. Sometimes God takes from us the thing that we find, we feel is most precious in life. And we are deeply grieved.

But where do we turn? We turn to him for comfort. God is the goal. He is the answer to our greatest need.

Now, I don't know if you've ever seen The Shack or read The Shack. I love The Shack. I watch it every time, foolishly, because it always makes me cry. But I watch it again nonetheless.

[14 : 10] And if you've never seen it, without giving too much away, it's a story of Mac who loses his child in dreadful circumstances. And then Mac gets a letter one day, which is claimed to be a letter from God, to go back to the place where his daughter had been abducted and murdered.

So he goes back to The Shack. He's very bitter, very angry with God. He'd lost his faith almost. But when he gets to The Shack, he's walking through the wood, and he meets a man walking on the road.

This man is Jesus. And Jesus invites him to the cottage. And then he goes into the cottage and discovers the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ready for a meal.

And they invite him to sit and have dinner. When he's sitting having dinner, he then looks around and says, there's a question I always wanted to ask.

Which one of you is God? And all three respond together, I am. It's quite a profound moment in the film. It depicts the living relationship that the Father has with the Son and has with the Holy Spirit and vice versa.

[15 : 27] And as Mark gets to know them, he gets to discover how God, the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit can help heal his pain and enable him to forgive those who'd hurt him.

To restore the broken relationship he has with them in order that he might restore the broken relationship that he has with his wife and his children. The idea of sitting at a table, having a meal, is wonderful.

It reminds us of the special relationship that God wants to have with us behind the door. Come and sit with me. As Tyler Statton put it, sorry, it was on the previous slide, prayer in any form by anybody is God's invitation to pull up a chair to the table and enjoy restful, intimate, unbroken conversation with Triune God.

God is the goal, the end goal of all our praying. It's not, wouldn't it be wonderful if he gave you what you desired?

It's, wouldn't he be wonderful? Isn't he wonderful? Because he gives us himself. And that helps us with hurtful, unanswered prayer experiences.

[16 : 56] He may not give you everything you want, but if he gives you himself, that is more than adequate compensation for what you feel you've lost because you've not received.

Ask, seek, and knock, and the door will be opened to you. I'm conscious that for some of you, it might be painful to hear that.

Because maybe you're destined to live with disappointment. But as the Father says to Mac in the shack, when all you can see is your pain, perhaps then you lose sight of me.

Perhaps it's time to stop feeling your pain and allow yourself to be comforted by your heavenly Father who loves you.

Faith does not grow in the house of certainty, says Papa in the film. Trust is the fruit of a relationship in which you know you are loved because you do not know that I love you.

[18 : 11] you cannot trust me. If you know that God loves you, you can trust him. He'll never let you down.

He'll always be with you. He says, I'm enough for you. Come and sit at my table. Ask, seek, and knock, and the door will be opened to you.

Amen.