

PART ONE

BASIC STUDIES ABOUT PRAYER

(for everyone)

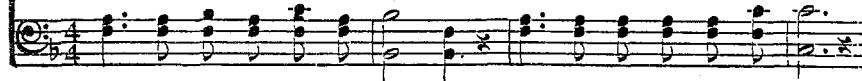
What a Friend

JOSEPH SCRIVEN

CHARLES C. CONVERSE



1. What a Friend we have in Je - sus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
2. Have we tri - als and temp - ta - tions? Is there trou - ble an - y - where?
3. Are we weak and heav - y - la - den, Cum - bered with a load of care?—



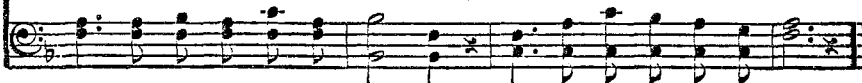
What a priv - i - lege to car - ry Ev - ery - thing to God in prayer!
We should nev - er be dis - cour - aged, Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Pre - cious Sav - iour, still our ref - uge, — Take it to the Lord in prayer.



O what peace we of - ten for - feit, O what need - less pain we bear,
Can we find a friend so faith - ful Who will all our sor - rows share?
Do thy friends de - spise, for - sake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer;



All be - cause we do not car - ry Ev - ery - thing to God in prayer!
Je - sus knows our ev - ery weak - ness, Take it to the Lord in prayer.
In His arms He'll take and shield thee, Thou wilt find a sol - ace there.



The Great God to Whom We Pray

A consideration of the subject of prayer rightfully begins with God--the great God--to whom we pray. If there is no God, what a deception and false hope prayer is. But God is no myth. "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6) to which all Christians heartily agree. Yet some have difficulty praying. If the Sadducees erred because they knew not the Scriptures nor the power of God (Matt. 22:29), the same too may be at the base of some of our modern-day prayer failure.

1. In Prayer We Must Realize We are Praying to a Personal God who is Really There.

Merely talking to hear oneself or to be listened to by people is not really prayer. Prayer is talking to God, our Heavenly Father, who is as much there listening as a friend is there when we are talking to him or her by telephone. How much talking on the phone would we do if we thought nobody was there listening? Our praying to God is somewhat like writing a friend--what we are writing, that friend will be reading and will be interested in. We understand this when doing the writing. So should we when praying.

Just as we address a person by name when talking on the phone or when writing a letter, this is the way it is with Bible praying. Jesus said, "After this manner therefore pray ye, Our Father which art in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). This is the way Jesus Himself prayed: "Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father" (John 17:1); "And now, O Father" (v. 5); "O righteous Father" (v. 25); and "Holy Father" (v. 11).

2. Prayer is One of Life's Very Special Privileges.

When we consider the One to whom we pray, isn't this a great privilege? David thought it was really something to be son-in-law to the king (I Sam. 18:23), but this is nothing compared to having God as our Father and getting to talk to Him via prayer. The famous illustrator Norman Rockwell counted it such a great privilege to be an invited guest to a state dinner at the White House that he took a tranquilizer pill so he wouldn't be so nervous upon the occasion. Well,

getting to talk to God in prayer is really something greater than being a White House guest, as great as that might be.

Praying to a God who is living, who invites us to pray to Him, and who has promised to answer our prayers is far different from praying to a lifeless idol that stares off into space and doesn't even know we are there and cannot bless us in any way. In Isaiah's day God asked, "To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like? They lavish gold out of the bag, and weigh silver in the balance, and hire a goldsmith; and he maketh it a god; they fall down, yea, they worship. They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth; from his place shall he not remove; yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer, nor save him out of his trouble" (Isa. 46:5-7). Not so with our God! Our God is "the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (I Tim. 6:17). He knows who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and what we are saying when we pray. "Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me" (John 2:1,2) "There is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether" (Psa. 139:4).

A little girl asked her mother, "What would we do if God died?" We would be in a terrible situation, but we don't have to worry about God ever dying (He is eternal and immortal--I Tim. 1:17). We need to be more concerned about our becoming dead to Him and to the great privilege of prayer that we have.

3. Our God is Everywhere, both to Hear Our Prayers and to Work our Their Answers.

The heathen had gods that in their minds were limited to certain places. When the Syrians could not defeat the Israelites, they said Israel's God was "of the hills" and that if battled them in the valley, they would whip them (I Kings 20:23). But God is everywhere, and He can hear prayer everywhere. We don't have to go to Jerusalem nor to Mt. Gerizim like the Samaritans did, for God is a Spirit who is everywhere (John 4:20-24). People have literally prayed to God

“everywhere” (I Tim. 2:8); Paul and Silas in jail (Acts 16:25); Daniel in his own house (Dan. 6:10); the penitent publican in the temple (Luke 18:10); Paul and the Christians of Tyre on the seashore (Acts 21:5); Elijah on the mountain top (I Kings 18:36); Jesus when coming up out of the river after being baptized (Luke 3:21); Hannah at the tabernacle (I Sam. 1:9,10); Peter on the housetop (Acts 10:9); Cornelius in his house (Acts 10:30); Saul in the house of his host in Damascus (Acts 9:4); Lydia and the other women alongside the river (Acts 16:13); and Abraham’s servant on his way to get a wife for Isaac (Gen. 23:12). And don’t forget Matt. 6:6.

And as far as working out the answer to prayers, He can act anywhere to accomplish this. When Paul was in dire circumstances over in Asia, prayers offered in his behalf by Christians on a different continent (by the Corinthians in Europe) were honored by God (II Cor. 1:8-11). Writing clear from Rome to Philemon in far-away Colosse, Paul said, “Prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you” (Phm. 22).

This understanding helps us pray for people and activities in other places.

4. The One to Whom We Pray has Many Means for Answering.

Yes, “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28), and we also know Who makes them work together for that purpose.

God can use people in answering our prayers as He did with Ezra’s prayers. Ezra 7:6 says, “The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.” Now listen to Ezra himself about it: “Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king’s heart” (Ezra 7:27).

God also uses angels in this way. Jesus really didn’t need Peter and his sword if He wished deliverance. He said to Peter, “Put up again thy sword...Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:52,53). Heb. 1:14

says of the angels, “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” Since He has innumerable angels (Heb. 12:22), no wonder we cannot pray too great or too many prayers for Him to answer!

God also uses circumstances when He chooses to do so as He did in delivering the Jews from Haman’s hatred. Think especially when Haman was first of all intending to hang Mordecai (Esth. 5:9-14) only to fall fate to God’s using the circumstance recorded in Esth. 6:1-11.

5. Nor is Our God Limited in His Power.

Sometimes friends want to help us but are not able because they do not have the means to do so. Not so with our God. He is not only willing but able to answer. How able is He? Listen: He “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). The aged Sarah laughed when God sent messengers to tell her she would have a child even though elderly. The Lord said to Abraham, “Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:13,14). Luke 1:37 says, “With God nothing shall be impossible.” This is where the power of God is important.

At times we may be like the man crawling across a frozen river on hands and knees, fearful that he might break through at any time, only to hear a great noise behind him--a big team of horses pulling a loaded coal wagon across that very ice. How sheepish he felt--the same way we should feel if we think God cannot do whatever He chooses to do.

6. Our Father Wants Us to Pray to Him.

Since we have considered how great a God we have, One who is also willing to answer our prayers, isn’t it good news that He really wants us to pray to Him?

Jesus said, “Ask, and you will receive” (Matt. 7:7). Paul wrote, “Let your requests be made known unto God” (Phil. 4:6). And Prov. 15:8 says, “The prayer of the upright is his delight.” And listen to Rom. 8:32: “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him

also freely give us all things?"

When we think of the great God to whom we pray, let us think on the other hand of how small we, the petitioners, are. Abraham said, "I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27). The Psalmist said, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou are mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Psa. 8:3,4). It is much like Psa. 34:6 says, "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and delivered him out of all his troubles."

The facts are: we are weak, He is strong; we are poor, He is rich; we are ignorant, He is wise; we are small, He is great; we are finite, He is infinite; we are temporal, He is eternal; we are dependent, he is independent; we need Him, He can get along without us.

The first encouragement, then, to pray is really

the God to whom we pray!

QUESTIONS

1. In what 2 matters did the Sadducees fail?
2. In what sense was prayer compared to talking to a friend by telephone?
3. In what sense was it like writing to a friend?
4. How is prayer to our God different from praying to an idol?
5. Why is it important to our praying that God is everywhere?
6. Why is it important to the answer of our prayers that He is everywhere?
7. What were some of the means God has for answering our prayers?
8. What did the messengers say when Sara laughed about having a baby?
9. Contrast us who pray with the One to whom we pray?

Prayer in Old Testament Times

Now that we have considered the great God to whom we pray, let us look at prayer in Old Testament times.

Most preaching on prayer is done from the New Testament. But was prayer new with Jesus and the New Testament?

1. The First Mention of Prayer.

The first mention of prayer is in Gen. 4:25,26: "And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew. And to Seth, to him also, there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: THEN BEGAN MEN TO CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD."

Earlier than this we read of Cain and Abel bringing their offerings of the fruit of the ground and of the flock to God, but evidently they offered them silently without saying a word to God.

If men began to call on God in the third generation, then Adam and Eve did not pray, then Abel did not pray, then Seth did not pray.

We might wonder why they didn't. Probably because God had not revealed to them that they could. Surely those earlier generations were made to feel the great chasm that sin had created between God and man.

2. Priests Prayed In the Old Testament.

Jer. 1:1 indicates that Jeremiah was a priest of Anathoth, a town very near Jerusalem. In his days King Zedekiah called on him to pray for the dangerous situation Jerusalem was in: "Enquire, I pray thee, of the Lord for us; for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon maketh war against us; if so be that the Lord will deal with us according to all his wondrous works, that he may go up for us" (Jer. 21:2). There were actually times in the book of Jer. when God told him not to pray for his people: "Pray not thou for this people,

neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee” (Jer. 7:16); “Thus saith the Lord unto this people, Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the Lord doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins. Then said the Lord unto me, Pray not for this people for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offerings and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Jer. 14:10-12).

In Judah’s post-exile period Ezra was a priest (Ezra 7:11). When he learned of the mixed marriages into which some of his fellow-Jews had fallen, listen: “At the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the Lord my God, and said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (Ezra 9:5,6), and for many additional verses he continued his priestly prayer in behalf of the people.

The aged priest Samuel knew Israel had greatly displeased God in asking for a king. In the time of wheat harvest it does not rain in that land, but Samuel said to Israel, “It is not wheat harvest today? I will call unto the Lord, and he shall send thunder and rain; that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king. So Samuel called unto the Lord; and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day: and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king” (I Sam. 12:17-19). Then the godly priest assured them, “God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you” (v. 23).

3. But Prayer was also the Privilege of the People in Old Testament Times.

This is evident from many verses in the Old Testament. Here are some: “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou

mayest be found” (Psa. 32:6); “Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer” (Psa. 4:1); “My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up” (Psa. 5:3); “O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come” (Psa. 65:2); “The prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8); and, “The Lord is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29).

It was just such a verse as this last one that caused the healed blind man to affirm the necessary righteousness of Jesus to Jesus’ critics: “Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth. Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of the one that was born blind. If this man were not of God, he could do nothing” (John 9:31-33).

So we see that prayer in Old Testament times was not only for the priests but also for the people. This is further brought out by some very well known Old Testament verses. Listen to the following and see if you have not heard them many times: “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near” (Isa. 55:6); “Mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people” (Isa. 56:7); “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isa. 59:1,2); “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (II Chron. 7:14); and, “And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore” (I Sam. 1:10). That was the woman Hannah. After God gave her the child Samuel, she later told the priest Eli, “For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him” (v. 27).

4. Yes, there was Prayer in Jesus’ Day.

Jesus said, “When thou prayest, thou shalt not

be as the hypocrites are” (Matt. 6:5), and then He proceeded to teach them how to pray. In Luke 18:10 He tells us the “two men went up to the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican”.

With this much Biblical evidence that prayer was a part of the religious life of God’s Old Testament people we are made to wonder why Jesus had to teach His Jewish listeners such a simple prayer as He did in His Sermon on the Mount: “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever. Amen” (Matt. 6:9-13). We are also made to wonder why it was necessary for John the Baptist to teach his disciples to pray since they were Old Testament Jews (Luke 11:1). And why would Jesus’ apostles rather late in His ministry--after they had heard His teaching on prayer and the model prayer of the Sermon of the Mount on top of all that was taught in the Old Testament--why would they have said in Luke 11:1, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” Evidently this was a self-confession that they had not been praying even though they had been with Jesus, had seen Him in prayer often, and were His chosen apostles. Think how sheepish they must have felt when He responded with that same simple prayer of the Sermon on the Mount: “When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins;

for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil” (Luke 11:2-4).

Now the above leads me to wonder and to ask, with all the teaching on prayer that we today have in our Bible, is it possible that we could be as poor and as delinquent about prayer as were the Jews of Jesus’ day--and even the men who were going to fill the leadership role as the apostles in the coming church? Yes, it is possible that many today who go to church and consider themselves Christians are as neglectful of prayer in their daily lives while still others, doing somewhat better in the matter, are still in great need of improving their communication with God. It is with this thought in mind that we are pursuing this series of needed Biblical considerations on prayer.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the first mention of prayer in the Bible?
2. What king called on Jeremiah to pray?
3. Why call on Jeremiah rather than somebody else?
4. What priest of the Post-Exile period prayed when he learned of the people’s mixed marriages?
5. Prove from the Bible that prayer in Old Testament times was for the people as well as priests.
6. Give evidence that there was prayer among the people during Jesus’ early life.
7. Give proof from John’s disciples that people then were neglecting prayer.
8. Give proof from Jesus’ disciples that they had been neglecting prayer.
9. Is it, therefore, likely that even today prayer is being neglected among the followers of Christ?

Great People of the Bible Prayed

Some Biblical matters are dispensational, meaning they belong to a particular dispensation but not to others. Not so with prayer. Prayer has been in all dispensations (Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Christian) because man's need of divine help is not limited to any dispensation nor is God's willingness to be asked for His help. Therefore, we can study prayer throughout the entire Bible and gain spiritual insights about prayer and our prayer-answering God.

Our title talks about "Great People", and we shall see that great people of the Bible prayed. One way to be great with God is to be a person of prayer. Heb. 11:6 assures us that in order to please God, we must not only believe He exists, but that He rewards those who diligently seek Him. Notice that Heb. 11:6 talks about pleasing God, and it follows the verse about Enoch of whom it says, "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God." What is particularly said about Enoch back in Gen. 5:24? It says he walked with God--this is what pleased God. And if you and I, even today, walk with God as Enoch did, and if we diligently seek Him as Heb. 11:6 says, we too will please Him, and all who please God are great in His sight.

Let us then look at some of the great people of the Bible who prayed.

1. Daniel was Great, and He Prayed.

Surely Daniel was an unusually godly person, just as we can be, and he was one of the great characters of the Bible. As a Jewish young man he was taken to Babylon as a result of King Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion of Judea. He was a brilliant young man--no physical blemish, well favored, skillful in wisdom, cunning in knowledge, understanding science, had ability to stand in King Nebuchadnezzar's palace, and capable of learning the Chaldean language (Dan. 1:3-6). A crisis arose because the king was about to slay all his wise men for not being able to recall to his mind the impressive

dream he had had (Dan. 2:1-13). When Daniel leaned of it, he asked the king for time, then went to the house of his Jewish companions, and they prayed, for Dan. 2:18 says they "desired mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret". The next verse says, "Then was the secret revealed unto Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven."

When we are in danger, in some crisis, then we too should pray, God will hear, and we should not forget to thank Him for sending needed help.

Much later in Daniel's life he had an even closer brush with death. Nebuchadnezzar's great kingdom had one hundred twenty districts, each with its own ruler. Over these one hundred twenty princes Nebuchadnezzar placed three presidents. Daniel had done such a successful job that the king was thinking of promoting him over the whole realm (Dan. 6:1-3). The other two presidents were jealous and wanted to get rid of him, so they flattered the king into signing a decree that no one should pray to any god or make a request of any person for the next thirty days except of the king himself (Dan. 6:4-9). They knew Daniel was a man of regular prayer. In spite of the penalty for praying (being cast into the den of lions), "when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and, his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem (see I Kings 8:44-52), he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime" (Dan. 6:10). He would not give up his praying to God. Yes, he was reported, yes he was cast into the lions' den, and yes God delivered him from the mouths of the hungry lions.

Shouldn't we who run no such risk of being eaten alive by lions for praying have and maintain a regular prayer life that nothing can interfere with? If Daniel believed that a death-sentence law by the government was not an excuse for not praying to God, then we should believe that nothing less than that would be an excuse for our not praying.

Another special reference to Daniel and prayer is found in Dan. 9:20-23.

2. Hannah was Great, and She Prayed.

A desire to be a mother in Israel was as native to Hannah as to other women in her land. Adding to her desire for motherhood was her being one of two wives of the man Elkanah, and his other wife "provoked her sore" because she could not bear. So she did what we are taught to do: she took her burden to the Lord. Listen to her earnestness: "O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life" (I Sam. 1:11). When the priest Eli got straightened out about her case, he said to her, "Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition" (I Sam. 1:17). With this assurance she "went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad" (v. 18).

She is an example to us to take our burden to the Lord and leave it there--not carry it home with us. When we pray, we do not have an on-the-spot priest to tell us God is going to answer, but we do have Christ's own promise: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). Let us then always "ask in faith, nothing doubting" (Jas. 1:6).

In due time her baby was born, and when her son was weaned, she brought him to the priest at the tabernacle and said, "I am the woman who stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord" (I Sam. 1:26-28). She called her son Samuel. Do you know why? "Samuel" means "asked of God."

We too should recognize when God has answered our prayers, and any promises we made at the time of praying should be carried out as promised.

What prayer lessons can we learn from this incident? That women can pray as well as men, that physical blessings can be asked for as well as spiritual blessings, and that our prayers should represent the earnest desires of our hearts.

3. Elijah was Great, and He Prayed.

He lived in the terrible days of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Because of the wickedness and its consequent influence on the nation of Israel, God was willing to bring a terrible drouth upon their land--just as He promised in Deut. 11:16,17 that He would do. Elijah, who lived across the Jordan from Samaria, the capital, appeared in Ahab's presence and said, "There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (I Kings 17:1). Either before he said this or immediately after, "he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months" (Jas. 5:17). With no rain for such a period of time the nation was desperate. Then came the showdown: Elijah representing Jehovah and the false prophets Baal in a contest on Mt. Carmel--won, of course, by Jehovah, he is God; Jehovah, he is God" (I Kings 18:39), and the prophets of Baal are slain (v. 40). Elijah "prayed again, and the heaven gave rain" (Jas. 5:18). This illustrates for us the great lesson that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16).

4. Nehemiah was Great, and He Prayed.

To desire and envision the rebuilding of a city wall as Nehemiah did is to desire and envision something that can only be realized if God leads and helps. And God did in answer to Nehemiah's prayers for rebuilding Jerusalem's walls.

When in Persia he first learned of the situation back at Jerusalem, this cupbearer to the king of Persia "sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed" (Neh. 1:4). He knew he had to have the king's permission even to be gone from the project, so he prayed, "O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man" (Neh. 1:11).

Burdened as he was about this matter, his countenance showed it one day when he was before the king. When the king asked him about his sadness, he told him of his burden, and when the king said, "For what dost thou make request?" (Neh. 2:4), before expressing his request, notice what he did: "I

prayed to the God of heaven". He then made his request, and "the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me" (Neh. 2:8).

This became the pattern of Nehemiah's life. When mocked by the project's enemies, he said, "Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head" (Neh. 4:4). When he settled a matter troubling some of his workers, he said, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:19). When the enemies were reproaching them again, Nehemiah reported, "They all make us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands" (Neh. 6:9). After each of his reform works in Neh. 13, he talked to God: "Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof" (13:14); "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy" (13:22); and, "Remember me, O my God, for good" (the closing statement in the book).

God heard his prayers and helped him, enabling them to complete rewalling the city in a record fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15)! Can't you see that such would not have been possible without God's special blessings? And why did those blessings come? In answer to this godly man's prayers--just as is open to us today when we work at God's work and pray.

5. Hezekiah was Great, and He Prayed.

Assyria was the great world-power before Babylon. Its enormous capital city was Nineveh. The strength of the Assyrian empire was vividly portrayed in the huge stone human-headed bulls guarding its palace's entrance. (You can see them today in the British Museum in London.) Their rulers Tiglath-pileser, Shalmaneser, and Sargon II were involved in conquering and destroying the Northern Kingdom of ten tribes. Later came their ruler Sennacherib of King Hezekiah's day. In the Assyrian portion of the British Museum there are walls of stone inscriptions taken from Sennacherib's palace by the archaeologists. They impress you with the military greatness of this ruler who came against Judah when

the godly Hezekiah was on the throne.

Isa. 36:1 says that this powerful king came against all of Judah's defense cities and took them. Jerusalem would be next. He sent messengers to scare them into surrender. Next he sent a letter. In such an hour "Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord," and he prayed (Isa. 37:14,15). Sometime during that threatening period Hezekiah became deathly sick, and God told him to set his house in order because he would not live (Isa. 38:1). At thirty-nine years of age this king "turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord" (v. 2). Did this man's earnest prayers bring about any changes? Listen: "Then came the word of the Lord to Isaiah, saying, Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears; behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years. And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria." Hezekiah did recover through divinely ordered medical means (v. 21), and listen to what happened to the mighty king Sennacherib: "It came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred fourscore and five thousand: and...they were all dead corpses" (II Kings 19:35). So much did Hezekiah rely on the Lord's help that II Kings 18:5 says of him, "He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him."

Then there is a difference between how much people actually trust in the Lord. Why can't you and I choose to be among those who really trust in God--and that includes believing prayer. We can, and we should.

6. The Apostles were Great, and They Prayed.

As we saw in our previous study, the apostles did not distinguish themselves for their prayers while Jesus was with them, but after He left them, they really learned to pray. In fact, they prayed so much that they had to get other men to care for the Grecian widows in the church's daily benevolent program, and they said, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). In making the above arrangements the apostles were not just getting out of a job but were spending so much

time in prayer and preaching that they could not take care of the widow-responsibility too. Does this not show that much prayer should characterize those of us who preach? Instead of neglecting prayer to take care of other things, we should delegate others to take care of many things so we can spend more needed time in prayer.

You ask, "Should it really take that much time to pray?" The Biblical answer is "yes". If we who lead do not know what all there is to pray about, you can see where the church's prayer breakdown begins. A praying church must begin with praying leaders. A later study will show what all there is to pray about. Then we shall see what we should be praying about, and then it will be a matter of devoting ourselves in a major way to prayer.

7. The Apostle Paul was Great, and He Prayed.

Paul was such a Christian man, such a preacher of the gospel, such an evangelist for Christ, and such a worker that there are far more chapters of Acts devoted to him than to all the other apostles combined, and God inspired him to write about one-half of the books of the New Testament. Was he a man of prayer?

When Christ stunned this great persecutor on his way to Damascus and even blinded him, he sent him into the city to await instruction. While he waited, he was so broken up with guilt and remorse that he neither ate nor drank but prayed for three days--until Christ's messenger came (Acts 9:9,11). Knowing how wrong he had been as a Jew, following his conversion he spent much time in prayer for his Jewish brethren: "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

When he had that "thorn in the flesh" that bothered him so much, he continued to ask God to remove it--until he found it was God's will for him to be saddled with it (II Cor. 12:7-9). When he and Silas were cast into the jail at Philippi, even with their backs bloody from the lashes given them and their feet secured in stocks, they "prayed, and sang praises to God," and they weren't ashamed that the tough men who were there in the prison heard them (Acts 16:23-25).

When writing his various epistles to

congregations, Paul assured them of his constant prayers for them: "Without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers" (Rom. 1:9); "I thank God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy" (Phil. 1:3,4); "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you" (Col. 1:3); "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers" (I Thess. 1:2). It is not conceivable that Paul wrote these things when he was not doing them, and since he did them, he surely did spend much time in prayer. If he did, we can. If he did, we should. If this brought God's blessings to him and upon those for whom he prayed, the same will be true in our case if we pray as we should.

Can't we see from these several Biblical examples that great people in the Bible prayed? Can we who want to be genuine Christians today be great with our heavenly Father if we do not pray? People who depend too much on themselves are proud in their own minds ("We can handle it"), so basically they don't do much praying. Let us all heed I Pet. 5:5-7: "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him: for he careth for you."

QUESTIONS

1. Why can we study prayer material from any dispensation?
2. How did Daniel's prayer save his life in Dan. 2?
3. When might Daniel have had a human excuse for not praying?
4. What burden did Hannah bear in life for sometime?
5. What did she do about it?
6. What does the name "Samuel" mean?
7. What 2 prayers did Elijah pray that affected the weather?
8. What does the Bible say about the "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man"?
9. Cite several times in Nehemiah's life when he prayed.
10. What great accomplishment did he realize because of God's help?

11. What powerful Assyrian ruler came against Judah in the days of Hezekiah?
12. What further personal calamity befell Hezekiah?
13. How did he compare with other kings of Judah in trusting Jehovah to answer his prayers?
14. How much do we see the apostles praying

in the early chapters of Acts?

15. What did Paul do concerning Israel's salvation besides preach to them?
16. What did Paul do about his thorn in the flesh?
17. What were some congregations we know Paul prayed for?

Prayer in Jesus' Life

When the book of Hebrews was written, Jesus' earthly life had been over for several years. But looking back at His time on earth, Heb. 5:7 says, "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared." This is probably referring to His praying in Gethsemane. It was "in the days of His flesh" that He prayed--when He was a dependent being, when He had specific needs, and when He trusted the One to whom He prayed to supply those needs about which He prayed.

And it is in the days of our flesh that we are to pray, for while here we too are dependent on God, we have many needs that only He can supply, and we trust Him to answer our prayers for those needs. In heaven we won't need to pray, for we will be where there will be no needs or unfulfilled wants. The precious privilege of prayer is for the here and now, and this is brought out in the last stanza of our song, "Sweet Hour of Prayer." Listen to it: "Sweet hour of prayer, Sweet hour of prayer, May I thy consolation share, Till, from Mt. Pisgah's lofty height, I view my home, and take my flight. This robe of flesh I'll drop, and rise to seize the everlasting prize, And shout, while passing through the air, FAREWELL, FAREWELL, SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER!"

Since prayer is for our here and now, how are we doing? Let us take a look at prayer in the life of Jesus.

There is no doubt but what He prayed much. The specific mentions of His praying no doubt are mentioned because of something special at that time, so we will look at those times and see if we can figure

out what the various settings were. We will consider twenty-four recorded instances.

1. Luke 3:21: *"It came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven were opened."*

He was thirty years of age and about to embark upon His public ministry. He was now leaving obscurity to enter the public years of His life. What a time to pray! Besides, He was about to face that bitter period of severe temptations recorded in the next chapter. What an example for every Christian young person who is graduating from high school, who is leaving home, and who is beginning life on his or her own! God will be with you if you ask Him. Life will be rich with meaning as we sing, "He leadeth me; oh, blessed thought!"

2. Mark 1:35: *"In the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed."*

The day before He had cast a demon out of a man in the synagogue, He had healed Peter's mother-in-law, and He had healed all the sick of the town that had been brought to the door of the house. He was the center of attention. He was in the public eye. Such was a time to pray. And when things are going our way, or when circumstances have pushed us into the limelight, then is the time to pray and not become proud.

The very day He went out to pray was the day the townspeople would beg Him to remain with them,

but it was the day that He would begin His first preaching tour of Galilee. Before beginning a big project, we should always pray, for its success will depend on God's blessing.

Notice that it was more important to go out and pray than it was to sleep in that morning. He was doing what others were not then doing. We too should pursue our spiritual life regardless of whether others do theirs or not. Notice too that it was early morning--prayer is a good way to begin our days. Notice also that He went out to a solitary place to pray--a place where He would not be disturbed, a place where He could be alone with God in His praying.

3. Luke 5:16: *"He withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed."*

Just what the setting was that called for this mention of Jesus' praying is not as obvious as most recorded instances of His praying. He is on His first Galilean tour, and His healing the leper in previous verses was the first recorded event on that tour. This tour would be the first real exposure that many places in Galilee would have of Jesus. Such an opportunity and the responsibilities connected therewith would provide an important occasion for special prayer.

4. Luke 6:12: *"It came to pass in those days, that He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God."*

The next morning Jesus would come down from this all-night prayer to choose the twelve apostles and to preach the great Sermon on the Mount. How important to have God's blessing and guidance! People from many places would hear the sermon, and it would become the world's best known sermon. These apostles would become His chosen witnesses. They would be significant in establishing the church and in spreading the faith, and some of them would write various books of the New Testament.

Sometimes people ask, "If Jesus prayed before choosing the twelve, why did God let Him choose Judas? Let us not think that Jesus didn't know what was going on when He chose Judas. About two years

later and about a year before the betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus said, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). John, the author, explains: "He spake of Judas Iscariot" (v. 71). A few verses before, Jesus said, "There are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him" (v. 64). Jesus, then, had a purpose in choosing Judas. I think I understand why, but the Bible itself never explains.

5. Matt. 14:19: *"He commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude."*

This was in conjunction with His feeding the 5,000. By having them sit down, all could witness the miracle. By His praying, the people could see that the multiplication of the loaves and fishes was by the direct power of God. Besides, Jesus always blessed food before eating.

6. Matt. 14:23: *"When He had sent the multitudes away, He went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, He was there alone."*

This took place immediately after feeding the 5,000. Jesus evidently prayed because He knew the thought of the people, the attitude of the twelve, and what was coming up in a few hours at Capernaum. They had been preaching the coming of the kingdom, and the Jews were thinking He was going to set up an earthly kingdom and overthrow Rome, and they were ready for it. After His feeding them, Jesus "perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make Him a king", so He departed into the mountain to pray (John 6:15). From what we read in Mark's account, the twelve evidently were peeved at Jesus for not accepting the crown, for when that very night after Jesus had prayed He came to them on the Sea and stopped the storm that was about to capsize them, "they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves; for their heart was hardened"

(Mark 6:51,52). And when later that day He preached the sermon recorded in John 6:26-58, "from that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66), and realizing the twelve might be under pressure to desert Him also (John 6:67), can't you see why Jesus spent many hours of that night in prayer? The earnestness with which we pray, and the amount of time spent in prayer will be in direct ratio to how much we grasp the seriousness of a situation. As the songs says, there will be times when we will realize "Where could I go but to the Lord?"

7. Matt. 15:36: *"He took the seven loaves and the fishes, and gave thanks, and brake them, and gave to His disciples, and the disciples to the multitude."*

The prayer situation was the same here in connection with His feeding the 4,000 as was present when He fed the 5,000.

8. Luke 9:18: *"It came to pass, as He was alone praying, His disciples were with Him; and He asked them, saying, Whom say the people that I am?"*

If you read on a few more verses (especially in Matthew's coverage--see Matt. 16:13-21), you will see He was about to evoke a statement of faith about Himself from the lips of Peter. He was also about to tell them of His going to establish the church and to break the news to them of His coming death. At such a crucial hour Jesus prayed. He prayed because He could not handle it alone, and this will be so true of us many times.

9. Luke 9:28: *"He took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray."*

As He prayed, what happened? "And as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening" (v. 29). The transfiguration! His talking with Moses (the lawgiver) and Elijah (the great prophet) about His coming death at Jerusalem! This event was not only reassuring to Jesus but impressive to the disciples (see II Pet. 1:16-18). Now they ought to understand that His

death was according to the plan of God.

10. Mark 10:16: *"He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them."*

Here Jesus was asking God to bless the little children. We too should pray for our little ones. Their lives will be important, and their lives will likely survive ours.

11. Luke 10:21: *"In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight."*

The same is recorded in Matt. 11:25,26, which may be a different time and setting.

The setting in Luke 10 (above) is the return of the 70 whom He had sent out. They were happy with the results. They had been chosen from among the common people, and Jesus could use them whereas the "wise and prudent" leaders with their pride and preconceived notions did not grasp the truth of Jesus' message nor the mission of His coming. We too should pause on various occasions as Jesus did just to thank the Father for what we are rejoicing over.

12. Luke 11:1: *"It came to pass, that, as He was praying in a certain place, when He was ceased, one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, teach us to pray."*

People may come to us and ask us to help them with their finances, with Bible study, with calling, etc. This is fine, but Jesus' prayer life so impressed the disciples that they asked Him to teach them to pray. What a testimony to the constancy of His praying!

13. John 11:41,42: *"Jesus lifted up His eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me."*

This was at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus had just told them to roll back the stone from the grave. He has just asked, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" It was with the stone rolled back that He prayed. The people had known Jesus to perform many miracles, and here it would appear they were going to get to see Him raise a man to life. But Jesus wanted them to connect what they were about to see with God, the One to whom Jesus prayed, and to the glory that belonged to God. We too should be careful that the emphasis is not on what we pray but on God who is answering.

14. Matt. 26:26: *"As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body."*

This was at the institution of the Lord's supper. We too do the same at each Sunday's Lord's supper, for I Cor. 10:16 speaks of our blessing the cup. At the Lord's table the prayer(s) should focus on the bread and cup; what they represent, the death of Christ, our shortcomings, asking for mercy, etc. and not on all the things we would normally pray about at other times.

15. Luke 22:31,32: *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have thee...but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."*

On that terrible night Jesus had sorrows aplenty of His own, yet He thought of and prayed for Peter. What an example for us that no matter how bad our situation might be, we should not forget to pray for others who also have needs.

It was important that Peter would not do as Judas--end it all. He would be needed for Pentecost and for years thereafter. Jesus' prayer had much to do with Peter repenting and coming back.

16. John 17: *The whole chapter (read it).*

This has been called Jesus' great intercessory prayer, and indeed it was. After praying about

personal matters (vs. 1-5), He did much praying for the apostles and for those who would later believe on Him through their preaching. This was Jesus' longest recorded prayer. It was a big prayer, for it was a prayer concerning many people and for very important matters. It was almost like a person praying for His children and then for their children. Christ, who was about to die to give Himself for the church, was concerned about the purity, about the unity, and about the outreach of the church down through the ages of time, and He was concerned about the apostles to whom He was entrusting the beginning of the church and its spread. If you don't think prayer is important and efficacious, don't tell Jesus, for He knew and acted otherwise.

17. Matt. 26:39: *"He went a little farther, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."*

This was His first prayer in Gethsemane. The vicious parade of unlawful events leading to the cross was about to begin, and it would begin right there in the garden. If we were to go through such an ordeal, it would be hard on us, and it was just as hard on Jesus. Earlier that week He had said, "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour," yet He recognized it was for that purpose that He came to that hour (John 12:27). He knew it was God's will that He die for the sins of the world. He knew He was to lay down His life (John 10:17,18). So in Gethsemane He prayed His will into subjection to God's will and went on to become obedient unto death (Phil. 2:8). What a model for us in our times of trial and temptation!

18. Matt. 26:42: *"He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done."*

The temptation not to go through with the coming ordeal came back to Jesus, and He needed God's help again. Jesus always depended on the Word of God and prayer when temptations came, and so should we. In ourselves we are no match for the

devil's power, but with the whole armor of God on, we are able to stand in that day (Eph. 6:11,12).

19. Matt. 26:44: *"He left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words."*

It was of this third prayer that Luke 22:44 says, "Being in an agony He prayed more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

He prayed the same words, but they were not "vain repetition". He meant every word of it even if He had prayed the same thing twice before. And we at times will be so burdened about a matter that we too will ask and ask the same thing and maybe in the same words.

We sing, "Oh, how He agonized there in my place!" Thank God, He was heard (Heb. 5:7), and though it was not possible to save Him from death and at the same time save the world, God did send an angel to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). God will always stand by those committed to doing His will.

20. Luke 23:34: *"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

This was Jesus' first prayer from the cross, and it was for His crucifiers. In the Sermon on the Mount He had taught His listeners to "pray for them which despitefully use you" (Matt. 5:44) and to forgive others (Matt. 6:14,15). On the cross He lived what He had taught. It takes a real Christian today to do as Jesus did in this prayer.

21. Matt. 27:46: *"About the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

Of all the things that hurt Jesus most, probably this was the worst. On the cross God had laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6), making Him who knew no sin to become sin for us (II Cor. 5:21). This is why God had to treat Jesus as if He were a sinner, and this broke Jesus' heart, resulting in the above agonizing exclamation.

22. Luke 23:46: *"When Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, He gave up the ghost."*

This was Jesus' dying statement. He was conscious clear to the end. Oh, that we might be conscious to the very end so that the last thing we do on this earth will be to pray! Can you think of any greater way for a Christian to pass from this life than right after he or she had concluded life with a prayer?

23. Luke 24:30: *"As He sat at meat with them, He took the bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them."*

This was in the home of one of the men of Emmaus with whom He had walked. It was meal time, and as Jesus' custom was, he prayed before they ate--just as we should always do.

24. Luke 24:50,51: *"He led them out as far as to Bethany, and He lifted up His hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."*

Jesus' days of incarnation were now ended, and He would return to heaven. As He was blessing and praying for the apostles, He began to rise into the cloud that would receive Him out of their sight. For the remaining years of their lives they would be able to recall that the last thing they saw or heard Jesus do was PRAY FOR THEM! This surely had to mean much to them, and so they returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God (Luke 24:52,53) and waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to come upon them.

Thus, we have gone through the life of Jesus chronologically noting the numerous times His praying was mentioned. What have you gotten from this treatment of His life? Surely this: God is a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God, a human being needs to recognize that life's demands are too great to be borne without God's special and available help, and that time spent in prayer is important and will be rewarded.

The disciples wanted Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1), and surely by His wonderful example He has taught us to pray!

QUESTIONS

1. What well known song points out the fact that prayer is only for this life?
2. Why do you think Jesus was praying as He emerged from the waters of baptism?
3. What had taken place the day before, and what was coming up in the immediate future that caused Jesus to rise early at Capernaum to pray?
4. How long did Jesus pray before choosing the apostles and preaching the Sermon on the Mount?

5. Why do you think Jesus spent much of the night in solitary prayer after feeding the 5,000?
6. At what precise moment did the transfiguration begin?
7. For which disciple did Jesus pray that his faith would not fail?
8. In what chapter of John is Jesus' great intercessory prayer?
9. Where did Jesus pray that the cup might pass from Him?
10. What prayer for those bringing about His death did Jesus pray from the cross?
11. What was Jesus doing when He was parted from the apostles at the ascension?

God's Gracious Prayer Promises

It was Walter Scott who first said the Bible contains four kinds of statements: facts, commands, promises, and warnings, necessarily indicating that there are many of each. This is surely true of promises--including promises of answered prayer.

We could call this message, "God's GREAT Prayer Promises," and that would be true, or, "God's BELIEVABLE Prayer Promises," and they are. But we have decided on "God's GRACIOUS Prayer Promises," for they are indeed gracious on God's part.

When God promises, we should believe--not even doubt or question. We need to follow the Biblical example of Abraham. When God promised him the birth of a son and much offspring. Rom. 4:18 states that he "believed in hope" when from a physical standpoint there was no hope. Since he was "not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb. He staggered not at the promises of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded, that what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (verses 18:21). So when we open the Bible and read God's prayer promises, let us believe that what He has promised, He is able to perform, and that His integrity will cause it to be performed.

1. Biblical Prayer Promises.

First, one from the Old Testament: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chron. 7:14).

Now let us notice some New Testament prayer promises. Let us begin with some in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "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" (Matt. 6:6); "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matt. 7:7-11). These verses contain unmistakable promises--promises of needs (a son wanting food) and other "good things". Do not pray and wonder if God

will answer your prayer. Count on His many promises to answer prayer.

Next notice the promise in Mark 11:24: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." Remember these words: "Ye shall have them!" Is that what you think after you have prayed? In our prayer attitude we should be like I was as a third grader. Before Christmas vacation our teacher had all of us write a letter to Santa Claus telling what we wanted. I had noticed the high school boys skating on the snow-packed streets that were as hard as ice, and I had included in my letter a request for ice skates. After the vacation when we were back in class, I raised my hand right in the middle of the teacher's teaching. "What is it, Donald?" I said, "When is Santa going to answer our letters?" "What do you mean?" she asked. I said, "I asked him for a pair of ice skates, and I didn't get them." She went on to explain that we wrote these letters merely in fun. Let me ask, "When God has so promised to answer our prayers, why can't we watch and expect the answer just as I did as a grade school boy?" Or is prayer something we say, and that's as far as it goes with our thinking? If it has been that way, let us change our faith to match God's promises.

Did you notice the "What things soever" in Mark 11:24? Notice the "whatsoever" again as we read John 14:13: "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." You can see that God has not restricted us to only a few things that He will grant in answer to prayer. Listen again: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). And again: "Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (I John 3:22).

Yes, God has committed Himself that He will answer the prayers of His children.

If we say, "It depends on who is promising something whether I believe it. And is the one promising able to fulfill it?" Well, we know there are people who promise things they can't fulfill, and some who don't intend to carry out what they promise, and that people sometimes forget what they promise. But none of these fits God. What He has promised, He is able to perform (Rom. 4:21), He cannot lie (Tit. 1:2),

and He does not forget what He is to remember (Heb. 6:10). As He promised Paul when there was no human hope that anybody would be saved from that terrible storm on the Mediterranean, God was able to save every person aboard even though the ship was lost (Acts 27:22-25,41-44). As to God's integrity concerning what He has promised, "He is faithful that promised" (Heb. 10:23). One windy spring afternoon a bonfire got away from a poor family and burned out into our field. A neighbor brought his tractor and plowed several furrows to contain the fire. When the man of the house arrived on the scene, he promised, "Albert will turn every one of the furrows over again," but his son Albert never did it--the difference between God promising and some people promising. And when God promised Hannah she would have a son in answer to her prayer, I Sam. 1:19 says, "Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the Lord REMEMBERED her," and she bore the son Samuel. And the God who remembered Hannah's prayer will also remember our prayers.

2. Biblical Conditions of the Promises.

If the only statements we had were, "Ask, and it shall be given you...for every one that asketh receiveth" (Matt. 7:7,8), we would suppose God's promise to be unconditional. But a study of other verses indicates His promises are with certain understandable conditions. His promise to answer prayers is like His promise of salvation. He is the author of eternal salvation--but to whom? To "all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:9). Yes, "the gift of God is eternal life" given us "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23), but what is a necessary condition for receiving heavenly inheritance? Rom. 8:17 says, "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ."

What are some of these Biblical conditions of His answering our prayers?

We must listen to Him if He will listen to us; we must answer His call if He will answer us when we call. At Lazarus's tomb "Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always" (John 11:41,42). Why? Jesus said, "I do always those things that please him" (John 8:29). And you remember that God said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"

(Matt. 3:17; Matt. 17:5). Other passages that show we must be serving God if day-by-day we expect Him to answer our prayers: "The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil" (I Pet. 3:12); "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16); "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). After we become Christians, we must abide in Christ to have our prayers answered.

But we can't "abide in Christ" until we have first gotten "into Christ", which we do when we become Christians through conversion (faith, repentance, and confession that culminate in baptism--Gal. 3:27). Incense in the Old Testament is taken to be a type of prayer in the New. Only priests were allowed to burn incense on the altar of incense (II Chron. 26:16-18), and it was situated in the holy place into which only priests could enter. Let us not be guilty of taking the altar of incense from the holy place (typical of the church) and relocating it out in the outer court (typical of the world).

Living in sin nullifies God's promise to answer prayer: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psa. 66:18); "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:2); "When ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood" (Isa. 1:15). It is "if our heart condemn us not" that we have "confidence toward God" so that "whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (I John 3:21,22). Peter wrote how wives are to treat their husbands and how husbands are to treat their wives-- "so that your prayers be not hindered" (I Pet. 3:7).

Another condition of answered prayer is that we are not asking God to do something contrary to His will: "If we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (I John 5:14). Paul said that three times he had asked God to remove the thorn from his flesh, but he didn't ask that after he learned it was not God's will to do so but rather to give him grace to bear it (II Cor. 12:7-9). Naturally we should not expect God to do something contrary to His will.

In praying we must also go to God in Jesus'

name if we expect our prayers to be answered: "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do...If ye ask any thing in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13,14); "Whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you" (John 15:16). The same is said in John 16:23. This reflects the fact that of ourselves we have no merit with God, but Jesus is our Saviour, and we are His. Having claimed Him before men, He will claim us before the Father (Matt. 10:32). Jesus is the mediator between us and God (I Tim. 2:5). He is the way, the truth, and the life, and nobody can go to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). This is why we pray in Jesus' name.

God will forgive our sins against Him when we ask, provided we have been forgiving people's trespasses against us: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...for if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:12,14,15). So Jesus taught, "When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any; that your Father which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). God holds the precious gift of forgiveness in His hands, but it will not be ours if we lack the forgiving spirit ourselves.

To be heard of God and answered we must really desire that for which we ask: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). If something doesn't really matter to you, then don't bother God with it. Pray about the things you really desire to see come to pass. This is what Paul prayed for: "Brethren my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

If we really desire something, it will show up in the fervency with which we ask for it, which is another condition of answered prayer: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16). Didn't Jesus pray fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44)? Jesus offered up prayers with strong crying and tears (Heb. 5:7). Epaphras of Colosse was with Paul at Rome, and when Paul wrote the Colossians, he said Epaphras was "always laboring fervently for you in prayers" (Col. 4:12). Notice he prayed "fervently", and he LABORED in prayer. It was important--He worked at prayers. The

Greek word for "laboring" is "agonidzo" from which "agonize" comes. As humans we regard urgent appeals for help much more than formal appeals and so does God.

Some things are not going to be answered immediately. God has many things to keep in mind when answering prayers. Some circumstances have to develop before the answer will come about. So persistence in prayer is another condition for the answer to some prayers: "Shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?" (Luke 18:7); We "ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). In the parable a man kept knocking until the three loaves of bread he sought were given him (Luke 11:5-8), so Jesus said, "Ask, and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (v. 9)--persistence in prayer. When the angel told Zacharias that his prayers for a son were about to be answered, they were likely prayers that had been prayed when he and his wife Elizabeth were much younger.

Humility before God is another important condition. Do you remember the parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray--one a proud Pharisee and the other a humble publican (Luke 18:9-13)? Jesus said the humble publican went to his house justified rather than the proud Pharisee, "for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (v. 14). This explains why people in Bible times (like Daniel in Dan. 6:10 and Paul and others in Acts 21:5) at times knelt before God in prayer.

It is true we sometimes have not because we ask not, but we can ask and still not receive if we ask with the wrong motive. Jas. 4:3 brings this out: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." God may not bless you with a better job if you are going to squander the larger income on yourself. He may not help you preach better or sing better if you are doing it for your own aggrandizement. He will be no party to our sinfulness.

And let us not forget to express thanks for what God has already given us when we come to ask Him for additional blessings. Phil. 4:6 says, "With thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto

God." Notice how closely connected thanksgiving is with prayer: "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2); "Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (I Thess. 5:17,18). If we are not thankful, we are like spoiled children who "get" and "get" but never "give" thanksgiving. God is not going to spoil His children--He will wisely cut off the special blessings until we recognize the Source from which all blessings flow.

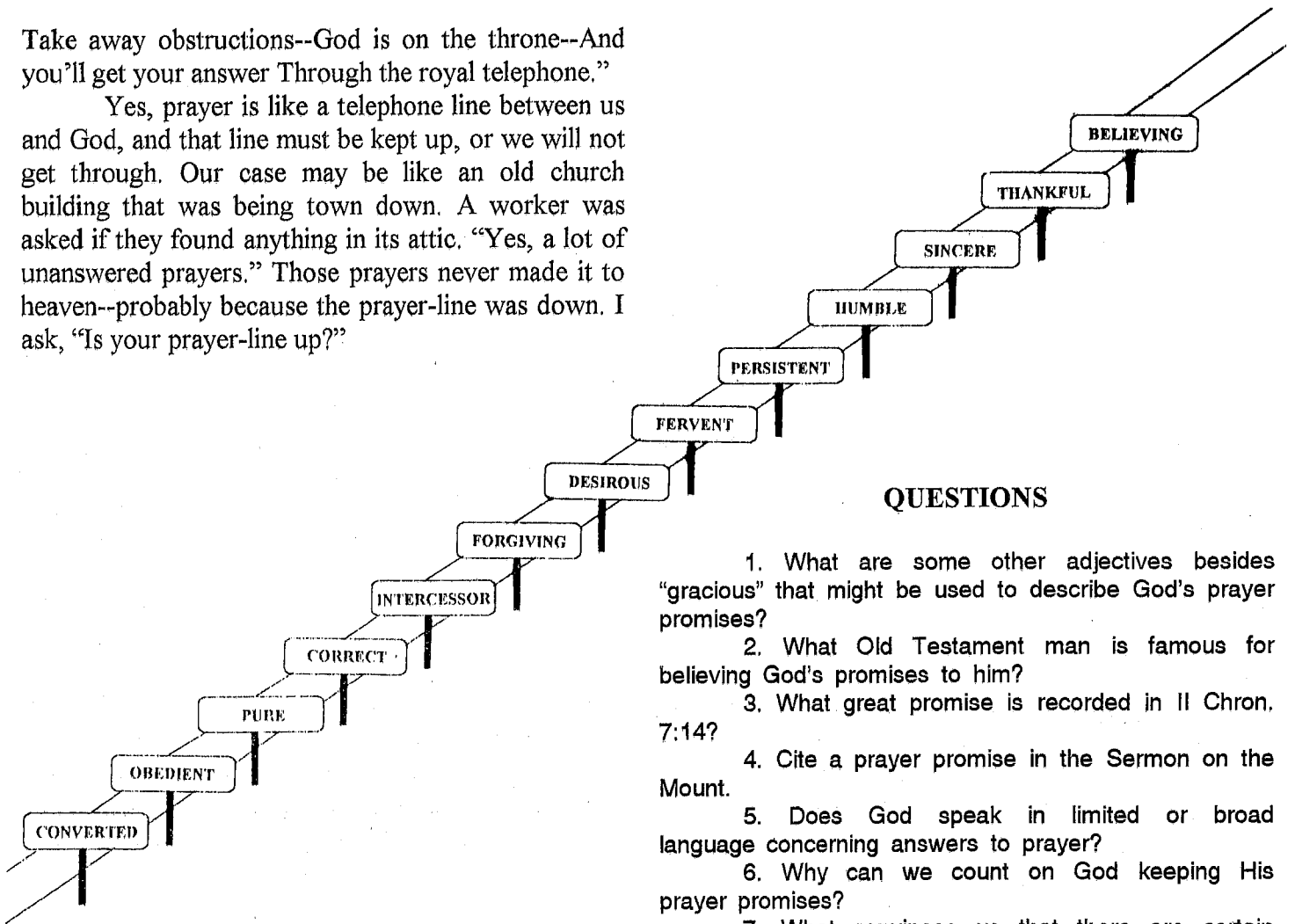
Finally in this particular study, and probably the most emphasized condition of answered prayer, is faith. Heb. 11 shows how much faith really pleases God. It is faith in HIM, faith in His POWER to do what we ask, faith in His WILLINGNESS to help us, and faith in His TRUTHFULNESS since He has promised. Listen to these verses: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24); "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering: for he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord" (Jas. 1:5-7). When two blind men wanted Jesus to heal them, He questioned them, "Believe ye that I am able to do this?" When they said, "Yea, Lord," He said, "According to your faith be it unto you." They must have indeed believed, for "their eyes were opened" (Matt. 9:27-30).

God had promised Israel the land of Canaan. When they did not believe, they so displeased God that He made an oath that they would not enter that land (Heb. 3:18,19). A lack of faith, then, is a lot more serious than most of us think. Why is God so against unbelief? Because it questions HIM, His TRUTHFULNESS, His POWER.

In our songbooks of yesteryear there was a song that compared talking to God in prayer with talking on a telephone. It said, "Central's never 'busy', Always on the line; You may hear from heaven Almost any time. 'Tis a royal service Free for one and all; When you get in trouble Give this royal line a call...Fail to get your answer? Satan's crossed your wire By some strong delusion Or some base desire;

Take away obstructions--God is on the throne--And you'll get your answer Through the royal telephone."

Yes, prayer is like a telephone line between us and God, and that line must be kept up, or we will not get through. Our case may be like an old church building that was being town down. A worker was asked if they found anything in its attic. "Yes, a lot of unanswered prayers." Those prayers never made it to heaven--probably because the prayer-line was down. I ask, "Is your prayer-line up?"



QUESTIONS

1. What are some other adjectives besides "gracious" that might be used to describe God's prayer promises?
2. What Old Testament man is famous for believing God's promises to him?
3. What great promise is recorded in II Chron. 7:14?
4. Cite a prayer promise in the Sermon on the Mount.
5. Does God speak in limited or broad language concerning answers to prayer?
6. Why can we count on God keeping His prayer promises?
7. What convinces us that there are certain conditions to God's answering prayers?
8. Of the 13 conditions portrayed on the drawing and discussed in the material, list 8 of them.

The Biblical Scope of Prayer

Years ago I heard two different preachers tell of their prayer sermon outlines from two well known verses. The first was from Jas. 5:16: (1) The effectual, fervent prayer (not just any prayer) (2) of a righteous man (not just any man) (3) availeth much (prayer won't do everything). The other preacher's outline was from Phil. 4:6 that says, "Be fearful ('anxious' ASV) for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." He said, (1) Be anxious for nothing, (2) be prayerful for everything, and (3) be thankful for anything. Not bad!

The "everything" of Phil. 4:6 surely makes prayer a wide open field for our requests--there is much that can and should be prayed for. And it goes along with the "whatsoever" in both Mark 11:24 ("What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them") and I John 3:22 ("Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him"). This study from the Scriptures will show that we are too restrictive in our prayers.

Let us notice for whom and for what we are to pray.

1. For Both Ourselves and Others.

Let your petitions be both for yourself and for others. Paul prayed about his own thorn in the flesh (II Cor. 12:8), but he also prayed for the Ephesian church (Eph. 1:16). Jesus prayed about the burdens upon His own heart (Luke 22:42), but He also prayed for Peter (Luke 22:32). He not only prayed for Peter in the matter, but He urged Peter to pray for himself (Matt. 26:40,41). Peter commanded Simon to pray for his forgiveness (Acts 8:22), but Simon desired that Peter would also pray for him (Acts 8:24). Paul prayed for the Thessalonian church (I Thess. 1:2), and he asked them to pray for him (II Thess. 3:2).

Nobody knows your needs as you do; therefore, you can do the best job of anybody praying for your own needs. In fact, if you don't pray for yourself, there will be some needs of your life that will never get prayed for. Do not neglect, therefore, to

pray for yourself. Pray for the wisdom you need, the courage, the health, the overcoming power, the ability, the safety, the guidance of the Lord, and the many other things you realize you need for your day-by-day living and for various problems and projects of your own. Appreciate the prayers of others for you, but do not depend wholly on them. Pray for yourself.

But don't forget to pray for others. They need your prayers. You need to think of others' needs as well as your own. Such praying is called "intercessions" in the Bible (I Tim. 2:1). If you pray for others as well as yourself, you will indeed have plenty to pray for. Prayer in no way is to be selfish on our part. At the throne of grace we should "do for others as we would have them do for us"--we should pray for them.

We have frequent guests in our home. During a preaching rally several years ago when we had many different people in our home, many of them asked God's blessing on us, and I will never forget what a wonderful season of blessings those prayers ushered in for us! Yes, we should pray for others also.

2. For Individuals and Groups.

Pray for individuals ("Simon...I have prayed for thee," Luke 22:31,32), and pray for groups ("The men which thou gavest me out of the world...I pray for them," John 17:6,9). There are needs of an individual nature, and there are needs of a group nature. Thus, pray for the individuals in the congregation where you attend, but don't fail to pray for the congregation as a unit--its spirituality, its doctrinal loyalty, its evangelistic outreach, its unity, and its faithfulness.

3. For Spiritual and Material Matters.

Be assured that God is pleased to hear your petitions concerning both spiritual and material things. We should pray much concerning the matters that pertain to the kingdom of God, the souls of men, and the spiritual side of life. God is God over the spiritual

realm of things, and we should make many petitions to Him concerning the spiritual. When Jesus said, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36), He was teaching us to pray about spiritual things. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." Why should we? Our spirit may be willing to do God's will, but our flesh may be weak--weaker than it ought to be (see Matt. 26:41). Paul mentions this fact about himself (see Rom. 7:18,19). So many times people seem to pray more about physical matters than they do spiritual. "Lord, give people a safe trip to the rally" may be heard much more than "Lord, help each of us to receive something good for our souls".

But prayer is also about material things. Zech. 10:1 says, "Ask ye of the Lord rain in the time of the latter rain; so the Lord shall make bright clouds, and give them showers of rain, to every one grass in the field." God is God of our whole person (physical as well as spiritual), and He is willing to hear prayer about anything that concerns any part of us. Deliverance from prison, ability to conceive children, and many other matters found in Bible prayers were material in nature. Food is important. We are to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). God wants to bless us with our earthly necessities. If we seek His kingdom and its righteousness, He will see that our earthly needs are cared for (Matt. 6:33). If you are out of a job, ask God to lead you to one. Do you think Lot prayed when he selfishly chose the well watered plain of the Jordan? I'm afraid not, and look how he ended up as a result. Ask God to prosper your business and then don't forget to be an even greater giver to Him and to others as a result.

We can also pray about matters of physical health. In the latter years of his reign, King Asa of Judah was diseased in his feet, and the Bible reports that in his disease he did not seek the Lord--only human physicians (II Chron. 16:12). It is not wrong for the sick to consult a physician, for Jesus said the sick need such (Matt. 9:12), but we should not seek a physician instead of the Lord. III John 2 is an example of praying about physical matters: "I wish ('pray' ASV) above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." Health is so

important and sickness so hindering. Pray for good health for yourself and for others.

We can also pray about decisions that need to be made: "If any of you lack wisdom" (and who doesn't from time to time?), let him ask of God," Jas. 1:5 says. Isn't that what young King Solomon did? "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the seashore...And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom" (I Kings 4:29,34). What a Source to turn to when we don't know what to do or how to do it or when to do it or even whether to do it! Don't hesitate to ask God's leadership in your decisions concerning the person to marry, the vocation to choose, the house to purchase, and a multitude of other decisions.

4. For Needs and Wants.

We should make our petitions for both our needs and our wants. That we can and should pray to God for our needs is evident to anyone knowing anything at all about the Bible and prayer. But one thing many do not understand is that God is also pleased for His children to bring their desires to Him in prayer. He wants them to have no desires they would be ashamed to bring to Him, and He is glad to show His love for His children by hearing their desires. Notice these passages that show we should take our desires ("our wants and wishes," the song says) to God in prayer: "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1); "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). Learn to express your desires to God. This will help you have only righteous desires. This will prove your trust in the love of God for your righteous wishes. This will bring many blessings into your life. This will make prayer very natural to you. Too many people are saying petitions for things which they have no real desire for when all the while they may have hearts full of righteous desires but have never thought to pray to God about them.

5. For Little Things and Big Things.

A well known song says to take “everything” to God in prayer, and Phil. 4:6 says precisely the same thing; “In every thing by prayer and supplication...let your requests be made known unto God.” If we pray about “everything”, we will pray to God about the little things of life, and we will pray about the big things too. We will not think the little things are too insignificant, for many things we think to be little have bigger involvements than we realize. Nor will we hesitate to pray to God about big matters as if God were unable to do anything about them. You will have big matters of life come your way. Be glad you can pray to God about them. He is able to do great things. Bible characters prayed big prayers, and they received big answers. It has been said that between the big things we think God will not give and the little things we don't need to bother Him with, the trouble is we don't pray about much of anything.

6. For Rulers and National Peace.

We are to pray for kings and for all who are in authority (I Tim. 2:1-3). God's Old Testament people were taught to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psa. 122:6). Years later when they found themselves in Babylon where they were going to live many years, Jeremiah told them to pray for the peace of Babylon, “for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace” (Jer. 29:7). Yes, we need to pray for those who are governmentally over us. If things go on in our land that shouldn't and we have prayed about them, we really have no right to do much complaining about them, do we?

7. About Problems--Ours and Others'.

King Herod had killed the apostle James (Acts 12:1,2) and intended to do the same to Peter (v. 3). While Peter was kept in prison, “prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Acts 12:5). In fact on the night before Herod was going to kill him, “many were gathered together praying” in the house of Mary, Mark's mother (Acts 12:12). Oh, how King Hezekiah prayed when the powerful Sennacherib and his Assyrian army were

threatening his Jerusalem (II Kings 19:14-18). He prayed, “Save thou us out of his hand” (v. 19), and He did (v. 35,36).

We are to cast all our care upon the Lord, for He cares for us (I Pet. 5:7). This is why we can be free from anxiety as set forth in Phil. 4:6. As a child at church I can remember the older people singing, “God will take care of you, Through ev'ry day, O'er all the way,” so “be not dismayed whate'er betide.” And He will. God will make a “tunnel” out of a “cave”, showing us light at its other end and leading us forth to it. But we must pray.

8. For Forgiveness--Ours and Others'.

Do we really have any need greater than this? In the prayer Jesus taught His disciples, we have this petition: “Forgive us our debts” (Matt. 6:12). When Simon of Samaria tried to purchase the gift of God with money, he was told, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (Acts 8:22). The pleading prayer in Psa. 51 is taken to be David's after his sin with Bathsheba. Oh, how he did pray for forgiveness: “Have mercy upon me, O God...blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin...Purge me with hyssop...Wash me...Make me to hear joy and gladness...Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities...Deliver me from bloodguiltiness” (vs. 1-14). You and I may not have taken another man's wife and had him killed in an attempt to cover our sin, but we all have sins that God only can forgive. Here is a fact: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8), and here is the good news: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (v. 9). Let us try more to understand our unworthiness before God and really realize how important it is that we have His merciful forgiveness. Here is another blessing for which we are to ask:

We should also pray for the forgiveness of others. Paul prayed that God would forgive those who should have stood with him when he was on trial but didn't (II Tim. 4:16).

“What is thy petition?” There are so many

things to pray about as you can see. If you would receive, be sure to ask. God has promised to answer prayers, but He does not answer prayers that are not prayed nor grant petitions that are not made to Him any more than we answer letters that are never written to us.

QUESTIONS

1. Cite 2 Biblical examples of people praying for themselves.
2. Cite 2 Biblical examples of people praying for somebody besides themselves.
3. What is an argument for praying for yourself?
4. What is praying for others called?

5. Give a Biblical example of praying for something spiritual.
6. Show from the Bible it is all right to pray for material blessings.
7. Who in the Bible was blessed with wisdom because he asked for it?
8. Show from the Bible that we may pray for wants as well as needs.
9. What keeps some people from praying for big things?
10. What keeps some people from praying for little things?
11. Which will help our governmental situation more, praying or complaining?
12. Show a Biblical example of praying about a serious problem.
13. Show a Biblical example of praying for forgiveness.

How Should We Pray?

Is prayer formal or informal? Should it be simple or elaborate? Should it be direct or the long way to the point? Should it be general or specific? We shall consider these questions.

1. Formal or Informal?

There are two figures of speech that come to mind with reference to whether prayer should be formal or informal: that of coming before God's throne (Heb. 4:16) and that of a child asking his father for earthly desires (Matt. 7:7-9). When one comes before the throne of a king, he does not do so without forethought and propriety. To have come before a king in Bible times in a haphazard manner would have been unthinkable. Also, the priest serving in the tabernacle in all of his duties (including burning incense--the type of prayer) exercised due formality in doing so. And so we too as we come before God need to realize we are coming before the great, almighty, eternal, majestic God of Heaven, and only those who are thoughtless or irreverent would think it acceptable to God to come before Him without proper and befitting dignity. Do not frown on proper formality in prayer. Just be free from empty formality. On the

other hand, don't forget the child asking his father for bread. He may not know big words, and he may not approach his father as other people do, but he knows what he needs and knows his father loves him, so he goes to His father in a plain, informal way concerning his needs. And so does the humble child of God in prayer. When we do not know how to word our thoughts, we don't have to worry about it--God will understand, and He wants us to pray. So we may say there are both formal and informal sides to prayer, but in both instances there is an earnestness and a sincerity. The formal aspect emphasizes the respect due God and the informal the love we share with Him.

2. Simple or Elaborate?

Next, should prayer be simple or elaborate? The prayer Jesus taught His disciples was very simple (Matt. 6:6-13). It is short and is composed of common words. Many prayers in the Bible were of the simple sort, and we would likely do well to make most of ours the same way. However, we need to be on guard against simplicity getting us into a rut, for such prayers can be said without much freshness of thought and can degenerate into unintentioned disrespect. But

the Bible does contain the elaborate prayers also--there are many notable examples; David's prayer in I Chron. 29:10-19; Solomon's in I Kings 8:23-53; Daniel's in Dan. 9:3-19; Ezra's in Ezra 9:5-15; and Jesus' in John 17. Study each of these prayers, and you will be able to criticize your own prayers in places. Simplicity in prayer likely fits the figure of a child asking his father for earthly needs while the elaborate seems to fit the figure of approaching the throne of a king.

3. Direct or Indirect?

Should prayer be direct or the long way to the point? Usually the elaborate prayers (see the above references) were not directly to the point. Time seemed to be no factor in them. Words were easy to come by. There was much to say in getting to the point. Jesus' all-night prayers must have had fulness of thought and expression. Yet in the Bible we also have some of the most direct, to the point prayers--such as: "O Lord, I pray thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (II Sam. 15:31); "Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee" (Num. 12:13); "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judg. 16:28); "Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see" (II Kings 6:17); "Lord save us: we perish" (Matt. 8:25); "Lord, save me" (Matt. 14:30); "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). In most of these instances it is evident why the individual came directly to the point--such as when Peter was beginning to sink, such as the sinful man who could not think of anything before God but his own sinfulness, etc.

4. General or Specific?

Some pray, "Lord, bless the sick everywhere," and yet not pray specifically for the sick ones whom they know. Or, "Lord, bless all your preachers everywhere," but not pray for the ones whom they know. Probably the most general of all prayers prayed is, "Lord, bless all those for whom it is our duty to pray." You have heard this prayed, haven't you?

Well, there are general petitions like the one in Matt. 6:10: "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in

heaven," and like Jesus' petition in John 17:20: "Neither pray I for these (the apostles--D.H.) alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." But some pray only in generalities--covering a lot of ground but landing nowhere. Two blind men at Jericho cried out as they heard that Jesus was passing by, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David" (Matt. 20:30). Jesus stopped and asked them, "What will ye that I shall do unto you?" (v. 32). And when they got out of the general ("Have mercy on us") and into the specific ("That our eyes may be opened"--v. 33), Jesus immediately responded (v. 34).

We wouldn't go into a restaurant, and when asked what we wanted, say, "Food." On the witness stand when asked, "What did the man do?" We wouldn't say, "He did something bad." When ordering from a mail order catalog, we wouldn't say, "Send me some merchandise." No, in all these things we would be specific because we can be, and we are expected to be. The same is true in prayer.

If we ask for specific things, then when they come to pass, we will know they are answers to prayer, and we will thank God for them. If we pray only in generalities, we will never know when or if the prayer was answered. And yet there are some things so beyond us that we must not altogether abandon some praying in the general. Pray about world conditions. Pray about the corrupting influences at work in our world. Pray for the stand of the church. Pray for evangelism at home and abroad. Wouldn't you like God to answer prayers beyond your ability to know or to specify what or where? So while we are to pray in the specific, there is still a place to pray in the general.

This lesson in prayer has shown it is not so much an either/or matter but a both/and matter--at times one way is in order and at other times the other way fits better. The main thing is to be on praying ground and praying terms with God, to see the many needs that only God can supply, to go to God with proper respect for Him, to go with the utmost sincerity, to be earnest and persistent in one's petition, to be thankful for all He has already given in answer to former prayers and out of plain providence over our lives beyond what we have even asked, to go regularly as did Daniel and yet to go to Him in between times as

needs arise, and to be willing to accept God's answer to our needs and our prayers. This is prayer indeed, prayer that pleases God, prayer that blesses the soul, prayer that gets divine results.

Aren't you impressed that whatever you as a Christian are interested in, so is God? He wants to hear you ask. He wants to bless you by answering your prayers. He wants you to thank Him for the answers He sends. Such a life of prayer will help bring us closer to Him and will secure for us blessings that will come in no other way. "Oh, what peace we often forfeit; Oh, what needless pain we bear!" Why? "All because we do not carry, EVERYTHING to God in prayer." Yes, everything--the big and the little, the spiritual and the material, for ourselves and for others, and for the general and the specific. May God help us see the wide scope of Biblical praying, and may He help us sense the need to change our prayer habits to fit a greater life of prayer as set forth in the Bible!

QUESTIONS

1. What shows that prayers should be prayed with proper dignity?
2. What shows that sometimes prayer may be more informal?
3. Show an example of simplicity in a Biblical prayer.
4. Show an example of an elaborate prayer in the Bible.
5. Show 2 Biblical examples of prayers to-the-point.
6. How do we know that other prayers were sometimes more wordy?
7. Give a Biblical example of praying in a generality.
8. Give a Biblical example of praying specifically.

The Ministry of Intercessory Prayer

Timothy had many instructions from Paul for teaching the saints in many places. In I Tim. 2:1 Paul wrote, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men." "Intercessions" means going to God in behalf of others. If we pray for others as the Bible teaches us to do, we will have much to pray about, as we shall see.

1. There are Many People to Pray For.

First of all, we should pray for lost people. Paul did. He wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1). When we add this field to our praying, don't we have a lot to pray for? All of us have numerous friends, neighbors, relatives, work associates, new acquaintances, and backsliders whom we know. All of these need Christ. All need salvation. All need to know God. What can we do besides talk

to them? Besides preach to them? We can pray for them, and we need to. Since great things come to pass in answer to prayer, we can be sure that something will take place that will open the door to some of them. Pray, and you will see.

Then there are fellow-saints to pray for. Listen to Eph. 6:18: "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." "For all saints!" That encompasses a lot of people. There are the local saints with whom we gather for public worship. How often do you pray for each of them by families and by individuals? Then there are saints elsewhere whom you know; saints in neighboring towns, saints who have moved elsewhere, saints whom you have met at rallies, saints we have met in traveling, etc. And you may have some relatives who are Christians. Some of the saints are young people, and you know they need our prayers, growing up in this age. Some are older people nearing the end of the

way. They need our prayers for finishing their courses. Then there are middle-age adults who have the responsibility of their families and the church. Let us pray for them.

In the opening verses of Paul's epistles he has taught us to pray for congregations elsewhere. He wrote the Colossian church, "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you" (Col. 1:3). To the church at Thessalonica, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers" (I Thess. 1:2). And to the church at Philippi, "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy" (Phil. 1:3,4). Besides your home congregation, how about other congregations of the Lord's people in your area? Have you been praying for other congregations in your state? in other states? in other parts of the world? It is wonderful to know of works elsewhere. We should thank God for them, and we should pray for their spiritual welfare, for them to maintain their stand for Christ, that souls will be added there, and that the work will go forward.

How about praying for the preachers you know? Those who preach to you and those who preach elsewhere? As great a Christian and as great a preacher as Paul was, he sought the prayers of God's people. Listen: "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you; and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith" (II Thess. 3:1,2); "Withal praying also for us, that God would open a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak" (Col. 4:3,4); pray "for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (Eph. 6:19,20). Preachers are human. They live in the same world you do. They face the same temptations. Some would be better Christians if you prayed for them. Some would have more courage to preach the Word with needed boldness and strength. All of them could do a greater work with more prayers prayed for them. When you have known of some preacher who gave up the

ministry, did you even stop to consider whether you had really ever prayed for him?

And don't you remember that Jesus said, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37,38)? The same is true today. Oh, the need for more laborers! How can this situation be remedied? Prayer will help. Pray for laborers in general to be multiplied, and then if you know somebody who ought to be making a decision in this way, pray for that one in particular.

Do you pray for your loved ones as you should? Listen to what it says about Job and his children: "His sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them. And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually" (Job 1:4,5). What an example of concern for his children! And shouldn't we have that same concern for each of our loved ones--our parents, our brothers and our sisters, our children, our grandparents, our aunts and our uncles, and our cousins? Don't leave your loved ones out of your prayers!

I Tim. 2:2 says we should also pray for rulers and those who are in governmental authority. Frankly it is more common to hear complaining about rulers than prayers for them. Complaining doesn't do much good, and it has no Biblical promise connected with it, but prayer will do good, and it does have a Biblical promise. God is greater than rulers (ask Nebuchadnezzar), and He has overpowered them at times. Let us pray, then, more often for those charged with governing our land.

Most instances of praying for others is likely for friends and loved ones, but we must also be pleased to pray for those who have wronged or harmed us. You will remember that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount even to pray for one's enemies (Matt. 5:43,44). Some say, "I'm praying for them all right; I'm praying they will repent." Well, that is good, but that is not in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the

Mount material. Listen to it: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Have you prayed this way for them? This is the way Jesus prayed on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And Stephen concerning those stoning him: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60). The Holy Spirit dwelling within the heart of the Christian will help him pray this kind of prayer from his heart. The natural man would not thus pray. Do you find it within your heart to pray sincerely for your enemies? If so, you are a maturing Christian.

2. Reflections on Intercessory Prayer.

The above is quite an array of individuals for whom we are to pray. Obviously we do not spend enough time in prayer. We probably don't pray for all of whom we should pray, and we probably don't pray often enough for them. What do you think?

We are taught to pray without ceasing (I Thess. 5:17) and to continue in prayer (Col. 4:2). On one occasion Jesus prayed all night (Luke 6:12). After feeding the 5,000 He spent about three-fourths of the night in prayer (Matt. 14:23-25). Daniel's prayer life included three sessions daily (Dan. 6:10). And the apostles spent enough time in prayer along with their preaching that to minister to the neglected widows in the daily ministrations would have robbed them of needed prayer and preaching time. They said, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:3,4). A full ministry of intercessory praying will help us fulfill a life of prayer such as we have been studying about in the Bible.

Are you aware that Jesus Himself makes intercession for us? Heb. 7:25 says, "He ever liveth to make intercession" for us. When we sin, I John 2:1 says He is our Advocate with the Father. He pleads our case before God. Say, do you want Jesus to quit interceding for you? Do you want Him to neglect interceding? Do you want Him to forget to intercede? Then we should not quit praying for others. We

should not neglect it. We should not forget to intercede for people.

Intercessory praying keeps us from being concerned only with ourselves. A Christian is unselfish. Phil. 2:4 says, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." The NIV gives for that verse, "Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." This we do when we not only pray for ourselves but for others. Here is something we can do for others, others near us and other away from us, for people we know and even for those we don't know.

Truly intercessory praying is a manifestation of our love for other people, and it is a manifestation of our faith in God's promises to answer prayer.

Our title speaks of intercessory praying as a "ministry". It is. It is something we should do regularly and responsibly. Surely such praying will develop a real prayer life in us--something some have never had, something that will take time and thought, but time and thought spent with God. Will you start doing such today and continue thereafter as long as you live, adding more and more people to your "prayer list" as time rolls on? Your life will be enriched--and so will theirs!

QUESTIONS

1. What does "intercession" mean?
2. What apostle prayed for the salvation of his nation?
3. For what saints should each of us pray?
4. For what congregations should each of us pray?
5. Show that we should pray for preachers.
6. Show that we should pray for more laborers to be raised up.
7. Who was concerned about his children every day?
8. Cite an example of praying for one's enemies.
9. In what way will intercessory prayer help us fulfill a prayer life?
10. What does intercessory praying manifest?

Living the Rewarding Life of Prayer

Prayer--like many other things--is based on certain decisions. In order to live the life of prayer we must make certain right decisions. Be sure you answer the following questions correctly.

Is prayer for New Testament days as well as Old Testament?

Is prayer for us today as well as for people in Bible days?

Is prayer essential to a Christian life, or is it optional?

Has God made definite prayer promises?

Is God able to fulfill the prayer promises He has made?

Will He keep His prayer promises?

Has God specified the conditions on which He will answer one's prayers?

Do you plan to continue to pray as you have been doing, or do you plan to improve?

If you plan to improve, do you know at this time just how you are going to make that improvement?

In order to improve, will you draw up some helpful plan of improvement, or will you just do a better job of praying spasmodically as you have been?

Proper answers to the above will go far in helping you to a greater life of prayer.

1. Arguments for Drawing up Some Plan or Prayer Schedule.

You have a work schedule whether you work for yourself or for somebody else.

You also have a schedule for church attendance.

You know how frequently you are to partake of the Lord's supper.

You have a schedule or plan for eating.

You also have a time for sleeping.

If you don't have plans for the above, you will have no job, you will be off-and-on in your church attendance, the Lord's supper really won't matter to

you, etc. Don't say you don't eat, and you don't sleep. We know you do. If you don't, you won't be around very long.

Having the above plans doesn't mean that occasionally you don't miss a day of work. Sickness may keep you from a church service. You may occasionally miss a meal, and some night you may not get to sleep your usual number of hours. But when the above happens, you don't junk your plans. No! Rather you go ahead with them with an occasional irregularity. The same would be true with your prayer plans and schedule.

What can be Biblically said for a prayer schedule? What about the busy government worker Daniel? Even after prayer was legally condemned for a month, Dan. 6:10 says, "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees **THREE TIMES A DAY, AND PRAYED, AND GAVE THANKS BEFORE HIS GOD, AS HE DID AFORETIME.**" When were those three times each day? Probably morning, noon, and night. Next we note a similar plan by the Psalmist in Psa. 55:17: "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud; and he shall hear my voice."

The prayer life of the early church was such that Acts 2:42 says, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in **PRAYERS.**" How much did the apostles pray? So much that they could not add caring for the Grecian widows material needs. They would have had to neglect prayer as well as teaching to have done so. Listen: "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2-4).

What, then, did the apostles expect out of the members by way of prayer when they wrote, "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17); and "Continue in

prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2)?

Surely, then, there is a need for each of us to have some plan or schedule in our prayer lives.

2. There Must be Some Time Set Aside for Prayer, or There Won't be Much Prayer.

We have a time to eat, to sleep, to go to work, to attend church, etc. Why shouldn't we also have a time to pray?

You may say, “We always pray before eating.” That's fine, but is that all the praying you do? While such prayers are meaningful, they are usually short and do not include all the categories of prayer that we Biblically considered in the preceding study.

Yes, pray at mealtimes but also pray with your family. Fathers are taught to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Why not have a time for getting the Bible out and read and teach it to the family and then pray? Find a daily time for this--preferably in the morning before the family members go their separate ways for the day. If morning doesn't work out for you and your family, then have it some other time in your day. But don't neglect to pray also when it is just you and God--private prayer. Also have some time for this. And, of course, you will want to pray before you go to bed for the night--thanking the Lord for the blessings of the day and praying for His care while you sleep.

Then at any time during the day you might find yourself praying as things come to your mind or attention to pray about--as you walk or drive or do other things alone.

What we are saying here is seen in the song we all sing, “Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord.” “Take time to be holy, the world rushes on; Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.” If we don't take this time, we won't do much praying, we won't spend much time with God, and we won't pray for many of the things and people we ought to be praying for.

3. Two Things You will Need to Do.

After you have decided just when would be

your best daily prayer times, here are two things you need to do.

1. Get a notebook and on separate sheets in it draw up different groups of people whom you know for whom you should pray. Of course, there will be your family members (parents, brothers, sisters, mate, children, and your married children's family members). Then have a sheet for each of the following groups: the sick, the terminally ill, the shut-ins, those who have recently lost loved ones, church activities now in progress or soon to be, your relatives, your mate's relatives, preachers, those preparing to be preachers, training programs, publishing efforts, overseas workers, neighbors, prospects, backsliders, widows, widowers, aged couples, sectarian acquaintances, local members, area congregations, congregations elsewhere, isolated members, enemies, rulers, world conditions, church conditions, and maybe others--the groups in your life. As you compile the names under each category, I am sure you will observe this fact: “Most of these I have not been praying for, and some of them I have never prayed for.” This is why such a notebook can prompt you to pray for more people and more cases.

2. If you have two prayer sessions daily (if this best fits your day), then I would suggest that in the morning you pray for the following: yourself, your family members, your activities for the day, any meetings or rallies or church activities in session, those who have recently lost loved ones, and those who are sick. Then for your other session that day select one or more groups from your notebook and pray for those in those groups.

Be sure to revise your listings from time to time as new people enter your life, as people themselves move into a group (like a woman becoming a widow over the loss of her husband), and as individuals pass away. Keep your notebook up to date.

I do think the above suggestions will make your prayer life a more rewarding experience, more people will be blessed because you have prayed for them, and you will probably be spending more time with God in prayer.

Years ago a preacher said in a sermon that two woodsmen were eating breakfast together. They had a big day of wood chopping before them. After

breakfast the one took time to sharpen his ax. The other said he didn't have time to sharpen his--he had to get going. At the end of the day, guess which had chopped the most wood. No, we do not lose time nor accomplishment by praying. Rather we gain and do much better. Prayer, then, is like taking time to sharpen your ax!

Won't you make some important decisions now about your future prayer life--decisions you ought to make, decisions that will help you do a better job of praying, decisions that God will be pleased with, decisions that will bless you with a better spiritual life and a greater spiritual accomplishment? God will help you, and you will be glad you did.

QUESTIONS

1. What are some questions you must answer properly if you are going to have a good prayer life?
2. What are some logical arguments for drawing up some plan or prayer schedule?
3. What can be said Biblically for having a prayer plan?
4. What are some categories of prayer that you should have?
5. In time should you pray for all the categories and the people in them?
6. How was sharpening one's ax before beginning a day of wood chopping compared to taking some time for prayer before beginning each day of life?

The Tragedy and Some Causes of Prayer Failure

The title suggests that there are prayer failures among God's people. With most Christians there is some prayer failure and in many cases a lot. Even the Bible indicates this.

When Paul was showing the universality of sin in Rom. 3, he included, "There is none that seeketh after God" (v. 11). Consider this statement in the light of Paul's other statements in that section: "There is none righteous, no, not one" (v. 10). What does that mean in this setting? There is none ABSOLUTELY righteous. Again, "There is none that understandeth" (v. 11). None of us understands AS WE OUGHT. "There is none that seeketh after God" (v. 11). None of us really seeks after God AS WE OUGHT. For sure all the above statements are true as regards the unconverted, but aren't they also true of us who are Christians? None of us is absolutely righteous; none of us understands as we ought, and none of us really seeks after God as we should. What a shame, but it is the truth. In Isaiah's day he lamented as follows: "There is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee" (Isa. 64:7). And to

some extent the same is still true today. Didn't Jesus have to teach His disciples to pray (Luke 11:1-13) even though they were Jews with their Old Testament that taught them to pray? This is why we are having this concentrated study on prayer--so we can do better in our prayer lives.

1. The Tragedy of Prayer Failure.

For one thing, we cheat ourselves out of many blessings that we could otherwise have. Jas. 4:2 says, "Ye have not because ye ask not." Preceding that statement James shows that people desire things and go to great lengths to obtain them, but he frankly says there are some things we will not obtain through human strivings--they must be asked for! When will we ever learn this? "Oh what peace we often forfeit! Oh what needless pain we bear!" Why? "All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer."

Hasn't the truth of Jas. 4:2 and the words of the above song ever come home to you at some time? There are things you wanted and worked for, and yet

they didn't come--because you did not pray for them. That's what the Bible says! When we stop to think about it, no doubt we have all robbed ourselves of many great and wonderful and needed things simply because we have not really made them matters of earnest, seeking prayer.

We can't bring back lost blessings and lost opportunities of the past--they are gone forever--but we can make an important change in the matter of prayer so we do not continue such losses. Let me illustrate. In a remote part of your basement you happen onto a faucet that is running a small stream of water because it won't completely shut off. Obviously you have been paying a higher water bill because of this faulty faucet. You can't help what has already happened, but you can get it fixed so you won't continue to pay an inflated water bill. Shouldn't we do the same about blessings we have been losing through prayer failure?

But we also sin against others when we fail to pray for them. They don't receive what they would if we prayed for them as we should. Think of the lost people you have not been praying for, the Christians you haven't, the congregations you haven't, the preachers you haven't, and others you haven't. God has made promises to answer our prayers for them. But if we haven't been praying for them, they haven't been receiving the blessings they would because we have not asked for them.

If we don't realize that prayerlessness for others is actually a sin, let us consider the language in I Sam. 12. In that chapter Samuel pointed out the people's sin in asking for a king. He said to the people, "Is it not wheat harvest today? (Palestine gets no rain during wheat harvest--D.H.) I will call unto the Lord, and he shall send thunder and rain; that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king" (v. 17). That chapter goes on to say, "So Samuel called unto the Lord; and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not; for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king" (v. 18,19). Now hear Samuel's exact words in v. 23: "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for

you."

In failing to spend enough time in prayer, we also rob God of praise that rightfully belongs to Him, of fellowship-time with Him, and of His getting to do things for us that He would delight to do. "Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name" (Psa. 29:2). We do this when we pray. "In all thy ways acknowledge him" (Prov. 3:6). Prayer is an acknowledgement of God. John 4:23 says God seeks us to worship Him. When we don't pray, we don't worship Him. "The prayer of the upright is His delight" (Prov. 15:8). So in our prayer failures, we actually rob our good Father of the time and acknowledgement and glory that are due to Him.

2. Some Common Causes of Prayer Failure.

Full schedules and not including prayer time in them leave many without much of a prayer life. Though we today have many labor-saving devices (cars to get there quickly, automatic washers and dryers and dishwashers, milking machines, corn pickers, etc.), most people seem to have little time left to do things they ought to do (like praying). Prayer is hurried through in a matter of minutes to rush out the door to do what are treated as the necessary things to do. Yes, everybody's busy, but we must take time to pray. "Take time to be holy--speak oft with thy Lord. Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone. Take time to be holy--the world rushes on." Unless we reserve time and schedule time for prayer (like Daniel did in Dan. 6:10 and the Psalmist did in Psa. 55:17), we will know nothing but prayer failure--failing to pray like we should.

Another cause is living in a time when real prayer doesn't seem to be all that important. A little prayer--yes, but much prayer--no. You can be a Christian and in stride with the church of today and not pray much--this is the prevailing practice and idea. But this is dangerous. This is not the way it is taught in the New Testament. Oh, how we need to change this and rise above this! Friend, in the matter of prayer (as well as other spiritual matters) we need to work out our spiritual life with more fear and trembling (see Phil. 2:12).

Not thinking that prayerlessness is actually a sin also contributes to prayer failure. But

prayerlessness is a sin. Sin is transgressing God's law or will, and prayer is a command: "Ask" (Matt. 7:7) is in the imperative mood. So is "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17). Sins of omission are just as much sin as sins of commission. Let us face our prayerlessness, then, as a sin that is displeasing to God.

Another reason we do not pray about enough things is we tend to trust ourselves in too many ways instead of trusting God. Prov. 3:5 says we should trust in God with all our hearts and not lean to our own understanding. Joshua was a great man and a great leader, but he followed his own judgement concerning the Gibeonites and their made-up story instead of consulting the Lord about them (see Josh. 9:3-10). Peter was too confident of himself and did not watch and pray as Jesus told him to do (Matt. 26:41). The rich have money, and they tend to trust in it rather than in God who has enabled them to have it. Listen what Paul told Timothy to tell them: "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in the uncertain riched, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (I Tim. 6:17). We need God's help in all things, and we can have it if we pray for it. But if we feel self-sufficient, we will not lean on His everlasting arms. The arm of flesh will fail us--we dare not trust our own! But don't we too much? This is prayer failure--failure to pray when we should.

Some people don't pray because they know they have some sin in their lives that is a barrier between them and God. When Adam sinned, where was he when God came down in the cool of the day? He was hiding--he didn't want to talk with God. We need to realize that sin wars against the soul (I Pet. 2:11). Notice how sin hinders praying: "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (I John 3:20-22).

Not being as spiritually minded as we should

be affects people's prayer efforts. Paul was urging the spirituality we need when he wrote, "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3). If we are not as spiritually minded as we ought to be, naturally we will not pray as we ought to pray.

Normal human beings do not want to fail in school, do not want to fail and get fired from their job, do not want their team to be a losing team, do not want to fail in business, do not want to fail in marriage, and in many other ways. Well, we shouldn't want to fail in the all important matter of prayer either. And we don't need to, for it is in the power of each one of us to walk and talk with God. Let us then see that we do not fail in prayer but abound in it. Make the change, and you will see a great difference in yourself--and you will like it, and so will God.

QUESTIONS

1. List some Scriptures that indicate there are some prayer failures among God's people.
2. Show that we cheat ourselves out of blessings we would receive if we prayed.
3. What lesson was taught by a leaking faucet?
4. Why do our prayer failures rob others of blessings?
5. What Old Testament priest realized it would acutally be sin if he ceased to pray for others?
6. What must busy people do if they are to have time for prayer?
7. Is the importance of prayer emphasized or deemphasized today?
8. Do most church people who are not living a real life of prayer think of themselves as sinning thereby?
9. How can being too self-reliant affect our prayer lives?
10. Why should it be natural for us not to want to be prayer failures?

Just What is Prayer?

There is much teaching in the Bible on the subject of prayer just as there are numerous instances of prayer recorded in the Bible. In this series of studies about prayer we have considered much of this material. As we come now to the final study (in Part One) it is our purpose to tie all of this together and bring each of us to the point of decision to improve our prayer lives in needed ways.

By our asking and discussing, "Just What is Prayer?" it is to cause us to realize as never before what prayer really is, believing that a better realization of what prayer is will encourage us toward a greater prayer life.

Before considering what prayer is, let us note what prayer is not. Prayer is not something customarily done at church but not elsewhere. Prayer is not something that leaders do in our place. Prayer is not something we do simply because we have been called on to pray. Prayer is not something we do only when in company with others who pray. Prayer is not something ritualistic and formal. And prayer is not oratory. My father used to tell of when a school teacher was called on to dismiss a service. He backed out, remarking, "I'm not good at oratory."

1. The Meaning of the Word "Prayer" is Asking.

Prayer is more than just saying words, even right words. Prayer is the heart asking God for specific things. An example: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God" (Jas. 1:5). It is like a child asking a parent for bread or fish or an egg (Luke 11:11,12).

The angel told Zacharias, "Thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son" (Luke 1:13). Oh, how many times he had asked God for a son, and now after so many, many years his petition is to be granted.

Secular uses of the word "pray" in the Bible (when a person is asking something of another human being) show that "pray" means "ask". Some examples: The Ethiopian said to Philip, "I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other

man?" (Acts 8:34). He was "asking" Philip. Again, listen to two men in Luke 14 as they asked to be excused from attending the special supper: "The first said, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused" (vs. 18,19).

Really, then, if we don't really ask, we have not really prayed.

2. Prayer is Taking Our Burdens to the Lord.

God knows we are human and have burdens too heavy to bear. The Father who invites us to pray is wonderfully described in our behalf in Psa. 103:13,14: "Life as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him, for he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." Jas. 5:13 shows that God wants to enter into our lives whether it is our joys or our sorrows, for that verse says, "Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms." And I Pet. 5:7 says, "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you."

At times we all have afflictions, burdens, and problems bigger than we are. How well several of our songs state it: "Where could I go but to the Lord?," "I cannot bear these burdens alone," so "I must tell Jesus...Jesus can help me--Jesus alone." Did you notice the contrast ("I cannot...Jesus can")? Two more songs: "Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there" and "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

In our earthly, human anxieties Phil. 4:6,7 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be known unto God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

So in our day of adversity when in our weakness we would faint (Prov. 24:10), Jesus gave instruction "that men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1).

3. Prayer is Depending on God for All Our Needs.

In the days of Gideon the Midianites and the Amalekites were a great burden to Israel: "They destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come into Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number; and they entered into the land to destroy it. And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the Lord" (Judg. 6:4-6). Later in that chapter when God called Gideon to military leadership to go against this great horde, Gideon felt so incapable. In the next chapter when he had assembled a modest sized army, "the Lord said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me" (Judg. 7:2). So in two consecutive phases God reduced his army from 32,000 down to only 300. Gideon didn't know how, but God said to him, "By the three hundred...will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand" (Judg. 7:7), and He did, and Gideon and his men knew they had not depended on the Lord in vain.

The young king Abijah of Judah with an army of 400,000 depended on the Lord when he met the veteran Jeroboam of Israel with an army of 800,000 (II Chron. 13:13,14), and God regarded that trust (v. 15,16).

We may have knowledge, we may have money, and we may have attained a measure of righteousness, but we are to trust God and not ourselves nor what we have. Timothy was to "charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (I Tim. 6:17). We are told in Prov. 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." We trust in the Lord instead in ourselves when we pray about matters rather than leaving the Lord out and going it on our own. Our song says, "The arm of flesh will fail you--you dare not trust your own."

Prov. 3:6 says, "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." We acknowledge

God when we pray--at mealtimes, at the beginning of our day, the beginning of a job, at bedtime, at the start of a trip, concerning decisions, etc.

4. Prayer is Thanking God for Blessings Received.

One year our garden hadn't done so well, and when we were at some friends' house one evening they loaded us with tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet corn, muskmelons, watermelons, and I don't remember what all out of their abundant garden, and God similarly lavishes His blessings on us--only He does so daily: "Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits" (Psa. 68:19). Upon the tither He opens the windows of heaven and pours out blessings so that we do not have room enough for all them (Mal. 3:10).

When we pray concerning matters on our hearts, we are told to remember the blessings God has already given us: "In everything by prayer and supplication WITH THANKSGIVING let your requests be known unto God" (Phil. 4:6). We are taught to "continue in prayer and watch in the same WITH THANKSGIVING" (Col. 4:2). When we say thanks, it is not paying for blessings received like we do when we pay C.O.D. charges for goods being delivered. No, thanksgiving is acknowledging the Source of our blessings--God (Jas. 1:17).

I was just beginning to teach a man in his 70's who had recently lost his wife to death. He had not been in church since he was 4 years of age, so I began to tell him some things about God. Among them I told him God was full of goodness and, like us, appreciated being thanked. From that teaching session my family stopped at a Target store. Since it was raining, I let Mrs. Hunt and our son Richard out at the door of the store before parking the car out in the parking lot. As I approached the store's entrance, out came two men marking down the price of some evergreens in front of the store from \$9.97 to \$2.97 (end of the season). At Midwestern School we had already removed some old evergreens that had outgrown their beauty in order to relandscape. Immediately I took thirty-two evergreens (all that were good) for the project. \$94.14 for what would have cost \$319.04 just a few minutes before. I had just praised God's goodness to an unsaved man, and look at what a blessing He immediately gave!

5. Prayer is a Ministry in Behalf of Others.

We live in a world of people: our immediate family members, our relatives, our neighbors, our work associates, the people with whom we do business, our fellow-Christians, spiritual leaders, etc. Oh, what an array of people we all know! Do they have needs? What are their spiritual conditions? Do we love them and want God's best for them? Are some of them living at distances from us so that we see them only occasionally?

Taking all the above into consideration we need to devise a prayer life so that we bring all of them and their needs before the throne of grace with some regularity. This is intercessory prayer, and the regularity of its performance is a ministry (a service we render before God in their behalf).

Paul said "intercessions" are to "be made for all men" (1 Tim. 2:1). He said, "Praying always...for all saints" (Eph. 6:18). When Jesus knew Peter faced a time of serious temptation, He told him, "I have prayed for thee" (Luke 22:32). In Acts, when Peter was in jail and about to be brought out to the people, "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12:5).

Consecrating ourselves to earnest, regular praying for others is truly the basis of a real prayer life. If you want one of the secrets to having a fulfilling prayer life, this is one of the greatest.

when I call unto him." Psa. 145:18 notes that "the Lord is nigh to all them that call upon him."

About the time I left home at 20 to go to Bible college, I had a pet cat, Tommy. He would often follow me to the barn or to the chicken house. If I sat down, he joined me. He was a beautiful solid steel-gray cat. One day he was sitting down looking off into the distance--just around the corner from me. He didn't know I was close by. I mused, "If he knew I was here, he would come right where I am." And I thought, "The more we realize the presence of God, the more we will be minded to pray." And that's true. How then we need to think on God, to know He is near, and to call on Him!

At the end of these studies it would be appropriate for each of us to think of ways we can improve our prayer lives, dedicate ourselves to those improving changes, and then conscientiously carry them out. As a Christian meaningfully sings, "I am Thine, O Lord; I have heard Thy voice, And it told Thy love to me, But I long to rise in the arms of faith and be closer drawn to Thee. Oh, the pure delight of a single hour That before Thy throne I spend! When I kneel in prayer, and with Thee, my God, I commune as friend with Friend. Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer, blessed Lord, To the cross where Thou hast died; draw me nearer, nearer, nearer, blessed Lord, To Thy precious, bleeding side." Prayer will have an important part in this.

6. Prayer is Actually Spending Time with God.

When we pray, we are talking to God. We are taking time for Him. Those who believe in God realize the importance of spending time with Him. Those who love God want to spend time with Him. Those who are expecting to be in Heaven with Him eternally find it desirable and natural to enjoy the wonderful privilege of prayer beforehand.

In prayer we call on God. In the days of Enoch, Seth's son, Gen. 4:26 says, "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord." From the time of Adam and Eve's sin and through the generation of their children, it would seem from this verse that people approached God only with their offerings offered silently. Oh, how much better to be allowed to speak to God! Psa. 4:3 says, "The Lord will hear

QUESTIONS

1. List 2 things prayer is not.
2. What does the word "pray" mean?
3. To pray, then, we must _____ God for things.
4. What does God want us to do about burdens we cannot handle?
5. Prayer is actually an act of _____ on God.
6. Prayer also includes _____ for blessings already received.
7. To live a real life of prayer we must also pray in behalf of _____.
8. Prayer is spending _____ with God.