

PRAYER

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1. " The sacrifice of praise"

Every serious minded believer will be looking for ways to overcome the sin that so easily besets us. According to the New Testament, having a spirit of true thankfulness to God *in all things* should help swamp our tendency to sinfulness; the concept of praising God should get such a grip on our way of thinking that the thinking of the flesh is thereby suppressed. Eph. 5:3,4 states this in so many words. It reels off a list of forbidden sexual thoughts and actions; and then the antidote is stated: "let (them) not once be named among you... *but rather* giving of thanks" .

A few verses later the same medicine is prescribed; this time as the antidote to an unsaintly abuse of alcohol: "Be not drunk with wine... *but* be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms... singing and making melody in your heart... giving thanks always for all things" (Eph. 5:18-20). This is a laboured, triple emphasis on praise as being the antidote to drunkenness. In similar vein, abounding in the doctrines of the basic Gospel with thanksgiving is the antidote to being spoilt through vain philosophy (Col. 2:7,8; this passage demonstrates the need for the words of our hymns to reflect basic doctrine). "Abounding therein with thanksgiving" is an aspect of our spiritual growth, our being "rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith". The Lord told satan to get hence, because men can only worship God. Worship / praise is therefore somehow proportional to overcoming sin. There is a power in worship; and this is why it is possible to worship " in vain" , without achieving that which God intends worship to achieve in us. If we are going to make use of praise as an antidote to our sinful tendencies, we need to get down to a business-like analysis of what praise is really all about. Remember that David didn't want to die because he knew that in death, he would not praise Yahweh (Ps. 6:4-6). Hezekiah likewise (Is. 38:19). For these men, praise of Yahweh was the essential purpose of living. David saw a connection between praise, and daily obedience / fulfilment of his commitments to God (Ps. 61:8). Even more so, Heb. 3:6 insists that holding fast the *rejoicing* of the Hope unto the end is essential for salvation. Praise isn't just for those that way inclined. It's vital for salvation. Israel fell away because they failed to keep Yahweh's principles *with joy* (Dt. 28:47). Moses in his final maturity identified this as a reason for the apostasy which he knew lay inevitably ahead of his people ⁽¹⁾.

David speaks of the actively transforming power of praise in Ps. 61:8: "So will I sing praise unto thy name for ever *that* [i.e. so that] I may daily perform my vows". David found the strength to perform those vows of freewill dedication to the Lord's service through regularly praising Him. Frequently in the Psalms, "praise" parallels a right walk before God in practice- e.g. Ps. 50:23: "Whoso offereth praise... him that ordereth his conversation aright". Men like David and Hezekiah pleaded with God not to let them die prematurely because they wanted to continue praising Him- so strongly did they see the purpose of life as being to praise God.

Praise: Not Just Music

It's important to realize that praise isn't just singing or using musical instruments. In Hebrew the same word means both 'worship' and 'service' (*abodah*). The supposition that praise = music is deeply ingrained in many minds. Thus there is the common assumption that the Angels sang to the shepherds; but in fact they *spoke* their praise (Lk. 2:13). If I may say so, some just can't sing- this side of the Kingdom (although we all will then: Is. 12:3; 26:1; Mt. 26:29,30; Rev. 15:3, in harmony with the Lord Jesus Himself, Heb. 2:12); but this doesn't

mean that they can't praise. Psalm 148 exhorts inanimate things to praise by reason of what they are- not that they must say or sing anything. Eph. 5:19 talks of speaking psalms and hymns " to yourselves...making melody *in your heart*" . The Greek translated " to make melody" means 'to twitch or twang, i.e. to play on a stringed instrument' (Strong)- evidently it's a musical term. The implication is that we should so know our own heart and spend time in communion with our own mind that we know how to rouse our own feelings in praise. Such self-knowledge is a sure antidote to fleshly thinking.

Playing our own heartstrings in praise means that praise is not only about offering up positive, joyful emotions to God. Hezekiah spoke some very sober words when he recovered from his sickness, writing them down for others to consider. He realized that his recovery was related to God's mercy in overlooking his sins; his gratitude was difficult to express in words; his way of expressing it was to walk in softness and sobriety before his God: " What shall I say?...I shall go softly all (the rest of) my years" (Is. 38:9,15). But Hezekiah described all this as " praise" (Is. 38:18). Thus our very way of living, even down to our body language, is an expression of our praise. Ps. 103:2 speaks of praising the Lord, who daily loads us with " benefits" , or LXX " praises" [s.w. 'praise' in the Hebrew text]. The things God gives us are therefore imperatives in themselves to praise Him. As we receive them, or more to the point, perceive the receipt of them, the heart breaks forth into a deep thankfulness. This is the true praise.

The Psalms often speak of praise as a way of describing a life lived in a Godly way. Ps. 101:1,2 parallels singing praises to God with 'behaving myself wisely in a perfect way'. This is why praise is so often defined in the Psalms as praising the Name of God- loving and thereby living His principles and ways.

Praise And Sin

Praise is related to the realization that sin has been forgiven. Hezekiah's praise on realizing God's mercy to him was expressed in a desire to walk in quiet fellowship with God for the rest of his life. There is no suggestion that praise was some kind of ecstatic exuberance of emotion. It may come as a surprise to learn that the normal Hebrew word translated " praise" is also translated " confess" in the context of confessing sin (Lev. 5:5; 16:21; 26:40; Num. 5:7). Contrition of heart because of appreciating our own failures is therefore one way of praising Yahweh's Name. So often does the word " praise" occur in the context of praising the *Name* of Yahweh, or the praising of " the God of Israel" , i.e. Yahweh. Ps. 48:10 is a classic example: " According to thy name (i.e. our appreciation of the Name), O God, so is thy praise" . The Lord Jesus now praises God by declaring His Name among the ecclesia (Ps. 22:22). Our praise too is an appreciation and declaration of the Name of Yahweh, i.e. His characteristics (Ps. 106:47; Is. 42:8). Such appreciation develops through our regular contact with God's word; even when we read incidents we feel we don't understand, we are all the time being exposed to the character and personality of God, i.e. His Name. David says he will praise whilst he has any mortal breath; for in a way, the praise we as mortal, sinful beings offer as an act of the will in the days of our flesh...this must be more valuable to the Father than that which we will give in immortal, sinless nature.

True repentance involves not only a recognition of our own error, but also a declaration of the righteousness of Yahweh's characteristics, i.e. His Name, and a belief that these are imputed to us. The whole process of confession, repentance and faith in imputed righteousness is all related to praise. Praise is a calling upon ourselves of Yahweh's Name (Is. 12:4), declaring

His righteousness, praising the beauty of His holiness (2 Chron. 20:21; Ps. 97:12; 99:3). It therefore follows that praise in this sense is not a 'happy clappy' outpouring of upbeat emotion; rather is it a serious, well controlled and informed appreciation of that great salvation which is tied up in Yahweh's Name. As true praise is proportionate to our appreciation of the Name (Ps. 48:10), it follows that only those who have the one faith can offer acceptable praise. The choirs and music of the apostasy is therefore just noise to God's ears; it can never be praise unless there is a true appreciation of Yahweh in those offering the praise.

There are other connections between praise and sin. Col. 3:16 speaks of communal hymn singing as a means of "admonishing" each other- and the Greek translated "admonish" here means just that (cp. Tit. 3:10). The connection between praise and confession / forgiveness makes this appropriate. It may be that Paul is writing with his eye on Dt. 32; the Song of Moses spoke of Israel's weakness and proneness to apostasy. Yet they were bidden sing this to each other. Would anything like that get into a Christian hymn book today?

"The sacrifice of praise"

True sacrifice is praise of God; thus Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac was "praise" (Gen. 22:5). Israel in their repentance " will account our lips as calves" (Hos. 14:3 LXX, RVmg.), i.e. as sacrifices. The " fruit of the lips" there was repentance. Which is why the Hebrew writer says that we " make confession to his name" with the fruit of our lips (13:15 RV). Continually we should offer this sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15), the thankfulness that wells up from knowing we are forgiven, the joy born of regular, meaningful repentance. And we do this " by" or 'on account of' the sacrifice of Jesus for us, which enables this forgiveness and thereby repentance (Heb. 13:12,15). " Continually" in itself suggests that " praise" does not mean singing or musical expression. This " sacrifice of praise" is a quotation from Jer. 33:11, which describes our offering " the sacrifice of praise... for his mercy" at the beginning of the Kingdom. Praise will [and does] bring forth sacrifice / action. Yet " praise" here is the same Hebrew word translated " thanksgiving" ; and the sacrifice of thanksgiving was the peace offering, a commemoration of our free conscience and the peace of sin forgiven (Lev. 7:12-15). If we seriously confess our sins and believe in forgiveness, we should be experiencing a foretaste of the praise we will be offering at the start of the Kingdom, as we embark upon eternity. Our offering of this sacrifice of praise will be " continual" if we continually maintain a good conscience through the confession of our sins. This is surely a high standard to have placed before us: to *continually* confess our sins, to *continually* receive God's mercy, and therefore to live *continually* in a spirit of grateful praise. The way David praises God so ecstatically for immutable things and principles (e.g. His character) is a great example in this (e.g. Ps. 33:3-5); our tendency is to only seriously praise God when He resolves the unexpected crises of life.

From all this it should be apparent that Biblical praise is fundamentally a state of mind rather than a vocal or musical expression. The way the musically-perfect praise of Solomon's orchestras was brought to an uncanny silence by the cloud of glory filling the temple is a cameo of this (2 Chron. 5:13,14). This is not to say that praise does not find expression in this way; but fundamentally it is mental appreciation of Yahweh's Name, seeing His characteristics expressed in all things around us, e.g. food, weather, situations in life etc. Knowledge of God (and this doesn't *only* refer to abstract doctrine, but to an awareness of how He works and expresses Himself in our lives) is therefore proportionate to the quality of our praise (Rom. 1:21). Praise is a sacrifice (Ps. 54:6; 69:30; Jonah 2:9; Heb. 13:15),

something requiring forethought and careful mixture of the correct ingredients to be acceptable. In the light of all this it is absolutely impossible for uncontrolled emotion to be part of true praise. Israel were called out of Egypt in order to declare among the surrounding nations the character and greatness of Israel's God. In this calling to be a missionary nation they failed miserably (what similarities with the new Israel?). The very reason why we are a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood (is) *that* we should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness (cp. Egypt)" (1 Pet. 2:9). Our separation from this world is therefore related to our praise of God. We don't shew forth the knowledge and praise of God to this world by singing to them; but rather by shewing in our lives and preaching that we have been separated unto a glorious Kingdom of light. This is the true shewing forth of praise.

Notes

(1) Joy in the sense of bubbly laughter joy isn't necessarily the joy of which Scripture speaks. "My joy I leave with you" is what the Lord promised; the nature of His joy is ours. A wrong conception of joy can result in the feeling that it's a sin to be depressed. This isn't so. And any implication that it is is quite strongly criticized in Prov. 25:20: "He that taketh away a garment in cold weather... so is he that singeth songs to an heavy heart". The heavy heart is the garment that protects the person from the 'cold weather' they're suffering. Don't take it away. Heaviness of heart is actually a gift from God to protect us from the coldness of life's hard winds. Let it be; accept it for what it is, and use it as God intended.

2. The Essence Of Prayer

2-1 The Essence Of Prayer

All too often, we feed back the way *we* use language into the way God uses it in Scripture- and His use of words and ideas is very different to ours. The way we conceive of prayer is a prime example. We tend to think of it as a conscious formulation of words, whether spoken or within our minds, requesting specific things from God. But this may not be how *God* sees prayer. If this is our view of prayer, a number of difficult questions arise when we examine our prayer experience closely. Frequently we have prayers answered when we really lacked faith in them. At other times, it seems as if God has heard a prayer and therefore done something in our lives, when actually we haven't prayed about it at all. Or (*very* commonly) we find we have requested specific things in prayer which we later see were totally inappropriate, and it was a blessing such prayers *weren't* answered.

Prayer: Not Just Words

My suggestion is that prayer is not necessarily specific words. It seems that the majority of "prayers" in the Bible are not specific, formalized verbal dialogue or requests, as, for example, we have in 'the Lord's prayer'. We would surely all recognize that there exists such a thing as unspoken language- the language of intention, desire. Husbands and wives are about this all the time, transmitting these things to each other in a non-verbal dialogue of life together. And prayer to God is part of our relationship with Him, too. And so prayer isn't merely words. Merely being in someone's presence is a form of dialogue with them. We do not pray *for* things, but rather *because* of our relationship with God. It just can't be that prayer is just a list of requests; for this is not how a relationship works. And this is why those who have

problems verbalizing themselves need not feel that they are unable to pray well. In a sense, a man *is* his prayer. Thus Job said that he felt that his prayers were “pure”; but he is later rebuked for saying that *he personally* was pure (Job 16:17; 33:9). The best way to explain what I mean is by giving examples:

- Jonah prayed- but what he did was to 'look towards God' (as Solomon spoke of) and confessed his weakness. He made no specific request. Yet we are told that his prayer was answered by the fish vomiting him out on dry land (Jonah 2:10). God saw it *as if* this is what he had requested.

- Abraham prayed for the city of Sodom to be saved for the sake of ten righteous who might be there (Gen. 19:24). He didn't specifically mention what was his heart's desire- that *Lot* be saved. But God discerned the *spirit* of his prayer, and saved Lot, even though Abraham 'knew not what to pray for' and asked for the 'wrong' thing in order to obtain what he really wanted, i.e. the salvation of Lot.

- Heb. 11:33 says that the likes of Abraham obtained promises by their faith. Yet the Old Testament record clearly enough states that the promises were just given to them by God; they weren't requested by the patriarchs. Indeed, David was surprised at the promises God chose to make to him. Conclusion? God read their unspoken, unprayed for desires for Messiah and His Kingdom as requests for the promises- and responded.

- " I, even I *only* am left" was Elijah's cry to God as he realized the depth of Israel's apostasy (1 Kings 19:10). But this was interpreted by God as a prayer for God to condemn Israel (Rom. 11:2,3). God read what was in Elijah's heart, and counted this as his prayer.

- Josiah's weeping and rending of his clothes was “heard” (2 Chron. 34:27); prayer is more than words.

- Nehemiah in his prayer of Neh. 1:11 simply repented and alluded to Scripture. He made no specific request for help to rebuild Jerusalem, although this was evidently in his heart, and was understood by the Father as his prayer.

- Ps. 6:8,9 makes a parallel between the weeping of David and his prayer ascending acceptably to God. Doubtless his weeping didn't include many well verbalized requests. But God heard " the voice of my weeping...the Lord will receive my prayer" .

- " I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears" (2 Kings 20:5) parallels Hezekiah's tears with his words. God interpreted his tears as a prayer. Hezekiah has earlier requested for God to both hear and see the words of Sennacherib (19:26), as if these too were to be read as a prayer for Divine intervention.

- In the time of Elisha we read that when a problem arose, the people concerned went indoors and shut the door. Going inside and shutting the door is associated with prayer, both by the Lord (Mt. 6:6) and Elisha himself (2 Kings 4:33). The other instances of shutting the door don't involve prayer, but they involve obediently doing something in faith- the woman shut the door upon her sons and poured out the oil in faith; she shut the door upon her sick son (2 Kings 4:5,21). Perhaps the implication is that what she did in faith and hope was read by God as prayer, even though she didn't apparently verbalize anything.

- Josiah sorrowed for Israel's sins, and God interpreted this as if Josiah was praying for the deferring of God's judgments, even though Josiah fully expected the judgments to come in his time (2 Kings 22:19).

- God heard the cry (often used concerning prayer) of Israel in Egypt (Ps. 106:44). Their *complaint*, even though it was said by idol worshippers who had precious little real faith, was seen by God as their prayer, and He answered them by delivering them. Yet Is. 64:3 says that the Exodus deliverance was something which Israel "looked not for". They didn't ask for it, but God read their groanings as if they were specifically requesting this, and granted it to them- even though they didn't actually ask for it, and the 'answer' to their 'prayer' was a surprise to them.

- The complaint of the believer-labourers cheated by their masters is paralleled with the cry of the wages which they were owed. This cry entered into the ears of the Lord of judgment (James 5:4). The situation was counted as the prayer of those brethren against the brethren employing and deceiving them.

- Even the situation of unbelievers is read by God as a prayer- the cries of the Philistines smitten with emerods "went up to heaven" (1 Sam. 5:12), just as the sins of Sodom did.

- Balaam, in his heart, didn't want to bless Israel; he wanted to curse them so he could get his hands on the riches Balak promised him if he did so. Balaam knew if God had told him to bless Israel, there was no way of changing things. But God says that He refused to hear Balaam's prayer to curse Israel (Josh. 24:10). It seems that Yahweh read Balaam's latent, unexpressed desires as prayer to Him.

- On one level, we are granted our heart's desires. The sinner receives his heart's desire, and so do the righteous, for they desire salvation (Ps. 10:3; 21:2). These desires are effectively our prayer.

- Hezekiah put the situation before God in prayer when he was surrounded by the Assyrians, and asked for deliverance from them. But God saw his prayer and attitude in quite a different light: "The virgin the daughter of Zion (Hezekiah and the faithful remnant in Jerusalem) hath despised thee, and laughed thee (Sennacherib) to scorn...shaken her head at thee" (2 Kings 19:21). Hezekiah's desperate plea for deliverance ("O Lord I beseech thee, save thou us out of his hand") was seen as a confident shaking of his head at Sennacherib. God sees our prayers very differently to how we do. Hezekiah simply put the situation before God: "Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear [the reproach]; open thine eyes, O Lord, and see" (Is. 37:17); and yet this was understood as him praying to God against Sennacherib (Is. 37:21). Hezekiah encouraged Isaiah to pray, because "The Lord they God will hear all the words of Rabshakeh...to reproach the living God...wherefore lift up *thy* prayer..." (2 Kings 19:3,4). Isaiah's words of prayer would be parallel with the words of Rabshakeh's words; and God would surely hear Rabshakeh's words and count them as a prayer to Him to do something. He would count the situation as the prayer, and Isaiah's praying was to be in harmony with this. That attitudes are read as prayers is reflected in the way that Rabshakeh's arrogance against Yahweh is described as him lifting up his eyes against God (2 Kings 19:22). By contrast, Hezekiah prayed at the same time: "Unto you do I lift up my eyes" (Ps. 123:1). 'Lifting up eyes' is therefore an idiom for prayer. Rabshakeh didn't consciously pray blasphemous words to God, but his attitude was counted as a prayer. Also in a Hezekiah context, we read of how his own heart was arrogantly 'lifted up' to God (2 Chron. 32:25,26

cp. his repentance for having a lifted up heart in Ps. 131:1). He made the same mistake as his opponent Rabshakeh- a lifted up heart was read by God as a heart / mind / eyes lifted up against Him. He noticed the attitude of heart in a man as a 'lifted up' to Him prayer.

- Likewise when Hezekiah was sick unto death, " he wept sore" and asked God to remember that he had lived a good life. He isn't recorded as making any specific request. But because God " heard thy prayer" , He healed him and promised to deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrians (Is. 38:4,5). Yet it seems Hezekiah did not specifically request these things. Perhaps in Hezekiah's *heart* he reasoned: 'I've been righteous, so save Israel from death for the sake of my righteousness, and raise me up from this bed of sickness so I can achieve this for them, so that they might share my salvation" . And God heard this attitude of mind as a prayer, and therefore promised to revive Hezekiah and save Judah. Thus Hezekiah's attitude at this time was *exactly* that of the Lord Jesus. Note that Isaiah 53 was primarily concerning Hezekiah at this time.

- Cornelius had his generous gifts responded to in the same way as his prayers- in that Peter was sent to teach him the Gospel and baptize him (Acts 10:4). This suggests that our good deeds are seen as an expression of our essential self, and are treated as prayers. Yet those good deeds are not in themselves verbalized requests. It is also doubtful whether Cornelius was specifically praying for more knowledge and the opportunity of baptism. But this is how his prayers were interpreted by God, and this passive though unexpressed desire was interpreted and responded to.

- David perceived the Kingdom to be one long prayer: " To enquire in his temple...all the days" (Ps. 27:4). He didn't see the Kingdom as eternally requesting things, but enquiring deeper into the Father.

- When the priests in Hezekiah's time blessed the people, " their prayer came up to (God), even unto heaven" (2 Chron. 30:27). But the blessing of the people was not a prayer to God, but words spoken by the priests to the people: " (May) The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee..." (Num. 6:24,25). Yet God saw these words of the priests as a prayer. It's rather like us saying 'God bless you' to a brother as we leave his house; God may read this as a prayer, and do something about it. But this isn't how *we* conceive of prayer. Consider too how the faithful speaking spiritually *to each other* was treated by God as a prayer to Him (Mal. 3:16). This may explain the enigmatic passage in 1 Sam. 20:12,13: " And Jonathan said unto David, O Lord God of Israel, when I have sounded my father...if there be good toward David and I send not unto thee [David]...and the Lord be with thee" . Jonathan's conversation with David seems to be merged with a prayer to God- perhaps indicating that the conversation was read by God as a prayer.

- The blood of Abel *cried* to God, as if it itself was a prayer. The situation cried to God, it was as if Abel cried to God in prayer for vengeance, even though he was dead. James 5:4 is a crystal clear example of the same thing: " The hire of the labourers which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of *them which have reaped* (the labourers) are entered into the ears of the Lord" . The cry of their wages was their cry; the situation was read by God as if it was their prayer. Or again, God saw the affliction of Israel, and heard their cry by the Red Sea (Neh. 9:9); seeing the situation and hearing the prayer are paralleled. And in a more negative context, God sees the behaviour / situation of the wicked as a cry ascending up to Him, as prayer does. Sodom's cry reaching unto Heaven is the obvious example (Gen.

18:20,21; 19:23); but Ps. 74:23 also speaks of the voice of God's enemies 'rising up' [Heb.] to Him in Heaven.

- Realizing this, Asa in his better days did not ask God to rush in and help, when he was faced with the crisis of the Ethiopian invasion. He showed his faith in the principles of God's knowledge: " Lord, it is nothing for thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us" (2 Chron. 14:11). There is no bleating on about the actual problem, rather does most of the prayer focus on reciting, in real faith, the characteristics of God. Coming down to earth, " Make the car start! Make the car start!" will give way, in spiritual maturity, to a praiseful recounting of God's character, with almost an incidental mention of the overbearing situation we are up against. We will request in spirit, but without making this explicit. Jn. 11:21,22 is a beautiful example of this. Martha understood Christ's power to help, and she prayed to Him (Jn. 11:22 cp. 16:23). But she didn't make the obvious, blindingly desperate request which filled her heart: to bring Lazarus back to her. She simply stated that the Lord could do all things. And she knew He would read her spirit, and see what she wanted.

- The Canaanite woman simply prayed: " Lord, help me" . The Lord's response was to heal her daughter, with the comment: " Great is thy faith. Be it unto thee even as thou wilt" (Mt. 15:25,28). She didn't specifically ask for anything, but the Lord understood her few words as expressing her hidden will, and treated this as her prayer.

- The way essential intention is understood as prayer is perhaps reflected in the way Matthew records that the disciples prayed during the storm on the lake: "Lord, save us, we are perishing!" (Mt. 8:25). Mark records that their actual words were "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (Mk. 4:38). Perhaps this was read by Matthew's inspiration as prayer. An alternative would be that they firstly said the words recorded by Mark, and then those by Matthew- in which case we could perhaps notice the difference between "Teacher!" and "Lord!", as if the higher they perceived the greatness of the Lord Jesus, the more moved they were to prayer.

- Moses asked God to relent on destroying His people because then, the promises to Abraham would go unfulfilled, and the surrounding nations would mock them (Ex. 32:11-13). These reasons were somewhat unfounded; for the nations did mock Israel in the end, and surely God would have fulfilled His promises to Abraham through the line of Moses. Yet God heard the essence of Moses' prayer and responded. The details weren't so important; it was the essence of what was in Moses' heart that God responded to.

- The 'hearing' of the situation of the unbelieving Rachael [for she still worshipped other gods] is repeated in God's 'hearing' of the groans of Israel in Egypt- even though they had not yet been taken unto Yahweh for a people, and did not know Yahweh as their God (Ex. 6:5,7). God 'heard' their situation, reported to Him by their representative Angels in the court of Heaven, and responded. He didn't demand their unqualified acceptance of Him nor their quitting with Egypt's idols before He 'heard' them through 'hearing' their situation.

- Manoah asked for the prophet (whom he thought the Angel was) to come again and tell them how to train their new child. His prayer was answered (Jud. 13:9)- but actually, his request wasn't specifically dealt with. The Angel came- not a prophet, as he asked- and confirmed to Manoah that really his wife was going to have a child. The spirit behind his request was understood and answered, rather than the actual words which he spoke.

- Prayer is likened to incense coming up before God. But so also is the almsgiving of Cornelius; his good deeds expressed a fine spirituality in his heart, and this was counted by God as prayer (Acts 10:4). Prayer is seen as an incense offering (Ps. 141:2); but the generosity of Mary (Jn. 12:3), the work of preaching (2 Cor. 2:16); living " a life of love" (Eph. 5:2 NIV); giving money to the needy (Phil. 4:18) are all seen as a fragrant incense offering. The act is the prayer. Mary's anointing was to be seen as a " memorial" (Mk. 14:9), but the only other times this word is used are in connection with the prayers of Cornelius (Acts 10:4, cp. the OT idea of prayerful people being God's 'rememberancers'). Likewise, prophecy does not have to refer to specific, lexical statements; it can refer to the spirit and implication behind the recorded words. Thus " the Scripture" prophesied Christ's resurrection after three days (Lk. 24:45; 1 Cor. 15:3,4); but nowhere is this explicitly prophesied. It is implied in the spirit behind the types, e.g. of Jonah and Gen. 22:4. So as 'prophecy' is not just the words but the spirit behind them, so prayer is not just the words, but the spirit in the man's heart who prays, even if the words come out wrong.

- The continual burning of incense, night and day, was a reminder that prayer (cp. incense) was a way of life, not only specific statements (Ex. 30:8). David's references to making constant prayer (e.g. Ps. 88:1) may allude to the constant rising up of the incense. We cannot be literally praying all the time, but our basic spirit of life can rise up as a prayer to God constantly. A man is, in a sense, his prayer. David asks God to hear him because he is righteous, and comments that " the foolish shall not stand in thy sight...the Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man. But as for me, I will come into thy house...hearken unto the voice of *my* cry...for unto thee will I pray" (Ps. 5:1-7). " The foolish...deceitful" are put for their prayers; the man is his prayer. This is why rejection of prayer is a sign of God's displeasure with the man who offers it. Ps. 109:4 in the Hebrew text reads simply: " For my love they are my adversaries: but I prayer" . And it means just that: a man is his prayer. David knew he was being falsely accused, and saw his lifestyle and being as a prayer to God in response to it all.

- Hannah and Daniel asked God to open His eyes to the situation they were in, they brought it before God, they asked Him to look upon them, but didn't make specific requests. Yet God interpreted their words as requests, and responded.

- Passages like Lk. 11:10 teach that every one who seeks in prayer, receives. This just isn't true in terms of the words of our actual requests being answered. But once we understand that God sees the spirit behind our words and answers this rather than the specific request, then these promises become more realistically believable.

These principles are not only confined to prayer. The weeping, helpless standing afar off at the cross are described as still following the Lord Jesus and ministering to Him, as they did in the happier Galilee days (Mk. 15:41). They are described as 'seeking [the risen] Jesus' when they came mourning to the grave, thinking to anoint the body (Mt. 28:5). Their essential spirit was understood and credited to them, even though their actions seemed to belie this. Likewise our essential desires are read as our prayers, even if the words we use seem quite different.

In the same way as Paul could claim to be ceaselessly praying, David speaks of his cry in prayer being " all the day long" (Ps. 86:3 RV). Clearly enough, for these men were not living their lives in monasteries, prayer was an attitude of mind. Their desires, even if not formally verbalized, were read as prayers. The incense, which was a symbol of prayer, was to be " seasoned with salt" (Ex. 30:35 RV). And these very words are quoted by Paul about our

speech being "seasoned with salt" - as if effectively, our speech is our prayer. This is why God tells Hagar that He "heard thy affliction" (Gen. 16:11; LXX "humiliation"), as if her situation and cry of desperation was received by Him as a prayer. The fact the Lord is mediating our prayers before the Father's throne ought to influence us as to what type of people we are. For who we are, not only our prayers, is reflected before Him in Christ. Our lives are in that sense our prayers. In passing, note that the Lord taught that he who humbles himself in prayer will be exalted (Lk. 18:14). Paul perhaps had this in mind when he spoke of how the Lord Jesus on the cross humbled Himself that He might be exalted (Phil. 2). Real prayer is a humiliating experience, a true humbling of self after the pattern of the Lord's crucifixion. We really need to ask ourselves whether this is anywhere near true of our prayer life.

Two of the greatest types of the Lord's mediatory work are Esther and Joseph. Esther was perhaps ashamed to reveal that she was a Jewess because of her people's behaviour, but given their desperate need she did reveal it in order to plead with the King for their salvation. And only when Joseph really had to use his influence to save his brethren did "Joseph's race become manifest unto Pharaoh" (Acts 7:13 RV). Does the Lord experience the same sort of embarrassment mixed with an urgent sense of our desperation, in His present mediation for us?

2-2 Prayer In The Spirit

In Ps. 109:4, David says "I am prayer"- translated in most English versions to the intent that "I make prayer". Who we are as persons is effectively our prayer and plea to God. This conception of prayer explains why often weeping, crying, waiting, meditating etc. are spoken of as "prayer", although there was no specific verbalizing of requests (Ps. 5:1,2; 6:8; 18:1,2,3,6; 40:1; 42:8; 64:1 Heb.; 65:1,2; 66:17-20; Zech. 8:22). The association between prayer and weeping is especially common: 1 Sam. 1:10; Ps. 39:12; 55:1,2; Jn. 11:41,42; Heb. 5:7, especially in the Lord's life and the Messianic Psalms. "The Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord hath heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer" (Ps. 6:8,9) crystallizes the point. *Desire* is also seen as effectively praying for something (Rom. 10:1; Col. 1:9; 2 Cor. 9:14). Weeping, desiring, waiting, meditating etc. are all acts of the mind, or 'spirit' in Biblical terminology. There is therefore a big association between our spirit or state of mind, and prayer. The spirit (disposition) of Christ which we have received leads us to *pray* "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). "Praying in the holy spirit" (Jude 20) is to be seen in this context. Prayer is part of the *atmosphere* of spiritual life, not something hived off and separate- it is an expression of our spirit. Thus there are verses which speak of many daily prayers as being just one prayer (Ps. 86:3,6; 88:1,2); prayer is a way / spirit of life, not something specific which occurs for a matter of minutes each day. The commands to "pray without ceasing" simply can't be literally obeyed (1 Thess. 5:17). "Watch and pray *always*" in the last days likewise connects prayer with *watchfulness*, which is an attitude of mind rather than something done on specific occasions. This is not to say that prayer *in no sense* refers to formal, specific prayer. Evidently it does, but it is only a verbal crystallization of our general spirit of life.

Rom. 8 speaks of the importance of being spiritually minded, and then goes on to say that our spirit, our deep inner mind, is transferred to God by Christ, called by His title "the Lord the spirit", *without* specifically spoken words. This is surely proof enough that the Lord does not mediate our prayers as an interpreter would, from one language to another, matching lexical items from one language with those from another. "We know not what to pray for", so the

Lord Jesus reads our inner spirit, and transfers this on a deep mental level, without words, to the Father. The whole process of mediation takes place within the Lord's mind, with the sort of groanings He had as He begged the Father to raise Lazarus (Rom. 8:26 cp. Jn. 11:38), and as on the cross He prayed with strong crying and tears for our redemption (Heb. 5:5 cp. Is. 53:12). The Lord Jesus is the same yesterday and today. That same passion and intensity of pleading really is there. This is why the state of our mind, our spirit, is so vitally important; because it is this which the Lord Jesus interprets to the Father. Because God responds to our spirit, our overall situation, sometimes He does things which seem to be an answer of prayers which were not properly believed in by the person who prayed. Examples include: Gen. 30:16,17; Ex. 14:10,11 cp. Neh. 9:9; Ps. 31:22; Lk. 1:13. Hezekiah simply opened up his situation before God in prayer, not asking for anything apart from God to look back over Hezekiah's life and recognize that he had had a heart for God (2 Kings 20:3). But then God responds by telling Hezekiah that He has heard his prayer for healing (2 Kings 20:5). God perceived the unexpressed essence of prayer, as Jesus perceived the unspoken desire of Martha and Mary for the immediate resurrection of Lazarus. Belief and unbelief can quite comfortably co-exist in a man (Mk. 9:24; Jn. 12:39-43). These prayers were answered because God saw the overall situation, He read the spirit of those who prayed and responded appropriately, even if their faith in their specific, vocalized prayers was weak. Perhaps in similar vein, James 4:6 appears to teach that God will hear the prayers of the humble man when a proud man is praying at the same time; faith is not mentioned here. The situation even of wicked people is seen as a kind of prayer ascending to God- "Forget not the voice of Your enemies: the tumult of those that rise up against You ascends continually" (Ps. 74:23).

So far we have seen that our innermost desires, our complaints, our situations, our deeply concealed attitudes, are read by God as if they are prayers, and answered accordingly. He sees us as asking for things which we perhaps can't even visualize (e.g. Ps. 106:44 cp. Is. 64:3), or having confidence in prayer which we certainly don't feel. How God saw Hezekiah's attitude to Sennacherib is a clear example. Yet God not only sees the thoughts and attitudes of His children like this. He describes Himself as "hearkening" to the mocking of Moab (Zeph. 2:8); and God hearkening is the language of responding to prayer. The wicked afflicting the poor, for example, leads to God hearing the cry of the poor (Job 34:28). The implication is that the nature of the situation, not just the fervency of their specific prayers, makes God respond. Hezekiah reflected that "it may be that the Lord...will hear the words of Rabshakeh" (Is. 37:4). He therefore sees the attitudes of the world as some kind of communication with Him, and He 'hearkens' to this and responds. This explains why so many powerful prayers do not make specific requests for help; rather do they show an opening up of the heart / spirit of the believer to God, and a putting of the situation before God, with the faith that God will read the situation as a request for Him to act; but the believer does not suggest to God in concrete terms *how* He might respond to the situation. Thus David often puts his situation before God, and calls that his prayer- although he doesn't explicitly request anything (e.g. Ps. 3:1-4; 142:1,2). The way God reads a situation as a prayer helps explain a difficult phenomena: i.e., why God appears to answer prayers which lack real faith (Gen. 30:16-18; Neh. 9:9 cp. Ex. 14:10,11; Ps. 31:22; Lk. 1:13). Presumably the Father reads circumstances as prayers, even though the believer's faith in their actual verbalized request may be weak. Job almost sarcastically asked God to show him where he had sinned, and for what God was punishing him (Job 13:23); and God heard this, because He looked below the surface of Job's words and saw the real essence of his request.

The God Who Knows

Putting the situation before God is not only a method of prayer to be employed when we face specific crises. It is a general principle to be followed in our daily relationship with the Father. Thus rather than praying for forgiveness in bald, brief terms, spiritual men confessed their sins to God, they opened their spirit to Him, and this was seen by God as them asking for forgiveness (e.g. Ps. 119:26). Daniel confessed Israel's sins, and God responded by saying that His answer to the prayer was to restore Jerusalem (Dan. 9:18-25). Again, his request was deep within his heart rather than specific. David likewise meditated on the Messianic Kingdom, and this was effectively praying for it to come (Ps. 72:20). In all this there is a kind of spiritual culture, for want of a better way of putting it; not an animal blurting out of the painfully apparent to the God who knows our need before we ask it, not a child-like demand for the obvious, as if our crudely expressed demand is the first the Father will know of our problem.

Men like David, Hezekiah and Daniel appreciated that God knew already. In a sense, all that will happen has happened; so prayer is an opening up of ourselves to God, a *service* of God (Dan. 6:16; Lk. 2:37), for His glory and for our benefit, rather than a means of communicating information to Him. Therefore they opened themselves up to Him, expressing their understanding that He knew the situation, and didn't present a long list of concrete requests to Him. Their relationship with Him went far beyond that kind of surface level. What of ours?

2-3 The Struggle Of Prayer

Appreciating that prayer is so much "in the spirit", we can better grasp why prayer is portrayed as a struggle. Moab would pray in the time of his judgment; "but he shall not prevail" (Is. 16:12), as if the prayer process was a struggle. Jacob, by contrast, struggled with the Angel in prayer and prevailed (Hos. 12:2-4). The Romans were to strive together with Paul in prayer (Rom. 15:30); the Lord's prayers in Gethsemane were a resisting / struggling unto the point of sweating blood (Heb. 12:2). "I would that ye knew what great conflict I have [RV 'how greatly I strive / struggle'] for you...that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding" is parallel to "We do not cease to pray for you... that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Col. 2:1 cp. 1:9,10). Paul's conflict / struggle for them was his prayer for them. Epaphras likewise was "always striving for you in his prayers" (Col. 4:12 RV). Our groanings, our struggling in prayer, is transferred to God by the Lord Jesus groaning also, but with groanings far deeper and more fervently powerful than ours (Rom. 8:22,23 cp. 26). Our prayers are to give the Father no "rest" (Is. 62:7), no cessation from violent warfare (Strong). The widow by her continual coming in prayer 'wearied' the judge into responding; Strong defines this Greek word as meaning 'to beat and black and blue' (RVmg. gives "bruise"). It's a strange way of putting it, but this is another reminder of the intense struggle of prayer. Jacob's wrestling with the Angel was really a clinging on to him, pleading with tears for the blessing of forgiveness; and in this he was our example (Hos. 12:4-6). Lk. 21:36 RV speaks of the believer 'prevailing' with God in prayer. The 'struggles' of Moses in prayer are an example of this; through the desperation and spiritual culture of his pleading, he brought about a change even in God's stated purpose.

The struggle of prayer is reflected in another word associated with it- 'groaning'. The Lord Himself prayed with strong groanings and tears, and He even now makes intercession for our prayers with groanings which are inexpressible within the limitations of descriptive words. 2 Cor. 5:4 says that we groan, being burdened (RVmg.), for the day when "mortality might be

swallowed up of life”. This is the language of a burdened Israel in Egypt, groaning for deliverance. Our ‘groaning’ in this mortal flesh (2 Cor. 5:2) is therefore not to be read as a justification for groaning and complaining about our humanity; but rather intense prayer for the second coming.

And so I have to ask: When was the last time you arose from your knees, or perceived the answer to your prayer, and knew that like Jacob or Moses, you had struggled and prevailed with God Almighty? How much of our praying is merely repeating phrases and clichés...? I don't write this to engender guilt nor to manipulate you. But what shall we do? I am part of what I condemn...for I too see that I slip into the same old phrases and themes in prayer, under the tyranny of the tired mediocrity of a man who has been saying essentially the same prayers to God all his life. Do you not sense with me the severity of the problem? J.I. Packer piercingly commented: " I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face" (*My Path of Prayer*, p. 56). To this I agree. And Scripture does too, in that often the person is put by a kind of metonymy for his or her prayers. Consider Prov. 15:29: “The Lord is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous”. Here, “the wicked” people’ is put for ‘the prayers of the wicked people’. The person, the life lived, the essential personality, is parallel with our prayer to God.

So what are we to do? Much praying, or praying as it ought to be done, isn't achieved because we don't plan to pray. Yes, get up just 10 minutes earlier each day to pray. Set the alarm clock earlier. Have regular prayer times. When Paul wrote of praying " night and day" , it could be that he refers to his twice daily prayer times. For he was hardly praying 24 hours / 24. Write out your prayers. Just recognize, honestly, that you are likely to wander in prayer. How many times do our prayers go something like this: " I come into Your presence Father through Jesus to thank you for [now, where did I leave the house keys...?] all the things You gave me today, for health, for [oh yeah, they're in my jacket pocket]...for...for...for...Your word and the hope of the Kingdom [hey, isn't Ivan coming round for tea tomorrow? Yakes, I forgot!] and please help me to share the message with [must go buy some tea and biscuits tomorrow]...with... more people...umm..." . One simple way around this is to pray out loud. And yes, I know it's a bit weird, and OK once or twice but not always...but I suspect to a man and to a woman, we are deeply worried [or ought to be] by our lack of focus in prayer.

James, as he often does, foresees how in practice we may reason that fervent prayer isn't possible, because...we are angry, low, tired, don't feel like it. So we tell ourselves. But James cuts across all this: " Elijah was a man subject to like passions [RVmg " nature"] as we" - and yet *he* prayed earnestly (James 5:17). We can't excuse our lack of prayer by blaming it on the " passions" of our natures. Men like Elijah had the same nature as we do, prone to the same depression and mediocrity, and yet they prayed fervently.

3. Prayer: Practical Guidance

3-1 Prayer: Practical Guidance

First of all, realize the crucial importance of prayer. It really is the lifeblood of spiritual life. Ensure that somehow you make the time and develop a prayerful attitude. For your relationship with God depends upon it. The early elders of the Christian church decided that they were spending too much time on practical matters with the result that they weren't finding enough time for prayer. And so they made a major re-arrangement to enable them to

devote more time to prayer (Acts 6:1-4). Paul assumes that prayer will be such a major component in the lives of married believers that they may well choose to temporarily abstain from sexual relationships in order to find a greater intensity in prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). This speaks of quite some emphasis on prayer; not just a few minutes at the end of each day saying often the same words. Daniel was willing to die in justification of his habit of open, unashamed, regular prayer (Dan. 6:10). Remember how those who had asked the King for more time before telling him his dream, had been given the death sentence; and yet knowing this, Daniel asks for more time- so that he can pray seriously for the answer (Dan. 2:8,16). He must have been tempted to just say a quick prayer; but he knew that real prayer is not merely an emotional outburst fuelled by the self-preservation instinct. This is a fine challenge to our excuses that we don't have or don't need much time to pray. As the Philistines closed in upon Israel, Samuel was busy offering up the burnt offering, symbolizing Israel's plea to God for help (1 Sam. 7:10)- when the natural reaction would have been to think 'Enough of that, come on, do something practical now...'. The widows who were financially supported by the early ecclesias gave themselves to constant prayer (1 Tim. 5:5 and context). In view of the way believers fall away and also because of our great duty to witness to the world, *first of all* (i.e. most importantly), *prayer* must be made (1 Tim. 2:1 and context). Indeed, it is an actual sin- albeit a sin of omission- to cease to pray for our brethren (1 Sam. 12:23).

Secondly, seek to perceive just how delighted God is to hear our prayers, to have us praying to Him, about *anything*. Our distance from Him, coming as it usually does from mere preoccupation with mundane things, must so awfully hurt Him. He must weep over the simple fact that we basically forget Him, minute after minute. Make an effort to pray, no matter how inadequate or irrelevant you feel your efforts are; for we are children, very little children, talking to a delighted Father. I have often found myself excusing a lack of personal witness by shyness- when there are far more fundamental issues which lead to my failure in this. And likewise I have caught myself excusing a lack of prayer by the idea that I am busy. But, as I often tell people who say they have no time to study the Bible, we will always, naturally, find time for what we want.

- Appreciate that God often puts us in the situation in which we put Him by our prayers. He does this in order to develop our understanding of what it means to pray to Him, and to allow us some window into how He actually feels when we pray to Him. For example, we ask God to forgive us, as we forgive those who sin against us. Whenever we deal with someone sinning against us, we are being given an insight into how God responds to us. Moses went through the same. God told Moses to "let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against [Israel]" (Ex. 32:10). But Moses prays to God and begs Him not to express His wrath against Israel; and God hears. Soon afterwards, Aaron prays / entreats Moses: "Let not the anger of my lord wax hot..." (Ex. 32:22). Moses found himself with the same emotions as God; and being approached by a somewhat unworthy man [Aaron] begging him to show unreasoned grace. This was *precisely* the situation God had just been in when Moses approached Him!

- Believe that God *wants* to answer our prayers, no matter how poorly formulated they are. He is our loving Father, who dearly loves us and so wishes to respond to our requests. Think of how He responded to Moses' request, that God wouldn't destroy Israel as He planned, and make of Moses a great nation. Moses' prayer was on the basis that if God did this, then, His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wouldn't be fulfilled (Ex. 32:13). Actually, if God made a great nation of Moses, who was a descendant of Abraham, Jacob etc, then the promises would still have been fulfilled. Logically, Moses didn't have a good argument.

Reviewed from hindsight in cold blood, it didn't add up at all. But God heard Moses, because He loved Moses, and because God perceived that Moses was so very genuinely motivated in what he was requesting. And it's the same with our prayers.

3-2 Prayer: A List Of Requests?

Stranded for a while with only my Bible, I read through the Psalms and other well known prayers, underlining those verses which make specific request, and trying to divide the requests into groups. The Psalms, of course, are the greatest collection of prayers which we have. Some sections of the Psalter are evidently more devoted to praise than prayer. However, Book 2 of Psalms (42-72) is entitled " the prayers of David" (Ps. 72:20). And there are some Psalms which are specifically entitled 'prayers' (38, 86, 90/91, 102, 142/3); and it has been demonstrated by several writers that the titles of the Psalms are inspired and should be read as such.

The results were as follows:

" The prayers of David" (Ps. 42 - 72): 1 request every 7 verses.

The specific 'prayers' recorded in Psalms: 1 request every 5 verses.

Christ's prayer in Jn. 17: 1 request every 4 verses.

It was quite amazing how very few personal requests were made in any of these prayers, although evidently one senses that often David had in mind a particular crisis. The categories of request which became evident after repeated reading were:

1) " Save me" - usually with the suggestion of 'save me eternally, in the Kingdom', or with the implication that God knows exactly what David wants saving from, and therefore he doesn't mention it explicitly. 2) For others spiritually, especially Israel. 3) For forgiveness. 4) For the Kingdom to come. 5) For the wicked to be punished (with evident reference to the Kingdom, rather than this life).

These last two categories account for over half of the requests made in the prayers. This should be compared with how 'The Lord's prayer' begins with the request for the Kingdom to come, and ends with a similar statement. That model prayer contains 11 statements, only 4 of which are requests (for the Kingdom, forgiveness, spiritual protection, daily food). Even the request for the coming of the Kingdom is not to be made simply because we desire personal relief from our problems. This would relegate the Hope of the Kingdom to just any other religion: a dim understanding of some fantastical future that enables the adherent to stumble along through life with some vague hope of a better tomorrow. " *Hallowed be Thy Name*" is what precedes the request for the Kingdom to come. *This* is why we should request the Kingdom: for the glory of God to be brought about, for His Name to be manifested both in us and the world at large.

Paul perhaps realized the tendency to make prayer just a list of requests when he commanded his Philippians: " In every thing by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6). This is what prayer is all about; an opening up of life before God, not specific requests; a casting of our care upon Him (1 Pet. 5 :7). The believers of the parable told their Lord of the ungrateful behaviour of their brother (Mt.

18:31)- they brought the situation before Him, without asking specifically for something to be done.

*But is this the pattern of our prayers? By contrast, don't they tend to be one long list of often very human requests, about which we have no idea whether or not they are God's will? The emphasis in Biblical prayers is **not** on requesting things. It is on praise and opening of our soul to God, knowing that He knows our needs already. And the Biblical pattern is that the most urgent need, that of the Kingdom and salvation, must take up by far the majority of our requests. Do we reflect this emphasis in **our** prayers?*

3-3 Prayer For Others

The above analysis reveals that David's requests in areas apart from forgiveness and salvation largely centred around his desire for God to grant spiritual help to others. There are many examples of praying for God to help others spiritually: 2 Kings 19:4; 2 Chron. 30:18; Job 42:10; Rom. 10:1; 2 Cor. 13:7; Phil. 1:9,19; Col. 1:9; 1 Thess. 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 4:16; 1 Jn. 5:16. Surely this was also the spirit behind Abraham's intercession for Lot to be saved out of Sodom. Granted a certain modicum of spirituality in those being prayed for, Noah, Daniel and Job all delivered the souls of others by their prayerful righteousness (Ez. 14:14). When we pray for others, God sees it as them praying (if they have a modicum of spirituality), in the same way as when the Lord Jesus prays for us, He interprets what He knows to be our spirit to God, recognizing that we don't know how to pray in words as we should (Jer. 11:14). The Lord Jesus prayed for us concerning spiritual issues which at the time we did not understand (Lk. 22:32; Jn. 17:9,15,20), and Paul especially seems to have grasped this example. Likewise Moses prayed for Israel's forgiveness and salvation, even offering his own place in the Kingdom to try to obtain this, and they never knew (until Ex. 32 came into circulation) what intense prayerful struggle Moses had gone through for them. If prayer for others really can help them towards the Kingdom, how much of it we should be doing! We need to pause for a moment and consider this question: Do I really believe that my prayers for others can influence their spiritual strength? The answer of all the Biblical evidence above is that this is indeed the case. Realizing this places a serious responsibility upon us to get on and do this, with all our heart and soul- not in a formal, duty-bound sense. There is further discussion of this in *Christians Unlimited*. Prayer for others and observing the answers actually seems to have a far more powerful effect on us than seeing prayers for ourselves being answered. Note too how many times Paul gives thanks for the spiritual progress he sees in others, even though we can be sure he saw clearly enough the spiritual immaturity which there still must have been in his converts. So many times he thanks God in his prayers for what he has seen in others (Rom. 1:8-10; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; 9:12-15; Eph. 1:3-23; Phil. 1:3-6; Col. 1:3-14; 1 Thess. 1:2,3; 2:13-16; 3:9; 2 Thess. 1:3-10; 2 Tim. 1:3-7; Philemon 4-7). Now it follows that if we are to *pray* like Paul, we must have the heart of love for people that was in him. So often we dwell upon the negative, the scandals, the failures of others. And we can't thank God for those things. Paul's pattern of prayer was of positive praise. And we can only share that if we have a mind that is positively perceptive of signs of response to grace in others.

God is so so sensitive to prayerfulness. He condemns the leaders of Israel: " You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel [an idiom for interceding with God in behalf of Israel- Ez. 2:30,31] so that it will stand firm" (Ez. 13:5). If only there had been a prayerful minority, God would have changed the whole course of His dealings with Israel. But petty materialism and self-mindedness was what stopped those leaders from

doing their job. God repeatedly stated that He would not spare /pity Israel in judging them (Ez. 5:11; 7:4,9; 8:18; 9:5 etc.). But Joel 2:17 exhorts the priests to beg God in prayer to “spare” [s.w.] His people during the invasion Ezekiel had prophesied. God is so sensitive to prayer that He will even change His stated purpose.

Some of the assurances that prayer will surely be answered are in the context of praying for others. " If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them" is in the context of concerned brethren trying to win back a weak brother (Mt. 18:19). Likewise " If we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us...if any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death" (1 Jn. 5:14-16). Again in a forgiveness context, Solomon asked that God would hear Israel " in all that they call unto thee for" (1 Kings 8:52). " I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should *go forth* and bring forth fruit...that whatsoever ye shall ask of the *Father in my name*, he may give it you" (Jn. 15:16) is full of connection with the world-wide preaching commission; and in this context, *whatever* we ask to this end will be given. A wondrous assurance, which the present writer can surely testify to. Lk. 11:5,6 presents a telling parable. A man finds a friend comes to him at midnight, wanting food. So he goes to his friend, notwithstanding the inconvenient hour, and asks for some loaves, but actually he's given whatever he wants. His want, his will, was to find sustenance for his friend / brother. And therefore his friend gives abundantly above all he asks or thinks, indeed, whatever he wants is provided. The promise of boundless response to prayer is therefore true, in the context of seeking to help others. This parable comes straight after 'the Lord's prayer'. In the parallel record, the prayer is followed by a reminder that we must forgive our brother, if we are to be forgiven (Mt. 6:14,15). So perhaps the friend coming to the man at midnight starving hungry, represents a brother sinning against us. Our response must be to go to the Father in prayer and seek forgiveness / spiritual food for our brother. And in that context, we will be given whatever we desire. Note that banging on the shut door is elsewhere a symbol of asking for forgiveness (Lk. 13:24,25; Mt. 25:10).

Those “indebted” to us [Lk. 11:4] are those who have a debt to us. But Biblically, who are those who are ‘indebted’? The same Greek word occurs often in the New Testament. Mt. 18:30 explains that there is a debt to us if we have been sinned against and it’s not been reconciled. The debt our brethren have to us, and we to them, is to love one another, to lay our lives down for each other, to entertain and receive each other at home (s.w. 3 Jn. 8; 1 Jn. 3:16; 4:11). A wife has her husband in her debt if he doesn’t love her with the love of Christ (Eph. 5:28); our brethren are in debt to us if they don’t give us material help when we truly need it (Rom. 15:27); or if they don’t wash our feet (Jn. 13:14). A debt implies that it’s not been paid; and so I come to the conclusion that the *forgiveness* of our debtors is forgiving our brethren when they don’t love us as they should, don’t care for us... and never apologize or rectify it. The debt is outstanding; they’ve not cleared it. But we are to forgive it; we are to forgive unconditionally, without demanding restoration or grovelling repentance before us. This is the challenge of that phrase in the Lord’s prayer. For we ask for “our sins” in general to be likewise forgiven; and they surely include many ‘secret sins’ which we don’t even perceive or haven’t repented of. And further. “As we also forgive every one that is indebted to us” (Lk. 11:4) can actually be read as a word of command, a statement that is actually a request. The request is that the sins of those who’ve sinned against us be forgiven- in this sense, “whosoever sins ye remit [s.w. forgive] they are remitted unto them” (Jn. 20:23). That’s another challenging thought. If they’re impenitent, how can they be forgiven? But if *we* forgive them, perhaps we are to understand that God is happy to forgive them. If we feel, as I do, that we’ve been sinned against so much... then we have a wonderful opportunity to

gain our own forgiveness and even that of those people... by forgiving them. The more I hurt at how others have treated me, the more I realize my own desperate need for forgiveness. The two things, as the Lord foresaw in His model prayer, dovetail seamlessly together.

One practical caveat needs to be mentioned in the context of praying for others. It is all too easy to slip into the habit (and slipping into bad prayer habits surely dogs every prayerful man) of reeling off a list of names each night, something like " Dear Father, be with David, and please be with the children, and with Sister Smith, and with Karen, and with...." . There's nothing in itself wrong with this. But over time, it can become a kind of incantation, with us fearful that this evening we let one of those names slip. Paul writes often that he " makes mention" or 'remembers' his brethren in regular prayer (Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:2; Philemon 4). The Greek *mneia* is the word used in the LXX for the " memorial" of the incense or the meal offering (Lev. 2:2,16; 6:15; 24:7), or the constant fire on the altar (Lev. 6:12,13). That fire, that flour, that incense, had to be carefully and consciously prepared; it had to be the result of man's labour. And likewise, Paul seems to be saying, he first of all thought through the cases which he then presented to the Father. This is a high standard to keep up.

The Lord assumed that whenever we pray, we will include a request for forgiveness. Not only is this one of the few requests in His model prayer, but Mk. 11:25 reflects the same assumption: " *Whensoever* ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any one; that your Father...may forgive you" (RV). *Whenever* we pray we should be seeking forgiveness. And the Lord also implies that whenever we pray, we will almost always have something against someone else. For He knew well that human society is inevitably filled with misunderstandings and bad feelings against each other.

In the parable, the friend comes to his friend. The second friend knocks on the door of his friend, in order to get something with which to help his friend. The knocking on the door is specifically a symbol of prayer. If we see our brothers need, even if we can do nothing physically to help (and so often, we cant); we will *pray* earnestly for them. If we truly feel for them, we will pray for them. The friend troubles his friend for help (Lk. 18:7), just as in another parable about prayer the desperate widow " troubles" the judge for a response (Lk. 18:5). " From within" (11:7) is always used in the Bible about the inner man, rather than meaning indoors. The Greek word occurs twice in the same context: " your *inward part*...that which is *within*" (11:39,40). Inside himself, he spoke to his friend: " Trouble me not" . Yet that satan within him, that desire to be selfish, was overcome by his realization of his friends need, and *why* it had arisen. And if we have this same emboldened conscience to overcome our innate selfishness and ask of our Father *for the sake of others*, then we will see the work of the ministry will be provided by Him- that is His sober promise.

To be blotted out of the book God had written may have been understood by Moses as asking for him to be excluded from an inheritance in the promised land; for later, a 'book' was written describing the various portions (Josh. 18:9). The connection is made explicit in Ez. 13:9: " ...neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel" . To be blotted out of the book meant to not enter the land (surely Ezekiel is alluding to Moses' experience). If Israel were to be blotted out there and then in the wilderness, then Moses wanted to share this experience. God had just spoken of 'blotting out' Israel from before Him (Dt. 9:14), and making a nation of Moses; but now Moses is asking to share in their condemnation rather than experience salvation without them. This was the extent of his devotion. On the last day of his life, Moses reeled off the great speech of

Deuteronomy, knowing full well that he was to die without entering the land. In Dt. 9:18 he says that his prayer of Ex. 32:32 *was heard*- in that he was not going to enter the land, but they would. Hence his urging of them to go ahead and enter the land- to experience what his self-sacrifice had enabled. In this we see the economy of God, and how He works even through sin. On account of Moses' temporary rashness of speech, he was excluded- and yet by this, his prayer was heard. He was temporarily blotted out of the book, so that they might enter. Moses' fleeting requests to enter the land must be read as a flagging from the height of devotion he reached, rather like the Lord's request to escape the cross in Gethsemane. But ultimately he did what he intended- he gave his place in the Kingdom / land so that they might enter [although of course he will be in the future Kingdom]. This is why Moses stresses on the last day of his life that he wouldn't enter the land *for Israel's sake* (Dt. 1:37; 3:26; 4:21). He saw that his sin had been worked through, and the essential reason for him not entering was because of the offer he had made. It "went ill with him *for their sakes*" (Ps. 106:32).

In all this, Moses was typifying the death of the Lord. Is. 53:8 describes His cross as being "cut off [Strong: 'excluded'] from the land of the living" (s.w. 'the congregation'- of Israel), for the transgression of His people. This is undoubtedly reference to the self-sacrificial exclusion of Moses from the land, that Israel might enter. The Lord died the death of a sinner, He chose like Moses to suffer affliction with us, that we might be saved. The intense prayer of Moses for Israel's salvation inspired David in prayer (Ps. 25:11 = Ex. 32:30,31). And Paul makes a series of allusions to Moses, which climax in an invitation to pray like Moses for the salvation of others:

2 Tim. 2:24,25

" the servant of the Lord
must not strive
but be gentle unto all

apt to teach

patient

in meekness

instructing those that oppose
themselves

if God *peradventure* will give them
repentance [i.e. forgiveness]"

2:19

2:20

2:21

2:22

2:26

Moses

A very common title of Moses

As Israel did with him (Num. 26:9)

The spirit of Moses

As was Moses (Ex. 18:20; 24:12; Dt. 4:1,5,14; 6:1; 31:22)

As was Moses

Moses was the meekest man (Num. 12:3)

at the time of Aaron and Miriam's self-opposing
rebellion

" *Peradventure* I shall make an atonement for your sin"
(Ex. 32:30)- and he prayed 40 days and nights for it.

= Num. 16:5,26

= Num. 12:7

= Num. 16:37

= Num. 12:2; 16:3

= Num. 16:33

This is quite something. The height of Moses' devotion for His people, the passion of his praying, shadowing as it did the matchless intercession and self-giving of the Lord, really is our example. It isn't just a height to be admired. It means that we will not half heartedly ask our God to 'be with' brother x and sister y and the brethren in country z, as we lie half asleep in bed. This is a call to sustained, on our knees prayer and devotion to the salvation of others.

But consider the *motivation* of Moses in all this; God's anger had been kindled against *him* (Ex. 4:14), and so when God's anger was kindled against *Israel* (Ex. 32:10 etc.), Moses was motivated by his own experience of failure and God's grace to pray for that anger to be turned away. And it should be the same with us. Insofar as we reflect upon God's gracious response to us, so we will be motivated to pray earnestly that yet others may experience that same grace.

The model prayer begins with the words " Our Father" . Straight away we are bidden remember that no man is an island; the Lord intended us to be aware of the entire community of believers in our private prayers. " Give us this day our daily bread" may appear hard for comfortably off Christians to pray- until they grasp that they are praying for " our" daily bread, not " my" daily bread. There are so many in the brotherhood for whom having daily bread is indeed a constantly uncertain question. We should be aware of the whole brotherhood; and pray that " we" will be given our bread for today.

3-4 Prayer For The Coming Of The Kingdom

The hope of the future Kingdom means that we will not now be materialistic. And the model prayer was given by Jesus in the context of His comment on how some tend to always be asking God for material things. The Lord teaches that the paramount thing we should request is the coming of the Kingdom, both in its glorious future 'political' sense as well as in the sense that the principles of the Kingdom should be manifested in our lives now. *This* is the request we should be making- for " Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of...after *this* manner therefore pray ye..." (Mt. 6:9,10). Later in Mt. 6 the Lord repeats the same words: " Your heavenly Father *knoweth that ye have need of all these things*...seek ye first his Kingdom" (Mt. 6:32-34 RV). The structure of the Lord's prayer reflects this- for the first and only request in it is a seeking for the coming of His Kingdom. The RV of Heb. 10:34,35 brings out well the same theme: " Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your *possessions*, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better *possession*" (RVmg). Who we ourselves will be turned into is our better possession, " a better possession and an abiding one" (RV). And this compensates for the loss of material *possessions* in this life. Therefore the writer urges them to not cast away their confidence in the receipt of this reward at the Lord's return (:35). The more humbly confident we are in receiving the Kingdom, the less the loss of possessions now will mean to us. But notice that prayer for the coming of the Kingdom is parallel with praying that God's will may be done. The Kingdom of God is not only a future issue. The principles of the Kingdom will be worked out in our lives, they will 'come' into our own daily experience, in so far as we seek to do the Father's will. God's will ultimately will be done anyway- but surely the Lord wished us to pray that in *our* lives, that will would be done, that we will be ready servants of all the Kingdom principles which the Lord taught in His parables of the Kingdom. Every other reference to the will of God being done in the NT refers to the obedient life of the believer right now (Mt. 26:42; Acts 21:14; Eph.5:17).

The Lord's words can be understood on many different levels. It can be argued that every phrase of the Lord's prayer looks forward on one level, but not exclusively, to the future establishment of the Kingdom:

" *Hallowed / sanctified be thy name*" uses an aorist tense which implies that it will be accomplished as a one time act; at the coming of the Lord. Indeed, the aorist tenses in the Lord's model prayer are arresting; each phrase of the prayer asks for something to be done in

a one time sense. This alone suggests an intended 'answer' in terms of the final establishment of the Kingdom

"Thy Kingdom come" - clear enough

"Thy will be done" again uses an aorist which demands a one time fulfilment- in the sense of 'May Your will come about...'. The will of God is often associated with His ultimate plan of salvation (e.g. Eph. 1:5-12; Col. 1:20). It has been pointed out that "Hallowed be Your Name" is (grammatically) a request for action, rather than simply an expression of praise. Jesus prayed this in Gethsemane and it cost Him His life. We know from the Old Testament that God in fact "hallows" His own Name (Ez. 20:41; 28:25; 36:22,23; 38:16; 39:27). By asking God to "hallow" or sanctify / realize that Name in our lives, we are definitely praying in accordance with His will. He wishes to do this- and so He will surely do this in our lives if we ask Him. All the principles connected with His Name will be articulated in our lives and experience for sure if we pray for this- for we will be praying according to His revealed will in His word. And the ultimate fulfilment of all this will be in final coming of the Kingdom.

"Give us this day our daily bread" has long been recognized as an inadequate translation of a very strange Greek phrase. The idea is 'Give us today, right now, the bread / food of tomorrow'. In ancient Judaism, *mahar* means not only tomorrow but the great Tomorrow, i.e. the Kingdom. Jesus spoke of the inauguration of the future Kingdom in terms of eating food together (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 6:21; 14:15; 22:29,30; Rev. 7:16). 'Give us the future Kingdom today, may it come right now' is perhaps one of the levels on which He intended us to understand the prayer. The aorist implies: 'Give us this once and final time' the bread of tomorrow. The Lord was surely alluding to the way that Israel in the wilderness had been told that "in the morning [tomorrow] you shall be filled with bread" ; and this was widely understood in first century Palestine as being typical of the coming of Messiah's Kingdom. Notice too how Is. 55:10 connects the descent of God's word made flesh in Jesus, with the giving of bread.

And one practical point. Even though we may have daily bread, we are still to pray for it. It's rather like Zech. 10:1: "Ask ye of the Lord rain in the time of the latter rain"; even when it's the season, still ask Him for what it appears you naturally already have.

"Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us" again uses the aorist which implies 'Forgive us this once'. Could this not be an anticipation of the state of the believer before the judgment seat of Christ- 'forgive me please this once for all my sins, as I have forgiven those who sinned against me'. If so, we have a powerful exhortation to forgive *now*; for in that awesome moment, it will be so apparent that the Lord's gracious acceptance of us will be directly proportional to how deeply we accepted and forgave our brethren in this life. Notice how strongly Jesus links future judgment with our present forgiveness (Lk. 6:37). He teaches us to pray now for forgiveness on the basis of how we have forgiven others, knowing that in prayer, we have a foretaste of the judgment. Now we can come boldly before the throne of grace in prayer, just as we will come before that same throne in the last day.

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one" can only really come true when we are changed into divine nature; for only then will we be freed /delivered [aorist- once, finally, for all time] from the 'devil' of sin. The word for trial / temptation is *peirasmos*, and I have never been entirely satisfied that we can reconcile the Lord's words here with the fact that God does not tempt any man (James 1:13-15). However, I feel happier with the idea that the Lord may specifically be bidding us pray for deliverance from the latter day

holocaust to come upon the saints. The Lord Jesus can keep us from " the hour of trial [peirasmos] which is coming on the whole world" (Rev. 3:10). When the disciples were bidden pray that they enter not into temptation (Mk. 14:38- *peirasmos* again), they were being asked to pray the model prayer with passionate concentration and meaning. Yet those men in Gethsemane were and are representative of the latter day saints who are bidden pray that they may escape " all those things" , the hour of trial / *peirasmos* which is coming, and to stand acceptably before the Son of man at His coming. We ought to be praying fervently for this deliverance; but I wonder how many of us are? For the days of the final tribulation will be shortened for the sake of the elect- i.e., for the sake of their prayers (Mk. 13:19,20). The final tribulation of the last days will be the supreme struggle between the flesh and spirit, between the believer and the world, between Christ and the Biblical 'devil'; and we are to pray that we will be delivered victorious from that struggle. Thus "Lead us not into 'the test'" (Mt. 6:13) could in this context be understood as a plea to save us from entering into the time of final tribulation- just as the Lord specifically exhorts us to pray to be delivered from that time. The implication would be that the final time of testing will be so severe that indeed the elect will scarcely be saved. It seems to me that none of us have the urgent sense of the time of testing ahead which we should have; how many are praying daily to be spared it? How many are in actual denial that it will ever come, even though it's clear enough in Scripture?

" *For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever*" is the appropriate conclusion to a prayer that asks for the establishment of that Kingdom.

Whilst commenting upon the Lord's prayer, it is worth pointing out that the Lord repeated the essence of each phrase at various points during His life. When facing His ultimate struggle when facing up to the cross, He asked that the Father's Name would be glorified (Jn. 12:28)- quoting His own words from His model prayer. It hurt and cost Him so much to pray that prayer- the prayer we may have known for so many years that we can pray it almost at no cost. But to truly ask for the Father's will to be done is in fact a commitment to the way of the cross (Jn. 6:38; Heb. 10:7-10; Mk. 14:36). So let us pray the prayer- but putting meaning into the words.

3-5 Visualize God

Another feature of Biblical prayers is the way they start with some reference to God, often involving several clauses. This is to be connected with the idea of lifting the eyes to Heaven at the start of a prayer (Ps. 121:1; 123:1; Ez. 23:27; Dan. 4:34; Lk. 16:23; 18:13; Jn. 11:41; 17:1). There are enough of these references to make us wonder whether other references to lifting up the eyes to Heaven is an idiom for prayer. This seems likely in Num. 24:2; Josh. 5:13; Jud. 19:17 and 1 Chron. 21:16 among others. The simple implication of all this is that we should begin our prayers with a conscious imagination and personalization of the Father to whom we pray; " Our Father, *who art* in Heaven" says it all. " *God is in Heaven*, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few (more often translated " little")" (Ecc. 5:2). Ezra, Nehemiah and Solomon all start their major prayers with a reference to the fact that God really *is* there in Heaven.

The fact that God is a material, corporeal being is vital here. The very fact God has a spatial location, in Heaven, with Christ at His right hand, indicates of itself that God is a physical rather than purely spirit-ual being. The fact Christ really is there, seated at God's right hand interceding for us, was a concept which filled Paul's thinking (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2 cp. 1 Pet. 3:22). We are invited to see Christ as sitting

there, unlike the nervous High Priests of old on their annual entry into the Holiest *standing*; and we are surely invited to see the connection with the fact that Stephen saw the Lord *standing* at God's right hand, caught up, as it were, in the passion of mediation for His suffering servant (Acts 7:56), whereas normally He offers our prayers seated.

3-6 Approaching God

This visualizing of the throne of Heaven is to be associated with the way the Psalms often begin a prayer with a serious, intense request for God to hear the prayer (Ps. 4:1; 5:1,2; 17:1,2; 26:1; 28:1,2; 31:1,2; 35:1; 43:1; 54:2; 55:1,2; 57:1-3; 61:1; 64:1; 67:1; 71:2; 80:1; 83:1; 86:1; 88:2; 102:1,2; 109:1; 130:2; 141:1,2; 143:1). This is without doubt a significant emphasis. There is a marked contrast with the way our prayers usually *conclude* rather than begin with a plea for God to hear us. Yet if we had this sense of entering into the court of Heaven, it would surely be the more evident that we have a desperate need to beg *on entrance* to be heard, to receive a hearing, through the Lord Jesus. The young Jews in Babylon desired mercy from before the God of Heaven, just as their Babylonian colleagues desired mercy from before the throne of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:18 AVmg.). 1 Pet. 4:7 RV exhorts us to be "sober unto prayer", as if a sober, reflective mind set precedes powerful prayer. There is no better way to develop this than to meditate upon our approach to God Almighty.

Which leads us to another common theme in Biblical prayers: the language of the courtroom, pleading, hearing, crying for justice, pleading with God as the judge to show mercy, sending forth Angels to execute the answers, etc. " He shall send from Heaven, and save me" (Ps. 57:3) is worth reflecting upon. The word " send" is normally translated 'to send away, to let depart', implying physical movement away. This implies Angels are physically sent over space to answer prayer. The same word occurs in other verses where this same idea stands up well- e.g. Ps. 144:7 " Send Thine hand (an Angel) from Heaven. . . " ; " Let my sentence come forth from thy presence" (Ps. 17:2); " Judge me (i.e. my prayer)" (Ps. 26:1); " Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me" (Ps. 35:1); " Judge me, O God, and plead my cause...O deliver me from the ungodly man" (Ps. 43:1) are just a few of many examples. We are invited to see God Himself as enthroned, with Angels before Him on the right and left (1 Kings 22:21,22). The book of Job takes us further; the sons of God come before God, and discuss His children. " Satan" comes before them, apparently also an Angel, but representing the attitudes of one or more of Job's 'ecclesia'. He presents his case to God, and is empowered to afflict Job accordingly. All things and men are Angelically controlled; they each have a representative Angel before God's throne. This explains why Angels appear to be in conflict in Daniel and Rev. 12; it may be that we are being given visions of the court of Heaven, whereby the Angels represent and to some degree identify themselves with those nations or things they represent; and therefore they appear to be in conflict, although in actual reality this is of course not the case.

The persecution of David, e.g., was brought before God's throne by the Angel representing those men, and David's prayer was considered, brought before God (although not mediated by) his Angel (cp. Rev. 8:4). David pleaded that his prayer would be considered, and Angels would be sent forth to execute that answer. Hence his request for answers in terms of the word " send" (Ps. 20:2; 43:3; 57:3; 144:7); he perceived God as sending forth Angels with the answers. This was Abraham's conception too (Gen. 24:12 cp. 40). The idea of prayer being presented before God as the judge of all was taken over by the NT writers, with the difference that the emphasis is placed on the Lord Jesus as our matchless mediator and advocate. This

sense of the court of Heaven is therefore vital, and is consistently held by believers throughout the Bible.

Confess Your Sins

This is a vital part of prayer. To come before "the throne of grace" is to come in essence before the judgment and before the cross of our Lord. Inevitably these things convict us of our desperation. The publican who beat upon his breast "went down to his house justified" (Lk. 18:14). Yet we were justified by the shedding of the blood of Christ (Rom. 5:9). That man's faith was consciously focused upon the Lord's sacrifice. We believe on Him who justifies us, through the blood of the cross (Rom. 4:5), and this faith is manifested through focusing upon the cross, and expressing it in prayer to be justified.

3-7 Psychology And Prayer

We need to recognize that different personality types will relate to God in different ways ⁽¹⁾. For some, an emphasis on truth strikes a chord with their temperament. For others, the Biblical stress upon grace or the heights of the 'mystery' of what God has really done for us will appeal to their personality more strongly. Those Jung categorizes as 'feeling types' are, for example, less likely to be impressed by truth, falsehood and logic as 'thinking types' are. All of us must take care that we don't merely pray in a way that that is just a function of our old personality; it requires Biblically-guided effort. The 'intuitive type', to use Jung's classification further, may thus be liable to a prayer life that is more an exercise in psychological catharsis, a personal self-expression, rather than a relationship with the God of the Bible. Perfectionist personalities may be inclined to always defer praying until their mood or the situation is right. Yet God's tremendously high view of us must be allowed to influence us, to the point that we do not have the devalued self-image and self-appreciation which leads to the dis-ease of perfectionism. For depressive personalities, any kind of beginning is excruciating; and to begin to pray is hard, too. They may unconsciously react against duty, against whatever they sense to be an obligation. Perhaps their parents beset them with too high expectations or constant obligations, and these issues will later find expression in difficulties in prayer. These types must come to see prayer as a pleasure, a conversation with their Father which is not a duty. Depression is not a sin. Moses was depressed and suicidal in Num. 11:14,17 but there is no word of rebuke from God. He saw why Moses was like that—because of an over-extension of himself in doing his Father's work. Depression may bring about an inability to feel, which makes the prayers of David seem so far removed from us. Yet again, depression isn't a sin. It's how we are at some times. It shouldn't be allowed to hinder us from praying. And of course there is always a tendency to see our Heavenly Father in terms of our earthly father. Here the Truth of God should set us free; for the God of the Bible is a totally new revelation to us.

Notes

(1) Some useful books about this include C.G. Jung *Types Of Personality*, Paul Tournier, *Psychoanalytical Technique And Religious Faith* and also his *Medicine And The Person*.

3-8 Prayer And Fasting

There seems to be the idea amongst us that fasting was somehow part of the Mosaic system that we have now left behind. Yet the Sermon on the Mount clearly implies that the Lord saw fasting as part of the path of discipleship (Mt. 6:16-18). And there are many examples of fasting in the Old Testament that are quite unconnected with obedience to the Law. When the bridegroom is away, then we will fast [by implication, for His return- Mt. 9:15]. Try it, that's all I can say. Just start by going without some meals. Use the time and the natural desire to eat to increase the poignancy of the special requests you are making. Is. 58:4 RV says that fasting makes "your voice to be heard on high".

Yet the essence of fasting is to take us out of our comfort zone. We human beings have a great tendency to form habits in order to create or keep us within the comfort zone. Yet truly creative thinking and action, not to say true obedience to the call of Christ, all occur outside of the comfort zone. Fasting is only one of many ways to go outside of it. Take a different route home from work; describe your faith to yourself in terms and language you wouldn't usually use. Pray at different times, bring before the Lord the most banal things you usually wouldn't dream of talking with Him about.

3-9 How To Improve Prayer

Pray Simply

The Lord in Gethsemane took a long time to pray the simple words: " Father, if" . It was long enough for the disciples to fight a losing battle against drowsiness and fall fast asleep (the Greek implies). But how do you pray? With simple, staccato words and phrases like His? Or do you desperately seek for words, any words, just to make it seem you prayed, trying to be like the more mature brethren you hear praying at gatherings? Or after many years of prayer, can I ask, are you just churning out the same old phrases and ideas, with little meaning put into the words...? If the Son of God Himself prayed in such simple terms, surely we ought to likewise. He was and is " harmless" (Heb. 7:26) in His priestly mediation; the same word is translated " simple" in Rom. 16:8. He was an intellectual beyond compare, morally and dialectically He defeated the most cunning cross-questioning of His day; and yet He was a working man surrounded by masses of daily problems. But He was and is " simple" in the sense of single-mindedly committed to His priestly work. We are on earth and God is in Heaven, and therefore our words should be few (Ecc. 5:2). Not few in the sense that we don't pray for very long, but few in terms of their simplicity and directness. The Lord warned us against the complicated prayer forms of the Pharisees; and asked us to *mean* our words of 'yes' and 'no' rather than use more sophisticated assurances. The heart is deceitful and so wicked we cannot plumb its depths (Jer. 17:9); and yet the pure in heart are blessed. This must surely mean that the " pure" in heart are those who despite the intrinsic self-deception of the human heart, are nonetheless " pure" or single hearted in their prayer and motives and desire to serve God.

Each statement of the apparently simple model prayer needs careful reflection. He told the disciples in Gethsemane to earnestly pray the simple saying: " pray not to fail in the test" (Mt. 26:41 cp. 6:13). The prayer that they could gabble mindlessly must be prayed with intense attention to every phrase.

Be Confident

So believe in prayer being answered that you act *and feel* as if it has been answered already. Jeremiah prayed from the dungeon: "You have heard my voice" (Lam. 3:56)- and yet he begs God to urgently save him. He doesn't beg God to hear him; he believed that what he asked was as good as done. God *had* answered; although Jeremiah was urging Him to answer in practice.

Don't just pray when you feel the need.

Don't pray out of anxiety alone, but as part of a way of life. Daniel (Dan. 6:10) and David (Ps. 55:17; 119:164) prayed regularly; the incense (cp. prayer) was offered regularly. Daniel was even willing to forfeit his life for the sake of showing openly his devotion to this practice. 5 minutes in the morning and at lunch time and 20 minutes at night ought to be a minimum (plus before meals and the daily readings). Speaking of his regular morning prayers, David wrote: " In the morning will I order my prayer unto thee" (Ps. 5:3 RV). Again there is the suggestion that he planned out ('ordered') his words before saying them. Even Jesus seems to have prepared His words before praying them. Consider Jn. 12:27 RVmg: " What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour?" . But it appears He decided against praying that.

Say "Amen"

Say "Amen" at the end of a prayer, out loud. "Amen" comes from the same Hebrew root as *he'min*, to believe, or, more strictly, "to affirm, recognize as valid". Thus when we read that Abraham "put his trust" in God (Gen. 15:6) we are to understand that he 'said amen' to God's promises. Maybe we need to reflect for a moment on what we have asked for from God, which promises of His we have pleaded in our prayer- and then 'Amen' it.

Don't just pray for yourself.

Prayer can easily become a form of spiritual selfishness. The majority of Bible prayers are for others. God will hear our prayers for others, provided they have a certain modicum of spirituality (James 5:16 cp. Jer. 14:12). If our prayers really can help others' on their salvation road- how we should use this! Remember Lot's deliverance for the sake of Abraham's prayers, whilst he unknowingly went about his daily life in those last hours. Reflect too how the Lord told us: " Pray *ye* may be accounted worthy to...be stood before the son of man" . Not 'pray for thyself', singular, but for the whole community of the last days.

Think what you are going to ask for in advance

Paul's description of praying " night and day" (1 Thess. 3:9,10) alludes to the sacrifices, prepared and offered " night and day" (Ex. 30:7,8; Ps. 55:16,17). There was clearly an element of preparation before offering the prayer, as there was before offering a sacrifice. Note how Prov. 15:8 likewise parallels sacrifice with prayer. Prayer ought to be a humbling experience, perhaps alluded to by the incense, representing prayer, needing to be "beaten small". Preparation of prayer involves humility. David takes words of supplication to himself, which as King he must often have heard from desperate citizens, and uses it in his own prayers to God: "Save, Lord: let the king hear us when we call... A Psalm of David" (Ps. 20:9). In this one sees a conscious humility in how David formulated his prayers.

Make sure what you ask for is what you really want, according to God's word. Recall how Jeremiah prayed against his Jewish persecutors: " Give heed to me, O Lord, and hearken to the voice of them that contend with me (note how he equates their words with his prayer, as if God sees behaviour of others as prayer to Him concerning us)...they have digged a pit for my soul...therefore deliver up their children to the famine, and pour out their blood by the force of the sword; and let their wives be bereaved of their children, and be widows; and let their men be put to death; let their young men be slain by the sword in battle...forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from thy sight, but let them be overthrown before thee" (Jer. 18:18-23). Yet Jeremiah spent much of the book of Lamentations repeating these phrases, almost every one of them, and pleading that God would *not* do this, and would relent of fulfilling his earlier imprecation against Israel. Like Jeremiah, we can all too easily pray for what we will later ask to be changed. David prayed for deliverance from "the evil man", Saul; he asked that Saul be slain and punished (Ps. 140:1,9,10). But when this prayer was answered, David wept with the amazing lamentation over Saul which we have in 2 Sam. 1. It's a lesson to think carefully about what we're praying for, and imagine our response and situation if actually the prayer is answered. We need to pray as if every prayer *will* be answered, not just expressing our feelings and immediate desires, as it seems David did in his prayer against Saul.

The glory of God must be our overshadowing influence. Hezekiah so wanted to live longer, and he was given that request. But he would have probably been better setting his hope on the future Kingdom and not asking for something which may have cost him his salvation. Jeremiah had used the phrase "there is nothing too hard for thee" in his prayer; but the Father responded to him by saying: "Is there anything too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:17,27). He was quoting Jeremiah's prayer back to him, and asking him if he really believed those words he had used. And many of the words and phrases we pray we do well to later reflect upon too.

Prayer is a sacrifice; it demands effort. The Jews prayed the afternoon prayer at 3p.m., when the sacrifices were being offered, to make this connection between prayer and sacrifice. Both Ezra (Ezra 9:5) and Daniel (Dan. 9:21) prayed at the time of the evening sacrifice. Clearly enough, prayer isn't something we just do half-heartedly, nor as a mindless duty, nor half asleep at night...it's a sacrifice.

Pray Slowly

There are of course times of crisis where we pray to God with open eyes, taking just a few seconds to cry out to Him in our time of need. Nehemiah's prayer before the King is an example of this (Neh. 2:4). Because God is pleased that we should turn to Him like this, let's not let all our prayers degenerate to this quick quick, over-and-done level. Prayer is likened to carefully prepared sacrifice, to painstakingly composed incense, beaten small (Ps. 141:2), mixed in just the right proportions. The penalty for not making the incense properly was death. Forethought will precede real prayer. It is an offering to God. And yet I sense our tendency is to rush into prayer, with the feeling that we are righteous simply because we are making the effort to pray at all. Think of Daniel, faced with a death sentence. It would have been my natural reaction to rush off a quick prayer to God, and ask for something dramatic to happen quickly. But Daniel asked that he would be given *time to pray*; he knew it would have to be serious prayer to save him from the situation, and he knew that involved time and effort (Dan. 2:16).

Try to allow gaps for meditation in between uttering statements in prayer. The Lord must surely have prayed like this when He prayed all night for guidance in choosing the twelve, or when He prayed the same brief words three times, during which time the disciples fell asleep. He prayed for a far longer time than it would take to just speak the words which He said. " Let this cup pass from me" may well have been punctuated by a few minutes between each word. To assist in this practically, perhaps whisper the words of your prayer out loud (this also guards against mind-wandering, the scourge of every prayerful man). Some Psalms seem to merge into God's answer; consider Moses' prayer for Joshua: " There shall no evil befall thee...he shall give his angels charge over thee...because he hath set his love upon me, I will deliver him...I will be with him in trouble" (Ps. 91). The request of Moses for Joshua merged into God's answer. We should come to sense a mutuality in prayer between us and the Father. God is attentive to our words in prayer (Ps. 17:1; Neh. 1:6) as we attend to His words (Prov. 4:1,20 s.w.). Likewise the Hebrew for " gracious" means literally to bow down; it is used both about God graciously bowing down to hear our prayers, and also of us bowing down to pray to Him (2 Chron. 6:37).

Prayer is intensely personal.

We should be saying and expressing things to God which are our most intense, essential, personal feelings. We cannot, therefore, easily use trite, stock phrases in our personal prayers. Note the grammatically needless repetition of the personal pronoun in Mt. 6:6: " When *thou* prayest, enter into *thy* closet, and when *thou* hast shut *thy* door, pray to *thy* Father, which is in secret; and *thy* Father which seeth in secret shall reward *thee* openly" . Likewise when reading the Psalms, especially 71, note how many times David addresses God with the personal pronoun: thee, thy, thou...it really is a personal relationship.

True prayer is to be "in secret". There should be an appropriate modesty in speaking about it to others. Consider how Moses spent 40 days in intense intercession for Israel, and succeeded in changing God's mind. But he didn't tell them this for about 37 years, until Moses recounted it to the people at the end of his life in Dt. 9:18.

Tiredness And Prayer

Have you noticed that we tend to yawn after we start praying? Or have you found that you really start feeling sleepy after beginning your evening prayers? This it seems to me is a very common obstacle amongst us to truly fervent, focused prayer. Because life is so frenetic, our brain is shocked when we do finally stop all the activity and sit still and mentally concentrate with our eyes closed. The brain figures something is wrong, and decides we need oxygen-hence the yawning. Simply be aware of this, and therefore consider making your main prayer at some time other than last thing at night.

Pray for the smallest things

The evidence presented in this chapter notwithstanding, don't be ashamed to pray to the Father for help in the *smallest* things. This is His will and pleasure for us. And don't be shy to pray for others, in apparently small things. Even the mighty Paul asked the Hebrew believers to pray for him because their prayers would hasten the day of his release (Heb. 13:19). We must pray not to be led into temptation (Mt. 6:13); but when we fall into such temptation (s.w.), count it all joy, James (1:2). The exercise of praying not to experience those temptations was for our spiritual benefit, and God is willing that it should be so.

Remember that the Lord Jesus is agonizing for you in Heaven, groaning in spirit for your innermost desire to be granted. The language of Romans 8 about His intercession with groanings which cannot be uttered is to be connected with Hebrews 5 speaking of the Lord groaning with strong crying and tears on the cross. The point being that the intensity of His prayer there, struggling for every breath, is the same essential intensity with which He mediates for us now. He died "*for us*", and yet right now He appears "before the face of God *for us*" (Heb. 9:24 RV). Thus there is a connection between His death and His ongoing mediation "for us". We must struggle with Him, framing and offering our words in the full realization of the agonizing effort He is willing to make to intercede. Remember how Stephen saw the Lord Jesus *standing* at the right hand of the Heavenly throne, whereas many times in Hebrews we read of how He has *sat* down there, in contrast to Mosaic priests who stand up. Yet such was the Lord's passion in intercession for Stephen that He *stood* up from His usually seated position. And this is going on right now, and it will do for you, too, next time you give thanks for a meal in His name, and when you pray tonight. The risen and exalted Lord is spoken of as being shamed, being crucified afresh, as agonizing in prayer for us just as He did on the cross (Rom. 8:24 cp. Heb. 5:7-9). On the cross, He made intercession for us (Is. 53:11,12); but now He ever liveth to make such intercession (Heb. 7:25). There He bore our sins; and yet now He still bears our sins (Is. 53:4-6. 11).

So let's try to avoid giving God the dog-end of our day, drifting off to sleep as we pray. This is a besetting weakness of the majority of us. Without being ostentatious in the eyes of others, try to use a physical position which is conducive to concentration. There are Biblical examples of prayer standing, kneeling, sitting, sitting cross-legged, with hands uplifted... Remember how the Lord told the disciples to *rise* and pray; He could see that curled up as they were, they were more likely to nod off to sleep than intensely pray (Lk. 22:46). He had already told them to pray (v. 40), and doubtless they had obediently started praying, but had fallen asleep while doing so. "*Rise* and pray" surely suggests: 'Come on men, I told you to pray, but you can't pray lounging around like that!'. And I would bet many of us need the same words.

4. The Power Of Prayer

4-1 God Changing His Mind

And God does change His mind. Remember how He told Moses that He was going to destroy Israel and make of Moses a great nation. And Moses pleaded with God. And God changed His mind. Just like He "repented", changed His mind, that He had made man at the time of the flood. Moses was specifically told to go away from the congregation, and yet he ran towards them in order to make atonement for them (Num. 16:45,47). Moses was so close to God that he could apparently 'disobey' Him because Moses knew there was a chance of changing God's intentions. He was so close to God- and in this case, God did indeed change His intentions. He had only just changed them over another matter, in relenting from destroying all Israel due to Korah's rebellion- because Moses prayed for the people (Num. 16:21,22). And there are so many other examples:

- God told Israel straight in Jud. 10:13: "Ye have forsaken me, and served other gods: wherefore I will deliver you no more" . But they begged Him, and He did. And likewise in Hosea, He said He would give them up completely, but just couldn't bring Himself to do it.

- He had promised to bring Israel in to the promised land. But He destroyed that generation- " and ye shall know my breach of promise" , or, " the altering of my purpose" (Num. 14:34). God's purpose *can* change. He says so Himself.

- Amos preached the message of coming judgment upon Israel and then due to his prayer, averted it. Days / months later perhaps, he added to the record of his prophecies: " The Lord repented for this: It shall not be, saith the Lord" (Am. 7:1 cp. 3; 7:4 cp. 6). The prophesied sending of fire and grasshoppers upon Israel was recorded, but then averted by Amos' prayer.

- Some prophecies are dependent on prayer for their fulfilment. Take Is. 62:1: " For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness" . But this is dependent upon prayer: " I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem...ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest *till* he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (:6,7). The prophecy that " I will not rest" was dependent for fulfilment upon the faithful continuing to pray and thereby not giving Him rest. Of course, they pray from their own freewill; there is the possibility they won't pray, and thereby, surely, there's the possibility the statement " I will not rest" is purely conditional on our prayers...?

- When Hezekiah studied the words of Micah, " did he not fear the Lord, and besought the Lord, and the Lord repented him of the evil which he had pronounced against him" (Jer. 26:19). Those words of prophecy had their fulfilment annulled or delayed thanks to Hezekiah's prayer and repentance. Likewise Jonah's prophecy that in 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed, unconditionally, was nullified by their repentance.

- Another example of God's being so open to change is to be found in the way He tells Hezekiah plainly: "You will not get well". And yet Hezekiah prays, and God informs him that He will heal Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1,6 NET). Clearly enough, prayer changes things.

- The principle is summed up in Jeremiah 18. It has been truly commented about this chapter: " Whenever a piece of pottery turned out imperfect the potter would take the clay and make it into something else. God says that this is the principle behind His actions. If He says He is going to build up a nation but the nation disobeys Him the prophecy will not be fulfilled. Equally, if He says He is going to destroy a nation and the nation repents, He will not carry out His intention" . This is why God Himself reflects that He " said surely..." , *but* changed His mind (Zeph. 3:7; Jer. 31:20).

If there is genuine freewill, it is apparent enough that God's purposes must be to some extent conditional. If the Lord had failed in the wilderness temptations, " there was the possibility that the purpose of God would have been circumvented". All this explains why the fulfilment of prophecy can only be perceived at the time of fulfilment- it is impossible to know in advance how it will be fulfilled. It isn't a time-line of future events which we are to discern. It should also be born in mind that " the teaching of Jesus [is] that the purpose of prophecy is that we shall be able to recognize the signs when they appear, not that we shall be able to predict the future":

- " I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe" (Jn. 14:29).

· The disciples did not expect Jesus to enter into Jerusalem " sitting on an ass's colt" in fulfilment of Zech. 9:9. But when He did, then soon afterwards, all became clear to them- that He had fulfilled this prophecy (Jn. 12:16).

· Likewise with prophecies such as " the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up" in Ps. 69:9, and even the Lord's own prophecies of His resurrection. When it happened, " his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture (Ps. 69:9), and the word which Jesus had said" (Jn. 2:17-22).

All this implies that God in a sense limits His foreknowledge. God allows Himself to be open to the emotion of surprise. Once this fact is established, it becomes apparent that God allows His option of foreknowledge to be limited in some ways at some times- although, as various passages make clear, He exercises it over other issues. God was surprised at the way Israel offered their children to idols: "...nor did it enter into my mind that they should do this abomination... indeed it never even entered my mind" (Jer. 32:35 NRSV; Jer. 7:31; 19:5). Likewise God "expected [the vineyard of Israel] to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (Is. 5:1,2 NASB). God Almighty muses: "Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes, did it produce worthless ones?" (Is. 5:4). Likewise "He looked for justice [i.e., expected it], but behold, bloodshed" (Is. 5:7). All this explains the utter pain of His relationship with Israel: "I thought that she would come back to me. But she did not... I thought that you would call me 'Father' and would not stop being loyal to me. But, you have been unfaithful to me" (Jer. 3:6,7,19,20 NET). Bearing all this in mind, one wonders whether the questions God asks at times are in fact merely rhetorical; perhaps some of them are genuine reflections of how He has restrained His foreknowledge in order to become vulnerably in love with His people. For example: "How long will these people treat me with contempt?" (Num. 14:11).

I'm aware that by saying these things, I'm pushing a view of God that is quite different to that held by many believers. My comment is that the view of God widely held in Christianity has its roots in Plato's philosophy that God is totally without emotion and unable to be touched by our situation on earth in a passionate manner. The very first clause of the 39 Articles of the Church of England reads: "God is without body, parts, and passions". The Westminster Confession of Faith says the same- God is "without passions". Frankly I find it incredible that this kind of thing can be said, when the Bible is so utterly full of examples of God's passionate response to human grief upon earth. It seems clear enough to me that those churches founded upon such suppositions are simply flatly in contradiction to clear Bible teaching, and reflect their roots in pagan philosophy rather than God's word. Rather than in any sense bringing God 'down', it seems to me that by assigning to Him the characteristics and possibilities which His own word so often speaks of, we are in fact elevating His awesomeness and wonder. It may be exhilarating or fascinating intellectually to discuss these things; but accepting the Biblical revelation of a God passionately responsive to our situation on earth demands a lot. Action from us is demanded, rather than resignation [which seems to me to be the result of thinking that God is without passions and never changes His mind on anything]. If God simply states His purpose and carries it out, forcing His way through human freewill, then God, to me at least, becomes about manipulation, raw power, and despotism. But the God of the Bible isn't like this. I like the way John Sanders puts it: "God did not want to dance alone, dance with a mannequin or hire someone who is obligated to dance with Him. God wants to dance with us as persons in fellowship, not with puppets or contracted performers, and thus needs our consent" (1).

Asaph, in self-admitted depression, encourages himself to pray by reflecting "That the right hand of the Most High does change" (Ps. 77:10 RVmg.). The fact we *can* change the mind and intention of God is a great motivation to pray.

(1) John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology Of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998) p. 210.

4-2 The Power Of Prayer

In all the above examples, prayer and repentance can change God's stated purpose. Prayer changes things. It really does. What would otherwise have happened can be changed by prayer. We, little and tiny humans, can change the mind of Almighty God. This is the extent of His sensitivity to us. Moses, Samuel and Jeremiah had the power to *within limits* change God's mind towards His people (Jer. 15:1). David prayed and fasted for his child by Bathsheba not to die- even though God had said that it would (2 Sam. 12:16). He clearly believed that God was a God who was open to changing in response to prayer. The prayer of a righteous man can even affect how God may hear the prayers of less spiritually committed people- thus Nehemiah prayed that God would hear the prayers of the rest of Israel in captivity (Neh. 1:11). Reflect how Abraham reasoned with God over Sodom's destruction. If 40 righteous had been found there....it wouldn't have been destroyed, thanks to Abraham's prayer. And he reasons with God, down to 10 righteous. Now I ask...if Abraham had asked: "If...*one* righteous man be found there...?" . Would God have said 'No'? We don't know, but the impression I have is He would have agreed. The salvation of Sodom depended upon Abraham's breadth of vision. God's mercy is upon us, and upon others, according as we hope in Him. Abraham's amazing spiritual ambition in changing the mind of God and reasoning with Him is really intended to be our example. Gideon picked up almost the very words of Abraham in Gen. 18:32 when he asks God "Do not let your wrath blaze...let me speak just once more" (Jud. 6:39). And if Abraham's spirit in prayer could influence Gideon... it can echo down through a few more centuries to influence us too.

All of the above may have sounded philosophical. But the bottom line is: prayer changes things. And seeing that it does, well then *pray on your knees, fervently!* Not cuddled up in bed about to fall asleep. Jacob is a symbol of us all. He became Israel, he who struggles with God. And this is a key feature of all those who comprise the true Israel. When God told Moses to leave Him alone to destroy them, and go back down to the people immediately (Dt. 9:12), Moses stayed on to plead with God not to destroy them. And God listened (Ex. 32:7-14). He repented of the evil He had thought to do. He changed His mind, because Moses stayed on. There is an element of striving with God in prayer, knowing that His mind *is* open to change (Rom.). This is what stimulates me to what intensity in prayer I can muster. That God *is* open to hearing and even changing His holy mind about something. Such is His sensitivity to us. Such is His love. And such is the scary implication of the total freewill which the Father has afforded us. This is why God could reason with Moses as a man speaks to his friend and vice versa. It was a dynamic, two way relationship in thought and prayer and being. This is why Jesus likens requesting things from God to a man asking a favour of his friend at midnight (Lk. 11:5,9). We are to see God as *our friend* to whom like Abraham, we respectfully and rather awkwardly present ourselves. And He sees us as *His* friends. There's a wonderful mutuality between a man and his God.

Revelation describes Angels rushing in response to human prayers, vials of judgment being poured out on earth as a result of the incense of prayer accumulating...this is the power of

prayer. If prayer is like incense, we must give Dt. 33:10 RVmg. its full weight- that incense would come up "in your nostrils". This is how intimately we are invited to see our prayers being received by God; this is the power of prayer. The golden vials full of prayers of Rev. 5:8 become the vials of judgments which are poured out on the land in Rev. 8:5- so close is the connection between the events that mould history, and the incense of prayer. The way the Angel comes out from the incense altar to begin the final judgments implies that the beginning of the end of human history is related to our prayers (Rev. 14:18). The more of it, the greater and stronger the effect- that was the lesson of the allusion to prayer as incense. The more the unjust judge was nagged [cp. prayer], the more he responded. This is why the Lord's rememberancers remind Him day and night of the needs of His people (Is. 62:6 RV). It really does produce response in Heaven that would not otherwise happen. Psalm 18 is full of the wonder of this. David marvels that when he cried to his God, " then the earth shook and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains were disturbed" as God " came down" in response to his mere human words and thoughts, prayerfully expressed.

The final reminder at the end of the Lord's prayer that "thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory" is evidently a conscious reference to David's prayer on gathering materials to build the temple: "Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all" (1 Chron. 29:11). The context is David saying that God can do absolutely everything, because absolutely everything, past, present and future, belongs to Him. He continues: "Both riches and honor come of thee, and thou rulest over all; and in thy hand is power and might; and in thy hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all" (1 Chron. 29:12). So what David is saying is that because the Kingdom, power and glory all belong to God, absolutely every material thing and every possible action is His and within His potential power to do for us... therefore we leave our prayer on that note. It's not only a note of praise, but an expression of faith that, quite simply, God can and will provide, in the very end.

Jer. 27:22 states that the temple vessels "shall be carried to Babylon". And yet the people of Jeremiah's time were urged to "now make intercession to the Lord of hosts, that the vessels which are left in the house of the Lord... go not to Babylon" (Jer. 27:18). An absolute unconditional statement of God's intentions can be changed by prayer. This is how powerful prayer is.

Finally, some encouragement not to fear the awesomeness of the power of prayer. Faith in prayer can result in mountains being cast into the sea. Yet this same idea occurs in Rev. 8:8 describing an Angel casting a mountain into the sea. The idea surely is that our prayers here on earth can really result in Angels acting from Heaven in a dramatic way here on earth. And yet Ps. 46:2 encourages us not to fear when mountains are cast into the sea. Putting the passages together, we're surely intended to realize that answers to bold prayer can actually be quite terrifying when they actually happen. I think we can all think of examples in our lives. The young sister prays to be able to go do missionary work; and when she's out there in the field, the answer to that prayer can seem terrifying. Another young sister pleads to become pregnant; and then there's some element of fear when that mountain is cast into the sea, and she realizes she is expecting a child.

4-3 God Limiting His Omniscience

All these things are hard to really believe if we think that God knows all things from the beginning and knows the outcome of every prayer and repentance. The passion and emotion would be taken out of it. It is clear enough that God at times limits His power. He *could* save everybody, indeed He wishes to do this, yet He allows human freewill to be genuine and meaningful, to the extent that not all will be saved. Israel in the wilderness " limited the Holy One of Israel" . He was left by Israel as a mighty man powerless to save (Jer.). The Greek word *dunatos* translated 16 times " mighty" is also 13 times translated " possible" . God's might is His possibility. But our freewill can limit that might. All things are possible to God, and therefore all things are possible to the believer- but if the believer has no faith, then, those possibilities of God will not occur (Lk. 1:49; Mk. 9:23; 10:27). And so I have no problem with a God who limits His omniscience. Here are some further examples of God limiting His knowledge:

- Recall how He " went down" to Sodom to see if they had really sinned as much as it seemed. He was surely restraining His omniscience in acting like that.

- He forgets our sins; and yet God knows everything that happens and is thought today, and also yesterday. And yet, He limits that total knowledge by forgetting our sins. In Amos 8:7 God swore He would never forget Israel's sin. Yet the same word is used in Is. 65:16 of how God hid their sin from His eyes. He restrained His omniscience. He erased His own permanent memory as it were.

- When God wanted to heal Israel, then He discovered their sin (Hos. 7:1; Ez. 16:57). Why speak like this if God already knew their sin from the beginning?

- Scripture repeatedly speaks as if God notices things and is then hurt by what He sees (Jonah 3:10; Gen. 29:31; Ex. 3:4; Dt. 32:19; 2 Kings 14:26; 2 Chron. 12:7; Ez. 23:13; Is. 59:15 cp. Lk. 7:13). If He knew in advance what they were going to do, this language is hard for me to understand. But God is therefore hurt and 'surprised' at sin- He saw Israel as the firstripe grapes, but they were worshipping Baal even then (Hos. 9:9).

- The eagerness of the God who was in love with His woman Israel is quite something. " Surely they are my people, children that will not lie!" (Is. 63:8), He triumphed. But this was because of His mercy and love to them (v.7). That love as it were blinded His eyes to their sin. And this is the basis of our being counted righteous if we are in His beloved Son. But with Israel, " *then* I saw that she was defiled...*then* my mind was alienated" (Ez. 23:13,18). He stopped restraining His omniscience. He saw them for who they were, unfaithful, and reacted. He did everything He could for His vineyard, and was then so bitterly disappointed when it brought forth wild grapes (Is. 5:4).

- God sent His Son to Israel, thinking " they will reverence him when they see him" (Lk. 20:13). But Isaiah 53 had prophesied that when Israel saw Him, they would see no beauty in Him and crucify Him. Yet God restrained that knowledge, in His love and positive hope for His people. Likewise Jesus, it seems to me limited His foreknowledge of Judas. He knew from the beginning who would betray him. One of the 12 was a traitor. Yet Judas was His own familiar friend in whom He trusted.

- Repentance, change of mind, can be hid from God's eyes (Hos. 13:14). He says in Ez. 5:11 that He will withdraw His eye, that it will not spare- when He saw the suffering of Israel at the hands of the invaders He sent (RVmg.). The idea of things being hidden from God's eyes

is surely a poetic way of saying He limits His omniscience. Likewise God did not let His eye spare in punishing His people (Ez. 5:11; 9:5), after the pattern of His telling Moses to 'let me alone' that He might destroy them. It's as if God knows that He *is* emotional and is capable of being influenced by those emotions. And yet, God is so torn. He wanted to destroy them. But He wanted to save them. They were His children. And, worst of all, He "often" went through this feeling (Ps. 106:45).

- "I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind" (Jer. 7:31; 19:5) was God's comment upon infant sacrifice. One could think that all possibilities have occurred to an omniscient, eternal God. But, no, not all. And He is hurt and shocked when His people devise perversions which He Himself has never even dreamed of. In this alone we see a limitation of His omniscience.

This explains why God's anger comes up in His face; why He speaks in the fire of His jealousy when His 'woman' has been unfaithful (Ez. 36:5). It also gives us a window into how God can say that His bowels, His innermost heart, are troubled for His people when He sees them suffer (Jer. 31:20). These wonderful, wonderful words would lose most of their power if God calmly foresaw it all coming, and men were just acting out the part He knew they would play. In this is the vitality and dynamism of our relationship with God. We are made in God's image, and so we too have feelings of surprise, shock, hurt, anger, revenge. God does too. As we pray, as we struggle to understand, as we Hope in His grace, our feelings and His come together in a wonderful relationship. This is why there is an element of mutuality in our prayers. God "granted" Hannah's request for a child (1 Sam. 1:27 NIV) and she "granted" the child back to God (1 Sam. 1:28 RV). When Hannah says 'What you give me, I will give back to you' (1 Sam. 1:11), she understood this mutuality between the Father and His children which is developed through answered prayer.

4-4 Prayer Changes Things

Quite simply, we have to believe that prayer changes things. God can change the course of a nation's destiny, or even in a sense the whole course of the universe, because some finite, ignorant, sinful human being has the neck to fervently ask Him to. We are encouraged by the Lord to persist in prayer (Lk. 11:5-13). Elijah had to pray for rain seven times before the cloud came. Daniel prayed 21 days before an answer came. Why doesn't God answer immediately? Is it not simply because He sees it is for our good to develop this habit of knocking on Heaven's door with the same same request? And I ask: do we really persevere in prayer?

Believe that you really will receive; avoid the temptation of asking for things as a child asks for Christmas presents, with the vague hope that something might turn up. Be like Paul, who fell upon the smashed body of Eutychus with the assurance: "Trouble not yourselves [alluding to his Lord in the upper room]; for his life is in him" (Acts 20:10). Remember how Elijah heard, by faith, the noise of rain even before he had formally prayed for it, and when there was no hint of rain (1 Kings 18:40-44 cp. James 5:18). The widow woman shut the door and started to pour out the oil into the vessels (2 Kings 4:5); the way the Lord alludes to this implies that she prayed before she started pouring, and yet she was sure already that it would happen (Mt. 6:6). This should inspire a spirit of soberness in our prayers. Moses cried to Yahweh to take away the frogs, "and Yahweh did according to the word of Moses" (Ex. 8:12,13); the requests of prayer become almost a command to God; by His grace, we will ask what we will and He will do it for us (Jn. 16:23). W.E.Vine makes the point that the Greek

here implies a superior asking an inferior to do something. Not only is this an essay in the humility of God's self-revelation, but it surely shows how if we seriously believe in the power of prayer, what we request really will be given. "Thou shalt also decree a thing (in prayer) and it shall be established unto thee" (Job 22:28). Rev. 9:13 portrays prayer as a command to the Angels. The prayer of command is to be found in the well known words of Ps. 122. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem", David exhorts. And the response [made so much clearer when the Psalm is sung]: "Peace be within thy walls...I will now say, Peace be within thee" (Ps. 122:6-8). The way peace is 'commanded' to be in Jerusalem by those who pray is because they so believe that the answer will surely come.

The Attitude Of Jesus

Jesus believed that He had already raised Lazarus back to life and so He was now asking him to come out of the grave. Presumably there were just seconds in it- He raised Lazarus, and then, invited Lazarus to come out. Jesus spoke to Lazarus as a person speaks to another living person. He didn't invite the immortal soul of Lazarus to reunite with the body. He raised Lazarus from the dead- that was the miracle. Jesus said that He 'awoke Lazarus out of sleep' (Jn. 11:11)- not reunited a 'soul' with a body. Jn. 11:42 is instructive- Jesus prays: "And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the multitude that standeth around I said it, that they may believe that thou didst send me". What was it that Jesus "said" or commanded of the Father? The preceding context doesn't seem to record Him saying that much. It seems to me that Jesus had asked / commanded / said to the Father to resurrect Lazarus. Jesus believed that this had happened. And so, in utter faith, he thanks the Father for raising Lazarus- even though Lazarus was still silent in the grave and there was at that point no actual physical evidence Lazarus had come back to life. But then Jesus says, believing so firmly the prayer had already been answered 'OK Lazarus, well, come out and see us then' [my paraphrase!]. The whole point was to demonstrate that "I am the resurrection and the life", to confirm Martha's faith that indeed there would be a resurrection "at the last day" (Jn. 11:24,25). It wasn't to demonstrate that Jesus could reunite 'soul' and body- it was to prove a resurrection. The same calm and total faith was seen when the Lord took the young girl by the hand and said "Talitha cumi, which is, My child, I say to you, Get up" (Mk. 5:41). "Get up" there isn't from the '*anastasis*' group of words which are used about the 'rising up' of dead people in resurrection. It's *egeiro*, which more literally means 'to get up'. 'Honey, it's time to get up now' was what the Lord was saying- not 'I command you to resurrect'. He had raised her, given her life, and He knew that. In fact, He'd done it a while beforehand. For He told the mourners: "The girl isn't dead, she's only sleeping" (Mk. 5:39). He raised her even before going into the room- and He knew that. And so when He finally saw her, He took her hand and gently asked her to get up out of bed. His gentleness, His faith, His calmness, His certainty that the Father heard Him- are all wondrous.

The Lord's utter confidence in the power of prayer is reflected in the way He speaks to lepers, to waves of the sea, to blind eyes and deaf ears, commanding them to do things. Yet clearly this was a result of His own prayer to the Father. Yet He was so confident that what He had requested would really come true. And in Mk. 11:23 He challenges us to tell mountains to be removed. He doesn't tell us to ask God to move a mountain; rather does He teach us to talk directly to the mountain. It's been observed that Biblical Hebrew has no word for 'yes'; instead, in order to show agreement, the preceding words of the speaker are repeated. Examples are in Esther 5:7 Heb. and Gen. 18:15 (1). Seeing that Biblical Hebrew reflects to us something of the mind of God, it seems to me that we're being taught by this to believe that what we ask for from God, we will receive; our request is the nature of the answer.

Hence the need for care in formulating *what* we ask for, believing that God's 'yes' will be effectively a repeating back of our words to us.

This should all provoke a sober, deliberate spirit in prayers of request. We will not use "vain repetitions" (Mt. 6:7); the Greek means literally 'to stutter / stammer with the logos'. We know what the man with a chronic stammer is trying to say before he actually finishes saying it. To hear him saying the same syllables again and again is a frustration for us. It's a telling way of putting it. God knows our need before we ask (Mt. 6:8). Say it, if we have to be explicit, and mean what we ask. And leave it there. 'Don't keep stammering on in your prayers' is to be connected with what comes a bit later: "Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek)...but seek (i.e. pray for, Is. 55:16) the Kingdom of God, and His (imputed) righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt. 6:31-33). We are not merely to believe that what we ask for we will receive. But Mk. 11:23 RV goes further: the Christian must "believe that what he saith cometh to pass" - present tense. He is to visualize the immediate fulfilment of what he asks for in the court of Heaven. Compare the RV and AV of Ps. 92:11 in this connection: "Mine eye also shall see [RV 'hath seen'] my desire...and mine ears shall hear [RV 'have heard'] my desire". The confusion in the tenses is surely intentional- David really felt he had already received that which he prayed for. He shows this again by the way in which he uses tense moods perhaps purposefully ambiguously in Ps. 56:13. The AV has: "Wilt not thou deliver my feet from falling...?", whereas the RV renders it: "Hast thou not delivered my feet from falling?". Another example is in Ps. 18:44,47: "The strangers *shall* submit themselves...God [right now, by faith in prayer] subdueth the peoples". David perhaps perceived that the requests of prayer must also be some sort of statement that the prayer was answered already. The Lord showed the way in this when He spoke to the corpse of the widow's dead son as if it were already restored to life: "Young man, I say unto thee, arise" (Lk. 7:14). David could have sorrow in his heart all day, and yet also sing in his heart to the Lord because he believed that God "hath dealt bountifully with me", i.e. his prayers he considered as already heard (Ps. 13:2,6). Hannah is a great example. After praying for a child, she went her way "and her countenance was no more sad" (1 Sam. 1:18) because she truly believed she would soon become pregnant.

In line with all this, remember that true prayer really will be heard; God 'hearing' is an idiom for Him answering (e.g. 1 Sam. 7:9; Is. 30:19; 65:24). Indeed, "hear me" in the AV is often translated "answer me" in the RV (e.g. Ps. 60:5; Mic. 3:4)- there is an intentional double meaning in the Hebrew word. There should be real comfort for us in knowing that prayer really is 'heard'; the hearing is, in a sense, the answer / response, with which a man should be content. Therefore David desired to praise God even before the answer was received; the knowledge God was really hearing him gave such confidence (Ps. 108:1-6; 109:30). Don't hide behind the excuse that unanswered prayer just means that God has heard but not answered. If the prayer is not answered, we have asked amiss (James 4:3); either we lack faith, or we lack a true understanding of God's ways, and have not allowed ourselves to be guided enough by His word. In either case, we have a problem.

Ask, believing that you will receive. Otherwise, prayer becomes just a conscience salver, rattled off to calm ourselves rather than meaningfully request something from the throne of Heaven. Recall how the believers held a prayer meeting for Peter's release; but when it was answered, and he was there knocking at the door outside, they mocked. Or think of how Abraham's servant prayed that the girl who came to meet him, gave him water and then offered to water his camels was the one to marry Isaac. This happened, just as he had prayed;

but, initially, he didn't believe it had happened: " The man looked steadfastly on her (AV 'wondering'); holding his peace, to know whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not" (Gen. 24:21 RV). We are *so* similar. It is in those moments that we realize just what a momentous thing it is, to ask something of God, to be performed on this earth. And to realize it actually happened. He did it, for me, a little ant crawling on the surface of a small planet that is hurtling through space, in a remote part of His universe...

Realize that prayer may be answered in totally unexpected ways. Paul prayed that he would have " a prosperous journey" in coming to see the Romans (Rom. 1:10). Little could he have realized, sitting in Corinth as he wrote, that the answer would involve many months of imprisonment in Jerusalem, a shipwreck that lead to an ecclesia in Malta...and so much other grief. But from God's viewpoint, the prayer was answered.

Open Faith In Prayer

If we're really confident in prayer being answered, we won't be shy to openly state to others that we've prayed about something and expect the answer to be coming. Paul even asks Philemon to prepare his bedroom for him, because he's so confident that prayers will be answered, and he'll be able to come to him. Another example would be how Hezekiah prays to be 'delivered' (Ps. 120:2) from the Assyrian invasion. Rabshakeh had heard of this even in the enemy camp, and warned the people of Jerusalem not to trust in Hezekiah's promise to them that his prayer would be answered and therefore "the Lord will surely deliver us" (Is. 36:18). Another lesson from this latter example is that prayerful attitudes spread- for Hezekiah had prayed for God to 'deliver' "my soul" (Ps. 120:2)- and yet the people therefore came to believe that the Lord would surely deliver "us", i.e. all of them and not just Hezekiah personally as he had initially prayed.

Bear in mind a simple point. Prayer should *precede* action. We pray, then act. Not act, and then pray as a kind of insurance policy taken out after the event. Analyze your prayers from this perspective. If they are the prayers of faith, then we will be praying *before* acting. If we believe that prayer actually changes things, then we will not use it as an after-the-event insurance policy.

Notes

(1) See E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) on Gen. 18:15 for more on this. The structure of the Hebrew language seems to reflect something of God's way of thinking. In Biblical Hebrew, there's no term for "yes" in replying to a question. Instead, the person answering repeats the question. Thus in Gen. 24:6 Jacob asks: "Is he well?"; and the shepherds reply "Well". God's way of saying "Yes" to our prayers / requests is to repeat back to us as it were our requests; and thus the form and wording of our prayers becomes in some sense important; for what we ask for is what we will receive back, if He answers positively.

5. The Comfort Of Answered Prayer

The experience of answered prayer is a strong confirmation that we are on the right track to the Kingdom. It has to be admitted that God is quite capable of deceiving the wicked that He is on their side when in fact He is against them. Christendom is full of such people whom God has deceived, often by appearing to answer their prayers when He is in fact only confirming them in their own deception. And yet there is also the very real Bible teaching that answered prayer is an indicator of our acceptable fellowship with God. Assuming that you do experience answered prayer, it has to be decided by each of us whether God is deceiving us or confirming us in the knowledge of His salvation. The evidence that the experience of answered prayer is an indicator of God's pleasure with us is quite compelling:

- " These things have I written unto you...that ye may know that ye have eternal life...and this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us" (1 Jn. 5:13,14). Answered prayer is the confidence that we have eternal life. Answered prayer means that our joy will be full (Jn. 16:24).

- God's face looks at the righteous if He accepts them (Ps. 11:7; 13:1)- and God turning His face toward men is a very common idiom for Him answering prayer (e.g. 1 Sam. 1:11). Thus acceptability with God and Him answering our prayers are related.

- Conversely, unanswered prayer is associated with God's rejection. " If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). Thus Nehemiah pleaded for God to unstop His ears and hear the prayer of the repentant remnant (Neh. 1:6).

- Coming before the throne of God in prayer (Heb. 9:24; Ps. 17:1,2) is the language of the judgment seat. If we become before His throne and are accepted, it follows that this is a foretaste of the outcome of the judgment for us, were we to be judged at that time. The Kingdom prophecy that " Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear" (Is. 65:24) is applied to us *now* (Mt. 6:8)- as if answered prayer is a foretaste of the Kingdom life. In the grace of Christ, we can have a certain " boldness" in prayer (Heb. 4:16); but we will have " boldness in the day of judgment" (1 Jn. 4:17) in the sense that the attitude we have in prayer now and the experience of the Lord we know now will be that we have in the day of judgment. If He is no more than a black box in our brain we call 'God' or 'Jesus', if for all our Christianity we haven't known Him, so it will be then as we face Him.

- " Thou answerest them, O Lord our God: thou wast a God that forgavest them" (Ps. 99:8) again associates forgiveness / acceptability with God and answered prayer.

- Answered prayer is paralleled with being given the Holy Spirit (Mt. 7:11 cp. Lk. 11:13). The prayer of the Philippians for Paul is likewise linked with " the supply of the Spirit" (Phil. 1:19). These passages therefore teach that having spiritual fruit is associated with answered prayer (Jn. 15:16), as is the possession of the Comforter (Jn. 14:14; 16:24 are in this context). Many passages imply that God's hearing of our prayers is proportionate to His perception of our spirituality. He will not respond to the prayer of those whose way of life is contrary to His word: Ps. 66:18; Pro. 1:24-28; Is. 1:15; 59:2; Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:10-12; 29:12; Lam. 3:8,44; Mal. 1:7-9; Mk. 11:25; Jn. 9:31; James 1:6,7; 4:3; 1 Pet. 3:7,12. But He will hear the prayer of the righteous; and 'hearing' is an idiom for 'answering', it doesn't just mean that God takes cognizance of the fact the righteous have prayed: 2 Kings 19:20; Mt. 7:7; 18:19,20; Jn. 14:14.

- Both David and Christ panicked when they felt their prayers weren't being answered; they felt that this meant they had sinned (Ps. 22:1-4; and consider too 17:15; 24:5; 27:4,8). Clearly they understood answered prayer as a sign of acceptability with God. Christ knew that God *always* heard Him (Jn. 11:42). When apparently God didn't hear His prayer for deliverance on the cross, He for a moment supposed that He'd sinned and therefore God had forsaken Him.

- The parable of the friend at midnight is surely to be interpreted like this: Friend coming = unexpected crisis; going to friend to get loaves = going to the Father in prayer; fact it is grossly inconvenient (children sleeping etc.) suggests that only because they are good friends will the man get up and give his friend the loaves (Lk. 15:5,6). This very nicely describes the way in which our answered prayers (for others' needs, in the parable) are a statement of the degree to which God counts us as His respected friends. And it explains why the Lord implied that the more we respond to others' requests, the more God will respond to ours (Mt. 7:10-12)- because our requests will increasingly be for others.

- Christ is a mediator between God and His people. The fact He mediates successfully for us means that we are His people. We know not what to pray for, but the Lord Jesus intercedes for the right things for us. Often we may pray for something, not receive it, and yet receive what is clearly Divine intervention in another way. This is proof that our prayers are being heard and Christ is mediating for us, even if we don't fully know God's will. Therefore this is proof positive that we *are* God's people.

- Experiencing answered prayer leads us to be more prayerful; it's part of the upward spiral of the spiritual life. "Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live" (Ps. 116:2).

In the same way as answered prayer reflects God's pleasure, so prayer which God doesn't respond to at all is one indicator of His displeasure (e.g. Saul's experience in 1 Sam. 14:37). This isn't to say that when we don't receive the answers we expect, then God hasn't responded. There's a difference between God *responding* to prayer and God *answering* prayer as we expect Him to answer.

The experience of answered prayer is therefore part of the upward spiral of confidence and spirituality experienced by the believer. The opposite is at times also true- unanswered prayer can be a sign of God's displeasure (e.g. 1 Sam. 14:37), just as answered prayer reflects His pleasure. But of course we have to be careful here- for unanswered prayer isn't *always* a sign of Divine displeasure. The Lord's experience on the cross is the most eloquent of such examples.

The upward spiral of answered prayer is referred to in Ps. 116:2: "Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live". The experience of answered prayer inspires us to pray yet more. "What things soever ye desire, believe that ye [did] receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mk. 11:24 Gk.) can be read as meaning that we should remember how we received things in the past, and therefore we should have faith that the things we now desire really will be likewise granted. It is for this reason that the prayers recorded in the Psalms constantly look back to previous experiences of answered prayer as a motivation for faith and Hope: Ps. 3:4,5; 44:1-4; 61:5; 63:7; 66:18-20; 77:4-16; 86:13; 94:5,7-19; 116:1; 120:1,2; 126:1,4; 140:6,7. Jeremiah likewise (Lam. 3:55,56). And even the fact other believers had received answers to prayer inspired David's faith in prayer (Ps. 74:11-

15; 106). " Nevertheless" , despite the fact God answers prayer, " when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith?" (Lk. 18:8). The implication is that the experience of answered prayer *ought* to develop faith, but such will be the spiritual perils of the last days and the lack of serious prayer, that there may well be no faith in the final generation. Answers to prayer are described as "great and mighty things, which you know not" (Jer. 33:3)- i.e. the very nature of answered prayer is that it is above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). It leads to a sense of wonderment with this God with whom we are in relationship. And answered prayer is indeed part and parcel of a living relationship with the Father and Son. Consider the context of the Lord's comment that where two or three are gathered together, He is in the midst of them (Mt. 18:20). It's about two or three being gathered together in united prayer and receiving the answer (Mt. 18:19). Receiving the gift of answered prayer is paralleled with the personal presence of Jesus in their midst. Answered prayer is part of His presence with us.

But...?

Probably all readers will now be in a state of doubt; because they will know the experience of answered prayer, but *also* that of unanswered prayer. But let's remember the above reasoning; answered prayer really does indicate our acceptability with God. The unanswered prayers must therefore be the result of:

- Prayer being answered in ways we do not perceive, or having an answer which will only much later be revealed. Elijah's prayer of 1 Kings 18:37 will only be answered when Elijah comes in the last days (Mal. 4:6). Zacharias and Elisabeth must have considered their prayers for a child unanswered; and yet they were answered, much much later in their lives. Daniel prayed for three weeks for the decree to be given to allow Judah to return from Babylon; from the first day he prayed this, his prayer was heard, but the answer wasn't made apparent for three weeks (Dan. 10:3,12,13). The Lord Himself prayed that more labourers would be sent forth into the harvest (Mt. 9:37), but the real answer only came in the sending forth of labourers by the Father in the post-resurrection dispensation (Mt. 20:1). The Lord said that whatever we say "in the ear in closets will be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Lk. 12:3). The reference to "closets" takes us back to Mt. 6:6, where He uses the same word to speak of how we should pray in closets and then we will be openly rewarded by the Father. The 'open reward' is clearly in the Kingdom (Mt. 6:4,18; Lk. 8:17; 1 Cor. 3:13). Could this not be saying, then, that in the Kingdom, the answers to the prayers we are *now* making will be openly proclaimed to all from the housetops? Hence there is an awesome connection between our feeble words of prayer now, and the nature of our eternal existence in the Kingdom.

- Praying for the wrong things, i.e. those things about which we do not know God's will for sure.

- Praying without faith, without really intending to receive the answer.

There is yet another window on unanswered prayer. The Lord felt made as if He was going to walk further on the Emmaus road, in order to provoke the two disciples to beg Him to abide with them; He appeared to be asleep during the storm on the lake, to drive the disciples to an ever greater urgency of appeal to Him. And the two miracles in Cana feature the same basic pattern of someone coming to Jesus with a request [on both occasions, having just returned to Galilee]; Jesus appearing to indirectly refuse the request, leading to the person persisting in asking; and then, the Lord gives them what they asked for. The apparent lack of response was in each case in order to develop in the person a deeper sense of their desperation, a more

focused faith. The lack of immediate response was from God's love, not His indifference. For the Father and Son have hearts that bleed for humanity, and would never be indifferent to our cry.

There is much guidance in the Psalms about unanswered prayer. In the midst of complaining to God about the pain of unanswered prayer, the Psalmist in the very same breath is still praising Him and believing Him. "God whom I praise, break your silence" (Ps. 109:1); "I say to God my rock, Why have you forgotten me?" (Ps. 42:9).

Yet all this said, the agony of unanswered prayer remains to some extent one of the mysteries of spiritual life. From our human point of view, the agony remains. We can seek to understand God's point of view on it, but for us, unhealed bodies and broken lives remain, for all the faith and seeking to discern God's will in the world.

There is the repeated Bible teaching that what we ask for, we will receive. God hearing prayer is an idiom for Him *answering* it; and this is not just the inference of an isolated verse. Consider the parallelism of Ps. 6:8,9:

" The Lord *hath heard* the voice of my weeping

The Lord *hath heard* my supplication

The Lord *will receive* my prayer" .

Hopefully we will all have had the experience of a crisis where we have prayed, really prayed, and the answer has miraculously come. Yet this is what real prayer is; and yet we simply can't sustain the intensity. The only real way out is to fall back on the fact that the Lord Jesus intercedes for us with that kind of intensity (Rom. 8:26). We have shown elsewhere that Biblical prayers rarely request things; if we ask according to God's will, we will receive (1 Jn. 5:14); and yet if God's word dwells in us, we will ask what we will, and receive it (Jn. 15:7). Thus if our will is purely God's will, we will receive answers to every prayer. That our will can be God's will is another way of saying that our spirit can be His Spirit. This is why several passages speak of how God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit (Rom. 8:15,16,26; 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13). It's why the early church sensed that not only were they witnessing to things, but the Holy Spirit of God also (Acts 5:32; 15:28). His Spirit becomes our spirit.

And yet our will is not yet coincidental with His; even the will of the Son was not perfectly attuned to that of the Father (Lk. 22:42; Jn. 5:30; 6:38), hence the finally unanswered prayer for immediate deliverance from the cross. Yet as we grow spiritually, the will of God will be more evident to us, and we will only ask for those things which are according to His will. And thus our experience of answered prayer will be better and better, which in turn will provide us with even more motivation for faith in prayer.

Prayers Answered By Grace

All this said, the ways of God are more profound than to operate in such a way that the righteous have their prayers answered and the wicked don't. There are examples in Israel's history where unspiritual Israelites prayed to God in crisis and God heard them- and this answer to their prayer was intended to show them His grace, and thus to lead them to

repentance. Solomon foresaw this when he spoke of how Israel would "turn from their sin because you answer them" (1 Kings 8:35 RVmg.). This grace of God in answering sinners would be so that God could "teach them the good way wherein they should walk" (1 Kings 8:36).

Sharing The Answers To Prayer

Share with others the joy of answered prayer. Perhaps the 'answer' is never fully complete, or realized by us, until we share it with others. The Psalms are full of this- a declaration of what God has done in response to prayer, and then a sharing of this with others: "O Lord, you have brought up my soul from the grave, restored me to life... Sing praises to the Lord, O you His saints... Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what He has done for me" (Ps. 30:3,4; Ps. 66:16). Appreciating this actually leads us to recognize *before* praying that the answer to the prayer will in some sense be for the benefit of others; we are setting ourselves up as a pattern to others. Thus Hannah speaks of how "my strength [horn] is exalted in the Lord", and then sees this as a sign of what God will do for Israel through the line of David: "He will exalt the power [horn] of his annointed" (1 Sam. 2:1,10). The inspired editors of the Psalms perhaps had this understanding- thus a prayer of David in Ps. 25 appears to have had a final verse added to it, to make it relevant to the deliverance of all Israel. Ps. 51 speaks of David's repentance and desire to build a temple, and yet the final parts of the Psalm appear to have been given special reference under a later hand to the repentance of the exiles issuing in their rebuilding of the temple. As Paul makes explicit in 2 Cor. 1:4, if we suffer anything, it is so that ultimately *others* may be comforted in our comfort. True Christianity, authentic relationship with God, simply can't be lived out in isolation, with us asking God for things and Him giving them to us just for us. We need to discern how *others* will be affected by our experience of answered prayer, and bear this in mind when formulating our prayers. And all this is surely the answer to the cynic's complaint that prayer is essentially selfish. It can be, it too often is; but Biblical prayer is not at all. In words which need reading twice, Elizabeth O'Connor drives the point home in *Journey Outward*: "If engagement with ourselves does not push back horizons so that we see neighbours we did not see before, then we need to examine the appointments kept with self. If prayer does not drive us into some concrete involvement at a point of the world's need, then we must question prayer... the inner life is not nurtured in order to hug to oneself some secret gain" (1). The Psalms have all this as a major theme. Thankfulness to God for answering prayer is to be expressed to others (Ps. 22:22; 109:30), indeed, the whole world should be told (Ps. 57:9; 18:49; 22:27; 96:1-3). Sharing the news about answered prayer is therefore part of our witness to the world. Our witness is not just a presentation of theological truths to them- it's actually a sharing with them about our prayer relationship with God.

Notes

(1) Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Outward* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

6. The Mediation Of Prayer

This study builds on some concepts which must first of all be mastered before we can go further:

1. Prayer is not just requesting things. God sees our situation and innermost desire / spirit as 'prayer' without us necessarily verbalizing these things in prayer. Evidence for this is provided in [*The Essence Of Prayer*](#) and [*Prayer: Some Practical Points*](#).
2. There is a connection between a righteous way of life and attitude, and God responding to prayer. This is discussed in [*The Comfort Of Answered Prayer*](#).
3. There is a connection between the word of God dwelling in us, and prayer being answered. There seems to be a connection between prayer and God's word being within us in Gen. 20:7- for exactly because Abraham was a prophet, therefore he could pray for Abimelech. Faith comes from our appreciation of the word (Rom. 10:17), and faith is the basis of answered prayer (Mt. 21:22)- to the point that we believe we have received the answer the moment we pray (as in Ps. 56:9). God cried to Israel in the prophetic word, but they would not hear; and so when they cried to Him, He also did not hear (Zech. 7:13). If the Lord's words dwell in us, we will ask what *we* will, and it will be done. Yet only if we ask according to *God's* will can we receive our requests (Jn. 15:7 cp. 1 Jn. 5:14). The implication is that if the word dwells in us, our will becomes that of the Father, and therefore our requests, our innermost desires, are according to His will, and are therefore granted. Therefore the word was what directed and motivated David's regular daily prayers (Ps. 119:164); they weren't standard repetitions of the same praises or requests, but a reflection of his Biblical meditation. He asks God to hear his prayers because He keeps God's word (Ps. 119:145,173). He asks God to hear *his* voice in prayer, using the very same words with which he reflects upon how he heard *God's* voice as it is in His written word. He even goes so far as to draw a parallel between God and his own "reins" or inner self- both of them "instruct me" (Ps. 16:7). His inner self was so absorbed into the reality of God. The Lord taught that we should believe that "what [we] say [in prayer] shall come to pass" (Mk. 11:23 RV). This is very much the language of God's word- what *He* says, comes to pass for sure. And so we're being invited to see *our* words in prayer as effectively like God's words; for if we pray according to His word, surely we will be heard.

The extent to which Bible-inspired prayer is in a sense a word of command is brought out by the way Ps. 20 parallels answered prayer with a number of things, including God fulfilling "all your counsel / advice": "The Lord... grant thee according to thine own heart, and fulfill all thy counsel... the Lord fulfill all thy petitions... the Lord will hear" (Ps. 20:4-6). The very personal nature of our requests is brought out- they are the desires of our *own* heart, David received "his heart's desire" (Ps. 21:2)- and the power of prayer is that God Almighty is willing to treat the fulfillment of these very personal desires as our "counsel" to Him, in that it is based upon the "counsel" of His word. Elijah's commanding of the drought by 'his' word, when it was in fact the result of his prayer, is a classic example. Jeremiah likewise prayed the word of command when he as it were ordered the sword of Yahweh to "return to your scabbard; desist and be still!" (Jer. 47:6).

David so often likens answered prayer to the Father 'hearing' the words of the prayer. Take Ps 54:2: " Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth" . And dozens of times 'hearing' is used in this sense. But David uses the very same word to describe our hearing of *God's* words (Ps. 44:1; 45:10; 49:1; 50:7; 81:8,11,13; 85:8; 95:7; 103:20). Likewise: " Give ear to my words, O LORD, *consider* my meditation" (Ps. 5:1), just as David 'considered' the words of God (s.w. Ps. 119:27,34,73,95,100,104,125,130,144,169). " He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination" (Prov. 28:9). This explains why so many faithful prayers can be analyzed for their connections, both conscious and unconscious, with earlier Scripture. The prayers of faithful brethren of today are likewise

full of both conscious and unconscious allusion to Scripture. It makes a good example to annotate the page of one's Bible with the cross references. David speaks repeatedly of how God 'inclines His ear' to the words of human prayer (Ps. 88:2 and many others). And yet he also records God's appeal to His people to incline *their* ears to His words (Ps. 78:1; Prov. 2:2; 22:17). The mutuality between a man and his God is expressed very clearly in our attitude to His word. If we hear His words, He will hear ours when we pray.

Neh. 1:5-10 and Acts 4:24-30 are good examples; just look up the cross references in most Bibles. Nehemiah's example is clearly based upon Deuteronomy being in his mind. Some of his allusions are conscious, others perhaps unconscious, but reflecting how the words of his prayer were rooted in the presence of the word in his mind:

Nehemiah 1	Deuteronomy
" The great and terrible God that keepeth covenant and mercy" (v.5)	7:12,21
" If ye transgress I will scatter thee abroad amongst the nations" (v.8)	4:27; Lev.. 26:33
" But if ye turn unto me	4:29
though there were cast out of you unto the uttermost parts of heaven yet will I gather them from thence	30:1-5
...the place that I have chosen to put my name there" (v.9)	12:5

Daniel 9 is another one. Daniel's prayer seems to have been motivated in the first place by his appreciation of God's promise that if Israel confessed their sins when in captivity, He would turn again to them (Lev. 26:40), as well as his knowledge that Jeremiah had prophesied that when Israel intensely prayed, God would turn again their captivity (Jer. 29:12,13). Not only did the word motivate Daniel's prayer, but his prayer almost breathes his saturation with it:

Daniel 9 Passages alluded to

:2 " books" Lev. 26:40; 1 Kings 8:52; Jer. 29:12

:3 Jer. 29:13

:3 " waste" Lev. 26:31

:4 1 Kings 8:23

:5 1 Kings 8:47

:7 1 Kings 8:46

:9 1 Kings 8:30,34,36,39

:17 1 Kings 8:29,38

:18 1 Kings 8:52

:18,19 Jer. 29:12

:24 Jer. 29:11

We have commented elsewhere how circumstances tend to repeat between Biblical characters, and how our lives too often have designed parallels with Biblical characters. This is surely providentially arranged- so that we can the more naturally frame our prayers in the words of Scripture, perceiving the similarities between our position and that of previous Bible characters. The prayer of Ps. 10:10-14 is clearly based around the experience of Hannah- the Hebrew words for 'seeing', 'vexing', 'afflicted' and 'forgetting' are all taken from the record of 1 Sam. 1 and 2. The Psalmist has changed the gender of the pronouns to male from female, and concludes with praising God for being the keeper of the fatherless, just as He had been the keeper of the childless in Hannah's case.

The Mediation Of Prayer

With this in mind, we can consider the classic passage concerning the mediation of prayer, Romans 8. The context of Romans 8 teaches that there is in fact just one Spirit; the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit of God, and is " the Spirit" in the believer (Rom. 8:9-11). There is " one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4). If the will of God is in us, if His will is embedded in our conscience, we will ask what we will, what our spirit desires, and it will be granted. This is because if our Spirit is attune with the Spirit of God and of Christ, our desires, our wish, is transferred automatically to Him. Whatever we ask being in the name of Christ, being *in* His character and the essence of His spirit, will therefore be done (Jn. 15:16). It doesn't mean that saying the words " I ask in the name of Christ" gives our request some kind of magical power with God. It must surely mean that if we are in Him, if His words abide in us, then we will surely be heard, for our will is His will. We are guaranteed answers if we ask in His name, if we ask what we will, if the word dwells in us, if we ask according to God's will... all these are essentially the same thing. If we are truly in Him, if the word really dwells in us, if our will has become merged with God's will, then we will only request things which are in accordance with His will, and therefore we will receive them. Thus the experience of answered prayer will become part of the atmosphere of spiritual life for the successful believer. The Lord knew that the Father heard Him always (Jn. 11:42). It is for this reason that the prayers of faithful men rarely make explicit requests; their prayers are an expression of the spirit of their lives and their relationship with God, not a list of requests. It explains why God sees our needs, He sees our situations, as if these are requests for help, and acts accordingly. The request doesn't have to be baldly stated; God sees and knows and responds.

This is why Romans 8 appears to confuse the spirit of God, the spirit of Christ in the believer, and Christ himself as " the Lord the Spirit" . Yet what Paul is showing is that in fact if we are spiritually minded, if our thinking is in harmony with the Father and Son, prayer is simply a merger of our Spirit with theirs; the idea of prayer as a means of requesting things doesn't figure, because God knows our need and will provide. The whole creation *groans*; we ourselves *groan* inwardly; and the Spirit makes intercession with *groans* that can't be uttered. Clearly enough, our groans are His groans. He expresses them more powerfully and articulately than we can. It has been observed: " As I read paul's words, an image comes to mind of a mother tuning in to her child's wordless cry. I know mothers who can distinguish a cry for food from a cry for attention, an earache cry from a stomachache cry. To me, the

sounds are identical, but the mother instinctively perceives the meaning of the child's nonverbal groan. It is the inarticulateness, the very helplessness, of the child that gives her compassion such intensity" ⁽¹⁾. In deep sickness or depression it can simply be that we find formal, verbalized prayer impossible. Ps. 77:4 speaks of this: "I am so troubled that I cannot speak" (formally, to God). It's in those moments that comfort can be taken from the fact that it is our spirit which is mediated as it were to God. Tribulation is read as prayer- hence even the Lord's suffering on the cross, "the affliction of the afflicted", was read by the Father as the Lord Jesus 'crying unto' the Father (Ps. 22:24). This is sure comfort to those so beset by illness and physical pain that they lack the clarity of mind to formally pray- their very affliction is read by the Father as their prayer.

This is not to say that on another level, it is not the Father's pleasure that His children should rush to Him in their times of crisis. But Paul's point is that if we are spiritually minded, prayer is a merger of Spirit between us and the Father, and although we know not what to pray for as we ought, the real essential desires of our Spirit are transferred through Christ to the Father. Likewise Eph. 2:18: " Through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" . This access is not only in the moments of time we designate for prayer. Christ suffered for us and obtained our forgiveness, " that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18), and we are in that position now, all the time, not just when we pray. Being in this position means that our Spirit, the essence of our spirituality, our deepest spiritual desires, are transferred to the Father by the Son. Christ is in Heaven, " to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:24), the Greek translated " appear" meaning to exhibit openly. We are openly exhibited to God by the Lord Jesus, he reveals our inner spirit, our essential desires, to the Father. We become one spirit with the Lord Jesus by baptism (1 Cor. 6:17; 12:13); thus what we feel deep inside us in our spirit, in the spirit-man created within us, is automatically, instantly the feeling of the Lord Jesus. And because He is one with the Father in Spirit, He can therefore relay our spirit to Him. Rom. 8 is teaching that this is really what prayer is all about, and what we request verbally, not knowing what to pray for as we ought, is not really the essence of prayer. Perhaps we're helped to understand this ability of the mind / spirit of the Lord Jesus to connect with that of human beings by Mk. 2:8: "Now immediately, when Jesus realized in his spirit that they were contemplating such thoughts, he said to them, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts?" (NET Bible). The spirit / mind of Jesus was at one with the spirit / mind of those men. Such was His sensitivity. I don't think it was a gift of Holy Spirit knowledge so much as His sensitivity to the minds of men... and yet Rom. 8:16 calls Jesus "The Spirit" as a title, saying that He bears witness with our spirit / mind, in His intercession to the Father. So Mk 2:8 gives us as it were an insight into how He *now* operates too... He's the same today as yesterday. He's at one with our mind / spirit, and also with the mind / Spirit of the Father. Thus is He such a matchless mediator.

There is a mutuality between God and His children in prayer. We 'make mention' of things to God (Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:2; Philemon 4). The Greek word used has the idea of bringing to mind, or remembering things to God. And He in response 'remembers' prayer when He answers it (Lk. 1:54,72; Acts 10:31 s.w.). What we bring to our mind in prayer, we bring to His mind. Those who pray for Jerusalem "keep not silence"- and therefore they give God "no rest" (Is. 62:6,7). But the Hebrew word for "keep not silence" and for 'give no rest' is one and the same! There's a clear play on words here. If we give ourselves no rest in prayer, then we give God no rest. His Spirit or mind becomes our spirit or mind, and vice versa. And hence the telling comments in Romans 8 about our spirit / mind being mediated to God in prayer through Jesus, in His role as 'the Lord the Spirit' (Rom. 8:26,27). Yet God Himself had stated that He will not rest nor hold His peace for Zion's sake (Is. 62:1). Yet His

doing this is conditional upon His prayerful people not allowing Him to rest due to their prayers.

Note in passing how Paul speaks of ‘making mention always’ in prayer of his brethren (Philemon 4 etc.). This is clearly alluding to the Is. 62:6,7 passage, about always making mention of Jerusalem in prayer. But for Paul, the true city of God was now the scattered group of Christian believers around the Roman empire of the first century. Jewish minds would’ve picked up Paul’s purposeful allusion to the ‘always’ prayers for Jerusalem; and would’ve marvelled that he saw the great holy city as now the bunch of guys whom he’d baptized around the place, and that instead of a city, it was those very real men and women who filled his thoughts, prayers and yearnings. Paul saw himself indeed as the watchman upon Zion’s walls- but watching over the people of God, not a physical city.

The Unity Of The Spirit

This unity of Spirit between us, the Son and the Father explains an apparent contradiction in the Lord's discourse in the upper room: " Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will *I* do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask *me* anything (being) in my name, that will I do (Jn. 14:13,14 RV)...If ye shall ask anything of *the Father*, he will give it you in my name...and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: for the Father himself loveth you" (Jn. 16:23,26 RV). Who do we pray to? The Father, or the Son? Who 'does' the answer to our prayers? God, or Christ? The context of the Lord's words was that " the Father is with me...I am in the Father, and the Father is in me...the Father abiding in me doeth the works" , even as the believers are in the Son and in the Father, as they are in us. This means that the question of who to pray to is on one level irrelevant. Our spirit bears witness with their Spirit, and there is only one spirit. This unity of the believer with the Father is only made possible through the Son, and so our formal prayers should be addressed to God through Christ, in recognition of this fact. But as we have seen, the essence of prayer is not formal request. To pray “in my name” could mean ‘in union with me’; yet Christ was at one with the Father. The Psalmist petitioned Yahweh to hear him “for His Name’s sake” (Ps. 25:11), just as we are to pray to Jesus ‘in His Name’. " He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:27) without us verbalizing our spirit in formal prayer. In the same way as the priests helped / assisted the Old Testament worshippers rather than actually offered their prayers or sacrifices, so with the Lord Jesus. Paul spoke of how he would be helped " through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus" (Phil. 1:19 RSV). Their prayers ascended directly to God, but the response was helped by the spirit of the Lord Jesus, His mental desire to help; and because He is so sublimely at one with the Father, this means that the help will surely come. The rapport between our spirit and His Spirit is again reflected by the way Rom. 8:6,27 use the same phrase, “the mind of the spirit”, to describe firstly the mind of *our* spirit, and then, the mind of the spirit of the Lord Jesus.

There is another angle on this unity between the believer and her or his Lord. The Lord Jesus is prophetically described as He “that hath boldness to approach unto me” (Jer. 30:21 RV). This is applied to us, who boldly approach the Father in prayer likewise (Heb. 4:16). We are bidden to draw near to the Father in prayer just as the Son drew near (Heb. 4:15,16). He wishes us to share in the loving relationship which there was between Him and His Father, and prayer is crucial to this.

Case Study

What we have suggested so far is best demonstrated by a case study. Lazarus had died, and the evident desire of Martha was to see her brother again, there and then. But she didn't go running to the Lord with this desire. She simply and briefly stated her faith in the Lord's limitless power to resurrect, and her knowledge that He could use the Father's power as He wished. He read her spirit, He saw her fervent desire. And He responded to this as if it had been a prayer. He groaned deeply within Himself, and wept- not the tears of grief, as the Jews mistakenly thought (note how throughout the record they misunderstand what is really going on), but the tears which go with the groaning of serious prayer (Jn. 11:33-39). Having done this, He comments: " Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me *always*" . Because His spirit, His mind, was in constant contact with the Father, His prayers / desires were always communicated to Him, and always being heard. " Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me" could almost imply that the Lord prayed for something, and then, after some interval, the answer came. We have an exquisite insight into the Lord's mind and the highly personal relationship between Father and Son in the words that follow: " I knew (not 'I know') that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe" . This almost certainly was not spoken out loud; this is a very rare and privileged glimpse into the unspoken communication between the Son and Father. The Lord seems to be adding this almost in half apology, lest it should seem that He prayed for Lazarus' resurrection, the answer came, and He then thanked the Father for it. It seems that this would be too primitive a sequence of events. He says that He *knew* that His request had been granted, and His utterance of thanks for the answer was for the peoples' benefit: that *they* might perceive that whatever the Son asked for, He received from God. But in reality, the Lord's thoughts to the Father seem to suggest, it wasn't a question of His prayers being accepted and answered. His Spirit, His thoughts, were one with the Father, and therefore it was not that His thoughts were considered, accepted and then God granted the request. What He thought was the prayer and it was the answer all in one. His 'mediation' for us is in the sense that He is the Lord *the Spirit*. There is no barrier (and was not any) between His mind and that of the Father.

And yet the Lord's Spirit struggles in mediation with crying and groaning (Rom. 8:26), as He did for the raising of Lazarus ⁽²⁾. There is a further connection with Heb. 5:5, where we learn that the Lord prayed on the cross with a like intensity. And this Lord is our Lord today. He can be crucified afresh, therefore He has the capacity for struggle and mental effort. The Greek for " groanings" in Rom. 8:26 also occurs in Mk. 7:34: " Looking up to heaven, he *sighed* and saith unto him, Ephthatha" . The sighing of intense prayer by the Lord was His more spiritually cultured reflection of the number one desire of that man's spirit, as was His groaning and tears for Martha's desire to be granted, and Lazarus to be raised. It has been wisely observed that the language of Christ's mediation can be quite misunderstood. The picture we should have " is not that of an orante, *standing* ever before the Father with outstretched arms...pleading our cause in the presence of a reluctant God... but that of a *throned* Priest-King, asking what He will from a Father who always hears and grants His request" ⁽³⁾.

Prayer For Redemption

There is a theme in all the NT passages concerning prayer and mediation. It is that they speak largely in the context of prayer for forgiveness and salvation (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25; 1 Jn. 2:1). This is what we really ought to be praying for. The passages concerning Christ as our mediator are all in the context of Him asking for our forgiveness, as the High Priest sought Israel's forgiveness on the day of Atonement. The description of Christ groaning in spirit to transfer our spirit to God (Rom. 8:26) is a reflection of the fact that we groan for redemption

and the coming of the day of the liberty of God's children (Rom. 8:22,23), when what is guaranteed by " the firstfruits of the Spirit" which we have, will at last be realized. " All things work together for good" to this end, of forgiveness and salvation. It certainly doesn't mean that every story ends up happily-ever-after in this life. " We know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Rom. 8:26) seems to be some kind of allusion back to the mother of Zebedee's children asking Christ to get her two sons the best places in the Kingdom (Mt. 20:22). He basically replied 'You know not what you pray for', in the sense of 'you don't appreciate'. It may be that Paul in Rom. 8 is saying that in our desire for the Kingdom, in our groaning for it, we don't appreciate what we ask for as we ought, yet Christ nonetheless makes powerful intercession for us to this end.

The requests of the Lord's model prayer are essentially for forgiveness and the coming of the Kingdom. He gave us that prayer in the context of the need to seek spiritual rather than material things. We have shown (*Prayer: Some Practical Points*) that what requests David made in prayer, were essentially concerning the coming of the Kingdom and forgiveness. There is therefore repeated emphasis that these things should form the majority of our requests. The Lord spoke His model prayer in the context of warning the disciples not to be like pagans in bombarding God with requests for material things; 'Instead', He seems to be saying, 'concentrate on what really matters; your forgiveness and redemption, praise the Father, reflect on Him, and mention to Him your basic needs for daily bread. He knows your humanity, and will provide'. There is good reason to think that this spirit of prayer has yet to be learnt by us. Examine your own prayers. Aren't they really a long list of requests? Maybe not. But a warning needs to be sounded. The disillusion of many believers with their God arises from this faulty concept of prayer.

Strange Conclusions

If the thesis presented in these studies is correct, some sizeable questions arise with regard to the common understanding of prayer. Why pray at all, in a formal sense, if the state of our spirit is all important, and if God sees and knows our heart anyway and interprets this as our prayer? Theoretically, there is no need. But in practice, we should pray; we are almost commanded to. But the point is, prayer is for our benefit; the process of it will develop us spiritually. Prayer changes things, but it also changes us. The action of prayer does not serve to inform God of our desires, the state of our spirit, or our specific requests; nor does the physical mention of the name of Jesus give our prayers some mystical power with God. If this were the case, our relationship with God would depend on the form of words we used. The more intellectually able or verbally expressive would therefore have a superior relationship with God. This is evidently wrong, and is the classic mistake of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. It is our spirit that is important, not the way in which we articulate this to God in language. And yet, we should pray. But the exercise is for our benefit. Israel were told to blow trumpets at their feasts, in order that God would hear their prayer and sacrifice, and remember them / take notice of them (Num. 10:10). The blowing of the trumpets didn't of itself remind God about His people; it was an exercise for their benefit. And the God who knows before we ask evidently doesn't need our prayers as a means of information transfer. The Lord Jesus prayed out loud: " Father, glorify thy name" . A voice came from Heaven saying that God had already done this and would do it again. And the Lord told the listeners that this response came not for His sake, not really as an answer to His prayer, but for their sakes, that in the apparent 'answer' to His words, they might see the power of prayer and the extent of the Father's relationship with the Son (Jn. 12:28-30). But He knew that the prayer had already been answered before it was prayed. And even with us, answers can come not

necessarily for the sake of the answer, but to demonstrate other principles. Likewise the Lord asks us to pray for the Kingdom to come, not because this means that a certain number of prayers will change the date, but surely because the process of petition for the Kingdom is for our benefit.

For Our Benefit...

In the same way, the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not necessary to obtain forgiveness; the blood of those animals could never take away sin. But they were instituted for the benefit and spiritual education of the offerers, not for any theological need which God may have had. God didn't want sacrifice as sacrifice *in itself*. The cattle on a thousand hills are His, and in that sense nothing can be given to Him (Ps. 50:8-14). And yet, for our benefit, He asks for sacrifice to be given to Him. Paul likewise asked the Philippians for an offering: "Not because I desire a gift: but I desire (spiritual) fruit that may abound to your account" (Phil. 4:17). Prayer is one of the new covenant's equivalents of the sacrifices.

God will ultimately preserve His Truth, through the Cherubim-Angels that keep the way to the tree of life. But for our benefit, we are commanded to disfellowship false teachers; for the process of self-examination, consideration of one's own weakness, agreement amongst the faithful etc. is for our development. If Israel hid their eyes from false teachers, "then I (Myself) will set My face against that man...and will cut him off" (Lev. 20:4,5).

Likewise, the day of judgment is for our benefit; the process will serve to prepare us for entry to immortal nature; it isn't a method for God to gather evidence concerning us, consider it, and reach a verdict. He knows the end from the beginning (as, now, does His Son).

Preaching also is a spiritual exercise for the benefit of the preacher. Through their work of witnessing, the persecuted believers overcome their tribulation (Rev. 12:11). The labourers were called to go out into the vineyard because the Lord felt sorry for them, standing idle with no work or livelihood- rather than because He needed them. If this was his motivation, he wouldn't have called anyone at the 11th hour, neither would he have paid them all the same wages if he was only using them for his benefit (Mt. 20:4,5). God will call His people unto Himself without us doing a thing; and yet we have a responsibility and even a commission to take Christ to the world. The fact God will call His people to Himself anyway does not exempt us from the duty of witnessing; and the process of this witnessing is so often for *our* benefit. Anyone who has reflected on any length of ecclesial experience will realize the truth of the fact that so many of our spiritual exercises in preaching and pastoral work are in fact for *our* benefit, although we may feel that they are only for the benefit of others. This is especially true of preaching: reflect how the disciples laboured so hard to catch all the fish according to the Lord's command, but when they reached land with all the fish, they found the Lord already had fish and prepared them for breakfast (Jn. 21:9). All the labour for the fish was for their benefit: not because the Lord needed fish (cp. converts); He already had His. Paul's request for material aid from the Philippians was "not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account" (Phil. 4:17). And the physical, verbal expression of prayer is one more example of a necessary spiritual exercise which is for *our* benefit.

John Calvin has some relevant words about this: "Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray in order that they may rouse

themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things" ⁽⁴⁾.

Does Christ Offer Our Prayers To God?

'But doesn't Christ mediate our prayers to God?', I can hear some of you wondering, as you reflect on the suggestion that prayer is not so much specific words, but rather our innermost thoughts relayed to the Father by the Son. Why then do we have the Lord Jesus as our High Priest? The answer to these questions revolves around deciding whether the Bible ever says that the Lord mediates our prayers to God, or that He intercedes for us in the sense of taking the words of our prayers and somehow presenting them to God in an acceptable form. In other words, are phrases like " We offer Thee our prayer through the Mediatorship of Jesus our High Priest at Thy right hand" really correct? The conclusion of what has gone before and what follows is that they don't give a fully correct picture.

We are told that we will no longer need Christ to ask the Father for us, we will be able to have a direct relationship with the Father in prayer (Jn. 16:26). We will not need to be like the disciples, who in their immaturity asked Jesus to pass on their requests to God (Jn. 11:22). He sees our spirit anyway, He knows our need anyway; this knowledge doesn't depend on the Lord's mediation. And yet against this we must balance the undoubted fact that the Lord is in fact our advocate and interceder. The advocate identifies with the one he helps, stands next to him, knowing his case fully. But as Christ is our advocate, so we should be to our brethren (" comfort" in 2 Cor. 2:7 is s.w. 1 Jn. 2:1). This doesn't necessarily mean that we interpret our brother's words to God, but rather than we pray for our brother, in our own words; we are with our brother, supporting him, knowing his weakness.

So on one hand we have a direct relationship with the Father. On the other, the Lord Jesus is our vital, saving advocate with Him. I don't think these two aspects can be reconciled by re-translation or expository juggling. The fact is, through what the Lord achieved, we theoretically don't need His mediation. He was our High Priest to bring us to God on the cross. He no longer needs to enter into the Holiest Place (cp. heaven) to gain our atonement, for this He did once for all (Heb. 9:26). We should be able to pray with the earnest intensity of Elijah or Moses, who prayed without an intercessor, and were heard. But we lack that intensity. And therefore the Lord Jesus holds up our feeble 'groanings' before the Father. Likewise He is our 'advocate', although theoretically a righteous man doesn't need an advocate. John almost writes as if 'Of course, you won't sin, but if very occasionally you do, Jesus can act as a powerful advocate for you'. And yet in reality, He is acting in the advocate role for much of our sin-stricken lives.

It must be remembered that the High Priest of the Old Covenant did not offer up the prayers of the people. Yahweh's ears were ever open to the cry of the individual Israelite, without an intercessor. Moses mediated the Old Covenant in the sense that he obtained it and relayed it to Israel; his mediation was a one-off act. This is the basis of the NT passages concerning the mediation of the New Covenant through Christ; He did this through His death and resurrection (Gal. 3:19,20; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Christ was the mediator of the new covenant so that the sins committed under the old covenant could be forgiven (Heb. 9:15); thus His mediation is not in the relaying of our words to God, but in the sealing of the new covenant through His own blood. The mediation between God and man by the Lord is

paralleled with His giving Himself as a ransom on the cross (1 Tim. 2:5,6). This is the sense in which He is the mediator of the new covenant; He mediated it *once*, not in an ongoing sense. Because His mediation was a one-off act, Christ would not be a priest if He were now on earth (Heb. 8:4). He is given the *title* of priest, as He is given the title "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), even though He is not now a man. He made one mediatory offering for all time (Heb. 5:7; 7:27); therefore He has nothing to offer now. The High Priest going into the Holiest is also a type of Christ entering Heaven. He is in a sense permanently in the Holiest, He bears our names *always* before Yahweh; He ever lives, all the time, to make intercession for us, all the time (Heb. 7:25). Rom. 8:34,35 suggest that the love of Christ, from which we cannot be separated, is manifested to us through His intercessions for us. He doesn't offer our prayers to God all the time; He is our intercessor in the sense that He is always there as our representative, and on this basis we have acceptability with God, as we are in Him. This is proof enough that intercession is not equal to merely translating our prayers into a language God understands. We offer our prayers ourselves to God, as men have ever done. We are, in this sense, our own priesthood. We offer ourselves to God (Rom. 12:1; 1 Pet. 2:5). He Himself made only one offering of Himself; He does not offer Himself again. If He were on earth, He would not be a priest. It is the fact we are in Him that makes our offerings acceptable.

The passages concerning mediation we have shown to refer to the Lord's mediation of the new covenant through the atonement God achieved through Him. None of them associate His mediation with the offering of our prayers to God. Indeed, several passages suggest that the actual fact of the exalted Lord now being in heavenly places, and we being in Him, is in fact the intercession necessary to bring about our redemption- rather than His translating, as it were, of our actual words (Rom. 7:25; 8:34; 1 Jn. 2:1). The references to intercession likewise never suggest that Christ intercedes in the sense of offering our prayers to God. "Intercession" can be read as another way of describing prayer; this is how the term is invariably used (Jer. 7:16; 27:18; Rom. 11:2; 1 Tim. 2:1). Thus when Jeremiah is told not to intercede for Israel, this meant he was not to pray for them; it does not imply that he was acting as a priest to offer Israel's prayers to God. Nowhere in the Bible is the idea floated that a man can offer another man's prayers to God and thereby make them acceptable. The Greek for "intercession" essentially means to meet a person; prayer / intercession is a meeting with God. There is evidently nothing morally impossible about a man having direct contact with God in prayer without any priest or 'mediator'; the Old Testament abounds with such examples. The fact we are called upon to make intercession for others is surely conclusive proof that "intercession" means prayer, not relaying the words of another to God (1 Tim. 2:1). This meaning of intercession needs to be borne in mind when we consider its occurrences in Rom. 8. There we are taught that we know not what to pray for as we ought; the Lord Jesus makes intercession for us- i.e. He prays for us- not with words, i.e. not transferring our human words into God's language, not shuttling to and from between us and God as it were, but with His own groanings of the spirit. We don't know how to pray, so Christ prays (intercedes, in the language of Rom. 8) for us.

We must now consider what it means to be acceptable to God by / in Christ, how we can give thanks to the Father in / by the name of Christ, if in fact He is not a relayer of our words to God (Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17; Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). Our acceptability with God is because we are in the name of Christ by belief and baptism. God sees our approach to Him as that of His Son (which is another reason why we don't need Him to be a mediating priest for us; this would imply that we were somehow separate from Him in God's eyes). Our offerings are acceptable to God by (Gk. *dia*, "in", on account of) Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5); by / by being in

Christ we offer to God the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15). The fact we come unto God directly *dia*, " by" , through, on account of the Lord Jesus does not mean that therefore Christ must interpret our every word to God; it cannot mean that in prayer we cannot come directly to the Father. If this were so, the Lord's model prayer would be seriously lacking in its omission of any such clause which reminds us that we are praying to God through the mediation / interpretation of Christ. If English and Greek mean anything, the Lord categorically stated that He does *not* transfer our prayers to God; through Him, as a result of His work, we have a direct approach to God: " Ye shall ask *me* nothing...Ye shall ask [the Father] *in* my name (i.e. because you are located there, in that position / relation): and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: for the Father himself loveth you" (Jn. 16:23,26,27). Christ does not pray for us in the sense of offering up our words of request to the Father; He prays for us, according to Rom. 8, of His own freewill, with His own agenda, not ours. The aim of His suffering and Heavenly mediation today, is that He might " bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). This refers to His reconciliation of us to the Father, rather than His offering of our prayers. Because we are in His Name, on account of (" by") Him and His work, we can pray directly to the Father. He does not pray the Father for us.

The fact we praise God and come directly to Him *dia*, through the Lord Jesus, does not mean that our words come to the Father through the Son as if He were a sieve or telephone line. We come direct to the Father *dia*, on account of, for the sake of, the work Christ achieved. The following are a few of many examples which give the flavour of *dia*: John was put in prison *dia Herodias*, for the sake of Herodias (Mt. 14:3); the Pharisees transgressed the commandment of God *dia*, on account of, through, their tradition (Mt. 15:3); the disciples couldn't heal *dia*, for the sake of, their unbelief (Mt. 17:20); the Angels of the " little ones" *dia* , for their sakes, behold the face of the Father (Mt. 18:10); because the Pharisees pretended to be pious they would *dia*, on this account, receive greater condemnation (Mt. 23:14); the faithful will be persecuted *dia* , for the sake of, Christ's name (Mt. 24:9); *dia* the elect's sake, on their account, the days will be shortened (Mt. 24:22). " I thank my God *dia* (through) Jesus Christ my Lord" (Rom. 1:8) doesn't therefore necessarily mean that Paul prays to God 'through' the Lord Jesus as some kind of connecting tunnel; he thanks God on account of, for the sake of Christ. The very same Greek construction occurs a few chapters later: " Who shall deliver me...? I thank God, through Jesus Christ" (Rom. 7:24,25). He thanks God that his deliverance is possible on account of the Lord Jesus.

Moses of his own freewill chose to intercede for Israel, concerning things which at the time they knew nothing about; things which were almost against their will, in fact. And this is the prototype of the Lord's mediation for us who know not what to pray for as we ought. Consider how he prayed for Peter when Peter didn't realize he was being prayed for (Lk. 22:32). Or how Nehemiah made his prayer parallel with that of the rest of Israel, and asked God to hear it- even though he may have been asking for *his* prayer and confession to be seen as that of Israel's, even though they hadn't uttered the same words (Neh. 1:11- in this we see some shadow of the Lord's present work for us). Moses' freewill interceding for Israel, not Aaron's offering of their sacrifices, is the basis of the NT descriptions of Christ's intercession for us in prayer. Lk. 13:8 records how Christ of His own volition asked the Father not to destroy Israel at the time He planned, but to give them longer to repent. This was exactly the spirit of Moses' pleas for Israel. But this is not the same as 'relaying' the words of human prayers to God. This is undoubtedly how many of us conceive of Christ's intercessory role for us; but is this actually what Scripture teaches? Many of the relevant Scriptures which speak of Christ's activity for us before the Lord God are not in this context; they suggest that He of His own will prays to the Father on our behalf concerning things which are on His agenda for

us, not ours. If we confess Christ before men, i.e. reveal Him to them, He will confess us, reveal us favourably, in the court of Heaven, before the Father and the Angels (Lk. 12:8). The Hebrew epistle stresses that the Lord Jesus usually sits at the right hand of the Father, but Stephen saw Him *standing*, in fervent appeal to the Father for him (Acts 7:55). As he saw this happening, he told the court that he saw Christ standing there. At that moment, the Lord was not relaying Stephen's requests to the Father; He was intreating the Father in His own way for Stephen. The fact that the Lord "ever liveth to make intercession" for us (Heb. 7:25) is an allusion back to Is. 53:12, which prophesies that on the cross, Christ would make intercession for the transgressors. His prayer for us then, that we would all be forgiven (and see the prophecies of this in Psalms 22,69 etc.) was therefore His intercession for our salvation. His whole death was His prayer / intercession for us. But it was of His own freewill; He was not relaying our words then. And His intercession for us on the cross is the pattern of His intercession for us now. This is- or ought to be- a humbling thought.

Notes

(1) Philip Yancey, *Reaching For The Invisible God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) p. 153

(2) This connection is strengthened by the knowledge that there are many links between Romans and John. See G. & R. Walker, *Romans In The Light Of John's Gospel* (Alsager: Bible Student Press, 1995).

(3) H.B. Swete, *The Ascended Christ* (London: L.U.P., 1912).

(4) John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (Eerdmans ed.), p. 144.

7. Angels Answering Prayer

See too http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/angels/angels7_5.htm

'Going out'

Angels are of course active in answering our prayer, obeying the commanding voice of God Himself in Heaven- answers to prayer "go. . . out" by prayer and fasting (Mt. 17:21). The answer to prayer is therefore likened to a 'going out'- of the Angel and command from the throne of grace? This language of 'going out' is frequently used in the Old Testament about the going forth of the cherubim Angels. Isaiah 37 is shot through with allusions to the Angel cherubim destroying the Assyrian host. The Angel went forth (v. 36)- perhaps referring to Him physically going forth out of the temple where He dwelt to slay the Assyrians outside the walls of Jerusalem. This phrase 'went out' is nearly always used about literal physical movement, which we have seen is what Angels literally do. Thus in the Ezekiel visions of the cherubim, they and the lightnings "went forth", physically and literally, in performing God's work. "Let my sentence come forth from Thy presence (Angelic language); let Thine eyes (Angels) behold the things that are equal", seeing they are involved with the 'coming forth', according to the parallelism of this verse. Thus David cried in prayer, and hoped for God's word of response to go forth, from the throne of Heaven (Ps. 119:147). Similarly Job's satan Angel "went forth" from the presence of the Lord (Job 1:12). Zech. 2:3 also has an Angel going forth to answer the prayers concerning restoring the fortunes of Jerusalem (see Zech.

5:5 too). Ps. 81:5 describes the Angel going out through the land of Egypt in order to "remove (Israel's) shoulder from the burden" . Ps. 81 is 'Angelic', following Ps. 80, which is another such Psalm. Heb. 1:14 also offers support: the Angels are "sent forth" to minister to us- by answering prayers? In the court of Heaven, God "thrusteth away the desire of the wicked" (Prov. 10:3 RV)- as if their prayers are rejected there. In passing, note that by praying for others, we represent them before the throne of God, in the Heavenly court. Paul prayed "on your behalf" for the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:4). Jeremiah's prayers for the people would've been accepted as their prayers, his voice before God would've been theirs, were it not that they themselves had sadly gone just too far away from God (Jer. 14:11,12).

This close association between Angels and answered prayer resulted in many of the early believers conceiving of God in terms of an Angel, as we have seen Jacob in particular did. Hannah is another example; she prayed to the Lord of Hosts (Angels) to "look on the affliction of Thine handmaid" (1 Sam. 1:11); and the Angels are God's eyes through which He looks on us. She came to pray "before the Lord" (v. 15)- i. e. before the Angel dwelling over the ark. Angels are associated with conception- the cases of Samson, John and Jesus quickly spring to mind.

There is a vision described in 1 Kings 22:22 of the Angels presenting their various plans of how to slay Ahab. God says to the one whose plan He accepts "Thou shalt persuade him (Ahab), and prevail also: go forth, and do so" . Thus the Angel still has to "prevail" or 'struggle' to operationalize a command from God which they know is His will to perform; and we have to do likewise, not least in the preaching of the Gospel, both obeying and prevailing. This makes more sense of Jer. 51:12, which says that "The Lord (of Hosts/ Angels, v. 14) hath BOTH devised and done that which He spake" about Babylon. We cannot leave the subject of Angels and prayer without returning to Daniel 10. Verses 2 and 3 show Daniel praying for three weeks- presumably for the fortunes of Israel to be restored. As the days went by, it would have seemed natural to assume that the prayer was going unanswered. However, the Angel told him that "from the first day. . thy words were heard" (v. 13), but the delay was because "the prince of the Kingdom of Persia withstood Me (the Angel) one and twenty days" - i. e. three weeks. So his first prayer was heard, but it took the Angel three weeks to work out the answer in practice. How many of our prayers are like that! The Angel then describes how he confirmed and strengthened Darius (11:1) to the same end to enable the prayer to be answered- as if when our Angel sees someone set in a course of action which will lead to the answer of our prayer, they are confirmed and strengthened in it. The same idea is found in Dan. 9:23; a command being given from God to answer a prayer as soon as it's prayed but there being a delay to the answer due to the Angels effecting the answer. "At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment (from God to answer your prayer) came forth, and I (the Angel) am come to show thee" .

An Electric Cosmos

Luke 15 describes the joy in Heaven when one sinner repents; the man who found the lost sheep " calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me. . when she (the woman) hath found it (the lost coin) she calleth her friends and neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me. . likewise I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the Angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" . The man and the woman must therefore represent God manifested through our guardian Angel. The Angel physically leaves the presence of God in Heaven and then goes off to arrange circumstances to encourage the sinner to return. He then calls all the others together to rejoice " when He cometh home" (into

Heaven, into the multitude around the throne of God from which Angels go and return in obeying God's Word). The whole Heavenly household (or just those other Angels which our guardian has used in arranging circumstances for us to repent?) then rejoice together. Thus we read in Hebrews 1:14 that *all* the Angels are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation". *All* the Angels are involved together in this work. *All* things in Heaven (the Angels) and on earth (the things they arrange on earth) are for our sakes! The whole of the cosmos is electric because of a deep change of heart within some tiny human being on planet earth.

Luke 11:7,8 gives further insight into how prayer is heard- the householder, God, is in His house (Heaven) with the door shut and his children with him in bed, and in order to get up- corresponding to God answering our prayer in the parable- the *whole* household, the children of God (a description of the Angels- Luke 20:35,36 etc.), have to be roused. Thus all the Angels are conscious of one specific action on our behalf. And note, all prayer is *heard*, even if the answers are not as we would expect. Whoever asks, receives (Mt. 7:8); those who pray constantly will be 'avenged' in some form (Lk. 18:7). Prayer does make a deep impact, and causes Angels to run hither and thither in response, even if we don't see any of the expected answers. The moment God hears a prayer it is in some sense answered; the hearing of prayer by the Father is the answer. This surely is the implication of the teaching that we are to believe that what we asked for we [in essence, in some form] have immediately received (Mk. 11:22).

Incredible control

The idea of every little thing in life and the world being controlled by Angels contradicts the notion that God has set this world in motion according to certain natural laws, and that things continue without His direct intervention- as if the whole system is run by clockwork which God initially wound up. Intervention in this system by God has been called 'the hand of providence'. However, these ideas surely contradict the clear Biblical teaching that every movement in the natural creation is consciously controlled by God through His Angels, thus needing an energetic input from Him through His Spirit for every action to occur. Consider the following:

- " Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them" (Mt. 6:26)- God consciously feeds the birds with their every mouthful.

- " If God so clothe the grass of the field. . . shall He not much more clothe you?" (Mt. 6:30). The blessings God gives us do not come by clockwork- we thankfully recognize they are individual acts of mercy towards us. Perhaps our sometimes 'clockwork' prayers are an indication that we think God's blessings of food etc. are clockwork too?. In the same way, God individually and consciously cares for each blade of grass. Fundamentally, they do not grow as a result of chemical combination or photosynthesis, but due to the conscious care of God using such processes.

- One sparrow " shall not fall on the ground without (the knowledge of) your Father" (Mt. 10:29). God is aware of the death of each bird- He does not allow animals to die due to their natural decay (the clockwork mechanism) without Him being actively involved in and conscious of their death. Again, Jesus shows how God's knowledge and participation in the

things of the natural creation must imply an even greater awareness of us. " The very hairs of your head are all numbered. . . ye are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt. 10:30,31).

- God "makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:45). God consciously makes the sun rise each day- it isn't part of a kind of perpetual motion machine. Hence the force of His promises in the prophets that in the same way as He consciously maintains the solar system, so He will maintain Israel. Job 9:7 seems to have this idea of conscious control in mind: "Who commands the sun, and it does not rise".

- Ps. 104 is full of such examples: " He watereth the hills. . causeth the grass to grow. . maketh darkness (consciously, each night). . . the young lions. . . seek their meat from God. . . sendest forth Thy Spirit (Angel), they are created" (not just by the reproductive system).

- Consider too Job 38:32; 39:27; Amos 9:6; Is. 40:7; Prov. 11:1.

There are important implications following from these ideas with regard to our faith in prayer. It seems to the present writer that our belief that the world is going on inevitably by clockwork is one of the things which militates against faith. To give a simple example: we may need to catch a certain train which is to leave at 9a. m. We wake up late at 8:45a. m. and find it hard to have faith in our (all too hasty) prayer that we will get it, because we are accustomed to trains leaving on time (at least in the Western world). But if we have the necessary faith to believe that each individual action in life is the work of God, then it is not so hard to believe that God will make the action of that train leaving occur at 9:30 a. m. rather than at 9a. m. when He normally makes it leave.

The relatively small amount of human repentance needed to make the Angel repent is shown in Amos 7. Amos sees visions of the impending judgements on Israel. After each he prays " O Lord God, forgive, I beseech Thee: who shall stand for Jacob? (If you, his Angel-God, don't?) for he is small" . The answer comes: " The Lord repented for this. It shall not be, saith the Lord" . He repented for the sake of one intense prayer! Notice too Amos asking " Who shall stand for Jacob?" . Michael the Angel stands for Israel in the court of Heaven (as the Angel 'God of Jacob'; Dan. 12:1), and thus it appears Amos is pointing out that if Israel is condemned and punished they will have no Angel with them- and so the Angel changes His mind.

Angels And The Will Of God

The fact we can alter God's will by wrestling in prayer with the Angels throws a serious question mark over the average public prayer, which seems to be a list of requests interspersed with a host of " If it be Thy will" s. Presumably we base our style of prayer on Biblical example. But where are the examples of men requesting something in prayer and adding a half hearted " If it be Thy will" ? Consider Elijah's calling down of fire to consume the sacrifices in front of the Baal worshippers. He didn't mention 'if it be Thy will'. Or again, how he says that their will not be dew nor rain but according to his word (1 Kings 17:1). He prayed that there would be no rain, James tells us. But he was *so* confident of the answers coming. Reflect how the Lord cursed the fig tree with fruitlessness. But when the disciples marvelled at how this had come about, the Lord started speaking about prayer. Clearly enough, He'd been praying for the fig tree to become barren, and He was so confident that what He had asked would truly come about. And so He comments in this context: " What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them [i.e. already], and ye shall

have them" (Mk. 11:24). He decided what he wanted, and he prayed with great faith. If our concept of the will of God is that it is all signed and sealed before we start to pray, then the very request for the prayer to be heard only if it is God's will makes a mockery of prayer. If God's will is determinate and decided already, then it will happen whether we pray or not. But prayer is powerful. We can change the declared will of God in many things- even up to the date of the second coming!

Thus for the man in good conscience with God " Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee (no mention here of 'if it is His will!'). . thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee" (Job 22:27,28). Absolute faith in prayer which is according to God's broad desires results in our requests effectively being decrees of what is now going to happen! To the present writer this is the only reasonable understanding of the relationship between the 'will' of God and our prayers. It is not difficult for us to know what the will of God in the sense of His desires is. We have been born again by the word of God. We were not born again by the will of man, but by the will of God. The will of God is therefore found in the word of God (James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; John 1:12-14). Thus if we pray according to our knowledge of God's desires as explained in the word, we are praying according to His will- and therefore if we have faith " He heareth us" . Jesus said as much: " If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what YE will, and it shall be done unto you" (Jn. 15:7). Notice He didn't say 'you will ask whatever is according to God's will , and it will be heard'. We ask whatever we desire, and we will receive. This is because our will should be the will of God if the word of God is in us. This is why David could say that God would be responsive to his prayers, "according to [my keeping of] thy word" (Ps. 119:58)

A nice picture of the Angels at work in dealing with our prayers is given in Mal. 2:17: " Ye have wearied the Lord with your words" (in prayer). The Hebrew for " wearied" means to 'exhaust by work'- as if God really makes a lot of effort in considering our prayers. God Himself never wearies- such language is surely more relevant to the Angels? The exhortation to an Israel whose prayers were half hearted and formal repetition needs to be heeded by all of us; and encouragement taken at the great energy expended to deal with our prayers.

It would seem from the earlier comment on Jacob wrestling with the Angel in prayer, that our prayers are in the first place heard by our guardian Angel, and that we can plead with Him for an answer. It appears from Is. 6:7 that Angels even have the power delegated to them to forgive (through Christ, now) our sins in response to our prayers. The Angels being God's eyes means that they are His sensors to our prayers and thoughts; thus it would be fitting if our prayers went to them first in the process of their presentation to God, although God Himself knows our every thought and word. Heb. 2:6 says that God is mindful of man because He visits him- which He does through His Angels (visiting is Angelic language). Thus God is mindful (literally mind-full!) of us because of the Angels " visiting" us with trials and observation " every moment" (Job 7:18). However, in the same way that for such thoughts to be powerful with God they have to go through Christ, so they also have to be presented to Him by the Angels. Naturally it must ever be remembered that there is only one mediator- the Lord Jesus, not Angels (1 Tim. 2:5). The connection between the Angels as God's eyes and His hearing of prayer becomes more relevant once it is realized that to 'find grace in God's sight' (eyes-Angels) is equivalent to saying 'please hear my prayer'- see Gen. 19:19; 32:5; 33:10,15; 34:11- at least in Genesis. This again explains why early believers conceived of God in terms of an Angel, as they would have prayed to the Angel and received the answers and other revelation of God from one.

Prayer as incense

I have elsewhere commented upon the connection between Angels and the cherubim. The original root of the word 'cherubim' is associated with prayer and intercession: "The closest cognate is the Akkadian *karibu* which is also a being at the entrance to the sanctuary. Its original meaning is that of an intercessor... a mediator of prayers... the one who prays *par excellence*"⁽¹⁾. Note too the parallel in 1 Kings 8 between Solomon spreading forth his hands to pray, and the Cherubim spreading forth their wings before God and man (1 Kings 6:27; 8:7 cp. 8:22,38,54). This is not to say that now the Angels are mediators of prayers- for the Lord alone is that.

In this context, Revelation has much to say about Angels and prayers. Rev. 5:8 shows each of the Angels (again notice how all of them are involved) having golden vials in which are our prayers, and that with them in hand they bow down to Jesus. So it would appear that our prayers go first to them, then to Jesus, and then to God Himself, who then gives His answer to the Angel before His throne to go forth and execute. Rev. 8:3 describes one Angel being given much incense- i. e. prayers- presumably by the individual guardian Angels. He then offers this up on the altar (Christ) to God, and the response from God comes in the form of the Angels sounding their trumpets. It is interesting to note that actually these Angels had already been prepared for what they were going to do (Rev. 8:2) when they had been earlier before the throne of God. God knows our prayers before we say them. He knew what the prayers of the people at that time would be, and had earlier prepared the Angels to answer them, and this was unleashed by their cumulative prayer. But without that prayer- that human part of the equation- the prepared answer would not have been put into action. The prayers were offered up by one Angel- this either means there is one Angel with overall responsibility for offering up prayers to Christ (the altar), or that there is one Angel who collects together the prayers from one period of time or about one particular subject and then offers them up to Christ. The fact "much incense" is mentioned presumably means that there was much prayer made at this time, and this was added to the "prayers of all saints" (v. 3) which had already been made about this.

Perhaps this idea of our prayers going first to an Angel is hinted at in Psalm 80:1 "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel (the language of Is. 63:11 regarding the guardian Angel of Israel in the wilderness), thou that leadest Joseph like a flock (the Angel led Israel through the wilderness); Thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth. . ". It would seem that the Angel "went up in the midst of them" as Moses had successfully pleaded for by physically dwelling between the Cherubim whilst they were encamped, occasionally shining out with the shekinah glory either in pleasure or anger at the people's behaviour during the journey. In this Psalm we see a prayer addressed to this Angel. We have commented earlier on the use of the word "send" with regard to God physically sending forth an Angel in answer to prayer. "The LORD send thee help from the sanctuary (Most Holy)" (Ps. 20:2) indicates that the Angel was physically there, and that God would send out His help through that Angel. The other allusions to the Angel in Ps. 80 are detailed in Chapter 12, but v. 4 is interesting at present. "O Lord God of Hosts (Angels), how long wilt Thou smoke against the prayer of this people?" . Incense represents prayer, but it seems that if prayer is insincere the Angels as it were fill the sanctuary with smoke to stop the incense getting through to Jesus. This is perhaps the situation in Rev. 15:8, where the temple was filled with smoke from "the glory of God and His power" (the Angels? cp. 2 Thess. 1:8,9), so that "no man" - i. e. no man's prayer?- could enter until the Angels had fully punished the world.

Is. 1:15 also seems relevant to God's method of rejecting prayer through the Angels. " When ye spread forth your hands (in prayer) I will hide Mine eyes (Angels) from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear" . God Himself hears and sees all words and actions, including insincere prayer. But He lets Himself be limited through His Angels turning away from being sensitive to some words of prayer.

In Zech. 1:12 " the angel of the Lord" asks Yahweh of hosts " how long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem...?" . Surely the Angel was representing those of God's people such as Ezra who were asking God " how long?" . And in response to that, the Angel seeks to persuade other Angels [" Yahweh of hosts"] to act.

Angels Answering

Does it follow that our guardian Angel or the Angel coordinating the offering of the prayers will only offer them to Christ if they are for some specific furthering of God's purpose when there are enough of them? This idea is very attractive regarding the second coming- once there is enough incense concerning this, it will be offered to Christ, who will then send it to God and the answer empowering Christ and the Angels to act will come. The fact that the incense is offered together must indicate a period of amassing it, and therefore a slight gap in the answering of the prayers through their being delayed in being offered to Christ.

An interesting thought arises from Prov. 15:29: " The Lord is far from the wicked: but He heareth the prayer of the righteous" . This implies that God is too physically far away from the wicked to hear their prayer. Ps. 10:1 is one of the many references in the Psalms to God being physically far away when a prayer is not answered: " Why standest Thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest Thou Thyself in times of trouble?" . This is the language of limitation- God Himself hears every sound of our lips, including the prayers of the wicked, which He says are like smoke in His nostrils and an annoyance to Him. So if our prayers are heard when God is 'near' us, does it not follow that when our Angel is physically near us, then our prayer is more quickly heard? Hence Jesus' Angel was physically with Him in Gethsemane in order to encourage Him in prayer. Once we accept that prayer goes first to an Angel, then this suggestion looks more sensible.

Luke 1 exemplifies how Angels are used in answering prayer. The Angelic context is set by v. 65 saying that Zacharias and Elisabeth " were both righteous before God" - recalling the language of the Law, where coming before God was coming into the presence of the Angel in the tabernacle. In God's sight no man is justified (i. e. counted to be righteous)- Ps. 143:2, although men may be justified in the view of His Angels. The people praying outside made a fitting parallel with the incense being offered in the temple. Seeing it was the day of Atonement, the prayers were fundamentally for forgiveness of sins which the animal sacrifices of the past year had not properly atoned for. The answer came in the form of an Angel standing on the right side (implying acceptance) of the incense altar, and giving news of the coming ministry of Jesus, the true means of Atonement. Gabriel says that He had been sent in answer to this prayer (v. 19)- He was therefore the Angel that appeared to Zacharias.

Delayed Answers

The Hebrew word translated " hear" is also that for " answer" (see Ps. 55:1). God's answer is in that sense instant; we must believe that what we ask for we have already received. And yet there does seem to be a definite gap between God's response and our requests. The fact the

Angels are limited in wisdom and power explains the delay in answer to some of our prayers. Daniel 10 is a clear example of this. Daniel 10:2 records that Daniel prayed for three weeks, presumably for understanding of the vision. In v. 12 Daniel is told by the Angel that " from the first day... thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words" . So because of his prayer (" words" - perhaps put like that to emphasize the power of the 'mere' words uttered in prayer), an Angel was sent from God to give him the understanding he had asked for. His very first prayer for this was answered- but the actual answer came three weeks later. The reason for this was that the Angel had been withstood by the prince of Persia for 21 days (v. 13). Three weeks is 21 days. So Daniel's first prayer was answered, but it took the Angel three weeks to work out the answer in practice; but during this time Daniel kept on praying, although at the time it must have seemed to him that no answer was forthcoming. So let us be prepared to persevere in prayer, as those saints in Rev. 8 did and were rewarded by the incense finally being offered by the Angel to Christ, and then to God.

It may just be possible that there is a mighty Angel of answered prayer (Gabriel?), in the same way as there is a 'wonderful numberer' co-ordinating the timing of God's purpose, and an Angel specifically representing Jesus and Israel (do these four make up the four forms of Angel manifestation in the cherubim and four living creatures?). This Angel would co-ordinate the presentation and answering of prayers. Thus in Luke 1:10,11 we see the priest's offering of incense paralleled with the prayer of the people, and in reply to these prayers and those of Zacharias an Angel comes and stands at the right hand of the altar of incense to announce the granting of the peoples' request (for forgiveness), and Zacharias' request for a child, in the form of the birth of John and his ministry of reconciliation with God. The incense altar represented the offering of prayer- the Angel coming to stand at the right side of the altar indicates answered prayer. The command from the altar (of incense?) in Rev. 9:14 to the sixth Angel telling Him to loose other Angels was maybe from this same Angel of answered prayer. All these suggestions need very careful development, especially guarding against making the Angels rather than Jesus our mediator. There is only one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5).

Notes

(1) Clauss Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) p. 274.

(2) Note that the Ziphites, although Israelites, are counted as not in the covenant; just as those rejected from God's people will be judged with the world, i.e. treated as 'Gentiles' as the apostate amongst natural Israel were.

7-2 Case Study: David And The Ziphites

Psalm 54 was written when David received the news that the Ziphites had betrayed him. The reference to oppressors 'seeking after my soul / life' (Ps. 54:3) uses the same Hebrew words as in 1 Sam. 23:15, where Saul seeks for David's life at Ziph. It gives an insight into the mind of David; how he perceived himself, how he understood God. He was obviously in a desperate situation- he'd been betrayed, and Saul appeared certain now to corner him and kill him. He asks God of course to save him; he doesn't just resign himself to what looked like an impossible situation. He had the vision to believe that God *can* do miracles. He asks God to

‘judge’ him, to ‘plead my cause’ (Ps. 54:1 Heb.). There he was, just having received the news... and he prays, and composes a Psalm, right there and then. Composing poetry in the heat of the moment was his way of calming down and focusing his faith. That’s not to say, of course, that he didn’t later refine it and ‘write it up’ as it were. In passing, note how Ps. 59 is another example of David composing a Psalm in the heat of the moment- it was written, according to the [inspired] introduction, whilst Saul’s men were watching his house planning to kill him. And there he was in his bedroom, praying and composing a Psalm...

He so often refers to the court of Heaven; he imagined his enemies, perhaps represented by an Angel in the court of Heaven. And yet he asks God, the judge, to plead his cause to Himself, like an advocate. He grasped what Paul later did- that the Father and Son are both our judge and *also* our defending lawyer, pleading our cause. And he goes on: “Hear my prayer...give ear to the words of my mouth” (Ps. 54:2). He saw prayer as some kind of a judgment experience. And again, the New Testament has the same idea- for the “boldness” with which we come before the “throne of grace” right now, is the “boldness” with which we will come before that same throne at the final day of judgment (Heb. 4:16; Eph. 3:12 cp. 1 Jn. 4:17). Therefore answered prayer is in a sense a foretaste of judgment. The Gentiles who ‘rose up against me’ (Ps. 54:3) are likened to the accusers, ‘rising up’ in a court of law. He had the vision of all actions here on earth being played out before the Heavenly court, presumably by Angelic representatives of each side. The same thing goes on more obviously in the book of Daniel and in the record of Job’s sufferings. The idea of his oppressors [i.e. Saul and his supporters] ‘seeking after’ him is again a legal concept- the same Hebrew word is translated ‘to make inquisition’, ‘to make request’, to ‘ask for’ in a legal sense. David expected God’s response to be a ‘delivering’ of him from ‘trouble’. But again, the Hebrew words used are judgment words- a ‘defence’ of him from his ‘adversary at law’ (Ps. 54:7). And in the end, the God who is his legal defence will turn into the judge, who will ‘reward evil unto mine enemies’ (Ps. 54:5). The enigmatic conclusion to the Psalm is perhaps explained by David’s vision of his representative Angel in the court of Heaven, as God’s eye, looking forth in judgment upon his enemies, just as the Angel did at the Red Sea : “Mine eye hath seen upon mine enemies” (Ps. 54:7).

So to David, the idea of a ‘court of Heaven’ had real meaning. In the panic moment of distress, in the adrenalin rush of the crisis moment, he was immediately aware of it. He thought deeply about it, and it was the basis for his faith. He reflects that his persecutors were acting as they were because they did not set God before them (Ps. 54:3, cp. Ps. 86:14). Their sinful behaviour was because they refused to accept the implication of a fundamental first principle- that God sees and knows all things, and is therefore truly present ‘before our face’. By contrast, David can say that he set the Lord *always* before his face (Ps. 16:8). And as Ps. 54 indicates, David was thoroughly aware that what he saw happening on earth, was being reflected in the Heavenly court; for God was and is present in every aspect of daily life.

In passing, note the division of this Psalm, hinging around the ‘Selah’ [pause] at the end of v. 3. David can speak from then on in the past tense. He was *so* certain that God would hear his prayer, that he speaks about the answer in the past tense. He had the attitude taught by the Lord in Mk. 11:24- that we should believe that we *have received* what we ask for, when we pray. God gave David an opportunity to demonstrate again that he had learnt his lesson. Some time later, the Ziphites yet again betrayed David to Saul. This time, David goes out with Abishai to where Saul was sleeping, but doesn’t kill him. He takes Saul’s spear, and then calls out to Saul, making the claim that God will “deliver me out of all tribulation” (1 Sam. 26:24). The Hebrew word he uses for “deliver” is just that he used in Ps. 54:7, which he

spoke at the time of the first crisis with the Ziphites: God "hath delivered me out of all trouble". He means: 'I believe that God *will* deliver me'. But David was so certain of receiving that deliverance from the court of Heaven, that he used the past tense. Yet God made the situation repeat, as He does in our lives; so that we put into practice the faith we learnt in our earlier experience of the same situation.

8. The Gospel: Inspiration For Prayer

Each doctrine which makes up the Gospel elicits something practical in us. And prayerfulness is something demanded of the Truth we believe. Consider how the following doctrines inspire true prayer:

1. God exists and we can have a personal relationship with a God we know.

Practicing The Presence Of God

Believing in God's very existence of itself affects a man's behaviour. "The *living God*" is a phrase often used by men in prayer or desperate straits. God *is*, He is the living One, and He therefore is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

2. God created all things

With the Babylonian army besieging Jerusalem and every reason to be depressed, Jeremiah exalts in the creation record and has this as the basis for his faith that Yahweh's power is far from limited (Jer. 32:17). God's reply to this prayer is to repeat that yes, "I am the God of all flesh, is anything too hard for me?" ; His creative power is to be seen as the basis for Israel's Hope (Jer. 32:36-44). Likewise He taught Job the futility of having such metaphysical doubts about Him, of the joy there is all around us in creation regardless of our personal suffering...through an exposition of His power as creator. All this is why the disciples were inspired to faith that their prayers for deliverance would be answered by the recollection of the fact that God has created all things and therefore nothing is too hard for Him (Acts 4:24 RV). Ps. 146:5-9 outlines God's creative power at the start of things, and on this basis the Psalmist appeals to Israel to be considerate to the poor and those on the margins in society. Why? Because we here on this planet were and are the marginal compared to the God who lives so far away, physically and in all other ways. And yet He created us, and sustains us His creation. The wonder of this should lead us to seek out those whom we would otherwise overlook. God the creator has empowered the marginal by giving and sustaining our lives, and so should we do. Just because the Father gives His sun and rain to all without discrimination, we likewise should love our enemies (Mt. 5:43-45). This is the imperative of creation.

3. God sees and knows all things

The fact God sees and knows all means that we might as well open our lives up before Him in prayer and meditation. Jeremiah "revealed my cause" before the Lord because he knew that God "triest the reins and the heart" (Jer. 11:20). This may be why men like Jeremiah were somewhat 'rough' with God; whatever they felt about God, they told Him. They so knew that God knew their thoughts....there was and is no point in saying fine words to God in prayer, whilst feeling harder about Him in ones heart. the Psalmists talk to God in a far 'rougher' way than we do. They pour out their feelings, their anger and frustration with their

enemies, their inability to understand how God is working...and they let it all hang down. They seem to have no reserve with God; they talk to Him as if He is their friend and acquaintance. David pleads with God to 'avenge my cause' (Ps. 35:23), he protests how he is in the right and how he longs for God to judge him. And so do the prophets, in the interjections they sometimes make in commentary on the prophecy they have just uttered. The emotion which David often seems to have felt was "Damn these people!", but he pours this out to God and asks *Him* to damn them. When we like David feel our enemies are unjust, we can:

1. Seek revenge. But this isn't a response we can make, Biblically.
2. Deny the feelings of hurt and anger. And yet, they surface somehow. And we join the ranks of the millions of hurt people in this world, who 'take it out' in some way on others.
3. Or we can do as David seems to have done. Take these feelings, absolutely as they are, with no rough edges smoothed off them...to God Himself. Pour them all out in prayer and leave Him to resolve the matter. In passing, this fits in with the conclusions of modern psychiatry- that we can't eliminate our feelings, so we must express them in an appropriate way.

This latter option is how I understand the imprecatory Psalms. Those outpourings of human emotion were read by God as prayers. The writer of Psalm 137, sitting angry and frustrated by a Babylonian riverside, with his harp hanging on a willow branch, being jeered ("tormented" Ps. 137:3 RVmg.) by the victorious Babylonian soldiers who had led him away captive...he felt *so* angry with them. Especially when they tried to make him sing one of the temple songs ("sing us one of the songs of Zion"). And, as a bitter man does, his mind went from one hurt to another. He remembered how when Babylon had invaded, the Edomites hadn't helped their Hebrew brethren (Obadiah 11,12). They had egged on the Babylonian soldiers in ripping down the temple, saying "Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation". And so in anger and bitterness this Jew prays with tears, as he remembered Zion, "O daughter of Babylon...happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock" (:8,9 RV). God read those angry words as a prayer, and in some sense they will have their fulfilment. For these words are picked up in Rev. 18:8,21 and applied to what will finally happen to Babylon. Her spiritual children will be dashed against the rock of Christ, the stone of Daniel 2:44, at His return. He will dash in pieces the Babylon-led people that oppose Him.

This makes these Psalms a challenge to us, in that they show how our earlier brethren poured out their souls, their anger, their doubts and fears, their joy and exuberance too...to the God who hears prayer, to the God who feels passionately for us, who feels for *our* feelings, *who sees and knows all things in the human heart*, even moreso through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we must ask whether our prayers are of this quality, or whether we have slipped into the mire of mediocrity, the same standard phrases, the same old words and themes... and even worse, could it be that we perceive that God only sees and hears the words we say to Him in formal prayer, and disregards our other feelings and thoughts? Seeing He sees and knows all things, let us therefore pour out all that is within us before Him. And we will find it wonderfully therapeutic when struggling against anger and hurt.

4. The Kingdom will come

The hope of the future Kingdom means that we will not now be materialistic. And the model prayer was given by Jesus in the context of His comment on how some tend to always be asking God for material things. The Lord teaches that the paramount thing we should request is the coming of the Kingdom, and our forgiveness so that we might partake in it. *This* is the request we should be making- for " Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of...after *this* manner therefore pray ye..." (Mt. 6:9,10). Later in Mt. 6 the Lord repeats the same words: " Your heavenly Father *knoweth that ye have need of all these things*...seek ye first his Kingdom" (Mt. 6:32-34 RV). The structure of the Lord's prayer reflects this- for the first and only request in it is a seeking for the coming of His Kingdom. The RV of Heb. 10:34,35 brings out well the same theme: " Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your *possessions*, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better *possession*" (RVmg). Who we ourselves will be turned into is our better possession, " a better possession and an abiding one" (RV). And this compensates for the loss of material *possessions* in this life. Therefore the writer urges them to not cast away their confidence in the receipt of this reward at the Lord's return (:35). The more humbly confident we are in receiving the Kingdom, the less the loss of possessions now will mean to us. Hebrews also associates the hope of the Kingdom with the characteristic of patience in the small things of this life. Hence Job, when he lost his hope, could exclaim: " What is mine end, that I should be patient?" (Job 6:11 RV).

5. The Bible is inspired by God

So Read The Bible And Let It Guide Your Prayer Requests

The sort of things we ask for in prayer will be affected by this; and we will read God's word with real reverence and fervour, knowing that this really is God's voice speaking to us, and that this really is the source of God's Holy Spirit which can work in our characters to bring about that transformation we faintly would see. The wonder of the Bible, as God's very own self-revelation, will remain with us. True response to belief in the inspiration of the word is that we will truly believe (Jn. 19:35), and we will see the secrets of our heart disclosed (1 Cor. 14:25). Likewise, if we grasp the reality of the cross, the thoughts of our hearts will be revealed (Lk. 2:35). The power of basics leads to real self knowledge and self examination. If His words abide in us, we will ask what *we* desire and receive it, because we ask according to the will of God revealed in Scripture- and will have made His will, our will. And thus we will enter a positive upwards spiral in our prayer life with the Father.

6. Jesus had our nature

Therefore in the daily round of life, He will be a living reality, like David we will behold the Lord Jesus before our face all the day. We will really believe that forgiveness is possible through the work of such a representative; and the reality of his example will mean the more to us, as a living inspiration to rise above our lower nature. Appreciating the doctrines of the atonement enables us to pray acceptably; " we have boldness and access with confidence by *the Faith*" - not just 'by faith', but as a result of *the Faith* (Eph. 3:12). Hebrews so often uses the word " therefore" ; *because of* the facts of the atonement, we can *therefore* come boldly before God's throne in prayer, with a true heart and clear conscience (Heb. 4:16). This " boldness" which the atonement has enabled will be reflected in our being 'bold' in our witness (2 Cor. 3:12; 7:4); our experience of imputed righteousness will lead us to have a confidence exuding through our whole being. This is surely why 'boldness' was such a characteristic and watchword of the early church (Acts 4:13,29,31; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:13; Heb. 10:19; 1 Jn. 4:17). Stephen truly believed that the Lord Jesus stood as his representative and

his advocate before the throne of grace. Although condemned by an earthly court, he confidently makes his appeal before the court of Heaven (Acts 7:56). Doubtless he was further inspired by the basic truth that whoever confesses the Lord Jesus before men, He will confess him before the angels in the court of Heaven (Lk. 12:8).

The connection between the atonement and faith in prayer is also brought out in 2 Cor. 1:20 RSV: " For all the promises of God in him are yea. That is why we utter the Amen through him" . The promises of God were confirmed through the Lord's death, and the fact that He died as the seed of Abraham, having taken upon Him Abraham's plural seed in representation (Rom. 15:8,9). Because of this, " we utter the Amen through [on account of being in] Him" . We can heartily say 'Amen', so be it, to our prayers on account of our faith and understanding of His atoning work.

Paul exhorts that prayers be made " for all men" , just because " Christ Jesus gave himself a ransom for all" , and He thereby is the one and only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:1-6). Because of what He enabled for all, we should pray for all, that somehow circumstances might be allowed which enable all men's salvation in Jesus to indeed spread to all men.

In the light of ten chapters of detailed exposition of the meaning of the blood of Christ, *therefore let us...*, Paul triumphantly drives home (Heb. 10:19-25): Let us enter boldly " into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" . This is only possible through a deep knowledge of sin forgiven. Our prayer life should be a positive and upbuilding experience: " Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" . Reflection on the atonement, believing it all, will result in a positive and unashamed faith.

9. Prayer And The Limitation Of God

9-1 Divine Ecology

A brother much beloved coined (and often uses) the phrase 'Divine ecology'. The idea is that all aspects of God's purpose somehow work together for good, even if in the short term it seems there is something not in order or out of balance in the way God is working. If we over analyse one aspect of God's purpose or workings with men, we can get an unbalanced picture; God may seem, e.g., too soft, or too hard. We need to see the different parts of His purpose in the wider picture and how they all work together to achieve the complete fulfilment of His purpose in us. Because we are too finite to comprehend the whole complex system, there are some aspects of His ways which appear to us unbalanced, but ultimately, this is not the case. I say all this because I want to focus on just one aspect of God's dealings with us: the way in which He gives us unlimited freewill to serve Him.

We need to understand this within the context of predestination; the sovereign will of God at work to achieve His will without the input of any man. We learn, I suggest, the fact that many things we do which seem to advance God's purpose, e.g. preaching and prayer, are primarily for our benefit, rather than being absolutely essential for the fulfilment of God's will. Consider, in a preaching context, how the faithful overcome by the blood of the lamb- by what is done for them- and also by the word of their preaching, as if the act of preaching and witnessing against a hostile persecuting system was what helped maintain their faith (Rev. 12:11). And because of this, Paul encouraged Timothy to take heed " to thy teaching...for in

doing this [i.e. preaching] thou shalt save both *thyself*, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16 RV). Having true doctrine is related to " speaking the truth" , " dealing truly" (Eph. 4:13-15 RVmg.) with each other- as if the sensitive, heartfelt preaching of truth should result in our own truthfulness. We continue professing / confessing our hope " that it waver not" (Heb. 10:23 RV). It doesn't waver for us, exactly because we preach it.

Paul Tournier in *The Meaning Of Persons* perceptively comments: " We become fully conscious only of what we are able to express to someone else. We may already have had a certain intuition about it, but it must remain vague so long as it is unformulated" (New York: Harper & Row, 1957, p. 22). This is why anyone involved in prayer, preaching, public speaking, writing or personal explanation of the Gospel to someone else will know that *they* have gained so much from having to state in so many words what they already 'know'. And in the course of making the expression, our own understanding is deepened, our personal consciousness of what we believe is strengthened, and thereby our potential for a real faith is enhanced. Tournier's observation is validated by considering the record of the healed blind man in Jn. 9. Initially he says that he doesn't know whether or not Jesus is a sinner, all he knows is that Jesus healed him. But the Jews force him to testify further, and in the course of his witness, the man explains to them that God doesn't hear sinners, and so for Jesus to have asked God for his healing and been heard...surely proved that Jesus wasn't a sinner. He was sinless. The man was as it were thinking out loud, coming to conclusions himself, as he made his bold witness (Jn. 9:31,33). And by praying out loud or writing out our prayers, we can come to the same realizations.

Total Freedom

This said, let me outline the thesis: God can do anything, He is omnipotent. But He chooses to limit His omnipotence in order to allow man total freewill. Therefore effectively, how far God will fulfil His purpose depends upon how far we are obedient to Him. Of course, God can act quite independently of us; He has the sovereign right and ability to act as He likes, and achieve His objectives how He likes. But it seems that God chooses to limit His ability to do this. We have complete freewill, and God works with us individually in proportion as we work with Him. We have genuine choice, not only as to whether to serve God, but *how* and on what level and to what extent we serve Him, within the salvation we experience in Christ. Indeed, the world has no freedom; men are slaves to sin, mastered by their own pride and lies. In Christ, we have experienced the gift of freedom (Rom. 5:15-18); " where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free" (2 Cor. 3:17). Indeed, the extent of our liberty is such that we must use it carefully lest we offend others (1 Cor. 8:8- e.g. the kind of thing we spend our money on, how far we indulge in 'relaxation'...). This " liberty" in which the NT so frequently exults (Lk. 4:18; 1 Cor. 10:29; Gal. 2:4; 5:13; James 1:25; 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:16) will be fully revealed in the freedom of the Kingdom: " the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). As it will be then, so now: we will not be free to do what we like morally, but within the context of God's covenant, we are free, totally and utterly free, in our service of Him. God doesn't see us as robots serving their maker; He sees us as His partners, His sons, His friends, even the willing, freely persuaded bride of His Son. But as the Master Chess player He builds our limitations into His total game plan. For example, God uses our weaknesses and experience of moral failure for the furtherance of His purpose. Thus a man's marriage out of the Faith is sometimes used to bring a woman *to* the Faith (not that this justifies it). Somehow God is never beaten; man can do nothing against the Truth, only for it (2 Cor. 13:8). Somehow God's word never returns unto Him void, somehow the lost sheep is always found. These are not just expressions of the essential hopefulness of the Father and Son (although

this in itself is something to be truly inspired by); these are statements which reflect the way in which within God's scheme of working, everything works out to His glory.

The final judgment will be of our works, not because works justify us, but because our use of the freedom we have had and exercised in our lives is the basis of the future reward we will be given. Salvation itself is not on the basis of our works (Rom. 11:6; Gal. 2:16; Tit. 3:5); indeed, the *free gift* of salvation by pure grace is contrasted with the *wages* paid by sin (Rom. 4:4; 6:23). And yet at the judgment, the preacher receives *wages* for what he did (Jn. 4:36), the labourers receive *hire* (s.w. wages) for their work in the vineyard (Mt. 20:8; 1 Cor. 3:8). There is a *reward* (s.w. wages) for those who rise to the level of loving the totally unresponsive (Mt. 5:46), or preaching in situations quite against their natural inclination (1 Cor. 9:18). *Salvation* itself isn't given on this basis of works; but the nature of our eternal existence in the Kingdom will be a reflection of our use of the gift of freedom in this life. In that sense the judgment will be of our works.

9-2 Limiting God

The Almighty allows His infinite power to become limited by our degrees of spirituality. His word is sent forth and *will accomplish* its purpose, Isaiah says; and yet we can make " the word of God of none effect" (Mt 15:6) by our traditions or our lack of preaching it. The word / Gospel will inevitably have a result, and yet it is also limited by the attitudes of men. Take another example: the widow woman was told to borrow pots in which to place the oil which would be miraculously provided. The extent of the miracle was limited by the number and size of the pots she borrowed in faith. Or take 2 Kings 8:10: " Thou mayest certainly recover: howbeit the Lord hath shewed me that he shall surely die" . Ben-Hadad *could* recover, it was possible in prospect, but God knew he would not fulfil certain preconditions, and therefore he would not. Abraham told his servant that God would send His Angel before him, so that his mission to find a suitable wife for Isaac would succeed: " He shall send his Angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence. And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee..." (Gen. 24:7,8). The Angel prepared in prospect for the success of the mission; but it still depended upon the woman's freewill. The whole incident in Genesis 24 can be read as typical of the search, through the preaching of the Gospel, for the bride of Christ. And consider how the men of Meroz " came not to the help of the Lord" (Jud. 5:23).

In a sense God requires not help from man; and yet in another sense He has delegated His work to us, and limits His achievements according to what we are willing to do. C.S. Lewis in *The World's Last Night* observes: " He seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye. Creation seems to be delegation through and through. I suppose this is because He is a giver" (p. 9). As any employer soon learns, delegation is a risk. We have been " entrusted with the Gospel" ; and therefore the world God so wants to love, the world God is appealing to, may never see Him; for He makes His appeal through us, as Paul told the Corinthians. Frederick Buechner remarked upon this " folly of preaching" : " to choose for his holy work in the world...lamebrains and misfits and nitpickers and holier-than-thous and stuffed shirts and odd ducks and egomaniacs..." (*A Room Called Remember* p. 142). Frequently missionary brethren lament such attitudes in the committee brethren who control their resources. But the point is, that we are all like this. And God has chosen to work through the likes of us.

Israel in the wilderness *could have had* honey out of the rock to feed them (Ps. 81:16), but because they "limited the Holy One of Israel" (Ps. 78:41), they received only water and manna. God had clearly promised them: "The LORD thy God shall deliver [the tribes of Canaan] into thine hand, and thou shalt destroy them with a mighty destruction" (Dt. 7:23). There are no conditions attached to this prediction in the record, and yet we must clearly understand it as meaning "This is what is potentially possible for you, I have enabled it in my plan, but it depends upon your faith". And tragically, Israel would not. They would inherit a land which was blessed with iron, and from whose hills "thou *mayest* dig brass" (Dt. 8:9); and yet they failed to make the effort to dig this out, and therefore they were dominated by the Canaanite tribes who had iron weapons. The Angels had made it potentially possible, but the realization of their potential plans depended upon Israel's freewill effort. When Lot says that he "cannot" flee from Sodom, the Angel responds by saying that he "cannot" [same Hebrew word] do anything until Lot has left- as if to suggest that the Angel's mission depended upon Lot's freewill decision for its realization (Gen. 19:19,22). The same word is found on the lips of another Angel in commending Jacob that he had "prevailed" (Gen. 32:28)- literally, he had 'coulded'. He had achieved what had been made potentially possible in terms of his relationship with that Angel. Caleb and Joshua perceived that Israel were "well able" to overcome the tribes and inherit the land, seeing that the Angel-hornet had gone ahead and prepared the way; and yet due to Israel's disabling of this possibility at the time, it was in some ways so that God Himself was "not able" to give them the inheritance, because *they* judged that *they* were "not able" to take it (Num. 13:30,31; 14:16).

Think of Jeroboam. The final comment upon him is that he was not as God's servant David (1 Kings 14:7-9). And yet he was set up with that potential possibility. Consider:

Jeroboam (1Kings 11) David

Man of valour v. 28 1 Sam. 16:18 RV

Young man v. 28 1 Sam. 17:58

Ruler over all v. 28 1 Sam. 18:5

I will taken thee and thou shalt reign over Israel v. 37 2 Sam. 7:8

Build a house v. 38 2 Sam. 7:11

v. 40 1 Sam. 19:2,10

And it works the other way, too. Prophecies of doom can be turned round by our repentance. Nineveh avoiding certain destruction on account of their repentance is a clear example. And one is tempted to think that Joshua's appeal to Achan to properly confess his sin was meant to give him the chance of avoiding the 'definite' condemnation promised. Likewise Acts 20:28-31 records Paul predicting the apostacy that was to come upon Ephesus; but he pleads with the elders to take heed and watch, so that his inspired words needn't come true. Indeed, every one of us in Christ is in effect nullifying the principle / prophecy that sin brings death, and for our sins we must return to the dust for ever.

According to Heb. 11:12, God's promises to Abraham were fulfilled on account of his faith; God in some way allowed Himself to be potentially limited by Abraham's faith. Indeed, the

promised world-wide blessing of all nations was promised only " because thou hast obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:16,18). In this sense the covenants of salvation were partly due to another man [Abraham] being faithful [although above all our salvation was due to the Lord Jesus]. In this sense he is the " father" of the faithful. Or take forgiveness. God is willing to totally forgive the repentant sinner. He could just forgive men; it is within His power to do this. But He doesn't. He allows His power to do this to be limited by the extent of our repentance. " If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil which I purpose to do unto them" (Jer. 26:3). Likewise " Repent ye therefore..., and be converted, *that* your sins may be blotted out...Repent therefore...and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart *may* be forgiven thee" (Acts 3:19; 8:22). The ability of God to forgive is controlled by our repentance (" that...may"). This is used by Peter as the source of appeal for men to repent. The power of the Lord was present to heal the Pharisees- but they would not make use of what was potentially made available (Lk. 5:17). He could not do a mighty work in Nazareth because of their unbelief- as if He would have done a mighty miracle greater than the few healings He did perform there, but that possibility was discounted by their lack of faith (Mk. 6:5,6). The conditions on which God's love and forgiveness operate was likewise stressed by Christ: " When ye stand praying, forgive...that your Father...may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mk. 11:25,26). God's eagerness to forgive us is therefore reflected in His eagerness to see us forgive others. His desire to make all grace abound towards us is something beautiful, something wondrous.

The very idea of our limiting its application to ourselves should fill us with a sense of urgency to forgive others so this might not be the case. If we can accept that God allows His power (i.e. His omnipotence) to be limited, it becomes easier to accept that there are circumstances He allows His omniscience (i.e. His knowledge) to be limited. Thus the God who by nature cannot forget and for whom time is nothing, can therefore have the capacity to not remember our sins on account of the Lord's death (Isa. 63:25). We can also reflect how an omnipotent God could have achieved salvation in a less painful way than He did- but He made bare His arm in the death of the cross (Is. 52:10), i.e. He expended Himself greatly. The same idea is present when we read of Yahweh paying a price for the redemption of His people from Egypt. He didn't pay the Egyptians anything, but the figure is used to express the extensive effort He was involved in for His people. This idea of God limiting His omnipotence and also His omniscience also explains why God is described as if He suddenly becomes aware of something, makes haste to intervene, or is hurt by sudden apostasy. These ideas are hard to understand if in fact God has total knowledge, i.e. awareness, from the beginning. They either express God to us in human terms; or God limits His omniscience, as He limits His omnipotence, and therefore disallows Himself from foreseeing all our possible futures. The fact is, God 'the Saviour of Israel' can become " as a mighty man that cannot save" by our refusal to accept His salvation (Jer. 14:8,9). He so identified Himself with Israel that in Egypt, He Himself heard a language which He understood not (Ps. 80:5). He *could* have understood it, and in a sense He did; but so identified is Yahweh with His people that He allows Himself to be limited by their perceptions. It's all brought together in the way Elisha tells Joash to smite upon the ground with arrows; if Joash had perceived deeper what Elisha meant, he would have smitten many times and the Syrian threat would have been eliminated entirely. But he didn't, and therefore Elijah was frustrated with him; the great potential victory was limited by a man's lack of spiritual perception (2 Kings 13:19).

In all these things, God is seeking to work a new creation in the experience of men and women. He has done this for us in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), and yet the reality of it is still

dependent upon whether we will allow ourselves to put on the new man after the image of God, whether we will become born again after His image and likeness (Eph. 4:23,24).

9-3 The Limitation Of Prayer

Our faith in prayer in some sense limits God's ability. The Jewish food laws were ended by the word of God (i.e. the Gospel of Christ) *and* Christian prayer before eating meat: personal prayer was a vital component to enable the sanctifying of food (1 Tim. 4:5). The widow woman believed that her little drops of oil would be multiplied; but how much they multiplied was limited, not by God, but by the number of pots she borrowed in faithful anticipation (2 Kings 4:3). So it was with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There was exhortation to "seek the best gifts"; and yet they were distributed "according as God hath dealt to every man [according to] the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3 and context). God doesn't just 'give' men faith. But He gave to each of them in the early church gifts which reflected the measure of faith shown by the individual believer. How much they could achieve for their Lord was limited by their faith.

We frequently commit the horror of limiting God in our attitude to prayer. All too often we see ourselves in the man who believed and yet still had unbelief: "If thou (Jesus) canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible" (Mk. 9:22,23). The man thought that Christ's power to help was limited: 'If you can do anything to help, well, please do'. The Lord Jesus turned things right round: 'If you can believe, anything's possible' - in other words, God can do anything, but His ability to directly respond to some particular need is limited by our faith, not by any intrinsic lack of ability within Himself. The man hadn't thought about this. He saw God as sometimes able to help a bit; Christ turned the man's words round to show that God's power is infinite, limited only by our faith (2). The same message is taught by putting together the fact that with God nothing is impossible (Lk. 1:37), and the fact that nothing is impossible *unto us* (Mt. 17:20). God's possibility is our possibility; and this is what the Lord was teaching the man who thought that it all depended upon the Lord's possibility alone. There are other instances where the extent and nature of the Lord's healing seems to have been limited by the faith of the recipient (Mt. 8:13 "as...so"; 9:29 "according to"; 12:22 "inasmuch"). The God who has given us His Son will, through His mediation, surely "freely give us all things" in response to our prayers (Rom. 8:32-34). And note how this passage is alluding to the LXX of Esther 8:7: "The King said to Esther, If I have freely granted thee all that was Haman's, and hanged him on a gallows [a cross]...what dost thou yet further seek?", and the King then gives Esther whatever she requests. Note the repetition of ideas: if death on a cross had been granted, then all other things would be freely granted to the mediator / intercessor, for the good of her / His people.

The Lord Jesus went on to comment on the healing of the boy: "This kind (of cure) can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting" (Mk. 9:29). Only intense prayer could send forth this kind of answer from God; He does not act on emotional grounds, just because He feels sorry for somebody. It needs to be noted that initially the man's child was not cured because the disciples didn't have the faith to do it. This teaches that God's activity for others is partly dependent on the prayers of a third party. What stronger motivation could we have to pray earnestly for each other? The prayer of the man of God caused Jeroboam's hand to be healed (1 Kings 13:6). Again, the prayers of someone else can affect the fortunes of another in a way which would not happen if they just prayed for themselves. The Corinthians "helped...by prayer for us" (2 Cor. 1:11) and thereby preserved Paul "from so great a death", presumably

by an awful torture- as if Paul's unaided prayers had less power than when the Corinthians were praying for him too. He says that this blessing of deliverance was "by the means of many persons" praying for him. Stephen believed this to the point that he could pray for the forgiveness of his murderers, fully believing God could hear and grant such forgiveness. Job believed this, in that he prayed God would forgive his children in case they sinned. The friends mocked this in Job 5:4; 8:4; 17:5 and 20:10, saying that the children of the foolish die for their *own* sins, whereas, by implication, Job had figured that *his* prayers and sacrifices could gain *them* forgiveness. Yet in the end, Yahweh stated that Job had understood Him and His principles right, whereas the friends hadn't. And when the Lord asked Martha: "Believest thou this?" (Jn. 11:26), is not the implication that Lazarus was raised because of *her* faith...? This one needs some meditation upon the context.

The deeper we think about these things, the more we come to marvel at the intricacy of God's working with us in our lives. Zechariah had prophesied in the context of the restoration, that Jerusalem could have been a city without walls, with God's protection (2:4-6). But Israel lacked faith, and therefore God came down to their lower level and allowed them to build a wall, and worked with them in this. The exercise of building that wall was a display of great faith and zeal on Nehemiah's part; yet in fact the work He did was a result of Israel's limiting God by their lack of faith, even though Nehemiah himself had faith. Indeed the whole failure of Israel became "riches for the world." (Rom.11:12) Nothing is ultimately wasted or lost. Nothing can be done against the Truth (2 Cor. 13:8). Meditate on your own life and identify the countless failures through which, especially as you look back over time, the "invisible" hand of God is discernible.

If Judah had remained in the land and not fled to Egypt, God would have repented of the evil He had promised, and would there and then have restored the land and rebuilt Jerusalem (Jer. 42:10 cp. Zech. 6:15); the whole restoration from Babylon would never have happened. But Israel would not. And yet the whole restoration exercise, as it happened, brought glory to God through the faith and spirituality of men like Ezra and Nehemiah. Behold once again 'Divine ecology'. The closer one looks, the more conditional prophecies and Divine statements there are. "My house shall be called a house of prayer" had the extent of its possible fulfilment limited by the Jews turning the temple into a trading centre (Mk. 11:17). The statement that Nebuchadnezzar would be humiliated for seven years *could* have been changed by his repentance (Dan. 4:16 cp. 27-29). "Thou *shalt* drive out the Canaanites, though they have iron chariots, and though they be strong" (Josh. 17:18) was in fact conditional on their effort and faith- although it doesn't sound like that in the positive way it is spoken. Daniel understood that after 70 years Jerusalem must be restored; but he earnestly prayed for their forgiveness *so that* this would happen (Dan. 9:2 cp. 19). Perhaps he opened his window and prayed towards Jerusalem exactly because he wanted to fulfil 2 Chron. 6:37,38: "If they shall bethink themselves in the land whither they are carried captive, and turn, and pray unto thee...toward their land...and toward the city which thou hast chosen". He knew that repentance was a precondition for the promised restoration to occur.

Abraham And Sodom

Perhaps the most telling example of the limitation of prayer is in Abraham's request that God would spare Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous men there. He then lowers the number to 40, and then finally to ten, assuming that surely Lot's family were righteous and would comprise ten righteous. If Abraham had left off praying at, say, forty...then this would have been the limit God set. If there were ten righteous there, the city wouldn't have been saved.

But Abraham went on to set the limit at ten. But we wonder, what would have happened if he had gone further and asked God to save Sodom for the sake of one righteous man, i.e. Lot? My sense is that the Father would have agreed. But the city wasn't saved for the sake of the one man Lot, because Abraham limited God's desire to save by the smallness of his vision. This principle can possibly be extended even wider. David asks: "Let thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, according as we hope in thee" (Ps. 33:22). And whoever prayed Ps. 132:10 asked to be heard "for thy servant David's sake" - he or she believed that God would remember David and for *his* sake respond favourably [and how much more powerful is prayer uttered for the sake of the Son of God!].

The record of Abraham reasoning with God about how many righteous people could save Sodom's destruction is a lesson powerful enough. But it becomes the more powerful when we realize that Gen. 18:22 originally read: "Yahweh stood before Abraham". Walter Brueggemann speaks of the image of "Abraham as Yahweh's theological instructor. It is as though Abraham were presiding over the meeting. But that bold image of Yahweh being accountable to Abraham... was judged by the early scribes as irreverent and unacceptable. Therefore, the text was changed to read as we have it" (1). If this is so, and there is good textual reason to accept it, then we are left saying 'Wow!' not only to God's humility, but to the extreme willingness which He has to hear and go along with the prayers of men. And further; Ez. 14:12-20; 18:5 teach that there can be no 'acquittal by association'; if a righteous man stands before God and pleads for others, he can save only himself. Yet Abraham had the spiritual vision, driven by a pure love of others and God's glorification, which led him to go beyond this basic principle, and stand before God, or have God stand before Him, and plead for others- and be heard! God clearly is willing to change even the application of His basic principles in the light of intense prayers for others. It's all a *huge* challenge to us in our prayers for others. Indeed, Abraham's prayer seems to show that God can be 'persuaded' to see things from quite another perspective. For Abraham reasons that God's Name will be profaned if the righteous perish with the wicked. "Far be it...." (Gen. 18:25 RSV) is the same Hebrew translated "profaned" in Ez. 20:9. Abraham is saying that God's Name will be profaned if his prayer isn't heard... and that prayer required God to abrogate, at least temporarily, the principle that a righteous man can only ultimately save himself. The whole record of the Yahweh-Abraham encounter in Gen. 18 is perhaps intentionally intended to echo the language of barter in a Middle Eastern bazaar- the 'price' moves from 50 down to ten. But in Middle Eastern culture, the buyer has more 'power' than the seller... and again, we see the almost disturbing message that we in our prayers for others can have some sort of 'power' over God when praying for others. It's like Jacob wrestling the Angel to a draw; through his prayers that night, he had power [Heb. 'power as a prince'] over the Angel and prevailed (Hos. 12:4). I say all this is "disturbing" because it demands such a huge amount of us in prayer, if these indeed are the possibilities. But shining through it all is God's grace. For the required ten righteous people weren't found; yet all the same, for Abraham's sake, Lot and his immediate family were not destroyed in Sodom (Gen. 19:29). And it could be argued that the whole theme of Isaiah 53, the innocent *one* saving the many, is somehow an allusion to Abraham's saving of Lot by intercession.

Conclusions

All this works the other way, too. It is not only so that we can limit God by our prayers. It is also true that prayer and spirituality can to some degree change the stated intentions of God, such is His openness to it. That God has intentions proves of itself that there can be a degree to which what He intends to do is governed by human response. James reasons that because

we have seen " the end intended by the Lord" (James 5:11 NKJ) we ought therefore to do the maximum of *our* ability. Thus Amos pronounced what the Lord had shown him: that the land would be destroyed by grasshoppers, and then by fire. But each time he begged Yahweh to relent. And " the Lord repented for this: It shall not be, saith the Lord" (Am. 7:1-7). Israel's salvation was to some degree dependent on the love and prayer of Amos. God may have prepared great things potentially, which are only 'released' by our prayer for them. Solomon asked God for a wise heart- but he was told that God had already given him this (1 Kings 3:12). The process of educating Solomon in wisdom would have started long before; but it was released, as it were, by Solomon's specific prayer.

To summarize. God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He doesn't pretend He is answering our prayers when He is only doing what He was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference as to the ultimate actions of Almighty God. God is not to be understood as looking with a great unblinking cosmic stare towards us on earth; He is open to having His mind and actions changed by our little words of prayer. Yet because of this, God in some sense allows Himself to be limited. Hasidic scholars coined the word *zimsum* to describe this self-limitation. When God 'chose' a world of time and space, He chose a medium with specific restrictions, just as an artist is 'limited' by his canvas and paints. He *could* have done it all another way. But this was the way He chose. C.S. Lewis summed it up: " Perhaps we do not realize the problem, so to call it, of enabling our finite free wills to co-exist with omnipotence. It seems to involve at every moment almost a sort of " divine abdication " "(2).

Notes

(1) Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) p. 168.

(2) C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night* (New York: Jovanovich, 1959).

9-4 The Power Of Preaching

Not only our salvation but that of others can be limited by our exercise of freewill. If others' salvation is not dependent upon our preaching, then there is no meaning to the very concept of preaching. This is true to the extent that a watchman can occasion the death of those he could warn, if he doesn't do it. And their blood [for they will die] *will be required* at his hand (Ez. 33:8,13). The wicked will only turn from their ways if the watchmen warns them- and Ez. 33 shows clearly enough that the watchman can be lazy to fulfil his commission, with the result that some will die eternally who need not have done so. It's not that another watchman is raised up to do the job- it is his responsibility, which he can discharge or not. Paul tells Timothy to pray for the Government to allow him to continue preaching because God " will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4). There is here the suggestion that Timothy's prayers would enable more men to come to the knowledge of the Truth, and thereby fulfil God's intention. But that intention and will of God had been made dependent on the prayers and preaching of the likes of Timothy.

Paul read the OT prophecies of how " to whom he was not spoken of, they shall see" ; and he didn't just see them as descriptions of what would ultimately happen. He realised that the fulfilment of this prophecy depended *to some extent* on our human freewill; and therefore he *strove* (against so many odds) to preach Christ where He had not yet been named (Rom. 15:19,20). And he asks the Romans to *strive together* with him in prayer (15:30)- i.e. to join

him in the struggle to witness world-wide, in that they would pray for his success. It was God's prophesied will that the Gospel would go world-wide; but it required the freewill strivings of Paul to enable it, and the strivings with God in prayer by the brethren.

We are to pray for His Kingdom to come, so that His will may be done on earth (Mt. 6:10). The Kingdom and the doing of His will are therefore paralleled. His Kingdom reigns over all in Heaven, for there, all the Angels are obedient to Him (Ps. 103:19-21). By praying for the Kingdom to come on earth we are not only praying for the Lord's second coming, but for the progress of the Gospel world-wide right now. Not only that more men and women will hear it and respond, but that those who have accepted it might work God's will rather than their own to an ever greater extent. Whether or not we can physically spread the Gospel is in this sense irrelevant; our prayer should be, first and foremost if the pattern of the Lord's prayer is to be taken exactly, for the triumph of the Gospel world-wide.

We Can Save Our Brethren

It is of course true that in some ways, we are ultimately responsible for our own salvation; our brethren can't really help us, if we willfully chose to rebel against our calling. And yet there is reason to think that up to a certain point, our prayers and pastoral concern for our brethren can save them, whereas without our effort they would not be saved. Reflect on 1 Jn. 5:16: " If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask [in prayer], and he [God] shall give him [the prayerful brother] life [eternal life, in the Johannine context] for them that sin not unto death" . This seems to be a fair paraphrase. If it isn't, what does this passage mean? James 5:15,20 say the same: " ...the prayer of faith (uttered by faithful friends) shall save the sick (struck down with sickness as a result of his sin, which seems to have happened in the first century, cp. 1 Cor. 11:30; Acts 5:5)...and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed...he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" . Behold the power of freewill effort for others: For the sake of our prayers, in some cases sins of others can be forgiven when otherwise they wouldn't be. For the sake of our conversion of our erring brethren, they can be saved from eternal death and have their sins covered. Likewise only once Israel had passed a certain level of sinfulness was Jeremiah told to cease prayer for them (Jer. 7:16 cp. 11:14). Until that point, God seems to have been willing to read Jeremiah's prayer for them as their prayer (his " cry" was seen as theirs). And Ez. 14:14,18 imply the same- Noah, Daniel and Job could have delivered Israel up to a certain point, but they were *so* hardened in sin at Ezekiel's time that even those men wouldn't have saved a nation which otherwise, for a lower level of sin as it were, they could otherwise have saved. If we have any grain of love in us, we will likewise dedicate ourselves to fervent prayer for our brethren, seeing it does have effect and validity within certain boundaries.

" When Jesus saw the faith of *the friends* , He said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, *thy* sins be forgiven *thee*" (Mk. 2:5). That man was healed for the sake of the faith of others. The Centurion's servant was healed for the sake of his faith; Jairus' daughter was healed because of his faith (Mk. 5:36). The mother of the sick girl got healing for her daughter: " For this saying [of faith and understanding] go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter" (Mk. 7:29). Many weren't healed by the disciples because they lacked the level of prayer and faith required (Mk. 9:29). Hezekiah obtained forgiveness and acceptance for those who kept the Passover " otherwise than it was written" - thanks to his prayer (2 Chron. 30:18). In Hezekiah's time, all Israel had to repent to avert total destruction- but even though they didn't,

the prayer of Hezekiah saved the nation (Jer. 26:13,19). All of Jerusalem would have been forgiven if there was even one that truly executed judgment, after the pattern of Phinehas (Jer. 5:1- or is this a reference to Messiah?). In fact there are quite a number of other examples of where the Lord does things for a person because of the faith of others (Mk. 5:22; 7:24; 9:14; Jn. 4:45). In other words, he regards intercession as of similar validity to the petitions of the person involved. The implications of this, the demands upon our prayer life for others, are amazing. Martin Luther commented that anyone serious about pastoral work should be spending three hours / day on their knees in prayer. I thought that this was just so much theory, until I got to know a missionary who spent around two hours / day on his knees.

And the other way round, it was Zedekiah who personally 'burnt' Jerusalem- it was his stubbornness which led to the city's destruction in the sense that had he repented, the sinful city could have been saved (Jer. 38:23 RVmg). Thanks to Solomon's prayer, and *if* he had been obedient, all Israel would have been blessed and experienced Yahweh dwelling amongst them (1 Kings 6:12,13). Moses prayed for God to forgive Israel; and He responded: " I have pardoned, according to *thy* word" (Num. 14:20) rather than according to their repentance and prayer. Indeed it would seem from Heb. 11:28 that Israel were delivered from the Egyptians due to *Moses'* faith in the Christ whom the sprinkled Passover blood pointed forward to. Jethro perceived the vital effort of Moses in Israel's salvation when he advised: " If thou shalt do this thing...then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place [Canaan] in peace" (Ex. 18:23). Due to Moses' prayer, " the Lord repented of the evil which he had said he would do unto his people" (Ex. 32:14 RV). Yet these are the very words of Jer. 18:8- if a *nation* repents, then God will repent. But in this case, God accepted the singular prayer of Moses. Likewise Peter told the lame man: " In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" ; but the healing was because of *Peter's* faith in Christ's Name (Acts 3:6,16). The Jerusalem Bible makes this apparent: " It is the name of Jesus which, through our faith in it, has brought back the strength of this man" . The RV has: " By faith in his name hath his name made this man strong" - as if the power of the name of Jesus is waiting to be activated by human faith.

It is also worth reflecting how Ps. 132, which was written after David's time (:8,10), includes a prayer to God to reward David for all his afflictions (:1). Even after a man's death, faithful men prayed for his salvation; so it seems. This needs some reflecting upon as to its implications. 2 Tim. 1:16 records Paul praying that the Lord would *give mercy* to the house of Onesiphorus; yet the same phrase is used in v. 18 about receiving mercy at judgment day. Here it seems that the whole household of Onesiphorus is to be granted mercy, at that day, because of his faithfulness. Does this imply that some will be in the Kingdom only due to the efforts of a third party? Thus the husband can save his wife...Noah saved his family. The spirituality of those in the land could affect the fate of the others in captivity (2 Chron. 30:9- and these words are applied to us in James 4:8). Indeed, if *Judah* had turned back to the Lord fully, then the 10 tribes who about 10 years previously had been taken into captivity in Assyria, they would have found " compassion before them that led them captive, so that they shall come again into this land" (2 Chron. 30:9). But they became 'the lost 10 tribes' because Judah didn't respond as fully to Hezekiah's reformation as they should have done.

Thanks to David building an altar at his own expense and asking God to kill him and his family, God stopped the plague upon Israel (2 Sam. 24:16,17- the stretched out hand of God in destruction was what David asked to be upon him and his family). Israel were suffering the effect of their own sin, in not paying the temple tax (Ex. 30:11-16); but in the spirit of Christ, David was willing to die for them. And his dominant desire was counted as if it had been

done, and thanks to his self-sacrificial spirit, the people were saved when they personally were unworthy. The wrath of God can be turned away by the actions of those He is angry with (Num. 25:4; Dt. 13:15-17; Ezra 10:14; Jonah 3:7,10; 2 Chron. 12:7; Jer. 4:4; 21:12). And yet that wrath can also be turned away by the prayers of a third party (Ps. 106:23; Jer. 18:20; Job 42:7). This means that in some cases, our prayers for others can be counted as if they have repented. We can gain our brother for God's Kingdom (Mt. 18:15), as Noah saved his own house by his faithful preparation (Heb. 11:7). Through *our personal* dying to the flesh, the life of Christ is manifest not only in us, but is made available to others: " Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are alway delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4:10-12). The life that is even now made manifest *in us* is also made available to work in others because death to the flesh has worked in us personally.

Thus we can as it were do the work of the Saviour Himself, if we truly live as in Him. In this spirit, *Moses'* faith in keeping the Passover led to *Israel's* salvation, they left Egypt *by* him (Heb. 3:16; 11:28); and when Aaron deserved death, he was redeemed by Moses' prayer on his behalf (Dt. 9:20). Moses' prayer, with uplifted hands, resulted in Israel's victory over Amalek; without his prayer, and the intensity of it, there would have been no victory for them. However, he had to learn this lesson; for God first of all taught him that if he explained the power of God's Name to Israel's elders, then they would hearken unto him (Ex. 3:18). But they didn't hearken unto Moses (5:20), because he didn't bother expounding the Name to them. Therefore he did explain it to them (6:1-9 = 3:14-17); but then again they refused to hearken to him (6:9 cp. 3:18). He learnt that what was proclaimed by God as possible all the same depends on human effort. And this lead him on even further, to realise that through his spirituality, he could bring salvation for others.

Jude further catches the spirit of all this when he writes: " ...praying in the Holy Spirit...of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire" (Jude 20-23), just as the Angel had pulled Lot from the fire (Jude 7)- in this sense, Jude seems to suggest, we can do God's work for him. Likewise we must " make a difference" concerning some, just as the Angels " contended" [s.w.] for men (Jude 9 cp. 22). The fire of condemnation at the judgment is in a sense already kindled, as the Lord Himself had taught (Lk. 12:49). The weak brother condemns himself by his way of life, and falls into condemnation even now, before the judgment (James 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:6; Tit. 3:11). We see this, and have the power in some cases to save the brother by pulling him out of that fire of condemnation. Surely the point is that we can save our brother from condemnation at judgment day by what we prayerfully do for him now.

Abraham saved Lot out of Sodom by his earnest prayer for him; and there is ample reason to think from the Genesis record and his subsequent reaction to the Angel's invitation to leave that Lot of himself was simply not strong enough. Without those prayers and the concern of Abraham read by God as prayer, Lot may well have been left to suffer the condemnation of the world he preferred to live in. And yet Lot fleeing from Sodom is used in the NT as a type of our latter day exit from the world at the Lord's coming. Is this not to suggest that the latter day believers will be saved only by grace, they will not be strong and ready to leave; and their salvation will only be on account of the prayers of the faithful? Lot was not without spirituality; but he was simply swamped by the pull of the world in which he had become entangled, not to mention his unspiritual wife. He was the type on which one could have compassion, making a difference, and pull out of the fire. Indeed, it could even be that Jude's

words about pulling a brother out of the fire may be a reference back to Lot being pulled out of the fire that came upon Sodom. Those in his position sin a sin which is not unto death only in the sense that we can pray for them, so that their sin will not lead them to condemnation. But only in this sense is sin not unto death; for the wages of sin, any sin, is death (Rom. 6:23). But in some cases this sentence can ultimately be changed on account of our effort for our brother.

Whilst the way I have expressed all this may seem radical, it is surely apparent that it would be pointless to pray for our brethren if in fact those prayers have no power at all, and if ultimately we are all responsible for our own spiritual path. There is in all this an incredible and most urgent imperative. This is why Paul bowed his knees in prayer for the Ephesians, knowing that his words could really increase and enrich the quality of their relationship with God, if not their very salvation (Eph. 3:14-19). If my prayers can influence your eternal destiny, if they can lead you from condemnation to the eternity of God's Kingdom: then I must, if I have any gram of love and care within me, dedicate myself to prayer for you. And you, likewise, for me. Prayer for others' spiritual well-being becomes no longer something which is 'tacked on' to our tired, repetitious evening prayers. The preparation of exhortations, comments on the daily readings, all the host of pastoral work which we all ought to be doing for each other in some ways: these things no longer should be seen as the repetitious duties required to keep the Christian show on the road. There is an urgency and vitality about these efforts to upbuild each other. For we are dealing with nothing less than the eternal destinies of others. Even if they are apparently spiritually strong, all the same, our prayers for them make a difference. Paul asked his brethren to pray for him " that I may be restored to you the sooner" (Heb. 13:19). The Lord Himself seems to have asked the disciples to add their prayers to His in asking the Father to send forth more labourers into the over-ripe, unharvested fields (Lk. 10:2), which, by implication, He alone couldn't satisfactorily gather.

All this leads on to reflection upon the power of collective prayer. If God is truly sensitive to one human prayer, allowing His mind to be swayed, influenced and even changed by it, then it follows that He is the more sensitive to the joint prayers of His children for the same thing. If one man on the top of Carmel, face between his knees, could bring forth clouds and rain...what might the united prayers of 50,000 believers achieve, uttered as they would be in languages from Albanian to Zulu? We read that God *will* shorten the period of time of trouble before His return (Lk. 18:7); and we read that He *will* also lengthen the period of grace (Lk. 13:6-9)...*if* His people ask Him. What He 'will' do perhaps should be read as what He *can* do. And this is why so much prophecy is conditional. Significantly, no other religion that I know contains this feature- of a God so passionate and so real that He will change His stated will and intention for the sake of His people's prayers.

10. Prayer In The 1st And 21st Centuries

Prayer In The Last Days

The early believers " continued" in the doctrine, [example of] prayer and fellowship of the apostles (Acts 2:42,46; 8:13). The same word is used of how *we* must " continue" in prayer (Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2), i.e. follow the example of the early ecclesia in prayerfulness. The disciples had " continued" in prayer after the Lord's ascension (Acts 1:14), and now their converts continued in prayer too. Note in passing that we continue in the pattern of those who convert us. Thus to start with, Simon " continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). This means that who *we* are affects the spiritual quality of others. So important was prayer in the early

community that the seven deacons had to make arrangements for the practical running of the ecclesia so that they could give themselves more time for prayer (Acts 6:4); prayerfulness was more important than petty administration. Husbands and wives abstained from sex for short periods so as to more powerfully pray individually (1 Cor. 7:5). Communal prayer was a source of their fellowship, their "one accord": "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42 NKJV). And they were "instant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). They got on their knees straight away. In Acts 12:5 they called a prayer meeting about Peter's imprisonment. 1 Tim. 5:5 shows that the sign of a true widow was that she continued in prayers night and day. She was supported materially so that she could keep up this work of praying for others (abused into the Catholic system of paying for prayers to be said). There was a specific group of "widows" in the early ecclesias, as in Acts 7. Their duty was to pray for others; so important was prayer seen. 1 Pet. 3:7 gives an unexpected reason for appealing for husbands and wives to get along with each other: that your prayers be not hindered. So important was prayer in the thinking of Peter. Comparing ourselves with the first century community, it seems to me that we simply don't give prayer the place of importance which they did. 1 Tim 2:1 reflects *their* balance: "I exhort therefore, that, *first of all* [the Greek implies 'most importantly' rather than just being first in a list], supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men". The scant information which we are given about Lydia and Cornelius before their conversions includes the fact that they were given to prayer; indeed, the implication is that they came to the Gospel as a result of their prayerfulness (Acts 10:31; 16:13,16).

So important was prayer in the early church that there developed certain standard acclamations or doxologies which may reflect common phrases used in prayers throughout the early brotherhood- just as there are certain phrases used in Christian prayers throughout the world today. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" is an acclamation that crops in up in some form or other in 1 Cor. 15:57; Rom. 6:17; 7:25; 2 Cor. 2:14; 8:16; 9:15. Likewise "God...to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Gal. 3:15; Rom. 11:36; 16:27; Eph. 3:21; 2 Tim. 4:18; 1 Tim. 1:17).

The prayerfulness of the first century should shock us into improvement. We can be shy to ask each other to pray, embarrassed to immediately suggest we pray as we sit there together discussing a problem or another brother's misfortune. We have much room for improvement here. But there *are* some good examples within our own ranks. I telephoned a sister recently. Her young daughter answered. I asked, 'Can I speak to mummy please?'. 'Well, err, could you call back?' she replied. 'Well, is mummy at home? I can hold...', I went on. 'Well, you see mummy can't come to the telephone because she's praying. She always does after lunch'. Like a picture worth ten thousand words, so was this to me, as an exhortation to regular and unashamed prayer, in the midst of life's myriad distractions.

Prayer In The Last days

Israel's deliverance from Egypt is in many ways a type of our redemption at the time of the Lord's return. The focus of the Passover feast was the lamb, and this should be the centre of our thinking in these last days. Some very intense Hebrew words are used to describe their association of themselves with it: "Draw out ('seize') and take you a lamb...strike ('lay the hand on', a word used about rape) the lintel...with the blood" (Ex. 12:21,22). And the run-up to Passover was to feature a business-like searching of the house for leaven (Ex. 12:19), reflecting the close self-examination which we should undertake individually and ecclesially ("your houses") in this prelude to the Passover-coming of our Lord. Not surprisingly, in the

light of this, Passover night was to be " a night of watching" (Ex. 12:42 RV mg.), strongly suggesting " watching in prayer" (Eph. 6:18; 1 Pet. 4:7; 2 Cor. 11:27?). Similarly those who are found " watching" at the Lord's midnight coming (cp. that of the Passover angel) will be found acceptable (Lk. 12:37). The picture of Israel in their family units huddled together around the Lamb, desperately focusing their attention on that saving blood, watching and praying, examining themselves- this is us, right now. For there can be no serious doubt that the second coming is almost upon our generation. The run up to the final tribulation will provoke a " praying always, that ye may be accounted worthy...to stand before the Son of man" (Lk. 21:36).

In these last days the times are tough now spiritually, getting tougher. Only " for the elects sake those days shall be shortened" and we will be saved by the second coming. Thus 2 Pet. 3:12,15 reminds us that by our prayers and spiritual development, the days before the second coming will be shortened. If they were not, even the elect would lose their faith (Mt. 24:22)- showing how those of us who are alive at Christ's coming will *barely* survive the spiritual traumas of the last days. The virgins were sleeping when they should have been watching; and Peter says that the righteous in the last generation (see context) will *scarcely* be saved (1 Pet. 4:18).

" The Lord...is longsuffering to us-ward" of the last days. This longsuffering of Jesus suggests the parable of the persistent widow, whose continued requests should match our prayers for the second coming (the vengeance of our adversaries which she requested will only come then). " Though he bear long" (s.w. 'longsuffering') with us, " God shall avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him" (Lk. 18:7). The " us" whom Peter refers to as experiencing the Lord's longsuffering ('bearing long') are therefore to be equated with " the elect" in their fervent prayers for the second coming. The days being shortened- a strong idea in 2 Peter 3- for the elect's sake therefore refers to the hastening of the second coming on account of the elect's prayers (Mt. 24:22). In view of the later references to Matt. 24, it is not unreasonable to think that Peter is consciously alluding to Mt. 24:22 concerning the shortening of the days for the sake of the elect's prayers, through his allusion to the parable of the persistent widow of Lk.18:7.

Despite the power of prayer in bringing about the Lord's return in vengeance, Lk. 18:9-14 continues in this same context to warn that despite this:

- Perhaps the Lord won't find such faith in prayer when he returns
- Many will pray but be so sure of their own righteousness that their prayers are hindered
- The disciples will tend to despise the little ones in the ecclesia.

May we not give way to these latter day temptations!

There is a triple emphasis on Israel praying to God in the lead up to Christ's birth (Luke 1:10,13; 2:37). We have seen from Joel 2:17 and many other passages that the remnant will likewise devote themselves to prayer in the last days, as will spiritual Israel.

The foolish virgins realize the need for prayer all too late; they knocked on the door with great zeal, asking for it to be opened; seeking but not finding. Knocking is sometimes used as a figure for prayer (Mt. 7:7). The basis for these foolish virgins is surely in Prov. 1:28,29: "

Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer...they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge" . Having a laid back attitude to developing a real knowledge of the Lord through the oil of the word is therefore effectively hating knowledge. As we see the Lord's coming approaching, our daily reading according to the *Companion* ought to be a bare minimum. There must be a *feeling* of and for those things of which we read, and a holding of them in the heart through the course of each day.

Love In The Last days

The days of Sodom are to be read as types of our last days. It is recorded for our learning " that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt" (Gen. 19:29). Thus in the type of the last days, the prayers and loving spiritual concern of the faithful remnant really can have an effect on the salvation of our weaker brethren. Note that Abraham's prayer that Sodom would be saved if ten righteous were found there, was not answered; but God knew the real spirit of his prayer, that Lot should be saved, and that God's justice should be upheld in not destroying the righteous with the wicked. It was this which God recognized and answered, even though Abraham had not specifically verbalized those thoughts in prayer. Our true spiritual love for our brethren, expressed in such intense prayer, will likewise be heard in these last days.

11. Prayer: A Foretaste Of The Judgment

The experience of answered prayer is a strong confirmation that we are on the right track to the Kingdom. Prayer is spoken of as entering before the judgment throne of God, as if the prayer is a symbol of the one offering it, and is judged by God enthroned in glory, and then a sentence / judgment is passed by God which the Angels operationalize (Ps. 7:6; 17:2; 35:23; 54:1,2; 109:7; 143:1,2). This is all reminiscent of the last day judgment. Indeed, the Hebrew word for 'intercede' means also 'to meet'; every prayer is a meeting with God (Job 21:15; Is. 47:3; 64:5; Jer. 7:16; 15:11). Phinehas " executed judgment" or, as some translations, 'prayed / interceded' for Israel (Ps. 106:30). Judgment and prayer are linked. The " breastplate of judgment" enabled the High Priest to bear the names of all Israel before the Lord in mediation- and their judgment was carried by him, as it is by Jesus, in the process of mediating for them (Ex. 28:29,30). Romans is full of legal language, of interceding, pleading, finding a favourable verdict etc., and refers this to the judgment and also to the cross. But Romans 8 uses these very ideas in relation to prayer, for in coming before the throne of grace now on account of the Lord's sacrifice, we come in essence before judgment. Coming before the throne of God in prayer (Heb. 9:24; Ps. 17:1,2) is the language of the judgment seat. If we become before His throne and are accepted, it follows that this is a foretaste of the outcome of the judgment for us, were we to be judged at that time. Our boldness before the Father in prayer will be the same attitude we have to Him at the judgment throne (1 Jn. 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14 all use the same Greek word). Job 33:26 LXX describes the prayer of the righteous like this: "He shall enter [God's presence] with a cheerful countenance, with a full expression of praise". This is really possible for the conscience cleansed in Christ.

Those who insincerely say " Lord, Lord" now, will say the same then, with the same lack of reality (Mt. 7:21,22). The publican went home after prayer " justified rather than the other" . It has been suggested that this reflects " a Semitic idiom which describes...an anticipation of his acquittal in the final judgment" ⁽¹⁾. When we call on the Father, we are judged according to our works (1 Pet. 1:17). Rachel felt that God hearing her voice was Him judging her (Gen. 30:4). The prayer of the poor is judged by God in His response to them (Ps. 10:7,8). Coming

boldly before the throne of grace in prayer is again judgment seat language (Heb. 4:15). Our attitude to God in prayer now will be our attitude to Him at the judgment; we are 'bold / confident' before Him now, and we can be 'bold' then (1 Jn. 2:28). Before the throne of grace we find grace to help (Heb. 4:16); whereas we will "find" [s.w.] mercy in the day of judgment (2 Tim. 1:18). Each time we receive grace to help before the throne, we are anticipating the judgment day scenario.

Mt. 6:4-6 makes it clear enough that our prayers "in secret" will be 'rewarded' "openly"; but the language of 'open reward' is used by the Lord in reference to the judgment: "For the son of man shall come in the glory of his father with his angels; and then he shall reward [s.w.] every man" (Mt. 16:27). In that day the workers will be 'rewarded' for their work (s.w. Mt. 20:8; Rom. 2:6; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 22:12); yet Mt. 6:4-6 says they will be rewarded for their prayers. Prayer will only ultimately be answered when the Lord returns; hence Mt. 6:4-6 leads on to the Lord's prayer, with its emphasis upon requesting the coming of the Kingdom, forgiveness etc rather than petty human requests. Here again we see a connection between prayer and the final judgment.

Marital strife results in prayers being "hindered" (1 Pet. 3:7), the same word translated 'hewn down' (Mt. 7:19) in a judgment day context. The evidence that the experience of answered prayer is an indicator of God's pleasure with us is quite compelling- even if the answers aren't at all what we expect:

- " These things have I written unto you...that ye may know that ye have eternal life...and this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us" (1 Jn. 5:13,14). Answered prayer is the confidence that we have eternal life. Answered prayer means that our joy will be full (Jn. 16:24).

- God's face looks at the righteous if He accepts them (Ps. 11:7; 13:1)- and God turning His face toward men is a very common idiom for Him answering prayer (e.g. 1 Sam. 1:11). Thus acceptability with God and Him answering our prayers are related.

- Conversely, unanswered prayer is associated with God's rejection. " If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). Thus Nehemiah pleaded for God to unstop His ears and hear the prayer of the repentant remnant (Neh. 1:6).

- The Kingdom prophecy that " Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear" (Is. 65:24) is applied to us *now* (Mt. 6:8)- as if answered prayer is a foretaste of the Kingdom life. Thus we must believe that we *received* what we ask for already (Mk. 11:24 Gk.).

- " Thou answerest them, O Lord our God: thou wast a God that forgavest them" (Ps. 99:8) again associates forgiveness / acceptability with God and answered prayer.

- Answered prayer is paralleled with being given the Holy Spirit, the token of God's acceptance (Mt. 7:11 cp. Lk. 11:13). The prayer of the Philippians for Paul is likewise linked with " the supply of the Spirit" (Phil. 1:19). Having spiritual fruit is therefore associated with answered prayer (Jn. 15:16), as is the possession of the Comforter (Jn. 14:14; 16:24 are in this context). Many passages imply that God's hearing of our prayers is proportionate to His perception of our spirituality. He will not respond to the prayer of those whose way of life is contrary to His word: Ps. 66:18; Pro. 1:24-28; Is. 1:15; 59:2; Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:10-12;

29:12; Lam. 3:8,44; Mal. 1:7-9; Mk. 11:25; Jn. 9:31; James 1:6,7; 4:3; 1 Pet. 3:7,12. But He will hear the prayer of the righteous; and 'hearing' is an idiom for 'answering', it doesn't just mean that God takes cognisance of the fact the righteous have prayed: Ps. 6:8,9; Mt. 7:7; 18:19,20; Jn. 14:14.

- Both David and Christ panicked when they felt their prayers weren't being answered; they felt that this meant they had sinned (Ps. 22:1-4; and consider too 17:15; 24:5; 27:4,8). Clearly they understood answered prayer as a sign of acceptability with God. Christ knew that God *always* heard him (Jn. 11:42). When apparently God didn't hear his prayer for deliverance on the cross, he for a moment supposed that he'd sinned and therefore God had forsaken him.

- The parable of the friend at midnight is surely to be interpreted like this: Friend coming = unexpected crisis; going to friend to get loaves = going to the Father in prayer; fact it is grossly inconvenient (children sleeping etc.) suggests that only because they are good friends will the man get up and give his friend the loaves (Lk. 15:5,6). This very nicely describes the way in which our answered prayers (for others' needs, in the parable) are a statement of the degree to which God counts us as His respected friends.

- Christ is a mediator between God and His people. The fact He mediates successfully for us means that we are His people. We know not what to pray for, but the Lord Jesus intercedes for the right things for us. Often we may pray for something, not receive it, and yet receive what is clearly Divine intervention in another way. This is proof that our prayers are being heard and Christ is mediating for us, even if we don't fully know God's will. Therefore this is proof positive that we *are* God's people.

The experience of answered prayer is therefore part of the upward spiral of confidence and spirituality experienced by the believer. God's generosity to us in answering us "above all we ask of think" should be reflected in our doing things for others over and above what they have requested (Philemon 21). "What things soever ye desire, believe that ye [did] receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mk. 11:24 Gk.) can be read as meaning that we should remember how we received things in the past, and therefore we should have faith that the things we now desire really will be likewise granted. It is for this reason that the prayers recorded in the Psalms constantly look back to previous experiences of answered prayer as a motivation for faith and Hope: Ps. 3:4,5; 44:1-4; 61:5; 63:7; 66:18-20; 77:4-16; 86:13; 94:5,7-19; 116:1; 120:1,2; 126:1,4; 140:6,7. Jeremiah likewise (Lam. 3:55,56). And even the fact other believers had received answers to prayer inspired David's faith in prayer (Ps. 74:11-15; 106). When the disciples prayed "Look upon their threatenings..." (Acts 4:29 RV), they were surely inspired by the praying of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19:16 using the same words. And these examples ought to specifically fire our prayer life, too. "Nevertheless", despite the fact God answers prayer, "when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith?" (Lk. 18:8). The implication is that the experience of answered prayer *ought* to develop faith, but such will be the spiritual perils of the last days and the lack of serious prayer, that there may well be no faith in the final generation.

Ps. 54:1,2 parallel the ideas we have been discussing: "Save me... judge me... hear my prayer... give ear to the words of my mouth". David saw the hearing of his prayer as the receiving of a judgment from God, which meant salvation. For him, God's hearing of prayer was a foretaste of the judgment, and an encouragement that he would likewise receive his desire for salvation even then. Despite our experience of prayer not being answered as we would wish in our humanity, the fact that we can all surely witness to God hearing and

responding to our prayers is one of the most wonderful encouragements that our salvation likewise will be granted in the last day.

But...?

Probably all readers will now be in a state of doubt; because they will know the experience of answered prayer, but *also* that of unanswered prayer. But let's remember the above reasoning; answered prayer really does indicate our acceptability with God. The unanswered prayers must therefore be the result of:

- Praying for the wrong things, i.e. those things about which we do not know God's will for sure
- Praying without faith, without really intending to receive the answer.

There is the repeated Bible teaching that what we ask for, we will receive. God hearing prayer is an idiom for Him *answering* it; and this is not just the inference of an isolated verse. Consider the parallelism of Ps. 6:8,9:

" The Lord *hath heard* the voice of my weeping

The Lord *hath heard* my supplication

The Lord *will receive* my prayer" .

Hopefully we will all have had the experience of a crisis where we have prayed, really prayed, and the answer has miraculously come. Yet this is what real prayer is; and yet we simply can't sustain the intensity. The only real way out is to fall back on the fact that the Lord Jesus intercedes for us with that kind of intensity (Rom. 8:26). We have shown elsewhere that Biblical prayers rarely request things; if we ask according to God's will, we will receive (1 Jn. 5:14); and yet if God's word dwells in us, we will ask what we will, and receive it (Jn. 15:7). Thus if our will is purely God's will, we will receive answers to every prayer. And yet our will is not yet coincidental with His; even the will of the Son was not perfectly attuned to that of the Father (Lk. 22:42; Jn. 5:30; 6:38), hence the finally unanswered prayer for immediate deliverance from the cross. Yet as we grow spiritually, the will of God will be more evident to us, and we will only ask for those things which are according to His will. And thus our experience of answered prayer will be better and better, which in turn will provide us with even more motivation for faith in prayer. The Lord Jesus is the great example in all this. He tells the Father in prayer: "I will that they...be with me" (Jn. 17:24) and yet elsewhere in the same prayer He says "I pray that..." (Jn. 17:9,15,20). Our will is essentially our prayer, just as His will was His prayer. The implications of our will becoming God's will, of the sacrifice of our natural will, are enormous. Our will is the thing we cling to the most, and only give up at the very last. Our will alone is what we truly have, our dearest thing- and we are called to sacrifice it. I see in the OT significance of the blood poured out far more than merely our physical life force- rather does it further symbolize our essential will.

We earlier pointed out that the judgment will be the time when God 'requires' of us our behaviour. And yet the Hebrew word is used about our enquiring / searching to God in prayer now (Gen. 25:22; Ex. 18:15; Dt. 4:29; 12:5; 1 Kings 22:5), as well as His 'requiring' /

searching of us at the last day (Dt. 18:19; 23:21; Josh. 22:23; 1 Sam. 20:16; 2 Chron. 24:22; Ez. 3:20; 33:6,8). There is a mutuality between a man and his God. We must keep and *seek* for His commandments and He will *seek* / *search* our hearts in response (1 Chron. 28:8,9- the same original words are used). The wicked don't *seek* for God because they don't think He will *require* their deeds of them; but because He will *require* them, we should *enquire* / *seek* for Him (Ps. 10:4,13,15- the same word occurs three times). We enquire of Him and He enquires of us, both now and in the last day. This entering into 'enquiry' with our God is what goes on in prayer. In it we have a foretaste of judgment to come.

Notes

(1) F.F. Bruce, *The Message Of The New Testament* (Paternoster, 1994 ed., p. 30).

12. Some Sample Prayers

Baptism is a new birth, into a new relationship with God as our Father, and into the Lord Jesus as our elder brother and mediator. After baptism, communication with God is therefore vital. Yet frequently there is a major problem facing newly baptized believers: How ever do we start to pray? For some, this problem is just endless. Others feel that their efforts are somehow lacking, and struggle with the inability of human language to express what they really mean. This difficulty will last, in some form, throughout our spiritual lives. However, we must ever be aware that the Lord Jesus does not just transfer our words to God as pieces of language. Seeing that we do not know how to properly express ourselves to God, He transfers the thoughts of our spirit to God (Rom. 8:26,27). It is in this context that Paul encourages us to have a spiritual mind in our daily life; because that is relayed to the presence of God by the Lord Jesus, " the Lord the Spirit" . Therefore our whole lives can be a life of prayer, lived out in the presence of the Lord God. However, we are encouraged to pray with our human words as well; indeed, Scripture is full of examples of men doing just this.

The model prayer given by the Lord can of course be used just as it is. But it's worth noting that the Lord's own subsequent prayers, and some of Paul, repeated the essence of some of the phrases in it, but in different words. This may be a useful pattern for us in learning how to formulate prayers. The prayer of Jesus in Jn. 17 is in some ways an expanded restatement of the model prayer. In it, the Lord asks for the Father's Name to be hallowed or glorified (Jn. 17:1,11,12); for His work or will to be done or finished (Jn. 17:4); for deliverance from the evil one (Jn. 17:15). The prayer of Jn. 17 can be divided into three units of about the same length (Jn. 17:1-8; 9-19; 20-26). Each has the theme of glory, of directly addressing the Father, and of the needs of God's people- all clearly taken from the model prayer.

There are at least two basic principles to bear in mind when formulating our prayers. Firstly, we must not pray to a black box in our brain which we call 'God'. We are invited to see Him as a real, personal being, located in Heaven, with the Lord Jesus at His right hand to offer our prayers powerfully to Him. This means that our prayers have a focus, we are not shouting words into the massive emptiness of space, nor are we dealing with abstract meditations which just remain within the brain cells where they originate. Secondly, we must pray to our supremely spiritual God in spiritual language; the language of the Spirit-word. Therefore our prayers should quote, paraphrase or allude to the language of Scripture as far as possible. The

following prayers seek to do this; it would make an interesting homework for readers to go through these prayers and pencil in the Bible references which are being alluded to.

Over the years, a number of brethren and sisters have asked for some written prayers to be provided. Time and again I have refused, feeling that this would result in God's children talking to Him through another man's words, with the result that their relationship with God would become sterile and empty. To some degree, I still have those reservations. Yet the number of brethren and sisters badgering me for at least some concrete guidelines has rapidly increased with the recent baptisms of many people who previously had no religion whatsoever, and certainly no Christian background. I feel it is better for God's people to at least pray *something* rather than nothing. Yet it must be emphasized a thousand times that what follows is not a prayer book. It is to stimulate your own thinking. I would suggest that to make these prayers personal you translate them into your native language, and add a few sentences. Some of us who have been praying all our lives often find ourselves guilty of using the same phrases and wording. There is nothing wrong with this in itself; Christ Himself prayed three times in Gethsemane, "praying the same words"; and He gave us His model prayer to be repeated. However, as men and women living "in newness of life", in a spirit of dynamic growth, we would all do well to occasionally examine the language and style of our prayers. Reading another believer's prayers may help in this. We ought to be talking about these issues when we meet and as we correspond. Do pray for guidance, that within the limits of our humanity we might be able to better express ourselves to our Almighty Sovereign, king of the Universe, Maker of Heaven and earth.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DAY

Great Father, God of Israel, God of all my brethren and sisters, I come to You in the name of the Lord Jesus this morning. Father. Please hear me. Please do send the Lord Jesus back soon. May it even be today Lord. Hasten that day Father, in its time. Father as I think about that moment of Jesus' coming, I do really struggle to be ready. Great God, I know that You want me to be ready and waiting. I know that this is Your will. And that whatever I ask, according to your will, you will hear. So Father in Heaven, hear in Heaven your dwelling place, hear as I pray that I will be ready for Christ this day. Guide, over-rule, all the things of this day, so that they will work together for my spiritual good. Give me the strength Father, mentally, to keep up the battle at the back of my mind. Please do help me to be spiritually minded, to be aware that I am your servant, a servant of the Most High God. Strengthen me Lord against this world, against the world of the flesh that is inside me as well as outside me. Gracious Father, may I really sense more deeply this day that I am yours, of spiritual Israel, living in this evil world. Oh Yahweh, God of Israel, may I learn more of your character this day, through my experience of life, through my meditation upon your word; may I know your Name. Because I know that those who know your Name will put their trust in you. And Father I do so want to live a life of faith, I do so wish that I could keep that sense of the reality of my calling more permanently before me. Help me to do this Father, please. O sovereign Lord, maker of Heaven and earth, yes, maker of Heaven and earth, do strengthen me in this I beg. And Father, be with all my dear brethren and sisters who are striving and struggling like I am, give us all the victory hour by hour this day, so that at the end of all things we might meet together in that final triumph. Oh Father, hasten your Kingdom, that wonderful moment of meeting Christ. And even now, in this life Father, may I know your saving grace, may I live now as if I am in the day of Thy Kingdom. Be with me all along this road Lord, feed me today please, give me what I need physically, and may I see your love in more things today Father. Oh Yahweh, Yahweh, may I have opportunities today to tell out of

myself to others this great Hope, this great knowledge, that the world around me might know the good news of your love, and of your dear Son. Oh Father, I do praise you for your presence near this morning, may it go with me, and may my sense of your closeness grow this day Father, oh may I not go back, slip back, be indifferent to the great things of your truth Father. Strengthen me onwards Father, and hear my spirit's sacrifice, as I pray to you through my Lord Jesus, Amen.

PRAYER BEFORE FOOD

Gracious Father, through the name of Jesus I come before you, into your presence, in the midst of this life, to ask you to hear my thanks for this food. Father, please open my eyes that I might see the greatness of your love in all things. And above all, I thank you for my Lord Jesus, for the hope of the Kingdom, that bread which a man may eat and live for ever. Oh great God, please hasten the Kingdom, and please do accept my feeble words of praise, in the mighty Name of my Lord Jesus, Amen.

PRAYER BEFORE A JOURNEY

Almighty Father, Yahweh I do ask in the name of the Lord Jesus for the coming of your Kingdom; but also while this life drones on Father, for your help on this journey, that you wilt lead me safely through the wilderness of this world, as you lead your people through all the deserts of their lives in the past- to make yourself a glorious Name. Please do the same with me Father. Please help me to be spiritually minded as the kilometres go by, despite all the problems of travel please help me to fix my mind on those high, high things of your word, to keep my mind in Heavenly places in Christ, and to meditate more clearly on the love of your beloved Son. Through Him, Lord, please do hear my words, Amen.

PRAYER BEFORE READING THE WORD

Perfect Father, through your dear, perfect Son I come into your presence, into the Holiest of all, Heaven itself, to pray intensely for the coming of Christ, that I might know you even as you now know me. Oh Father in my spiritual man I only desire one thing, to sit in your temple and behold the beauty of your character and your ways. So I do thank you for giving me these moments now to do that; as I sit before you now Lord I strive for the spirit of that young man Samuel to say 'Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth'. So Father, do please speak to me through your word, make it personal to me, open my eyes that it might be more to me than black print on white paper, show me the wonderful things of your word, show me your glory, Yahweh of Israel, and please do grant me the strength to take the spirit of these things with me in my life Father, that I might not just intellectually exult in these things. So Father, please do hear my prayer, my earnest cry to you as I seek to enter deeper into your spirituality, the ultimate perfection of your Spirit, in the name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.

PRAYERS AT THE BREAKING OF BREAD

INTRODUCTORY

Almighty Sovereign, Yahweh, God of all Israel, I come before your throne through the mediation of my Lord Jesus, in my mind Lord I bow before the presence of your glory as I sense it reflected in the face of the Lord Jesus. Bow down your ears to hear me, O God. Father, please please open my eyes, to behold more finely the greatness of Christ, to see your

glory reflected through Him. May I really grow in knowing you, O Father, may this meeting also be a step up the ladder for me in knowing the grace of your beloved Son, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Open my eyes Father, that I might imagine the more clearly and realistically the pain of His life, and above all of His death, may I see its meaning for me Father, please may I perceive it the more clearly, and may I take away into this difficult life the spirit of these things. Please do be with all your dear children, as we are united together around this slain lamb, the emblems of your dear Son, in the darkness of this Egypt, this world of emptiness. Wherever they are Lord, physically and spiritually, be near to each of them, bind us together Father, through our common experience and understanding of the love of Christ. Open my eyes to your word as I read it now Lord, may I especially see the spirit of Christ there, and may I see my desperate need Father, yes Lord, may I see the desperateness of my position, my need for your forgiveness and grace through the Lord. Oh Yahweh, please hasten the Lord's coming, that I might see Him for myself, that my eyes might behold Him, that I might see the King in His beauty. May He come in my lifetime Father. Help me to hold on Father, oh Yahweh may I keep faithful to that covenant we made at baptism. Father I do so thank you for the wonder and closeness of our relationship. I do so thank you, with my feeble human words and thoughts, for going forth so mightily in my case, to take me unto yourself, to forge me into one of your people. Oh Yahweh God of my covenant, who keeps mercy for me and all your people, please do accept what I am now going to do, to re-affirm my covenant with you. Bind me closer to you Father, and to all others who are bound in covenant with you. Help more, Father, to come to know your Name, to see your grace in Christ, and help me in the coming week to beseech men and women in your behalf, help me to in the same spirit beseech my brethren and sisters, that they too would respond more earnestly to your great love. Great Father, yet once again I ask that my eyes might be opened ever wider to the greatness of your love in the Lord; may I really come to know the love of Christ, that passes my human knowledge, may I see the length, the breadth, the depth, and above all the height of the love of Christ. Oh Father give me a larger mind, the mind of your Spirit, help me in the coming week to make more time for your word, to think more about it in the day, to rise earlier in the mornings to think about it more, to start each day more spiritually. Great God, you know my heart, my desire towards you, yet remember that I am but dust, know my frame. Oh Yahweh, what is man that you are mindful of Him, and the son of man, that you visit Him? Who am I, Father, that you have come so close to me. Make me to know my own weakness more Lord, and the surpassing majesty of your strength, may I appreciate your righteousness the more, may I see it as wonderful as the great mountains; may I more truly and more fully love your righteousness, may I be helped to so develop, that I will therefore love the righteousness of Christ, that I might see the beauty of your beloved Son, that I might more fully share your love of Him, oh Father. So Lord, please do help me as I read and meditate upon the Lord Jesus, help me to concentrate, focus my mind, uplift me Lord, that I might be stronger and stronger in your grace, that it might the more endlessly inspire me day by day, and at times even hour by hour, in this lonely life Lord. So hear my prayer Father, draw near to me now Lord, for I come before you in the mighty name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE BREAD

Almighty Father, I come before you through your beloved Son. Through Him, Father, please do hear me, understand and accept my thanks for the gift of the Lord Jesus, who I see symbolized in this bread. I see again, hopefully more clearly than before, that you did so love me that you gave your only beloved Son. So Father I summon what faith I have, I'm trying to fix it all upon the Lord, that bread which came down from Heaven, from you. Father, I

believe in Him, symbolized as He is by this bread. So Father I open my heart to Him and to you, come and dwell in me, come and eat with me both of you, dwell in my heart. Oh Father, in the intensity of this moment please dwell within me, may your life live within me. Yet especially Lord, may I take this intensity with me in my daily life, knowing that if I eat the flesh of Christ in my daily life, then I have eternal life. So Lord as this bread becomes part of me, in some small way, so may the spirit of Christ become part of me, may I show by the way I think, the way I speak, even the tone of my voice, that I have really experienced such abundance of grace, and the gift of righteousness which you have given me in Christ. Oh Father, help me, even make me, to appreciate these things more deeply, may they become more fundamentally part of me. And Yahweh, God of Truth, sensing the presence of your love, I ask my heart's desire: please do send Him back soon. Please Father, please hear me in Heaven your dwelling place, in His holy name, Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE WINE

Oh Father, God of all grace and mercy, through the Lord Jesus, my priest at your right hand, I come to ask for Thy grace in one thing: to understand and accept my praise for the blood of Christ. Oh Father, I do praise you for the way the bread and wine make it all come so real once again. Wash me, Almighty Father, in His blood; strengthen me intellectually, spiritually, that I might have all joy and peace through truly believing that I am totally pure in your perfect sight, clothed in the righteousness of your peerless Son. Hasten, O Yahweh God, that great day of the final triumph, when I shall drink this cup again with my Lord Jesus in Jerusalem, the city of the great king. Hasten it Lord, hurry it on, and in the days that remain may the wonder of my connection with the blood of the Lord Jesus grow and grow. Oh Lord, may I pour myself out, pour out my life in all ways, as He did. Strengthen me to rise up to the height of His example a little more, Almighty Father, and yet may I grow in faith in the totality of mercy and grace which I see here. Accept my praise for this, loving Father, please, in the name of my Lord and Saviour Jesus, Amen.

CONCLUSION

Oh Yahweh, hear me again. I bow out of your presence as it were now, Lord, in the name of the Lord Jesus. I do so thank you for what I've been able to do, I do above all praise you for your love toward me in Christ, and I magnify as best I can the extent of His victory over the flesh. Oh that you would rend the heavens, that you would come down, that all the earth might know the wonder of your manifestation in Christ. Oh may He soon return Father. Guide me in this brief life, help me to know mine end, help me to see the utter vanity of all else outside Christ, to truly catch the spirit of His dedication to you and your ways. Oh Sovereign Father, so far above the dearest of human love, as I sit here in your presence, and in the presence of your beloved Son, I sense your infinity, the majesty of your glorious character, and above all of your love and grace toward me in Christ. For a brief moment Lord I have touched the sky, I've reached out of earthly things into your heavenly things, I have started to rise up to the great things of your Spirit; and now I set my face to return to this world, to shoulder the cross once again, and I earnestly beg for your help to take the spirit of Christ with me, that I might hold on to the spirit of His cross as I too struggle for the mastery. Oh Father I know there is no short cut, I cannot be crowned unless I strive lawfully, oh Yahweh guide me onwards then, through this waste wilderness, through the howling winds of this world and of my own nature, and Father I know that you will pull me through, according as I abide with you. Oh Father may I abide with you all my days, hold me Lord in your glorious light, even now, and lead me to that fullness of fellowship with you and my Lord

Jesus which is all I seek in life. You know me, Lord, you know my life, my ways are open to your view, know that this is truly all my hope, and all my desire. Oh Father I do praise you for this closeness which we experience, which we experience now, for this unity of the Spirit, through the glorious mediation of the Lord Jesus. Oh Sovereign Father, Yahweh of Israel, Lord of the whole earth, I know that you have heard me through Him. For this I simply praise you. Amen.

Questions For Reflection And Discussion

1. How many minutes / day do you spend praying?
2. What are the main problems you face in prayer physically, e.g. is it hard for you to find time? To find a time and place where you will not be disturbed by family?
3. What are the main problems you face in prayer spiritually, e.g. do you have a problem in knowing what to pray for?
4. What do you think you can do about these problems?
5. How can we know what we should pray for? Should we pray for things if we don't know whether or not they are according to God's will?