

Asking in Prayer

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*I dedicate this book to my wife
and companion for 64 years.
I first met her when she was 18.
I married her when she was 20
and I buried her when she was 84.*

*We had a good and happy life together
and with the Lord's help we raised five children.*

On her gravestone is written,

Helen Elaine Walker: Wife, Mother, Princess.

*Elaine was always ready to pray.
She was my helper in learning about prayer.
We learned together about the value of praying specific things.
That is why this book is entitled "Asking in Prayer."
May it be a blessing to all who read it.*

Richard E. Walker

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1

To Whom Should We Pray?

People pray to many different gods, yet the Bible teaches that there is only one God. In the Book of Isaiah, we read that God asked,

“Is there any God besides Me?
Indeed there is no other Rock;
I know not one.”

Isaiah 44:8

The Old Testament tells how God educated the Jewish people to worship Him only. It happened like this: When the Jewish people served God, and Him only, they found that they were blessed; but when they left off serving Him and started worshipping idols, God withheld His blessings from them.

THE DISASTROUS RESULTS OF WORSHIPPING IDOLS

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes that idol worship was started by people who thought they were wise. The results, however, were disastrous:

“Professing to be wise,
they became fools,
and changed the glory
of the incorruptible God
into an image made like corruptible man--
and birds and four-footed beasts
and creeping things.
Therefore God also gave them up
to uncleanness,
in the lusts of their hearts,
to dishonor their bodies among themselves.”

Romans 1:22-24

From this we learn that the worship of idols is an affront to God. People that worship idols are saying, in effect, that God does not exist or that, if He does exist, He does not matter.

THE WORSHIP OF ANIMALS

The worship of animals is also an affront to God, for He is infinitely greater than they. He is the one who created them. Therefore, He is the one who should be worshipped, not the creatures that He has made.

THE WORSHIP OF MEN

People in the city of Lystra, in Asia Minor, tried to worship the Apostle Paul and Barnabas, thinking they were gods that had come down to earth, but Paul and Barnabas would have none of it. They tore their clothing, ran among the people, and cried out,

“Men, why are you doing these things?

We also are men with the same nature as you.”

Acts 14:15

Paul and Barnabas then instructed the people of Lystra to leave their vain worship and turn to “the living God who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them” (Acts 14:15).

Likewise, the Apostle Peter refused to allow people to worship him. When a man named Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet and tried to worship him, Peter lifted the man up and said to him,

“Stand up;

I myself am also a man.”

Acts 10:26

THE WORSHIP OF ANGELS

Not even the holy angels should be worshipped. When the Apostle John fell at an angel’s feet in an attempt to worship him, the angel said to John,

“See that you do not do that!

I am your fellow servant,

and of your brethren

who have the testimony of Jesus.

Worship God!”

Revelation 19:10

Notice what the angel said to John: “Worship God.”

THE WORSHIP OF THE DEAD

Neither the Apostle Peter nor the Apostle Paul allowed themselves to be worshipped while they were on earth. In view of this, why should we suppose they have changed their thinking, now that they are among the dead?

The prophet Isaiah said,

“When they say to you,
‘Seek those who are mediums and wizards,
who whisper and mutter,’
should not a people seek their God?
Should they seek the dead
on behalf of the living?”

Isaiah 8:19

What is the point of trying to communicate with the dead? Is there any reason to think that dead people know more about life on this earth than the people who live here now? Communing with the dead is useless and an abomination to God (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

THE WORSHIP OF SAINTS AND IMAGES

Some people defend the worship of images of the saints, by saying, “We don’t worship them; we merely revere them.” Yet, whether we call it ‘worshipping’ or ‘revering,’ it is the same. It is giving worship, or reverence, to something (or someone) other than to God and His Son.

Some say they don’t worship dead saints. They say that they only ask the saints to relay their requests to God, not to

“grant” their requests themselves. Yet, even if it were true that dead saints could hear our requests and relay them to God, why should it be necessary for us to ask them to do this for us? The Bible teaches that Christians can pray directly to the Father for themselves. The Bible also teaches that the Holy Spirit supplies whatever assistance may be needed in relaying our requests to the Father (Romans 8:26-27).

Someone may say, “But the saints have more influence with God than we do.” Well, it is certainly true that the prayers of a righteous person have influence with God (James 5:16), but it is not true that a person has to be dead before he or she can pray for us. If we desire to have a saint pray for us, we can ask some godly brother or sister on earth to pray for us; for the Bible teaches that all true Christians are “saints” (Romans 1:7). The Bible also teaches that we should pray for each other (James 5:16).

Our access to the Father has already been made available by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is our “advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1). He is also our “Mediator” (1 Timothy 2:5) and He makes intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). The Holy Spirit assists Him (Romans 8:26-27) in making it possible for us to speak directly to the Father.

JESUS PRAYED TO THE FATHER

Jesus addressed His prayers to God, whom He called “Father.” By addressing His prayers to God, Jesus showed us to whom we should pray. Here are a few examples of how Jesus prayed. He said,

“I thank You, Father,
Lord of heaven and earth...”

Matthew 11:25

“Father, I thank You
that You have heard Me.”

John 11:41

“Father, the hour has come.”

John 17:1

“And now, O Father, glorify me...”

John 17:5

Both by example and by teaching Jesus showed us that we should address our prayers to the Father. He said,

“But you, when you pray,
go into your room,
and when you have shut your door,
pray to your Father
who is in the secret place;
and your Father who sees in secret
will reward you openly.”

Matthew 6:6

From this can be seen that prayers should be addressed to God, the Father.

SHOULD REQUESTS BE ADDRESSED TO JESUS?

Some people direct most (or all) of their requests to Jesus;

but apparently Jesus does not want us to address our requests to Him, for He said,

“And in that day
you will ask Me nothing.
Most assuredly, I say to you,
whatever you ask the Father in My name
He will give you.”

John 16:23

There are a few instances in the New Testament where someone spoke a prayer to Jesus, but the bulk of the requests that are recorded there are addressed to the Father.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. How did it come about that people got started worshipping idols?
2. Why was it so difficult for the children of Israel to learn to worship God only?
3. Can you suggest a reason (or reasons) as to why the holy angels should not be worshipped? Please suggest a reason, if you can.
4. Do you think that people should bow down and worship holy men and women? What is wrong with doing that?
5. Do you suppose some people would enjoy being worshipped? Please, explain.
6. Do you think Satan would like to be worshipped? Please, tell why you think as you do.

2

Does God Really Answer Prayers?

It came as a surprise to me when I realized that God desires to hear our prayers and that He is anxious to help us. There was no excuse for my not having realized this sooner, because the Bible clearly teaches it.

GOD WANTS PEOPLE TO PRAY TO HIM

King David wrote,

“The Lord is near to all
who call upon Him,
To all who call upon Him,
To all who call upon Him in truth.”

Psalm 145:18

King David had found from his own experience that God was always near when he called upon Him. Thus, David believed that God would help all of those who call on Him provided they call “in truth” (Psalm 145:18).

David also wrote,

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
And His ears are open to their cry.”

Psalm 34:15

HOW KING SOLOMON FELT ABOUT PRAYER

King Solomon learned many things from David, his father; and he adopted much of David’s attitude toward prayer. Solomon wrote,

“The sacrifice of the wicked
is an abomination to the Lord,
But the prayer of the upright is His delight.”

Proverbs 15:8

So, Solomon believed that God takes delight in the prayers of upright people.

GOD SEEKS WORSHIPPERS

God not only delights to have good people pray to Him, but He is also actively seeking such people. Jesus said,

“But the hour is coming, and now is,
when the true worshipers
will worship the Father in spirit and truth;
for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”

John 4:23

GOD IS WILLING TO HELP US

God is not stingy with His gifts but bestows His blessings lavishly. For example, God made the earth to be very beautiful and has given mankind the ability to see and appreciate the beauty of it. He has also made the earth fruitful (Acts 14:17) and has provided an amazing variety of good things to eat. He did all of this, and more, because He takes delight in doing good things for those who fear (respect) Him. He is anxious to fulfill even their desires. King David wrote,

“He will fulfill the desire
of those who fear Him;
He also will hear their cry
and save them.”

Psalms 145:19

GOD HAS A LONG HISTORY OF HELPING PEOPLE

God has proven over and over again that He is willing to answer prayers. The Bible is full of examples of how God answered prayers in the past.

For example, Abraham interceded in prayer for Abimelech, whose wife had become sterile. After Abraham prayed for her, she was able to bear children again (Genesis 20:17).

Later, when the children of Israel refused to go up to the Land of Canaan, Moses prayed that God would not destroy them. Moses prayed as follows:

“Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray,
according to the greatness of Your mercy,
just as You have forgiven this people,
from Egypt even until now.”

Numbers 14:19

In response to Moses’ prayer, God spared the Jewish nation (Numbers 14:20).

In the time of the judges, a Jewish woman named Hannah prayed that God would make it possible for her to bear a son. She promised that if God would give her a son, she would dedicate her child to God. She prayed,

“O Lord of hosts,
if You will indeed
look on the affliction of your maidservant
and remember me,
and not forget your maidservant,
but will give your maidservant a male child,
then I will give him to the Lord
all the days of his life.”

1 Samuel 1:11

God granted Hannah’s request (1 Samuel 1:20,27), and Samuel was born. After Hannah had weaned Samuel, she brought him to the high priest; and he grew up with the high priest at the tent of worship. Samuel became one of the great priests of Israel.

The prophet Elijah prayed that no rain would fall on the land of Israel for three years and six months (James 5:17). Elijah prayed this because the people of Israel had been worshipping idols instead of God. Finally, Elijah prayed again,

and rain fell (James 5:18).

King Hezekiah was one of the better kings of Judah, yet God told him that he was going to die. Hezekiah pleaded with God, saying,

“Remember now, O Lord, I pray,
how I have walked before You in truth
and with a loyal heart,
and have done what is good in Your sight.”

Isaiah 38:3

God heard Hezekiah’s prayer, saw his tears and was moved with compassion. Consequently, God added fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life (Isaiah 38:5).

When God commanded Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh to preach to the people, Jonah fled from the task and went west to the sea instead of east to Nineveh. As Jonah fled, a storm came up, and Jonah was thrown into the sea, where a giant fish swallowed him (Jonah 1:17). From the belly of the fish Jonah prayed to God (Jonah 2:1), and God caused the fish to spit Jonah out on dry land (Jonah 2:10).

King Manasseh was perhaps the worst king that the nation of Judah ever had. As a result of Manasseh’s sins, his enemies took him captive and in captivity he changed his attitude toward God. Concerning this, the Bible says,

“Now when he was in affliction,
he implored the Lord his God,
and humbled himself greatly
before the God of his fathers,
and prayed to Him;
and He received his entreaty,

heard his supplication,
and brought him back to Jerusalem
into his kingdom.

Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.”

2 Chronicles 33:12-13

Manasseh learned the hard way that God exists and that God answers prayers.

A BOOK I FOUND AT THE LIBRARY

While I was preparing to write this chapter on God’s willingness to hear and answer prayers, I went to the library of Lubbock Christian University in Lubbock, Texas. There I ran across a little book entitled “Your Prayers are Always Answered,” written by Alexander Lake.

Inside the front cover of the book, I found a handwritten dedication, which read: “To President M. Norvel Young with kind regards and sincere appreciation, from Godwin J. Knight, Governor of California. April 25, 1958.”

I was delighted to come across this little book, partly because I, like many others, consider myself to have been a friend to the late Dr. Norvel M. Young, who formerly preached for the Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, and who subsequently became president of Pepperdine University in California.

I was fascinated with Mr. Lake’s book for yet another reason. It contains a collection of stories about people that prayed to God and had their prayers answered.

One of the chapters in the book is entitled, “Public Servant of God.” It tells the story of the prayer-life of Governor

Godwin Knight, the man who had presented the book to Dr. Norvel M. Young. The chapter tells how Governor Knight, as a young man, began to pray and how God blessed him throughout his life.

Governor Knight became convinced that every move he made, every job he took was a part of God's plan for him. While he was yet a boy, he asked God to direct his career. He also asked God to help him recover some money that his father had lost, and God did this many years later.

In the preface to the book "God Always Answers Prayers," Alexander Lake explained his reason for writing about prayer. He said that in 1910, when he was seventeen years old, his father, Dr. John G. Lake was a missionary in Johannesburg, South Africa, and that prominent men in the South African government, such as Louis Botha, General Jan Smuts and Christian De Wet, occasionally came to their home. They always knelt and prayed before starting their discussions and closed each meeting with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Alexander Lake explained that these men would sometimes sit for a while after they had prayed and tell stories of how their prayers had been answered. Alexander Lake said that hearing these stories made such a deep impression on him that he subsequently made a hobby of collecting stories about how God answers prayers.

I admire Alexander Lake for his interest in how God answers prayers. I am impressed that he thought that such stories are worthy of being collected and published in a book.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose it is that God likes to hear good people pray?
2. Can you think of any prayers in the Old Testament, which God answered, other than those mentioned in this chapter?
3. Have any of your own prayers ever been answered? Would you like to tell about some of them? Please tell about them if you care to.
4. Do you think answered prayers have evidential value as to the existence and power of God? If so, how?
5. When God answers prayers, does it show anything about His attitude toward His people on earth? What does it show?
6. What thoughts do you suppose went through Jonah's mind when he found himself on dry land? Do you think that anyone had to convince Jonah that God hears and answers prayers?

3

Is It Okay to Ask God for Help?

Yes, it is all right to ask God for help.

DAVID WAS A TEACHER OF PRAYER

King David taught that God's help is available. He did this by making reference to his own experience in praying. He wrote,

“Come and hear, all you who fear God,
And I will declare
what He has done for my soul.
I cried to Him with my mouth,
And He was extolled with my tongue.
If I regard iniquity in my heart,
The Lord will not hear.
But certainly God has heard me;
He has attended to the voice of my prayer.
Blessed be God,
Who has not turned away my prayer,
Nor His mercy from me!”

Psalm 66:16-20

FEEL FREE TO ASK FOR HELP

Jesus told a story about a man to whom a traveler came by night. The man did not have any bread in his house, so he went to his friend's house and said,

“Friend, lend me three loaves;
for a friend of mine
has come to me on his journey,
and I have nothing to set before him.”

Luke 11:5-6

From within his house, the friend answered,

“Do not trouble me;
the door is now shut,
and my children are with me in bed;
I cannot rise and give to you.”

Luke 11:7

Regarding this story, Jesus said,

“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.”

Luke 11:8

In telling this story Jesus taught that we can ask God for what we need. In order to make this point even more clear, Jesus said,

“And I say to you, ask,
and it will be given to you.”

Luke 11:9

Furthermore, Jesus taught that we should feel free to be aggressive in asking. He said,

“Seek, and you will find;
knock, and it will be opened to you.”

Luke 11:9

Therefore, it is all right to knock on the door of heaven. Jesus reassured us, saying,

“For everyone who asks receives,
and he who seeks finds,
and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Luke 11:10

Jesus was so desirous of getting the message out that God is willing to answer prayers that He did not pause here to point out that there are certain conditions to be met in praying.

ASKING IS A PART OF PRAYING

The familiar prayer that is often called “The Lord’s Prayer” (Matthew 6:9-13), is filled with asking. In it, Jesus said we should pray:

“Hallowed be Your name.”

Matthew 6:9

With this request, Jesus taught us to request that God's name be considered holy.

He also said to pray,

“Your kingdom come.”

Matthew 6:10a

With this request, Jesus taught the disciples of His day to ask for God's kingdom to come into existence. However, the kingdom (reign) of God came into existence with the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus (Acts 2:32-36). For that reason, people of today do not need to ask for God's kingdom to come into existence; but they can ask for its advancement.

Jesus also said to pray,

“Your will be done on earth.”

Matthew 6:10b

With this request, He taught us to ask for people to be obedient to God's will.

He also said to pray,

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Matthew 6:11

With this request, Jesus taught us to ask for our daily food.

He also taught us to pray,

“Forgive us our debts.”

Matthew 6:12

With this request, Jesus taught us to ask for forgiveness.

He also taught us to pray,

“Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”

Matthew 6:13

With this request, Jesus taught us to ask for help in avoiding sin and in struggling against the devil.

So we see that almost the whole of what we call “The Lord’s Prayer” is filled with asking.

ONE OF OUR FIRST SPECIAL PRAYERS OF ASKING

In 1949, my wife and I and our first two children were in Zurich, Switzerland. We were awaiting permission from the Allied High Command in Berlin to enter Germany as missionaries. We had been waiting for five months before permission finally came.

When the permission finally came, we had to find someone to take over the lease on the apartment, in which we had been living. Unless we found someone, we would have been obligated to continue to pay \$100 per month. That was a lot of money in those days. So we put an advertisement in a newspaper and many people responded to the ad, but no one could afford such high rent.

In spite of the fact that we had not found a renter, we cleaned up the apartment and moved into a small hotel in the neighborhood for our last two nights in Zurich. That night at the hotel, we did something that was unusual for us. We prayed a special prayer, which dealt with one specific thing: We asked God to help us find a renter.

The very next day, a lady came and looked at the apartment and took it. We were greatly relieved! This strengthened our faith in prayer. If we had started praying for a renter earlier, we perhaps would have been spared much anxiety.

The author of the book of James wrote,

“You lust and do not have.
You murder and covet and cannot obtain.
You fight and war.
Yet you do not have
because you do not ask.”

James 4:2

Sometimes, people do not get what they want, for no other reason than that they do not ask God for it.

The Book of James goes on to caution people, however, that they must ask with a good motive. James wrote,

“You ask and do not receive,
because you ask amiss,
that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

James 4:3

HOW CAN WE KNOW IF OUR MOTIVES ARE RIGHT?

A certain young lady in Berlin, Germany, asked my wife how one can know whether or not one's motives were right in asking. Elaine told the young lady that a person grows in his or her ability to know what is right and wrong. Elaine referred the young lady to Hebrews 5:14 which says,

“But solid food belongs to those
who are of full age, that is,
those who by reason of use
have their senses exercised
to discern both good and evil.”

Hebrews 5:14

As people grow more familiar with the Bible, and as they gain experience in asking according to what the Bible says, their requests become more pleasing to God. In time, a person stops asking for things that are foreign to God’s way of thinking.

CAN WE PRAY FOR PHYSICAL AND MATERIAL THINGS?

I used to think that people should pray only for spiritual things, not for physical and material things. Now, I see that requests for physical things are not essentially different from requests for spiritual things, as long as our motives are right. I now think that even physical things can be asked for, as long as we intend to use them for God’s glory.

IS IT SELFISH TO BE CONTINUALLY ASKING GOD FOR SOMETHING?

No, God wants His people to ask for things. Jesus indicated, however, that His followers should be modest in their asking. He taught them to say, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11), i.e. the bread we need for today.

We should not ask for a truckload of bread, unless, of course, we have so many mouths to feed that we need a truckload of bread. In that case, it is perfectly all right to ask for a truckload of bread. It is not wrong to ask for big and expensive things, provided we need them for some good purpose.

THE BROAD PROMISE THAT JESUS MADE

Sometimes, people place unnecessary and artificial limits on what God will or will not do. Jesus said,

“If you abide in Me,
and My words abide in you,
you will ask what you desire,
and it shall be done for you.”

John 15:7

Notice that Jesus Himself is the one that made this promise. He realized, of course, that this is a broad promise. He saw the breadth of it even more clearly than we see it.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Can you recall any specific requests that King David made of God?
2. Did Jesus ask for many things in His prayers or only for a few things? Do you think Jesus asked for more things than most of us do?
3. Do you think that God would have given you more of the things that you desired, if you had asked Him for them?

Can you name a few things you should have asked for?

4. Do you think you are now praying more than you did a few years ago? If so, what led you to step up your praying?
5. Do you find that praying and reading the Bible go together? How do they go together?
6. How has reading the Bible helped you to know what to pray for? Give some examples, if you can.

4

Does The Way We Live Affect Getting Our Prayers Answered?

In chapter two, I referred to a book entitled, “Your Prayers Are Always Answered.” While this book is interesting, and while it tells what I consider to be true stories, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. It is misleading in that it implies that God always gives a *positive* answer to every request; and that is not true, for God does not give a positive answer to every request.

The truth of the matter seems to be that God grants many, or most, of the requests of some people, even though He may not grant them exactly in the way that these people want them granted. It also seems that God does not grant very many requests of other people. So while a few people get many of their requests granted, most people get only a few of their requests granted. If this is true, it leads to the following question,

IS GOD A RESPECTER OF PERSONS?

In January of 1993, I was invited to teach a seminar on prayer at the Eastside Church, on the campus of Cascade College in Portland, Oregon. During that seminar, I asked the

people in the audience to write any questions they had on 3/5-inch cards and hand the cards to me.

In response to the assertion that I had made to the effect that God grants the requests of true Christians more often than the requests of others, I received this question:

“If God answers the prayers of a Christian, and only some (prayers) of those who are not Christians, would that not make Him a respecter of persons to those whom He will not hear?”

I believe the proper answer to this question is, Yes, God *is* a respecter of persons with regards to prayer. I say this because it is clear that He does not grant all the requests of all the people all the time (John 9:31).

Yet, in another way, it is true that God is *not* a respecter of persons. He is *potentially* willing to answer the prayers of everyone. It depends on the people themselves, whether or not God will answer their prayers. Let me explain:

GOD DOES NOT LISTEN TO THOSE WHO DO NOT LISTEN TO HIM

In the book of Proverbs, where God’s wisdom is presented in a personified way, Wisdom speaks out, saying,

“Because I have called and you refused,
I have stretched out my hand
and no one regarded,
Because you disdained all my counsel,
And would have none of my reproof,

I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when your terror comes.”

Proverbs 1:24-26

This passage shows an aspect of God’s nature that is sometimes overlooked. It is this: God means business! When He says something, He intends for people to pay attention. This is because He is a great King, and kings are to be obeyed. This being the case, God does not normally respond to the prayers of people that who do not respect what He has said.

Please, hear again what Wisdom said in this regard:

“Then they will call on me,
but I will not answer;
They will seek me diligently,
but they will not find me.”

Proverbs 1:28

The fact that God is reluctant to grant the requests of those who do not respect His word is brought out more clearly in the following verse. It says,

“One who turns away his ear
from hearing the law,
Even his prayer shall be an abomination.”

Proverbs 28:9

These words were written originally for Jewish people. They were written to show that God expected the Jews to keep the Law of Moses. In this passage (Proverbs 1:24-29), King Solomon was telling the Jews that if they did not keep the Law of Moses, God would not hear their prayers.

There are four stories in the 107th Psalm, which suggest

that if the Jewish people would repent of their sins, God would hear them. Here are shortened versions of these four stories:

Story # 1:

There were people who were lost in the wilderness and who were hungry and thirsty. When they cried out to the Lord, He led them to a city, where they found food and water (Psalm 107:4-7).

Story # 2:

There were people who were imprisoned in a dark dungeon where they were bound with chains. When they cried out to the Lord, He set them free (Psalm 107:10-14).

Story # 3:

There were people who were so sick that they could not think of eating food. They were near death, but when they cried out to the Lord, He healed them (Psalm 107:17-20).

Story # 4:

There were people who were in a ship in a storm and the winds and the waves tossed them about. When they cried out to the Lord, He calmed the storm (Psalm 107:23-30).

These stories show that God sometimes hears the cries of those that are in extreme difficulty when they call on Him. He sometimes helps them in spite of the fact that they have not given proper thought to Him before they got into trouble.

Each of us has heard stories of how God has shown mercy on someone when that person repented of his or her sins and pleaded to God for help. It seems that a penitent prayer is the kind that God is most anxious to hear (Luke 18:10-14).

When a person appeals to God for help he or she is, in effect, making a commitment to obey God. If that person starts obeying God, after God has helped him or her out of a difficulty, the difficult situation turns out to have been a blessing in disguise.

If, however, a person does not attempt to obey God after God has helped him or her out of a difficult situation, God may not be willing to help him or her again (John 5:14).

OBEDIENCE IS REQUIRED

In spite of the fact that Christians are not under obligation to keep the Law of Moses, the idea that obedience is required has been brought forward into the New Testament. Jesus is the one who brought the idea forward. He said,

“If you abide in Me,
and My words abide in you,
you will ask what you desire,
and it shall be done for you.”

John 15:7

This statement contains two stipulations for getting prayers answered that were laid down by Jesus Himself: (1) We must be abiding in Jesus; and (2) we must have Jesus’ words abiding in us.

In this chapter, we will look at the second of these two

stipulations. In the following chapter, we will look at the first stipulation.

So let us ask the question,

HOW CAN WE HAVE JESUS' WORDS ABIDING IN US?

One way to have Jesus' words abiding in us is to be reading the Bible constantly, over and over again, so that we can become familiar with its contents. Unless we become familiar with the contents of the Bible, we cannot truthfully claim to have Jesus' words abiding in us; for the Bible is the only authentic source of the words of Jesus.

An even better way to have Jesus' words abiding in us is to commit His words to memory. Memorization of Scripture used to be a regular part of Bible study; but today, unfortunately, it has gone out of style.

In addition, there is something else that we can do that might be even more important.

WE MUST BE ATTEMPTING TO DO WHAT JESUS TAUGHT

This brings us to the heart of the matter. Our having Jesus' words abiding in us involves more than being familiar with what Jesus said. It involves our attempt to live according to what He said.

So, if we respect what God has said through Jesus, God will respect what we say to God in prayer. It is as simple as that.

The reverse is also true. If we do not respect what God has said, He will not respect what we say to Him in prayer. Is that fair? Certainly, it is fair. With what right can we expect God to listen to us if we do not listen to Him?

Be assured, however, that God will not lightly abandon His efforts to influence us for good. He will keep on trying to influence us, as long as He holds out hope for us.

He will not pay attention to our every request, however, until we pay attention to His every word, as best we can. So, in order to start receiving the full blessing of having prayers answered, we must change our relationship with God.

CAN A PERSON CHANGE HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Yes, of course a person can change his or her relationship with God. Jesus came into the world to make such a change possible (John 3:16-17). There is hope for every person who regrets that he has neglected God, and who starts listening to what God has said through Jesus and who starts reforming his life (Acts 3:19).

GOD'S CONSTANT ATTENTION

God occasionally helps sinful people who call on Him when they are in trouble. His help for them is less reliable, however, and less constant than the attention that He lavishes on people who earnestly try to do what He has said in the New Testament. People who earnestly try to do what God has said receive His help not only occasionally but on a regular basis.

This is what the Apostle John was affirming when he wrote the following words:

“And whatever we ask
we receive from Him,
because we keep His commandments
and do those things
that are pleasing in His sight.”

1 John 3:22

With these words, the Apostle John repeated the promise that Jesus had made to His apostles, in which Jesus said,

“If you abide in Me,
and my words abide in you,
you will ask what you desire,
and it shall be done for you.”

John 15:7

The fact that the Apostle John repeated the promise that Jesus had made many years earlier, shows that Jesus' promise was intended, not for the Twelve alone, but for all of Jesus' followers.

The scope of this promise is so wide as to be mind-boggling. Due to the large number of things that a person might ask for, receiving such a promise is better than having access to the mythical “horn of plenty.” It is better than having a secret gold mine or a string of oil wells. If people only knew what blessings are available to them, they would seek them with all their hearts.

Is it, then, really true that people who try to do what God has commanded through Jesus will receive what they pray for?

Yes, with certain limitations and restrictions, which we will discuss later, it is definitely true.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you think it would be good if God granted every request that people made? If not, why not?
2. Do you think that people today are studying the Bible and memorizing Scripture as much as they should? What can be done about this?
3. Have you ever been personally acquainted with people that knew the Bible well, and who quoted it, but who did not follow what the Bible said? What do you think about people like that?
4. Do you know anyone that turned to God in time of trouble and God, as a consequence, rescued that person out of trouble? Did God's help change that person's life?
5. Do you agree that getting prayers answered is a rich blessing? Please elaborate on this.

5

God Pays Special Attention to His Children's Prayers

As I pointed out in chapter four, Jesus made two stipulations in John 15:17 about our getting our prayers answered. One stipulation is that Jesus' words must be "abiding" in us. The other is that we must be "abiding" in Jesus. Here is what Jesus said:

"If you abide in Me,
and my words abide in you,
you will ask what you desire,
and it shall be done for you."

John 15:7

The question before us in this chapter is what did Jesus mean when He said that we must "abide" in Him? The word "abide" means to remain or live in a certain place. Therefore, we must be remaining or living in Jesus, before we can have confidence that our prayers will be answered.

Before we can be "remaining" in Jesus, however, we must get into Him. So for us the most immediate question is:

HOW DO WE GET INTO JESUS?

What kind of an answer do you want to have to this question? Do you want an answer based on speculation and human tradition? No, you want to hear what the Bible says.

Then get ready! Hold your hat! The answer will take your breath away. Here is what the Bible says: We get into Christ by being immersed (baptized) into Him.

See, I told you the answer would take your breath away. Here is some of the evidence for such an answer: The Apostle Paul wrote,

“For as many of you as were baptized
into Christ have put on Christ.”

Galatians 3:27

The Apostle Paul said here that we get into Christ by being baptized (immersed) into Him. He also said that when we are baptized (immersed) we put on Christ. It is like putting on a coat. We are not *in* the coat until we have *put it on*. The same is true with regard to Christ; we are not actually in Him until we have put Him on in baptism. So we see that the way to get into Christ is to be baptized (immersed) into Him.

Baptism includes having faith in Christ (Mark 16:16) as God’s Son before we are baptized (immersed). It also includes our sincerely repenting of, and leaving off, our sins (Acts 2:38) before we are baptized (immersed).

I know this sounds strange to people who have been taught to expect a religious experience as evidence that Christ has saved them, but such an expectation does not come from the Bible. It comes from the teaching of John Calvin (1509-1564),

a French theologian, who lived in Switzerland.

To a Calvinist, a religious experience is evidence that the Holy Spirit has come into his heart. As long as he does not doubt the validity of the experience, he feels saved.

Yet the New Testament teaches something different. It teaches that sinful people cannot receive the Holy Spirit (John 14:17). That is because the Holy Spirit comes to a person, not before he has obeyed God, but after he has begun to obey Him (Acts 5:32). To be explicit, a person receives the Holy Spirit after he has repented of his sins and has been baptized (immersed) in water to wash away his sins (Acts 2:38-39; Acts 22:16).

When a person comes up out of the water in which he has been baptized (immersed), he enters a new status (Romans 6:4). In response to his new status, God sends the Holy Spirit into that person's heart. The Holy Spirit comes, not to make him a child of God, but to give witness to the fact that he has become a child of God. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“And because you are sons,
God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son
into your hearts,
crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’”

Galatians 4:6

CHILDREN BY ADOPTION

Everyone is a child of God in a sense, because God created everyone. Yet no one can be God's child in a spiritual sense until he or she has gotten into God's spiritual family, and the way he gets into God's spiritual family is by adoption. The

Apostle Paul wrote that God had:

“Predestined us to adoption as sons
through Jesus Christ to Himself,
according to the good pleasure
of His will.”

Ephesians 1:5

This verse teaches that God decided in advance that He would adopt human children, but the verse does not say that God predestined which humans He would adopt. From God's point of view, everyone can potentially be adopted into God's family (2 Peter 3:9). So whether a particular person is adopted or not depends on that person himself, for God will not force anyone to come into His spiritual family.

God is not partial toward individuals in the sense that He determines in advance who can and who cannot be in His spiritual family. He does not send His Holy Spirit only to certain people, whom He has chosen in advance. Every person has an equal opportunity to become a child of God.

Once a person has made the decision, however, to follow Jesus and has rendered proper obedience (Romans 6:17) to the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-4), he or she is adopted into God's spiritual family and receives the full rights of sonship (Ephesians 2:19). The process of adoption involves:

- (1) faith in Jesus (Hebrews 11:6),
- (2) repentance for sins (Luke 13:3,5),
- (3) confession of faith in Jesus (Romans 10:9-10),
- (4) and baptism (immersion) in water for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38).

DOES GOD ADOPT PEOPLE ON THE BASIS OF FAITH ALONE?

In the Middle Ages there was a teaching that seemed to say that people could be saved by their works. A German monk named Martin Luther reacted against this teaching. Many people today react against it. They are, for that reason, very suspicious of any thought that God's blessings should be dependent upon what a person does or does not do. As a result, they come to the erroneous conclusion that faith in Jesus is all that is necessary in order to be saved. For that reason they underestimate the importance of repentance and baptism (immersion).

Yet, if salvation is received by faith alone, why did Jesus (Luke 24:47; Mark 16:15-16) and the apostles (Acts 2:38) command repentance and baptism (immersion) as conditions of salvation?

WHAT CAN BAPTISM POSSIBLY HAVE TO DO WITH GETTING MY PRAYERS ANSWERED?

Being baptized may have a lot to do with whether or not we get our prayers answered. In addition to the idea of adoption, there is yet another figure of speech that is used in the New Testament to describe what happens to a person when he or she is baptized. It is this: He or she is "born again." Jesus said,

"Most assuredly, I say to you,
unless one is born of water and the Spirit,

he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

John 3:5

Was Jesus referring to baptism (immersion) when He used the expression “born of water?” Yes, of course He was. Many people do not think so; but the Apostle Paul said,

“Not by works of righteousness
which we have done,
but according to His mercy He saved us,
through the washing of regeneration
and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

Titus 3:5

Baptism (immersion) is the “washing” that regenerates a person (Titus 3:5). It paves the way for the “renewing,” which the Holy Spirit produces (Titus 3:5).

The Apostle Paul emphasized in another place the importance of baptism (immersion) in bringing about a new life. He said,

“Therefore we were buried with Him
through baptism into death,
that just as Christ was raised from the dead
by the glory of the father,
even so we also should walk
in newness of life.”

Romans 6:4

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP EXISTS

God’s spiritual children have a special relationship with

God, and for that reason He is especially attentive to their requests. Jesus said,

“If you, then, being evil,
know how to give
good gifts to your children,
how much more will your father
who is in heaven
give good things to those who ask Him!”

Matthew 7:11

Does God treat the requests of His children with greater respect than the requests of other people? Yes, He does. I do not say this to discriminate against anyone. I would be pleased if He could answer everyone's prayers. I simply want to point out, however, how essential it is for everyone to become one of God's spiritual children. Everyone who wants to have his prayers answered on a regular basis has first to become one of God's children in a spiritual sense.

DOES GOD ALWAYS PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE REQUESTS OF HIS CHILDREN?

Yes, He does. There is a difference between the way He treats the requests of His children and the way He treats the requests of others. God has never promised to heed the requests of those who are not His spiritual children, but He has promised to heed the requests of His children (John 15:7; Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13; 1 John 3:22; 1 John 5:14-15). He may occasionally grant the requests of those that are not His children, but He always grants, if possible, the requests of

His children.

A Christian lady observed that God had been answering her prayers on a regular basis for some time. She also observed that the prayers of some of her friends were not being answered at all, so she spoke to a young preacher about this. She asked him, “Why are my prayers being answered and the prayers of others are not? Doesn’t God listen to everyone’s prayers?”

The young preacher replied, “No, God does not listen to everyone’s prayers. He listens to you because you are His child.”

The young preacher continued, “If a strange child were to come to you and ask for something, you might give him what he asked for, or you might not. If, however, one of your own children asked you for something, how would you react?”

The lady said, “I would react immediately!”

The young preacher said, “That is the way God reacts too.”

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Is God satisfied with our having faith only, without works?
See James 2:14-26.
2. Does it seem to you that God does occasionally answer the prayers of those that are not in His spiritual family?
3. Does it seem to you to be true that God does answer the prayers of His spiritual children on a regular basis? Why do you think as you do?
4. Why does God go to such great lengths to answer the prayers of His children? What do you think?
5. Why does God not force people to come into His spiritual

family?

6. Do some people seem to get discouraged with praying because they never seem to get what they pray for?
7. Do you think that most people realize that they must be “in Christ” before their praying produces steady results?
8. Would it be wrong for a person to get baptized solely for the purpose of getting his prayers answered? What do you think?
9. If a person realizes that his or her prayers are seldom answered, should that be a wake-up call, signaling that something is wrong with his or her relationship with God? Please comment on this.

6

God Wants to Hear from His Children

Some people think that God is so busy running the universe that He does not have time to listen to their petty concerns; but that is not true. There is no limit to the number of things that God can do at the same time. He is able to run the universe and take care of His children as well.

God said through the prophet Isaiah,

“Is My hand shortened at all,
that it cannot redeem?
Or have I no power to deliver?
Indeed with My rebuke I dry up the sea,
I make the rivers a wilderness.”

Isaiah 50:2b

GOD DESIRES TO ASSOCIATE WITH HIS CHILDREN

It appears that God desires to enter into a fatherly relationship with His children. He desires to hear their requests and draw them into communion and fellowship with Himself.

If a child does not communicate with his earthly father,

something is wrong with the child. Perhaps, the child is not very bright. Or perhaps that child is too proud, or too independent-minded, to admit that he needs his father. For whatever reason, if a child isolates himself, it saddens a father's heart.

In the same way, God's fatherly heart is saddened if His children never speak to Him. Not only is it disrespectful of them to ignore Him, but it is also not good for them to be isolated from Him.

HOW MY WIFE AND I FEEL ABOUT OUR CHILDREN

Elaine and I are grateful for the five children, whom the Lord has given us. We have loved each of them from his or her very first day. When they were babies, we looked forward to their first words. We were delighted when they first began to say "dada" or "mama." We were glad every time they learned a new word. A still greater thrill came when, finally, they were able to communicate with us.

Now that they are grown and have families of their own, we still enjoy hearing from them. We are pleased with each letter and each telephone call that we receive. In a similar way, I think, God delights to hear from His children.

HE WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT OUR PROBLEMS

Elaine and I are glad when our children share with us as much of their lives as they feel free to share. When they have problems, we are thankful if they tell us about them. We do not

want to hear only about the pleasant things that happen to them. We want to hear the unpleasant things, too. This is because we are concerned about them. I am confident that God feels the same way about His children.

An earthly father takes time to listen to his children, even if the child's problem is only a scratch on the finger. Similarly, nothing is too trivial for God to take an interest in. Jesus said,

“Are not five sparrows sold
for two copper coins?
And not one of them is forgotten
before God.
But the very hairs of your head
are all numbered.”

Luke 12:6-7

King David wrote,

“As a father pities his children,
So the Lord pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust.”

Psalms 103:13-14

Nothing needs to be hidden from God; for there is no part of our lives about which He is not already informed. Nothing is too personal, or too intimate, for Him to hear about. Anything that concerns us concerns Him; and He is glad when we come to Him with our problems. He is not glad, of course, that we have problems, but He is glad that we feel free to discuss our problems with Him. When we discuss our problems with Him, it shows that we accept Him as Father and that we have

confidence in Him. The apostle Paul wrote,

“Be anxious for nothing,
but in everything by prayer and
supplication,
with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known to God.”

Philippians 4:6

PRAYING CAN BE EDUCATIONAL

When our youngest two granddaughters were small, my wife and I began talking with them on the telephone; because they lived in a distant city. We would say “Hi” in order to see what kind of response we would get.

All that we heard at first from each of them was a faint “Hi.” We were delighted with that one word. Even though long-distance telephone calls were expensive in those days, we felt that we had gotten our money’s worth; for it was no ordinary “Hi.” It was our new granddaughters sending us greetings.

Some of what our children and grandchildren said at first sounded childish, but that did not disturb us. The important thing was that our communication with them had started. Now that they are older, we are delighted that we can enter into a real conversation with them.

This is similar to the way that we make progress in speaking to God. When we first start praying, our prayers may not make much sense, and we may ask for things that are not wise. Nonetheless, we should pray, for our communication with God has to start somewhere. He wants to hear from us

even though our prayers at first may not be very intelligent or very spiritual.

LEARNING TO TALK TO GOD

Occasionally, children say things of which their parents do not approve. Sometimes children learn expressions from other children at school that are not acceptable at home; so parents have to let their children know that those expressions are not acceptable.

Children learn what proper and respectful speech is by speaking. If children never enter into conversation with their parents, they will never learn to speak to their parents, as they should.

The situation is similar with regards to our speaking to God. Unless we pray, we will not learn to pray; and the more we pray, the better we get at it. In spite of our best intentions, however, it is inevitable that we occasionally pray unwisely. This is because our desires and emotions sometimes get the better of us; and we ask for things that may not be good. Yet, in spite of this, God wants us to pray; and He is able to override our unwise requests.

Why does God want to hear our prayers, even though He knows that they may not be adequate? Could it be that He uses our prayers to educate us? Yes, it seems that He teaches us by the way that He answers our prayers. The better the prayer, the greater the likelihood that it will be answered. If we can find out what God would like for us to pray, the likelihood that our prayers will be answered is greatly enhanced.

HOW DO WE FIND OUT WHAT GOD WOULD LIKE FOR US TO PRAY?

Before we can know what we should pray for, our thinking has to be brought into line with God's thinking. We have to come to understand what He wants. We will never fully understand Him, of course, but we can grow in that direction.

Learning what God would like for us to pray is not impossible. He has provided an instruction book about praying. It is the Bible. The Bible tells us everything we need to know about praying. It helps us to distinguish between prayers that are pleasing to God and those that are not.

In the Bible we find many prayers that can be used as patterns for praying. The psalms, for example, are mostly masterpieces of praying. We can profit greatly from reading them; for most of them breathe a spirit of awe and reverence.

There are other beautiful prayers in the Bible in addition to those in the Psalms. The Bible contains stories of many men and women who prayed. In this way, the Bible reveals to us what God thinks about prayer.

GOD IS PLEASED WITH MATURE PRAYING

God is like a proud parent. He delights when His children speak well, and He is honored when they speak respectfully to Him. He is doubly honored when they ask Him for things that coincide with what He desires, for then they ask wisely. When they ask wisely, it shows that His children have come to value the things that He values. So, as they learn to pray properly, it becomes easier for Him to answer their prayers.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you sometimes feel that your requests are so insignificant that you hesitate to mention them to God? Why do you feel that way, if you do?
2. Why do some people give no thought to God and ignore His wishes? Were you ever like that?
3. Is it a sign of weakness when people are aware of their need for God's help? Please explain.
4. Do you have difficulty speaking with God as your father? If you do, please explain why, if you can.
5. How many prayers do you suppose God has answered for you in your lifetime? Was it ten prayers, twenty, one hundred, or perhaps more?
6. How many answered prayers do you suppose it takes before a person can be sure of God's existence and of His providence?

7

Asking In Jesus' Name

When I was a teenager I attended the Columbus Avenue Church of Christ in Waco, Texas. There I received a lot of encouragement and some good instruction.

It was the custom of that congregation to train the young men by giving them opportunity to serve at the communion table on Sunday evenings. I remember the first time I was called upon to serve at the communion table. My job was to give thanks for the communion bread. I was very nervous, but I managed to mumble a short prayer.

At the close of the meeting, one of the ladies of the congregation came to me and said, "Son, you said a nice prayer, but you forgot something."

I was dumbfounded! What had I forgotten?

She explained, "You forgot to pray in Jesus' name."

Later, I thought to myself, "Didn't God know that the prayer was in Jesus' name? Didn't the people know that the prayer was in Jesus' name? If so, why did I need to mention it?"

While I was thinking this way I was overlooking one important point: I did not know that I was supposed to be praying in Jesus' name.

MAKING REQUESTS IN HIS NAME?

Several years later, after I had begun to read the Bible more carefully, I came across the passage that tells of Jesus' sitting at the last Passover meal with His disciples. He said to them,

“Most assuredly, I say to you,
he who believes in Me,
the works that I do he will do also;
and greater works than these he will do,
because I go to My father.
And whatever you ask in My name,
that I will do,
that the Father may be glorified in the Son.
If you ask anything in My name,
I will do it.”

John 14:12-14

The “greater works” of which Jesus spoke are not necessarily miraculous works, for Jesus did not come primarily to do miracles. He came with a larger purpose in mind. He came to teach about God and to save people from their sins. When Jesus spoke of the “greater works” He was telling His apostles what everyone would do that believes on Him.

Every believer can do the “greater works” that Jesus was talking about. They can go about doing good deeds for others and they can teach others about Jesus. They can do the “greater works” through the power that God supplies; but they must ask God to help them and they must ask in Jesus' name.

Please notice that the requests should be made of God the Father, not of Jesus Himself. God is the one that grants the

requests and Jesus is the one that carries out whatever God decides.

Notice also that the Father is glorified when believers ask for things in Jesus' name and when Jesus carries out what God decides.

Please be aware of the fact that when the Bible speaks of "believers," it refers to true Christians and not to people that simply say they believe in God but who do not obey what Jesus said.

JESUS SPOKE A SECOND TIME ABOUT ASKING IN HIS NAME

He said to His apostles,

"You did not choose Me,
but I chose you
and appointed you
that you should go and bear fruit,
and that your fruit should remain,
that whatever you ask the Father
in My name
He may give you."

John 15:16

Jesus had chosen the apostles and He had taught them. Soon He would send them out to "bear fruit." The fruit that they would bear would be lasting fruit. Their primary job would be to teach people the gospel and to do good deeds.

Jesus implied that the apostles could ask the Father for whatever they wanted. Yet He told them that they must ask in His name.

***JESUS SPOKE A THIRD TIME
ABOUT ASKING IN HIS NAME***

In the course of Jesus' last evening with his apostles before His death, He returned again to the idea that they should ask in His name. He said,

“And in that day
you will ask Me nothing.
Most assuredly, I say to you,
whatever you ask the Father in My name
He will give you.
Until now you have asked
nothing in My name.
Ask, and you will receive,
that your joy may be full.”

John 16:23-24

It appears that Jesus' disciples had not been in the habit of going to the Father with their requests but that they had been coming to Jesus with their questions and to get His help.

The time was just around the corner, however, when they would be able to speak to the Father for themselves. They would be able to go directly to Him. Direct access to God is a privilege that has been granted not only to the apostles but also to all of God's children. Jesus is the one that makes access to God possible (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus was encouraging His

apostles to start asking God for things; but He told them to ask in His name.

When the apostles needed information after Jesus had ascended to heaven, God supplied them with information by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The way that God supplies information to us today is through the inspired writings, which are in the Bible.

When people ask God for things and Jesus fulfills their requests it fills their hearts with joy.

JESUS SPOKE A FOURTH TIME ABOUT ASKING IN HIS NAME

Jesus spoke again of the time when His disciples would start asking God for things. He said,

“In that day you will ask in My name,
and I do not say to you
that I shall pray the Father for you;
for the Father Himself loves you,
because you have loved Me,
and have believed
that I came forth from God.”

John 16:26-27

This teaches that if Jesus' followers love Him, and if they believe that Jesus came from God, they can ask God for things. Jesus said, however, that they should ask in His (Jesus') name.

He told them that it would not be necessary for Him (Jesus) to intercede for them with the Father, because the Father Himself loves them. The reason that the Father loves them is

because they love Jesus and believe that He came from God.

Please remember that our love for Jesus must include our doing what Jesus said (John 14:23).

Now here are some questions that arise:

***CAN A PRAYER BE VALID THAT IS
NOT OFFERED IN JESUS' NAME?***

Once, when I was discussing prayer in a seminar in Portland, Oregon, I invited the people of the audience to submit to me in writing any questions they may have.

A card was handed to me that read,

“The ‘model’ prayer which Jesus gave to his disciples does not include the phrase ‘in Jesus’ name.’ And all of Paul’s recorded prayers do not include the phrase ‘in Jesus’ name.’

“The context of John 14 does not seem to be about prayer, therefore the verses used seem to be taken out of context.

“If a prayer is not closed with the phrase ‘in Jesus’ name,’ are you saying that the prayer is not valid and therefore God will not answer the prayer? Is it the words ‘in Jesus’ name’ that validate the prayer, or perhaps the attitude?”

I do not recall exactly what I said in response to these questions; but if I were answering them today I would say that the “model” prayer (i.e. “the Lord’s prayer”), which Jesus gave in Matthew 6:9-13, also does not include other important

things. For one thing, it does not include anything about our giving thanks; and we know that we should be thankful.

It should also be pointed out that “the Lord’s prayer” was spoken before Jesus had said anything to His disciples, so far as we know, about their asking in His name.

As to the objection that the Apostle Paul did not pray in Jesus’ name, it can be said that Paul’s prayers, as found in his writings, appear to be only bare outlines of what he may actually have prayed. We know that Paul was in favor of praying in Jesus’ name. See Ephesians 5:20 and Colossians 3:17.

Moreover, I would dispute the contention that the context of John chapters 14-16 is not about prayer. To me, these chapters seem to be about prayer, as well as about other things.

I would not go so far, however, as to say that no prayer is valid that does not contain the phrase “in Jesus’ name,” for it is not for to me to decide which prayers are valid and which are not. That is for God to decide.

My concern here is not to make a decision about the validity of specific prayers but rather to look at the New Testament in order to see what it says about how the effectiveness of our praying can be increased.

Our praising God and giving Him thanks may be gratifying to Him even though we make no mention of the fact that we are praising Him in Jesus’ name. How much more gratifying, however, would our praise and thanksgiving be if we made mention of Jesus, the primary gift that God has given us?

Let it be remembered that we are considering in this chapter not offering praise to God but about asking favors of Him; and Jesus gave explicit instructions as to how we should

go about asking favors.

If our heavenly Father has decided to honor His Son by having people ask favors in His Son's name, who are we to disregard the Father's wishes? We are in no position to set the rules for our dealings with God.

It may be that God will decide to grant a request from someone that does not mention Jesus in his or her prayer. It would be wise, however, for us to pray as Jesus instructed, especially when we are asking for things that are important to us.

Further, it is difficult to see how we can honor a person without mentioning his name.

Indeed, when praying in public it would seem especially appropriate to mention Jesus, since one of the goals of public worship is to honor God through Jesus.

IS PRAYING IN JESUS' NAME JUST AN EMPTY FORM?

In the summer of 1979, I made a speech in a mission seminar at a Christian university. In that speech, I made some statements similar to those that I have written above.

During the question and answer period that followed the speech, someone asked, "If I always say 'in Jesus' name' when I pray, isn't there a danger that this may become just an empty form?"

The answer I gave was: "Yes, of course, there is a danger. Any part of prayer can become an empty form if we let it, but we must see to it that we always mean what we say when we pray."

If we pray without mentioning that we have access to God through Jesus, we ignore His (Jesus') position in heaven; and our ignoring Him dishonors both Him and the Father.

***DO WE RECEIVE SPECIAL TREATMENT
WHEN WE COME TO GOD IN JESUS' NAME?***

In 1985, while Elaine and I were in Vienna, Austria, a lady in Germany, called on the telephone and asked me to visit her mother, who lived in Czechoslovakia. The mother was ill with cancer and our friend could not go to be with her without being arrested, because our friend had earlier fled from Czechoslovakia. So I agreed to go in her stead.

Our friend sent me a letter to take along with me to her mother. The letter read in part, "Please treat Richard as if it were I who were visiting."

As a result of the letter, our youngest son Harold and I went to Czechoslovakia and were treated royally by the lady's mother. Upon our arrival, she fixed us tea and a snack. Later in the day, she prepared an evening meal for us, even though her food supplies were very short. Afterwards the whole family came by for a visit. At bedtime we were shown to the very room where our friend had lived as a little girl. All of this happened to us because we came in the name of the daughter of the house.

This is similar to the way God treats His people when they come to Him in the name of His Son Jesus.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you think most people fully realize what a privilege it is to be able to pray to the Father and to ask for His help? Have you always realized this?
2. Do you suppose it makes any difference whether you mention the name of Jesus at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a prayer?
3. Has it been your custom in the past to mention that you were praying in Jesus' name when you ask God for things? Do you do so now?
4. Can you think of any specific examples of the "greater works" (referred to in John 14:12) which Jesus' people do today?
5. Do you suppose that it is possible for people to bear fruit that lasts without their praying for it?
6. What is some of the fruit you would like to bear?
7. How can people keep the phrase "in Jesus' name" from becoming an empty form?

8

Asking According to the Will of God

King David found that it was good and pleasurable when he did what God wanted him to do. David wrote,

“Then I said, ...

‘I delight to do Your will, O my God,
And Your law is within my heart.’”

Psalm 40:7-8

Try as David might, he was not able to do exactly as God wanted him to do. So only to David’s descendant Jesus, do the words of David adequately apply, “I delight to do Your will, O my God.” See Hebrews 10:5-7.

Jesus could truthfully say,

“My food is to do
the will of Him who sent me,
and to finish His work.”

John 4:34

Jesus also said,

“I can of Myself do nothing.
As I hear, I judge;

and My judgment is righteous,
because I do not seek My own will
but the will of the Father
who sent Me.”

John 5:30

Again, Jesus said,

“For I have come down from heaven,
not to do My own will,
but the will of Him who sent Me.”

John 6:38

Thus we see that Jesus greatly desired to do the will of God.

ALSO THE APOSTLE PAUL DESIRED TO DO THE WILL OF GOD

Observe how the apostle Paul expressed himself in a letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote,

“But I will come to you shortly,
if the Lord wills.”

1 Corinthians 4:19

Paul did not say, “I am determined to come to you, no matter what.” He said that he would visit Corinth if it were the Lord’s will for him to do so.

THE ATTITUDE THAT WE SHOULD HAVE

We should not leave the Lord's will out of our calculations. James wrote,

“Come now, you who say,
‘Today or tomorrow
we will go to such and such a city,
spend a year there, buy and sell,
and make profit.’”

James 4:13

Instead, we should say,

“If the Lord wills,
we shall live and do this or that.”

James 4:15

In the light of these statements from David, Jesus, Paul and James, it is not surprising that we are taught in the New Testament to ask for things according to the will of God.

***QUESTION: HOW DO WE FIND
OUT WHAT GOD'S WILL IS?***

The most obvious answer to this question is that we can learn the will of God by reading the Bible. The apostle Paul wrote,

“All Scripture is given
by inspiration of God,
and is profitable for doctrine,

for reproof, for correction,
for instruction in righteousness,
that the man of God may be complete,
thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17

So, if we want to be successful at praying, we must read the Bible; for reading the Bible and praying go hand in hand. The apostle Paul said,

“Study to show thyself approved unto God,
a workman that needeth not to be ashamed,
rightly dividing the word of truth.”

2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV)

I have quoted just now 2 Timothy 2:15 from the King James Bible because it uses the word “study” in this verse. The word “study” is a good translation from the Greek, for it shows that we must work at understanding the Bible.

***QUESTION: CAN WE PRAY WITH
CONFIDENCE THAT GOD WILL
ANSWER OUR PRAYERS?***

Yes, we can pray with confidence that God will answer our prayers, provided we fulfill the requirements mentioned earlier in these chapters, namely that we must be in Him and His words must be in us. The second requirement is that we ask for things that are in agreement with God’s will. The apostle John said,

“Now this is the confidence
that we have in Him,
that if we ask anything
according to His will,
He hears us.”

1 John 5:14

WHY DOES GOD WANT US TO ASK ACCORDING TO HIS WILL?

God may have many reasons for wanting us to ask according to His will, but here are some possible reasons:

- (1) If we ask according to God’s will, it gives Him honor. It shows that we respect Him and that we desire to make our lives harmonize with His thinking.
- (2) Asking according to God’s will shows also that we are mature enough to be able to distinguish between what is good and what is bad.
- (3) Asking according to God’s will increases the likelihood that our requests will be of such a nature that God will be able to say “Yes” to them.

QUESTION: DOES GOD WELCOME OUR INPUT INTO HOW THINGS WILL TURN OUT?

Yes, amazingly, He does. He wants us to participate in planning for the future. He allows us to make suggestions regarding the future. We do not, of course, determine the future

by ourselves, but He allows for something of us to be in it.

Once my wife and I had the pleasure of choosing the wallpaper and the paint for a new house. Even though we did not cut any of the boards ourselves or lay any of the brick, we had the pleasure of contributing something to the appearance of the house. We were pleased that there could be something of us in it. In a similar way, it is pleasant when we see God including our requests in His plans for our future.

GOD ALLOWS US TO HELP HIM

We are like children who come into the workshop of their dad and ask if they can help him. The dad may not need his children's help, yet he may allow them to help because he loves them and enjoys their company. Further, he may want to please them by granting their request. He also knows that if he can get them started at the work he is doing, they may become reliable workers in the future.

Someone may ask, is there room for originality on our part? The answer is, "Yes, there is plenty of room for originality because God is the one who makes originality possible." God goes to great lengths to allow us to put our stamp on our future. It is only in harmony with Him that we are able to accomplish anything truly original. Only by Him are we able to leave a unique legacy for the future.

The devil is the one who leaves no room for originality in his servants. Have you ever noticed how closely evil people resemble each other? They are very alike in what they say and do.

God makes originality possible because He wants to give

us what we desire. As we grow in our ability to recognize what is good His confidence in us also increases. Consequently, He is able to give us more and more room for making requests.

IS IT DULL PRAYING FOR ONLY WHAT GOD WANTS?

Some people may think that asking for what God wants makes praying dull, but that is far from the truth. Praying for what God wants makes praying exciting, for then we enter into His work. We become His partners; and when He grants our requests, He is saying in effect, “You prayed well!”

IS THIS INCONSISTANT?

Some readers may think they see an inconsistency here. They may say, “In an earlier chapter, you said that we can pray for anything we want, but now you are telling us that we should pray only for what God wants. Is this not inconsistent?”

In defense, I would say that the better we understand God, the more we find ourselves desiring the very same things that He desires. We finally come to realize that He knows best. When we reach that point, we will not wish for anything other than what God wants.

GOD’S FELLOW WORKERS

The apostle Paul considered himself to be God’s “fellow worker” (2 Corinthians 6:1). We too can become fellow workers with God. This is perhaps our highest honor and our

greatest pleasure. There is very little in life that can equal it.

God does not want us to be fellow workers in name only. He wants us to assume some responsibility for the future. He wants us to lay out before Him in prayer the options that we see so He can review them with us. Further, He wants us to pray about our desires and intentions. If we do this, He will try to incorporate our desires into the future.

GOD IS A GREAT ARTIST

In a prayer session in November, 1984, at the Eastern European College in Vienna, Austria, David Drennan told of having seen an artist invite people that were watching to take a paintbrush and put random splashes on a canvas. After the canvas had been turned into a mess by the splashes, the artist took paintbrush in hand and made a beautiful picture out of it.

This is similar to what God does with our projections for the future. He takes our imperfect suggestions and turns them into something beautiful.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Jesus never wanted anything to happen that would be contrary to the will of God?
2. Jesus said that His food was to do the will of God (John 4:34). What did Jesus mean by that?
3. Do you think we should ask for things that we suspect God would not want us to have?
4. Can you think of examples of someone that came up with something truly original by working with God? If you can,

please share your thoughts.

5. Can you think of some acquaintance of yours that has left a unique legacy for good by working with God? Please tell about that person if you can. Was that person a praying individual?
6. Do you feel God is currently granting more of your requests than He did earlier in your life? If this is so, why do you think it is so?

9

Trusting in God

If it is true that God does not usually answer the prayers of sinners and if He sometimes says “no” even to His own children, can I really trust Him to take care of me?

Yes, you can trust Him to take care of you, for God is faithful (1 Corinthians 10:13). The whole Bible stands as a witness to the faithfulness of God.

GOD HAS SHOWN HIS FAITHFULNESS

God chose a man named Abram and promised to bless him and his descendants. God changed Abram’s name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5), which means, “father of nations.” The Bible is the story of how God faithfully carried out His promise to bless Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham’s grandson, Jacob (or Israel), went down to Egypt with his family in order to escape a famine. While Jacob’s children were in Egypt, they multiplied greatly. After many years, Moses led Abraham’s descendants out of Egypt. When they came to Mt. Sinai, God said to Moses,

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob,
and tell the children of Israel:

‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,
and how I bore you on eagles’ wings
and brought you to Myself.’”

Exodus 19:3-4

Although God had promised to bring the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, they were afraid to go up into that land, because very big people lived there. Moses said to them,

“Do not be terrified
or afraid of them.
The Lord your God,
who goes before you,
He will fight for you,
according to all He did for you
in Egypt before your eyes.”

Deuteronomy 1:29-30

After Moses’ death Joshua led the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, and they conquered a great portion of that land. Toward the end of Joshua’s life, God said to Joshua,

“I sent the hornet before you
which drove them out from before you,
also the two kings of the Amorites,
but not with your sword or with your bow.
I have given you a land
for which you did not labor,
and cities which you did not build,
and you dwell in them;

you eat of the vineyards and olive groves
which you did not plant.”

Joshua 24:12-13

God’s providential care is evident in the history of the children of Israel. Their history is written in the Bible for all to read. During the times when they obeyed God, and worshipped Him only, God blessed them (Judges 2:16-18). God helped them out of trouble over and over again.

WHAT KING DAVID THOUGHT ABOUT THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

David found that God was faithful, not only to the nation of Israel, but also to him personally. One of the prayers that David composed said,

“I will love You,
O Lord my strength. The Lord is my rock
and my fortress and my deliverer;
My God, my strength,
in whom I will trust;
My shield and the horn of my salvation,
My stronghold.”

Psalms 18:1-2

Toward the end of David’s life, he wrote,

“I have been young, and now am old;
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken,
Nor his descendants begging bread.”

Psalms 37:25

David felt that God had proved Himself to be faithful.

JESUS PROVED THAT GOD IS FAITHFUL

God's promise that He would bless the world through Abraham's seed has been fulfilled in Jesus (Romans 4:13). Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's loving care (Romans 5:8), and He is the chief proponent of trusting in God. Jesus said,

“Therefore do not worry,
saying, ‘What shall we eat?’
or ‘What shall we drink?’
or ‘What shall we wear?’
For after all these things the Gentiles seek.
For your heavenly Father knows
that you need all these things.”

Matthew 6:31-32

Can we rely upon these words today? Yes, of course we can. We should trust God to take care of us, especially if we are trying to do His work. Jesus said,

“But seek first the kingdom of God
and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be added to you.”

Matthew 6:33

With these words Jesus assured us that if our objective is to advance God's kingdom and to live righteously, God will take care of us.

The apostle Paul gave additional assurance of this when he wrote,

“And we know
that all things work together for good
to those who love God,
to those who are called
according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:28

Just as God sustained Abraham and his descendants as long as they were faithful to God, so also will God sustain spiritual Israel (the church) as long as it is faithful.

Just as God brought the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, so will He bring spiritual Israel (the church) safely into heaven (Hebrews 4:8-11).

GOD IS ABLE TO TAKE CARE OF HIS PEOPLE

One of the Bible passages that gives comfort to preachers, evangelists, missionaries and all who are working to advance God’s kingdom is found in second Corinthians, where Paul wrote,

“And God is able
to make all grace abound toward you, that you,
always having all sufficiency in all things,
have an abundance for every good work.”

2 Corinthians 9:8

Notice how frequently the word “all” is used in this passage. Paul said that God is able to make “all grace” abound.

Further, he said that God is able to do it “always.” He assured the Corinthians that they would have “all sufficiency in all things,” and this would give them “an abundance for every good work.” These words indicate that God is able to help. The only question is, do we trust Him enough to rely on Him to take care of us?

THE APOSTLE PAUL TRUSTED GOD

The apostle Paul trusted God’s providence, and he encouraged others to do the same. He wrote,

“And my God shall supply all your need
according to His riches in glory
by Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 4:19

Indeed, God is able to supply all your needs. The Apostle Paul also wrote,

“Be anxious for nothing,
but in everything by prayer and supplication,
with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known to God.”

Philippians 4:6

JAMES A. HARDING

An outstanding advocate for depending upon God was James A. Harding, a gospel preacher, for whom Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas (USA) is named.

Early in his preaching career, Harding was invited to preach a series of sermons for a wealthy church in Louisville, Kentucky. His preaching for that church would have given him a lot of prestige. In addition, the church was able to pay him liberally.

Harding, however, had previously received a call to go to a little mountain church near Richmond, Kentucky to preach. He accepted the call to the poor church instead of the one to the wealthy church. He reasoned that the wealthy church could afford to get anyone it wanted but that only he was likely to go to the little mountain church. He was not worried about finances, because he felt that those who put the needs of God's kingdom above their own needs would have their personal needs taken care of.

Once, a wealthy banker invited Harding into his office and said to him, "I understand that you go out preaching all the time. I cannot preach, but I can make money. And evangelizing where you do, you will not receive much money. Just let me know when you need money and I will be glad to let you have it."

Sometime after that Harding saw that he needed about twenty-five dollars, so he went to the banker and asked for help.

The banker said to him, "I would just as soon give you fifty dollars."

Harding replied, "No, twenty-five dollars will do."

Harding promised to pay the money back as soon as he could, but the banker said, "If it suits you to hand it back, all right. If not, it is also all right. And if you need more let me know."

Harding went to his banker friend a number of times for help. Each time the banker gladly let him have money.

After a while, however, Harding began to think about Philippians 4:6 (which is quoted above), and he came to the conclusion that he had not been relying on God. He had been relying on man rather than on God. Consequently, he resolved not to go to the banker anymore; and he never did, even though the temptation to do so was often great.

He found, however, that he got along just as well as before. He was able to meet all of his financial obligations promptly, and he had the consolation of knowing that he was trusting in God and not in man.

One January, Harding and his singer needed about twenty-seven dollars for a series of sermons they had planned to give. They needed the money for travel and advertising, but they had received only one dollar and fifty cents in contributions.

Nonetheless, they decided to go ahead and keep their appointment. On their way to the appointment, they spent the night with a man and his wife, who gave them thirteen dollars. They also stopped off at a post office and found a letter from a Christian brother with a check in it for twenty-five dollars. Another man sent them ten dollars. So, all together, they received forty-nine dollars and fifty cents. Since Harding had paid all of his family's bills before he left home, he came out financially to the good.

At one point, the fledgling Christian Missionary Society wanted to put Harding on a salary in order to give him financial security, but he turned the offer down; for he felt that it would curtail his liberty and reduce his dependence upon God.

Over the years, Harding found that God took care of him adequately. He found that he was able to do his work and to provide for his wife and their seven children as well.

Dear Reader, I wonder if God would provide for you as He did for James A. Harding. I believe He would.

(Note: This information about James A. Harding was taken from a biography of his life, entitled “The Eyes of Jehovah,” written by Lloyd Cline Sears and published in 1979 by the Gospel Advocate Co., Nashville, TN 37210.)

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Can you state, along with King David, that you have never seen a righteous person forsaken or such a person's children begging for bread?
2. Have you found that God has always provided you with food, clothing and shelter?
3. How does a person go about seeking the kingdom of God first?
4. How can an apparent misfortune work for our good? Can you give an example from your own experience?
5. Have you ever seen some good work falter solely for the lack of finances?
6. Can you give an example of someone from your own acquaintances that truly trusts in God?

10

Does God Want Us to Expect “Yes?”

I once heard a preacher say, “If God were to grant our requests immediately, it would scare many of us half to death.”

How could a preacher make a statement like that? He could make such a statement because many of us do believe that God answers our prayers. It is regrettable, however, if we do not believe that God answers our prayers, for God wants us to believe that He will act on our behalf. The Scriptures say,

“If any of you lacks wisdom,
let him ask of God,
who gives to all liberally
and without reproach,
and it will be given to him.
But let him ask in faith,
with no 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.”

James 1:5-8

God wants us to have confidence that He will say “yes” to our requests. We read:

“Now this is the confidence
that we have in Him,
that if we ask anything
according to His will,
He hears us.
And if we know that He hears us,
whatever we ask,
we know that we have the petitions
that we have asked of Him.”

1 John 5:14-15

If we do not expect a “yes,” we are like children who have no confidence in their parents.

Some children seem to think, “My parents don’t know I have problems,” or “I can’t trust them to help me,” or “They don’t want to help me,” or “They can’t help me.” Such a distrust of parents is tragic. It is even more tragic when God’s children so misread His mind as to think that He does not want to grant their requests.

Of course we know that God occasionally overrides our requests; and, as obedient children, we are prepared to live with that. In fact, we want Him to override our requests when necessary, because His wisdom is far greater than ours.

JESUS’ CONFIDENCE IN PRAYER

In the final days before His death, Jesus and His disciples were walking toward the city of Jerusalem, and He got hungry.

Seeing a fig tree, He went up to the tree expecting to find figs to eat; but there were none, only leaves. Then Jesus did a very uncharacteristic thing. He cursed the fig tree, saying,

“Let no fruit grow on you
ever again.”

Matthew 21:19

Immediately after Jesus had said this, the fig tree withered. It disturbs some people that Jesus caused a fig tree to wither and die. If, however, Jesus is the Christ, He had every right to do as He chose concerning the tree.

It appears that He used the tree in order to teach a lesson to His disciples, for He said,

“Assuredly, I say to you,
if you have faith and do not doubt,
you will not only do
what was done to the fig tree,
but also if you say to this mountain,
‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’
it will be done.”

Matthew 21:21

Jesus promised that prayer could move mountains! Is this a valid promise? If it is, this is one of Jesus’ *great* promises, and it indicates how powerful prayer can be.

PRAYER IS POWERFUL

Although it can be rightfully said that prayer is powerful, it is not powerful by itself. It is God who gives power to prayer. He is the one that moves mountains.

Jesus' statement about moving mountains teaches that God will do great things for His children, provided they ask Him and provided they believe that He is willing and able to do what they ask.

MOVING MOUNTAINS

There are many kinds of mountains in the world that need to be moved. Not all of them are material mountains. Some are mountains of opposition, mountains of hatred, mountains of despair, and so on.

The question is sometimes asked, "Do you think God would remove an actual, literal mountain if we asked Him to do it?" My answer is, yes, I believe He would, under certain circumstances, provided He thought it proper for Him to do it. He might, however, use people, their agencies and their machines to bring about the removal of a literal mountain.

ASHLEY S. JOHNSON

Once, in Vienna, Austria, my friend Otis Gatewood presented me with an excellent book on prayer, which was written by a gospel preacher named Ashley S. Johnson, entitled "The Life of Trust."

In his book Ashley S. Johnson tells how he, in the late

1800's, started a training school for preachers with only one hundred dollars in his possession. He had tried without success to solicit funds for his proposed school. After a while he decided to change his approach. He took God in as his partner. Next, he dedicated himself to his project, including his body, soul, spirit, life, earnings, and his honor. Then he trusted in God's promises for the rest.

Although Johnson had been preaching the gospel for fifteen years, this was a new level of commitment for him.

In his book, Johnson tells of how God, in response to his prayers, gave him both students for the school and a building for it. It seems that God moved a mountain for Ashley S. Johnson. At least Johnson perceived it to be so.

The book by Ashley S. Johnson is dedicated to a man named George Muller (or Mueller), a Bible oriented man, of Bristol, England, who built a great orphanage by prayer. It was from Muller that Johnson got the inspiration for relying on prayer.

Johnson figured that if an orphanage could be built by prayer, then a school could be built by prayer, too.

GEORGE MULLER

Although George Muller was dependent on free-will donations to support his orphanage, he stubbornly refused to make his needs known to others. He wanted to test the efficacy of prayer.

He wanted for it to become perfectly clear whether God would answer his prayers or not. That is why he made his needs known only to God.

Muller prayed about every need as it arose. He kept a diary of his needs, his prayers and their fulfillment. His diary has been published and anyone can read how the needs of the orphans were met daily and a great orphanage was built by prayer. In this way, he made a scientific study of the efficacy of prayer.

George Muller's "Autobiography" is available from Whitaker House, Pittsburgh and Colfax Streets, Springdale, Pennsylvania 15144 USA.

THE FIG TREE

There is yet more to be said about the tree that Jesus caused to wither. Mark, the Gospel writer, adds an interesting detail. He records that Jesus said,

“Therefore I say to you,
whatever things you ask when you pray,
believe that you receive them,
and you will have them.”

Mark 11:24

The original Greek of this passage reads something like this: “Believe that you have received whatever things you ask for, and you will have them.”

That is to say, we should believe that God has already granted our requests and that we are only waiting for the time of their fulfillment.

Here are some examples of what this means: Suppose we were to go to church in order to pray for rain, should we take our umbrellas along with us or not? Which action would best

express our faith?

Or, suppose we were to conduct a gospel campaign with the expectation of bringing people to Christ, and suppose there was a baptistery in the church building, should we keep the baptistery full of water during the campaign or not? Which action would best express our faith?

God wants us to act on faith, trusting that He will work with us and that He will give us the desires of our heart in the accomplishment of good things.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. What lesson do you think Jesus taught by cursing the fig tree?
2. Have any mountains ever been moved in your life by prayer? Please elaborate.
3. Do you normally expect a “yes” when you pray? Tell why you expect a “yes,” if you do?
4. How can Christians increase their confidence in the effectiveness of prayer?
5. Should we ask for things that we think God does not want to grant? Please, state the reason for your answer.
6. Do you usually tell God not to give you what is not best? Please, explain what your practice is in this regard.

11

How Should We React When God Says “No?”

How do you think God should respond when His people ask for things that are not good for them? Should He give them what they want or should He say “No?” What do you think?

If God were to give His children everything they ask for He would be like an earthly father that gives his child a bicycle when there is no safe place for the child to ride.

He would be like a mother that sets only sweets before her children, because that is all they want to eat.

Since it is true that it would not be good if God were to give us everything we ask for, how should we react when God says “No” to us?

Should we feel rejected? No, we want God to say “No” when we ask for things that are not good. We are glad that we have such a heavenly Father, one that loves us enough to say “No.”

It is regrettable, of course, that we are not always able to ask what is best; but it is unavoidable, since we are still in the flesh and do not know what the future will bring.

Therefore, we should not be disappointed when God overrules our requests. If He does overrule them, we should realize that He has good reasons for overruling.

***SOMETIMES OUR REQUESTS
ARE TOO SMALL***

Often God has something much better in mind for us than we know to ask.

Take King Solomon for an example. As Solomon began his reign he asked God to help him. He prayed,

“Therefore give to Your servant
an understanding heart
to judge Your people,
that I may discern between good and evil.
For who is able to judge
this great people of Yours?”

1 Kings 3:9

God was pleased with Solomon’s request, and God said to Solomon,

“Because you have asked this thing,
and have not asked long life for yourself,
nor have asked riches for yourself,
nor have asked the life of your enemies,
but have asked for yourself understanding
to discern justice,
behold, I have done according to your words; ...
And I have also given you

what you have not asked:
both riches and honor,
so that there shall not be anyone like you
among the kings all your days.”

1 Kings 3:11-13

***WHEN THE LORD CLOSES ONE DOOR,
HE OFTEN OPENS ANOTHER***

Speaking from my own experience, disappointments often turn to blessings. I thought it was a tragedy when I lost my preaching job in 1983.

It turned out, however, to be for my good; for although one door was closed to me, the Lord opened other doors.

Since 1983, I have been able to make eight extended visits to Vienna (Austria), nine evangelistic trips to Bulgaria, two visits to Berlin (Germany), and seven mission trips to India.

During this time since 1983, the Lord made it possible for me to speak on the subject of prayer in Austria, Germany, Korea, India, Poland, Bulgaria and the USA.

So time and events have healed my original sense of tragedy at having lost my job.

Let me cite a similar experience of Gwynneth Curtis, a friend of mine. He was in charge of the Alumni Association of a Christian university. Yet he had been praying that God would help him get more directly involved in saving souls.

While he was praying in this vein, my friend’s superiors transferred him to a job that was ranked below the one he held.

At first, he was disappointed. As it turned out, however, in his new capacity, he was in charge of recruiting preaching

students for the Bible Department of the university. So his disappointment vanished when he realized that he had been given the very thing for which he had been asking.

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS AILMENT

The Apostle Paul was afflicted with an ailment that we cannot identify. He called it his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Whatever Paul’s ailment may have been, he was anxious to get rid of it. He pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away. Yet in spite of his pleading, the Lord refused to grant his request. Instead, the Lord said to him,

“My grace is sufficient for you,
for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”
2 Corinthians 12:9

So Paul received a “No” from the Lord. What do you suppose his reaction was? Did he think that the Lord was treating him unfairly? Did he think the Lord did not love him?

No, he concluded that his illness was “a messenger of Satan,” which the Lord permitted him to keep so that he would not become proud over the many revelations that he received (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Although Paul had prayed for health, he was determined to be content with the decision that the Lord made. He was also confident that the Lord would help him bear the affliction. He wrote,

“Therefore I take pleasure
in infirmities, in reproaches,
in needs, in persecutions,
in distresses,
for Christ’s sake.
For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

2 Corinthians 12:10

GOD KNOWS BEST

There is a story in the Old Testament about King Hezekiah, who fell ill. God sent a prophet to tell Hezekiah to set his house in order, because he was going to die (Isaiah 38:1). When Hezekiah heard this he turned his face to the wall and wept bitterly. He prayed to God in the following way:

“Remember now, O Lord, I pray,
how I have walked before You in truth
and with a loyal heart,
and have done what is good in Your sight.”

Isaiah 38:3

As a result of Hezekiah’s prayer, the Lord granted him an additional fifteen years of life (Isaiah 38:5). Yet after Hezekiah recovered from his illness, he fathered a son, named Manasseh, who turned out to be the worst king that Judah ever had.

His son Manasseh caused the people of Judah to commit such gross sins that many of them were put to death and others were taken to Babylon as captives.

It seems that it would have been better if Manasseh had never been born. If that is so, then, perhaps, Hezekiah should

have humbly submitted to God's decision to bring his life to an early close?

What appears to us as an impending tragedy sometimes turns out to be for the best.

“THY WILL BE DONE”

Jesus had a much better attitude toward His impending death than Hezekiah did. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He took three of His disciples aside and said to them,

“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful,
even to death.”

Matthew 26:38

Then Jesus went a little further and fell on His face and prayed,

“Abba, Father,
all things are possible for You.
Take this cup from me.”

Mark 14:36

Jesus was, no doubt, tempted to think: “Surely, there is some way that God's Messiah would not have to be humiliated and put to death!”

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was in agony and that sweat rolled down from Him like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). Luke also tells us that an angel from heaven appeared to Jesus and strengthened Him (Luke 22:43).

Matthew says that Jesus prayed,

“O My Father,
if this cup cannot pass away from Me
unless I drink it,
Your will be done.”

Matthew 26:42

When Jesus realized that there was no other way, He humbly submitted to the will of God. He prayed,

“Not as I will,
but as You will.”

Mark 14:36b

Jesus’ decision meant that He would have to suffer.

Yet on that glorious morning that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, He was glad that God had helped Him to get through the difficult time.

In the midst of hot trials, it is often difficult for us to see what benefit could come from God’s saying “No” to our requests. Often, however, when the suffering is over, we see that what God had in mind for us was for the best (Hebrews 12:11).

Further, if we are patient in the midst of suffering, it demonstrates our trust in God. An unknown author has beautifully stated the case for patience in the face of suffering. He wrote,

“I asked for strength that I might achieve;
He made me weak that I might obey.
I asked for health

that I might do greater things;
I was given grace
that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power
that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness
that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things
that I might enjoy life;
I was given life
that I might enjoy all things.
I received nothing that I asked for,
all that I hoped for.
My prayer was answered.”

CONCERNING JACK NADEAU

My friend Jack Nadeau preached the gospel for fifty years before he became ill with cancer. Here is a paragraph that he wrote in the flyleaf of his Bible nearly a year before he died:

“Thank you God, my heavenly Father, for this little book [the Bible] which is the greatest book among all the books in the world.

“Thank you, loving Father in Heaven, for my recent illness which began on May 15th. It has been a great blessing, bringing answers to many prayers and much love to Kay, me and our

family. It has given me a new spiritual start. It has deepened my prayer life greatly. It has helped me to know Jesus in new ways. It has helped me to love Jesus more and give my life anew to Him, who died for me. It has shown me how wonderful it is to have brothers and sisters in the family of God. It has helped me to love this family more than I ever dreamed possible.

“Hence, I’ve recommitted the rest of my life to serving this family, to striving for purity of heart and to keeping my relationships healthy and strong. It has helped me to forgive my enemies and pray for them. That’s a breakthrough for me.

“O thank you God! Above all, it has helped me to hate sin and Satan and to love Jesus and His work on the cross more. It’s helped me love my eight children more and their spouses and their children and my spouse in an incredible way. It’s helped me love my friends more and appreciate medical facilities including doctors, nurses, technicians and modern technology.

“Therefore, Father, I praise you for illness.

Love, Your son
Jack Nadeau,
October 15, 1987.”

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you want God to say “No” when you ask for something that is not good? Please, explain.
2. Have you ever asked for something that God granted, but which turned out to be a disappointment? Please, tell about it, if you have.
3. Have you ever been given more than you asked for? Please, tell what God did for you.
4. Have you ever experienced that when God closed one door He opened another? Please illustrate.
5. What should a Christian’s attitude be toward physical suffering? Please describe what you think it should be.
6. Do you feel that death is the greatest possible tragedy? If not, why not?
7. When you pray for things do you sometimes say, “Thy will be done?” Why do you say that, if you do?

12

Does Being Thankful Help Get Our Prayers Answered?

Yes, God wants His people to be thankful. The Apostle Paul said,

“Pray without ceasing,
in everything give thanks;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”
1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

IS THANKFULNESS AN OBLIGATION?

Yes, it seems so. The Apostle Paul felt that he was obligated to give thanks for the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. He wrote,

“We are bound to thank God always for you,
brethren, as it is fitting,
because your faith grows exceedingly,
and the love of everyone of you all
abounds toward each other.”
2 Thessalonians 1:3

The Christians at Thessalonica had come to Christ under unusual and trying circumstances (Acts 17:1-9) and were very dear to Paul's heart. What is more, their faith and love were growing. Therefore, if Paul had not given thanks for such people, it would have shown insensitivity on his part.

INGRATITUDE IS VERY UGLY

An ungrateful person is not looking to see who has blessed him, but is thinking only of himself. Ingratitude seems to say, "I am worthy of all that you have done for me and much more." Such an attitude is very inappropriate, especially when it relates to God!

AN UNGRATEFUL PERSON IS LIKE A SPOILED CHILD

Should a parent keep on doing nice things for a spoiled brat? If a parent keeps on doing nice things for such a child and does not correct him or her, it only makes matters worse. So a loving parent may have no alternative but to do less for a child like that in order to bring the child to his or her senses.

In the same way, God may have no alternative but to do less for a person who cannot see that God has blessed him or her. For that reason what God will do for a person in the future may depend upon the way that person has responded to what God has done for him or her in the past.

THE SAD RESULTS OF INGRATITUDE

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul spoke of people who, although they knew God, did not glorify Him as God, nor give Him thanks (Romans 1:21). As a result of their lack of appreciation of what God had done for them, they fell into the worship of idols. This caused God to give them up to uncleanness (Romans 1:24) and to turn them over to their vile passions (Romans 1:26).

THANKFULNESS LEADS TO FAITH

If ingratitude causes people to forget God and to lose their faith, does gratitude help them to have and maintain faith? Yes, thankfulness is an eye opener. It helps people see that God has surrounded them with blessings. When people are able to see their blessings it makes it easier for them to believe in God.

HOW ESSENTIAL IS FAITH IN GETTING PRAYERS ANSWERED?

It is very essential. Here is what James said about it:

“If any of you lacks wisdom,
let him ask of God,
who gives to all liberally
and without reproach,
and it will be given to him.
But let him ask in faith,
with no 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.”
James 1:5-7

To repeat, here is how thankfulness helps in getting prayers answered: Thankfulness leads to an awareness of what God has done. Awareness of what God has done leads to faith. And faith helps in getting prayers answered.

DO OTHER BLESSINGS FLOW FROM THANKFUL PRAYING?

Yes, they do. One blessing that flows from thankful praying is the blessing of peace. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“Be anxious for nothing,
but in everything by prayer and supplication,
with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known to God;
and the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds
through Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 4:6-7

There are still other blessings that flow from praying with thanksgiving? One of the Psalms suggests that God helps those that offer praise to Him. God is quoted as saying,

“Whoever offers praise glorifies Me;
And to him who orders his conduct aright
I will show the salvation of God.”

Psalm 50:23

This verse says that God helps people when they are in trouble if (1) they live according to His principles and if (2) they praise Him. Praise must be sincere, of course, before God rewards it. He is not interested in just having people speak sweet-sounding words. He wants people to love Him from their hearts and to praise Him sincerely. He wants people to praise Him because they have caught a glimpse of His goodness and grandeur and because they are truly grateful for what He has done for them.

The thought that God helps those who praise Him is corroborated by an earlier verse in this same Psalm, which says,

“Offer to God thanksgiving,
And pay your vows to the Most High.
Call upon Me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you,
and you shall glorify Me.”

Psalm 50:14

Judging from all that is said above, it appears that God is more likely to respond to our pleas for help if we are in the habit of expressing thanks to Him. Perhaps one of the reasons that He is so inclined is that when we express our thanks to God we make Him look good.

On the other hand, when we refrain from thanking Him, we make Him look small and ineffective. By withholding the

thanks due to Him, we cast a shadow on His name and, thereby, deny the reality of His solicitous care. In that way, our ingratitude tells a lie about God.

***WILL BEING THANKFUL
BRING US PROSPERITY?***

Well, it might. There is a suggestion to this effect in second Chronicles, where the story is told of how King Hezekiah appointed priests and Levites and commanded them to bring burnt offerings and peace offerings to God, as prescribed by the Law of Moses. Hezekiah instructed the priests and Levites

“To serve,
to give thanks,
and to praise [God]
in the gates of the camp of the Lord.”

2 Chronicles 31:2

After King Hezekiah had reinstated the proper public expressions of thanksgiving to God, it is recorded concerning Hezekiah,

“So he prospered.”

2 Chronicles 31:21

From this, it looks as though God may give prosperity to those who truly appreciate His kindness and who express their appreciation in their prayers.

A WORTHWHILE EXPERIMENT

It might be worthwhile, dear Reader, to find out if by expressing your thankfulness to God for what He has done for you in the past, you might induce Him to do something even greater for you in the future.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. If a person is truly thankful for what he or she has received, is he or she more likely to lead a happy life? What do you think?
2. How can a person give thanks “in everything,” as 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says?
3. Do you think a person appears more beautiful in the eyes of God when he or she is thankful? If so, why?
4. Is a person also more attractive to humans’ eyes when he or she is thankful? What do you think?
5. Have you ever noticed that when God is on the verge of blessing you, the devil tries to make you feel sorry for yourself and thereby tempts you to say or to do something of which you will later be ashamed? When this happens, does it lessen your joy in the blessing that God gives?
6. How many of your prayers are devoted to the giving of thanks? What would you estimate the percentage to be? How can you improve the percentage?

13

Making Decisions with Prayer and Bible Reading

Many people do not have much confidence in their ability to make decisions. For that reason some people lay out “a fleece before the Lord.”

The idea of laying out “a fleece before the Lord” goes back to the time of Gideon, one of the judges of Israel.

God told Gideon to save the children of Israel from the Midianites, who had invaded the land (Judges 6:14). Gideon was not certain, however, that he had gotten the message right, so he thought of a way to get a sign from the Lord.

He laid out a fleece (a sheepskin) on the ground and asked the Lord to cause dew to form on the fleece and there be none on the ground. In this way, Gideon hoped to gain assurance that the Lord intended to save Israel through him (Judges 6:37).

The next morning, there was no dew on the ground, but the fleece was wet. In fact the fleece was so wet that Gideon was able to squeeze a bowl of water out of it (Judges 6:38). Yet Gideon was still not sure.

He asked the Lord to reverse the process and to grant that the ground would be wet and that the fleece be dry. The next

morning it was so, and that was how Gideon became sure of divine guidance in delivering Israel.

The question for us is, does God want us to make decisions in that way? I used to think that that He does, but I came to realize that there are no instructions in the New Testament to the effect that we should lay out “a fleece before the Lord.” Therefore, I came to the conclusion that it is not proper for us to make decisions in that way.

Laying out “a fleece before the Lord” is an attempt to force God to give a sign even though He may not be willing to give one, and it would be wrong for us to try to force God to do anything.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO MAKE DECISIONS

During the days when my family and I lived in the city of West Berlin as missionaries, I often did not know the best way to advance the work of the Lord in that city.

Occasionally, I would write to the elders of the congregation in the USA that oversaw our work and I would ask for their advice. Several times they wrote back saying they were not close enough to the situation to know how to advise us. They said that they had confidence in us and that we should decide for ourselves on the best course of action.

Finally, my friend, W.W. Stirman, one of the elders of the congregation, wrote that we should not be afraid to make decisions. He said that if we should happen to make a wrong decision, God was able to make it turn out all right, provided we decided according to the best we knew.

This was sound advice and it eased my mind considerably.

It is much better to have this attitude than to be paralyzed by indecision. This attitude is compatible with what the apostle Paul said when he wrote,

“And we know that all things work together
for good to those who love God,
to those who are called
according to His purpose.”

Romans 8:28

GOD WANTS US TO MAKE DECISIONS

In order to make good decisions we need to do two things: (1) to pray for wisdom and (2) be reading the Bible. Let us look closer at these two things:

PRAYING FOR WISDOM

James wrote,

“If any of you lacks wisdom,
let him ask of God,
who gives to all liberally
and without reproach,
and it will be given to him.”

James 1:5

It seems that God want us to trust that when we ask for wisdom He gives it to us, for James wrote,

“But let him ask in faith, with no 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.”

James 1:6-7

READING THE BIBLE

In addition to praying for wisdom, we also need to be reading the Bible. The Bible is our chief source of information regarding the mind of God. He would prefer that we pray for His help in understanding the Bible (Ephesians 1:18) than that we should seek His guidance through miracles, dreams or private revelations.

The apostle Paul advised young Timothy, saying,

“Till I come, give attention to reading,
to exhortation, to doctrine.”

1 Timothy 4:13

The apostle Paul also said,

“All Scripture is given
by inspiration of God,
and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof,
for correction,
for instruction in righteousness,
that the man of God may be complete,
thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17

It would be wrong for us to ignore what the Bible says and then ask God for a special sign. If we did that, that would be a

sin of presumption. That is to say, we would be presuming that no matter whether we live by God's word or not, we have a right to ask for God's mercy and grace.

If we turn to the Scriptures, however, we learn what God wants us to do. The apostle Paul wrote, the Scriptures equip us for "every good work."

We should not take the Bible and let it fall open where it may and then suppose that whatever passage happens to come up is God's special message to us. That is not reading the Bible. That is using the Bible in search of a sign. If we keep on reading the Bible as a whole, however, we will grasp the meaning of its teaching.

THE NEW TESTAMENT ANSWERS ALL SORTS OF QUESTIONS

Many people do not fully appreciate what a wealth of instruction is to be found in the New Testament.

Suppose a person, for example, wants to know whether or not he should avenge himself against some person that has done him a wrong. If he wants to know what he should do, let him read the passage that says,

"Repay no one evil for evil."

Romans 12:17

Or suppose a woman wonders whether or not she should preach in the assembly of the church. Let her read the passage that says,

“Let your women keep silent
in the churches,
for they are not permitted to speak;
but they are to be submissive,
as the law also says.”

1 Corinthians 14:34

Or suppose a person wants to know whether or not he or she should help other Christians financially. Let that person read the passage that says,

“For I do not mean
that others should be eased
and you burdened;
but by an equality,
that now at this time your abundance
may supply their lack,
that their abundance
also may supply your lack
--that there may be an equality.”

2 Corinthians 8:13-14

After reading these passages, and others, Christians will be better able to decide what they should do regarding these and other matters. If this becomes their regular approach to decision making, they will be able to walk in the light of God’s revealed truth and will not be continually stumbling around in the dark. They will be able to decide on the basis of what they have learned from the New Testament.

MATTERS ABOUT WHICH GOD HAS NOT SPECIFICALLY SPOKEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

God equips His people to be able to make decisions even in matters about which He has not specifically spoken in the Scriptures. He equips His people by giving them His Spirit (Acts 2:39).

That is to say, the Holy Spirit comes into the hearts of God's people after they have been immersed (baptized) for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38). When the Holy Spirit comes into their hearts, He (the Holy Spirit) strengthens them.

HOW DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT STRENGTHEN PEOPLE?

The Holy Spirit strengthens people in the "inner man" (Ephesians 3:16). As a result, Christ is able to live in their hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17). This means that they have Christ's attitude. Christ's attitude causes them to be "rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:17). When they are rooted and grounded in love, they are able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width, length, depth, and height of love (Ephesians 3:18-19). Such an attitude is of immense help in making good decisions.

The Holy Spirit also bears other fruit. He bears joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Such attributes equip people to make good decisions. These attributes may not insure people against making wrong decisions; but people who have

these attributes will make decisions that are, by and large, close to the mind of God.

GOD WANTS HIS PEOPLE TO GROW UP

Like any wise parent, God longs for the day when His children will be able to stand on their own two feet, as regards making decisions. He wants them to know of themselves what is good and He wants them to choose it, so that they will be able to join Him in the pursuit and enjoyment of good things.

If God were to give people a special sign every time they were confronted with making a decision, it would diminish their ability to decide things on their own. As a result, they would never grow up. They would remain children forever and be continually “tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14).

Unless people are in the habit of reading the New Testament, they may assume that something is in harmony with the will of Christ, when in reality it may not be. Anyone that is not reading the New Testament is almost certain to make bad decisions, for he will be easily misled.

The apostle John warned of this possibility, when he wrote,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit,
but test the spirits,
whether they are of God;
because many false prophets
have gone out into the world.”

1 John 4:1

The proper way for a Christian to test any idea is to check it out with the New Testament.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO MAKE DECISIONS

What a great blessing it is that we have the New Testament! Since we have it, we should not be afraid to make decisions in the light of what it says.

It is also a great blessing that we can ask God to give us wisdom in making decisions according to His thinking. If we ask Him for wisdom, He will give it to us (James 1:5).

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you have difficulty making decisions? Why do you suppose you have this difficulty?
2. Is it becoming easier for you to make decisions, as you grow older? Please elaborate on this.
3. Have you ever tried to “lay out a fleece before the Lord?” If you have, how did it turn out?
4. What do you think about using the New Testament as a guide book? Please explain your thinking.
5. Have you ever looked into the New Testament to find out what you should do with regard to some particular matter? Please elaborate on this?
6. Have you ever prayed for wisdom regarding a certain decision? Do you feel that it helped when you asked for wisdom? Please tell about it?

14

Bearing Fruit with Prayer

The children of Israel are portrayed in the Old Testament as a vineyard that God planted in the land of Canaan (Isaiah 5:7). After God planted the vineyard, He expected to see good grapes from it; but it bore wild grapes instead (Isaiah 5:2).

THE VINEYARD

Jesus told a parable about a man that planted a vineyard (Luke 20:9-16) and rented it out. At harvest time the man sent a servant to get some of the grapes; but the workers in that vineyard beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed.

So the owner sent other servants, and the same thing happened to them.

Finally, the owner decided to send his own son. When the workers saw the owner's son, they killed him and threw him out of the vineyard, thinking that the vineyard would then be theirs.

Jesus asked His listeners about this. He said, "What will the owner of the vineyard do?"

Jesus Himself gave the answer, saying,

He will come and destroy those vinedressers
and give the vineyard to others.”

Luke 20:16

Jesus’ parable about the workers implies that God was disappointed in the way Jewish leaders (workers in His vineyard) were treating His Son (Jesus). The parable foreshadows that the Jewish leaders would put Jesus to death. It also foreshadows that God would turn the vineyard over to others. As a result of His turning the vineyard over to others, the physical descendants of Israel would no longer have exclusive rights to be considered the vineyard of God.

JESUS IS THE VINE

Jesus taught that all the branches in God’s vineyard must be connected to Himself. He said,

“I am the vine,
and you are the branches.”

John 15:5

Everyone that belongs to Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, is a branch in Him. To each branch He gives nourishment and strength, so that only through Him are His people able to bear fruit. Jesus affirmed this when He said,

“Abide in Me, and I in you.
As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself,
unless it abides in the vine,

neither can you,
unless you abide in Me.”

John 15:4

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN ABIDING IN JESUS?

The expression “abide in Me” involves more than having an emotional attachment to Jesus. It involves doing what Jesus said. The Apostle John explained:

“But whoever keeps His word,
truly the love of God is perfected in him.
By this we know that we are in Him.
He who says he abides in Him
ought himself also to walk
just as He walked.”

1 John 2:5-6

GOD IS THE VINEDRESSER

The vineyard, in which Jesus is “the vine,” belongs to God; and God takes care of it. God is the “vinedresser.” Jesus said,

“I am the true vine,
and My Father is the vinedresser.”

John 15:1

HE IS A MASTER VINEDRESSER

A part of the work that a vinedresser does is to prune his vineyard. Jesus said,

“And every branch that bears fruit
He [God] prunes,
that it may bear more fruit.”

John 15:2

One winter I had the privilege of visiting a vineyard in Austria with my friend Bob Hare, who was a long-time Christian worker in Vienna. The vineyard was on the eastern side of the Neusiedler See, near the Hungarian border.

At the time of our visit, the vines had already been pruned. To me, they seemed to have been cut back too far; but as we walked along among the vines, the owner of the vineyard explained that when he trims, he keeps in mind how he wants each vine to look after it puts out shoots. He also said he trims each vine in such a way that it will bear more fruit.

I was impressed with how precisely a master vinedresser seemed to know what he wants to accomplish by his pruning. God, as our master vinedresser, also knows precisely what He wants to accomplish in the life of each one of us.

BEAR FRUIT OR DIE

Jesus cautioned about the necessity of His disciples bearing fruit. He said,

“Every branch in Me
that does not bear fruit
He [God] takes away.”

John 15:2

Jesus also cautioned,

“If anyone does not abide in Me,
he is cast out as a branch and is withered;
and they gather them
and throw them into the fire,
and they are burned.”

John 15:6

God does not want to cast out any of his branches. He does so only reluctantly. He wants to maintain all the branches so they can bear fruit. Only as a last resort does He cast them out. Before He casts them out, however, He does everything possible to get them to bear fruit.

DOES GOD PRUNE HIS VINEYARD TODAY?

Yes, I am confident He does. Someone may ask, “How He prunes His vineyard?” Well, one way that He prunes is by allowing trials and difficulties to come upon His people. The Book of Hebrews puts it this way:

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful
for the present, but grievous;
nevertheless, afterward it yields
the peaceable fruit of righteousness
to those who have been trained by it.”

Hebrews 12:11

When God allows His people to be chastened, it is not due to any lack of care on His part. Rather, it is a sign of His love

(Hebrews 12:6); for His people are trained by chastening, and it enables them to bear more fruit.

DOES GOD HAVE ANY OTHER WAY OF PRUNING?

Yes, Jesus was continually pruning (cleansing) His disciples. Toward the end of His life on earth, He told them that they were “already clean,” that is, pruned. He said,

“You are already clean because of the word
which I have spoken to you.”

John 15:3

While Jesus was with His disciples, He taught them many things. He taught them, for example, to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44), to get along with their adversaries (Matthew 5:25), not to swear an oath (Matthew 5:37) and so on. With such admonition Jesus pruned away many of the faults of His disciples.

WHICH WILL IT BE?

We can choose how we will be pruned. Will we allow ourselves to be pruned by what Jesus and the apostles taught? Or will we wait for God to do the pruning by whatever chastening He deems appropriate?

We will spare ourselves much pain and suffering if we allow ourselves to be pruned by what Jesus said. Being pruned by what Jesus said is more pleasant than being pruned by trials and difficulties. If we prune ourselves as we read what Jesus

and His followers said in the New Testament, God may not find it necessary to prune us severely in other ways. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“For if we would judge ourselves,
we would not be judged.
But when we are judged,
we are chastened by the Lord,
that we may not be condemned
with the world.”

1 Corinthians 11:31-32

SPIRITUAL GROWTH LEADS TO FRUITFULNESS

The Apostle Peter listed some of the stages of spiritual growth in his second letter. He wrote,

“Add to your faith virtue,
to virtue knowledge,
to knowledge self-control
to self-control perseverance,
to perseverance godliness,
to godliness brotherly kindness,
and to brotherly kindness love.”

2 Peter 1:5-7

Our growing spiritually is like ascending a flight of stairs: We start out on the first step, which is faith. Then, we go up the steps, one by one, until we finally reach the top, which is

love. Each step is important. No step can be skipped over. Each step helps us get to the one above it.

Acquiring these attributes helps us bear fruit, for the Apostle Peter wrote,

“For if these things are yours and abound,
you will be neither barren nor unfruitful
in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

2 Peter 1:8

BEARING FRUIT IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS

The Apostle Paul was a master at bearing fruit in the lives of others (Colossians 1:28). For example, he wanted to go to Rome in order to bear fruit among the Romans, as he had among other Gentiles (Romans 1:13). The fruit that the Apostle Paul wanted to bear in Rome is the kind that is born by teaching the gospel (Colossians 1:5-6) and influencing people.

Each of us, like Paul, should be ready and anxious to bear this kind of fruit (1 Peter 3:15), as we have the opportunity. We cannot force people to obey the gospel, but we can sow the seed of the gospel in their hearts. If they accept it, it will result in their salvation (James 1:21).

IS THERE A SECRET TO BEARING FRUIT FOR GOD?

Yes there is. Jesus revealed the secret, yet it is still unknown to many people. The secret is this: Those that are abiding in Jesus and have Jesus' words abiding in them are the

ones that can bear spiritual fruit. Jesus said,

“If you abide in Me,
and My words abide in you,
you will ask what you desire,
and it shall be done for you.”

John 15:7

In view of what Jesus said, the way for His followers to start bearing spiritual fruit is for them to ask for it in prayer. The idea of bearing fruit by prayer does not appeal to everyone. Some people have little or no patience with prayer. Instead, they want to *do* something for the Lord. I understand this frame of mind. I used to have it myself; but I have come to see that nothing of real significance can be accomplished without asking the Lord for it.

Prayer produces more fruit than would otherwise be the case; and this glorifies God. In the verse that follows the one just quoted above, Jesus said,

“By this My Father is glorified,
that you bear much fruit;
so that you will be My disciples.”

John 15:8

When people bear fruit in this way, they demonstrate that they are Jesus’ disciples; and the fruit they bear will not be short-lived, for Jesus said,

“You did not choose Me,
but I chose you and appointed you
that you should go and bear fruit,

and that your fruit should remain,
that whatever you ask the father in My name
He may give you.”

John 15:16

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Does it strike you as strange that spiritual fruit is born by praying, rather than exclusively by work? Please explain.
2. Do we have to be connected to Jesus before we can bear fruit by praying for it? If so, why is that?
3. How can a person get connected to Jesus? Please explain.
4. How can a person stay connected to Jesus? Please elaborate.
5. Why is spiritual growth necessary before we can bear much fruit? Please explain.
6. Is there anything we can do in order to grow spiritually? If so, what?
7. Has God done any “pruning” in your life? If so, what has your reaction to it been?

15

The Family at Prayer

It is beautiful when a family sits down to eat and the members of the family bow their heads while thanks is being offered for the food!

THE FAMILY ON TELEVISION

It is sad that only rarely does one see a family on television giving thanks for its food. Instead, one sees members of a family rush in, hurriedly fill his or her plate with food and start eating without giving God a thought. That is not the way humans should eat. That is the way animals eat: they fall over their food and devour it. People who fail to give thanks to God miss an opportunity to do something uniquely human. Only humans have the capacity to express in words their thankfulness to God. It is a glorious privilege to be able to do this.

WHERE DID PRAYING AT MEALTIME COME FROM?

The habit of praying at mealtime is not a quaint custom that grew up by chance. It is something that Christian people

learned to do by observing Jesus. For example, before Jesus fed the five thousand, the Scriptures say that He

“commanded the multitudes
to sit down on the grass.
And He took the five loaves
and the two fish,
and looking up to heaven,
He blessed and broke
and gave the loaves to the disciples;
and the disciples gave to the multitudes.”

Matthew 14:19

Shortly after He had fed the five thousand, He fed another four thousand. Matthew records that,

“He took the seven loaves and the fish
and gave thanks, broke them
and gave them to his disciples;
and the disciples gave to the multitude.”

Matthew 15:36

In these stories we see Jesus either blessing or giving thanks for food before He gave it to others to eat.

THE EUCHARIST

The giving of thanks is prominent in the Lord’s Supper, which is sometimes called the “Eucharist.” The word “Eucharist” means, “a giving of thanks.” Matthew describes Jesus’ last Passover meal with His disciples by saying,

“Jesus took bread,
blessed it and broke it,
and gave it to the disciples and said,
‘Take, eat; this is My body.’
Then He took the cup,
and gave thanks,
and gave it to them, saying,
‘Drink from it, all of you.’”
Matthew 26:26-27

JESUS’ MEAL WITH TWO DISCIPLES

After Jesus arose from the dead, He sat down for a modest meal with two of His disciples, who had not recognized Him. Luke says that,

“He took bread, blessed and broke it,
and gave it to them.”
Luke 24:30

As Jesus blessed the bread and broke it, the eyes of the two disciples were opened so that they recognized Him. Offering thanks for food seems to have been something that Jesus customarily did before eating.

THE APOSTLE PAUL SPOKE ABOUT GIVING THANKS FOR FOOD

The Apostle Paul indicated that he also thought it proper to give thanks to God for food. He said,

“For every creature of God is good [for food],
and nothing is to be refused
if it is received with thanksgiving;
for it is sanctified by the word of God
and prayer.”

1 Timothy 4:4-5

TEACHING CHILDREN TO PRAY

Every father, as the head of a family (Ephesians 5:23), has the responsibility to see to it that his children learn to pray. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“And you, fathers,
do not provoke your children to wrath,
but bring them up in the training
and admonition of the Lord.”

Ephesians 6:4

Teaching children to pray is a part of what is involved in bringing up children “in the training and admonition of the Lord.”

The best time to introduce children to prayer is while they are still young. If a father waits until his children are teenagers, it may be too late to teach them to pray. They may not be willing to participate in family prayers unless they have been taught to pray when they are little.

It might be good for a husband and wife to designate a time and place for family prayers.

It would be thoughtful of a wife for her to say, “Now, children, let’s be quiet for a moment, and ask Dad to pray with

us.” That would be much better than for a husband to have to say, “You kids simmer down, I want to pray.”

Children who get to hear their parents pray are blessed. If they hear their parents honoring God in prayer, they are more likely to honor God in prayer themselves.

In addition, it becomes easier for children to respect their parents if they hear their parents pray; and the children are more likely to honor their parents if they know that their parents recognize that they, as parents, are subject to the authority of God.

Moreover, children will become convinced that their parents love them if they hear their parents praying for their (the children’s) welfare.

When children are sick it is especially comforting for them to hear their parents praying for them. Parents need to be praying with their children on a regular basis, otherwise their sick children will be shocked when they hear their parents praying for them and think that they are about to die.

PRAYER IS A WINDOW INTO THE HEART

Deep thoughts of the heart are revealed when families pray together. No member of a family is likely to suspect hidden animosity when he or she hears the members of the family praying for him or her; for a person’s prayers reveal what a person really thinks. When children hear other members of the family praying for them, they come to realize that the others are on their side and not against them. Thus, praying helps take the strain out of family relationships.

DISCUSSING PRAYERS IN ADVANCE

It is good to discuss from time to time in advance what the family wants to say in prayer. Jesus said,

“Again I say to you
that if two of you agree on earth
concerning anything that they ask,
it will be done for them
by My Father in heaven.”

Matthew 18:19

Discussing prayers in advance provides an opportunity to lay out before the Lord, and before the family, any problems that may be troubling the family. Discussing prayers in advance enables each member of the family to have some input into the decisions that affect them. If each feels free to make suggestions, no one feels left out. It is especially important that children be given the opportunity to make suggestions for prayer.

Asking the children for suggestions for prayer gives parents an opportunity to discuss with their children, and with the Lord, what they would like for their children to be in years to come.

PRAYERS ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Prayers are appropriate when something special happens in a family. Suppose, for example, that someone has a birthday, or that someone had just become engaged, or that someone has had a baby. All of these occasions are ideal situations for

family prayers. Prayers would be appropriate also when someone is ill or is facing surgery, or when someone has died.

As Joel, our oldest grandson, was getting ready to go off to college, my wife and I were invited to be present in his parents' home for prayers on Joel's behalf. On that occasion, many blessings in the form of prayers were spoken over Joel.

When Lois Elaine, our oldest granddaughter graduated from college, her parents invited many people that had befriended her during her college days to come for a session of prayer and thanksgiving. These occasions were moving experiences.

SHOULD A HUSBAND PRAY WITH HIS WIFE?

Yes, by all means. Nothing is better for a marriage than for a husband to pray with his wife. When he prays with her, he reveals to her his heart. She is, then, better able to understand what problems he faces and how he feels about them. As a result, she will be a better partner to him.

When a husband and a wife pray together, it reduces friction in the marriage and gives the devil less room to operate.

In order for a man to be able to pray with his wife, however, he must be living with her "with understanding" and be giving her honor. The Apostle Peter wrote,

"Likewise you husbands,
dwell with them with understanding,
giving honor to the wife,
as to the weaker vessel,
and as being heirs together

of the grace of life,
that your prayers may not be hindered.”

1 Peter 3:7

SHOULD A WIFE LET THE HUSBAND DO THE PRAYING?

Some husbands leave most of the praying to their wives. It would be better, however, if wives were to urge their husbands to take the lead in prayer. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“Therefore I desire
that the men pray everywhere,
lifting up holy hands
without wrath and doubting.”

1 Timothy 2:8

According to this, men are the ones who should do the praying. This does not mean that wives should not pray for themselves privately or with their children or with other women. What it means is that men are the ones who have been specially commissioned to pray.

So, wife, if your husband is present let him do the praying. Please, do not feel disadvantaged by this. There are many interesting and rewarding things that God has commissioned you to do (Titus 2:3-5). If you do all that God has commissioned you to do, and the praying too, that does not leave much for your husband to do.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you think family prayers are beneficial? If so, Why?
2. Do you find that little children enjoy praying? Please share your experience in praying with children.
3. In your opinion, is the giving of thanks at mealtime going out of style? If it is, why is this happening? What can be done about it?
4. Do you (or did you) pray with your children at bedtime? What are some of the obstacles that keep parents from doing this, and how can these obstacles be removed?
5. Have you had any experience with praying and reading the Bible with your family early in the morning? If you have, please tell about it.
6. Do you feel free to pray with your wife or your husband? If not, why not? If praying with wife or husband presents a problem, what can be done about it?

16

Praying for Others

There are outstanding stories in the Old Testament of how God's people spoke prayers for others.

Take for example Abraham: He prayed six times that God would spare the city of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32), but alas, Sodom was too wicked. God could not spare it. With better results, however, Abraham prayed for King Abimelech's wife, and she was healed (Genesis 20:17).

Take Moses for example: He prayed that God would not destroy the children of Israel after they refused to go up into the Land of Canaan and take possession of it. In response to Moses' prayer God, spared the children of Israel (Numbers 14:15-20).

Moses also prayed that God would take away the serpents (Numbers 21:7) that were afflicting the children of Israel in the wilderness. As a result, God took the serpents away and healed the people.

In addition, Moses prayed for his brother, Aaron (Deuteronomy 9:20), and God spared Aaron's life.

Take Samuel, the last of the Judges. Samuel knew that the children of Israel needed his prayers, and he felt duty bound to pray for them. Samuel said to them,

“Moreover, as for me,
far be it from me
that I should sin against the Lord
in ceasing to pray for you.”

1 Samuel 12:23

Take Job as another example. When Job finally stopped criticizing his friends and began praying for them, God healed him (Job 42:10).

JESUS' EXAMPLE

Jesus was as diligent in praying for others as were these men of the Old Testament. Jesus prayed all night long before making His final selection of the Twelve Apostles (Luke 6:12-13).

When I was young, I marveled at how Jesus could pray all night long. I could not fathom how anyone could pray that long. I had trouble praying for just a few minutes. What I did not realize was that Jesus was praying for a lot of people.

In the night before Jesus was betrayed, He prayed for His disciples, saying,

“I do not pray
that You should take them out of the world,
but that You should keep them from the evil one.”

John 17:15

In the same prayer, Jesus interceded for those whom His disciples would in the future recruit, saying,

“I do not pray for these alone,
but also for those
who will believe in Me through their word.”

John 17:20

GOD WELCOMES INTERCESSORY PRAYER

James wrote,

“Confess your trespasses to one another,
and pray for one another,
that you may be healed.
The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man
avails much.”

James 5:16

The Apostle Paul exhorted young Timothy, saying,

“Therefore I exhort first of all
that supplications, prayers, intercessions,
and giving of thanks be made for all men,
for kings and all who are in authority,
that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life
in all godliness and reverence.
For this is good and acceptable
in the sight of God our Savior.”

1 Timothy 2:1-3

To sum up, here are the arguments that have been put forward so far in this chapter as to why we should pray for others:

- (1) It would be sinful for us not to pray for others (1 Samuel 12:23).
- (2) Jesus Himself set us an example by praying for others (John 17:15).
- (3) The prayer of a righteous person “avails much” (James 5:16). That is, it is very effective.
- (4) Praying for others is “good and acceptable” in God’s sight (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

If these arguments are valid, as they seem to be, then God’s people need to be active in praying for others. The Apostle Paul wrote that we should be

“praying always with all prayer
and supplication in the Spirit,
being watchful to this end
with all perseverance and supplication
for all the saints.”

Ephesians 6:18

GOD’S GREAT ABILITY TO ANSWER PRAYERS

Intercessory praying gives God an opportunity to intervene in situations, in which He might not feel free to intervene, unless someone asks Him to do so. When God told Moses that He had decided to destroy the children of Israel in the wilderness, Moses prayed that God would spare their lives. God granted Moses’ request and said to him,

“I have pardoned, according to your word.”

Numbers 14:20

One remarkable aspect of God's power is His ability to weave answers to our prayers into the fabric of events. He can weave them in so smoothly that His intervention is not even noticed. Indeed, He is so skillful that some people are not aware that He is the source of their blessedness. They may think their good fortune is due to chance, or to their own intelligence or industry. Their blessedness may be due in reality, however, to the prayers of their godly parents or grandparents.

DOES PRAYING FOR OTHERS BENEFIT US IN RETURN?

Yes, it benefits us greatly. Since most of us tend to be self-centered, the simple exercise of thinking of others does us good. But there are additional benefits.

In the process of deciding what to pray for others, we ask ourselves, "If I were in that person's shoes, what would I want God to do for me?" After we have identified another person's needs and have verbalized them in prayer, it may occur to us that we could possibly be the means that God intends to use to help that person. Thus, praying for others sometimes prompts us to do good deeds.

Intercessory praying helps us in other ways, too. When we pray for others, it relieves any resentment that we may feel toward the person for whom we pray.

For example, after we have prayed for someone's prosperity, we are not likely to be jealous if that person starts having more money than we have.

In addition, after we have prayed for someone, it becomes

easier for us to forgive that person; and if we forgive, we become more lovingly disposed toward him or her.

There is still more. Praying for others gives us something to talk to God about. If we are in the habit of praying often, we may run out of things to say to Him, unless we fill our prayers with requests for others. Making requests for others, therefore, helps to keep our prayer-life alive. It prevents our prayers from turning into “vain repetitions” (Matthew 6:7).

Furthermore, every answered prayer provides additional evidence of God’s helping hand. The more we pray--whether for ourselves or for others--the more we give God opportunity to act.

The result of seeing God act is that our faith becomes stronger. So, of a truth it can be said that our faith grows in proportion to the expanding of the list of the people for whom we pray.

WHEN OTHERS PRAY FOR US

When we hear that someone is praying for us, it should make us feel good, for it is a compliment to us. It shows that someone esteems us enough of us to mention us before the throne of God.

THE PRAYERS OF THE HERRING AVENUE CHURCH IN WACO, TEXAS

When Elaine and I moved to Germany as missionaries in 1949, we went there under the auspices of the Herring Avenue church in Waco, Texas.

The Herring Avenue church was a daughter congregation of the Columbus Avenue church, which I attended as a teenager. The Herring Avenue church contributed to our financial support and had the oversight of our mission work for over twenty years.

In 1954 we moved to West Berlin. While we were there, the Marshal Plan aid from the United States was transferred from West Germany to West Berlin. So we witnessed the reconstruction of West Berlin. We were there when the infamous Berlin Wall was built in 1961. Some of our church members who lived in East Berlin were on the S-Bahn (rapid train) that Sunday morning when traffic between the two parts of the city was cut off. They were en route to church in West Berlin, but were turned back at the border between East and West Berlin.

While we were in Berlin, we received from time to time encouraging letters from the United States. One of our regular correspondents was W.W. Stirman, a dear friend, who had been an elder of the church when I was a teenager in Waco, and who had encouraged us greatly.

In almost every letter, Brother Stirman wrote, "We are praying for you." He also wrote from time to time, "Hardly ever a service of the church goes by but that your names are mentioned in prayer."

I calculated once how many prayers were prayed for us. The Herring Avenue church, with its 300 or so members, met three times a week. Since there are 52 weeks a each year, around 936,000 prayers must have been sent to heaven on our behalf, during the twenty years that we worked under the oversight of the Herring Avenue congregation. It finally

dawned on me that nearly a million prayers had been prayed in our behalf by those lovely people! Although we were not always aware of it, a wall of prayers surrounded us.

In later years, as my wife and I were talking about this, she commented, “Those prayers were what it took to keep us in Berlin. We couldn’t have stayed there without them.” She was right!

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do your prayers tend to be too short? If so, how can you lengthen them?
2. Have you ever made a prayer list? If you did, was the list a help to your praying? Please tell how it helped, if it did.
3. Does praying for others help you to be less worried about your own problems? Please explain.
4. Which do you find easier to do, to rejoice with those that rejoice or to weep with those that weep (Romans 12:15)? How does praying help in either case, if it does?
5. Should we pray for people that we do not like? If so, why should we?
6. How does praying for others enlarge our faith? Can you give an example from your own experience?
7. Do you like for people to pray for you? If so, please explain why you do.

17

Praying for Church Members

The Apostle Paul instructed us to pray for all saints. He wrote,

“Praying always with all prayer
and supplication in the Spirit,
being watchful to this end
with all perseverance
and supplication for all the saints.”

Ephesians 6:18

To whom was Paul referring when he said we should pray for “all saints?” Was he referring to such saints as St. George, St. Catherine, and so on? No, he was referring to Christians. All true Christians are considered to be “saints” in the New Testament. Paul said that we should pray for all of them.

No one could pray for all of the Christians in the world individually, of course. There are too many of them. Yet we can pray for the saints that assemble where we do. We can also pray for the saints whom we know in other congregations.

DON'T PRAY IN SHORTHAND

At times, I have prayed in very general terms for the

members of the congregations where I have attended. I have said things like, “Bless all the members of this church.”

I doubt now that such prayers convinced God that I was seriously concerned about the members of those congregations. Praying in such general terms is not real praying. It is more like a kind of shorthand.

Occasionally, I have heard other people use shorthand in their prayers. I have heard people say, “Bless all the people for whom we should pray.” Such a prayer is, no doubt, well intended, but it is more of a confession of neglect than a real petition. It reveals that the speaker has no intention of praying individually for people, as he should. A better prayer would be, “Lord, forgive me for not praying for people, and help me to pray as I should.”

There are, no doubt, some situations in which a short, general prayer is acceptable. For instance, at the end of a long gathering, after detailed prayers have already been spoken, a general prayer might be acceptable. Or, at the end of a long day, when a person has little strength left, a general prayer might be acceptable.

At certain times, however, a general prayer may not be satisfactory. For example, if I were sick and lying in a hospital, I would rather have someone praying for me specifically, and by name, than to have someone say, “Bless all the sick.”

THE APOSTLE PAUL’S REQUEST FOR PRAYERS

When the Apostle Paul was in prison in Rome he felt the need for the prayers of his friends. In his letter to the

Ephesians, after he had instructed them to pray for “all saints” (Ephesians 6:18), he added, “and for me” (Ephesians 6:19). It is doubtful that Paul would have been satisfied with a general prayer, such as, “Bless everyone that is working under difficult circumstances,” or “Be with all those that are in jail.” Nothing less than specific prayers for Paul would have been comforting to him.

SPECIFIC PRAYERS

Jesus seems to have prayed specific prayers. For example, Jesus said to Simon Peter,

“Simon, Simon! Indeed,
Satan has asked for you,
that he may sift you as wheat.
But I have prayed for you,
that your faith should not fail;
and when you have returned to Me,
strengthen your brethren.”

Luke 22:31-32

Please, notice the word “you.” Jesus did not say, “I have prayed for all those who might be tempted.” He prayed specifically for Simon Peter. He said, “I have prayed for YOU.”

In addition, Jesus made a specific request on Peter’s behalf: He prayed that Peter’s faith might not fail.

ALSO THE APOSTLE PAUL PRAYED SPECIFIC PRAYERS

The Apostle Paul wrote to the brethren in the city of Rome that he had been praying for them “without ceasing” (Romans 1:9). Surely, his prayers consisted of more than, “Bless the Roman church.” I say this because Paul was acquainted with many of the members of the Roman church. He knew Phoebe, as well as Aquila and Priscilla. He also knew Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junia, Amplias, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus, Herodion, Narcissus, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and Olympas. All of these names are mentioned in the sixteenth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

I am surprised that the Apostle Paul knew the names of so many people in Rome. Up until the time of his writing the Roman letter, so far as we know, he had not been in Rome. How did it come about that Paul could keep the names of all of these people in his mind? Was it through direct revelation of the Holy Spirit? Or could it have been because he had been praying for these people for such a long time that he had them stamped indelibly on his memory?

EPAPHRAS “LABORED” FOR THE COLOSSIAN BRETHREN

In one of his letters, the Apostle Paul mentioned a man named Epaphras, a Colossian brother, who was in Rome with Paul. Although Epaphras was absent from his beloved brethren

at Colossae, he prayed for them. Paul said that Epaphras was “laboring fervently” for the Colossians in prayer (Colossians 4:12). That implies that he was praying for them in some detail.

PRAYING FROM THE CHURCH BULLETIN

Many congregations print a church bulletin, and often requests for prayers are printed in the bulletin. Sometimes, various items can be found in the bulletin about which prayers should be spoken. Therefore, a good way to find something useful to say in prayer would be to read the church bulletin. For example, someone may have a new baby, or there may have been a death in the congregation, or a new member may have been added to the fold. Such items could be mentioned in prayers.

PRAYING THROUGH THE CHURCH DIRECTORY

One way to make certain that we pray for all the saints that meet with us in the congregation where we worship would be to take the church directory, start with the A’s and pray right through to the Z’s. If the congregation is large, we might pray for a few of the people at a time, until we have worked our way through the list.

I confess, to my shame, that I have belonged to congregations in the past without ever mentioning the names of all of the members of the congregation in my prayers. Earlier, I did not know that I should pray for each member, and now that

I know it, I still have a problem getting myself to do it. Maybe it is because I am too lazy, too self-centered, or too forgetful. But for whatever reason, it is still a struggle for me to concentrate on each person individually in prayer. One of my prayers is that, with God's help, I will be able to overcome this weakness.

SHOULD WE PRAY FOR MEMBERS WHOM WE DO NOT KNOW?

If we run across the name of a person in the church directory with whom we are not acquainted, should we skip over that name? No, we should not skip over that name. We can, at least, pray that we will get acquainted with that person. Praying for that person will help us desire to get acquainted with him or her. As a result, we will perhaps go out of our way to find out who that person is and what he or she is like. Thus, our prayers may motivate us to positive action.

SHOULD WE PRAY FOR PEOPLE WE DO NOT LIKE?

If we run across the name of a person in the church directory that we do not like, should we just skip over that name? Certainly not. We should pray for that person all the more. We should pray for him or her, even though we may not feel like doing it. If we go ahead and pray for that person, our prayers may possibly help bring about such a change either in that person or in ourselves that we would learn to love him or her.

PRAYING FOR ERRING BRETHREN

Should we skip over the name of a brother or a sister that is not living right? No, we should not. We have scriptural authority for praying for erring brethren. The Apostle John wrote,

“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin
which does not lead to death,
he will ask,
and He will give him life for those
who commit sin not leading to death.”

1 John 5:16

This passage suggests that God may overlook and not punish the sin of a brother or a sister simply because we ask Him. That being the case, we should be very diligent in praying for each other!

It should be remembered, however, that the privilege of asking for pardon for others does not extend to every sin, as the Apostle John explained,

“There is sin leading to death.
I do not say that he should pray about that.”

1 John 5:16

Some sins are so grievous that our prayers will not help, unless our brother or sister repents and stops doing those sins. Every time we see that God has granted our requests for our brothers or sisters, it makes us glad to have contributed something to his or her welfare.

***A GREAT DAY OF PRAYER AT
THE HILLCREST CHURCH
IN ARLINGTON, TEXAS***

Toward the end of the 1970's, the Hillcrest Church in Arlington, Texas was going through difficult times, so the elders decided to have a special day of prayer for the church.

A list of some 500 names was drawn up of people for whom prayers could be spoken. The list contained the names of the members of the congregation plus the names of some of their families and friends.

At first, it was planned to spend five minutes praying for each person. We soon realized, however, that it would take 2,500 minutes to devote five minutes to each of the 500 persons. That would take over 41 hours. So when it became clear that it would take a day, a night, and another day, to devote five minutes to each person, the goal was lowered to devoting only one minute to each person.

Name cards were prepared with suggestions for what to pray for each of the 500 people. Ten or fifteen men consented to speak the prayers. Each of the men agreed to pray for a batch of fifteen names. Several of the men agreed to take more than one batch.

The praying started at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning. The auditorium was darkened. Every fifteen minutes, a different brother went to the speaker's stand and prayed. The praying lasted all morning and into the afternoon. There was no pause for lunch.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, the praying was still going on. Finally, all the prayers were spoken.

I was present for that long session of prayer. My recollection is that it seemed like a very short day. As each man spoke lovingly to God on behalf of the people on his list, time seemed to fly by.

Not long after that day, one of the brothers that had been present that day said to me, “No one may have noticed it on the outside, but on the inside, that day changed me!”

One of the conclusions that I drew from that experience was that the benefits that we receive from praying for others are often as great as the benefits that our prayers bestow upon those for whom we pray.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever mentioned the names in prayer of all of the members of the congregation where you worship? If you have, please tell about it.
2. What do you think about Epaphras, who “labored” for the Colossians in prayer (Colossians 4:12)? Have you ever labored for anyone in prayer? If you have, would you care to tell about it?
3. Have you ever prayed concerning the items mentioned in the church bulletin? If so, what was your experience with that?
4. Have you ever prayed all the way through the church directory? If you have, how long did it take? Did you find it tedious?
5. Do you like to pray deliberately, going into considerable detail about the people for whom you pray? Please explain your answer.

6. Do you have trouble praying for people whom you do not like? If you do, why do you have trouble with this, and what can be done about it?
7. Have you ever asked anyone what he or she would like for you to pray for him or her? If you have, how did that person react?

18

Praying for the Lost

King David prayed for the lost. He prayed that the Gentiles that did not know God would learn to praise Him. David said in prayer to God,

“That Your way may be known on earth,
Your salvation among all the nations.
Let the peoples praise You, O God;
Let all the peoples praise You.
Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy!”

Psalm 67:2-4

JESUS ALSO PRAYED FOR THE LOST

While Jesus was hanging on the cross and His life was ebbing away, He prayed for the wretched creatures who were crucifying Him, saying,

“Father, forgive them,
for they do not know what they do.”

Luke 23:34

With these words Jesus carried out the teaching that He had earlier given His disciples when He had said to them,

“But I say to you, love your enemies,
bless those who curse you,
do good to those who hate you,
and pray for those who spitefully use you
and persecute you.”

Matthew 5:44

STEPHEN PRAYED FOR HIS MURDERERS

Stephen, the first Christian martyr followed Jesus’ example. He spoke a prayer for those that were stoning him to death. He said,

“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”

Acts 7:60

THE APOSTLE PAUL PRAYED FOR LOST JEWS

The Apostle Paul loved his Jewish brethren dearly, and their salvation weighed heavily upon him. He wrote,

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and
prayer to God for Israel is
that they may be saved.”

Romans 10:1

Even though the Apostle Paul prayed for the salvation of his Jewish brethren, he realized that they needed to hear the gospel before they could be saved. In the chapter where he said he prayed for the salvation of Israel, Paul also asked,

“How then shall they call on Him
in whom they have not believed?
And how shall they believe in Him
of whom they have not heard?
And how shall they hear without a preacher?
And how shall they preach unless they are sent?
As it is written:
‘How beautiful are the feet of those
who preach the gospel of peace,
Who bring glad tidings of good things!’”
Romans 10:14-15

Paul knew that a person had to hear the gospel before he or she could be saved. This explains why Paul emphasized the importance of the gospel. He wrote,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ,
for it is the power of God to salvation
for everyone who believes,
for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”
Romans 1:16

HERE ARE SOME REASONS WHY EVERY PERSON NEEDS TO HEAR THE GOSPEL

A person needs to hear the gospel because faith comes by hearing. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“So then faith comes by hearing,
and hearing by the word of God.”
Romans 10:17

A person needs to hear the gospel so he will know to repent of his sins, for Jesus said,

“Thus it is written,
and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer
and to rise from the dead the third day,
and that repentance and remission of sins
should be preached in His name to all nations,
beginning at Jerusalem.”

Luke 24:46-47

A person needs to hear the gospel so he will know to confess his faith in Jesus. Jesus said,

“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men,
him I will also confess
before My Father who is in heaven.
But whoever denies Me before men,
him I will also deny before
My father who is in heaven.”

Matthew 10:32-33

A person needs to hear the gospel so he will know to be immersed (baptized). Jesus said,

“Go into all the world
and preach the gospel to every creature.
He who believes and is baptized will be saved;
but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

Mark 16:15-16

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Is it important for a person to have faith? Yes, it is important because the book of Hebrews says,

“But without faith it is impossible
to please Him,
for he who comes to God
must believe that He is,
and that He is a rewarder of those
who diligently seek Him.”

Hebrews 11:6

Is it important for a person to repent of his or her sins? Yes, it is important because Jesus said,

“I tell you, no;
but unless you repent
you will all likewise perish.”

Luke 13:3,5

It is important for a person to confess his or her faith in Jesus? Yes, because the Apostle Paul said,

“For with the heart
one believes to righteousness,
and with the mouth
confession is made to salvation.”

Romans 10:10

It is important for a person to be immersed (baptized) for the remission of his or her sins? Yes, because the Apostle Peter said,

“Repent, and let everyone one of you be baptized
in the name of Jesus Christ
for the remission of sins;
and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 2:38

Although we need to be praying for the lost, there are certain Biblical principles that we need to observe when we pray.

THERE ARE SOME THINGS FOR WHICH WE SHOULD NOT PRAY

We should not ask God to save people without their hearing and obeying the gospel, for the gospel is the power that God uses to lead people to Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ,
for it is the power of God to salvation
for everyone who believes,
for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”

Romans 1:16

We should not pray that God would send an angel to teach some person the gospel, because we humans are the “earthen vessels” that contain the gospel “treasure.” The Apostle Paul wrote,

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels,
that the excellence of the power
may be of God and not of us.”

2 Corinthians 4:7

We should not pray that someone would return from the dead in order to convert people, because Jesus said that if people will not listen to what the Scriptures say, they would not listen if someone were to arise from the dead (Luke 16:31).

We should not pray that the Holy Spirit would come into someone's heart and convert him or her, because Jesus said that the people of the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit (John 14:17).

Finally, we should not pray that God would rearrange a person's thinking so as to force that person to believe in Christ. If God were to do that, it would make God's grace irresistible. There is, however, no such thing as "irresistible grace;" for God allows people enough freedom to resist the Holy Spirit, if they choose. The martyr Stephen said to the people in a synagogue in Jerusalem,

"You stiff-necked
and uncircumcised in heart and ears!
You always resist the Holy Spirit;
as your fathers did, so do you."

Acts 7:51

However, there are many prayers that can be prayed for the lost. Here are a few suggestions, with illustrations:

***WE MIGHT PRAY FOR A PERSON TO GET
INVOLVED IN A PROJECT THAT WOULD WILL
HELP HIM OR HER SEE THE LIGHT***

There was a Muslim priest in India that specialized in the gospel of John. His job was to go around to various mosques

and make speeches against Jesus. Eventually, however, the priest found himself in a quandary. When he spoke against Jesus, he became very nervous and his hands began to sweat. So he came to some Christian missionaries in Bombay and asked them, “What should I do? I have fallen in love with Jesus?”

WE MIGHT PRAY THAT A PERSON WOULD HAVE THE TIME TO READ THE BIBLE

There was a German soldier that was severely wounded in World War I. His leg was so badly mangled that he had to spend a lot of time in bed. So he worked on his farm six days a week, and on Sunday he rested in bed. This gave him time to read His Bible.

Having read the Bible over and over many times, he finally found out what it takes to make him a Christian, and he became one.

WE MIGHT PRAY THAT A PERSON WOULD BE CONFRONTED WITH THE TRUTH

There was a Jewish boy in Israel that was assigned to write a paper for school. He decided to write on the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament.

In the course of preparing for his paper, he came to see that Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. Now that he is a grown man, he is a believer in Jesus and a teacher of Christianity in Israel.

***WE MIGHT PRAY THAT A PERSON
WOULD COME TO REALIZE
HIS OR HER NEED FOR GOD***

There was a prisoner that was known as the “meanest man in the prison system of the state of Texas.” He was so mean that the prison officials threw him into solitary confinement, not knowing what else to do with him. Since he needed something to read in order to keep from going crazy, he asked for a Bible. He knew that the Bible was the only book that the prison officials were likely to let him have.

So he started reading the Bible in order to prove that it is false. Every time he found a passage that he thought was a contradiction, he wrote the reference to the passage on the wall of his cell. As he continued to read the Bible and grew in understanding, he began to cross out the references on the wall. He crossed them all out one by one.

After all his objections had all subsided, he asked the prison guards to allow him to be baptized.

In the years that followed, that man was pardoned by the governor of the state of Texas and released from prison.

Afterwards, he had many opportunities to teach the gospel to inmates in various prisons.

***WE MIGHT PRAY THAT WE WOULD
HAVE OPPORTUNITIES TO
TEACH THE GOSPEL***

Paul Sherrod and his wife, who lived in Lubbock, Texas, were anxious to help people become Christians. They prayed

each day that God would send them someone to teach.

In his book, “Successful Soul Winning,” Paul Sherrod tells various stories about how the Lord answered their prayers.

One day, the doorbell of their home rang. When they opened the door, there stood a young lady about eighteen years of age. She asked, “Can I use your bathroom?”

Paul Sherrod and his wife graciously let the young lady come into their home. When she came out of the bathroom, they invited her to sit down and visit with them, which she did. They learned that she lived about five miles down the road and that she had already walked a mile before she reached their house. They also noticed that the girl had been drinking alcohol and was under the influence of it at that time. So they said to her, “What you need is the Lord.”

“Yes, I know,” she answered, “and I would like to have Him, but I don’t know how to find Him.”

So a Bible study was arranged for a later date. As a result of the study, the young lady obeyed the gospel and became a wonderful Christian.

OTHER SUGGESTED PRAYERS

We might pray that God would treat people so kindly that His goodness would lead them to repentance. See Romans 2:4.

Or we might pray that Christian people would set a good example for others to follow. See Matthew 5:16.

Or we might pray that God would be patient with unbelieving people so that they would live long enough to have an opportunity to repent of their sins (2 Peter 3:9).

Or we might pray that God would open a door for the

gospel to be taught to some loved one (Colossians 4:2-3).

Most of the appropriate prayers for a lost person ultimately turn into prayers for someone to go to that person and help him or her see the truth and obey it. So a prayer for the lost is, at base, a prayer for Christian workers. This agrees with what Jesus said, namely,

“The harvest truly is plentiful,
but the laborers are few.
Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest
to send out laborers into His harvest.”

Matthew 9:37-38

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why did God not make a person's salvation depend solely upon that person's having faith in God? Is faith in Jesus enough by itself to save a person? What do you think?
2. Why does God not put people into His kingdom solely on the basis of the prayers that others pray for them? What do you think?
3. Have you ever prayed for a friend or a relative to be saved? If you have, what did you say in your prayer? Did your prayer help?
4. Do you think there are still people in the world who realize that they are lost and who want to be saved? If so, what should we do about it?
5. Do you ever mention Christian workers in your prayers, such as elders, preachers, teachers, evangelists, counselors, missionaries, etc.? Name some of the people for whom you pray.

6. Were you ever involved in speaking prayers that seemed to have opened doors for the gospel? Please tell about it, if you were.

19

Praying for Forgiveness

The prophet Nathan came boldly before King David and accused him of having committed two grievous sins.

He accused David of having committed adultery with Bathsheba and of having caused the death her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

David was guilty of these sins and he knew it. He also knew that he had not only sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite but also against God. Therefore, David confessed his guilt to Nathan the Prophet, saying,

“I have sinned against the Lord.”

2 Samuel 12:13

A confession of David is recorded in Psalm 51, where he may have referred to these sins. David prayed,

“Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your loving kindness;
According to the multitude
of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
Against You, You only, have I sinned.”

Psalm 51:1-4

If David had refused to confess his sins and had not asked for forgiveness, it is doubtful whether or not God would have forgiven him. Confession of sins and pleading for forgiveness are vital parts of being forgiven.

WHAT ABOUT US?

If we confess our sins and pray for forgiveness, as David did, can we expect that God will forgive us, as He did David? Yes, we can expect forgiveness, provided we have the proper relationship to God.

THE STORY OF SIMON THE SORCERER

There is a story in the Book of Acts about a man named Simon, who was a sorcerer before he became a Christian.

When Simon the Sorcerer heard Philip the Evangelist preaching about Jesus and the kingdom of God in the city of Samaria, he believed and was immersed (baptized) (Acts 8:9-13).

Simon was amazed at the signs and miracles that Philip did. Simon learned that the ability to do signs and miracles was given by the laying on of the apostles' hands, so he offered money to Peter and John and said to them, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

In response to this request, Peter said to Simon,

“your heart is not right in the sight of God.
Repent therefore of this your wickedness,
and pray God
if perhaps the thought of your heart
may be forgiven you.”

Acts 8:21-22

Simon had tried to buy a gift from God with money. That was a sin. The apostle Peter commanded Simon to repent and pray for forgiveness. Peter would not have told him to repent and pray for forgiveness had there been no possibility that he could be forgiven.

Peter's instructions to Simon may cause some people to be perplexed and ask, “Why were Peter's instructions to Simon different from those that he gave on the day of Pentecost, when he told the people to repent and be immersed (baptized) for the forgiveness of their sins(Acts 2:38)?

The difference lies in the fact that Simon had already been immersed (baptized) (Acts 8:13), whereas the people on the day of Pentecost had not yet been immersed. Therefore, Simon had a different relationship with God than the people on the day of Pentecost. Simon was already in the kingdom of God, while those on the day of Pentecost were not yet in it.

Here is a partial list of the wonderful things that had already happened to Simon, which had not yet happened to the people on the day of Pentecost.

- (1) His sins had been washed away (Acts 22:16).
- (2) He had been forgiven of his past sins (Acts 2:38).

- (3) He had been added to the church (Acts 2:47).
- (4) He had been raised to live a new life (Romans 6:4).
- (5) He had put on Christ (Galatians 3:27).

This means that Simon had privileges and blessings that the people on the day of Pentecost did not yet have. Because of Simon's new relationship to God through Jesus, he could pray for forgiveness with confidence that God would hear him. This agrees with what the Apostle John wrote,

“If we say that we have no sin,
we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins,
He is faithful and just
to forgive us our sins
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

1 John 1:8-9

Whether or not Simon repented and prayed for the sin that he had committed after that he had been immersed, is not known. It is not recorded in the Bible. If he did repent and pray, as we hope he did, there is every reason to believe that he was forgiven.

Simon's story shows that a believer that has repented and been immersed (baptized) has the privilege of asking in prayer for further forgiveness. Of course, no one desires to sin after he or she has been baptized. The whole purpose of baptism is to escape sin and its consequences, but we know that no one is perfect and that “we all stumble in many things” (James 3:2).

A few years ago, there was an old gospel preacher that was visiting a school where preachers were trained. He came to the school to give advice to young preachers. He said that as soon as he became aware of some sin that he had done, he confessed that sin immediately to God and asked for forgiveness. He also said that when he asked for forgiveness, he thanked God for the forgiveness that he believed he received. He said that by thanking God for forgiveness at the moment of confession, it became easier for him to find peace. It enabled him to put his mistakes behind him. As a result, there was no need for him to be constantly worrying over past mistakes.

WHAT ABOUT A PERSON WHO HAS NOT BEEN IMMERSED (BAPTIZED)?

Can a person pray for forgiveness if he or she has not been immersed (baptized)? Well, a person can pray, of course; but the question is, will his or her praying for forgiveness be as effective as praying after immersion (baptism)?

If a person prays for forgiveness before immersion (baptism), God is likely to do for him what He did for the Ethiopian eunuch.

To the Ethiopian eunuch, God sent someone to explain the Scriptures to him (Acts 8). That enabled him to know that he should be immersed (baptized).

WHAT GOD DID FOR CORNELIUS

A Roman soldier named Cornelius was stationed in the city of Caesarea, on the coast of Judea. Cornelius knew of Jehovah,

the God of the Jews, and he regularly prayed to Him. Cornelius also made donations to poor Jews (Acts 10:1-2).

Cornelius' prayers and alms came up before God, yet his prayers and alms could not save him. He still needed to hear and obey the gospel. That is why God sent an angel in a vision, telling Cornelius to send men to Joppa, a village that was nearby.

At Joppa, his servants were to ask for a man named Simon Peter, who would come and tell Cornelius what he needed to do in order to be saved (Acts 10:3-6).

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he told Cornelius and his friends about Jesus (Acts 10:34-43). While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all that heard his words (Acts 10:44).

This convinced Peter (Acts 11:15-17) that he should not hesitate to immerse (baptize) Cornelius and his friends, even though they were not Jews.

When Peter immersed them, Cornelius and his friends entered into a new relationship with God. They were forgiven of past sins and their prayers took on a new significance.

IMMERSION (BAPTISM) IS THE INITIAL REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS

Many people do not realize that immersion (baptism) is itself a request (or an appeal) for forgiveness. It is the initial request for forgiveness that a person should make. In it a request is made of God for Him to forgive all the sins that a person has committed before that person came to know Jesus.

The Apostle Peter showed that immersion (baptism) is a request (or an appeal) for forgiveness when he wrote,

“And corresponding to that,
baptism now saves you--
not the removal of dirt from the flesh,
but an appeal to God for a good conscience--
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 3:21 (NASB)

Thus, it becomes clear that immersion (baptism) is a part of God’s plan for saving people. In it people are saved from all the bad things they did before they came to know Jesus.

SOMEONE MAY HAVE AN OBJECTION

Someone may not agree with what has been said and object by saying, “You’re placing too much emphasis on baptism. Forgiveness is an internal and a spiritual matter. By emphasizing baptism, you are turning forgiveness into something external and ceremonial.”

In response to this, I would say that forgiveness takes place in the mind of God, not in our minds. Whatever conditions He lays down are the ones we must live by.

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

As an additional response to the above objection, let us look at another conversion story. It is the story of a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. How did his conversion go?

When Saul was on the road to Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven shone around him (Acts 9:3) and the Lord spoke to him, saying,

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.
It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”
Acts 9:5

Saul was frightened. So trembling, he asked, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” The Lord said to him,

“Arise and go into the city,
and you will be told what you must do.”
Acts 9:6

Saul was blind for three days. During that time, he fasted and, I suppose, prayed. If Saul did pray for forgiveness, his praying for forgiveness was not of itself sufficient; for Saul found out that a person needs to wash his sins away. He needs to wash them away by being immersed (baptized) in the name of Jesus before he can call on the name of the Lord with any confidence of being heard.

In order for Saul to find out what he must do, the Lord sent a disciple to him--a man named Ananias--who restored his sight and said to him,

“And now why are you waiting?
Arise and be baptized,
and wash away your sins,
calling on the name of the Lord.”
Acts 22:16

Prior to Saul's immersion (baptism), he was in the same condition as that of Simon the Sorcerer, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Cornelius before their immersion. When Saul obeyed the gospel by being immersed (baptized), however, he joined them in Jesus.

A WARNING

There is one additional stipulation about praying for forgiveness that must not be overlooked. It is this: God tends to treat people the same way they treat others.

If we forgive others, God will be inclined to forgive us. If we do not forgive others, He will not forgive us. To explain this, Jesus told a parable about a king that wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The king called in a servant that owed him ten thousand talents and demanded payment. That was a lot of money, and the servant was not able to pay. So the servant begged his master to show mercy on him and his master canceled the debt.

Afterwards, this same servant went out and found a fellow servant that owed him one hundred denarii, which was not much money.

The servant grabbed his fellow servant by the throat and demanded, "Pay me what you owe me!" That servant fell down and begged, "Have patience with me, I will repay you all;" but the servant had no patience with his fellow servant and caused him to be thrown into prison.

When the other servants heard about this, they were upset and went to the king and told him what had happened. The king ordered that the unforgiving servant be brought before

him and he said to him,

“You wicked servant!

I forgave you all that debt

because you begged me.

Should you not also have had compassion

on your fellow servant,

just as I had pity on you?”

Matthew 18:32

Then the king delivered the unforgiving servant to the torturers until he should repay all he owed.

Concerning this story Jesus made the following comment, saying,

“So My heavenly Father

also will do to you

if each of you from his heart,

does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

Matthew 18:35

It seems that God’s willingness to forgive our sins may depend in part upon our willingness to forgive others.

Jesus taught us to pray,

“And forgive us our debts,

As we forgive our debtors.”

Matthew 6:12

Jesus also promised,

“For if you forgive men their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”

Matthew 6:14

Then Jesus warned,

“But if you do not forgive men their trespasses,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Matthew 6:15

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose God does not simply overlook our sins without requiring us to repent and be baptized?
2. To whom should we confess our sins? Should we confess to a priest, to a preacher or to someone else? See James 5:16.
3. Should a person confess to the person against whom he has sinned and asked for that person's forgiveness? See Matthew 5:23-24.
4. If we have wronged someone, should we try to make restitution, as best we can? Explain.
5. Under what conditions should we confess to the church and ask for its prayers?
6. Does it do any good to plead with God for help in overcoming bad habits, weaknesses and sins? Can you cite any examples?
7. At what point can we feel confident that God has forgiven our sins?

20

Praying in the Assembly

A congregation of the Lord's church is never more beautiful or powerful than when it is assembled and is praying and praising God. It is then that a church adopts its proper pose; and it is then that it is able to accomplish the most worthwhile things.

THE BEAUTY OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

The very first congregation of Christian people that ever existed was in the city of Jerusalem. That congregation was very attractive. It was a praying church. It won the hearts of many people in Jerusalem. Concerning this, the Acts of Apostles records:

“So continuing daily with one accord
in the temple, and breaking bread from
house to house, they ate their food
with gladness and simplicity of heart,
praising God and having favor with all the people.
And the Lord added to the church daily
those who were being saved.”

Acts 2:46-47

Many men are aware that prayers should be spoken in the assembly, but they feel threatened when they are called upon to speak a prayer in the assembly. Perhaps, they feel threatened because they have no clear idea of what they should say to God in prayer.

HOW CAN A MAN GET STARTED PRAYING IN THE ASSEMBLY

A good way to come up with something to say might be for a man simply to make a list of some of the good things God has done and simply thank Him for them.

In addition to thanking God for the things He has done, some of His magnificent attributes might also be mentioned in public prayer. For instance, mention could be made of His power, His wisdom, or His righteousness.

FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

If a man has difficulty finding the right words to use in prayer, all he has to do is to read the Psalms of the Old Testament; for in them He will find many beautiful words of thanksgiving and of praise.

The Psalms have served as a book of prayer for both Jews and Christians for centuries. The words and expressions in the Psalms can be easily woven into present-day prayers.

However, a person should not simply quote the Psalms in his prayers. Rather, He should speak from his own heart.

PREPARING PRAYERS IN ADVANCE

The prayers that are spoken in an assembly should reflect the importance of the assembly. They do not have to sound formal, yet they should be taken seriously. They are as important, for example, as is the preaching. Therefore, it would be good to give advance notice to the men that are selected to pray, so they can plan what they want to say.

Just as a preacher needs to prepare himself so he can have something meaningful to say, so the brother that is to lead in prayer should prepare himself. If he prepared himself he will not fall into the trap of using tired and worn-out phrases that rob his prayer of meaningfulness and freshness. If no preparation is made, an opportunity may be lost for real, heart-felt communication with the Father.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

The person, or persons, that speak public prayers should approach God in a humble manner and should speak to Him with respect; for in public prayer a person is not speaking for himself alone but for the whole congregation. For that reason he should try to say something to which the whole assembly can say "Amen."

A prayer-speaker should speak loud enough so everyone can hear, even those seated at the back of the auditorium. He should enunciate clearly. He should also remember that some of the people in the assembly may be hard of hearing.

The one that speaks prayers in the assembly should not use big words. He should speak simply enough so that even the

children in the audience can understand.

Out of respect for the feeble, he should not pray for too long a time, especially if the congregation is standing. A prayer does not have to be very long to be effective. It is out of place for a person to preach a sermon in a prayer; for prayers should be addressed to God, not to people.

TRANSACTING BUSINESS WITH THE LORD

Every congregation has a lot of business to transact with the Lord, and men that lead public prayers in the assemblies of the church should address issues that concern the congregation. They should not hesitate to ask God for help in solving problems that the congregation faces. Nor should they hesitate to ask God for whatever blessings they see that the congregation needs.

The brothers that speak prayers in the assembly should not forget that there may be grief-stricken people present. Some of the people present may not feel well physically. They may even be hurting physically. Some of them may be struggling with a difficult decision or with a severe temptation (Matthew 6:13). Such problems could be dealt with in prayer, but in a discrete way.

The special problems that young people face should not be overlooked, nor the problems of the elderly.

It would be good to mention the elders, the deacons, and the ministers of the congregation in prayer.

When praying for the sick, it is good to pray for them by name.

Members of the church that have a prayer request should

make their request known in advance. If the congregation publishes a bulletin, it would be helpful if a copy of the bulletin were supplied to the person that has been designated to lead in prayer. Or the person designated to pray might confer with some of the leaders of the congregation and ask what they think should be mentioned in prayer (Matthew 18:19).

PRAYING FOR THE GROWTH OF THE KINGDOM

It is always appropriate to pray for the growth of God's kingdom (Matthew 6:10). There is no harm in praying for a wide range of things throughout the world. Indeed, it is nobler to pray widely than to concentrate exclusively on local affairs.

Surely, there is a missionary somewhere that is anxious to have prayers spoken on his or her behalf. Surely, there is some mission point in which the congregation is interested, and for which prayers should be spoken.

PRAYING FOR OTHER CONGREGATIONS

What if prayers were spoken for sister congregations from time to time? Would that please the Father?

The policemen of the city always need prayers. Firemen, schoolteachers, social workers, and city officials and politicians need prayers as well. Inquiry could be made as to what problems these various public servants face, and petitions could be brought before the Lord for them.

Prayers could also be spoken for doctors and nurses, as well as for patients in the hospitals. Prayers could be spoken

for people in jail and for those that oversee them.

PRAYING BIG PRAYERS

Sometimes we hesitate to pray for things that are beyond the scope of our own immediate interests, but we should feel free to ask for a wide range of things. God is a great King and He is able to do great things. It is not likely that we will ask him to do things that are too great for Him.

Jimmy Lovell, founder of the gospel paper called “Action,” said that our prayers are often too small. He said that God’s people should not hesitate to pray big prayers. Their prayers can have worldwide repercussions. Indeed, they can influence the course of history.

God’s people should be known as the praying people of the world. If they were recognized in this way, people from the community would be coming to them and asking for their prayers.

The Apostle Paul wrote,

“Therefore I exhort first of all
that supplications, prayers,
intercessions, and giving of thanks
be made for all men,
for kings and all who are in authority,
that we may lead a quiet
and peaceable life in all godliness
and reverence.
For this is good and acceptable
in the sight of God our Savior.”

1Timothy 2:1-3

The combined prayers of the saints sometimes carry greater weight in world affairs than powerful armies do. The saints' prayers can be more important than diplomatic conferences. Imagine what would happen if hundreds of thousands of Christians, in thousands of churches, were praying for the same thing. Suppose, for instance, there is a war to be averted, or hunger in some far-off place to be assuaged and God's people were praying about these things. What would happen? Would God's fatherly heart not be touched? Would He not be moved to action? Would He not, perhaps, avert disaster for the sake of His people who beg Him? Never underestimate what God can do concerning our private affairs or on a worldwide scale. We should elevate our expectations. It requires no more effort on our part to pray big prayers than it does to pray little prayers.

TARGETED PRAYERS

In the late 1970's, the newspapers and TV reports were filled with stories of how Christian people were being persecuted in China.

On a certain Sunday, the Hillcrest church in Arlington, Texas decided to fill its morning assembly with prayers for China. Prayers were offered for the suffering believers in China, particularly for those that were in prison because of their faith. Different brethren of the Hillcrest church spoke prayers that Sunday concerning various aspects of Chinese life. A prayer was spoken for China's leaders, asking that they might give more freedom to the people. A request was made concerning the economic well being of the Chinese nation, and so on.

Shortly after that day, things seemed to ease up a bit in China, especially in the area of religious freedom. No human knows, of course, how much the prayers of the Hillcrest church influenced the situation. I like to think, however, that their prayers had some effect, because I believe that no prayer of God's people is ever wasted.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever made a list of your blessings? If you have, was the list long or short? Please mention a few of your blessings.
2. Does it disturb you when prayers are spoken in the assembly for a wide variety of causes, issues, and individuals? Please explain.
3. Do you go along with the idea that prayers could be prepared in advance? Tell why you think as you do.
4. Are there any missionaries for whom you pray privately? Are there any missionaries for whom the congregation to which you belong also prays? Can you name a few?
5. Do you think that a request is more likely to be granted if it is prayed in the assembly, with the whole congregation consenting and saying "Amen?" If so, please tell why.
6. Have you ever been in an assembly where prayers were said for city, county, state and national leaders? If so, how did you like it? How did the other people that were present seem to like it? Were any of those prayers answered, so far as you know?
7. Do you have any suggestions for improving the prayer life of the congregation to which you belong?

21

The Elders at Prayer

This chapter is devoted to the prayer-life of the elders of a congregation of Christians.

Let us identify who we are talking about when we speak of the “elders” of a congregation. We are talking about the elderly men of a local congregation, who have been chosen to lead a congregation. They are men that have qualified themselves by their godliness, by their willingness to serve and by their knowledge of God’s word.

THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

We get a glimpse of what elders of a congregation should be like when we read the words that the Apostle spoke to the elders of the Ephesian church. Paul was on a journey to Jerusalem at the close of his third mission-tour. He interrupted his journey at Miletus, which is on the coast of Asia Minor, and sent a message for the elders of the church at Ephesus to come to him at Miletus (Acts 20:27). After the elders had come to meet him, Paul said to them,

“Therefore take heed to yourselves
and to all the flock,
among which the Holy Spirit has made you

overseers,
to shepherd the church of God
which He purchased with His own blood.”

Acts 20:28

These words of the Apostle Paul imply several interesting things. They imply that,

- (1) The church in Ephesus was overseen by a group of local men. One man did not rule over it.
- (2) Paul called this group of men “overseers” (Acts 20:28). The English word “overseer” is a translation of the Greek word “episcopos.” The Greek word “episcopos” is sometimes translated into English as “bishop.” We get our English word “bishop” from a corrupted pronunciation of the Greek word “episcopos.”
- (3) The function of the Ephesian elders was “to shepherd the church.” When Paul said that they were “to shepherd the church,” he was referring to their work as “pastors” for shepherds and pastors are the same.
- (4) Therefore, the words “elders,” “bishops,” and “pastors” in the New Testament all refer to the same group of men. These terms are interchangeable designations that refer to the different aspects of their work.
- (5) The “elders” of a congregation are in charge only of the congregation “among which the Holy Spirit has made” them “overseers.” That is to say, they were not in charge of other congregations.

WHAT KIND OF MEN SHOULD BE ELDERS?

It may come as a surprise that “elders” (bishops or pastors) of congregations are supposed to be married men. See 1 Timothy 3:2.

Furthermore, elders and their wives should have children. See Titus 1:6. Their children must be old enough to demonstrate by their behavior what kind of leaders and teachers the men would make. See 1 Timothy 3:4-5.

In addition, elders are neither to be self-willed, quick-tempered, drunkards, violent, nor men greedy for money (Titus 1:7). Instead, they are to be hospitable, lovers of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy and self-controlled (Titus 1:8). They must hold to sound (healthful) teaching and be able to exhort and convince those who contradict the teaching (Titus 1:9).

HOW WERE MEN ORIGINALLY SELECTED TO BE ELDERS?

Originally the elders of a congregation were appointed by one of the apostles like Paul (Acts 14:23) or by one of the evangelists like Timothy and Titus (Titus 1:5).

Since none of the Apostles are alive today, the task of selecting elders falls most naturally to the evangelist that starts a congregation in a certain place.

An evangelist, however, would be wise to take into account the sentiments of a congregation before selecting and appointing elders. If no evangelist is available to appoint elders, the congregation can, presumably, select and appoint men on its own.

ELDERS SHOULD BE MEN OF PRAYER

Since we have identified who we are talking about when we speak of “elders,” let us turn now to speaking about their prayer-lives.

Elders need to carry on a vigorous prayer-life. What Jesus said about His follower’s private prayers applies also to elders. Jesus said,

“But you, when you pray,
go into your room,
and when you have shut your door
pray to your Father who is in the secret place;
and your Father who sees in secret
will reward you openly.”

Matthew 6:6

Private prayers are especially important in the lives of elders. Unless they have a personal and intimate relationship with God, they cannot pray effectively in the assembly of the church. The members of the church will be able to tell whether or not their elders pray very much in private.

Elders should be praying in private for the members of the congregation, especially for the weak members and for those who are threatened by Satan.

Observe how Jesus prayed for His followers. He said,

“I do not pray that
You should take them
out of the world,
but that You should keep them from the evil one.”

John 17:15

If Jesus felt the need to pray for His followers, should not an elder pray for the people under his care?

When an elder prays for the flock, he is forced to think about the individuals. If he finds that he does not know the individuals well enough to speak a meaningful prayer for each of them, it should motivate him to get acquainted with them so he can pray for them in a meaningful and effective way.

ELDERS PRAYING WITH INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION

If elders are recognized as being god-fearing men, people will come to them and ask them to pray with them.

When members of the church invite elders to come to the bedside of their sick ones in order to pray for them, it is an expression of the confidence that they have in their elders (James 5:13-16).

ELDERS PRAYING WITH THEIR FELLOW ELDERS

It is appropriate for elders to talk with God about the condition of their flock. They should plead for His help in serving as elders, and they should seek His forgiveness when they fail. Their speaking to God about the congregation shows that they realize that they are accountable to Him (Hebrews 13:17). They should report to Him on their stewardship just as Jesus gave an account to the Father for the Twelve Apostles. He said to the Father,

“While I was with them in the world,
I kept them in Your name.
Those whom You gave Me
I have kept;
and none of them is lost
except the son of perdition,
that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.”

John 17:12

Jesus was referring to the fact that all of His apostles had remained faithful to Him, except Judas, whom Jesus called a “son of perdition.” If Jesus made a report to the Father on His stewardship, surely it would be appropriate for the elders of a congregation to make a report on their stewardship.

Prayer is one of the tools that shepherds use in shepherding the flock. By praying, they bring far-reaching blessings upon their sheep. Their pleas give the Father an opportunity to intervene and to bring His awesome power to bear on people and events.

When elders speak with the Father about the congregation, they show their sensitivity to the Father’s station and power. When they lay the affairs of the church before Him and ask for His help, they honor Him. If, however, they make decisions without consulting Him, they show disrespect. Therefore, they should pray before making vital decisions and taking significant steps. They should be praying every day, not just when all else fails.

The shepherds (elders) of a flock have many things to discuss with the Father. For example, they need to discuss the proper food that they should be feeding to the sheep. That is, they need to discuss with Him the teaching program for all age

groups. They may need to discuss the physical welfare of the people, as well as their spiritual welfare. They also need to discuss with Him how best to protect the flock from people who would harm it.

When elders pray, it makes their job easier, because praying takes the burden off of them and places it on God's shoulders, where it belongs (1 Peter 5:7). Praying also takes the worry out of serving as an elder and puts joy into it.

It is very helpful when elders pray with each other. Their praying together promotes unity in the eldership. It draws them closer together and prevents their working at cross-purposes. Further, if an elder knows that his suggestions are going to be laid before the Father in prayer, he will think twice before making them. He will make only such recommendations, as he thinks will look good to the eyes of the Father. This will eliminate many frivolous suggestions and will shorten the time that has to be spent in elders' meetings. Cutting down on the time that has to be spent in meetings is a serious consideration; for one of the burdens that elders bear is the hours they must spend in consultation with each other.

ELDERS' PRAYERS BEFORE THE CONGREGATION

Elders are the ones who speak to God for the congregation as a whole, and they are in the best position to make formal requests of Him. They are the spokesmen for the whole church. When they make a request, the whole congregation speaks through them.

It might be wise for the elders to ask from time to time what the members of the church would like for them to pray on behalf of the congregation.

ELDERS ALSO NEED TO PRAY WITH THEIR OWN FAMILIES

It is possible for elders to get so bogged down with looking after the flock that they forget their own families. When this happens, their families suffer. Therefore, an elder needs to take time to pray with his own family.

THE EFFECT OF A PRAYING ELDERSHIP

When the members of a congregation hear their elders praying, it takes the sting out of the authority that the elders have over the flock. Prayer also tends to take pride out of the picture. It demonstrates better than anything does that the elders are humble men. It shows that they are aware that the flock does not belong to them personally but that they are only co-shepherds and that their job is to carry out the wishes of the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

Members of a congregation feel good about elders whom they know to be praying men. They can submit to the leadership of such men, for they feel safe in their hands.

In addition to the above, elders set the tone for the congregation. If the congregation has praying elders, it is more likely to be a praying church.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think God planned for congregations to be overseen by a group of men, rather than by just one man?
2. Have you ever been a member of a congregation that was overseen by Biblical elders? If you have, please tell what it was like?
3. Do you think that being an elder of a congregation is a big job? Please, give the reason for your answer.
4. Have you ever known anyone whom you think would make a good elder? What qualities did you see in that person?
5. How early in life do you think a young Christian man should begin to prepare himself to be an elder in the church? What can he do in order to prepare himself? What should he watch out for?
6. Has an elder of the church ever prayed with you? Would you like for that to happen?
7. Would you have more confidence in an eldership that does a lot of praying than in one that prays little? Please explain.

22

Women at Prayer

Hannah, whose story is told in the Old Testament, desired to have children, but she had none. Each year she accompanied her husband to the tabernacle of the Lord at Shiloh, where animals were sacrificed to God. Once, when Hannah was at the tabernacle, she prayed,

“O Lord of hosts,
if You will indeed look on
the affliction of your maidservant
and remember me,
and not forget your maidservant,
but will give your maidservant a male child,
then I will give him to the Lord
all the days of his life,
and no razor shall come upon his head.”

1 Samuel 1:11

God answered Hannah’s prayer; and she bore a son, whom she named Samuel (“gift of God”). In compliance with her promise, Hannah dedicated Samuel to the priesthood. While he was still a small boy, she took him to live with the high priest, Eli, where he was trained for the priesthood. Hannah loved God, prayed to Him and God granted her request.

A WOMAN'S PRAYER-LIFE

Every woman needs to carry on a vigorous prayer-life. She herself needs to be praying and not always only listening to what others pray. She needs to refresh her spirit in prayer. She needs to be praying that God will give her wisdom to manage her affairs properly.

The private prayers of a godly woman, because of her humble and trusting heart, may be more pleasing to God than the public prayers of many men. James said, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous woman "avails" just as much. When the New Testament says that Christians should pray for each other (James 5:16), it refers to women, too. This world would be a much sadder place, were it not for the prayers of godly wives, mothers and daughters.

MY PRAYING WIFE

My greatest step forward in praying was when, in 1944, I married a praying girl. What a blessing my wife, Elaine, has been to me! A praying mother raised her.

When our children came along, Elaine sat at the bedside of each of our five children to "hear" his or her nightly prayers. After the children were in bed, she would then ask me to speak "our prayer." I have always felt that it was a nice touch on her part to ask me to pray. It saved me from imposing my prayers upon her. By asking me to pray, she deftly placed the responsibility for praying on my shoulders, where it belonged.

I confess, however, that sometimes, when I thought I was too tired to pray, or when I simply was not in the mood, I was resentful and grumpy with her; but she has, I believe, graciously forgiven me of that. I now rarely miss an opportunity to pray with her.

In 1984, while I was teaching on prayer in the Vacation Bible School at the College Church in Paris, Texas, I received a letter from Elaine, in which she wrote: "I am so thankful that the Lord gave you the opportunity to speak on prayer. And I am praying that you will be able to convey the message that God wants you to share with them. I keep finding more prayer passages. It is amazing how little I know about it, even yet. This is one I found this morning:

“Do not fear, Daniel,
for from the first day
that you set your heart to understand,
and to humble yourself before your God,
your words were heard;
and I have come because of your words.”

Daniel 10:12

Not only is it a blessing for a man to have a praying wife, but it is also a blessing for a woman to have a husband that will pray with her. I would advise Christian women to think twice about marrying a man that does not pray. A man who will not pray with a woman before the wedding will not likely pray with her after the wedding.

It is preferable, of course, that a man speaks the prayers for the family; but if he cannot or will not, what should a wife do? First of all, she should mention the problem in her own private

prayers and ask the Lord for His wisdom and help. Second, she should go ahead and say the prayer herself at mealtime if her husband allows it. She should also pray at night with the children; and if her husband allows it, she should pray with him.

There is no way to tell in advance how much the prayers of a godly woman can accomplish. Certainly, a woman should be praying at all times. She should be praying for her husband, her children and all of her family and friends. Indeed, she should surround her family with a wall of petition for its welfare.

Whether or not children pray when they get older may depend on whether or not their mothers prayed with them when they were young.

MOTHERS AT PRAYER

In 1954, Elaine and I moved to West Berlin, Germany with our children. In Berlin, we met a German girl who was married to an American soldier. The American soldier and his wife lived with her parents in the same house, and the marriage of the soldier and his wife was on the verge of falling apart.

One day, the girl came to us and asked our advice about her marriage. Among the things that we told her was that she should pray about her marriage. She replied, "I cannot pray. My mother never taught me how to pray." That was a sad comment about her mother.

How do you teach a child to pray? One way is to give the child a little prayer to memorize. The problem with a memorized prayer, however, is that it may keep the child from composing prayers on its own.

A far better way to teach a child to pray is for a parent to sit with a child, while the child is still young, and say short sentences for the child to repeat. This is the way that my wife taught our children to pray. Gradually, the children learn to come up with sentences of their own. It would be good to continue to sit with a child at prayer time, as my wife did with our children, until the child is mature enough to pray entirely on its own.

The habit of praying is one of the greatest gifts that a mother can give to her children. It is better than silver or gold. Sometimes, it is a godly grandmother that has the responsibility (and the privilege) of teaching her grandchildren to pray.

SHOULD WOMEN PRAY IN THE CHURCH ASSEMBLY?

One cannot gather from reading the New Testament that women were leading prayers in the assemblies of the early church. Even if one assumes that some of the women were leading prayers in some congregations, it cannot be inferred that it was a proper thing for them to do.

The Apostle Paul wrote,

“And the spirits of the prophets
are subject to the prophets.
For God is not the author of confusion
but of peace,
as in all the churches of the saints.
Let your women keep silent in the churches,

for they are not permitted to speak;
but they are to be submissive,
as the law also says.
And if they want to learn something,
let them ask their own husbands at home;
for it is shameful for women to speak in church.”

1 Corinthians 14:32-35

There are plenty of opportunities for Christian women to be active without their having to speak publicly in the assembly of the church. For example, mature women in the congregation should be praying with the younger women and teaching them to do all the things that the Apostle Paul mentioned in his letter to Titus. In that letter Paul advised,

“The older women likewise,
that they be reverent in behavior,
not slanderers, not given to much wine,
teachers of good things
--that they admonish the young women
to love their husbands, to love their children,
to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good,
obedient to their own husbands,
that the word of God may not be blasphemed.”

Titus 2:3-5

Women have a God-given mission and God wants them to shine. He does not want them to shine in a public display of their beauty or talent. As givers of life, women have a holy mission. Theirs is to foster and preserve life. Their mission is holy, because life is holy. Women’s fulfillment is to be realized in quietness and privacy. It is far too holy for public display.

Christian women should not feel disenfranchised if they are not called upon to speak publicly in the assembly.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. How can women who work at a job outside of the home, and who also look after a family find time to pray? Do you have any suggestions?
2. From whom did you learn to pray? Would you care to tell about it?
3. Is it “discrimination” if women are not called upon to speak public prayers in the assembly? Please explain your point of view.
4. Not so many years ago women used to wear a hat or a covering of some kind in the assembly. Why do they no longer do that?
5. Do you know any elderly women who carry out Titus 2:3-5? If you do, please tell who they are, and tell something about them.

23

Praying for the Sick

Jesus was the greatest healer that ever lived. He healed many people and He healed them in many different ways. Sometimes He touched a person and that person was healed (Luke 22:51). Occasionally, He used His own spittle to heal a person (Mark 7:33-34). Often, people touched Him and were healed (Mark 5:28-29). It was not even necessary for Him to be in the presence of a person for that person to be healed (Matthew 8:13). He was able to heal, if He chose, merely by speaking a word (Mark 3:5).

Here is a typical description of Jesus' work as a healer. Matthew says,

“Then His fame went throughout all Syria;
and they brought to Him all sick people
who were afflicted
with various diseases and torments,
and those who were demon-possessed,
epileptics, and paralytics;
and He healed them.”

Matthew 4:24

ALSO THE TWELVE APOSTLES WERE HEALERS

Jesus gave the Twelve Apostles power to heal people (Matthew 10:1) and they continued to exercise their healing power even after He had gone to heaven. For example, a beggar was lying at one of the entrances to the temple in Jerusalem and the Apostle Peter said to the man,

“Silver and gold I do not have,
but what I do have I give you:
In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
rise up and walk.”

Acts 3:6

After he was healed, the man accompanied Peter and John into the temple. The healed man was leaping and praising God. Also the Apostle Paul performed mighty miracles, including miracles of healing (Acts 19:11-12).

THE GIFT OF HEALING

There were in the first century also certain other Christians that had the ability to heal in a miraculous way (1 Corinthians 12:9). Not all Christians had this ability (1 Corinthians 12:30). The ability to heal was one of the “spiritual gifts,” which the apostles gave to certain Christians by laying their hands on them in a ceremonial way (Acts 8:17-19).

Today, the gift of miraculous healing has passed away, as have the other spiritual gifts of a miraculous nature. They passed away when the last of those Christians died upon whom

the Apostles had laid their hands.

HAS THE GIFT OF HEALING BEEN REVIVED?

Some people claim that “spiritual gifts” of a miraculous nature have been revived. Some claim that they possess the gift that enables them to heal.

People who claim this sometimes make a show of trying to heal. There is a striking difference between the healings of Jesus and the apostles and the supposed miraculous healings of today. When Jesus undertook to heal people they were always healed. No illnesses were so severe that He could not heal them. He could heal with prayer or without prayer. He could heal a believing person or an unbelieving person. His ability to heal did not depend upon the person whom He healed, but upon the power of God. No one has such power today.

PRAYING FOR THE SICK

The fact, however, that Christian people today do not have the power to heal miraculously should not keep them from praying for the sick.

They may pray for themselves when they are sick, as the Apostle Paul did when he was ailing (2 Corinthians 12:8); and they should not neglect to pray for others. The book of James says,

“And pray for one another,
that you may be healed.”

James 5:16

Indeed, Christians have a special responsibility in this area. They should pray for their sick relatives, their sick friends and their sick neighbors. Yet, James was not speaking to people at large when he wrote the words, “Pray for one another.” He was speaking to members of the Lord’s church. We know this to be true because of what James had said a few verses earlier, namely,

“Is anyone among you sick?
Let him call for the elders of the church,
and let them pray over him,
anointing him with oil
in the name of the Lord.”

James 5:14

James seems to have been speaking about praying for the sick within the context of a local congregation.

CALLING FOR THE ELDERS OF THE CHURCH

Members of the Lord’s church may call for the elders of the congregation to which they belong to come and pray over them.

Who are these “elders,” whom they may call? According to the New Testament, elders are the older men of the congregation, who have been selected because of their personal qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) to oversee a local congregation of the Lord’s people (Acts 20:28).

Although every Christian can pray for the recovery of the sick, it is the elders who are most likely to be heard by God. This is due to the fact that they, having been screened and

selected by the members of the church, are likely to be among the most “righteous” men of the congregation. Their being “righteous” men is very important; because James said, “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16).

CALL A PRIEST?

Notice, the passage in James 5:14 says nothing about calling a “priest.” It says call “the elders of the church.” If the passage had said to call a priest, it would have been out of line with the rest of the New Testament, which portrays all Christians as priests (1 Peter 2:9).

SHOULD THE SICK BE BROUGHT BEFORE THE CHURCH?

James 5:14 does not say anything about the sick being brought before the church. Rather, it says to call the elders of the church to come to the bedside of the sick. When this is done, as prescribed by James, it prevents a spectacle from being made by praying for the sick. By failing to observe the private nature of this matter, so-called “faith healers” put on a theatrical performance, often in order to make financial gain by their supposed healings.

Notice, James made no mention of anyone being required to demonstrate his or her faith by making a financial contribution to the church or to the elders.

IS THIS EXTREME UNCTION?

No, this is not extreme unction. The term “extreme unction” refers to the last rites, which are sometimes administered to a dying person. James was not referring to preparing a person for death. He was referring to praying that the sick person might be made well and live. James said,

“And the prayer of faith will save the sick,
and the Lord will raise him up.
And if he has committed sins,
he will be forgiven.”

James 5: 15

CONFESSION OF SINS

The above passage in James seems to indicate that a sick person should confess his sins, possibly in prayer, when the elders of the church come to pray with him. James said,

“Confess your trespasses to one another,
and pray for one another,
that you may be healed.”

James 5:16

DOES JAMES 5:14-15 APPLY TODAY?

Some students of the Bible think that James 5:14-15 is not applicable today. They think the passage relates only to that age of the church when “spiritual gifts” were present.

There is a problem, however, with such an interpretation as this. It seems unlikely that all the elders of early churches possessed “spiritual gifts.” If not all the elders in the early church possessed spiritual gifts, and if these gifts were the deciding factor in whether or not people would be healed, it seems that James would have made some stipulation about calling only those elders who possessed spiritual gifts. James failed to stipulate, however, that only elders possessing spiritual gifts should be called. This suggests that the possession of spiritual gifts was not the deciding factor in whether or not the prayers of the elders would help the sick.

Moreover, if the effectiveness of praying for the sick were dependent upon someone possessing the gift of healing, it would not have been necessary to call the elders. Anyone that possessed this gift would have done just as well.

WHAT ABOUT THE “OIL?”

Should the oil that is mentioned in James 5:14 be understood as medicinal or ceremonial? Some students of the Bible think that the oil is medicinal, but that is doubtful. It is doubtful because oil is not helpful for all illnesses. It helps, at best, for only some illnesses.

Moreover, if the oil were medicinal, it would have to be applied to those parts of the body that were affected by an illness. Yet it would be inappropriate for the elders of the church to apply oil to any and all parts of people’s bodies, especially when medicating women. For these reasons, I think that the oil in this passage is ceremonial, and the oil, if applied, should be applied to the head, and only in small amounts.

DOES THE OIL DO ANY GOOD?

Does anyone know whether or not elders' anointing the sick with oil does them any more good than merely praying for them? No one knows that for sure. That would be for God to decide. The main point about anointing with oil seems to be that it should be done "in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). That means, it should be done in recognition of the fact that Jesus is Lord. In my judgment, the oil is designed primarily to test whether or not people have sufficient respect for the lordship of Jesus actually to do what the Bible says.

A PERSONAL AND PRIVATE MATTER

In any case, no acrimony should arise within the congregation over whether or not the elders of the church should be asked to come and pray over the sick and to anoint them with oil. Each person should feel free to decide for himself whether or not he wants the elders to come to him. It is a personal and private matter. I would hope, however, that a brother or sister who has some contagious disease would use discretion about calling the elders to his or her bedside, so as not to expose the elders to infection.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Jesus healed many people. Why do you think He healed so many people?
2. Do you know of any so-called "faith healers" that have exploited sick people for financial gain? Can you name a

few?

3. If someone is healed in answer to prayer, would you call that a miracle?
4. Have you ever prayed for healing when you, or someone else, were sick? Do you think your prayers helped?
5. Since everyone is going to die sometime (unless the Lord returns beforehand), are you able to face the reality that it might not be God's will for a person to recover? Do you ever include that thought in your prayers for the sick?
6. Have you, or has anyone whom you know, ever called for the elders of the church to come and pray for the sick? Did the elders respond? What was the outcome of their praying? Did they anoint the sick with oil?

24

Don't Talk Nonsense in Prayer

God is an intelligent being and wants His people to communicate with Him on an intelligent level. Jesus taught us that a prayer to God should make sense. Jesus said,

“But when you pray,
do not use vain repetitions
as the heathen do.
For they think that they will be heard
for their many words.”

Matthew 6:7

The “heathen,” to whom Jesus referred are the Gentiles, i.e. the nations of the earth that do not know Jehovah God.

THE WORSHIP OF BAAL

In the days of Elijah, the prophets of Baal were preparing an animal sacrifice for their idol. They danced around their altar calling on Baal from morning till noon, saying, “O Baal, hear us!” When no response came from Baal, the prophets began to cut themselves with knives and lances until blood gushed out. They kept on doing this until the evening, but they received no answer from their idol.

In contrast to this, Elijah spoke a simple prayer. He said,

“Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,
let it be known this day
that You are God in Israel,
and that I am Your servant,
and that I have done all these things
at Your word.
Hear me, O Lord, hear me,
that this people may know
that You are the Lord God,
and that You have turned their hearts
back to You again.”

1 Kings 18:36-37

After Elijah had spoken this prayer, fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifice that Elijah had prepared.

WILL PEOPLE BE HEARD FOR THEIR MANY WORDS?

Many people think that they will be heard for their many words (Matthew 6:7). They repeat words and phrases without really thinking about what they are saying. This type of praying, however, does not influence God. Praying repeated words and phrases may excite people's emotions but God is not impressed. That is not how God wants His people to pray to Him.

Our words and phrases do not have the power to manipulate God. Yet He can be moved, like any father, by the earnest pleading of His children.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

“The Lord’s Prayer” is a good example for us to follow in praying. Jesus gave this prayer to teach us how to pray (Luke 11:1-4). It is a simple, intelligent prayer in which every word carries a meaning. Here it is:

“Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.”

Matthew 6:8-13

USING INTELLIGIBLE SPEECH IN PRAYER

God speaks in an intelligible way to us in His Holy Scriptures, hence it is reasonable for us to suppose that we should speak to Him in an intelligible way. It is a mistake to think that praying unintelligible sounds is a higher form of communication than intelligent speech. Actually, unintelligible sounds are a lower form of communication and are not Spirit-filled. A true Spirit-filled prayer will have real meaning to it. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“I will pray with the spirit,
and I will also pray with the understanding.
I will sing with the spirit,
and I will also sing with the understanding.”

1 Corinthians 14:15

HOW PARENTS FEEL ABOUT ‘BABY-TALK’

Parents are pleased when their little baby first says, “Dada” or “Mama.” Yet, they would be disappointed if their child never developed beyond that level. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“When I was a child,
I spoke as a child,
I understood as a child,
I thought as a child:
but when I became a man,
I put away childish things.”

1 Corinthians 13:11

After the Apostle Paul became a man, he no longer spoke like a child. He encouraged the people in the church to act like grown-ups and not like little children. He wrote,

“Brethren, do not be children in understanding;
however, in malice be babes,
but in understanding be mature.”

1 Corinthians 14:20

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE TURN TO SPEAKING IN TONGUES?

Some people turn to speaking in tongues because they want to bring more excitement into their worship; but there are more effective ways to bring excitement into the worship. If people will pray more intelligently, and with greater fervor, they will have excitement enough; and they will not be tempted to use unintelligible speech. Unintelligible speech, rather than adding to the assembly, detracts from it, for unless people understand what is said, they will not be able to say, “Amen” (1 Corinthians 14:16).

It is true that the Holy Spirit speaks to God with “groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26), but that does not mean that the Holy Spirit speaks to God in an unintelligible way. It simply means that the groanings of the Holy Spirit are so filled with meaning and emotion that no human can speak them.

THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

There were certain people in the church at Corinth that possessed “spiritual gifts.” This meant that some of them could speak in languages that they had not learned. The ability to speak foreign languages was given to them so that they could convince unbelievers of the truthfulness of their message (1 Corinthians 14:22). This ability was very useful to the apostles, evangelists and others when they went to foreign countries to preach the gospel. Some of the Christians in Corinth, however, were misusing this gift. They were speaking foreign languages

in their local assembly. That was not proper. The Apostle Paul wrote to discourage the use of foreign languages in the assembly of the church. He said,

“I thank my God I speak with tongues
more than you all;
yet in the church I would rather speak
five words with my understanding,
that I may teach others also,
than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

1 Corinthians 14:18-19

We, therefore, should refrain from praying in a language that the people who are present do not understand, unless there is a translator.

A QUIET CONVERSATION WITH THE FATHER

Prayer does not always have to be highly emotional. Sometimes a quiet conversation with the Father is fully adequate. The Apostle Peter wrote,

“But the end of all things is at hand;
therefore be serious
and watchful in your prayers.”

1 Peter 4:7

An American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), wrote a poem in which he described the frenzied worship of the pagans of India, who drink the soma juice in order to induce ecstasy. In his poem “The Brewing of the Soma” Whittier contrasted the excess of those that drink the soma

juice with the quiet worship of those who love Jesus. In order to show what Christian worship is like, Whittier composed a prayer that he included in his poem. This prayer is found in many hymnbooks today, and it is a prayer that has meant a lot to me personally. It goes like this:

“Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.”

The fourth verse says,

“Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.”

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. God is not impressed with “vein repetitions.” Why is God not impressed with “vain repetitions?” What do you think?
2. Why should prayers come from the heart? What difference does it make?
3. Are you surprised at how straightforward and business-like “The Lord’s Prayer” is?
4. Why do you suppose it is that some people feel that unintelligible speech is a higher form of praying than intelligible speech?

5. Do you see any signs that pagan styles of worship are creeping into the way that Christians worship? Please, explain.
6. What can we do in order to be able to pray with more intelligence and with greater fervor?

25

Walking with God

Enoch is the first person of whom it is said in the Bible that he walked with God. The book of Genesis says,

“So all the days of Enoch
were three hundred and sixty-five years,
And Enoch walked with God;
and he was not,
for God took him.”

Genesis 5:23-24

Concerning Enoch, the New Testament says,

“By faith Enoch was translated
so that he did not see death
‘and was not found
because God had taken him.’
for before he was taken he had this testimony,
that he pleased God.”

Hebrews 11:5-6

Notice that Enoch possessed two very important characteristics:

- (1) He had faith in God and
- (2) He lived in a way that pleased God.

These two characteristics are essential if anyone aspires to walk with God.

NOAH WALKED WITH GOD

Most people in Noah's day had forgotten about God. As a result, wickedness was great on the earth (Genesis 6:5); and God decided to destroy all mankind because of their wickedness (Genesis 6:7). Of Noah, however, the Bible says,

“...Noah was a just man,
perfect in his generations.
Noah walked with God.”

Genesis 6:9

God warned Noah about the flood that was coming and instructed him to build a big boat in which he and his family could be saved. God told him precisely how to build the boat and he did everything just as God had told him. The New Testament says concerning Noah,

“By faith Noah,
being divinely warned of things not yet seen,
moved with godly fear,
prepared an ark for the saving of his household,
by which he condemned the world
and became heir of the righteousness
which is according to faith.”

Hebrews 11:7

The picture that the Bible presents of Noah's walk with God is that he

- (1) had faith in God,
- (2) lived justly,
- (3) feared God
- (4) and did everything just as God had told him to do it.

As a result, Noah was saved from the flood.

KING DAVID'S WALK WITH GOD

David was well aware of his sins. He looked to God for forgiveness and help. He felt that he could walk through "the valley of the shadow of death" without fear if God were with him. He wrote,

"Yea, though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; For you are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Psalm 23:4

CAN JUST ANYONE WALK WITH GOD?

Yes, anyone can walk with God, rich or poor, educated or uneducated. There is a lovely passage, written by the Prophet Micah, in which he encourages everyone to walk with God. He said,

“He has shown you, O man,
what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly, To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?”

Micah 6:8

Our walk with God today differs from that of the great men of the Old Testament in that God does not speak directly to us as He did to some of them. The book of Hebrews says,

“God, who at various times
and in different ways
spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,
has in these last days spoken to us by His Son,
whom He has appointed heir of all things,
through whom also He made the worlds.”

Hebrews 1:1-2

So, God speaks to us today through His Son, Jesus and Jesus’ Apostles. Their words are found in the New Testament, and it is from the New Testament that we get our instructions. For that reason, it would be wrong for us to imply that we get private instructions in addition to, or possibly in contrast to, what the New Testament says.

One thing is clear: The Holy Spirit does not circumvent the New Testament, which He Himself inspired.

AN AWARENESS OF GOD’S PRESENCE

Although God does not speak directly to us, we can still have pleasant fellowship and sweet communion with Him.

There is a delightful little book named, “The Practice of the Presence of God,” which contains the thoughts of a man known as “Brother Lawrence.” He was a Carmelite friar (brother) who lived in Paris in the 17th century. The interesting thing about Lawrence is that he tried to keep his mind centered on God at all times. He wrote, “I drove away from my mind everything that was capable of interrupting my thought of God.” (This quotation is from pp. 15-16 from the little booklet entitled “The Practice of the Presence of God” by Brother Lawrence, New Format 1977, Mowbrays of London and Oxford.)

Lawrence found that concentrating on God helped him in numerous ways. For one thing, it helped him avoid temptations. Lawrence wrote, “But when we are faithful to keep ourselves in His holy presence, and set Him always before us, this not only hinders our offending Him and doing anything that may displease Him, at least willfully, but it also begets in us a holy freedom, and, if I may so speak, a familiarity with God wherewith we ask, and that successfully, the graces we stand in need of” (Page 16).

IT IS NOT EASY

When I was young, I enjoyed being absorbed in some exciting story. I enjoyed reading books and listening to the radio, and I still enjoy those things. Yet, any absorbing experience, however pleasurable, can distract us from thinking about God. It is not easy to keep our thoughts constantly centered on God, for our minds keep wandering.

I am not suggesting that we sit around all day and do nothing but think about God. It is obvious that we cannot do that. Yet anyone can train his or her thoughts to fly to God the moment he or she is free from some necessary task.

I must confess that I sometimes go hours without thinking about God. I find that in those times, when I am not thinking about Him I am most tempted to do or to say something wrong. Moreover, I find that when I am not thinking about God I become more easily troubled and discouraged. However, when I remember to think of Him, it is as if the sky has opened up and the clouds have disappeared. My heart leaps up in those moments as if it were springtime.

REMEMBERING TO PRAY

One great advantage of constantly thinking about God is that it prompts us to communicate with Him. It takes only a few seconds to send a message up to Him. These short prayers are called in the German language, “Stossgebete.” That means that they are like short notes sounded on a trumpet.

I recall that I was attempting to learn to ride a snowmobile in the woods near the border between Oregon and California. As I was trying to go up a steep hill, the snowmobile went out of control and started going down, headed straight for a tree. I had time for only one word. I cried out, “God!” I believe that God heard that prayer, for although the snowmobile was demolished and although I still have a tender knee resulting from that accident, it could have been much worse.

The prayers of Jesus were sometimes very short. Once, when he appeared to have reached the limit of His patience

with the cities Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, He spoke a short prayer, saying,

“I thank You, Father,
Lord of heaven and earth,
because You have hidden these things
from the wise and prudent
and have revealed them to babes.”

Matthew 11:25

In the middle of a busy day, if we should happen to think of someone for whom we should pray, we can send up a short prayer for that person before we forget. In such ways, an awareness of God’s presence helps to fill our days with prayer and gives us inner peace. It also awakens within us a thirst for God, which reminds us to seek the time and a place for more extensive prayer.

The awareness of the presence of God moderates our conduct, sweetens our speech and decorates our face.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt a desire to walk with God? Please comment.
2. Do you regret that God does not speak to you directly, as He did to the prophets of the Old Testament? Please explain.
3. How would you feel if God spoke to other people today but not to you? Please, elaborate.
4. Do you have difficulty in pulling your mind back to God? Please, describe what difficulty you have, if any.

5. What helps you most to be able to concentrate on God?
6. Do you know anyone who appears to be thinking of God all of the time? Please, describe how thinking of God seems to affect that person's life.

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Joy in Praying

Some of David's psalms express sorrow and suffering, but most of them express a hearty exuberance and great joy in God. They illustrate that God is the source of joy.

King David liked to show his delight in God. He danced before the Ark of the Covenant when it was being brought to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:16). He expressed the same joyful spirit when he wrote,

“Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice,
you righteous;
And shout for joy,
all you upright in heart!”

Psalm 32:11

David did not forget that it was God who had called him from tending sheep and who had helped him defeat Goliath. Also, he knew that it was God who had put him on the throne of Judah and of Israel. He wrote,

“Whom have I in heaven but You?
And there is none upon earth
that I desire besides You.”

Psalm 73:25

Again, David wrote,

“But it is good for me
to draw near to God;
I have put my trust in the Lord God...”

Psalm 73:28

As David lay awake at night, he sometimes rejoiced in the thought of God. He wrote,

“My soul shall be satisfied
as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth shall praise You
with joyful lips.
When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches.”

Psalm 63:5-6

JOY IN PRAISING THE LORD

David enjoyed going to the tabernacle and observing the rituals of worship that took place there. He wrote,

“...For I used to go with the multitude;
I went with them to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and praise,
With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.”

Psalm 42:4

David also liked to take up a harp and sing along with the singers at the tabernacle. He wrote,

“Oh, send out Your light and Your truth!
Let them lead me;
Let them bring me to Your holy hill
And to Your tabernacle.
Then will I go to the altar of God,
To God my exceeding joy;
And on the harp will I praise You,
God, my God.”

Psalm 43:3-4

David thought that he would like to spend his days at the temple, which he hoped to build. He wrote,

“One thing I have desired of the Lord,
That I will seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to inquire in His temple.”

Psalm 27:4

One of the sons of Korah echoed a similar thought when he saw that a swallow had built its nest near the altar (Psalm 84:3). He wrote,

“For a day in Your courts
is better than a thousand.
I would rather be a doorkeeper
in the house of my God,
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

Psalm 84:10

WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT SAYS ABOUT PRAYING AND REJOICING

In the New Testament, praying and rejoicing go hand-in-hand. The Apostle Paul recommended to the Roman brethren that they should be:

“...rejoicing in hope,
patient in tribulation,
continuing steadfastly in prayer...”

Romans 12:12

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul showed just how closely rejoicing and praying are related to each other. He said,

“Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing,
in everything give thanks;
for this is the will of God
in Christ Jesus for you.”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

The Apostle Paul did a lot of praying in his lifetime and he enjoyed it very much. To his friends in the city of Philippi he wrote,

“I thank my God
upon every remembrance of you,
always in every prayer of mine
making requests for you all with joy.”

Philippians 1:3-4

Paul felt that rejoicing and praying were attributes of a healthy mind. He instructed the Philippians to develop these attributes. He wrote,

“Rejoice in the Lord always.
Again I will say, rejoice!
Let your gentleness be known to all men.
The Lord is at hand.
Be anxious for nothing,
but in everything by prayer and supplication,
with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known unto God.”
Philippians 4:4-6

Paul feared that his admonition to rejoice might be tedious to the Philippians if they heard it over and over again. Nonetheless, he repeated it, because he felt it would be safe for them to hear it (Philippians 3:1).

JOY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Finding joy in the Holy Spirit is a precious part of being a Christian. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“...for the kingdom of God
is not food and drink,
but righteousness and peace and joy
in the Holy Spirit.”

Romans 14:17

Indeed, real joy is a fruit that is produced by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). This joy is deep and abiding. It wells up from

within and it colors every thought and every deed. Jesus said,

“He who believes on Me,
as the Scripture has said,
out of his heart will flow
rivers of living water.”

John 7:38

Jesus indicated that the Holy Spirit enables a person to become like a spring of sparkling water that gives refreshment and encouragement to many people (John 7:39).

JOY IN GOD AND IN CHRIST

God the Father and God the Son are also sources of joy. This is true because God is Himself “Spirit” (John 4:24) and because His Son partakes of His nature. So, if a person has any one of the three (Father, Son, or Holy Spirit) in his heart, he has all three. Just as the three are one in heaven (1 John 5:7), so are they also one in the heart of a Christian. Therefore, there is no difference between finding “joy in the Holy Spirit” and finding joy in God or in Christ.

JOY IN RECEIVING THE GOSPEL

The brethren in Thessalonica received the gospel “with joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). The “joy of the Holy Spirit,” which the Thessalonians experienced, was not limited to them. Everyone experiences the same joy when he or she receives the gospel and acts upon it, for then the Holy Spirit comes flooding into his or her heart (Acts 2:38-39).

THE JOY OF ANSWERED PRAYERS

Children of God can be confident that God will, if at all possible, answer their prayers. When they observe God granting their requests, they are filled with joy. Jesus was referring to this when he said,

“Until now
you have asked nothing in My name.
Ask, and you will receive,
that your joy may be full.”

John 16:24

MY PERSONAL JOY IN GOD

At times in my life I have been filled with an overwhelming feeling of love for God. I remember the joy it gave me when as a youth I heard moving sermons at the assembly of the church. My heart would often swell with love and joy.

I remember that as a youth I was the only one sitting in a park in Waco, Texas one late afternoon; and I felt the presence of God so close that my heart was filled with joy.

I remember also that after I was grown, I was looking up at a beautiful full moon from the porch of our apartment in Malden, Massachusetts and praying to God. I felt that I could safely entrust to Him my life and that I would gladly do so.

Although I have not been able to live at such high emotional peaks at all times, I treasure the memory of those moments. The knowledge that such joy is possible has helped me get through some of the dark days.

Dear Reader, have you ever noticed the joy that is evident on the faces of people on a Sunday morning as they come out of an assembly of the church? They are not joyful merely because they have been with friends again, or because they have been released from having to sit confined to an uncomfortable church bench. They are joyful because their thoughts have been cleansed and lifted up by hearing the word of God. Furthermore, they have been in the presence of God and they have been speaking with Him in prayer. You too can know this joy by bringing your life into accord with God's way of living and by learning to pray.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that King David loved God with all his heart? What makes you think as you do?
2. In your experience, do you find that the people who seem to know God are generally more joyful than those who do not know Him? How do you explain this?
3. Do you see a difference between joy and pleasure? Please explain the difference?
4. Have you ever felt a consuming love for God? Please, tell about it.
5. Do you find it exciting to pray? If not, how can you make it more exciting?
6. Do you recall any prayers that God has answered for you? Are the answers that you received a source of joy to you? Please, share the story of your joy.

