

# **Prayer and the Will of God**

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# **Prayer and the Will of God**

by Jonathan Cooper

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# **Prayer and the Will of God**



# Introduction

CHRISTIANS SPEND a lot of time talking about prayer. We ask other people to pray for us; we listen to prayer requests in church; we pray for healing; and we talk about the power of prayer. However, one thing that we don't do very often is actually *study* prayer. We may spend a lot of time engaging in prayer, but that's not the same thing as understanding what the Bible teaches. Do our prayers actually honor God? Do we understand what sort of prayer requests God will answer – and what requests He refuses? How much do we really know about prayer? Have we ever really stopped to think about it?

What I'd like to do is take this opportunity to look at what the Bible has to say about prayer. The Word of God contains a great many prayer requests. What sort of things did people pray for – and how do their prayer requests compare to the sort of things we pray about today? What requests did the Lord listen to and grant, and what requests did He reject? I think if we spent a little bit of time studying the Bible, we might get a very different picture of prayer than what we originally thought.

Finally, I'd like to look at a few key principles of prayer that tend to get overlooked. In our self-centered culture it's easy to forget that life is not about us. We are living sacrifices, dedicated to serving the Lord however He sees fit. God is passionate about His glory – and that has some important ramifications.

I hope that you find this study to be edifying.

Jonathan Cooper  
9/18/2015



# The Lord's Prayer

HERE IS SOMETHING to think about: how did Christ teach His disciples to pray? This is a good place to start our study in prayer, because the answer to that question should give us insight as to what sort of prayers God wants us to be praying and what things God wants us to focus on. If we are going to be praying at all (and we *definitely* should be), we need to be doing things God's way.

According to the Bible, there came a day when the disciples approached Christ and asked Him to teach them to pray:

**Luke 11:1:** “And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.”

That was a very wise request! We would do well to heed their example. The Lord has the answers, and He has given them to us in His Word; we should seek them out so that we might better honor Him.

In response to this question Jesus taught them what has come to be called the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is repeated several times in the gospels, and it is probably one of the most famous prayers in the Bible. The most familiar version of this prayer can be found in the book of Matthew. Rather than quoting the whole thing at once, I'd like to break it apart into pieces and talk about each section. I think there are some important things that we can learn from this amazing prayer.

# The Glory and Will of God

This is how the prayer starts:

**Matthew 6:9:** “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.”

The very first thing that this prayer does is give glory to God. It doesn't start out by asking anything, and it doesn't have a self-centered focus. This prayer is directed to God and it gives Him glory and honor. The first thing it is concerned about is the glory of God.

This is a key point – in fact, it will be foundation for our entire study. You see, everything exists for the purpose of glorifying God. Man is not the center of creation. We were actually created for God:

**Revelation 4:11:** “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

All things were created for God – and the Lord even told us why He created all things. It was so that He might be glorified. This is getting into rather deep territory, but all of creation glorifies God by revealing His hidden attributes. This is how Paul put it in the book of Romans:

**Romans 9:22:** “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had

afore prepared unto glory,”

You see, before God created the world He had certain aspects of His character that simply could not be revealed. God could never show mercy to anyone because no one had ever wronged Him. God could never grant forgiveness because no one had ever sinned. God could never judge the wicked or show His divine justice because there were no wicked. God possessed all these character qualities – mercy, wrath, forgiveness, grace – but there was no way to reveal them. They were hidden.

That is why God created the world – to reveal aspects of His character that had been hidden for all the ages of eternity. Through creation God glorifies Himself by revealing who He is. God uses everyone in this world (including both the righteous and the unrighteous) to demonstrate His character and His divine attributes. The world and everything in it was created to give glory to God.

The Lord is also quite clear about our own purpose. We are to glorify God in all things:

**1 Corinthians 10:31:** “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”

The Bible is not the story of God saving mankind from sin; it is the story of God glorifying Himself through creation. In other words, the Bible is about *God*, not about man – and our prayers should likewise focus on the glory of God. The Lord's prayer starts out by seeking to glorify God, because that is *everything*. That is why we were created in the first place, and that is our entire purpose in life. If our prayers are not seeking to glorify God then they are a waste of time.

One of the truths we will learn in this study is that when God answers prayer, it is for His glory and it is to accomplish His will. If you want to have one of your prayers answered then those two things should be at the heart of your prayer. But I am getting

ahead of myself.

This focus on the glory and will of God is continued in the next verse:

**Matthew 6:10:** “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

After glorifying the name of God, this prayer seeks the will of God. This prayer isn't about us trying to accomplish our own will; it is instead about us seeking God's will. Do you see what a striking difference that is? This prayer wants to see God honored in this world, and it wants to see God's will carried out in our lives.

In other words, this isn't a self-centered prayer. This prayer wants to see the kingdom of God advanced and wants to see the people of this world submit themselves to the reign of Christ. Those are the *very first things* on this person's mind, and that is where this prayer starts. Can we say the same thing about our own prayers?

This has some important implications. You see, since this person is focused on God's kingdom and God's will, that means that *all the things this prayer asks for are meant to accomplish those goals*. This person isn't praying for his own benefit; instead he is seeking to advance God's kingdom and glorify God's name. This person is praying from the perspective of one of God's servants, who only seeks to advance God's interests in this world.

Now, when *we* pray, we often pray from our own perspective. We have our own will and our own list of things that we would like to see accomplished, and we pray so that *our* will might be done. We want our own kingdom advanced, and we want to maximize our own happiness and comfort. But *that's not how Christ taught us to pray*. He wants our prayers to be centered on *His* kingdom, *His* glory, and *His* interests. Stop and think about that for a minute. Are the things that we are praying for about God, or are they about us?



# Our Daily Bread

Now, this doesn't mean that we can't mention our own needs. The next few verses address that very topic:

**Matthew 6:11:** "Give us this day our daily bread."

The person who is praying this prayer has needs, so what does he do? He goes to God in order to get them fulfilled. That is the right thing to do – after all, Jesus Himself said that we should cast all our cares upon Him, for He cares for us. But notice what this person asks for. He doesn't ask for wealth; all he seeks is enough to get by for that *one* day. He's not worried about tomorrow at all; his only concern is surviving the challenges of the day. He asks for his *daily* bread – the food that he needs right now to keep from starving.

This is a very Biblical request. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ told us to not worry about tomorrow, for God knows what sort of things we need:

**Matthew 6:31:** "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil

thereof.”

This is one of the most overlooked and ignored passages in the entire Bible. Jesus is saying that God knows that you have needs. He knows that you need food to keep from starving to death. God is aware of the problems in your life; after all, He knows all things. Therefore, since God loves us and cares about us, He wants us to trust Him to provide for us. Our time shouldn't be spent worrying about those kind of things; instead it should be spent seeking the things that pertain to the kingdom of God. All we need to worry about is today and the challenges that it brings; God will handle tomorrow. The Lord wants us to trust Him with our needs while we go about doing the Father's business.

Instead of doing that, though, we tend to obsess over things that may or may not ever happen. We spend our life fraught with worry, ignoring the fact that God loves us and has promised to provide for us. God wants us to be concerned with *today*, not with tomorrow. After all, tomorrow is in God's hands.

This prayer is focused on the needs of the moment – not on problems that may or may not ever happen, and not on something that will happen ten years from now. All this prayer wants is the grace and resources needed to get through *today*. This isn't a greedy prayer. The person who is praying this wants to advance the kingdom of God, and in order to do that he needs the resources to survive that day. So that is what he asks of God.

## Overcoming Sin

But this prayer addresses more than just the person's physical needs. It addresses his spiritual needs as well:

**Matthew 6:12:** “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

We need more than just our daily bread; we need forgiveness. Sin is still a reality in our lives, and we often do things that are not right in the sight of God. This prayer does not simply brush those things under a rug; instead it goes to God and asks for forgiveness for all the evil things the person has done. This prayer is from someone who wants to be right with God. The person who prays this is seeking to obey God's commands and live for the Lord, and where he has failed he seeks God's forgiveness and grace. (How often do we pray about our own sins? Do we seek forgiveness on a daily basis, as this prayer does?)

At the same time, this prayer freely forgives others. This prayer reflects the reality that there are other people who have sinned as well, and it offers forgiveness to them. This prayer doesn't hold grudges, or seek to hurt other people, or refuse to forgive. It does not seek forgiveness for its own sins while denying forgiveness to others. This prayer is not out for revenge; instead it seeks mercy.

This prayer is not quite done, though. Not only does it seek forgiveness for sin, but it also seeks to be protected from evil:

**Matthew 6:13a:** “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: ...”

Forgiveness for sin is not enough; it would be far better to not be tempted in the first place. It is good to overcome evil, but it is better to not be confronted with evil to begin with. As you can see, this prayer asks God to keep us from situations where we might be tempted to sin. Some people seek these situations out, believing that the more they are tempted the stronger they will become; as you can see, Jesus strongly disagrees with that approach. Jesus commands us to pray so that we might be kept far away from temptation. Being tempted is a *bad* thing. It's not something we should seek out, and it is something we should

actively avoid.

Do you see the heart of this prayer? This prayer is about holiness. The person who is praying this wants to be kept far from evil. He doesn't want evil to rule over him and he doesn't want to engage in sin. He wants to lead a righteous, holy, honorable life.

Stop and think for a moment about all the ground that this prayer has covered. It has sought to glorify God; it seeks the advancement of God's kingdom; it asks only for what is necessary to get through today's problems; it seeks forgiveness for sin; it forgives those who have done wrong; and it pursues holiness by asking to be kept from temptation and evil. In other words, this prayer is all about honoring God, doing God's will, and living a holy life. The focus of this prayer is on *God*, not on ourselves.

## Thine Is The Kingdom

As if all that were not enough, look at how the prayer closes:

**Matthew 6:13b:** "... For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

This prayer is not about us! (This is a point that needs to be emphasized, as it is so easy to fall into the trap of praying extremely self-centered prayers.) This prayer is not trying to advance personal goals, and it's not seeking personal wealth; instead it seeks God's kingdom. There is absolutely nothing in this prayer that says "I want to be rich and famous and have a fabulous life". It's all about God.

Next, this prayer says that all power belongs to God. The person who is praying this does not see himself as being in charge; instead he views himself as a humble servant to the Master. This prayer is all about serving God and advancing His

interests in this planet. It makes it very clear that God is in charge and we are not.

Finally, this prayer says that all the glory belongs to God. Now, in our day *we* want to be the ones who are glorified. We want people to like us, to notice the things that we do, and to speak highly of us. We want to be famous and important (our culture loves celebrities, after all). But this prayer isn't like that. This prayer devotes all of the glory to God. It seeks to glorify God, not ourselves. The person praying this is passionate about glorifying God – it's how the prayer started and it's how the prayer ends. There is nothing in here about personal glorification; instead it's all about the Lord.

This is really quite a prayer, isn't it? It's very different from the sort of prayers that are so common in our own day. It really should give us something to pause and think about. Are the prayers that we pray anything like this at all?

## **The Value Of Short Prayers**

There's one more thing about this prayer that I'd like to mention. As you may have noticed, it's actually pretty short. This is not an accident; it is a feature.

You see, back in Bible times the Pharisees liked to pray very long, drawn-out prayers. They did this to prove to everyone how spiritual they were. They thought that long prayers were super-spiritual and super-holy, and were a sign of their innate greatness. Therefore, they would pray long prayers in order to show off what great people they were.

Now, doesn't that sound familiar? Don't we tend to believe that long prayers are more spiritual than short prayers? Don't we think that if we are flowery and elegant and drawn-out in our prayers, that God will be more honored by them and will bless us in return? Isn't it universally agreed that long fancy prayers are far

more holy than little short prayers? If we had to be honest with ourselves we would have to admit that the modern Christian thinks exactly like the ancient Pharisees did.

It is important to realize that God *hated* what the Pharisees were doing. Christ condemned this whole way of thinking on three separate occasions:

**Matthew 23:14:** "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation."

**Mark 12:40:** "Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation."

**Luke 20:47:** "Which devour widows' houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation."

So what did Christ say about this? Was He happy with what the Pharisees were doing? Was He pleased that they were praying extra long prayers in order to make a show of how great they were? *Absolutely not!* In fact, He said that this was one of the reasons why they would receive *greater damnation*. They were going to be judged by God for what they were doing, because their heart was far from God.

If we are praying in order to impress God with our own greatness then we have gone very far astray. We should be praying to *honor God*, not to honor ourselves! Our prayers should be God-centered and God-focused. Our audience is *the Lord*, not the people around us.

As you can see, Christ does not have a problem with short prayers. In fact, pretty much every single prayer in the entire Bible is actually quite short (which is something we'll discover in

the course of this study). The Lord's Prayer is extremely short, and Christ intended for it to be a model of how we pray. *This is not an accident.*

Using prayer as a tool to impress other people is a very great evil. That is *not* what prayer is about. Being extra long-winded and drawn-out in your prayers is not going to win you any points with God. The Lord does *not* like that sort of thing.

This is what the book of Ecclesiastes has to say about prayer:

**Ecclesiastes 5:2:** “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.”

The point of this verse is quite simple. When you pray you are talking to God Himself – the Almighty Father who has all knowledge and all power, and who created the Universe by speaking it into existence. *That is a serious thing to be doing.* Therefore, when you pray, watch what you say and speak with care. Take your prayers seriously, because God is not to be trifled with. The Lord would vastly prefer a short, sincere prayer over a long, drawn-out prayer that only serves to show others how “great” you are.





# Prayer Styles

MODERN CHRISTIANS seem to have only one prayer style: they pray with their heads bowed and their eyes closed. There are a few exceptions, but this is overwhelmingly the most common method of prayer in the United States. Since it's so common, it is easy to think that this is how all believers have prayed throughout the ages – but that is not the case. If we examine the Bible we will see that there are actually several different methods of prayer, and “heads bowed and eyes closed” is *not* the most common method.

## With Bowed Head

Since the most common method of prayer in modern times is to pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed, let's take a look at that first. It is true that you can find this style of prayer in the Bible. For example, when Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac, the servant bowed his head and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving when he met Rachel:

**Genesis 24:48:** “And I bowed down my head, and worshipped the Lord, and blessed the Lord God of my master Abraham, which had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter unto his son.”

This style of prayer is extremely rare, though. Usually people only did this when God Himself talked to them or when the Lord performed some sort of mighty miracle. It was very rare

to do this while praying. For example, when Solomon dedicated the temple, fire came down and consumed the offerings. This amazing miracle from God prompted the Israelites to bow their heads and worship God:

**2 Chronicles 7:3:** “And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the Lord, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.”

It was common for people to bow their heads in worship. For example, the Israelites bowed their heads and worshiped when Moses told them that the Lord was going to deliver them from slavery:

**Exodus 4:31:** “And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.”

In the days of Hezekiah, people worshiped the Lord with bowed heads:

**2 Chronicles 29:30:** “Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped.”

We also see people worshipping the Lord with bowed heads in the days of Ezra:

**Nehemiah 8:6:** “And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

As you can see, there are instances in the Bible when people bowed their heads, but this was usually done in *worship*, not in prayer. People worshiped the Lord with bowed heads – but they prayed in a very different manner.

## Standing With Hands Spread

One common method of prayer was to pray while standing, with your hands spread. Although this seems very strange to us today, it was a normal thing to do in Bible times. For example, it is how Solomon prayed when he dedicated the temple that he had built:

**1 Kings 8:22:** “And Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven:”

One way that we know that this was a very common method of prayer is because God actually refers to it. In the book of Isaiah, God condemns the Israelites for all their sins and wickedness and rebellion. He tells then that He will no longer hear their prayers, which they are making with their hands spread:

**Isaiah 1:15:** “And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when

ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.”

God is not condemning their method of prayer; instead He is condemning them for continuing to ask God for favors while living such wicked lives. The reason we know God wasn't offended by this style of prayer is because this style is actually *commanded* in the New Testament:

**1 Timothy 2:8:** “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

How did Paul expect Christians to be praying? With hands lifted up. I realize that's not how we pray, but it's evidently how prayer was done in the time of the apostles.

## Kneeling With Hands Spread

Sometimes people stood and prayed, and other times they knelt and prayed. However, instead of praying with their hands clasped together (which is how we pray today), they actually had their hands spread wide while kneeling. Solomon prayed that way:

**1 Kings 8:54:** “And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven.”

Ezra the priest also prayed in that manner:

Ezra 9:5: “And 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,”

As you can see, praying with hands spread was quite common. Today we would never do that; we tend to pray with our hands folded together – and we assume that's how it has always been done. But as you can see, that is not the case.

## Kneeling

People also prayed while kneeling. Jesus prayed that way when He was in the Garden of Gethsemane:

**Luke 22:40:** “And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation.

41 And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed,

42 Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”

In these examples it's impossible to know whether the hands were spread or folded; the passage doesn't say. All we know is that the person was kneeling before God.

Christ is not the only one who prayed this way; the apostles did as well. Peter knelt to pray before raising the woman Tabitha from the dead:

**Acts 9:40:** “But Peter put them all forth, and

kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.”

The apostle Paul prayed this way several times when he was on his way to Jerusalem:

**Acts 20:36:** “And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all.”

**Acts 21:5:** “And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed.”

So, as you can see, people in the Bible prayed while standing and they also prayed while kneeling. But that's not all! There are still a few more Biblical prayer styles left to cover.

## **Fasting and Mourning**

There are some occasions in the Bible when men were so overwhelmed that they mourned, fasted, and prayed. This was not just a simple, quick prayer; this was a prayer that was accompanied by a great deal of grief and passion.

When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the people of that city were in dire straits, he wept, mourned, fasted, and then prayed:

**Nehemiah 1:4:** “And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and

prayed before the God of heaven,”

Likewise, when the prophet Daniel learned that God had promised to only exile Israel for 70 years, he fasted, mourned, and prayed that God would keep His promise:

**Daniel 9:3:** “And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:”

These were very earnest prayers that sprang from a deep sense of mourning and a heartfelt burden for other people. These people really cared, and they made their love for their nation evident in the amount of grief they displayed. It wasn't enough to just pray; they also fasted and mourned. (We will talk more about both of these prayers later in our study.)

## Silent Prayer

When we pray today we usually offer silent prayers. This type of prayer can be found in the Bible, but it's quite rare. When Hannah prayed that the Lord would give her a son, she prayed silently:

**1 Samuel 1:13:** “Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken.”

The reason we know this must have been rare is because when Eli saw her praying, he thought she was drunk. He was evidently not used to seeing people pray in this manner. Her behavior was so strange to him that he thought she was a

drunkard. However, the Lord heard Hannah's earnest prayer and gave her what she sought (which is something we will discuss later in this study).

## Prostrate On The Ground

Sometimes people prayed while lying prostrate on the ground. Christ prayed this way in the Garden of Gethsemane:

**Matthew 26:38:** “Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.

39 And 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.”

When Jesus prayed this prayer He was feeling extreme sorrow and stress. He fell down to the ground and prayed with such passion that He sweat great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). He was filled with extreme sorrow – but as we know, His prayer was not granted. Instead of taking this suffering away from Jesus, God strengthened Him so that He could carry out the redemption of mankind.

## Eyes Cast Down

When Solomon dedicated the temple, he looked up to Heaven and prayed. However, there is a different prayer in the Bible that was prayed by someone who was so humble that they



refused to look up at all. Instead they prayed with their eyes cast down in humility and repentance:

**Luke 18:11:** “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.”

The Pharisee prayed with great pride and boasted about what a wonderful person he was; the publican, though, humbled himself before God and pleaded for forgiveness. That is why the publican went home forgiven and the Pharisee did not. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

## Praying Toward The Temple

One of the most common styles of prayer in the Old Testament was praying toward the temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon mentioned this several times in his prayer of dedication for the temple:

**1 Kings 8:42:** “(For they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm;) when he shall come and pray toward this house;

43 Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to

thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel; and that they may know that this house, which I have builded, is called by thy name."

**1 Kings 8:44:** "If thy people go out to battle against their enemy, whithersoever thou shalt send them, and shall pray unto the Lord toward the city which thou hast chosen, and toward the house that I have built for thy name:"

The reason for this style of prayer is found in verse 43. When people prayed toward the temple and the Lord granted that prayer, that brought glory to the Lord by showing that the temple was God's building. Under the Mosaic Law, the temple was the place where men were supposed to gather and worship the Lord with their sacrifices and burnt offerings. Answering prayers that were prayed toward that building would show that the temple really did belong to the Lord.

The psalmist mentioned this looking toward the temple:

**Psalm 5:7:** "But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple."

When Jonah was in the belly of the great fish, he prayed toward the temple:

**Jonah 2:4:** "Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple."

Even after the temple was destroyed and the Jews were exiled to Babylon, people still prayed toward the temple. Daniel did it before he was cast into the lion's den:

**Daniel 6:10:** “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.”

So why don't we pray this way anymore? Well, it's true that there is no longer a temple in Jerusalem, but there's more to it than that. As we saw in the case of Daniel, he continued praying toward the temple even after the temple was gone. The reason we no longer pray this way is the same reason why we have stopped offering sacrifices: the death and resurrection of Christ changed everything. You see, before the death of Christ, the Lord manifested His presence in a building in Jerusalem. Today, though, the Holy Spirit dwells within us, which means that our bodies are the temple of the Lord. We no longer need to go to Jerusalem to worship God. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman, we now worship the Father in spirit and in truth:

**John 4:20:** “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.

21 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

22 Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.

23 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

This style of prayer is simply no longer necessary. God is no longer in a building in Jerusalem; He now dwells within us. The Lord wants us to worship Him from the heart, wherever we might be. Before He made His name known through the temple; now God works through us to accomplish His will. If we want to bring glory to God then we should walk in His ways, spread the gospel, and worship Him in spirit and in truth. Praying toward Jerusalem will not accomplish anything. Christ really did change everything.

# The Prayers of the New Testament

IN MODERN TIMES it is common for Christians to pray for one another and to ask each other for prayer requests. This practice is quite Biblical and has a long history. There are numerous people in the Bible who prayed for one another, and who asked others to pray for them as well.

However, one thing that *has* changed is the nature of our prayer requests. What we pray for today, and what people prayed for in the Bible, are two very different things. Biblical prayers tended to be focused on the spiritual well-being of the churches, and on asking God for opportunities to share the gospel. Unfortunately, modern prayers tend to be a great deal more self-centered. The apostles were about the Father's business – but I fear that our primary concern is with ourselves and our own well-being.

As we begin our study I'd like to take a quick look at the different things that people prayed about in the New Testament. There are quite a few prayers mentioned throughout the letters to the churches, and these prayers should not simply be ignored or passed over. If we study these prayers we will get a glimpse at the sort of things that were on the mind of the early church. Some of the things that they prayed for are still matters of prayer today – but there are other things that we *should* still be praying for, but which have fallen by the wayside.

# Deliverance

In the days of the early church, the apostles faced intense persecution. The gospel was never popular, and when the apostles went from city to city proclaiming the resurrection of Christ they encountered a great deal of opposition. But they did not face this opposition alone. When Peter was put in prison for preaching the gospel, the church prayed for him:

**Acts 12:5:** “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

By this point in history James had already been put to death. The church did not want to see Peter killed as well, so they prayed that God would set him free.

Peter is not the only apostle that the church prayed for. The apostle Paul also requested that prayers be made for him as well, so that he might be delivered from the enemies of the gospel:

**Romans 15:30:** “Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me;

31 That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints;

32 That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed.

Paul later made a very similar pray request to the Thessalonian church:

**2 Thessalonians 3:1:** “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you:  
2 And that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith.”

Considering all the persecution that Paul faced, it is not at all surprising that he would pray for deliverance. He was faced with enemies on every side who fought him and tried to stop him from preaching the gospel. So what did Paul do in response? He requested prayer, that he might be delivered from them so that he could do the work of God.

In our day we do not face the same opposition to the gospel that the apostles encountered (although times are changing rapidly). Still, there are many parts of the world where Christians face imprisonment and even death. We should remember these brothers and sisters in the faith and pray for them, for they are earnestly in need of our prayers and support. It is a very difficult thing to stand up for Jesus in a society that punishes that with death. Our fellow Christians around the world stand in need of our prayers, and we should not forget them.

## Dedication To God's Work

Another type of prayer that we find are prayers of dedication. When the Holy Spirit separated Saul (who later became Paul) and Barnabas for His work, the church prayed for them before sending them out on their mission:

**Acts 13:2:** “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I

have called them.

3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Likewise, when the apostles ordained elders, they prayed over the elders before they began their ministries:

**Acts 14:23:** “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

We still do the same thing today. It is common to pray for missionaries before they leave for the mission field, and to pray over newly-appointed elders and deacons. However, if you'll notice, the church did not just pray over these people; they fasted as well. In both of these cases they fasted and prayed. We don't do very much fasting anymore – but the early church certainly did.

Although this study is not about fasting, the concept of fasting is closely linked with prayer. Fasting is a time when we set aside the things of this world (such as food) and dedicate ourselves wholly to prayer. Instead of spending our time with the things of the flesh, we pursue the things of the Spirit. Fasting and prayer go together – in fact, fasting is really a dedicated time that is set aside for prayer.

If you have not studied fasting then I encourage you to pick up a good book on the topic and spend some time learning about it. Fasting is a very Biblical discipline. It may not be popular today, but God's Word has not changed.

## Visitation

In our time it is very uncommon to pray that God might



allow a person to come and visit us. After all, travel is fairly easy in this modern age of automobiles and air transportation. It used to take years to travel from one end of the globe to the other, but now that same trip can be made in a single day. Travel is much easier and cheaper than it used to be.

However, in Biblical times travel was difficult and highly dangerous. It was not an easy matter to travel from one country to the next. In fact, in the Bible there are numerous times when people prayed that one person might be able to go and visit someone else. This is actually one of the most common prayers that we find in the Bible.

For example, Paul prayed that he might be allowed to go to Rome and visit the people there:

**Romans 1:9:** “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers;

10 Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.”

Paul had an earnest and passionate desire to go and visit the people in Rome – but he couldn't just hop on a plane and fly there. So he prayed that God would give him the opportunity to visit them.

The apostle also prayed that he might be able to visit the Thessalonian church:

**1 Thessalonians 3:10:** “Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?”

He prayed that he might be able to see Timothy again:

**2 Timothy 1:3:** “I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day;

4 Greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy;”

He also expected that Philemon's prayers for him would open a door for the apostle to pay him a visit:

**Philemon 1:22:** “But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.”

As you can see, Paul placed a high priority on going to visit people. In fact, it was so important that he made it a matter of prayer. Why? Because *Paul wanted to be a blessing to these people*. He wanted to enrich their lives and minister to them. Since he could not easily go and see them in person, he wrote them letters – and he prayed that God would allow him to visit them.

## Spiritual Growth

One of the most common prayers of all was prayer for the spiritual health and well-being of the churches. Paul spent a great deal of time praying that God would bless the churches and help them grow in the faith. For example, he prayed that God would give the Ephesian church wisdom and understanding:

**Ephesians 1:16:** “Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;

17 That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the

Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him:  
18 The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,  
19 And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power,

He prayed that God would give the Philippian church love, discernment, and sincerity:

**Philippians 1:9:** “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;  
10 That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ.  
11 Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.”

Paul prayed that God would give the Colossian church wisdom and make them fruitful in the Lord's work:

**Colossians 1:9:** “For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;  
10 That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;”

Epaphras prayed that the Colossian church would

obediently and perfectly follow God's will:

**Colossians 4:12:** “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”

Paul prayed that the Thessalonian church would be blameless in their walk with the Lord:

**1 Thessalonians 5:23:** “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

He also prayed that the Thessalonian church would bring glory to God:

**2 Thessalonians 1:11:** “Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power:

12 That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

He prayed that Philemon's faith would transform his life:

**Philemon 1:4:** “I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,

5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;

6 That the communication of thy faith may

become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.”

Paul is not the only one who prayed these kind of prayers. The unknown author of the book of Hebrews prayed for the ability to have a good conscience and live an honest life:

**Hebrews 13:18:** “Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.”

These prayers reveal the heart and passion of the apostles. They cared deeply about the well-being of the churches – in fact, they cared so much about it that they made it a matter of prayer.

We would be wise to do the same. In the prayers that we pray, do we remember the spiritual health and well-being of others? We are quick to pray for someone when they get cancer or a serious illness, and there is nothing wrong with that. But do we pray that God would be glorified in their lives? Do we pray that they might bring forth spiritual fruit? The physical health of a person is important, but their *spiritual* health matters infinitely more. Do we pray these kinds of prayers?

## **Boldness**

The apostles led very difficult lives. These mighty men of God were persecuted, hunted down, and imprisoned for their faith. The world put a tremendous amount of pressure on them to stop preaching the gospel – but they refused to give in to temptation. Rather than bow to the world and stop telling others about Jesus, the apostles instead prayed that God would give them great boldness to preach His Word:

**Ephesians 6:18:** “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

19 And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,

20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

As you can see, Paul did not want to back down under pressure. Instead he sought the grace to boldly proclaim the gospel and say the things that needed to be said. He made a similar prayer request to the Colossian church:

**Colossians 4:3:** “Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds:

4 That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.”

Paul was not looking for a chance to be silent and sit down. Instead he prayed that God would give him opportunities so that he might proclaim the name of Christ. He wanted the grace to ignore the hatred of the world and speak as the Lord commanded.

When we are faced with opposition we should not back down and stop speaking; instead we should seek the Lord for the boldness we need to preach His gospel. The apostles did not try to preach on their own; instead they depended on God for the strength they needed to carry out His will. They sought the Lord for boldness – and He gave it to them.

# Forgiveness

One other type of prayer that we find in the New Testament are prayers for forgiveness. Now, when we think of forgiveness we typically think about praying that God would forgive our sins. However, there are cases in the Bible where people prayed that God would forgive the sins *of someone else*.

For example, a man named Simon once offered the apostles money in order to buy the Holy Spirit. He saw the apostles working miracles, and he wanted to buy that power so that he could work miracles as well. When Peter condemned him for his greed and wickedness, Simon asked for Peter to pray for him so that he might be forgiven:

**Acts 8:22:** “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.

23 For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.

24 Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.”

There is another example of this as well. Late in Paul's life there was a time when he faced some particularly severe persecution. In fact, it was so severe that everyone abandoned him. Paul prayed that God would not hold this sin against them:

**2 Timothy 4:16:** “At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge.”

What we see Paul doing here is *offering them forgiveness*. Even though everyone abandoned Paul, the apostle forgave them. He did not want to see them charged with that sin, even though

they were guilty. Paul was showing compassion and mercy on them.

Christ has done the very same thing for us. When mankind sinned God was not required to save any of us, and yet He chose to do exactly that. Even though we were all guilty and had become the enemies of God, the Lord sent Jesus Christ into this world to die in our place and suffer the consequences of our sins. Instead of condemning us for what we had done and sending us all to Hell, Jesus took our sin upon Himself and suffered the penalty that we deserved. He showed us incredible compassion and mercy – mercy that we did not deserve. We can be saved because Jesus chose to show mercy on us instead of condemning us for our great wickedness. We can repent of our sins and believe on Him, and be clothed in His perfect righteousness. Through repentance and faith we can be made right with God and have fellowship with Him.

Part of the Lord's prayer was that we forgive others for the things that they have done against us. We can see that Paul did exactly that – and we should do the same.



# **The Prayers of the Wicked**

WHEN WE THINK OF PRAYER, we tend to think of all the times that the righteous saints of God prayed. Prayer, after all, is something that Christians do. We don't normally think of wicked people praying at all – except, perhaps, for salvation. Why would someone who isn't a Christian pray to the Lord?

It may be uncommon for unbelievers to pray, but there are a number of times in the Bible when this happened. Let's take a look at what God did in response to these prayers.

## **Prayers God Granted**

There are times when unbelievers asked God for something, and instead of saying “No” the Lord immediately granted their prayer. This is quite extraordinary, and is not at all what we would expect. After all, why would God ever hear the prayers of the wicked? Isn't God against the wicked? Why is He doing favors for people who have rejected Him?

Those are excellent questions. Let's take a look at these situations and see what happened.

### **Pharaoh**

One striking example of God granting the prayers of very wicked men can be found in the case of Pharaoh. As we all know, God used Moses to command Pharaoh to let God's people go.

When Pharaoh refused, God sent plague after plague upon the land of Egypt. These plagues devastated the country and caused immense pain and suffering.

It wasn't very long before these plagues started to annoy Pharaoh. In fact, it quickly got to the point where Pharaoh called for Moses and asked him to stop the plague. For example, let's take a look at the plague of frogs:

**Exodus 8:1:** "And the Lord spake unto Moses, Go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me.

2 And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs:

3 And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into thine house, and into thy bedchamber, and upon thy bed, and into the house of thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneadingtroughs:

4 And the frogs shall come up both on thee, and upon thy people, and upon all thy servants."

God was very clear here: if Pharaoh did not let God's people go so that they could serve Him, He would send a massive plague of frogs upon the land of Egypt. Frogs would be *everywhere* – in houses, in beds, in ovens, and even on their bodies. It would be terrible.

Did Pharaoh let the people go? Absolutely not. So God did exactly what He said He was going to do, and sent a plague of frogs. The plague was every bit as bad as God has warned. In fact, when the plague hit Pharaoh became very unhappy about it. He asked Moses to pray to God to stop the plague:

**Exodus 8:8:** "Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said, Intreat the Lord, that he

may take away the frogs from me, and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may do sacrifice unto the Lord.”

Now, was Pharaoh being sincere? Of course not! He had no intention of letting God's people go. His promise was just a lie. As soon as the frogs were gone he was going to break his word. Did God know this? Of course He did. After all, God knows all things. He knew what Pharaoh would do if He answered this prayer.

But yet, despite all this, God still answered Pharaoh's prayer anyway. He put a stop to the plague of frogs and removed them from the land:

**Exodus 8:12:** “And Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh: and Moses cried unto the Lord because of the frogs which he had brought against Pharaoh.

13 And the Lord did according to the word of Moses; and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the villages, and out of the fields.”

God did exactly what Pharaoh wanted. The Lord put an end to the plague of frogs – and in response, Pharaoh immediately violated his promise and refused to let the people go.

So what happened next? Well, God kept sending more plagues. After the plague of frogs God sent a plague of lice, but Pharaoh refused to let the people go. Since Pharaoh didn't obey, the next plague that God sent was a plague of flies. The flies were so bad that Pharaoh called for Moses and asked him to pray to stop the plague:

**Exodus 8:28:** “And Pharaoh said, I will let you go, that ye may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness; only ye shall not go very far away: intreat for me.

29 And Moses said, Behold, I go out from thee, and I will intreat the Lord that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people, to morrow: but let not Pharaoh deal deceitfully any more in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.”

As you can see, Moses prayed and asked God to stop the plague of flies. Did God listen? Yes, He did: He heard Moses and stopped the plague. Now, at this point even *Moses* knew that Pharaoh wasn't going to keep his word – you can see that in verse 29. Yet Moses prayed anyway and God granted his request. God *definitely* knew that Pharaoh wasn't going to keep his promise, but God still did what Pharaoh asked. Did Pharaoh let the people go once the flies were gone? Absolutely not! Instead he violated his promise yet again.

Here's the thing, though: even though God is answering Pharaoh's prayers, Pharaoh's life is not improving. Yes, it's true that God stopped the plagues and gave Pharaoh a chance to keep his word, but each time Pharaoh went back on his promise the Lord brought an even *worse* plague upon his life. Each plague that God sent brought increased devastation upon Egypt. The plagues started out with frogs and flies, which were a real pest but weren't life threatening. However, the plagues didn't stop there. Later, after Pharaoh continually refused to obey, God sent a terrible plague of deadly hail:

**Exodus 9:22:** “And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch forth thine hand toward heaven, that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, upon man, and upon beast, and upon every herb of the field, throughout the land of Egypt.

23 And Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven: and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran along upon the ground; and the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt.

24 So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.

25 And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt all that was in the field, both man and beast; and the hail smote every herb of the field, and brake every tree of the field."

The plagues were no longer mere annoyances; now they had escalated to a very dangerous level. The Bible says that this plague consisted of hail mixed with fire, and it was every bit as bad as it sounds. This hailstorm was so terrible that it destroyed all the crops, broke all the trees, and killed all men and animals that were outdoors. This was the worst hailstorm that Egypt had ever seen, and it had a high body count.

So what did Pharaoh do? He did the same thing he had done in the past: he called for Moses and asked him to pray to God to stop the storm. So that's what Moses did:

**Exodus 9:27:** "And Pharaoh sent, and called for Moses and Aaron, and said unto them, I have sinned this time: the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.

28 Intreat the Lord (for it is enough) that there be no more mighty thunderings and hail; and I will let you go, and ye shall stay no longer.

29 And Moses said unto him, As soon as I am gone out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands unto the Lord; and the thunder shall cease, neither shall there be any more hail; that thou mayest know how that the earth is the Lord's."

Moses prayed, the hail stopped, and Pharaoh once again refused to honor his promise to let the people go. All of this was

very predictable, and God surely knew that it was going to happen. After all, God knows all things. He knows the end from the beginning, and He knows everything that will ever happen. But look at what is going on here. Each time Pharaoh goes back on his word, God sends another plague that is more dangerous and deadly than the one before it. These plagues are bringing glory to God by showing His divine power over nature. In Egypt the pharaohs were regarded as gods; the people believed that they could control the world. When God sent these plagues upon Egypt He demonstrated that Pharaoh had no power at all. The ruler of Egypt could not get rid of the frogs and flies, and he could not stop the hailstorm. Pharaoh's supposed divine power and godlike status was nothing more than a lie. Through these plagues God was glorified by showing the whole world who was *really* in control of nature. God was demonstrating to everyone that the Egyptian gods were frauds and that He alone was the one true god.

By heeding Pharaoh's prayers God was advancing His own agenda. He was punishing Egypt for the way they had enslaved Israel for the past 400 years, and He was showing the utter powerlessness of the false gods that the Egyptians worshiped. The Lord was bringing glory and power to His name. Pharaoh may have had his prayers answered, but he was not winning. Each answered prayer brought with it more pain, suffering, and death.

Incidentally, that was not the last time that Pharaoh asked God for something. After Pharaoh continued to go back on his word, God sent a plague of locusts. The locusts were terrible:

**Exodus 10:14:** “And the locust went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such.

15 For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat

every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.”

The plague of hail had already destroyed everything that had grown up to that point. God allowed some time to pass between the plague of hail and the plague of locusts, and a few crops had started to grow. That's when the locusts covered the land and ate the few remaining things that had survived. Since Egypt's last hope for food had just been destroyed by the locusts, the nation was facing a severe famine. Their food supply had been destroyed *twice*, and now there was no way to simply grow more. If the country was in a bad situation before it was in even worse shape now. Egypt was on the verge of starvation.

So Pharaoh called for Moses with great haste and begged him to make it stop:

**Exodus 10:16:** “Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron in haste; and he said, I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you.

17 Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin only this once, and intreat the Lord your God, that he may take away from me this death only.

18 And he went out from Pharaoh, and intreated the Lord.”

In every other case Moses listened to Pharaoh and prayed, and this case was no different. After he prayed God stopped the plague. One might think that by this point Pharaoh would have learned his lesson. After all, each time Pharaoh violated his word, God sent a plague that was even worse than the one before. But Pharaoh still refused to keep his promise. He still would not let the Israelites go – so God kept sending more plagues. The Lord finally sent the plague that killed all the firstborn of the land. That

plague scared Pharaoh so badly that he forced Israel out of the country. The Egyptians were terrified that if the Israelites stayed around any longer, God would kill everyone. (Judging by how things were escalating, they were probably right.)

Of course, that's not the end of the story. Once Pharaoh let Israel go, he immediately regretted his decision and took his army to go enslave them again. When Pharaoh chased after Israel, though, God Himself fought against them and drowned them in the Red Sea. Pharaoh and his powerful army were killed, and that was the end of that.

So what can we learn from all this? Well, first, we can see that God did indeed grant the requests of a very wicked Pharaoh. Even though Pharaoh completely lacked even the smallest bit of sincerity and humility, and even though he made promises that God knew he would not keep, the Lord still did exactly what Pharaoh asked. The reason God did this was because each answered prayer advanced His will and brought glory to His name. The real winner in all this wasn't Pharaoh; *it was God*.

In fact, this was actually the plan all along. Before God sent any plagues upon Egypt, the Lord told Moses what He was planning on doing:

**Exodus 7:2:** "Thou shalt speak all that I command thee: and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he send the children of Israel out of his land.

3 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.

4 But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth mine armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.

5 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth mine hand upon



Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.”

God actually *wanted* Pharaoh to go back on his promises and refuse to let the Israelites go, because that gave God an opportunity to glorify His name. Through Pharaoh's refusals God was able to clearly demonstrate His divine power and glory. The plagues that God sent showed everyone that the Lord was the One True God, and that the gods the nations worshiped were just worthless idols. Through these plagues God judged Egypt for their sins and demonstrated His power. Look at what Rahab told the Israelite spies a generation later, when the nation finally made it to the city of Jericho:

**Joshua 2:9:** “And she said unto the men, I know that the Lord hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you.

10 For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed.

11 And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.”

Rahab was convinced that the Lord was the true God because she had heard of the miracles and wonders He had done. The amazing and terrible things that God did to the Egyptians brought great glory to His name and showed His divine power. Even people in distant lands heard and feared Him!

It made sense for God to answer Pharaoh's requests

because it gave Him the opportunity to bring even worse judgments upon Egypt. The person who ultimately benefited from Pharaoh's prayers was not Pharaoh (who was eventually drowned in the Red Sea) but God. All Pharaoh got out of it was even more judgments and even more pain. The plagues led to the death of his firstborn, and then his own death as well.

So yes, God did answer Pharaoh's prayers. But it didn't do Pharaoh any good, did it?

## Israel

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, there were multiple times when they disobeyed the Lord. At first the Lord was patient with their disobedience and treated them with restraint, but when they continued to disobey and rebel the Lord grew angry. Eventually God started punishing them for their wickedness. One example of this can be seen in Numbers 11:

**Numbers 11:** "And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord; and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp.

2 And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched."

This passage needs a little bit of background to put it in context. Israel had been out of Egypt for some time now, wandering around in the wilderness. Even though Israel was in the wilderness, God still provided for them. In fact, God had taken care of their every need since they left Egypt. Despite this

loving care, Israel was never the least bit grateful. Instead of being thankful for God's great love for them they spent their time complaining. Every time they needed something they never went to God and prayed for it. Instead they complained that God was evil and was trying to kill them all. Israel did this *every single time*. They showed no faith in God and no respect for His name. They were a truly wicked group.

Eventually the Lord tired of their disrespectful attitude and decided to punish their complete lack of faith in Him. So God sent fire to the outer parts of the camp, and it started burning people alive. When this happened Israel became distraught and cried out to Moses about it. Moses then prayed for them and God stopped the judgment.

Now, were the Israelites being sincere? Absolutely not! If you read on through the Bible you will discover that Israel *never* stopped disobeying God. They continued to doubt God, disobey Him, and complain about His provisions every single chance they had. Yet, despite all of this, God still halted His judgment – just as He stopped His judgments of Pharaoh.

It's true that Pharaoh didn't pray to God personally; Moses prayed on his behalf. The nation of Israel did the same thing. When the Israelites went to Moses, he interceded on behalf of the nation and the Lord granted his prayer.

Why would God have mercy on the nation when they had no intention of ever obeying Him? Well, in the case of Pharaoh it was so that the Lord might show His divine power and glory. God used Pharaoh for His own purposes. In the case of Israel it was because God always keeps His promises. You see, God told Abraham that He was going to give the land of Canaan to his descendants as an everlasting possession:

**Genesis 12:7:** “And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land; and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him.”

**Genesis 13:14:** “And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward:

15 For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed **for ever**.”

**Genesis 15:18:** “In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:”

**Genesis 17:6:** “And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

God made a promise to Abraham, and God took His promise very seriously. He said He was going to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants, and that was exactly what God was going to do. Now, if God killed all the Israelites because of their gross disobedience, that would mean Israel would never inherit the land – and thus God's promise to Abraham would be broken.

In fact, God actually made it clear to the Israelites that the reason He spared their lives was because of His covenant with Abraham. No matter how wicked Israel became, God would never destroy them entirely. Even if they became so evil that God

cast them out of the land of Canaan, He would still remember His promise and have mercy on them:

**Leviticus 26:42:** "Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.

43 The land also shall be left of them, and shall enjoy her sabbaths, while she lieth desolate without them: and they shall accept of the punishment of their iniquity: because, even because they despised my judgments, and because their soul abhorred my statutes.

44 And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the LORD their God.

45 But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the LORD."

Do you know why God created the world in the first place? It was to bring Himself glory by revealing the hidden attributes of His character. In the eternal ages before the world existed, God never had a chance to show His faithfulness and mercy. By making a covenant with Abraham and then keeping that covenant in spite of Israel's faithlessness, God revealed who He really was. He clearly demonstrated that He always kept His promises and was always faithful, even when we were not. God revealed His character and brought glory to His name.

That was why God continued to spare Israel when they disobeyed. The Lord did punish them, but He never put an end to them. We can see another example of this in Numbers 21. Once

again the Israelites were being wicked and faithless. Take a look at what they were doing:

**Numbers 21:5:** “And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.”

Keep in mind that at this point in their history, God was literally feeding them with bread from Heaven. God never let any of them starve to death or die of thirst, and had always provided for all of their needs. Yet despite this abundant love that God had shown to them, Israel still insisted that God hated them and was trying to kill them.

Israel was being deliberately evil here. God had already told them that He was going to bring them to the land of Canaan and give it to them as an everlasting possession. God had *not* rescued them from the Egyptians just to kill them. The Lord already told them that back in Leviticus:

**Leviticus 26:13:** “I am the Lord your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that ye should not be their bondmen; and I have broken the bands of your yoke, and made you go upright.”

God used great signs and wonders to miraculously set them free, and He had provided for them ever since. The Lord had loved them, been patient with them, and cared for them. In return Israel has demonstrated absolutely zero faith in God. At every turn they complained, spoke against God, and accused God of trying to kill them all.

The last time that Israel treated God this way (back in Numbers 11), the Lord sent a fire that burned them alive. You

would think that would have taught Israel a lesson, but apparently it didn't. So this time God did something a little different. Instead of sending another fire He sent a plague of deadly snakes that killed many people:

**Numbers 21:6:** “And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

8 And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.”

As you can see, the people were distraught about being killed by a plague of deadly serpents, so they asked Moses to pray for them and make the serpents go away. Moses then prayed on their behalf and God agreed to help. The Lord told Moses that instead of taking away the serpents, He was going to provide deliverance in a different way. Whenever someone was bitten, all they had to do was run to a pole that Moses was going to create and look at it. When the person looked upon the pole they would be healed.

I realize this seems very strange, but this was actually looking forward to the cross. Those who are lost and dying in their sins need only to run to the crucified Savior, who gave His own life for their sins. All who repent of their wickedness and believe in Christ will be saved. God was using this plague to help the Israelites understand what the Messiah would one day accomplish.

Even though these people were desperately wicked and had no intention of ever serving or honoring God, the Lord still

provided a way of salvation for them. The reason He did this is because God's faithfulness to His promises and covenants is absolute:

**2 Timothy 2:13:** “If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself.”

Do you see how God glorified His name by showing mercy on Israel and keeping His covenant? At every turn we see that God's will was being advanced and His kingdom was coming to pass. God can use even the prayers of the wicked to accomplish His goals.

## The Golden Calf

We can see this same truth illustrated in the infamous incident of the golden calf. While Israel was in the wilderness, Moses went up to Mount Sinai and stayed there for 40 days. Even though 40 days is not a very long time, the people got tired of waiting for Moses to come back. They asked his brother Aaron to make them some pagan idols to worship:

**Exodus 32:1:** “And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.”

To understand just how terrible this was, we need to put it into context. Before Moses went up to talk to God, the entire congregation had gathered at the foot of the mountain and heard



God *audibly* give them the Ten Commandments. That experience was so terrifying that the people begged God to stop. They said that they could not bear hearing God talk directly to them, and they asked Moses to go get God's commandments and bring them back. Moses would then tell them what God wanted Israel to do.

When God agreed with their plan, Moses went up to the mountain and remained there for 40 days while God talked to him. This means that the entire reason Moses was up on the mountain in the first place was because the people were so terrified of God they couldn't bear hearing His voice! Yet, even though this nation had just heard the voice of God, they turned around and began engaging in idolatry less than two months later. These people had heard *the voice of God*, and they still couldn't be bothered to be faithful for even *two whole months*.

When the people came to Aaron, they asked him to help them engage in paganism and idolatry – a clear violation of the first commandment, which they had just been given from *the very voice of God*. Yet, despite this, Aaron enthusiastically agreed to help them. He did not object in the slightest:

**Exodus 32:2:** “And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.

3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron.

4 And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.”

Who asked for the earrings? Aaron did. Who fashioned it into an idol? Aaron did. Who told Israel to worship these pagan idols and give them honor for rescuing them from Egypt? Aaron

did. Now, Aaron could have objected to all of this. He could have rebuked them for sinning and said that he wanted no part of this. He could have stopped them from building these idols – but he didn't. Instead he joined right in, and even dedicated the next day as a pagan feast to worship these idols. Aaron was a key force in this entire wicked event.

Needless to say, God was *very* unhappy about this. He told Moses that He was going to kill the entire nation of Israel because of what they had done. Moses immediately rushed down the mountain and interceded on their behalf. When Moses confronted Aaron and asked him how he could commit such a terrible sin, this is what Aaron said:

**Exodus 32:21:** “And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them?

22 And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief.

23 For they said unto me, Make us gods, which shall go before us: for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.

24 And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.”

As you can see, Moses was astonished that Aaron would commit so great a sin. When he confronted Aaron about it, though, Aaron basically said this: “Please don't get angry with me! It was all the people's fault. All I did was take some gold and cast it into the fire, and this calf magically appeared all on its own. You can't blame me for this!”

Aaron refused to take *any* responsibility for his part in this sin, and he didn't even bother to apologize. What Aaron should

have done was confess his sin, own up to what he did, and plead for forgiveness – but he *never* did that. He just acted like none of it was his fault and he wasn't involved. What we see in this passage isn't an apology; it's an attempt to shift the blame to others. It's appalling behavior.

One thing we find out much later is that God was very, very angry with Aaron over what he had done. That fact isn't mentioned in Exodus, but it is mentioned in Deuteronomy. This is what Moses said:

**Deuteronomy 9:20:** “And the Lord was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him: and I prayed for Aaron also the same time.”

God was so angry with Aaron over his sin that He wanted to kill him. However, Moses interceded on behalf of his brother, and God agreed to spare his life and forgive him. Even though we have no record of any time when Aaron owned up to what he did and repented of it, God still forgave him and spared his life.

Moses also interceded on behalf of the whole congregation. God was going to kill them all, but Moses prayed for them:

**Deuteronomy 9:26:** “I prayed therefore unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, destroy not thy people and thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed through thy greatness, which thou hast brought forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand.”

Since Moses interceded on their behalf, God forgave them for their idolatry. He did not kill Israel for its terrible sin of serving pagan idols, and He did not kill Aaron either. Instead He granted them all mercy and forgiveness – even though He surely knew that the Israelites were never actually going to trust Him. Israel responded to God's forgiveness with more disobedience,

rebellion, and faithlessness. They never demonstrated anything that was even close to sincere repentance.

It may seem like God was giving these wicked people a free pass (especially when you look at the way the nation continued to be disobedient in the weeks and years to come), but if you look more closely you will see that God's will was being done and God's plan was being advanced. We have already pointed out that it was God's will to glorify Himself through the nation of Israel. He promised to give them the land of Canaan, and if He had killed them all because of their sin then He could not have kept that promise. Sparing their lives allowed Him to keep His covenant with Abraham. The Lord had also promised that the Messiah would come through the line of the Jews, and by sparing the lives of the Jewish people God was able to keep that promise as well. In other words, God's mercy advanced God's plan.

We see the same thing in the life of Aaron. God had a plan to use him, and that plan could only be accomplished if Aaron wasn't dead. You see, after this event Aaron was never again involved in pagan idols. Instead he became Israel's first high priest, who worked in the tabernacle and offered sacrifices on behalf of the nation. The Lord used him to usher in and establish the sacrificial system, which pointed the way to the person and work of the Messiah. Aaron had a key role to play, and God was not willing to let him die until he had accomplished it.

There is another angle to this as well. God offered mercy to both Aaron and Israel. Aaron learned from his sin and never repeated it; he faithfully served God for the rest of his life. Israel, though, did *not* learn the lesson of the golden calf. In the days that followed their terrible idolatry, the nation continued to complain and attack God. When they finally reached the land of Canaan and God told them to go in and possess it, the nation refused. They instead decided to *kill Moses* and go back to Egypt. Since that entire generation refused to enter the land, God condemned them to wander around in the wilderness until they all died. God then gave Canaan to their children. In other words, even though

God had mercy on these idolaters and granted Moses' prayers of intercession, *all the people still died in the end, and none of them set foot in Canaan*. Their prayers may have been answered, but it didn't do them very much good.

Israel ignored God's mercy and continued to sin, and as a result they perished. They did not take advantage of the opportunities that God gave to them, and they suffered the consequences of that terrible decision. Aaron, however, faithfully served God for the rest of his life. In both cases God was glorified and His plan was advanced. The people may have been wicked, but God won in the end and accomplished exactly what He intended to accomplish.

## The Attack On Benjamin

In the book of Judges we are told of a time when a Levite went on a journey with his concubine. During that journey he stopped to spend the night in a city that was filled with Benjamites. The reason he chose to stay in that city was because he thought the pagan cities of the land were full of people who couldn't be trusted, whereas a fellow Israelite would surely have good manners. As it turned out, he was very wrong. The Benjamites had become extremely wicked, to the point where they had formed roving rape gangs. They were determined to rape the Levite to death for daring to spend the night in their city:

**Judges 19:22:** "Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him."

Needless to say, the Levite was very distraught about this. Since he wanted the gang to leave him alone, he did something utterly appalling: he threw his wife outside. The Benjamites raped her until she was dead:

**Judges 19:25:** “But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go.

26 Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, till it was light.

27 And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way: and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down at the door of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold.

28 And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her up upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place.”

After this horrifying incident, the Levite went home and told the rest of the nation of Israel what had happened. When the other tribes found out what the tribe of Benjamin had done, they were horrified. They were astonished that such a wicked thing had taken place in their nation:

**Judges 19:30:** “And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds.”

The Israelites then went to the city where the crime had been committed, and demanded that the guilty parties be turned over so that they could be judged for their crimes. The Benjamites, however, refused. They liked the idea of roving gangs who raped people to death, and they were determined to defend that sort of behavior no matter what the cost. They weren't going to let anyone stop them from raping people to death. So the Benjamites brought out their army to defend the city:

**Judges 20:11:** “So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, knit together as one man.

12 And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What wickedness is this that is done among you?

13 Now therefore deliver us the men, the children of Belial, which are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death, and put away evil from Israel. But the children of Benjamin would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel.

14 But the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together out of the cities unto Gibeah, to go out to battle against the children of Israel.”

Let's be clear here: the Benjamites were incredibly wicked and depraved people. They were actually willing to go to war *to protect their right to rape people to death*. It's really difficult to get more barbaric than that. These people richly deserved the judgment of God. When the men of Sodom committed the exact same sin, God sent fire from Heaven and burned their cities to the ground – along with the people inside them. This is a gross violation of the law of God, and it could not be tolerated.

The people of Israel knew that something had to be done, so they inquired of the Lord and asked who should lead the attack

on Benjamin. God answered their prayer and said that Judah should go first:

**Judges 20:18:** “And the children of Israel arose, and went up to the house of God, and asked counsel of God, and said, Which of us shall go up first to the battle against the children of Benjamin? And the Lord said, Judah shall go up first.”

As you can see, everything seemed to be in order. The Israelites were going to battle for a righteous cause, they had prayed about this, and they were doing things God's way. They actually sought God's counsel! After all that preparation and prayer you would naturally expect the Israelites to win the battle, right? Surely God would fight for them – only He didn't. Israel expected to win, but to their surprise the Benjamites *defeated* them:

**Judges 20:20:** “And the men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin; and the men of Israel put themselves in array to fight against them at Gibeah.

21 And the children of Benjamin came forth out of Gibeah, and destroyed down to the ground of the Israelites that day twenty and two thousand men.”

What's going on? Why would God do that? Why didn't God give them the victory over the wicked Benjamites? After all, Israel was just trying to bring this wicked tribe to justice, and yet the Benjamites won and 22,000 Israelites were killed. Where is the justice in that?

The answer is simple: it's because the other tribes were just as wicked, albeit in a different way. Yes, under the Mosaic Law it was indeed a sin to rape people to death – a sin punishable



by execution. But *the rest of Israel was also guilty of breaking the Law*. They had abandoned God long ago and spent their time worshiping idols. Oh, they might pray a quick prayer to God whenever they needed God's help to defeat their enemies, but their hearts were far from Him. The Lord had commanded them to remove all of the idols from the land, and they refused. God told them not to serve false gods and yet they served false gods anyway. Under the Mosaic Law, worshiping idols and serving false gods was *also* punishable by death.

From God's perspective there were no good guys in this fight. Israel and Benjamin were both wicked, and neither deserved to win. Nobody on either side cared about God or served Him. Since that was the case, *God was not on anybody's side*. In this fight there were only deeply wicked people who were trying to kill other deeply wicked people. Why would God support anyone?

When Israel lost the first battle they prayed and asked God if they should continue fighting. God once again answered their prayer and told them they should continue:

**Judges 20:23:** “(And the children of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until even, and asked counsel of the Lord, saying, Shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother? And the Lord said, Go up against him.)”

Since God told them to keep fighting, the Israelites went out and fought. Israel expected a great victory but instead they were defeated by Benjamin yet again:

**Judges 20:25:** “And Benjamin went forth against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed down to the ground of the children of Israel again eighteen thousand men; all these drew the sword.”

Even though God had told them to go into battle, the Benjamites won and killed 18,000 Israelites. Why would God do this? Why would God respond to their prayer and give them guidance that just got them killed? It is because God really did want the Benjamites to be judged for the terrible sins they were committing. He did want the Israelites to fight them – *but He wanted Israel to repent of their own sins first*. Before Israel could go out and execute God's judgment against the wicked *they needed to stop being wicked themselves!* That is why God kept saying yes, and that is why Israel kept being defeated in battle.

This time the Israelites finally got the message:

**Judges 20:26:** “Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.”

After this terrible defeat the entire nation of Israel went to the house of God and wept, fasted, and offered sacrifices. This time when they asked counsel of God, He promised to give them victory. The next day Israel went to war and God finally gave them the victory they had sought:

**Judges 20:35:** “And the Lord smote Benjamin before Israel: and the children of Israel destroyed of the Benjamites that day twenty and five thousand and an hundred men: all these drew the sword.”

So the Benjamites were defeated, and 25,100 men were killed. In the Mosaic Law God had promised to curse cities and tribes that committed grievous sin, and here we see that God fulfilled that promise. He did exactly what He said He would do.

Benjamin's cities were burned to the ground, their people were slaughtered, and only 600 men escaped:

**Judges 20:46:** "So that all which fell that day of Benjamin were twenty and five thousand men that drew the sword; all these were men of valour.

47 But six hundred men turned and fled to the wilderness unto the rock Rimmon, and abode in the rock Rimmon four months.

48 And the men of Israel turned again upon the children of Benjamin, and smote them with the edge of the sword, as well the men of every city, as the beast, and all that came to hand: also they set on fire all the cities that they came to."

At this point Israel had a problem, because the whole nation had made a vow to not give their daughters to the Benjamites as wives. This put the very existence of the tribe of Benjamin at risk. Since there were only 600 Benjamites left, and since none of them were women, and since they couldn't marry any of the daughters of other tribes, what were they going to do? It looked like the tribe was facing extinction.

Now, God hadn't told Israel to make that vow; they did that all on their own. When Israel was faced with the problem of how to keep the tribe of Benjamin from disappearing, Israel could have prayed and asked God's counsel – but they didn't. Instead they took matters into their own hands and came up with a horrible and wicked solution. They found one group of Israelites who hadn't taken that vow, and told the Benjamites to kidnap that group's daughters and take wives by force:

**Judges 21:20:** "Therefore they commanded the children of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in wait in the vineyards;

21 And see, and, behold, if the daughters of

Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.”

Since Israel had promised to not *give* the Benjamites their daughters, the Israelites decided to solve that problem by having the Benjamites *kidnap innocent girls and force them to be their wives*. Yes, that was their solution to the problem, and that is exactly what the Benjamites did. (Remember, the whole reason Israel had gone to war against Benjamin in the first place was because they had formed groups that were going around raping people. Israel was now telling them to form a group to kidnap women and *force* them to be their wives. That's awfully close to telling Benjamin to go form rape gangs, isn't it? Do you see why God was disgusted with both parties in this conflict?)

As you can see, the Benjamites were a wicked group – but the rest of Israel wasn't much better. God granted Israel's prayer and gave them the victory they sought, but it would be difficult to argue that there was anything upright or moral about Israel. This is how the book of Judges ends:

**Judges 21:25:** “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

There are times when God is not on anybody's side, because nobody is on His side.

## Give Us A King

The prophet Samuel judged Israel during his lifetime, and when he was old he appointed his sons as judges. However, his sons were corrupt and did not walk in his ways. Since his sons

were evil, the people asked for a king to be appointed over them:

**1 Samuel 8:4:** “Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah,  
5 And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”

This may seem like a reasonable request, but it was actually very wicked. Yes, it's true that Samuel's sons were not paragons of virtue, but if you go back and read the book of Judges you'll find that *all* of the judges that ruled over Israel had serious problems. Samson spent time with prostitutes and made frequent use of their services. Gideon created an ephod that became an idol. Jephthah offered his own daughter as a human sacrifice. The judges that reigned over Israel left a *lot* to be desired. In fact, things were so bad that being corrupt and taking bribes would have been an *improvement* over the things the other judges had done!

The truth is Israel was being dishonest with Samuel. The real reason they wanted a king had nothing to do with corruption. If that was really their concern then they could have asked Samuel to pick a more honorable person as their judge, and the problem would have been solved. No, the truth is that Israel no longer wanted God to rule over them. They wanted a human king instead:

**1 Samuel 8:6:** “But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the Lord.  
7 And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.”

As you can see, God was not deceived. The Lord knew what was really going on. The people didn't want God to be their king because they had rejected Him. When Samuel tried to tell the Israelites that a human king would abuse them, take advantage of them, and do horrible things, the people didn't care. (Apparently corruption from *judges* was bad and could not be tolerated, but corruption from *kings* was perfectly fine.) This is what the nation told Samuel:

**1 Samuel 8:19:** “Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us;  
20 That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.”

The people didn't want God to fight their battles; no, they wanted a king to fight them instead. They didn't want to trust in God to deliver them, even though the Lord had given them the entire land of Canaan and had delivered them time after time. The Israelites had rejected God entirely. They wanted a human king to lead them, judge them, and fight for them. They were finished with God.

This prayer request was incredibly wicked. Israel was asking God to get out of their nation. They were asking God to give them a king *who would replace God in their lives*. This request was made by wicked people for a wicked purpose. These people were deep in sin and were asking God to *help them sin even more*.

You would think that God would deny that request, right? Surely God would never agree to that kind of prayer. This is exactly like a wife asking her husband to find someone for her to commit adultery with. It was an incredibly evil prayer – and yet God granted it:

**I Samuel 8:21:** “And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he rehearsed them in the ears of the Lord.

22 And the Lord said to Samuel, Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king. And Samuel said unto the men of Israel, Go ye every man unto his city.”

God gave the nation of Israel exactly what they wanted. He had Samuel appoint a man named Saul over the nation. Saul was a tall, handsome man who had a great deal of charisma and a total lack of character. Saul made terrible decisions and refused to obey God. He hunted down innocent people and tried to kill them, he refused to obey God, and he abused those who were under his authority. His slaughter of the innocent Gibeonites brought three years of famine upon the entire nation.

After Saul was killed by the Philistines, a man named David became king. David was a man after God's own heart. He did love God and he did try to serve Him, but very few other kings followed his example. Virtually every king the Israelites ever had was terribly wicked. The sons of Samuel took bribes; the kings of Israel and Judah murdered countless people and led the nation into idolatry. As bad as the judges were, the kings were far worse.

When the people of Israel asked for a king, they were committing a terrible sin. They were rejecting God and openly showing their lack of faith and love for Him. So God judged them *by giving them what they asked for*. By the time the era of kings was over, the entire nation had been destroyed, the Temple had been torn down, Jerusalem had been sacked, and the people had been carried off to Babylon and removed from the land. Nothing like that ever happened during the era of judges.

God warned the people that there would be consequences for rejecting Him, and there were indeed serious consequences. In this case, answering Israel's prayer was *not* doing them a favor; instead it was a judgment against them. God destroyed them by

giving them exactly what they wanted.

## Jeroboam

Another example of a wicked person praying can be found in the time of the kings. When King Solomon became old he rebelled against God and started sacrificing to false gods. As punishment for this the Lord said He was going to take the kingdom away from his son Rehoboam and give ten of the tribes of Israel to someone else. When Solomon died and Rehoboam became king, God did exactly that. Rehoboam got to keep two tribes (Benjamin and Judah), and God gave the rest of them to a man named Jeroboam. God told Jeroboam that He was giving him these ten tribes to rule, and added that if Jeroboam walked in God's ways then the Lord would bless him and his descendants:

**1 Kings 11:37:** “And I will take thee, and thou shalt reign according to all that thy soul desireth, and shalt be king over Israel.

38 And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that is right in my sight, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee.”

Did Jeroboam walk in God's ways? Absolutely not. Even though God told him that He would bless him and his offspring if he obeyed God, Jeroboam had no faith in God's promise. Jeroboam decided that the only way to keep his kingdom was to *disobey* God and start serving idols. He therefore build two golden calves and told the tribes to worship them. In other words,



not only did Jeroboam worship idols, but he persuaded his *entire nation* to worship them as well! This is despite the fact that *that is the very same sin that caused God to take those tribes away from Solomon in the first place!*

Because of Jeroboam's terrible idolatry, God sent a prophet to condemn the king for what he had done:

**1 Kings 13:1:** “And, behold, there came a man of God out of Judah by the word of the Lord unto Bethel: and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense.

2 And he cried against the altar in the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar, thus saith the Lord; Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon thee, and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee.”

This man of God told the king that the Lord was going to raise up another king named Josiah, and Josiah would destroy the king's pagan altar and burn the bodies of the false priests upon it. As you might imagine, Jeroboam was not happy to hear this news. Instead of repenting and asking God to have mercy on him, the king tried to have the prophet arrested:

**1 Kings 13:4:** “And it came to pass, when king Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God, which had cried against the altar in Bethel, that he put forth his hand from the altar, saying, Lay hold on him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him.

5 The altar also was rent, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the

Lord.”

When the king stretched out his hand to seize the prophet, God immediately struck the king and crippled his hand. God then tore the altar apart to make it very clear that the prophet really *did* speak for God. (It should be noted that everything the prophet foretold did eventually come to pass. God did eventually raise up a king named Josiah, and that king did destroy the altar and burn the bodies of the pagan priests upon it. God kept His promise – as He always does.)

King Jeroboam was not happy about having his hand destroyed. Since seeking medical attention wasn't going to help, the king asked the prophet to pray that he might be healed:

**1 Kings 13:6:** “And the king answered and said unto the man of God, Intreat now the face of the Lord thy God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored me again. And the man of God besought the Lord, and the king's hand was restored him again, and became as it was before.”

Did God heal him? Yes, He did. Now, I'd like to point out that Jeroboam was a very wicked king. When he asked to be healed he had not repented of anything, and after this healing he never changed his ways. Jeroboam never destroyed his idols or told the nation to seek the Lord. Even after hearing the judgment of God proclaimed against him and seeing God destroy his altar and curse his hand, Jeroboam still refused to repent. He stubbornly clung to his idolatry and kept leading the people into paganism:

**1 Kings 13:33:** “After this thing Jeroboam returned not from his evil way, but made again of the lowest of the people priests of the high places: whosoever would, he consecrated him,

and he became one of the priests of the high places.

34 And this thing became sin unto the house of Jeroboam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from off the face of the earth."

Yes, it's true that God healed him in spite of his wickedness. You see, God was offering mercy to the king. If Jeroboam had repented of his sin and destroyed his altars, it's quite possible that history would have played out differently. After all, God is a compassionate God who shows mercy to those who love Him and keep His commandments:

**Exodus 34:6:** "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,

7 Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."

God is glorified when He shows mercy to the wicked and offers to forgive their sins. That is one of His attributes that was hidden for all of eternity, but is now clearly displayed. The Lord was bringing glory to His name by offering Jeroboam a chance to repent of his idolatry. God was demonstrating compassion.

Jeroboam, however, did not repent. Since he did not take advantage of the mercy that God showed him, God did exactly what He said He would do. When Jeroboam's son Nadab became king, God raised up a man named Asa to oppose him. Asa murdered Nadab and killed Jeroboam's entire family:

**1 Kings 15:28:** "Even in the third year of Asa

king of Judah did Baasha slay him, and reigned in his stead.

29 And it came to pass, when he reigned, that he smote all the house of Jeroboam; he left not to Jeroboam any that breathed, until he had destroyed him, according unto the saying of the Lord, which he spake by his servant Ahijah the Shilonite:

30 Because of the sins of Jeroboam which he sinned, and which he made Israel sin, by his provocation wherewith he provoked the Lord God of Israel to anger.”

It's true that God extended mercy to Jeroboam and healed his hand. However, when Jeroboam rejected that mercy and continued to serve idols, God wiped out his entire family. The Lord had all of them killed, down to the last man. God had promised Jeroboam that if he served the Lord then God would bless his offspring and make them secure. Since Jeroboam instead led the entire nation into idolatry, God cursed his offspring and killed them.

Are you seeing a pattern here? God granted Pharaoh's prayers and had mercy upon him, but since Pharaoh never obeyed God he was ultimately killed and lost everything. God granted Jeroboam's prayer for healing, but since Jeroboam refused to repent the king ultimately lost his entire family. Jeroboam rebelled in order to keep the kingdom, but that rebellion cost his son both his kingdom and his life. God offered mercy to Pharaoh and Jeroboam; when they rejected it they suffered terrible consequences.

So yes, Jeroboam did have his prayer answered. But it really didn't do him a lot of good, did it? In the end he and his family faced the terrible judgment of God – a judgment they could have avoided if they had just accepted God's mercy and repented of their sins.

## Manasseh

One of the last kings of Judah was a man named Manasseh. This particular king was incredibly wicked. Now, Judah had seen some wicked kings before, but Manasseh was especially evil. The Bible tells us that he was an idolater:

**2 Chronicles 33:1:** “Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem:

2 But did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, like unto the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel.

3 For he built again the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down, and he reared up altars for Baalim, and made groves, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them.”

It also says that he defiled the Temple and turned it into a place of pagan worship:

**2 Chronicles 33:4:** “Also he built altars in the house of the Lord, whereof the Lord had said, In Jerusalem shall my name be for ever.

5 And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.”

It even says that Manasseh *burned his children alive* as human sacrifices to pagan gods:

**2 Chronicles 33:6:** “And he caused his children

to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom: also he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger.”

In fact, he was so bad that under his reign the people of Judah became worse than the Canaanites who used to live in the land:

**2 Chronicles 33:9:** “So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err; and to do worse than the heathen, whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel.”

As you can see, Manasseh was an *incredibly* wicked man. He was so wicked that God punished the entire nation for his sin. The Lord brought in the Assyrians, who came and conquered Manasseh and carried him off to Babylon as their prisoner:

**2 Chronicles 33:11:** “Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon.”

At this point it's easy to imagine that the story of Manasseh was over. He was an incredibly wicked man, he did incredibly evil things, and God brought judgment upon him and carried him away captive. This king *definitely* deserved it. This seems like the end of his story – but it isn't.

You see, while he was in prison he humbled himself and cried out to God:

**2 Chronicles 33:12:** “And when he was in

affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers,

13 And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.”

When Manasseh humbled himself before God and prayed, the Lord heard him. God forgave him for his idolatry and for all the terrible things he had done. In fact, God did more than just forgive him: God actually brought him out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem, and *gave him his kingdom back*. Manasseh had been a prisoner in a foreign land without any hope of ever being free again, but now he was king once more.

That's a pretty astonishing answer to prayer, isn't it? When Manasseh humbled himself and prayed, God forgave him and released him from prison. One might wonder: why would God do this? After all, God didn't just forgive him for his sins; the Lord actually *put him back on the throne*. That is an astonishing thing to do!

It does, however, illustrate the love and forgiveness of God:

**Exodus 20:6:** “And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.”

God is merciful to all those who humble themselves and come to Him in repentance. He forgives those who seek forgiveness and who are broken about their sin:

**Psalms 34:18:** “The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.”

**Psalm 51:17:** "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

This is brilliantly illustrated in the life of Manasseh. Manasseh was broken and contrite, and God heard him. When Manasseh humbled himself the Lord raised him up. But the story doesn't end there. When the Lord restored Manasseh as king over Jerusalem, Manasseh instituted a series of reforms. The king proved that his repentance was sincere by the amazing actions he took:

**2 Chronicles 33:15:** "And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city.  
16 And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel."

The change in the life of King Manasseh led to a national revival. The king removed the idols from the land, cleansed the Temple, and restored it to operation again. He commanded the nation to serve the Lord and he led the way by personal example. God's forgiveness of Manasseh led to the advancement of the kingdom of God. The land had been given over to idolatry, but when Manasseh returned he changed that.

When God showed mercy on Pharaoh, the king of Egypt did not repent and God ultimately killed him. When God showed mercy on Jeroboam, he refused to repent of his idolatry and God took the kingdom away from his son and killed his entire family. However, when God showed mercy on Manasseh the king *did* repent and led the nation back to God.

What we can see from all of this is that God is rich in



mercy to those who call upon Him – and this mercy brings glory to God. Those who take advantage of God's abundant mercy will find forgiveness and blessing. However, those who abuse God's mercy and use it to continue lives of sin and wickedness will only find destruction and death. The Lord is merciful – but He will not be mocked.

# Prayers God Denied

So far we have seen in our study that there are times when God grants the prayers of very wicked people and gives them what they want. God answered the prayers of both Pharaoh and Jeroboam, even though both of those people were very wicked men who never repented of anything.

However, there are other times when God refuses to hear the prayers of the wicked. Let's take a look at a few examples.

## King Saul

When Israel foolishly told God that they didn't want Him to reign over them anymore and wanted a human king instead, the Lord gave them the man Saul as their new ruler. At the beginning of his reign Saul ruled wisely: he delivered Israel from their enemies and he fought their battles. As time went on, though, Saul became more and more disobedient.

The king's first big sin came when the Philistines gathered to attack Israel. The enemy army was so large that it caused the Israelites to go into hiding:

**I Samuel 13:5:** “And the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the sea shore in multitude: and they came up, and pitched in Michmash, eastward from Bethaven.

6 When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait, (for the people were distressed,) then the people did hide themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in high places, and in

pits.”

Before the battle could begin, though, Samuel was supposed to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. This sacrifice was important: without the Lord's help, victory would be impossible. Israel depended upon the Lord to fight their battles for them. Their strength was in God, not in swords or horses.

However, only the priests could offer sacrifices. Since Samuel was a priest, he could offer the offering. It was a serious sin for anyone else to offer a sacrifice because only the priests had been cleansed, trained, and appointed by God. Only the priests had the holy anointing oil upon them. If you were not a priest then you could *not* offer an offering.

So Saul waited for the seven days that Samuel had told him. When Samuel didn't appear in that time, the king decided to go ahead and offer the offering himself – in gross disobedience to God:

**I Samuel 13:8:** “And he tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed: but Samuel came not to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him.

9 And Saul said, Bring hither a burnt offering to me, and peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering.”

This was especially insulting because burnt offerings were offerings of *dedication to God*. They were a sign that you were wholly dedicating yourself to following God and obeying His commands. Saul was not allowed to offer this offering, but he did it anyway – in direct *violation* of God's commands! Saul was making an offering that said “I am dedicated to obeying God”, and he was offering it in a way that was grossly *disobedient*. What Saul was displaying here was blatant hypocrisy.

Keep in mind that Saul did have other options. When Samuel did not appear at the appointed time, the king could have

sent someone to look for him. Saul could have waited a little longer. He could have looked for another priest to offer the offering. The one thing he should *never* have done – offer the offering himself – is exactly the one thing that he did.

As it turned out, Samuel appeared just a few moments later:

**I Samuel 13:10:** “And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might salute him.  
11 And Samuel said, What hast thou done? ...”

If Saul had waited just a few more minutes, Samuel would have arrived and all would have been well. Instead of waiting, however, he took matters into his own hands, and that brought about his downfall. It turned out that this whole episode had been a test. Since Saul failed the test, he also lost the throne to Israel:

**I Samuel 13:13:** “And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever.  
14 But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the Lord commanded thee.”

If Saul had obeyed, his children would have inherited the throne and his line would have become the line of kings. Since he disobeyed, his line would no longer continue. In other words, this sin cost his children the throne of Israel. But it didn't cost him the throne – not yet, anyway.

Saul's next big sin was when the Lord told him to wage

war against Amalek and utterly destroy them. The Amalekites had oppressed Israel when God delivered them from Egypt, and the Lord had not forgotten their sin. It was now time for them to be judged, and God commanded Saul to utterly destroy them:

**I Samuel 15:2:** “Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.

3 Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

God's commandment was pretty clear and left no room for interpretation. Saul was required to utterly destroy *everything* that pertained to Amalek. Not only was he to destroy all of the people, but he was even supposed to kill the *animals*. Instead of doing that, though, Saul spared the king and kept the best of the loot:

**I Samuel 15:9:** “But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly.”

The Lord was very upset with what Saul had done. In fact, God was so angry over Saul's sin that he rejected him as king over Israel:

**I Samuel 15:22:** “And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king."

Not only had Saul's children lost the kingdom, but Saul himself had lost it as well. The throne no longer belonged to him. God rejected Saul and appointed David as king over Israel. Saul, though, refused to give up the throne. Even though God had revoked Saul's right to reign over the nation of Israel, Saul continued to cling to the throne and spent years trying to kill David. As if that were not bad enough, Saul even slaughtered an *entire city* of priests (including children!) because one of the priests had helped David and given him some food.

Near the end of Saul's life, an army of the Philistines came against him. When Saul saw this army he became afraid. He sought the Lord and prayed, but God refused to answer him:

**I Samuel 28:5:** "And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled.

6 And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets."

Saul wanted the Lord's help, but God refused to help him. Saul inquired of the Lord to find out how to defeat the Philistines, but the Lord would not answer. God rejected all of Saul's attempts to seek direction and guidance. The king was on his own.

Since God wasn't answering his prayers, the king decided that the best thing to do was to engage in even more disobedience. He used a witch to talk to the dead in order to get guidance from the deceased prophet Samuel. This was a terrible, terrible sin. Under the Mosaic Law, witches were supposed to be executed. Communicating with the dead was strictly forbidden on pain of death. Saul, though, did not care. He was going to do

whatever he wanted, regardless of what God thought of the matter. (Keep in mind that this kind of disobedience was the very reason why God wasn't answering his prayers in the first place! Saul had learned absolutely nothing.)

When Saul finally did get in contact with the dead prophet Samuel, the news was all bad. Samuel told him that God was his enemy and that he was going to be killed the very next day:

**I Samuel 28:16:** “Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?

17 And the Lord hath done to him, as he spake by me: for the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David:

18 Because thou obeyedst not the voice of the Lord, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the Lord done this thing unto thee this day.

19 Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines: and to morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the Lord also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.”

Samuel's prophecy came true. The next day Saul and his sons were killed, and David finally became king over Israel.

Why did the Lord refuse to hear Saul's prayers? It is because Saul had repeatedly refused to obey God. In fact, Saul went far beyond simply disobeying God. He spent years trying to murder the man God had appointed as king over Israel, and he slaughtered an entire city of priests. Saul rejected God and made himself God's enemy, so God made himself the enemy of Saul.

There is no evidence that Saul ever repented of anything. At the end of his life he didn't repent of his sins or plead for

mercy; instead he engaged in witchcraft and sorcery in an attempt to force God to answer him. Since he never changed and since he stubbornly refused to obey God, the Lord killed him and gave his kingdom to someone else.

That is the sort of thing that happens when you live a life of stubborn, continued disobedience. This is how the book of Proverbs puts it:

**Proverbs 15:10:** “Correction is grievous unto him that forsaketh the way: and he that hateth reproof shall die.”

Saul *hated* correction. He stubbornly insisted on disobeying the Lord and doing things his way. No matter what God told him, Saul never listened – and in the end, he became the enemy of God and the Lord killed him. There is a very serious lesson here, and we should take it to heart. Yes, you can disobey God and choose to be stubborn. Yes, you can indeed do things your way – but if you do that then you will also become God's enemy. As the Bible says, you can be sure that your sin will eventually find you out.

## The Elders of Israel

During the ministry of Ezekiel, there came a time when the elders of Israel wanted some guidance. So they came to the Lord and sought God's wisdom:

**Ezekiel 20:1:** “And it came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth month, the tenth day of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to enquire of the Lord, and sat before me.”

This seems like a good thing, right? Here we have the



leaders of the nation coming before the Lord to seek His counsel. This seems wonderful, but the Lord was not at all pleased by this. In fact, God utterly rejected them. Just as God refused to hear King Saul, God also refused to hear the prayers of these men:

**Ezekiel 20:2:** “Then came the word of the Lord unto me, saying,  
3 Son of man, speak unto the elders of Israel, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Are ye come to enquire of me? As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you.”

As you can see, the Lord rejected these men entirely. God then explained why He would not hear their prayers and why He would not help them:

**Ezekiel 20:4:** “Wilt thou judge them, son of man, wilt thou judge them? cause them to know the abominations of their fathers:”

God reminded them how sinful and rebellious Israel had been ever since the Lord delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Israel was required to obey God and keep His commandments, but instead of doing that the nation rebelled against Him at every turn. God spared them judgment time and time again and had mercy on them, but Israel still refused to repent of their sins.

The elders of Israel knew all of this history but they still refused to walk in the ways of God. Instead of serving God, these men offered up *human sacrifices* in service to their pagan gods:

**Ezekiel 20:30:** “Wherefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Are ye polluted after the manner of your fathers? and commit ye whoredom after their abominations?  
31 For when ye offer your gifts, when ye make your sons to pass through the fire, ye pollute

yourselves with all your idols, even unto this day: and shall I be enquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you.”

In other words, these people were *burning their children alive* as human sacrifices! They were not only engaging in idolatry, but they were also performing human sacrifice as well. Despite their extreme wickedness and paganism, they still thought that God would answer their prayers and do them favors. They thought that they could burn their children alive to idols and engage in all sorts of terrible sin, and could then turn around and go to God when they ran into trouble. They were convinced that the Lord would answer their prayers and fix all the problems they were having.

God responded to them by saying *no*. Since they were serving idols, God would not help them. Since they were engaging in child sacrifice, God would not hear their prayers. Instead of helping them God promised to judge them and rule over them with fury:

**Ezekiel 20:33:** “As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you:”

There are many people today who commit a very similar sin. They reject God and serve other gods. They live as they please, commit whatever sins they want, and live a life of utter paganism. However, when things go bad they pray to God and expect Him to fix their life and give them peace and happiness again.

*God is not interested in being a part of that.* You cannot spend your life rejecting God and living in sin and disobedience, and then expect God to answer your prayers and fix your life when things go wrong. The Lord was quite clear that He would

*not* hear the prayers of these wicked people. Since they served idols, let them cry out to their worthless idols for salvation – because they were not going to be getting any help from the Lord.



# **The Prayers of the Righteous**

SO FAR WE HAVE BEEN LOOKING AT the prayers of the wicked. However, the Bible also contains the prayers of the righteous. Let's take a look at these prayers and see how God answered them.

## **Prayers God Granted**

There are many times in the Bible when God responded to the prayers of the righteous and granted them. Let's take a look at a few examples.

### **King David**

David was a valiant and courageous man. He was the one who fought Goliath and killed him, and he also led Israel into battle on many occasions. However, David knew that his true source of strength and victory was the Lord. From his very first battle he always depended on God, and he never hesitated to inquire of the Lord and seek His guidance. Before David went into battle he prayed and sought the will of the Lord.

We can see this illustrated time and time again. When the Philistines came against the city of Keilah, David prayed and God answered:

**I Samuel 23:1:** "Then they told David, saying,

Behold, the Philistines fight against Keilah, and they rob the threshingfloors.

2 Therefore David enquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I go and smite these Philistines? And the Lord said unto David, Go, and smite the Philistines, and save Keilah.

3 And David's men said unto him, Behold, we be afraid here in Judah: how much more then if we come to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?

4 Then David enquired of the Lord yet again. And the Lord answered him and said, Arise, go down to Keilah; for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand.

5 So David and his men went to Keilah, and fought with the Philistines, and brought away their cattle, and smote them with a great slaughter. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah."

Notice how much David trusted the Lord! When the Lord said to go, he went. David trusted in the Lord for his victories, and God always provided. Unlike King Saul, David did not depend upon himself. Instead he looked to the Lord for success.

On one occasion the Amalekites invaded the city of Ziklag and kidnapped David's wife and children, along with the wives and children of the men who followed David. It would have been easy for David to give into hopelessness and despair after such a terrible blow, but instead of doing that David prayed:

**I Samuel 30:6:** "And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.

7 And David said to Abiathar the priest, Ahimelech's son, I pray thee, bring me hither the ephod. And Abiathar brought thither the ephod to David.

8 And David enquired at the Lord, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? shall I overtake them? And he answered him, Pursue: for thou shalt surely overtake them, and without fail recover all."

Do you see the great faith of David? He didn't just assume that God would be with him, and he didn't go off on his own to avenge himself. Instead he stopped and prayed. When the Lord gave him an answer he trusted that answer and did what the Lord told him. David pursued the Amalekites, and just as the Lord said he recovered everything.

This was a constant theme in David's life. After Saul was killed and David began to rule over all Israel, David prayed and asked God where he should go:

**2 Samuel 2:1:** "And it came to pass after this, that David enquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And the Lord said unto him, Go up. And David said, Whither shall I go up? And he said, Unto Hebron.

2 So David went up thither, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail Nabal's wife the Carmelite.

3 And his men that were with him did David bring up, every man with his household: and they dwelt in the cities of Hebron.

4 And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. And they told David, saying, That the men of Jabeshgilead were they that buried Saul."

David wanted to know if he should go into any of the cities of Judah. Was it even wise to enter that territory? God told him that it was safe and He directed David to the city of Hebron. David obediently went there, and that is where he began his rule over the nation. He prayed and trusted God for guidance, and he did whatever God told him to do.

After David became king he continued to trust God. When the Philistines came against him, he prayed:

**2 Samuel 5:17:** “But when the Philistines heard that they had anointed David king over Israel, all the Philistines came up to seek David; and David heard of it, and went down to the hold.

18 The Philistines also came and spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim.

19 And David enquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I go up to the Philistines? wilt thou deliver them into mine hand? And the Lord said unto David, Go up: for I will doubtless deliver the Philistines into thine hand.

20 And David came to Baalperazim, and David smote them there, and said, The Lord hath broken forth upon mine enemies before me, as the breach of waters. Therefore he called the name of that place Baalperazim.”

Not only did David seek the Lord's will and then follow through in obedience, but after God gave him the victory David praised the Lord and gave Him all the credit! When David smote the Philistines, David said that the Lord was the one who granted him success and who defeated them. David clearly believed that God was the reason why he was victorious in battle.

When the Philistines came against him again, David did not trust in his own strength. Instead he prayed and sought the will of the Lord:



**2 Samuel 5:22:** “And the Philistines came up yet again, and spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim.

23 And when David enquired of the Lord, he said, Thou shalt not go up; but fetch a compass behind them, and come upon them over against the mulberry trees.

24 And let it be, when thou hearest the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then thou shalt bestir thyself: for then shall the Lord go out before thee, to smite the host of the Philistines.

25 And David did so, as the Lord had commanded him; and smote the Philistines from Geba until thou come to Gazer.”

This time when David prayed the Lord gave him a different plan of attack. David obediently did exactly what the Lord commanded him, and the Lord granted him the victory.

As you can see, David loved the Lord and trusted Him completely. Before David went into battle he prayed, and he trusted in the Lord for victory. When God gave him a plan he followed it in obedience and trusted its outcome to the Lord. God refused to hear the prayers of King Saul and would not help him – but He did help David time and time again.

David's view of life can be summed up in this verse:

**Psalms 20:7:** “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.”

David didn't trust in his chariots or horses. Instead he trusted in the Lord, and he always gave God the credit for his victories.

Do you see how God was glorified in His answers to David's prayers? David did not trust himself; instead he depended

on God, and that brought glory to the Lord. When David was victorious he praised God and gave Him all the credit, and that brought glory to the Lord. When David was in trouble he went to God for help, and that brought glory to the Lord.

By answering David's prayers, God not only protected His people Israel (which is something He had promised He would do), but He also brought glory to His name. He displayed His power, might, and love, and He advanced His kingdom's interests on Earth.

## Elisha

Elisha was a prophet – the successor to the famous prophet Elijah. He was a godly man who fought against the wickedness of his day. The Lord used him to do many miracles – in fact, the Bible records him doing twice as many miracles as Elijah. God was with him in a mighty way, just as God had been with his mentor.

During his ministry he developed the habit of eating at a certain family's house. This family not only supported him with food, but even gave him a place to sleep:

**2 Kings 4:8:** “And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread.

9 And she said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually.

10 Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall

be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither.

11 And it fell on a day, that he came thither, and he turned into the chamber, and lay there."

As you can see, this family gave Elisha food and a place to rest. Elisha was grateful for what they had done for him and wanted to help the family in some meaningful way. When Elisha's servant told him that the wife was childless, Elisha promised her that she would have a son:

**2 Kings 4:14:** "And he said, What then is to be done for her? And Gehazi answered, Verily she hath no child, and her husband is old.

15 And he said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the door.

16 And he said, About this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son. And she said, Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid.

17 And the woman conceived, and bare a son at that season that Elisha had said unto her, according to the time of life."

It is a touching story: a woman who had lost all hope of having a child gave birth to a son. However, the story doesn't end there. A few years later the child fell sick and died:

**2 Kings 4:18:** "And when the child was grown, it fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers.

19 And he said unto his father, My head, my head. And he said to a lad, Carry him to his mother.

20 And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon,

and then died.”

Yes, she was given a son – and now that son was dead. The woman immediately went to Elisha, who sent his servant Gehazi to lay his staff on the child. However, the child was not healed. So Elisha himself went to the child and prayed:

**2 Kings 4:32:** “And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed.

33 He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord.

34 And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm.

35 Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

36 And he called Gehazi, and said, Call this Shunammite. So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said, Take up thy son.”

There are very few people in the Bible whom God used to raise someone from the dead. What Elisha was praying for rarely happened, but God granted his request. Elisha had intended this son to be a blessing to that family, but when the son died the woman's joy was turned into grief and sorrow. When this tragedy struck, Elisha prayed to the Lord and the Lord heard him. The woman received her dead son back to life again, all because God answered Elisha's fervent prayer.

Why did God answer this prayer? It was because of the faith that was behind it. In Hebrews 11:33 we are told that faith is the reason why “Women received their dead raised to life again”.

Elisha had faith that even though the son had died, God had the power to raise him from the dead. By answering Elisha's prayer God brought glory to Himself. He showed that He really did have power over death itself, and He demonstrated His great love, compassion, and care. Answering this prayer brought glory to His name. (If God answered *your* prayers, would that bring glory to His name or would it just make your life more comfortable and happy? Are you truly praying prayers that glorify God?)

This is not the only time in Elisha's ministry when his prayers were answered. On one occasion the king of Syria tried to kill the king of Israel, but Elisha intervened and defeated Syria's plans. The Syrians decided to put a stop to Elisha's meddling by sending an entire army to get him:

**2 Kings 6:13:** "And he said, Go and spy where he is, that I may send and fetch him. And it was told him, saying, Behold, he is in Dothan.

14 Therefore sent he thither horses, and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night, and compassed the city about.

15 And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do?"

Elisha's servant saw the army that had surrounded the city and was terrified. It looked like all hope was lost, but Elisha knew that was not the case. He prayed that his servant might be shown the truth of the situation:

**2 Kings 6:16:** " And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.

17 And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the

Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.”

The servant could only see the army of the Syrians, but there was actually a much greater army that was protecting Elisha. When Elisha prayed, his servant could finally see what had been there the whole time. Elisha then prayed once more and the Syrian army was smitten with blindness:

**2 Kings 6:18:** “And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said, Smite this people, I pray thee, with blindness. And he smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.”

As you can see, God answered Elisha's prayers in a powerful way that showed His strength and brought glory to His name. Just like King David, Elisha knew that the Lord was the source of his strength, and he looked to God for deliverance and help. Elisha's faith brought glory to God.

## Hezekiah

King Hezekiah was one of the last kings of Judah. (In fact, during the reign of his son Manasseh the nation was conquered and his son was carried away as a prisoner.) Hezekiah was a righteous man who served the Lord – but his reign was not without trials. While he ruled over Judah a great army came against him:

**2 Kings 18:17:** “And the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rabsaris and Rabshakeh from

Lachish to king Hezekiah with a great host against Jerusalem. And they went up and came to Jerusalem. And when they were come up, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is in the highway of the fuller's field."

The army surrounded the city of Jerusalem and prepared to conquer it. The Assyrians told Hezekiah that they did not believe his God could possibly rescue the nation from their army. In fact, the Assyrians mocked the very idea. They pointed out that the gods of all the other nations had been powerless against them:

**2 Kings 18:33:** "Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered at all his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?

34 Where are the gods of Hamath, and of Arpad? where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah? have they delivered Samaria out of mine hand?

35 Who are they among all the gods of the countries, that have delivered their country out of mine hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of mine hand?"

The Assyrians were confident that their army was stronger than any gods – including the God of Israel. When Hezekiah heard their taunting, he prayed and asked the Lord to defend His glory and honor:

**2 Kings 19:15:** "And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said, O Lord God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth.

16 Lord, bow down thine ear, and hear: open,

Lord, thine eyes, and see: and hear the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent him to reproach the living God...

19 Now therefore, O Lord our God, I beseech thee, save thou us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the Lord God, even thou only."

Hezekiah pointed out that the Assyrians had blasphemed the name of the Lord and mocked His power. Sennacherib was saying that Jerusalem's defeat would prove that the Most High God was utterly powerless and could not withstand the might of the Assyrians. Hezekiah prayed that God would defeat this pagan army and use that victory to prove to the nations that He alone was the One True God, and that His power was great indeed. In other words, Hezekiah prayed that God would use this occasion to bring glory to His name.

When the king prayed this prayer, the Lord heard it and answered him:

**2 Kings 19:20:** "Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard.

21 This is the word that the Lord hath spoken concerning him; The virgin the daughter of Zion hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee.

22 Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel."

Hezekiah was right: the Lord interpreted the words of



Sennacherib as blasphemy – a direct attack upon Almighty God. The Lord granted Hezekiah's prayer and promised that the Assyrian army would not attack Jerusalem:

**2 Kings 19:32:** “Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it.

33 By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord.

34 For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.”

Because the Assyrians had attacked the power and strength of the Lord, the Lord promised to defend Jerusalem and use that as an opportunity to show His great glory and might. That very night the Lord sent an angel to slaughter the entire Assyrian army:

**2 Kings 19:35:** “And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.”

The Assyrians mocked the Lord and said that He was powerless against them – and in return the Lord killed them all. The Assyrians discovered that they had no power to stand against the Living God. The Lord used this as an opportunity to bring glory to His name (which, as you may have noticed, is a recurring theme when it comes to the way God answers prayer).

This is not the only time that Hezekiah prayed. Not too long after this amazing victory, Hezekiah became deathly ill.

Isaiah the prophet came and told him that he was going to die of his illness:

**2 Kings 20:1:** “In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.”

When Hezekiah heard this he was heartbroken. He cried out to the Lord and prayed that his life might be spared:

**2 Kings 20:2:** “Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying,  
3 I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.”

The Lord heard his prayer – in fact, He heard it immediately. Before Isaiah even had time to leave the building the Lord told him to go back and bring a message to Hezekiah:

**2 Kings 20:4:** “And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying,  
5 Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord.  
6 And 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; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.”

Talk about an answer to prayer! God immediately responded that yes, He would heal Hezekiah and give him an additional 15 years of life. The Lord heard the king and granted his request – once again showing His great might and His power over death itself. Hezekiah trusted in the Lord and looked to Him for strength, and God provided for the king's needs.

But there is still more. There was a time in Hezekiah's reign when he led the nation to celebrate the Passover:

**2 Chronicles 30:1:** “And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel.”

Now, God had commanded Israel to celebrate the Passover every year. This regulation was given to the nation a long time ago, back in the days of Moses. Once Israel reached the land of Canaan, though, the nation abandoned God and spent their time serving idols. During the reign of Hezekiah the king tried to bring the nation back to God and commanded that they celebrate the Passover. Although some people scoffed and refused to listen, there were many who came. However, it had been a very long time since the nation had celebrated the Passover, and some of those who did come did not cleanse themselves according to the rules of the Mosaic Law:

**2 Chronicles 30:18a:** “For a multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim, and Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover otherwise than it was written.”

This was much more than a minor oversight. The book of Leviticus has entire chapters full of rules regarding holiness,

cleanliness, and ceremonial purity. It was a serious matter to violate those rules and partake of holy things when you were unclean – in fact, it was so serious that it brought down God's judgment upon people. However, when Hezekiah found out what was going on, he interceded and prayed that God would forgive the people:

**2 Chronicles 30:18b:** “But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, The good Lord pardon every one  
19 That prepareth his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary.  
20 And the Lord hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people.”

The Lord had begun to strike people who were violating His ceremonial laws. What the people were doing was definitely a sin – but Hezekiah prayed that God would forgive them. The king pointed out that they were trying to seek God and honor Him, and asked that the Lord would pardon those who sought Him even if they were not properly cleansed. In response, the Lord did exactly what Hezekiah requested. He forgave the people and healed them.

As you can see, Hezekiah sought the Lord and found Him. When the king prayed, the Lord answered him. Why? Because the things that Hezekiah sought were things that brought glory to the Lord. Hezekiah never depended upon his own strength; instead he always went to the Lord in his times of trouble, and he praised the Lord when his prayers were answered. The Lord was the king's fortress – and God always provided for him.

## The Apostles

As we have seen, there are a number of people in the Old

Testament who prayed and were delivered in amazing ways. If we go to the New Testament we will find exactly the same thing. The apostles did quite a bit of praying during their ministry, and the Lord heard their prayers and answered them in powerful ways.

One of the first prayers that we find during the time of the apostles is recorded in Acts 1. At the very beginning of their ministry (and right after Jesus ascended into Heaven) the disciples realized that they needed someone to replace Judas. Judas had betrayed Christ and then committed suicide, which left an opening in their group. There were supposed to be twelve disciples, not eleven. Since they had an open position in their ranks, they prayed that God would show them who should take his place:

**Acts 1:24:** “And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen,  
25 That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.  
26 And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

As you can see, God granted their prayer and Matthias joined them. Now, it may seem strange that they would cast lots to decide something that momentous, but they were simply being obedient. This is what it says in the book of Proverbs:

**Proverbs 16:33:** “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”

The disciples were acting in faith. They knew that every lot that was cast was not random at all; the Lord was the one who decided its outcome. That is why the disciples chose to cast lots when it came time to make this decision. They were simply

trusting that God was the one who governed all things. It's certainly an unusual way to seek the will of the Lord, but it is something that we see in both the Old and New Testament.

Shortly after Matthias replaced the traitor Judas, the priests and Sadducees arrested the apostles for preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The next day the priests released the disciples, but only after threatening them with further punishment if they kept trying to spread the gospel. In response to this threat, the disciples prayed that God would give them the ability to preach the Word of God with boldness in the face of persecution. The Lord immediately granted their prayer:

**Acts 4:31:** “And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”

It was the Lord's will for the gospel to be spread to all nations, and God chose to use the apostles to set the foundation of the Church. God did not want the apostles to be defeated and go into hiding; instead He wanted them to boldly spread the Word to all people. The apostles were praying for something that was very much the will of God and that was designed to advance the kingdom of God. Therefore, the Lord granted their request and gave the apostles the strength they needed to carry out God's will.

When people in Samaria began to receive the gospel and believe, the apostles sent people there to pray for them and disciple them. When Peter and John prayed over these new converts, the people received the Holy Spirit:

**Acts 8:14:** “Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:

15 Who, when they were come down, prayed for

them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:

16 (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)

17 Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost."

The apostles were doing exactly what Jesus had commanded them to do, and Jesus responded exactly as He had promised. After all, Jesus had said this:

**Luke 11:13:** "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"

God had promised to give the Holy Spirit to those who asked – and when the disciples asked, the Lord responded. God always keeps His promises.

Later in the book of Acts, a beloved woman named Tabitha died:

**Acts 9:36:** "Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.

37 And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber."

Even though Tabitha was dead, the people did not lose hope. Instead of giving into despair they asked Peter to come and help them. When Peter arrived, he prayed. God answered his prayer and raised Tabitha back to life:

**Acts 9:40:** "But Peter put them all forth, and

kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.”

There was another time when Paul and Silas were being held in prison. While they were in prison they prayed – and God released them from their chains:

**Acts 16:25:** “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.

26 And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed.”

Finally, there was a time when a man lay very sick of a terrible illness. When Paul prayed for him, he was healed:

**Acts 28:8:** “And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him.”

When we look at all these miraculous answers to prayer, we begin to see a picture of God's love, compassion, and grace. God demonstrated His power over illness by raising people back to health. God demonstrated His power over death by raising Tabitha back to life. God also showed that even prisons could not keep His children in bondage if God wanted them to be out in the streets preaching the gospel.

These answers to prayer did more than bring glory to God; they also proved that the apostles were chosen by God and were preaching His message. In those days the New Testament did not exist yet, because it was still being written. The apostles were busy with their ministry – but their message was competing with



messages from many false teachers and false apostles. This created a problem, for how could people tell who was genuine and who was counterfeit? Some people genuinely spoke for God and others were liars and deceivers, but how could the average person possibly know which was which? After all, the Bible was still being written.

This seems like an insurmountable problem – and it might have been, if it were not for the miracles. When a person like Paul or Peter claimed to speak for God and then *raised someone from the dead*, it became very clear that he really *did* speak for God. After all, no one could possibly raise the dead back to life without the power of God. Likewise, if two apostles were trapped in prison and God miraculously freed them, that was a powerful sign that those men were truly working for God.

In other words, when God used the apostles to do mighty miracles, He validated their message and put His stamp of approval on them. He was making it clear to the whole world who spoke for Him and who did not. These answers to prayer furthered the kingdom of God and brought glory to His name.

As you can see, the Lord does indeed answer the righteous when they call upon Him. He has delivered His people in amazing ways.

# God Delivers Israel

One of the key themes of the Old Testament is that God loves Israel and watches over her. Even when Israel is stubborn and wicked and refuses to be obedient, God will still deliver Israel out of her troubles if she will come to God and pray for His help. We can see this over and over again in the Old Testament. During the time of the Exodus there were many occasions when God intervened to save Israel. The Lord was always there to provide for Israel's needs – even when Israel was being rebellious and hard-hearted.

You would think that God would be very reluctant to help a nation that has been so wicked and faithless, and yet that's not the case. For example, there was once a time when the Israelites ran out of water in the wilderness. When this happened the people didn't pray; instead they murmured against Moses. Yet, even though the people did not trust God, the Lord still provided for them. When Moses prayed that God would give them water, the Lord did exactly that. God took the bitter water that they had found and made it drinkable:

**Exodus 15:24:** “And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?  
25 And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them...”

It wasn't long after this that the people of Israel ran out of water again. When that happened the people should have remembered the great deliverance that God had just shown to them, and they should have prayed and asked God to provide water. That's what they *should* have done – but that's not what

they did. Instead of doing that they criticized Moses and accused him of trying to murder them all. Despite Israel's complete lack of faith, Moses prayed for them and the Lord provided the water that they needed:

**Exodus 17:3:** “And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?

4 And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me.

5 And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go.

6 Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.”

Even though Israel was wicked and faithless, God still provided.

The Lord continued to watch over the Israelites even after they reached Canaan. Once they were in the land, the people abandoned God and worshiped idols. Because of this God turned the Israelites over to their enemies so that they would see the error of their ways and turn back to God. Whenever the nation became unhappy about being oppressed, they cried out to God. The Lord would always deliver them – but Israel refused to stay faithful. They always abandoned God and went back to their idols.

One example of this can be found in the case of Jehoahaz, who was one of the kings of Israel. He was a wicked king. In fact,

he was so wicked that God turned him over to the Syrians:

**2 Kings 13:1:** “In the three and twentieth year of Joash the son of Ahaziah king of Judah Jehoahaz the son of Jehu began to reign over Israel in Samaria, and reigned seventeen years.

2 And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and followed the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which made Israel to sin; he departed not therefrom.

3 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he delivered them into the hand of Hazael king of Syria, and into the hand of Benhadad the son of Hazael, all their days.”

When this happened, Jehoahaz cried out to the Lord and asked Him to save them. God granted his prayer and did exactly that:

**2 Kings 13:4:** “And Jehoahaz besought the Lord, and the Lord hearkened unto him: for he saw the oppression of Israel, because the king of Syria oppressed them.”

Since Jehoahaz sought the Lord, it would be easy to think that he had repented of his sins and that the nation had started serving God. Sadly, that did not happen. Even though God had just delivered them, the nation kept worshiping the golden calves that Jeroboam had set up:

**2 Kings 13:6:** “Nevertheless they departed not from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, who made Israel sin, but walked therein: and there remained the grove also in Samaria.)”

Even though God rescued the nation in their time of need,

Israel refused to honor the Lord and serve Him. No matter how many times the Lord saved them they still stubbornly clung to their idols.

This trend did not start in the time of the kings. The truth is that Israel had been doing this for a long time. If we go back to the time of the judges we can see the exact same pattern. Shortly after the Israelites entered Canaan, the people sinned and served false gods. When this happened the Lord handed them over to their enemies. When the people prayed and asked God to deliver them, the Lord raised up Othniel to save them:

**Judges 3:9:** “And when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.”

After Othniel delivered them, the Israelites went back to serving their false gods. The Lord then oppressed them again, which caused them to cry out to God again. This time the Lord raised up Ehud to save them:

**Judges 3:15:** “But when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded: and by him the children of Israel sent a present unto Eglon the king of Moab.”

Once the Israelites had been saved, they went back to serving their false gods. The Lord then oppressed them again, which caused Israel to cry out to God again. The Lord answered their prayers and raised up Deborah:

**Judges 4:3:** “And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord: for he had nine hundred chariots

of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.

4 And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time.”

God used Deborah to save Israel from her enemies, but once Israel was rescued they went back to their idols. The Lord then sent the Midianites to oppress them. When Israel cried out to the Lord, God raised up Gideon to free them:

**Judges 6:6:** “And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the Lord.

...

11 And there came an angel of the Lord, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.”

After Israel was delivered from the Midianites, the nation went back to serving their idols. God then handed them over to their enemies to be oppressed. When Israel cried out to the Lord for deliverance, God raised up Jephthah to save them:

**Judges 10:10:** “And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, saying, We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim.

11:1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah.”

Even though Israel was utterly faithless and wicked, and even though Israel clung to her idols and her false gods, the Lord still rescued Israel every time they called upon Him. The

Israelites were God's chosen people and He would not abandon them or allow them to be destroyed. God had a plan for the Israelites – a plan that included the birth of the Messiah – and He would not allow that plan to be thwarted. Even the wickedness of the entire nation could not cancel out God's promises or cause Him to abandon them.

The devil has tried very hard to destroy the nation of Israel. Satan knew that if he could kill all of the Israelites then the Messiah could never be born – and if the Messiah was never born then salvation would be impossible. If the devil wanted to thwart God's plan (which he most definitely did) then destroying Israel was the way to do it. Nation after nation was sent to wipe Israel off the face of the world, but in every instance God rescued the Israelites. Even when God allowed foreign powers to conquer them, God never allowed them to kill everyone. The Lord always saved a remnant, because Israel was key to His plan for history and the redemption of mankind.

In the time of the kings, there was a day when the Philistines came against the nation of Israel. When the prophet Samuel cried out to God, the Lord saved them in a miraculous way:

**1 Samuel 7:9:** “And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him.

10 And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel.”

Generations later, in the time of King Asa, a mighty army of Ethiopians came against the nation of Israel. This army had more than a million soldiers. It was much larger than any army

that the Israelites could put on the field, and could easily have killed the entire nation. When King Asa saw the invading force he earnestly prayed and asked the Lord to save the nation. God then did exactly that:

**2 Chronicles 14:11:** “And Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, Lord, it is nothing with thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O Lord our God; for we rest on thee, and in thy name we go against this multitude. O Lord, thou art our God; let no man prevail against thee.

12 So the Lord smote the Ethiopians before Asa, and before Judah; and the Ethiopians fled.”

God saved the nation of Israel from total destruction and gave the Israelites a great victory.

Not only did God deliver the Israelite people, but He also delivered Israelite kings as well. During the reign of King Jehoshaphat, the king made the foolish decision to go into battle with the wicked king Ahab. When Jehoshaphat was in the battle, the enemy saw him and tried to kill him. However, when the king cried out to the Lord, God helped him and saved his life:

**2 Chronicles 18:31:** “And it came to pass, when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, that they said, It is the king of Israel. Therefore they compassed about him to fight: but Jehoshaphat cried out, and the Lord helped him; and God moved them to depart from him.”

As you can see, the Lord is quick to hear Israel when they cry out to Him, and He is always willing to deliver them. God loves His people and He will defend them against their enemies, if they will just pray to Him and ask for His help. The devil wants to destroy them all and wipe them off the face of the world, but



God will never allow that to happen. God made the Israelites a promise, and He always keeps His promises.

# God Sometimes Denies The Prayers Of The Righteous

As we have seen, there are times in the Bible when the righteous asked God to deliver them from their problems, and God granted their request. However, there are also times when God did *not* grant them deliverance. Sometimes God refused to give His children the things that they prayed for. Even though Christ said “ask, and ye shall receive”, that doesn't mean that every single prayer of the saints will be granted.

Let's take a look at the times when God said “no” and see if we can figure out what is going on.

## Miriam

Miriam was the older sister of Moses. (You may remember her as the girl who watched over her baby brother when he was put into the Nile, and who talked to Pharaoh's daughter.) When Moses and Aaron led the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness, Miriam went with them. However, there came a time when Miriam became proud. In fact, she became so proud that she decided to try to exert authority over her brother. She criticized him and claimed that Moses wasn't as great as he thought he was:

**Numbers 12:1:** “And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman.

2 And they said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us?

And the Lord heard it.

3 (Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.)”

It is important to realize that Moses had not done anything to deserve this poor treatment. Moses had faithfully served the Lord. He did not deserve to be criticized, and yet his own sister had spoken out against him. Now, the way that Miriam chose to speak against her brother was particularly curious. Moses had spent forty days with God at the top of Mount Sinai. Moses had been hidden in the rock while God Himself passed by and he saw the Lord's glory. Moses spoke with God face to face on a regular basis. It was simply *impossible* to deny the fact that Moses had a special relationship with God that no one else shared – and yet that is precisely what Miriam denied!

Miriam was trying to claim that Moses was no better than anyone else. “Moses isn't that great; why, God speaks to us too! Who does that Moses think he is, anyway?” This may seem like a rather mild thing to say, but in reality it was cruel and completely unjustified. Moses was a very meek person who never lorded his authority over anyone. You never see any instances of him exerting his authority, or criticizing those around him, or trying to tell others how great he is. Miriam might have attacked Moses, but Moses never attacked Miriam. In fact, when Miriam criticized him he had no intention of defending himself – so the Lord intervened. God was *very* unhappy with Miriam because of what she had said:

**Numbers 12:5:** “And the Lord came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth.

6 And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto

him in a dream.

7 My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house.

8 With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

9 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and he departed.”

As you can see, God actually rebuked Miriam *in person*! This is quite extraordinary. It is extremely rare for God to do something like this, and it really illustrates just how wicked Miriam actually was. When God leaves Heaven so that He can yell at you in person, that is when you know that you are in a *lot* of trouble. (Interestingly, as far as we know this is the only time that God ever spoke to Miriam – and *nothing* that God had to tell her was comforting or happy. God had a lot of great things to say about Moses, but He had only bad things to say to Miriam.)

But the Lord did more than just rebuke Miriam. He also struck her with leprosy:

**Numbers 12:10:** “And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.”

Having leprosy during Old Testament times was a very serious matter. Anyone who was a leper was considered to be unclean – and that had an enormous impact on that person's life. If a person was unclean then she could not go to the tabernacle and worship. It meant that she could not participate in sacrifices. It also meant that she couldn't live with the rest of the people; instead she had to live outside the camp and warn everyone who came by that she was unclean. It was a *terrible* life – one that was

cut off from the worship of God.

Miriam had claimed that her relationship with God was every bit as special as the one that Moses had – and that claim cost her everything. Thanks to her pride and arrogance, Miriam was now completely cut off from the tabernacle altogether. This would have been a humiliating blow. On top of all that, though, there was the fact that leprosy *could kill you*. That was another thing for her to worry about! Miriam was now unclean, cast out, forbidden from getting anywhere near the tabernacle, and in danger of dying from a terrible disease.

As soon as her brother Aaron saw what happened, he begged Moses to pray for her:

**Numbers 12:11:** “And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned.

12 Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother’s womb.”

If you know anything about Moses then you already know that Moses listened to Aaron. When Pharaoh asked Moses to pray, Moses prayed – even though Moses knew that Pharaoh wasn't sincere. Moses did the very same thing here. He prayed and asked God to forgive his sister Miriam.

Since God so quickly relented when Pharaoh asked for mercy, you might expect Him to do the same thing for Miriam. After all, Pharaoh was a wicked ruler who had enslaved an entire nation, and God still listened to his requests. Miriam had definitely sinned, but she hadn't murdered anyone or commanded that all the Israelite children be thrown into the Nile and drowned. Up to this point Miriam had been a faithful servant of God. Yet when Moses prayed, God did something unexpected. He told him *no*:

**Numbers 12:13:** “And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee.

14 And the Lord said unto Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again.”

When Moses asked God to heal Miriam, *God refused*. The Lord said that Miriam was going to have to be shut outside the camp with leprosy and suffer for seven days. After she had spent a week being humbled, God would heal her and receive her again – but not before. Miriam had attacked Moses and humiliated him, and now it was her turn to suffer.

In other words, Miriam had sinned and God wanted her to be ashamed over what she had done. Miriam wasn't like Pharaoh; she knew better than to act the way she did. Miriam was a respected person among the congregation. If she could get away with attacking Moses and get off without any real punishment then it would just encourage other people to do the same thing. God was making an example of Miriam in order to humble her (because God *hates* pride), and to demonstrate that this sort of thing was wrong and there were consequences for it.

Yet God did temper His judgment with mercy. He could have left Miriam with leprosy for the rest of her life, but He did not. He eventually healed her, but only after she had suffered long enough to make it clear that what she had done was wrong.

What we see here is an illustration of this principle:

**Luke 12:47:** “And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.

48 But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few

stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

Christians who know better and who still choose to do very wicked things will be punished for it. In fact, they might be punished more harshly than unbelievers who do the same things simply because Christians *do* know better. The book of Hebrews puts it this way:

**Hebrews 12:5:** “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:

6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?

8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.”

This passage teaches that the Lord disciplines those He loves. This is actually a *good* thing because it teaches us not to sin and it helps us learn to seek holiness. If God is not disciplining someone for their sins then that is a good indication that that person is not a Christian at all. Parents only discipline their own children; they do not usually discipline other people's kids.

Now, this is not to say that God ignores the sins of unbelievers. As we saw in the cases of Pharaoh and Jeroboam, God most certainly does punish the sins of the wicked. The best course of action is to learn the will of God and obey it. However, when a man of God sins the Lord takes that very seriously

because *he should know better*. The Lord has saved him and given him a new heart and mind, and God requires that person to walk in His ways and be obedient to his commands. Since the righteous are God's children, the Lord is going to discipline them so that they learn not to sin.

## Moses

Moses is one of the towering figures of the Old Testament, and we've already mentioned him quite a bit in the course of this study. It's amazing to think about all the ways that God used Moses. God called Moses to go to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh let Israel go. God used Moses to send plagues upon Egypt, to deliver Israel out of Egypt, to guide Israel through the Red Sea, to lead Israel through the wilderness, and to provide for Israel for 40 years. The Lord called Moses to go up to Mount Sinai, and the Lord gave him the Law. The Lord used Moses to write the first five books of the Bible. The Lord even talked to Moses face to face and spoke very highly of him:

**Numbers 12:6:** "And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream.

7 My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house.

8a With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold..."

As you can see, Moses was a very special person who had a unique and powerful relationship with the Lord.

However, there was one time in Moses' life when he



disobeyed God. We can find the account of this in Numbers 20. At this point in Israel's history the nation was wandering around in the wilderness and had run out of water. Since Israel had a need, they should have gone to the Lord and asked Him to provide for them – but of course they didn't. Instead of having faith in God, the Israelites accused Moses of being an evil schemer who wanted to kill them all with thirst.

So Moses went to God and prayed. The Lord told Moses to go to a certain rock and speak to it. After he spoke to the rock it would give them water:

**Numbers 20:7:** “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,  
8 Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together; thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speake ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink.”

Up to this point Moses had always done everything God told him to do, and he had always done it in exactly the way God commanded. On this one occasion, though, Moses refused to obey God. Moses did not believe that speaking to the rock would work. Therefore, Moses took things into his own hands. Instead of speaking to the rock he decided to beat the rock with his rod:

**Numbers 20:11:** “And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.”

This may seem like a rather small and unimportant act of disobedience. God commanded Moses to speak to the rock, but instead of doing that he hit the rock. Surely God wouldn't be upset over a small detail like that, right? After all, Moses got most

of it right. He did bring his rod, he did do it in front of the congregation, and he even went to the correct rock. The only thing he got wrong was one tiny little detail.

When it comes to serving God, though, it's not enough to get things *mostly* right. God requires complete perfection, and anything less than that is sin. Since Moses disobeyed God and refused to do what He commanded, the Lord became quite angry:

**Numbers 20:12:** “And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.”

Because Moses did not have faith in God and refused to trust Him, the Lord said that Moses would not enter the land of Canaan. Instead of entering into the promised land, he would die in the wilderness along with the rest of that wicked and faithless generation.

Moses was not happy about this. He prayed and asked God to forgive him – but God refused to relent or change His mind. In fact, God actually told him to stop praying about it because the subject was closed. God's mind was made up. Moses was not going to set foot in the land of Canaan:

**Deuteronomy 3:23:** “And I besought the Lord at that time, saying,

24 O Lord God, thou hast begun to shew thy servant thy greatness, and thy mighty hand: for what God is there in heaven or in earth, that can do according to thy works, and according to thy might?

25 I pray thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon.

26 But the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me; and the Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto me of this matter."

Given everything that we've seen so far in our study, this may seem kind of harsh. After all, God listened to *Pharaoh's* prayers, and Pharaoh enslaved an entire nation! God listened to the prayers of King Manasseh, even though Manasseh profaned God's temple and murdered many innocent people. Manasseh actually *burned his children alive as human sacrifices* and God still forgave him. All Moses did was strike a rock instead of talking to it, and that one act of unbelief cost him the promised land. Considering how God treated the prayers of Manasseh, the way He treated Moses' prayer seems a bit shocking.

In order to understand why God refused to hear Moses' prayer for mercy, we need to take a step back. Years before this event happened, Moses led the Israelites to the border of Canaan. Moses told the nation that even though there were giants in the land, they would be able to defeat them because God was with them. All Israel had to do was have faith in God and the promised land would be theirs.

Israel, though, did *not* have faith in God. They did not believe God and they did not have any trust in His promises. Instead of listening to Moses they decided to kill Moses and return to Egypt. (You can read the account of this in Numbers 13 and 14.)

When God saw this He became very angry. Since that generation refused to believe God, He condemned them to wander around in the wilderness until they all died. He would then give the land to their children – but He would not give any of it to that faithless generation:

**Numbers 14:28:** "Say unto them, As truly as I live, saith the Lord, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you:

29 Your carcases shall fall in this wilderness;  
and all that were numbered of you, according to  
your whole number, from twenty years old and  
upward which have murmured against me.

30 Doubtless ye shall not come into the land,  
concerning which I swear to make you dwell  
therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and  
Joshua the son of Nun.”

The reason that entire generation was not allowed to enter the land of Canaan was because *they did not have faith in God*. Since they did not believe God or take Him seriously, they lost the promised land and it was given to someone else.

Which brings us back to Moses. The reason Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it was because *he did not believe God either!* He didn't believe that God could make the rock give water just by speaking to it. Since he showed exactly the same lack of faith that cost the Israelites the promised land, he received the same punishment.

This was simply inexcusable. Moses, of all people, should have believed God. Moses was closer to God than anyone else in the nation, and Moses actually spoke to God face to face on numerous occasions. Moses had not only seen the mighty miracles that God had done, but God had actually used Moses to perform many of them! Moses had no reason to doubt God, and yet when the critical moment came he showed the entire nation that he didn't believe God either. Moses should have set an example, but he didn't – and it cost him dearly.

Did God hold Moses to a high standard? Yes, He certainly did. However, we need to remember that to whom much is given, much is required:

**Luke 12:48:** “But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to

whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

God gave Moses *extraordinary* gifts and revelation. With that came a great deal of responsibility – along with severe consequences for lacking faith. The Lord takes faith *very* seriously. As Moses found out, there are very serious consequences for doubt and unbelief. Without faith it is impossible to please God.

## David

King David was probably the greatest king that Israel ever had. King Solomon may have been wiser and richer, but when Solomon became old he abandoned God and started worshiping idols. King David never did that. I Kings 15:3 tells us that David's heart was perfect before God. David loved God with great sincerity and served God all his life. He kept God's commandments and walked in integrity.

However, David was not perfect. There was a time when he committed a very great sin. First of all, he committed adultery with another man's wife and got her pregnant:

**2 Samuel 11:3:** “And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?

4 And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house.

5 And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child.”

David then tried to cover up his sin by having her husband Uriah sleep with her so that he would think the child was his. When that failed David arranged to have Uriah murdered:

**2 Samuel 11:14:** “And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

15 And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.”

After Uriah was dead, David married Bathsheba and took her to be his wife (even though the king already had several wives). By the time all of this was over the king had committed both adultery and murder – two extremely serious sins.

When God saw what David had done He was very angry about it. The Lord sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke the king for his sins:

**2 Samuel 12:9:** “Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.

10 Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife.

11 Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun.

12 For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.”

God told David that the consequences for his sins would last the rest of his life. The Lord would raise up evil against him out of his own family, and his wives would be raped. When David repented and asked God to forgive him, Nathan told him that his sin had been put away. However, the child that had been conceived would die:

**2 Samuel 12:13:** “And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.

14 Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.”

David did *not* want the child to die. After Nathan left, David prayed and begged God to spare the life of his son:

**2 Samuel 12:15:** “And Nathan departed unto his house. And the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick.

16 David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.”

David fasted, prayed, and pleaded with God to spare the life of his child. However, God did not grant his prayer. The Lord said that the child would die, and that is exactly what happened.

In the case of King Manasseh we saw that God forgave someone who committed far worse sins than anything King David had done. David murdered just one person; Manasseh

murdered many people and offered his own children as human sacrifices. Yet God granted Manasseh's prayer but refused David's.

The reason God did not grant David's prayer is because of what it says in verse 14: what David did gave the enemies of the Lord an opportunity to blaspheme God. David was a man after God's own heart and was well known as someone who served the One True God. When David stole another man's wife and murdered her husband, that offered God's enemies an opportunity to attack the Lord. "Just look at what that servant of God did!" they could cry. "Why, he's no better than anyone else. Apparently their God condones murder and adultery. David claims to be holy but he's just as wicked as everyone else. The Lord is no different from Baal."

This puts David's sin into an entirely different category from the sins of Manasseh. When Manasseh sinned, it did not reflect on God because *Manasseh didn't serve God* and didn't even pretend to care about God. When David sinned, it *did* reflect on God's character because David was such a well-known servant of the Lord. We see the same thing happen today when pastors are caught having an affair: it makes the Church look bad, it makes Christianity look bad, and it discredits the pastor's entire ministry. It has terrible, far-reaching consequences that inflicts significant harm on both the Church and the glory of God.

It therefore made sense for God to punish David in a very visible way. God wanted the world to know that David had sinned and the Lord was angry with him. If the child lived he could have become king over Israel (after all, Solomon, who David had with Bathsheba, actually *did* become king). Since the child had been conceived as a product of adultery and murder, that would set a terrible precedent. David sincerely loved his child; we can see this by the way David begged God to spare his life. But that love was not enough to save him.

Now, it may seem unfair for God to strike the child, since the child had not done anything wrong. However, we need to remember that if the child died and went to be with the Lord, the



child's suffering would be over. David, though, would bear that loss for the rest of his life. There are few things in life that are more painful than losing a child. That is something that David would never forget – and he would know that *he was responsible*. The consequences of his sin would be with him for the rest of his life.

This was not the only punishment that King David received. Since David took another man's wife and committed adultery with her, God raised up Absalom, who raped David's wives. Absalom launched a rebellion against the king that made him flee for his life and nearly cost David the kingdom. David suffered greatly for what he had done – because as we have already seen, to whom much is given, much is required.

## Conclusion

We have seen three different occasions where a righteous person prayed and God refused to grant their request. In each of these three occasions, the reason the righteous person was praying was because they had sinned and God was punishing them for their sin. The person was praying that God would spare them the consequences of their sin, and in each case God refused. God wanted them to suffer for what they had done so that they would learn not to do it again, and so that the world would see that God does not condone sin. God was glorified in refusing these prayers because He was chastising His children. A good father disciplines his children and does not spare them, so that they might grow up to become better men and women. God does exactly the same thing.

# When God Afflicts the Righteous

In modern times there are many teachers who proclaim what is commonly called the “prosperity gospel”. They say that if you serve God then He will bless you with money, health, and everything you could ever want. All you have to do is believe in God and all your dreams will come true. This message is quite popular – and why wouldn't it be? After all, this is exactly the way that we think the world should work. The wicked should suffer and the righteous should be happy. What could be more fair than that?

Even though this message is attractive, the truth is that it is completely wrong. There are a number of times in the Bible when God deliberately afflicted the righteous – not because they had done anything wrong, but because they *hadn't* done anything wrong. Sometimes God brings pain and suffering into the life of a righteous person *because* that person is righteous.

Let's take a look at a few of these cases and see how God dealt with their prayers.

## Job

Job is one of the most famous characters in the Bible. He was an incredibly wealthy man who had a deep love for God and a great reverence for Him. In order to make any sense of what happened to Job, you need to understand that he was a very righteous man. In fact, he was so righteous that God Himself pointed that fact out to Satan:

**Job 1:8** And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright

man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?  
9 Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth  
Job fear God for nought?  
10 Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and  
about his house, and about all that he hath on  
every side? thou hast blessed the work of his  
hands, and his substance is increased in the  
land.

As you can see, God actually bragged to the devil about how righteous Job was! That is high praise indeed. God thought very highly of Job – but Satan claimed that Job only served God because the Lord had richly blessed him. The devil said that if God took away Job's blessings then Job would curse God. In order to test Job's faith, God agreed to allow the devil to afflict Job and bring great suffering into his life.

We all know the story of Job, so I'm not going to repeat it here. The point is that the whole reason Job suffered so greatly was because he was a righteous man. Stop and think about that for a minute. If Job hadn't been one of the most righteous people who ever lived then God would never have tested him. The reason Job lost his wealth, his children, and his health was *because he was righteous*. Being righteous actually brought suffering into his life. (That is the exact opposite of the message of the prosperity gospel, isn't it?)

The reason God did this is because God cares a great deal about our faith. It is of tremendous importance to Him. Our faith is much more precious than gold, because only faith can save us from an eternity of suffering in Hell. Gold cannot purchase our salvation, but faith can. Since faith is so important, God tests our faith in order to prove it. He puts us through trials so that we will know if our faith is real or if it is just counterfeit. Faith *needs* to be tested. That is the only way to determine what sort of faith we actually have.

By putting Job through great pain and trials, God tested him to see if he would continue to honor God even in life's most

difficult trials. The Bible is clear that there are times when God puts us through hard times in order to test our faith:

**1 Peter 1:6:** "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:"

All throughout the trials that Job faced, he was confused and in great pain. He didn't understand why God would afflict him and bring him so much suffering. Job demanded to speak with God so that he could set God straight and tell God that He had wronged Job. At the end of the book God answered Job's prayer and spoke directly to Job – but what He had to say only humbled Job and made Job realize that there were many things in life that he did not understand. Job realized that he was not greater than God and he had no right to criticize the things the Lord had done. He repented of his sin and asked God to forgive him – and the Lord did. God then restored his fortunes and gave him peace.

The point is that there may be times in life when we seem to suffer for no discernible reason. It may seem like everything is going wrong all at once, and life just isn't getting any better. We may think that God is against us and that He has abandoned us to drown in our problems and our pain. When those difficult times come we need to remember that God loves us and knows far more than we do. It may be that God is testing our faith to prove it, or there may be other factors that we are unaware of. God may be using our suffering to accomplish His own purposes. The important thing is to trust God through the difficult times. We may think that we know everything, but the truth is we don't.

If we abandon God when the hard times come then that is

a sign that our faith was worthless all along. After all, if we had possessed genuine faith then *it would have stood the test*. If a chair collapses the first time it is sat in then it really wasn't much of a chair in the first place, was it?

## The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul is one of the most towering figures of the apostolic era. God used him in mighty ways – in fact, there aren't many people who could claim to be greater. The Lord used him as the apostle to the Gentiles, and countless souls were saved through his preaching. The Lord used him to write much of the New Testament, and gave him many revelations. On top of all that, God also gave Paul the gift of healing: he could heal people miraculously, and one time he even raised someone from the dead. Paul was truly blessed beyond measure.

Yet there came a time when God decided to bring great pain and suffering into the apostle's life:

**2 Corinthians 12:7:** “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.”

The Bible tells us that Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh”. We're not told what this thorn was, but it's clear that it was causing him great pain. The apostle now had a difficult problem to deal with, and he decided to deal with it the same way that we often do. Since Paul was being buffeted by the devil, he prayed that God would take the problem away:

**2 Corinthians 12:8:** “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.”

As you can see, Paul actually prayed about this affliction on three separate occasions. He earnestly asked the Lord to remove it from his life – and surprisingly, the Lord said no. God told him that He had put this problem into Paul's life *on purpose*:

**2 Corinthians 12:9:** “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

You see, God actually *wanted* the thorn in the flesh to be in Paul's life! God had blessed Paul so richly and given him so much divine revelation that he was in danger of being exalted above measure. It would have been very easy for the apostle to fall into the sin of pride – and God did not want that to happen, because God hates pride. The Bible tells us that God is against the proud but gives grace to the humble. Paul could easily have started thinking that he was better than everyone else – after all, look at all the mighty things that God had done through him!

So God humbled him by giving him a serious physical infirmity. This thorn in the flesh forced Paul to depend on God's grace. Instead of removing the problem, God gave Paul the grace he needed to deal with the issue. In other words, God's grace was sufficient for Paul to get *through* the problem. God put Paul in a position where he would be more dependent upon Christ.

When God told this to Paul, the apostle responded by saying that he would rejoice in his infirmities because they meant that the power of Christ would rest on him. It gave Paul a new perspective to know that this problem was deliberately given to him by God. The reason the Lord did not grant Paul's prayer was because the problem Paul was trying to solve was put into his life for *good*, not for evil.

The same is true for us today. There may be times when God brings problems into our lives for our good (or perhaps for

the good of those around us). We may not like the problems, but one thing we can be sure of is that God will be with us through the trial and will give us the grace that we need to endure it. God never promised Christians a happy life – but He did promise to always be with us and to never forsake us.

## The Martyrs

In the book of Revelation we are told that one day the martyrs will cry out to God and ask Him for something. Now, before we look at what they prayed for we need to remember that these people were murdered because of their faith in Christ. This is not a group of faithless or wicked people; no, these are the faithful servants of God. These men and women truly gave everything for the cause of Christ. They held nothing back and willingly laid down their lives in service of their Lord and master.

When we think about what the martyrs might be doing in Heaven, there are all sorts of things that come to mind. However, I'm pretty certain that we would never imagine what they're actually doing. Revelation tells us that these martyrs are crying out to God because they want Him to *avenge their blood*:

**Revelation 6:9:** “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”

That's a bit startling, isn't it? When we think of Heaven we tend to picture it as a calm, happy place where everyone has everything that they could ever want. However, as you can see,

that's not the case for these martyrs. These people remember that they were murdered and they are *not* happy about it. They want God to avenge them, and they are praying that God will punish those who killed them. They want to see God's wrath poured out upon the world in punishment for all the innocent blood that the world has shed.

Now, there's nothing wrong with this prayer request. It's not sinful for the martyrs to be praying this. The Lord Himself said that vengeance belongs to Him, and He promised to repay those who oppressed His children. The murder of innocent people is a horrible thing, and it does indeed deserve the wrath of God. It is not a sin for a murdered person to cry out to God and ask Him for justice to be done. In our own day we have somehow come to believe that it's wrong for a victim to want his oppressor brought to justice, but the Bible never teaches that.

Since this request is being made by martyrs who are in Heaven, you might imagine that God would immediately grant their request – but He doesn't. Instead God says this:

**Revelation 6:11:** “And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.”

In other words, God tells the martyrs that they need to be patient. It isn't yet time to punish the world for its sins because *not enough Christians have been martyred*. God is going to wait until even *more* people have been murdered for their faith, and then God will bring judgment. Only when the number of martyrs has been filled will God judge the world for its sins.

Does God have the power to stop these people from being murdered? Absolutely. But instead of doing that, God deliberately withholds His judgment. The death of the martyrs is serving a critical purpose in the kingdom of God, and the Lord will not



bring it to a stop prematurely. Too many souls are at stake.

I realize this probably doesn't fit very well with our view of God, but this isn't the first time that we see this concept taught in the Scriptures. Do you remember what Jesus told Peter? It was the same idea:

**John 21:18:** “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.

19 This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.”

Jesus told Peter that it was God's will for the apostle to die by crucifixion. How could such a terrible, painful death possibly be the will of God? Because that death would bring glory to God – and the whole reason we were created in the first place was to bring glory to God.

Peter is not the only one who was told that he would have to suffer for the glory of God. Do you remember what God told Paul after he was converted on the road to Damascus? It was the same sort of thing:

**Acts 9:15:** “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.”

God chose the apostle Paul to do great things *and to suffer great things*. Didn't the Lord have the power to make sure that Paul didn't suffer for his faith? Of course – but that wasn't God's

will. God was glorified through Paul's *suffering*, not through his comfort.

You see, God's overriding concern in this world is *His glory*, not our comfort. We see this all throughout the Bible. This is the song that the 24 elders sing in the throne room of Heaven:

**Revelation 4:11:** "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

Despite what we may think, God does not exist for our pleasure. Instead we exist to glorify and honor God. *This is a key principle*. If you do not understand this concept then your life will never make much sense. There are many times in life when God is glorified by our suffering, and there are also times when our untimely death brings more glory to God than living a long and happy life.

Just take a look at the lives of the apostles. Their suffering and martyrdom is actually part of the foundation of the Church itself. You see, none of us have ever seen the risen Lord, but the apostles claimed to have seen Christ after He rose from the dead. *Our faith rests upon their written testimony*. It is therefore very significant that 11 of the 12 disciples were martyred (only the apostle John was not). This means that the apostles chose *death* over admitting that the whole Jesus thing was actually a hoax. The fact that these men were willing to die in defense of what they taught (and die in brutal and painful ways!) gives tremendous support to their claims. It is powerful evidence that they were telling the truth.

We can see that same factor at work in the life of the apostle Paul. He taught many astonishing things – and he suffered a great deal for those teachings. If Paul had abandoned Christ he could have fixed all his problems and gone back to living a life of prestige and wealth, but he refused to do that. Instead Paul deliberately chose a life of suffering in order to stay true to the

gospel. That provides tremendous evidence that Paul was telling the truth. The fact that Paul suffered so greatly and yet never wavered in his message is a sign that his message can be trusted.

Which brings us back to the martyrs of Revelation. During the Tribulation the antichrist will try to cement his rule over the entire world. The false prophet will institute the Mark of the Beast and will try to force everyone to take it. Those who receive the Mark will be spared, and those who refuse the Mark will be killed. However, God makes it clear that those who take the Mark will be damned for all of eternity. Taking the Mark is a sin that *cannot be forgiven*.

This means that the stakes are very high. When Christians refuse to take the Mark and are killed for it, they are giving their lives as a testimony to the world that the Mark is an evil thing and should be resisted at all costs. They are standing for the truth of the gospel and are making a bold statement to the entire world. Their death is a witness that there is something terribly wrong about taking the Mark. The fact that Christians are preaching against it *and then dying for their message* will be incredibly powerful evidence that they are telling the truth.

The death of all those people will be a far more convincing witness than if all those Christians lived peaceful, happy lives and then died of old age. Remember what is at stake here: if someone takes the Mark they *cannot* repent of it. They will face the eternal wrath of God. Salvation will no longer be possible for them. The testimony of all those martyrs will be a powerful witness that the world will desperately need to hear in that dark hour. Why would God want to stop that witness prematurely?

As you can see, there are greater things in this life than our happiness and comfort. Sometimes God will deliberately allow us to suffer because our pain serves a greater purpose – and that is something we need to keep in mind.



# God Grants Requests That Are Key To His Plan For History

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF TIMES in the Bible when people pray for things that are vital parts of God's plan for history. When these people pray for God's will to be done, God sometimes grants their prayers in amazing ways. Let's take a look at a few of these examples and see what is going on.

## The Birth of Samuel

In the days of the judges there was a woman named Hannah. This woman had a serious problem: she was barren. She was greatly afflicted by this and very much wanted to have a child. When her family went to the temple, she prayed to the Lord that she might have a son:

**1 Samuel 1:10:** "And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore.  
11 And she vowed a vow, and said, 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, and there shall no razor come upon his head."

Now, there are a number of things going on here. The only

reason she prayed this prayer was because she was unable to have children. The only reason she promised to give her child to the Lord was because she was desperate to have a child. If she already had children then she would never have prayed with this much fervency, and she would never have made that vow.

All of these details are important because the child that she gave birth to was the prophet Samuel. Samuel was a key figure in the Old Testament. He replaced the corrupt priests Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas – wicked men who perverted the tabernacle sacrifices and stole from the people. Samuel was a righteous judge who followed the Lord and did what was right. He was also the man God used to appoint Saul as king over Israel – and before Samuel died, God had him appoint David as king to replace Saul.

God had big plans for Samuel – but we need to remember that the reason those plans came to pass was because Hannah was barren and was afflicted by that. Because of the trial that God introduced into her life, Hannah prayed and vowed to give the child to God. The Lord then heard her and gave her the son that she so earnestly desired:

**1 Samuel 1:20:** “Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord.”

Because she was afflicted, she prayed. Because she prayed, the Lord gave her what she desired – and the Lord's will was done.

Do you see how God can use difficult circumstances to advance His will and accomplish His plans? Sometimes tragedy and trial is the mechanism that God uses to accomplish His will. In other words, the troubles that we are going through may be in our lives for a reason. We may not be able to understand what that reason is, but we do know that “all things work together for good for those who love God”. We can see this principle brilliantly

illustrated in the life of Hannah – and we know that we serve the same God that she did. The problems that we suffer through are not random; they are there for a reason.

## The Hidden King

Another time we can see this principle is in the life of Samuel. We have already looked at the time when Israel demanded a king and God agreed to give them one. After Israel made their wicked request, God sent Samuel to appoint Saul as king over Israel. Now, God was not happy about doing this. The reason Israel asked for a king was because they no longer had faith in God. When Samuel went to present the new king of Israel to the people, the prophet made it clear that what they were doing was wrong:

**1 Samuel 10:17:** “And Samuel called the people together unto the Lord to Mizpeh;

18 And said unto the children of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all kingdoms, and of them that oppressed you:

19 And ye have this day rejected your God, who himself saved you out of all your adversities and your tribulations; and ye have said unto him, Nay, but set a king over us. Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes, and by your thousands.”

You would think that after this dire speech the people would have been ashamed and changed their minds, but they didn't. No one repented of their wickedness or mourned that they

had rejected God. Instead they insisted on having a king appointed over them. However, when Samuel went to present their new king to them, Saul could not be found:

**1 Samuel 10:20:** “And when Samuel had caused all the tribes of Israel to come near, the tribe of Benjamin was taken.

21 When he had caused the tribe of Benjamin to come near by their families, the family of Matri was taken, and Saul the son of Kish was taken: and when they sought him, he could not be found.”

So what did Samuel do? He prayed. God then told him exactly where Saul was hiding:

**1 Samuel 10:22:** “Therefore they enquired of the Lord further, if the man should yet come thither. And the Lord answered, Behold he hath hid himself among the stuff.”

Saul was not going to be able to hide. Israel had rejected God and demanded a king, and God was going to make sure that they got exactly what they wanted – even if it led to the nation's destruction. That day Saul found out that you cannot hide from God. The Lord had a plan to use Saul to prove a point, and He was not going to let Saul escape.

Because God answered Samuel's prayer and revealed Saul's hiding place, Saul became king over Israel. He turned out to be every bit as bad as the prophet Samuel had warned. The wicked King Saul proved God's point that Israel was much better off with the Lord as their king.



# The Temple Dedication

During the reign of King David, the king decided to build a temple. However, God told him that although his heart was in the right place, he could not build the temple because he had spent his life as a man of war. The Lord did want a temple to be built, but it would be constructed by David's son Solomon.

Since that was the will of God, David spent years gathering together many of the supplies that his son would need to build the temple. When Solomon finally became king he constructed it. It took seven years to build the temple, and on the day the temple was dedicated Solomon opened the ceremonies with a word of prayer. His prayer is one of the longest in the Bible.

Because this is such a beautiful and elegant prayer, I'd like to take some time to look at each piece. If you ever wanted to know how the wisest man who ever lived approached prayer, this is your answer.

His prayer begins by glorifying the Lord:

**1 Chronicles 8:22:** "And Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven:

23 And he said, Lord God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart:"

Solomon makes it clear that there is only one God, and that there are no other gods like Him. He magnifies the Lord for His faithfulness and goodness toward those who serve Him. Solomon then praises the Lord for keeping the promise that He made to his father David:

**1 Chronicles 8:24:** “Who hast kept with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him; thou spakest also with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day.”

The king is referring to the fact that God had promised David that his son would build the temple – and here Solomon was, a generation later, dedicating that very temple. God had kept His promise and did exactly what He said He would do, and Solomon praised Him for it. The king then asks God to keep the second half of the promise that He made to David:

**1 Chronicles 8:25:** “Therefore now, Lord God of Israel, keep with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him, saying, There shall not fail thee a man in my sight to sit on the throne of Israel; so that thy children take heed to their way, that they walk before me as thou hast walked before me.

26 And now, O God of Israel, let thy word, I pray thee, be verified, which thou spakest unto thy servant David my father.”

The Lord had promised David that if his children served God the way he had, then his descendents would continue to reign over Israel and their throne would be established. Solomon asked God to keep that promise – and God did. The problem was that *Solomon* didn't keep his end of the bargain. Solomon was the one who broke that agreement. Instead of serving the Lord faithfully, Solomon abandoned God when he got old and started serving pagan idols. Because of this God did what He promised and took most of the kingdom away from Solomon's son Rehoboam. The reason this promise did not come true was because of Solomon, not God.

The temple that Solomon built was magnificent. Billions

of dollars worth of materials were put into it, including lavish amounts of silver and gold. It was a building of tremendous wonder and glory. However, in his prayer Solomon pointed out that it paled in comparison to the magnificence of almighty God:

**1 Chronicles 8:27:** “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?”

Do you see how Solomon glorifies God at every turn? The king points out that the universe itself cannot contain the Lord. How much less could the temple he had built possibly do so! Yet Solomon humbly prayed that the Lord would honor the temple and hear the prayers that were made there:

**1 Chronicles 8:28:** “Yet have thou respect unto the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer, which thy servant prayeth before thee to day:  
29 That thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which thou hast said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make toward this place.

Solomon reminded the Lord that He promised to put His name there, and he prayed that God would do exactly that. The king wanted the temple to be a house of prayer – but he knew that if the Lord did not watch over the temple and hear its prayers, then those who prayed were doing so in vain. Everything depended upon the Lord.

The king was aware of Israel's terrible history of disobedience. He therefore prayed that God would grant forgiveness to those who sought it:

**1 Chronicles 8:30:** “And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant, and of thy people Israel, when they shall pray toward this place: and hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place: and when thou hearest, forgive.”

He knew that Israel was going to sin and he knew that they would need forgiveness. Solomon therefore prayed that the Lord would grant forgiveness to those who repented.

The king also prayed that God would judge the wicked and protect the righteous:

**1 Chronicles 8:31:** “If any man trespass against his neighbour, and an oath be laid upon him to cause him to swear, and the oath come before thine altar in this house: 32 Then hear thou in heaven, and do, and judge thy servants, condemning the wicked, to bring his way upon his head; and justifying the righteous, to give him according to his righteousness.”

Solomon longed for justice to be done. He wanted to see the wicked punished and the righteous justified. He therefore prayed that God would watch over His people and judge them. Solomon didn't want the wicked to get away with wickedness, and he didn't want the righteous to suffer unjustly.

The king also prayed that God would forgive Israel if they sinned against Him:

**1 Chronicles 8:33:** “When thy people Israel be smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee, and shall turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray, and make supplication unto thee in this house: 34 Then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin

of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers.”

Solomon knew that Israel has a history of disobeying God, and he knew that the penalty for disobedience was being removed from the land. He therefore prayed that if Israel disobeyed and was carried off into foreign lands, that if they repented God would forgive them and bring them back home. (As you can see, Solomon was wise. He knew exactly the sort of trouble that the nation was going to get itself into. Sadly, he did not foresee his own descent into wickedness and paganism.)

Likewise, if God sent a famine upon the land because of the nation's sin, he prayed that God would forgive the people if they turned from their sin and sought the Lord:

**1 Chronicles 8:35:** “When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, because they have sinned against thee; if they pray toward this place, and confess thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou afflictest them:

36 Then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy servants, and of thy people Israel, that thou teach them the good way wherein they should walk, and give rain upon thy land, which thou hast given to thy people for an inheritance.”

But Solomon didn't stop there. He went on to pray about other possible curses that Israel might face:

**1 Chronicles 8:37:** “If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be;

38 What prayer and supplication soever be

made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house:

39 Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;)

40 That they may fear thee all the days that they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers.”

Solomon seems keenly aware that the nation of Israel was very susceptible to idolatry. He therefore prayed that if God cursed them for their sins, He would forgive them if they repented and cried out to Him. The king was asking God to be merciful to those who sought forgiveness and grace. He wanted Israel to fear God and serve Him and be blessed in the land.

But his prayers were not just for Israel. He also prayed for the foreigners who might visit the land:

**1 Chronicles 8:41:** “Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name's sake; 42 (For they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm;) when he shall come and pray toward this house; 43 Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel; and that they may know that this house, which I have builded, is called by thy name.”

Solomon prayed that God would hear the prayers of the

foreigners who came to Israel and heard of all the great things that the Lord had done. He wanted all the people of the world to know about the Lord and serve Him. The king didn't want the temple to be just for Israel; instead he wanted people from all nations to come and serve God there.

He also prayed that the Lord would be with Israel in battle:

**1 Chronicles 8:44:** “If thy people go out to battle against their enemy, whithersoever thou shalt send them, and shall pray unto the Lord toward the city which thou hast chosen, and toward the house that I have built for thy name:  
45 Then hear thou in heaven their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause.”

As you can see, the king knew that the only way Israel would ever succeed was if the Lord was with them. If the Lord blessed them then they would be blessed; if He sent them rain then their crops would grow. If the Lord evicted them from the land then only the Lord could restore them to it. If they went out to battle the victory would only be won if the Lord fought for them. Solomon was praying that the Lord would hear their prayers and grant them victory, because if the Lord was not on their side then all was lost.

Solomon was especially concerned about the possibility of the nation being carried away captive. He prayed about this possible future judgment at great length:

**1 Chronicles 8:46:** “If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near;  
47 Yet if they shall bethink themselves in the land whither they were carried captives, and

repent, and make supplication unto thee in the land of them that carried them captives, saying, We have sinned, and have done perversely, we have committed wickedness;

48 And so return unto thee with all their heart, and with all their soul, in the land of their enemies, which led them away captive, and pray unto thee toward their land, which thou gavest unto their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for thy name:

49 Then hear thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven thy dwelling place, and maintain their cause,

50 And forgive thy people that have sinned against thee, and all their transgressions wherein they have transgressed against thee, and give them compassion before them who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them:

51 For they be thy people, and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest forth out of Egypt, from the midst of the furnace of iron:

52 That thine eyes may be open unto the supplication of thy servant, and unto the supplication of thy people Israel, to hearken unto them in all that they call for unto thee.”

Solomon prayed that if the Israelites disobeyed God and were carried out of the land, that the Lord would hear them if they repented with all of their heart. He apparently knew that one day that might happen, and he wanted God to forgive His people and restore them if they repented and returned to Him.

The king closed his prayer by reminding God that the Israelites were His people, whom He chose:



**1 Chronicles 8:53:** “For thou didst separate them from among all the people of the earth, to be thine inheritance, as thou spakest by the hand of Moses thy servant, when thou broughtest our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord God.”

As you can see, that is quite a prayer! What Solomon wanted was simple. He wanted God to watch over the nation of Israel, and care for them, and forgive them when they sinned. If the nation was removed from the land because of their wickedness then he wanted God to forgive them and bring them back – as long as they repented with all of their heart and all of their soul.

If you study the history of Israel then you will see that God granted this prayer. When later generations disobeyed, God did indeed send judgment upon the land. However, when the people repented and sought the Lord, He forgave them and healed their land.

Sadly, there came a day when the people refused to repent anymore. The Lord sent them prophets to warn them that judgment was coming, but they refused to listen. They mocked the prophets and persecuted them, and continued to serve their idols. God finally sent the Babylonians against them, who conquered Israel and exiled its people to Babylon. There the Israelites remained for 70 years, until Daniel cried out to God and begged the Lord to forgive their wickedness.

If you look at the things that Solomon prayed for, you can see that he had a genuine heart for God. He loved the Lord and he wanted to see the name of the Lord magnified. This prayer wasn't intended to make himself great, or to obtain riches, or to magnify the temple that he had built. Instead this prayer was all about the glory of God. The king wanted to see Israel faithfully serve the Lord, and he also wanted God to forgive Israel when they fell short. He knew that Israel was disobedient and would fall into sin, and when that happened he wanted Israel to repent and the Lord

to forgive them.

In other words, what he was seeking was the glory of God. He wanted all men to fear the Lord and to walk in His ways. If only Solomon had taken his own advice!

## The Prayer of Daniel

The prophet Daniel was one of God's most faithful servants. He spent his life in Babylon as a high-ranking official who looked out for the welfare of the Jews. There is a great deal that we could say about this man of God, but what we want to focus on in this study is the prayer that he prayed at the end of his life.

There came a day when Daniel was studying the teachings of Jeremiah and discovered that God had promised to only exile Israel for seventy years:

**Daniel 9:2:** “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.”

When Daniel discovered this he immediately prayed. He wanted to see Israel restored to the land, but he knew that the reason the nation had been exiled in the first place was because of their sin. Before asking God to free Israel from Babylon and return them to the promised land, he first humbled himself and sought forgiveness for the sins of the entire nation:

**Daniel 9:3:** “And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:

4 And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;

5 We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

6 Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land."

Do you see how Daniel is interceding on behalf of Israel and seeking forgiveness for their sin? He knows that Israel has been rebellious and disobedient, and he knows that they have not listened to the prophets that God sent to turn them back to him. David therefore asks God to forgive Israel for their great wickedness in rebelling against Him:

**Daniel 9:7:** "O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee.

9:8 O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee."

Daniel tells the Lord that He was righteous to exile them from the land, because Israel had broken God's covenant and sinned against Him. Daniel actually spends quite a lot of time

dwelling on this fact:

**Daniel 9:9:** “To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him;

10 Neither have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

11 Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him.”

Daniel understands why Israel was exiled to Babylon. The destruction of Jerusalem was not a strange, random event; instead it was God keeping His promises:

**Daniel 9:12:** “And he hath confirmed his words, which he spake against us, and against our judges that judged us, by bringing upon us a great evil: for under the whole heaven hath not been done as hath been done upon Jerusalem.

13 As it is written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth.

14 Therefore hath the Lord watched upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the Lord our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth: for we obeyed not his voice.”

If Israel had repented at the warnings of the prophets then they would never have been exiled to Babylon in the first place.

Since the nation did not repent they were forced out of the land. Daniel acknowledges all of this. He knows that Israel has been disobedient and he seeks God's forgiveness:

**Daniel 9:15:** "And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

16 O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us."

Daniel knows that God has been angry with Israel and he prays that the Lord would turn His righteous anger away from them. Daniel doesn't try to argue that Israel has been righteous and deserving, because he knows that they have been very wicked. Instead he casts himself on the great mercies of the Lord:

**Daniel 9:17:** "Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake.

18 O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.

19 O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name."

He knows that the only way the nation will be restored is if God has mercy on them. Daniel passionately seeks that mercy with sackcloth and ashes.

Did the Lord respond to this humble prayer that magnified Him and sought forgiveness for sin? He certainly did! In fact, God actually sent an angel to tell Daniel that his prayer had been heard:

**Daniel 9:20:** “And whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy mountain of my God;

21 Yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation.”

The Lord did exactly as Daniel prayed: He forgave Israel for their great sins against Him, He brought them back into the land, and He raised up Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. What Daniel prayed for was the will of the Lord, and everything that he sought came to pass. God kept His promises – as He always does.

## The Prayers of Ezra

When Israel entered the land of Canaan, God told them that as long as they obeyed God they could remain in the land and God would bless them. However, if Israel disobeyed God then He would remove them from the land. Their options were clear: if

they were obedient they would be blessed, and if they were disobedient then they would be cursed.

Instead of being obedient, however, Israel chose to be disobedient – and they remained disobedient for centuries. Occasionally there would be a period of revival when the people would turn from their sin, but it never lasted very long. Eventually the people became so wicked that they were actually more evil than the pagans who used to live in the land. When God warned them to repent, they refused. So God did exactly what He said He would do: He removed them from the land, sent them into captivity for 70 years, and destroyed the temple.

However, God tempered His judgment with mercy. He told the people that they would only be exiled for 70 years, and when that period was over God would bring them back into the land. The Lord also said that the temple would be rebuilt. He even foretold that a man named Cyrus would issue the edict to have the temple restored:

**Isaiah 44:28:** “That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”

The rebuilding of the temple was a key part of God's plan. Not only was it impossible for the sacrificial system to continue without it, but the Bible prophesied that the Messiah would one day enter into it. If there was no temple then that prophecy (along with others) could not be fulfilled.

It should come as no surprise that everything God promised came to pass. Cyrus really did issue an edict that called on the Jews to return to the land and rebuild the temple:

**2 Chronicles 36:23:** “Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem,

which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.”

In response to that edict, a group of Jews went to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Now, the story of the temple's reconstruction – and the devil's attempt to stop it from being rebuilt – is too complicated to explore in detail here. However, I would like to discuss one part of this fascinating story. One of the things the king did was give back all of the items that had been stolen from the original temple, such as the golden cups that were used in offering sacrifices. Since all of these items had been carried away into a foreign land, that meant these valuable treasures had to be transported back to Jerusalem so they could be used in the new temple. This was great news – but it was also a problem.

You see, carrying a tremendous amount of priceless treasures through miles of open countryside was a very risky business. A caravan with that much wealth would make a prime target for thieves. However, Ezra did not want to ask the king for an armed guard because he had told the king that his God was great and powerful. If that was true then surely God was strong enough to protect them Himself, without the king's help. (After all, if God could *not* protect His own treasures and needed the king's soldiers to do it for Him, then that would make the Lord look pretty weak and powerless, would it?) So Ezra prayed and asked the Lord to glorify His name by protecting their caravan:

**Ezra 8:22:** “For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him.

23 So we fasted and besought our God for this:



and he was intreated of us."

As you can see, this prayer was really all about God's glory. The reason that Ezra didn't want a guard in the first place was to prove that his God was strong and powerful. What Ezra was really doing was asking the Lord to glorify His name and prove to the king that He truly *was* powerful.

The Lord answered this prayer and did exactly as they asked. The journey to Jerusalem was uneventful and the caravan arrived without being robbed. God's name was glorified and the treasures arrived unharmed.

Now, if the caravan had been robbed it would have been a serious matter. Not only would the priests have lost the holy vessels that they needed to restart the temple, but the surrounding nations would have seen the robbery and thought that God was weak. But the Lord did not let that happen. He intervened to make sure that His will was done and His prophecies came to pass.

After Ezra reached Jerusalem and delivered the valuable temple treasures, he discovered that there was another problem. The Israelites had disobeyed the Lord and intermarried with the pagans of the land:

**Ezra 9:1:** "Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.  
2 For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass."

This may seem like a small matter to us, but it was not a small matter to God. The Mosaic Law strictly forbade the Israelites from marrying pagans. God did not want His people to marry pagans who worshiped false gods, for then their hearts might be turned away to idolatry. Marrying outside of God's people was strictly forbidden – and yet that is precisely what the people had done. In fact, the rulers of the people were some of the worst offenders. The people had not been careful to keep their hearts pure; instead they brought idol worship and paganism into their families.

When Ezra heard this he was greatly upset:

**Ezra 9:3:** “And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.

4 Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.”

The magnitude of this sin overwhelmed him. Ezra had been trying to rebuild the temple so that the people could worship the One True God, and it turned out the Israelites were busy bringing idolaters into Israel! How could Ezra ask for God's blessing when the people were committing this great sin? The people could not worship both God and idols at the same time. Rebuilding the temple would accomplish very little if the people were worshiping false gods; in fact, that was why God had destroyed the previous temple in the first place.

So Ezra prayed a prayer of confession. The first thing he said was how ashamed he was for what Israel had done:

**Ezra 9:5:** “And 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,  
6 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.”

When Solomon dedicated the first temple he stood up, spread his hands apart, and looked up toward Heaven. Ezra, though, was too ashamed to do that. He could not bear to look up at God, and instead fell to his knees. He knew the magnitude of Israel's sin and was filled with horror. Ezra did not try to cover up this sin or minimize it; instead he told God exactly how horrible it really was.

Ezra knew why Israel had been cast out of the land in the first place. It was because of their terrible sins:

**Ezra 9:7:** “Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.”

He pointed out that Israel had never stopped sinning against God. The Lord had removed them from the land and exiled them because of their sin, and here they were, still sinning. Even though God had brought the sword upon them and gave them over to the hand of their enemies, they had still not stopped sinning. Their fathers had sinned against God, and they were sinning against God as well. Their exile to Babylon had apparently taught them nothing.

Despite their sin, God had been gracious to them:

**Ezra 9:8:** “And now for a little space grace hath

been shewed from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

9 For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.”

The Lord had returned them to the land and helped them rebuild both the temple and the wall around Jerusalem. God had been gracious to them and shown them mercy – but despite all of this Israel continued to sin against God:

**Ezra 9:10:** “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,

11 Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness.

12 Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever.”

Ezra knew the Lord's commandment in this matter, and so did the people of Israel. God did not want the Israelites to tolerate those who worshiped idols, and He did not want Israel to bring idolaters into their families and marry them. Instead the Lord

wanted Israel to be wholly dedicated to Him. The people were not allowed to marry those who would turn their hearts away from God, but that was precisely what Israel had done. Despite the way God had punished them, Israel still sinned. Despite the great mercy the Lord had shown to them, Israel still sinned.

Ezra then said that God had actually punished the Israelites less than their sins deserved:

**Ezra 9:13:** “And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this;”

God delivered them from their enemies and yet they still sinned. That is the message of this prayer. In fact, in this entire prayer Ezra does not ask God for anything. He does not seek any favors. Instead he confessed Israel's sin and closed by saying that the Lord was righteous and Israel was wicked:

**Ezra 9:14:** “Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldst not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?

15 O Lord God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.”

This is how you pray a prayer of confession. Ezra did not offer any excuses, or try to blame the problem on someone else, or say that this really wasn't that big a deal. He accepted full responsibility for what Israel had done and did not attempt to hide. He confessed that God was righteous and Israel was wicked;

that God had shown them great mercy, and in response Israel had been disobedient. He humbled himself before the Lord and made a full and complete confession of their sin. This is true repentance. This is a genuine, heartfelt, serious prayer – a prayer that means business.

In response to this prayer, Israel confessed their sin and changed their ways. Ezra 10 tells how Israel corrected the problem and offered sacrifices in repentance. There is not time or space to explore that chapter, but there is an important lesson from all of this: after praying a genuine prayer of repentance, you need to follow through and *put an end to the sin*. You cannot simply say “God, forgive me” and then go right back to what you were doing. Prayers that seek forgiveness need to be followed by *a change of behavior*. When Christ forgave people for their sins He would then say “Go and sin no more” (see John 5:14 and John 8:11). He said this because He meant it and *He expected people to obey*.

You should never use forgiveness as an excuse to keep on sinning. It is true that Christians continue to fall into sin, and that we struggle with temptation on a daily basis. However, that is completely different from saying “I’m going to go ahead and sin because God will forgive me.” The apostle Paul had some choice words for people who think that way: their “damnation is just” (Romans 3:8). You see, if you are only seeking forgiveness so that you can keep on sinning, then you have never been saved at all. You are not a Christian; instead you are on the road to Hell. Genuine Christians are characterized by a hatred for sin and a passion for holiness. If you do not have that then you are not of God (I John 2:3-5).

## The Prayers of Nehemiah

We have already discussed how Israel's disobedience led

to the destruction of Jerusalem and the 70-year exile to Babylon. However, God promised them that they would not stay there forever. The Lord told Daniel that they would return to the land and rebuild Jerusalem:

**Daniel 9:24:** “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy.

25 Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.”

This particular passage is one of the key prophecies in the Old Testament, and it contains a lot of information that is well outside the scope of this study. We don't have the time or the space to get into the meaning of the 70 weeks, or what God was intending to accomplish. What I want to focus on instead is what it says in verse 25 – that the city of Jerusalem and its wall would be rebuilt.

Some time after this prophecy was given, a man named Nehemiah asked a friend how Jerusalem was faring. The response that he got was not encouraging:

**Nehemiah 1:2:** “That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are

left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.”

When Nehemiah heard this he was devastated. He immediately wept, fasted, and prayed:

**Nehemiah 1:4:** “And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,”

We have seen this before in the case of Daniel. Before Daniel sought the Lord he wept, fasted, and mourned (that's what the sackcloth and ashes were for). Nehemiah was doing the same thing – he was humbling himself before God. He then made his request to the Lord. Like Daniel, he began by confessing the sins of his people:

**Nehemiah 1:5:** “And said, I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:

6 Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.”



Nehemiah does not claim that Israel was a wonderful nation that deserved God's mercy. Instead he said the same things that Daniel did – that Israel had been disobedient and had not kept God's commandments. He didn't start by making demands; instead he started by mourning over his sin and repenting of it. Nehemiah then went back to the reason why the Israelites were exiled in the first place:

**Nehemiah 1:8:** “Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:

9 But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.”

God said that if Israel transgressed His laws then He would scatter them among the nations, but if Israel kept His commands then God would regather them into the land. Nehemiah repented of Israel's sin and asked God to have mercy on them. He reminded the Lord that the Israelites were His people, and he prayed that the king would grant Nehemiah's request to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem:

**Nehemiah 1:10:** “Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.

11 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. For I was the king's cupbearer.”

As we can see in verse 11, Nehemiah was going to go to the king and ask him to allow Jerusalem to be rebuilt. What Nehemiah wanted was for God to bless his efforts and restore the fortunes of the people of Israel.

In response to Nehemiah's prayer, God used him to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem and fulfill the prophecy that He gave to Daniel. Although the rebuilding project was not easy and Nehemiah faced determined opposition, the Lord was with him. God answered his prayer and used Nehemiah to fulfill prophecy and accomplish the will of God.

The process of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem was not easy. Nehemiah faced a lot of opposition. When Sanballat and Tobiah mocked what Nehemiah was doing, he turned to the Lord for help:

**Nehemiah 4:4:** “Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:

5 And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.”

Nehemiah prayed that the unjust curse of these wicked men would be turned back upon them. He prayed that they would be reproached instead of Israel. These men were acting out of a hatred for the God of Israel. They were the Lord's enemies, and Nehemiah prayed that God would remember their sins.

Even though Nehemiah was under constant attack by people who tried to take his life, he never tried to avenge himself. Nehemiah understood that vengeance belonged to the Lord, and that God was the one who would repay people for the wicked things they had done. Instead of taking matters into his own hands Nehemiah turned the problem over to God and asked Him for

help.

Not only did Nehemiah seek the Lord when he faced trials, but he also sought the Lord when he did good deeds. For example, as the governor of the land he was entitled to a rich salary, but he did not accept it. Instead he performed the office of the governor at his own expense. He then prayed that God would remember the good deeds he had done:

**Nehemiah 5:19:** “Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.”

We saw earlier that Nehemiah went to the Lord for vengeance. Here Nehemiah goes to the Lord for reward. He didn't try to seek the praise of men; instead he sought the praise of God. He did what was right and he did it quietly, and he then prayed that the Lord would remember all he had done.

This is the right way to do good deeds. Christ said that we should do our good deeds in secret so that the Lord would reward us openly. Instead of seeking the praise of those around us, we should serve God with all our heart and seek His praise.

When Nehemiah was troubled and Sanballat made threats against him, he prayed that God would strengthen him so that he might carry out the work of God:

**Nehemiah 6:9:** “For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.”

Nehemiah did not trust in his own strength; instead he prayed that God would give him the strength that he needed in order to carry out the task that God had given to him.

When Sanballat hired men to try to trick Nehemiah into sinning, Nehemiah did not rail against them. Instead he asked God to look upon the terrible things they had done:

**Nehemiah 6:14:** “My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.”

Notice that he did not seek to avenge himself; instead he sought God. Nehemiah spent a lot of time in prayer, and his prayers were richly answered. When God blessed the people and they finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, the enemies of Israel became very depressed. The reason they were upset was because they knew the Lord was the one who had accomplished the task:

**Nehemiah 6:16:** “And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.”

In other words, the Lord glorified Himself in this matter. By answering these prayers and rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, the Lord was glorified. Even the enemies of God were forced to give Him glory, because they had to admit that the Lord was the one who had accomplished it.

After the wall was rebuilt, Nehemiah discovered that Israel was sinning in a number of areas. In response to this he instituted a series of reforms. When Nehemiah found out that the tithe was not being brought in and the temple was being neglected, he condemned the rulers for what they had done and he set the matter in order. He then asked God to remember him for this:

**Nehemiah 13:14:** “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.”

When Nehemiah discovered that the people were violating the Sabbath by buying and selling merchandise on that day, he put a stop to it. He then prayed that God would remember him for this:

**Nehemiah 13:22:** “And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.”

When Nehemiah discovered that the priests had intermarried with pagans and idolaters, he condemned them for it. He then asked God to remember the great wickedness of these priests:

**Nehemiah 13:29:** “Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.”

The book of Nehemiah closes with this phrase:

**Nehemiah 13:31b:** “Remember me, O my God, for good.”

Do you see the heart of Nehemiah? When he had a need, he went to God. When he was troubled, he went to God. When he needed strength, he went to God. When his enemies attacked him, he went to God. When he did something good, he went to God. When men sinned and did terrible things, he went to God. The

Lord was the focus of his entire life. Nehemiah didn't want the praise of men; instead he wanted the praise of God. He didn't want the vengeance of men; he wanted the vengeance of God. He wanted God to bless him and look after him. That is a remarkable testimony, isn't it?

## The Prayer of Jonah

The story of Jonah is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. God commanded the prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them that if they didn't repent of their many sins, God would destroy them. However, Jonah actually *wanted* God to destroy the wicked Ninevites. He didn't want to preach any message there at all because he was afraid that the Ninevites might repent and be saved. In order to make sure that God destroyed them, he boarded a ship and went as far as he possibly could in the opposite direction.

Since Jonah was being disobedient, God caused that ship to get caught in a mighty storm. The storm was so terrible that it threatened to destroy the ship and drown everyone on board. Jonah told the sailors that the storm was sent because of him, and if they threw him overboard the storm would stop. The sailors didn't want to harm Jonah but they ultimately did what he asked.

Now, Jonah no doubt thought that being thrown overboard would be the end of his journey. He probably thought that he would die, and then the Ninevites would never hear the message of God's repentance. God would then destroy them all and Jonah would get his way. But God outsmarted Jonah. The Lord prepared a great fish, and the fish swallowed Jonah.

After Jonah was in the fish for three days he got tired of it. He then prayed a rather selfish prayer. He started out by talking about his predicament:

**Jonah 2:1:** “Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord  
his God out of the fish's belly,  
2 And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction  
unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly  
of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.  
3 For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the  
midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me  
about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over  
me.”

One of the key aspects of this prayer is that it spends a lot of time talking about Jonah. This man is obsessed with himself and his problems. Jonah doesn't begin his prayer by asking for forgiveness; no, instead he talks about the fact that God drowned him in the ocean. Notice how he says that the Lord was the one who cast him into the deep. There's no mention at all of *why* God did that in the first place. Jonah's disobedience isn't mentioned.

In Jonah's distress he looks to the Lord:

**Jonah 2:4:** “Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.”

Jonah then goes back to talking about his plight. It becomes very obvious that he did not like being cast into the sea and sinking to the bottom of the ocean:

**Jonah 2:5:** “The waters compassed me about,  
even to the soul: the depth closed me round  
about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.  
6 I went down to the bottoms of the mountains;  
the earth with her bars was about me for ever:  
yet hast thou brought up my life from  
corruption, O Lord my God.”

Notice how Jonah says that God brought up his life “from

corruption”. In verse 2 he talks about being in Hell (which, in this particular context, is just a reference to the grave). Some scholars think that Jonah actually died when he was cast into the ocean, and that the Lord brought him back to life.

So what did Jonah do during this terrible time? He prayed:

**Jonah 2:7:** “When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.”

Ok, so Jonah is praying. But remember, the reason Jonah was in this predicament in the first place was because of his gross disobedience to God. In the prayers of Daniel and Ezra we saw beautiful passages of repentance. Those godly men humbled themselves and cried out to the Lord for forgiveness and mercy. Does Jonah do this? Absolutely not. This is as close as he gets:

**Jonah 2:8:** “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.

9 But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord.”

Jonah prays and asks God to save him, and at the end of the prayer he agrees to go to Nineveh. But nowhere does he ever seek forgiveness for what he did.

As prayers go, this one is pretty terrible. When Daniel and Nehemiah prayed they began by confessing their sin and seeking the mercies of the Lord. They acknowledged the things they had done wrong and they humbly asked God to forgive them. Jonah, though, doesn't do that. At no point in this prayer does Jonah offer anything that remotely resembles an apology. Instead he talked about drowning, and sinking to the bottom of the ocean, and how unhappy he was about everything. He points a finger at God for drowning him in the ocean, but he never admits that he was wrong for even being on that ship in the first place.



Yet, Jonah did pray and ask God to help him. Even though this was a very selfish prayer, and even though Jonah didn't acknowledge his sin or repent of his hard heart, God still heard him. The Lord delivered him from the fish:

**Jonah 2:10:** “And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.”

Why would God answer such a terrible prayer? Because in the end God got exactly what He wanted. Jonah went to Nineveh and preached the message of God's coming judgment, and the people there responded with repentance. The city was saved *in spite* of Jonah. If God left Jonah in the fish then none of that would have happened – but since God answered Jonah's prayer, the Lord's will was done, the city was saved, and God's name was magnified.



# Prayers For Sins Committed In Ignorance

ONE OF THE THINGS the Bible teaches is that sins which are committed in ignorance are still sins, and God holds people accountable for them. In modern times we like to think that if the sin was committed in ignorance then it doesn't count; God only holds it against us if we knew better.

However, that is not the case. Under the Mosaic Law there was an entire list of sacrifices that were set aside for those type of sins. If you sinned in ignorance you couldn't just say "Oops"; instead you had to make a certain type of offering to God before the Lord would forgive you. We find these sacrifices listed in Leviticus 4. Here is one example:

**Leviticus 4:2:** "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done, and shall do against any of them:  
3 If the priest that is anointed do sin according to the sin of the people; then let him bring for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock without blemish unto the Lord for a sin offering."

As you can see, if a priest sinned in ignorance he had to bring a young bullock and offer it before the Lord. There were other sacrifices if the guilty party was a ruler or a common person. No one was exempted: if you sinned then you had to seek forgiveness for it.

The laws regarding these sacrifices were a bit complicated. The actual sacrifice varied depending on who you were (a priest, a ruler, a common person, etc.) However, it should be noted that if you sinned in ignorance you did have to seek forgiveness for it. God did not simply brush it under the rug or pretend that it never happened.

Let's take a look at a few people in the Bible who committed these type of sins, and examine the prayers that they prayed about them.

## Abimelech

Abimelech was the king of Gerar during the days of Abraham. When Abraham moved to Gerar, he lied and told the king that his wife Sarah was actually his sister. Because of this lie, Abimelech took Sarah into his house:

**Genesis 20:1:** "And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.

2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah."

Now, Abimelech had no way of knowing that Abraham was lying to him. He took Abraham at his word and brought Sarah into his house in innocence. He didn't know that he was actually taking another man's wife. However, the fact remained that Sarah really *was* Abraham's wife, and Abimelech the king had taken her from her husband. The king didn't know that he had sinned, but he had sinned all the same.

Because he sinned and took someone else's wife, God

cursed him and his entire household:

**Genesis 20:18:** “For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.”

Even though Abimelech had no idea that he was doing anything wrong, he was still guilty and God still punished him. However, God had mercy on him. The Lord came to him in a dream and told him what he had done:

**Genesis 20:3:** “But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.”

When God told him this Abimelech protested that he had no idea that Sarah was Abraham's wife, because he had been told that she was his sister. God told him that He understood that, and knew Abimelech was sinning in ignorance:

**Genesis 20:6:** “And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.”

Since Abimelech had acted in ignorance and did not intend to commit a sin at all, God stopped him from making the situation even worse. However, Abimelech was still guilty and God required him to make it right:

**Genesis 20:7:** “Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die,

thou, and all that are thine.”

Not only did Abimelech have to restore Sarah, but Abraham had to pray for Abimelech and ask God to forgive him before God would remove His curse from Abimelech's household. Even though Abimelech had sinned in ignorance, it was still a sin and Abimelech was still in trouble.

So Abimelech did as God commanded him. He returned Sarah, and Abraham prayed for him:

**Genesis 20:17:** “So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children.”

After Abraham prayed, God healed Abimelech and his house.

I realize that to us this entire situation may seem strange and unfair. However, it does make sense if you stop to think about it. A sin is still a sin, even if it is committed in ignorance. If sinning in ignorance was a valid excuse then we could excuse all of our sins by refusing to study the Bible! It would mean that as long as we didn't know what the Ten Commandments were, then God couldn't punish us if we went around murdering or stealing. Do you see how ridiculous that is? Sins are *always* sins. Not knowing that it was a sin is not an excuse.

If you are truly sinning in ignorance then God may keep you from making the situation worse (as He did with Abimelech), but your guilt remains. That guilt must be dealt with, which means that you must seek forgiveness – and that forgiveness must come from the party that you wronged. In this case Abimelech had wronged Abraham, so Abimelech had to restore Sarah to him and ask him to pray for the king.

The other thing that we need to remember is that God had made a special promise to Abraham:

**Genesis 12:3:** “And I will bless them that bless

thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”

As you can see, God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and curse those who cursed Abraham. When Abimelech took Sarah he was causing Abraham great harm (even though Abimelech had no way of knowing that was the case). Therefore, God kept His promise to Abraham and cursed Abimelech.

Even though God still held Abimelech responsible for his actions, God had mercy on him. The Lord revealed to him what he was doing, and Abimelech quickly took action to make it right. God saw the situation and He moved to help Abimelech.

## **The Friends of Job**

The book of Job recounts the fascinating story of a very righteous man who went through a time of great trial and suffering. Since we've already discussed Job earlier in this study there's no need to repeat all of that here. Besides, what we want to take a look at in this section is the friends of Job, not Job himself.

Early in the story the man Job lost everything he had – his wealth, his family, and even his health. When this terrible tragedy happened his friends came to visit him. You might think that Job's friends came to cheer him up and comfort him, but you would be wrong. Job's friends never made any attempt to comfort Job. They never once sympathized with him or tried to help him feel better. Instead they spent about 30 chapters of the Bible attacking him, arguing with him, and telling him what a horrible person he was. The message of Job's friends was that these terrible things happened to Job because he was one of the most wicked people who ever lived. Since he was a bad person, bad things happened to him:

**Job 4:8:** “Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.”

That was their message to Job. The more Job insisted that he was *not* some kind of lunatic serial killer, the more Job's friends insisted that he must be lying to them. After all, if he was as good as he claimed then his life would never have been struck by disaster!

At the end of the book God came and talked to Job. After rebuking him for his arrogance, the Lord turned His attention to Job's friends. Now remember, Job's friends had given him the best theological advice that they had. They sincerely believed the things that they were telling him. They weren't trying to mislead him, and they weren't trying to be false teachers. It just happened that what they were saying was completely wrong. It was an innocent mistake – but God was not amused. The Lord required them to repent of what they had done and seek forgiveness for it:

**Job 42:7:** “And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words unto Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath.

8 Therefore take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job.”

Job's friends were trying to do the right thing. They gave him the best advice they had – but it was the wrong advice, and that mattered a great deal. The Lord was angry with them because the things they said about God *were not true*, and that was a



serious offense. It was so serious that God required them to offer a sacrifice for it and ask Job to pray for them so that they might be forgiven.

Yes, believe it or not, giving out bad theology is *that serious*. God takes it personally. This might seem harsh, but think about it: if people gave out bad information about you, wouldn't *you* take it personally? You don't want people to go out and spread lies about you. Even if the person who is spreading the information sincerely believes that it's true, you still aren't going to be happy with them because the things that they are saying are *wrong*.

God takes bad theology *very seriously*. It's no small matter to Him. The Lord rebuked the three friends of Job and demanded that they seek forgiveness. The three men obeyed God and did as He commanded:

**Job 42:9:** “So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went, and did according as the Lord commanded them: the Lord also accepted Job.”

Once Job prayed for his three friends, the Lord forgave them. As you can see, even though they had sinned in ignorance and were trying to give Job the best advice they had, God still required them to repent, offer a sacrifice, and have Job pray for them. It was not enough to just say “Oops – my bad.”

If you sin in ignorance, you cannot expect God to simply ignore it on the grounds that you didn't know any better. You have to seek forgiveness – and that means you have to pray.



# The Sins of Previous Administrations

SOMETIMES GOD BRINGS immediate judgment upon a nation for the sins that it is committing. Other times, however, the Lord judges a nation for things that it did in its past. Let's take a look at a few examples of God's delayed judgment and see what the Lord did.

## The Gibeonites

During the reign of King David a famine came upon Israel. When the famine entered its third year, David prayed and asked the Lord why the famine was happening. The king received an unexpected answer:

**2 Samuel 21:1:** “Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David enquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.”

In order to understand this answer we need to go back a little bit and take a look at Israel's history. When God freed the Israelites from slavery and brought them to the land of Canaan, He promised to give that land to them as an everlasting possession. However, God also told them to kill all the people who lived in the land. They were to leave no one alive, and they

were *especially* not to make any peace treaties with any of the nations that lived there. God did not want the Israelites to live in peace with the people of those lands; instead God wanted them to destroy all of those wicked people. The Lord warned them that if they spared the inhabitants of the land, the pagans would draw their hearts away from God and lead them into idolatry (which, actually, is exactly what ended up happening).

When the Gibeonites saw Israel approaching they came up with a plan to trick Israel. They went to the Israelites and pretended that they were from a faraway nation:

**Joshua 9:3:** “And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai,

4 They did work wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up;

5 And old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy.

6 And they went to Joshua unto the camp at Gilgal, and said unto him, and to the men of Israel, We be come from a far country: now therefore make ye a league with us.”

Joshua wasn't convinced that the Gibeonites were actually from a distant land. He wanted to know what proof they had that they weren't just another Canaanite nation. The Gibeonites told him that their old sacks and old shoes were proof that their claims were true:

**Joshua 9:11:** “Wherefore our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spake to us, saying, Take victuals with you for the journey, and go to meet them, and say unto them, We are your

servants: therefore now make ye a league with us.

12 This our bread we took hot for our provision out of our houses on the day we came forth to go unto you; but now, behold, it is dry, and it is mouldy:

13 And these bottles of wine, which we filled, were new; and, behold, they be rent: and these our garments and our shoes are become old by reason of the very long journey.”

When Joshua saw the old garments he was convinced that they were telling the truth. He believed the lies of the Gibeonites and made a peace treaty with them. Shortly after making the agreement, however, the Israelites discovered that they had been tricked. At that point it was too late: they had already agreed to not kill them and they could not go back on their word. In fact, when the rest of the Canaanite nations came and attacked Gibeon, Joshua had to defend them:

**Joshua 10:6:** “And the men of Gibeon sent unto Joshua to the camp to Gilgal, saying, Slack not thy hand from thy servants; come up to us quickly, and save us, and help us: for all the kings of the Amorites that dwell in the mountains are gathered together against us.

7 So Joshua ascended from Gilgal, he, and all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valour.”

Even though the Gibeonites had lied to Joshua, and even though it was not God's will for Israel to make peace with any of the nations of the land, God still required Israel to keep the covenant that they had made with the Gibeonites. Since they made a promise, God expected them to keep it.

Israel did keep their promise, right up until the reign of

King Saul. We don't know exactly what Saul did, because his attack isn't recorded in the Bible. All we know is what is revealed in 2 Samuel 21 – that Saul apparently launched an attack upon the Gibeonites and killed them. Saul was a wicked king, and he compounded his wickedness by attacking a nation that Israel had made a peace treaty with.

Keep in mind that Saul had nothing to do with forming that treaty; it was agreed to a very long time ago, by people who had been dead for centuries. Yet, from God's perspective, the nation of Israel had made a covenant with the nation of Gibeon, and God required Israel to keep her agreements. Since Saul violated that agreement and slaughtered an innocent nation, the Lord sent His judgment upon the nation of Israel.

This wrath happened to fall upon Israel during the reign of King David. Now, David was not a party to any of this. It was King Saul who had slaughtered the Gibeonites, not David. Yet the punishment still fell during David's administration. It would seem that God had given the nation of Israel a chance to repent of their sin and make it right, but they had not taken that opportunity. When decades went by and Israel still refused to repent, the Lord sent the famine upon them.

Since the famine happened during the reign of King David, it was his task to remedy the situation. David could not simply pray and ask God to remove the famine because the famine was sent as a judgment against the entire nation. In order to fix the situation David would have to somehow atone for the wrong that Saul had done. That meant David had to seek out the few surviving Gibeonites and ask what they would accept in restitution:

**2 Samuel 21:2:** “And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel

and Judah.)

3 Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? and wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the Lord?"

Since Saul had killed the Gibeonites and their children, the Gibeonites demanded that Saul's children be put to death. (They couldn't ask for Saul to be killed because he was already dead.) They didn't think it was fair that their children were dead but their killer's children were still alive:

**2 Samuel 21:5:** "And they answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel,

6 Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord did choose. And the king said, I will give them."

You might think that there was no way David would agree to put Saul's children to death, and even if he did there was no way the Lord would accept it. But that is not the case. David gave the Gibeonites what they wanted, and the Lord accepted this and stopped the famine:

**2 Samuel 21:14:** "And the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son buried they in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the sepulchre of Kish his father: and they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God was intreated for the land."

There are several points that we can gather from all of this. First, God expects nations to keep their promises. Even if the

promise is an old one, and even if it is not to their advantage to keep it, nations must do what they said they will do. Nations *must* keep their word. If a nation goes back on its word then God will judge that nation for its faithlessness. Now, that judgment might not come at the time of the incident; the Lord may delay it for many years, to give the nation a chance to repent and make it right. But the judgment will eventually come.

The second thing we can see is that when God's judgment comes, you cannot simply pray to God and ask Him to stop His judgment. Instead you have to make restitution. This means that you must go to the offended party and make things right – and only then will God relent. If you have wronged someone then you must make it right; you can't just “pray it away” and leave the wronged person hurt. It doesn't work that way. If you want God's blessing on your life again then you *have to make it right*.

## Manasseh

We've already talked about King Manasseh earlier in this study, but there is another aspect to his reign that deserves discussion. King Manasseh was a very wicked king. Although he did eventually repent and change his ways, the first part of his reign was filled with horrific violence. In fact, he was so wicked that he led the people of Judah to be even worse than the pagans who used to live in the land:

**2 Kings 21:9:** “But they hearkened not: and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel.”

In fact, the king's actions were so outrageously evil that the Lord condemned the entire nation with this curse:



**2 Kings 21:10:** “And the Lord spake by his servants the prophets, saying,

11 Because Manasseh king of Judah hath done these abominations, and hath done wickedly above all that the Amorites did, which were before him, and hath made Judah also to sin with his idols:

12 Therefore thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle.

13 And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab: and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.

14 And I will forsake the remnant of mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies;

15 Because they have done that which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day.”

God said that because the people of Judah had become so incredibly evil, the Lord was finished with them. He was going to destroy the city of Jerusalem and turn them over to their enemies. This wasn't going to be just another invasion – no, it would be much worse. The Lord was going to bring an unbelievable, apocalyptic judgment upon the nation. God was *angry*, and the time for judgment had come.

As we saw earlier in this study, Manasseh did eventually repent of his sins. God had him carried back to Jerusalem, where he became king once more. Manasseh then instituted a series of reforms. He cleansed the city of its idols, he stopped the idolatry

that was going on in the temple, and he urged the nation to serve the Lord. Manasseh turned to the Lord and did what was right.

Since Manasseh repented and changed his ways, you might think that God would cancel His judgment – but that's not what happened. The judgment of God still came, exactly as He promised. The Lord did delay His wrath until the reign of a future king named Jehoiakim, but it still came:

**2 Kings 24:1:** “In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant three years: then he turned and rebelled against him.

2 And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldees, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servants the prophets.

3 Surely at the commandment of the Lord came this upon Judah, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he did;

4 And also for the innocent blood that he shed: for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood; which the Lord would not pardon.”

Even though Manasseh prayed to the Lord and humbled himself, and even though God forgave him and restored him to his kingdom, *God refused to pardon the innocent blood that had been shed*. You see, innocent blood defiles the land:

**Numbers 35:33:** “So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are: for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.”

The blood of all those innocent people cried out to the Lord for judgment (much like the martyrs that we looked at earlier). Since Manasseh repented, God delayed His judgment – but He refused to cancel it altogether. That blood still had to be avenged. It had to be paid for, and the only way it could be paid for was by destroying the nation that had shed it. God's judgment may have been delayed, but it still came.

In this case it was not enough to simply pray and ask God for forgiveness. The Lord did forgive Manasseh, but the innocent blood still had to be paid for – and that meant the nation *had* to be judged. This judgment could not be prevented by prayer. Israel had shed so much innocent blood that atonement could only come by the destruction of the nation and the death of its inhabitants.

Just because judgment does not come immediately does *not* mean that judgment will never come at all. God may be delaying judgment due to repentance or due to His mercy, but He will not cancel it altogether. God judges the sins of nations, especially when they are guilty of shedding innocent blood. That is one national sin that the Lord will not pardon.



# How Modern Christians Pray

NOW THAT WE'VE SEEN the different types of prayers that are found in the Bible, let's take a look at the sort of things that we tend to pray for. There are actually some pretty significant differences between Biblical prayers and modern prayers. In fact, some of our most common prayers aren't the least bit Biblical at all.

## *What Do We Pray For?*

In general, our prayers usually fall into one of four categories:

- We pray over our food
- We pray for healing
- We pray for things in our life (or in someone else's life) to get better
- We pray for souls to be saved

There are prayers that don't fall into one of these categories, but I suspect that the vast majority of prayers made by Christians today fall into one of those four groups. However, this raises an interesting question: just how common are these types of prayers in the Bible? Let's take a look and see what we find.

# Praying Over Food

It's very common for Christians to pray over their food before they eat it. They typically say something along the lines of "God, please bless this food that we are about to eat". I have to ask, though: why do Christians pray this prayer? What do they expect God to do in response to their request? Are Christians hoping that God will make their food more nutritious or more digestible? What does "bless this food" even mean?

I know this seems like a strange thing to ask, but stop for a minute and think about it. When you pray you are actually going before the Almighty God of the universe and asking Him for something. What, exactly, are you asking for? Is there something that you actually want from Him as you pray over your food, or are you just wasting God's time? If you don't know what you want from God then *why are you praying in the first place?*

I have asked a number of people what they're doing when they pray over their food, and most people have no idea. From what I can tell most people haven't given it much thought. It's just a religious ritual that we perform. We're expected to do it and we've been taught that it's the right thing to do, and so we go along with everyone else and do it. But if you search the Bible for some commandment that Christians are supposed to pray over their food before they eat it, you are going to be sorely disappointed. There just isn't one.

Now, there are a few occasions in the Bible where someone prayed over their food before they ate it. Jesus blessed the food that He fed to the multitude – right before He multiplied it:

**Matthew 14:19:** "And 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 the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the

multitude.

20 And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full.”

After Jesus blessed the food, He was able to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes. Notice, though, that Jesus did not pray “with every head bowed and every eye closed”. Instead He looked up to Heaven when He did this. Note also what this particular prayer actually accomplished: after Jesus blessed the food, He was able to feed *thousands of people* with it and take up twelve baskets worth of leftovers.

Jesus did exactly the same thing when He fed the crowd of four thousand people:

**Mark 8:5:** “And he asked them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven.

6 And he commanded the people to sit down on the ground: and he took the seven loaves, and gave thanks, and brake, and gave to his disciples to set before them; and they did set them before the people.

7 And they had a few small fishes: and he blessed, and commanded to set them also before them.

8 So they did eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets.”

Once again we see that Jesus blessed the food and then used it to feed a massive crowd of thousands of people. I'm pretty sure, though, that when most people pray over their food this is *not* what they are trying to accomplish.

There is one other occasion in the Bible where food was prayed over, and that is communion. We find this in the book of Luke:

**Luke 22:19:** “And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.”

In this particular case Jesus thanked God for the food that the Lord provided. Now, that makes a lot of sense. The Bible commands us to be grateful for everything that the Lord has done for us, and that includes giving thanks to God for His provisions. Praying over our food in order to *thank God for it* is a very reasonable thing to do. In fact, when you stop and think about it, we should probably be thanking God for a lot more than just our food.

But I fear that we have gone far beyond that and haven't given much thought to our prayers. Why are we asking God to bless the food “to the nourishment of our bodies”? Are we eating rocks? Do we think our food has been poisoned? Do we expect our meals to be indigestible, and we're somehow hoping that if we pray over it we will get less heartburn? If that's not what we really think then *why do we say those things?* Should we really be praying nonsense to God?

Having said all of that, there actually *is* a case where the Bible suggests it might be wise to pray over your food, and that is if you are afraid that eating those particular foods might be sinful. Paul mentions this in one of his letters to Timothy:

**1 Timothy 4:3:** “Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving:

5 For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.”



I realize this entire concept might seem strange to us, but it was a genuine concern in the early Church. Under the Mosaic Law there were all sorts of foods that Israel was not allowed to eat. For example, eating pork was forbidden: if you ate any pork products then you were engaging in sin. When Christ came and the Church was born, some people thought that Christians were required to keep those same dietary restrictions. However, the Lord made it clear that this was not His will. As you can see from these verses, we are now allowed to eat all foods. Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused. You do not have to abstain from meats, or from pork, or from any other food that was forbidden in the Old Testament. If you are genuinely worried about it then just pray over it and it will be fine.

I strongly suspect, though, that very few modern Christians have ever been worried about this particular problem. We are not praying over our food because we think it's sinful to eat bacon; we're praying over our food out of habit. We have been taught that's what we should do, and so that's what we do. Now, if you want to take a moment to thank the Lord for the meal that He has so graciously provided to you, then that's great. That makes a great deal of sense, and that is something that 1 Timothy said we should be doing anyway. We *should* be thanking God for all sorts of things in our life. However, if you want to spend ten minutes impressing everyone at the table with how skillful you are at praying eloquent and flowery prayers, then you have lost your way. God is *not* impressed with long prayers and He is *especially* not impressed when you do things for the sole purpose of convincing others how great you are.

Incidentally, praying over people's food is easily one of the most common prayers that any Christian prays. However, as we've seen, that sort of prayer is *extremely* rare in the Bible. It may occupy a large part of our prayer life, but it occupied a very small part of the prayer life of a typical person from Biblical times. As we've already seen in this study, people from ancient times tended to pray about far more serious matters.

## ***Prayers For Healing***

It is very common for churches to take up prayer requests for people who are sick, injured, or near death. In fact, churches actually devote quite a bit of time to this. Christians are quick to ask other people to pray for them when they are sick or in need of healing.

Unlike praying over food (which is quite rare in the Bible), prayers for healing are very common. One example of this that we have already discussed is the case of King Abimelech. When Abraham went to stay in Gerar, he told the king that his wife Sarah was actually his sister. Since Abimelech thought Sarah was unmarried, he took her into his palace. In return, God punished the king's entire family:

**Genesis 20:18:** “For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.”

God then went to Abimelech in a dream and told him what he had done, and Abimelech then restored Sarah to Abraham. After Abraham prayed to God, the Lord healed them:

**Genesis 20:17:** “So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children.”

In this case King Abimelech never intended to take another man's wife. He believed Abraham and thought that Sarah really was just his sister. He never meant any harm and was trying to do what was right. As soon as he learned of his sin, he repented and made things right. That is when Abraham prayed for him and God healed him.

As you can see, this is a little different from most of our prayer requests. In this case a man had unknowingly wronged someone else, and so God brought illness into the family. Are there times when God strikes people with illnesses because of their sins? Absolutely – and Abimelech is not the only instance of this in the Bible. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he condemned that church for abusing the Communion table and using it as a drunken revelry. Because of the shameful way they were treating something holy, God struck them with illnesses and *even death*:

**1 Corinthians 11:28:** “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.

29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”

God does indeed punish some sins with illness – but before you panic I'd like to point out that these were really enormous, easy to spot sins. Abimelech took someone else's wife, and the Corinthians were getting drunk at the communion table. These are pretty black-and-white issues. Neither of them were subtle points of theology.

When illnesses strike us today, it's not easy to determine why it happened. God doesn't send us a postcard in the mail to explain what's going on. In many cases it probably has nothing to do with sin; in other cases, though, it might. However, it's probably a waste of time to look for deeper, “hidden meanings” in the disasters that strike us. You see, if there is sin in our life then we should be repenting of it *regardless* of whether we are sick. If we have wronged someone then we should seek their forgiveness and try to make it right. If we are sinning then we need to stop. If we do those things and live with a clear conscience then we won't have much to worry about. We might still get sick, but we can

feel confident that it's not due to our sin because we've already addressed that.

Another example of illness due to sin can be found during the reign of King Hezekiah. We've actually discussed this very example earlier in our study. When Hezekiah was king he held the first Passover that Israel had celebrated in many years. In order to celebrate the Passover you had to do it the way that God required, and you had to be ceremonially clean. Since Israel hadn't celebrated the Passover in generations, there were a number of Israelites who celebrated it in violation of God's standards. This was an understandable mistake (after all, these people had never seen anyone celebrate it before in their entire lives), but it was still a sin – and God struck them with disease for what they had done. Sins committed in ignorance are still sins, even if they were done with good intentions. However, King Hezekiah prayed for these people and asked God to forgive them and honor the intention of their hearts:

**2 Chronicles 30:18:** “For a multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim, and Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover otherwise than it was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, The good Lord pardon every one  
19 That prepareth his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary.  
20 And the Lord hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people.”

As you can see in verse 10, God listened to Hezekiah and healed them.

This example still isn't like most of our modern prayer

requests for healing. These people weren't going about their normal lives when they suddenly came down with cancer. The reason these people were sick was because God was punishing them for violating His commandments. However, when Hezekiah prayed and asked God to honor their intentions, He relented and healed them. These people were trying to do the right thing; they just missed the mark.

Typically when we think of prayer requests for healing we are talking about praying for someone who has contracted a disease. As it turns out, we do see that in the Bible. For example, Paul prayed for the father of Publius, who was sick of fever. The Lord healed him immediately:

**Acts 28:8:** “And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him.”

There was also a time when Peter prayed over a woman *who had died*, and God raised her back to life:

**Acts 9:40:** “But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.”

The Bible certainly does have examples of people praying for healing, and God did respond to those prayers. But here's the thing: when the apostles prayed for someone they were always healed *immediately*. Even if they were *dead* they were still healed immediately! You will find no cases in the Bible of an apostle praying over someone's illness for months and months, and then watching that person make a slow and gradual recovery. In each case the sick person was prayed for *one time*, and then they were instantly healed of whatever was afflicting them.

I know how strange that sounds, but that's the way it

worked in the Bible. Take a look at these instructions from the book of James:

**James 5:14:** “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:

15 And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.”

This passage says that if someone was sick, they were to call for the elders of the church to come and anoint them with oil and pray over them. When that happened the person *would* be healed. There was no “ifs” or “maybes”; instead there was immediate, miraculous healing.

That's rather curious, isn't it? We certainly don't see that today. These days it's common to pray over someone for months, and even that is no guarantee that the Lord will heal them. So what has changed? Are we just not praying in faith? Why don't we see this kind of healing anymore? I mean, sure, sometimes we see people miraculously healed, but it's extremely rare and it is certainly not guaranteed.

I'd like to point out that although this sort of miraculous healing was common in the early days of the apostles, it actually stopped later on in their ministry. We just looked at a case when Paul prayed over the father of Publius and healed him. Yet, later in Paul's ministry, this happened:

**2 Timothy 4:20:** “Erastus abode at Corinth: but Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.”

Look at that – Trophimus was sick! When Paul left him behind he was *still* sick. I have no doubt that Paul prayed over him and asked God to heal him, but God obviously said no. The prayer that healed Publius' father did *not* heal Trophimus.

The problem was not that Paul had changed or that the apostle somehow lacked the necessary faith. What most people don't realize is that the gift of healing was only given for a short time at the very beginning of the ministry of the apostles. The reason it was given was to establish their authority as ministers of God. When Paul prayed over Publius' father and he was healed, that was a sign to Publius that Paul actually was an apostle and his gospel message could be trusted. Remember, in those days there was no New Testament because it hadn't been written yet. This means that anyone could come along and claim to have a message from God. Miracles like the gift of healing established the credibility of the apostles and enabled people to tell the genuine ones from the false ones.

These miracles were critical in the early Church, but as time went on they stopped being necessary. It was not God's will to sustain the Church through miracles. Once the New Testament was written and the foundation of the Church was laid, God chose to work through His Word to reach the lost and make disciples of the nations. We find this in Hebrews 1:

**Hebrews 1:1:** "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,  
2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;"

Yes, it's true that in ancient times God spoke through visions and angels and so forth, but the Lord no longer does that. Instead He has chosen to speak to us through His Son. Jesus has given us the Word of God, which contains everything that we need:

**I Timothy 3:14:** "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned

them;

15 And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Now that we have the Scriptures we don't need miraculous signs to tell us who is speaking for God and who is not. Everything that we need is contained within the Word. Those who speak in accordance with the Bible are from God, and those who preach messages that violate the Word are not from God. Miracles are completely unnecessary – in fact, they're irrelevant. Even if false teachers were somehow able to perform miracles, we would still know that we should reject them because *their message does not agree with the Bible*. (If they did agree then they wouldn't be false teachers!) The Bible is all the authentication that we need. It therefore makes perfect sense that the gift of healing has been retired; it has accomplished its purpose.

Does God still heal people? Of course – but it is rare. God may grant the earnest prayers of His people and He may provide miraculous healing, but it is not something that is guaranteed. It all depends on His will. If God didn't always grant healing when the apostle Paul prayed for it, then that should tell us something. Miraculous healing is a gift, not a right.

## Prayers For Difficult Circumstances

When something is going terribly wrong in our life (and



that could be a very long list of things!) we tend to pray about it. We ask God to fix the difficult circumstance and make our lives happy again. Maybe things aren't going well in our marriage or in our job. Maybe we're having financial troubles. It could be a whole lot of things. When we run into a life problem, we bring it to the Lord and ask God to fix it so that things will be well again.

This is not a bad thing. After all, Jesus did tell us to cast all of our cares upon Him, for He cares for us. Bringing these things to the Lord is a wise thing to do. We know that the Lord hears us, and we know that there are times when He grants our request.

One example of this that we have already studied is Samuel's mother Hannah. Before Samuel was born Hannah was barren:

**1 Samuel 1:6:** “And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb.”

So what did Hannah do? She prayed:

**1 Samuel 1:10:** “And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore.”

As we saw in our study, the Lord granted her request. Hannah gave birth to the prophet Samuel, who became a key figure in Israel's history.

Sometimes, though, the person with the serious problem is someone else – a friend of ours, perhaps, or a neighbor. When that happens we go to the Lord and ask Him to help that person. People commonly do this today, and people did the same thing in Bible times. For example, there was a time when the apostle Peter was arrested:

**Acts 12:1:** “Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the

church.

2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)”

Herod had just killed James, and the king was probably going to kill Peter as well. Peter was in a bad place – but Acts 12:12 tells us that people gathered to pray for him. They wanted God to set the apostle free. There was no chance of this happening on its own accord, so people prayed. They knew that God was mightier than Herod and they had faith that the Lord could deliver out of any circumstances.

The Lord heard their prayer and delivered Peter from prison and certain death. God sent an angel, who set Peter free:

**Acts 12:7:** “And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.”

Does God grant deliverance? Absolutely! But there are also times when God does *not* grant deliverance. Earlier in this study we saw a time when Paul was sorely afflicted. The apostle asked God to free him from this affliction, but the Lord refused:

**2 Corinthians 12:7:** “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for

thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Was Paul in troubled by this affliction? Yes. Did Paul pray over it? Yes – three times. Did God deliver him from it? *No*. The problem wasn't Paul's faith; the issue was that God *wanted* Paul to suffer and be afflicted. It was God's will for Paul to be in pain so that he might be humbled. The pain would force Paul to depend on Christ and not think highly of himself.

As we have already seen earlier in this study, there are times when God *deliberately* brings pain and suffering into our life. In those times the reason God does not grant our prayers is because God actually *wants* us to be in that situation, because it is serving His purposes. In those cases God is not going to fix the problem; instead He is going to give us the grace to live through it. What He wants to do is give us the strength to endure it. It's true that if we didn't have that pain then our lives might be more comfortable, but from God's perspective our lives would actually be *worse*.

Another example of this can be found in the case of Baruch. You probably haven't heard of him; he's a rather obscure person who lived in the days when Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. This is what God told him:

**Jeremiah 45:2:** “Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, unto thee, O Baruch:

3 Thou didst say, Woe is me now! for the Lord hath added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest.

4 Thus shalt thou say unto him, The Lord saith thus; Behold, that which I have built will I break down, and that which I have planted I will pluck up, even this whole land.

5 And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek

them not: for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the Lord: but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest.”

Baruch was a depressed man. He had been a faithful helper of Jeremiah, and he did everything the prophet had asked him to do. He sought the Lord and read the words of God to the people, and he did his best to get them to repent and change their ways. Baruch did all the right things and worked hard to turn Israel back to righteousness, but the nation refused to listen. Instead of repenting they actually *burned* the words of God and persecuted Jeremiah.

So God did exactly what He said He would do: He sent armies against Jerusalem to destroy it and enslave the people. Even though Baruch was faithful, he did not have a happy life. His country was destroyed, his people refused to repent and were killed, and he probably lost everything that he owned. Baruch was a very unhappy man.

What did God tell him? Well, as you can see, the Lord said that Baruch lived in a bad time. Since the nation refused to repent, God was bringing “evil upon all flesh”. “All flesh” meant, well, everyone. Baruch was never going to have a happy and comfortable life because things were going to go horribly for everyone. This was a time of judgment, not blessing. God was in the middle of destroying *everything*, and that was going to have an impact on Baruch – even though Baruch had done all the right things.

All God would give Baruch is one promise: that He would spare his life. Baruch would experience a great deal of pain and sorrow, but God would watch over his life and make sure that he wasn't murdered. That was the most Baruch could expect.

Now, the point of this passage isn't that God will make sure that His children are never murdered. The fact that 11 of the 12 apostles were martyred proves that. The point is that when we live in bad times, we shouldn't expect to live comfortable lives while everyone around us suffers. It should be enough for us that

we haven't died along with everyone else.

As you can see, there are times when God will hear our prayer and deliver us from the problems that afflict us. There are also times when God will *not* deliver us because He is actually using the difficult circumstances to accomplish His will. In those cases God will instead give us the strength to endure the problem.

Finally, if the whole world is on fire and everyone around us is dying, it's a little much to ask God to give us comfort and easy living. When God is burning nations to the ground and leveling cities, it should be enough that we are still alive. That in itself is a gift from God.

## Praying For Salvation

One of the most common prayers among Christians is praying for someone else's salvation. However, this type of prayer is actually very rare in the Bible. In fact, I could only find one example of this. It is found in Paul's letter to the Romans:

**Romans 10:1:** “Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.”

We do see passages where we are told to pray for our enemies. The Bible commands us to pray for others and pray for those who persecute us. But if we want to find an explicit example of someone praying for the salvation of the lost, we are left with only this one instance – and even it isn't as clear as we might like.

You see, in Romans 10 the apostle Paul is saying that he sincerely wants Israel to be saved. However, Paul goes on to say that Israel has rejected the gospel and God has deliberately

blinded them to the truth. Because of this blindness God has grafted in the Gentiles and made them partakers of the gospel. Paul then says that Israel will remain blind until the Lord has finished building His Church. Only after the “fulness of the Gentiles” has been brought in will God move to save Israel. Eventually all Israel will be saved, but not until that point in the future.

In other words, even though Paul *wants* Israel to be saved and is praying for it, he already knows that Israel is not going to be saved for a very long time. Paul actually does not expect his prayer to save Israel, because he already knows what God is going to do and what the outcome will be.

This means that Paul's prayer for salvation is quite different from the ones that we make. When we pray for someone to be saved, we have no idea if they will be saved or not. In fact, the whole reason we are praying is because we want to see them get saved. Paul, though, *already knows* that Israel had been hardened and won't be saved until a certain time, at which point all of them will be saved. When Paul is praying for Israel's salvation, he is praying for something that he already knows is going to occur and that God has already promised to do.

This means that the only example in the Bible of praying for someone's salvation is nothing like our own prayers. This may seem strange, but it's not an accident. In order to understand why, we have to go back and understand how people get saved to begin with. Stop and think about it for a moment. When we ask God to save someone, what are we really asking Him to do?

You see, there are two different view of salvation. Some people believe in something called “predestination”, where God chooses to save some people and chooses not to save other people. People who believe this way are called Calvinists. There are other people who believe that God offers salvation to everyone, and it is up to each individual to choose God. People who believe this way are called Armenians. Armenianism teaches that God has already done everything He possibly can for every individual; all God can do now is wait and see who chooses Him.

Now, there is a great deal that can be said about Calvinism and Armenianism, but that is an enormous subject that is well beyond the scope of this book. People have written entire books on this subject. I do have an opinion on this topic, but getting into that opinion and defending it would detract from what this book is about.

What I would rather do is look at the topic of prayers for salvation from both perspectives. One thing that everyone agrees on is that if our name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, we will be saved. Now, people commonly assume that our names are written in that Book the moment we are saved, but that is not the case. The Bible actually tells us that our names were written there before the world began:

**Revelation 17:8:** "The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is."

In other words, all the names that are in that Book were written there before *anyone* was born. The list is set and it does not change. This in itself does not support Calvinism or Armenianism, because both sides have a reasonable explanation for this passage. A Calvinist would say that God decided the names and wrote them down, and an Armenian would say that God looked into the future, saw who would choose Him, and then wrote those names down. You can argue either way.

But here is the thing. If you are a Calvinist then you believe that God alone decides who will be saved and who will not be saved. That decision was made a long time ago, and God is not going to change that list no matter what you pray. The list is what it is. You can pray all you want but it will not change anyone's fate, because the fate of every person has already been

decided.

If you are an Armenian then you believe that God has already made the offer of salvation to everyone, and it is up to each person to choose God. There is nothing more that God can possibly do because the decision isn't up to Him. If it actually *was* up to God then that would mean that God did more to save some people than He did to save others, which would mean that God chooses some people over others. People who believe that are called *Calvinists*. Being an Armenian means that you believe God has already done everything that He possibly can. Therefore, if the decision isn't up to God then why are you asking God to save people? *It's out of His control!* (Now, if you don't believe that it's out of God's control then that means you believe a person's salvation *is* in God's control. That means you are a Calvinist.)

In either case there is no reason to believe that praying for the lost would make any difference whatsoever. Calvinists believe that God has already predestined the elect to be saved, and Armenians believe that it's up to each person and *not* up to God. Regardless of who is right, neither group has a strong case for praying for the lost.

I realize that you might pray for someone's salvation and then see them get saved, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they were saved in response to your prayer. I know that is hard to accept, but you have to realize that people in the Bible did *not* pray for the salvation of others. Instead they did something completely different. You see, the Bible doesn't tell us to pray for the lost. Instead it commands us to *preach the gospel* to the lost:

**Mark 16:15:** "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

If you want to see your family and friends gets saved then you should be sharing the gospel with them. The Bible is quite clear that God has chosen to use the *preaching of the gospel* (not



prayer!) to save those who believe:

**Romans 1:16:** “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

**1 Corinthians 1:21:** “For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.”

What God wants us to do is spend our time *preaching the gospel*, because God works through the gospel to save souls. That is His mechanism for saving the lost – the preached Word of God. If you want to save someone's soul then preach the gospel to them. That *alone* has the power to save those who believe.

If you don't believe me then go back and read those verses again. It doesn't say that *prayer* is the power of God unto salvation; it says that the gospel is. It doesn't say that God chose to use the foolishness of prayer to save those who believe; no, God chose *preaching*. People are saved by believing the gospel.

You might say that you are just praying for your friends to listen to the gospel, or maybe be receptive to it. You might be praying that God would soften their hearts or convict them of their sin. No matter how you phrase it, though, what you really want is for God to go into that person's life and do something so that they get saved. There are people who believe that God has that kind of power, but those people are *Calvinists*. If you believe that God needs to do “extra stuff” in a person's life in order to push them “over the hump” and get them saved, then you are a Calvinist, not an Armenian.

If you truly have a heart for the lost and want to see them come to Christ, then share the gospel with them! 1 Corinthians 1:21 could not be more clear: God has chosen to use *the gospel* to save them that believe. Your best chance of seeing people get

saved is through sharing the gospel. Some people may listen to it and others may call it foolishness, but that is what God has chosen to save the lost – and the gospel is full of saving power.

# Key Principles of Prayer

AS WE HAVE SEEN during the course of this study, the Bible has a lot to say about prayer. Now that we've had a chance to examine the different prayers found in the Bible, it's time to take a look at how God answers prayer – and how He does not. What conclusions and lessons can we take away from our study?

## 1. How Does God Answer Prayer?

The Bible is clear that God cares about the righteous:

**Psalm 34:15:** “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry.

16 The face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.”

Not only does God love His children, but He also listens to them and hears their prayers. The Lord cares deeply about the righteous – and He is against the wicked. In fact, He is so passionately against wickedness that one day He will exterminate it entirely.

However – and this is important – this does *not* mean that God will always grant all of the prayers of the righteous. We have already seen cases where a righteous person prayed and God did not grant their request. Paul was troubled by a thorn in the flesh, and God refused to remove it because Paul needed that thorn in

his life to stay humble. Sometimes suffering is part of God's will for us – and when that is the case, no amount of prayer is going to make that suffering go away.

## Suffering

The truth is there are times when it is actually God's will for us to suffer. This is a hard thing to hear, but it's true. Take a look at what God once told Paul:

**Acts 9:15:** “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.”

The Lord said that Paul was going to have to do a lot of suffering, and that is exactly what happened. The apostle Paul went through all sorts of difficult trials in his life. Just take a look at his testimony:

**2 Corinthians 11:24:** “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings

often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

The apostle actually suffered even more than this, because at the end of his life he was martyred. That is a *lot* of suffering! (Can you imagine how you would feel if all these things happened to you?)

It some ways this really doesn't seem fair. After all, the apostle Paul was a man of God and the Lord used him in mighty ways. Not only was he the apostle to the Gentiles, but God also used him to write a large portion of the New Testament. He was a key figure in the early church – and yet look at how much he suffered! He knew the Lord and he loved God, and yet his life was full of very difficult trials.

We often think that since we're Christians we ought to have only good things happen to us. After all, God loves us and His ears are open to our cry – so surely God will bless us and curse our enemies, right? But somehow we overlook passages like these:

**James 1:2:** "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

**1 Peter 1:6:** "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:"

There will be times in our life when God will try our faith, and that isn't going to be pleasant. Just take a look at Job: in a single day he lost his possessions and his family, and a short time later he lost his health as well. Job lost everything because God wanted to see if he would continue to serve the Lord when life became difficult.

God may choose to do the same thing to us. He may not test us in exactly the same way that He tested Job, but we *will* be tested. When that day comes and our life is filled with suffering and pain, will our faith hold fast or will it break? Will we continue to trust God when everything goes against us, or will we abandon God and accuse Him of failing us?

God puts *tremendous* value on our faith. Notice how Peter says that our faith is much more precious than gold! You see, faith is the only thing that can save our soul. Gold may be able to purchase many things, but it can't save us from Hell. Faith really *is* more precious than gold – and God will test it to see if it's genuine.

One of the very valuable things that testing does is show *us* if our faith is real or not. We may think that we're strong Christians, but when the times of trial come we will learn all sorts of things about ourselves that we never realized. We may discover that our faith isn't nearly as strong as we thought it was – or we may learn that our faith has what it takes to endure life's storms. It's possible that we might find areas of hidden sin that we weren't aware of. These times of trial may be difficult and painful, but they are very important because *they reveal who we really are*.

## **Deliverance**

The Bible tells us repeatedly that the Lord cares about the righteous. After all, didn't He die to save us? Didn't Jesus shed His own blood so that we might be forgiven? The Lord paid a very high price so that we might be saved. God hears the cries of

the righteous and He provides deliverance for them:

**Psalm 34:19:** “Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.”

**Psalm 30:2:** “O Lord my God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast healed me.”

**Psalm 34:6:** “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.”

**Psalm 107:6:** “Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses.”

**Psalm 107:13:** “Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses.”

**Psalm 120:1:** “In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and he heard me.”

The problem is that we read verses like these and assume that whenever we cry out to God, He will *always* deliver us out of our problems. We think that when life is unfair and we are being persecuted, all we have to do is cry out to God and He will immediately fix the situation. After all, God loves us and cares about us. We know that God hears our prayers, so surely that must mean He will always come to our aid.

But does God always heal everyone's sickness? I'm afraid not. If God answered every prayer for healing then no one would ever die – but people still die, don't they? There are many times when God *doesn't* provide healing. There are also times when God does not rescue us from our oppressors. Eleven of the twelve disciples were martyred, and all over the world today Christians

continue to be imprisoned and murdered. Since they were killed by their enemies, that clearly means that God did not deliver them. As we discussed earlier, the reason the Lord let them die is because their death would advance the gospel and bring Him glory. Sometimes the kingdom of God is advanced not through our deliverance, but through our pain.

Some people think that if God isn't granting their prayers, that means they haven't prayed hard enough or they aren't righteous enough. However, that logic doesn't apply to the disciples, does it? Look at all the great works and mighty miracles that God did through them! God clearly loved them, cared about them, and heard their prayers – and yet He still did not deliver them.

The whole reason that we exist in the first place is to glorify God. Everything that God does is centered around His glory. The theme of the Bible is not the salvation of man; it is God pursuing His glory. *God* is the center of history, not man. We are not the main theme at all; we are instead the vehicle that God has chosen to use to reveal His glory. If God can be most glorified when we live a life of suffering and pain then that is the life God is going to give us. If God can be most glorified by our dying a martyr's death then that is what will happen to us. In the end it isn't about our comfort at all. It is all about God's glory. The Lord will answer our prayer requests in ways that are consistent with glorifying His name and advancing His interests on Earth. We must remember that He will *not* answer them in ways that maximize our own comfort and peace, because *that is not His goal*.

We need to keep in mind, though, that all the promises in the Bible are still true. Do you know what happens when a Christian dies? The problems in their life come to an end. Wicked men may be able to hurt Christians as long as they are still in this world, but once the righteous are in Heaven the wicked can no longer torment them. Christians may have trials and pains in this life, but in the next life there will be rest and glory. We must never forget that God has promised to put a final end to all



wickedness and suffering and pain and tears. There is a new world coming – a world that will be inhabited by righteousness and perfection. Better days are on the way, and they will last forever.

Paul put it this way:

**Romans 8:18:** “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

It may be God's will for us to do a great deal of suffering in this life. If that turns out to be the case, we can remember that Christ also suffered greatly in this life so that we might be saved. We are not greater than our master. If Christ suffered then surely it's not strange if we must suffer as well. Are we better than Christ? Do we deserve to have a better life than He did? Of course not!

But the time of suffering *will* come to an end. Paul was clear that the sufferings of this life, as serious and painful as they may be, simply cannot be compared with the glory that is coming. What God will give us on that fateful day will dwarf any pain that we might have experienced in this life. In other words, better things truly are coming.

## Our Refuge

This verse puts it well:

**Psalms 142:5:** “I cried unto thee, O Lord: I said, Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living.”

God loves us and cares deeply about us. He really is our

refuge. Other people may fail us and abandon us when times get hard, or when life goes against us. They may choose to walk away when it isn't convenient for them to be our friend. However, even if everyone around us fails, God will never fail. He will never stop loving us and He will never stop watching over us. God promised to be with us until the very end of the age, and that is exactly what God will do – because God always keeps His promises. He is our refuge, and we can run to Him in times of trouble.

As the psalmist says, God is also our portion. This means that the Lord is the one thing that really matters in this life, and God alone is what sustains us. We may find other things in life that we enjoy for a time, but none of them can compare to the everlasting God. It is God alone who can keep us going during the seasons of pain and the times of trial. It is God alone who will keep us by His divine power and who will bring us safely home to Heaven. Only God can give us peace when there is simply no peace to be had, and only God can mend our broken hearts and make us whole again. We may not be able to solve our problems or even find a way to keep going, but the Lord will always be there. All we need to do is call upon Him in prayer, for He cares for us.

## 2. Hindered Prayers

Did you know that there are things that can hinder our prayers and keep God from answering them? It's true. There are certain things you can do that can actually block your prayers. We find this topic discussed in the book of 1 Peter:

**1 Peter 3:7:** “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as

being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."

In this passage Peter is saying that men ought to honor their wives and treat them with respect. In fact, he said that if men fail to treat their wives as they deserve, then that failure will actually hinder their prayers.

Now, this rule does not just apply to husbands. There is actually a general principle at work here. It boils down to this: if you are doing wrong to someone else and treating them without love, then don't expect God to answer your prayers. God is not going to help you if you are sinning against other people. Before God will hear your prayers you have to go to that person and make things right. Only after you have stopped your sinful behavior and sought forgiveness will God hear your prayers.

This same principle applies to giving as well. This is what Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount:

**Matthew 5:23:** "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;

24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

What Jesus is saying here is very simple. If you have wronged someone then don't bother trying to give God any gifts, because He has no interest in them. Instead of making offerings to God, go and make things right with the person that you wronged. Once you have done that you can then come to God and offer your gift. God will accept it – but until you make things right, your gift (and your prayers!) will be rejected.

If you don't want your prayers to be hindered then maintain good relationships with those around you. Do not wrong other people. If you do happen to sin against others then go to them and make it right. God will not hear your prayers if you are

doing terrible things to those around you.

### 3. God Is Not On Our Side

When it comes to prayer, there is a key principle that I think we often misunderstand. You see, when problems arise in our life we often think that God should be on our side. After all, aren't we His children? Aren't we trying to do the right thing? Aren't we in the right and our enemies in the wrong? Why would God allow these terrible things to happen?

But the truth is that *God is not on our side*, nor will He *ever* be on our side. Look at what the Lord once told Joshua:

**Joshua 5:13:** “And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?”

14 And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my Lord unto his servant?”

Joshua asked this man a very simple question: are you for us or are you against us? God told him the answer was *neither*. God wasn't on anybody's side because it doesn't work that way. The Lord, after all, is the Most High God. The reason He wasn't on Joshua's side was because Joshua was looking at it all wrong.

The truth is there are only two sides: there is God's side and there is the devil's side. That is all there is. You are either with God or you are against God. God will never be on your side because *you don't have a side*. God instead expects you to be *on*

*His side.* He requires you to repent of your sins and put your faith and trust in Christ, and then give your life to Him as a living sacrifice. God commands you to work for His glory and the advancement of His kingdom. God is not going to work for you because He expects you to be working for Him. He is the boss and you are the servant.

The real question is this: whose side are you on? Can you honestly say that you are on God's side and that you are fully devoted to Him no matter what the cost? Or do you expect God to be on your side and do whatever it is you want? Do you understand that you are the servant and God is the Lord, or do you expect God to be serving you? Do not make the mistake of thinking that God is on your side. That simply isn't how it works. God is not on your team – but you ought to be on His.

## 4. We Reap What We Sow

One of the facts of life that is easy to overlook is that God wants us to experience the consequences of our actions. In life we tend to do as we please, and then when something terrible happens we ask God to deliver us. In other words, what we really want is the ability to do whatever makes us happy, and then be spared the consequences of our terrible actions. We only want to experience the good outcomes; we don't want to face any negative results of our decisions.

But that's *not* how it works. God wants us to experience the consequences of the things we have done, whether they be good or bad. It is important to God that our actions have consequences. Take a look:

**Galatians 6:7:** “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.  
9 And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

Do you see what's going on here? If we sow to our flesh and encourage our sinful desires then God wants us to reap the consequences of that choice. In that case the Lord *wants* us to experience corruption and loss. Bad things will happen because *we did things that were wrong*. This isn't strange and unusual; it's perfectly normal. It is how God designed things to operate.

When this happens we can't expect prayer to rescue us from the problems that we created. Yes, God can forgive us for what we've done, and yes, God can help us change our lives. A humble and contrite heart is of great value in the sight of God. But prayer is not a tool that we can use to escape the consequences of our actions so that we can keep on sinning. If we sow evil then we shouldn't be surprised if we reap evil as well.

Likewise, if we sow to the Spirit then that will produce a very different kind of harvest – a blessed harvest. That is also something that God wants us to experience. Since we did things that were good and right, God wants us to reap the harvest that comes as a result of that. Now, it may take a long time for that harvest to come; we may have to continue working for what seems like a lifetime before we see any results. But the results *will* come, as long as we don't give up and walk away. We just need to keep on going.

The point is that our actions really do have consequences, and prayer is not a mechanism to escape those consequences and live a more comfortable life. Although there are times when things happen to us that we couldn't possibly have prevented, there are other times when we are our own worst enemy. If we continue to follow evil and do terrible things then we shouldn't be surprised if we reap a painful harvest.

## 5. God Uses Evil People For His Glory

One of the most common questions that people have is why evil exists in the world. If God exists then why doesn't He stop all the wickedness and crime that is going on? After all, surely an all-powerful God could make sure that nothing bad ever happened to anyone, and yet we see bad things happening all around us. Why does God allow these things to take place? Why doesn't He just step in and put an end to it? All over the world there are Christians praying for evil to be stopped, and yet evil continues to exist. Why doesn't God answer those prayers? Why does He allow wicked men to commit so many terrible crimes?

Before we answer that question, we need to remember that when God created the world there was no pain or suffering or death or disease. God created a world that was perfect in every way. It was a true paradise. God then gave mankind one commandment: in order to maintain that paradise and live forever, all mankind had to do was *not* eat of the Tree of Knowledge. That's it. If mankind had obeyed God then all would be well. The world would still be a paradise today, and there would be no hatred or strife or wickedness.

But mankind did *not* obey that commandment. Instead they chose to sin and follow their own will, and when they did that they brought suffering and death into the world. This means that *mankind* chose to turn the world into what it is today. We are the ones who took God's perfect world and broke it. We are responsible for all the evil that is in the world – and yet, in our wickedness, we blame *God* for the state of this planet. We act as if it is His fault, when in reality mankind is responsible. None of this would be happening if it hadn't been for that first sin.

Since mankind is responsible for destroying God's paradise, the Lord would be perfectly within His rights to let us all suffer and die. Remember, God is the victim here. He didn't

have to step in and save us from our sins, but He chose to save us anyway because He loved us. God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross and take upon Himself the punishment that we deserved. Jesus shed His own blood in payment for our sins so that all who repent and believe on Him might be saved. That is how much He loves us! Jesus paid the ultimate price in order to ransom us from our sins and grant us immortality.

But that's not all. God has also promised to put an end to all wickedness and death. On the great and terrible Day of Judgment the Lord will take the devil and all of the wicked and will cast them into the Lake of Fire. He will then create a new Heaven and Earth where there will never again be any more pain or suffering or tears. God is going to restore paradise, and all those who put their trust in Jesus will live there forever with Him.

So God *does* have a plan to fix this world and put an end to all evil, and He will bring it to pass. In the meantime, though, the world is full of evil. Now, there are times when God steps in and puts an end to it. For example, take a look at what happened to King Herod:

**Acts 12:21:** "And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

23 And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost."

When Herod sat on his throne, the people praised the king and called him a god. Since Herod accepted the divine praise and did not give the glory to God, the Lord struck him dead. Herod took glory that belonged to God, and Herod died for doing so. As you can see, there really are times when God acts to put an end to wickedness.

But there are also times when God allows the wicked to



do terrible things. Take a look at what God allowed King Saul to do:

**1 Samuel 22:18:** “And the king said to Doeg, Turn thou, and fall upon the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned, and he fell upon the priests, and slew on that day fourscore and five persons that did wear a linen ephod.

19 And Nob, the city of the priests, smote he with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword.”

King Saul commanded Doeg the Edomite to slaughter the *entire city of Nob*, right down to the women and children, and Doeg did exactly that. God did not step in to intervene and save anyone in that city of priests; instead God allowed this massacre to happen. A whole city was wiped out – and this was not just any city. This was a city of *priests*.

This brings up all sorts of questions. Why didn't God intervene to stop this senseless slaughter? Surely God could have prevented Saul from doing this, right? And yet God allowed it to happen. This is exactly the sort of evil that we see in the world around us. We see terrible people doing terrible things, and sometimes it seems like God is nowhere to be found.

However, there is more to the story. The reason God allowed this to happen was because it was the fulfillment of a curse. You see, back in the days of the judges there was a priest named Eli who had two sons – Hophni and Phinehas. These sons were incredibly wicked men who abused the Lord's sacrifices and actually stole from the offerings themselves. Since they despised the Lord and profaned His holy sacrifices, the Lord pronounced a curse upon them and their entire family line:

**1 Samuel 2:31:** “Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's

house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house.

32 And thou shalt see an enemy in my habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel: and there shall not be an old man in thine house for ever.

33 And the man of thine, whom I shall not cut off from mine altar, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart: and all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age.”

Abusing the holy sacrifices of God and stealing from them was an *extremely* serious matter. It was so serious and so vile that when these men refused to repent, God cursed them. The Lord promised to kill them, their families, and all their descendents, and that is exactly what He did. A few years later Hophni and Phinehas were killed in battle, but their descendents survived – for a generation. Then God used the wicked king Saul to kill the rest of them and fulfill His curse. In other words, God was doing exactly what He promised to do.

There are times when God uses wicked people – like King Saul – to punish other wicked people. There was once a time when Habakkuk complained to God that He was failing to punish the Israelites for all their wicked sins. In response God told him that He had a plan. He was raising up the Chaldeans to come and kill them:

**Habakkuk 1:6:** “For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwellingplaces that are not their's.

7 They are terrible and dreadful: their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves.”

When Habakkuk heard this he was horrified, because the

Chaldeans were much more wicked than the Israelites. Yet they were the vessel that God chose to bring His judgment. There are times when God raises up wicked people and gives them power so that they might bring judgment upon His enemies. The Lord cares about the sins of nations, and He sometimes raises up wicked men in order to punish other nations. Make no mistake: God used the wicked Chaldeans to punish a wicked Israel. That is not the first time that the Lord judged a nation for their sins, and it was not the last either. God still judges people and nations for their sins today.

There are other times when God allows wickedness to endure in order to test people's faith. This is something that we have already studied. In the book of Job, God allowed the Sabeans to come and murder all of Job's servants so that God could test Job's faith. God is able to use both the righteous and the wicked for His glory and His purposes.

One thing that we do know is that God will always be with us through every trial, and will give us the strength to endure. This doesn't mean that life will be easy; life is rarely easy for the righteous. But it does mean that we do not walk through this life alone.

## **The Final Judgment**

In this life there often seems to be wicked people who get away with their wickedness. We want to see the wicked defeated and their evil schemes brought to an end, but instead we see wicked people who are incredibly successful and who don't seem to have the same problems that other people have. Even the psalmist Asaph complained about this very issue:

**Psalm 73:3:** "For I was envious at the foolish,  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

4 For there are no bands in their death: but their

strength is firm.

5 They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.

6 Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment.

7 Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish."

It just doesn't seem fair, does it? We pray that God will deliver us and bless us, but instead we are faced with problems and trials. Meanwhile, wicked people have "more than heart could wish". It just seems wrong. Since God is against the wicked then shouldn't they be suffering? Since God is for the righteous then shouldn't they be blessed? Why then do wicked people prosper while the righteous suffer? What is going on?

Part of the problem is that we expect the books to be balanced in this life. We want the Lord to avenge us right here and now. We want to see the wicked brought to justice *immediately*. We forget what Abraham told a certain rich man:

**Luke 16:23:** "And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

24 And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

25 But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented."

Yes, it's true that in this life the wicked may receive many good things while the righteous suffer. But you have to remember that those good things are the only good things that the wicked will receive *for all of eternity*. After they die they will be cast into

a place of fiery torment, where they will be in pain for the rest of time. They will never again experience any good things; instead they will experience unbearable and unending pain.

But that is not the fate of the righteous. Now, it's true that in this life they may suffer greatly. They may even lose their lives for their faith in Christ. But when they die they will go to Heaven, where they will be comforted and receive many good things. The righteous will experience the endless joy that can be found at the throne of God. They will live for all of eternity in a place where there is no pain or suffering. They will receive good things *forever*.

It is far better to receive pain for a short time in this life and then an eternity of joy, than to receive good things in this life and an eternity of unbearable torment. Despite what you may think, and despite the way it seems sometimes, *the wicked are not winning*. They are the ones who should be pitied, for their eternal doom is coming and they will not be able to endure it.

One day God will judge the wicked for all the wicked things they have done, but that will not happen in this life. It will instead happen at the Great White Throne judgment:

**Revelation 20:11:** “And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

14 And death and hell were cast into the lake of

fire. This is the second death.

15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

When that final judgment day comes, all of the wicked will be judged for all of their evil works. None of their deeds will be overlooked; every last sin will be brought out and exposed. It will be a terrible, terrible day for them. On that day all of the wicked will be found guilty and will be cast into the Lake of Fire, where they will be tormented forever. That is the day the wicked will receive the due penalty for all their sins.

Do you see the terrible things that are awaiting in their future? The wicked are going to get away with *nothing*. All they are doing in this life is storing up wrath for the day of judgment. They aren't escaping justice; they are just making things much worse for themselves.

Think of it this way. When you go to a fancy restaurant, the waiter sits you down at a table and gives you a menu. During the course of your meal you can order as much as you want. You can get an appetizer, an entree, and a dessert – or even two desserts, if you want. You can keep on ordering and the staff will keep on bringing out the food. However, once the meal is over the waiter will present you with your bill. That is when you have to pay for what you've ordered.

Life is like that. During this life you can commit all kinds of sins. You can do terrible things and cause all sorts of harm. You can be rebellious, you can hate God, and you can live a life of complete and total disobedience. However, once you die you will have to pay the bill. When Judgment Day comes you will have to stand before God, and you will be required to pay for every last sin you have committed. If your sins are not paid for by the blood of Christ then you will be cast into Hell and tormented for all the endless ages of eternity. When the wicked add more items to their tab, it doesn't mean that they are getting away with something; it just means that the Day of Judgment will be that much worse for them.

## 6. God Is Not Giving You New Revelation

One thing I've noticed over the years is that Christians like to claim that God personally told them to do whatever it is they're doing. It's quite common to hear things like "God told me to preach this message" or "God told me to phone that person" or "God told me to make that decision". In each case people are claiming that they were not acting of their own accord; instead God Himself ordered them to do whatever it was they did. They were acting under Divine Command.

This phenomenon greatly disturbs me. Whenever someone begins a sentence with "God told me..." I inwardly wince. As soon as a person claims that they are acting under the direct command of God, they instantly make themselves unaccountable. Any criticism of their actions becomes impossible. After all, it wasn't *their* idea; they were just doing what God told them to do! God said jump, so they jumped. You can't even have a rational discussion about what they just did because any criticism of them instantly becomes criticism of God. Saying "God made me do it" is an easy way to make sure that no one can question them; it grants complete immunity.

However, does God actually speak to people in that manner? Does God *really* talk to people today and send them Divine messages telling them what to do and when to do it? I am convinced the answer is no. God speaks to us through His Word, and although He does guide our lives and watch over us, He does *not* speak to us directly. He may use our consciences to convict us and He may use our friends to remind us of the truth, but God is no longer in the business of talking directly to His people. That is not how He is working in this era of history.

What a lot of people don't realize is that the Bible is all the divine revelation that we need:

**2 Timothy 3:16:** "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto **all** good works."

This passage says that the Scriptures have been given to us so that we can be perfect. It tells us that the material contained within its pages is enough to *thoroughly* furnish us for *all* good works. In other words, there are no good works that are outside its scope. The Bible says that it has 100% of the divine revelation that we need in order to live in this age. No other revelation is necessary. We don't need to pray and ask God to give us new information, because God has already given us everything that we need.

Now, when the Bible claims to be sufficient then it is either telling the truth or it is lying. If it is telling the truth then we do not need a "personal word from God". It means that we don't need God to divinely speak to us because He has *already* told us everything that we need to know in His Word. Since God has *already* spoken, all we need to do is read what He has said.

However, if God *does* speak to His people today then 2 Timothy 3:17 is a lie. It means that the Bible is *not* enough and that we need additional information that God failed to supply. It means that the Bible does not fully equip us for life but instead leaves us unprepared for many situations, and our only hope is for God to speak to us directly and fill in the critical information that He left out of the Bible. Since this train of thought is utterly ridiculous (because every word in the Bible is true, including 2 Timothy 3:17!), that means there are no such things as "personal words from God".

But, some may say, isn't it true that God *used* to speak directly to His people? Didn't God speak to people through dreams, angels, and so forth? Yes He did, but the Bible tells us



that He no longer does that. His method of speaking to us has changed:

**Hebrews 1:1:** "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,  
2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;"

As you can see, things are different now. In the past God spoke in many different ways, but now God only speaks to us through His Son Jesus Christ. The words and teachings of His Son can be found written in the New Testament. What was written is complete; we do not need anything more than what the Scripture provides. Praying and asking God to provide more information that what He gave us in His Word is the wrong thing to do.

People have this idea that in Biblical times it was common for God to lead His people by speaking directly to them, but that is not the case. Very few people in the Bible were ever spoken to directly by God. According to Dr. Sam Kurien, "The only individuals who heard from God more than twice in the Old Testament are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Aaron, Joshua, David and Solomon. These eight and no more!" Hearing from God was not common; it was extremely rare. There are large numbers of prominent Bible characters who never heard from God *even one time*, as Gary Gilley points out:

"Below are some of the important characters found in the Old Testament who never heard directly from God as far as we know: Caleb, Esther, Mordecai, Ruth, Joab, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jehoshapat, Jonathan, most of the judges, Ezra, Nehemiah, Shadrack, Meshach and Abd-nego (although they may have been comforted by the

Son in the fire). In addition whole categories of key leaders never heard from God personally, including none of Jacob's sons except Joseph, none of the kings of Judah after Solomon, none of the judges except for Gideon, none of the returning exiles and none of David's mighty men or military leaders. This is just a sampling; many more could be cited." (Gary Gilley)

On top of that, when God did speak to people He always did so in a very direct and obvious manner. As Dr. Sam Kurien pointed out, "When God spoke, it was in an audible voice, or on occasions through a vision or dream. There is not a single instance of God speaking to the mind or heart inaudibly through an inner voice." People today like to say that "God spoke to my heart", but *never one time in the entire Bible did God ever speak to anyone in that manner.* There is zero Biblical evidence that God communicates that way. The Holy Spirit does convict sinners and does help us understand the Scriptures, but even the Spirit is never depicted as whispering to a person's heart. There is not one case of that anywhere in the Bible.

Moreover, when God did speak in times past He talked about big-picture issues, not personal life decisions:

"When God did speak in Scripture it almost always dealt with the big picture of what God was doing in the outworking of His redemption program or the life of His people in general. You will search in vain to find God telling people what job to take, how many donkeys to buy, or what land to purchase — except as it was related to the bigger issue of God's dealings with His people." (Gary Gilley)

Today people believe that when they are faced with a decision, they can just ask God what to do and God will divinely

Speak to them and tell them what decision to make. The problem with this idea is that the Bible simply does not support it. This type of divine advice is exceedingly rare in the Bible. There were a few men – like King David – who inquired of God and received direct responses, but very few people had that privilege, and those who did only used it in the most extreme circumstances. It has never been the ordinary experience for the average believer.

You will simply not find any verses in the Old or New Testament that say “When you are faced with a decision, ask God about it and He will divinely impress the correct choice upon your heart.” God guides us, yes, but *not* through direct revelation; instead He speaks to us through His Word. God does shape our lives, but He does so by His divine power – the same power He uses to raise up nations and cast them down. God is not sitting in Heaven hoping that you will make the right decision so that His plans will work.

But, you might say, isn't all of this negated by the fact that “personal words from God” really do exist? After all, God really does speak to people and tell them to do things! People pray for guidance and then in their minds they suddenly know what to do. Sometimes people get an urge to call someone, and lo and behold something good comes of it. Isn't that proof that God really does speak to His children today?

I'm afraid not. You see, there is an enormous difference between “I suddenly knew what to do” and “God Himself told me which choice was right”. Likewise, there is a big leap between “I heard a voice” and “That voice was definitely God”. In each case *you* are deciding that the voice must be from God. You are ruling out the notion that it might be your own idea, and the reason you are ruling it out is because you believe that God talks directly to His children. Therefore, if you ask God what to do and you suddenly think of something, you are deciding that whatever you just thought of must have come from God. *But that is not the only possible explanation.*

One of the ways we know that these “personal words from God” are not actually from the Lord is because God cannot lie

and God cannot be wrong. Whenever the Lord speaks He always speaks authoritatively. In fact, the way that prophets were tested in Old Testament times was by evaluating the outcome of their predictions. If they ever got *anything* wrong then they were false prophets and God demanded that they be immediately executed:

**Deuteronomy 18:20:** "But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die.

21 And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken?

22 When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him."

So what about these "personal words from God" – are they 100% accurate? Absolutely not. Sometimes they work out and sometimes they don't. When something good happens people "know" it was from God, but when things go terribly wrong they say that they "misunderstood" – or they blame God for giving them bad advice! These "personal words from God" cannot be trusted 100% of the time, and that is bad news. A prophet that had that kind of track record was labeled a false prophet and was not to be trusted *at all*. In fact, he was actually supposed to be killed for falsely claiming to speak for God.

In other words, the Bible has a lot of negative things to say about these "personal words from God". The Bible says that the Scriptures are all we need to thoroughly furnish us for all good works, and that no other revelation is required. It says that God has stopped speaking to people through dreams and visions and direct revelation, and that He now speaks to us through His Son. It says that very few people in all of history have ever heard

directly from God Himself, and that God has never talked to anyone by directly impressing something upon their mind. It also said that anything that is not 100% accurate is not the voice of God.

All of this is very strong evidence that “personal words from God” are just our attempt to escape responsibility for our own decisions. Instead of being honest and saying “I decided to do that”, we claim that it was God's doing and we can't be held responsible. Instead of admitting that perhaps the vision was *not* from God or that perhaps the dream really was just a dream, we claim that God was giving us extra information that He did not include in the Bible – information that we somehow *have* to have, even though 2 Timothy 3:17 says that the Bible is enough to cover all situations that we will ever encounter.

That last point often gets overlooked. If personal words from God exist, then that means the Bible is an open book that can be added to at any time by anyone who claims to have heard from God. It means that the Bible isn't finished, but instead is a work in progress that is being constantly enlarged. After all, it's impossible for Jesus to speak with anything less than absolute authority! If Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, told someone something then whatever He said is absolute truth and we should add it to our Bibles. If Jesus gave someone a tour of Heaven and revealed all kinds of new information about it, then we should add a new book to the Scriptures. After all, Jesus has spoken and every one of His words is flawless. Therefore we should be busy collecting all of this new revelation from Jesus and add it to our Bibles so that everyone can know what *else* Jesus had to say.

I realize this line of reasoning sounds ridiculous, but that is exactly where the belief in “personal words from God” ends up. The Bible simply does not support the idea that the Scriptures is an open book that can be added to as the need arises. We are told that we should contend for the faith that was *once* delivered to the saints:

**Jude 1:3:** "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was **once** delivered unto the saints."

You can search your Bible from cover to cover and you will never find any verse that says "The Scripture is a work in progress. God is going to add a lot more to it as time goes on, so stay tuned!" The Bible is a closed book. You cannot add a Book of Mormon or a Book of Things That Jesus Revealed To Me.

This is how one person put it:

"The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply that God *cannot* add any more words to those he has already spoken to his people. It rather implies that *man* cannot add on his own initiative any words to those that God has already spoken. Furthermore, it implies that in fact God has not spoken to mankind any more words which he requires us to believe or obey other than those which we have now in the Bible." (Grudem)

Does this mean that God will never speak to His people again? Of course not. But it does mean that for now, in this age and in this life, the Bible is all that we need. When we crave a "personal word from God" we are telling the Lord that His Word is not enough – that God left out important information that we cannot live without. We are telling Him that the Scriptures do not equip us for all good works; we need something more in order to get by. That does not honor the Lord or His Word.

In conclusion, I think it is a bad thing to say "God told me to make that decision", and I think it is a grave error to claim that the Lord has given us new divine revelation. There are no personal words from God. The Bible is all the revelation from

God that we have been given, and it truly is all that we need.

## 7. Persistent Prayers

Before we bring our study on prayer to a close, there is one more topic that we need to discuss. Jesus once told His disciples that we should learn to pray with great endurance and persistence. Instead of just giving up after the first try, we should continue to seek God:

**Luke 18:1:** “And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

2 Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:

3 And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

4 And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;

5 Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

6 And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.

7 And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?

8 I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”

The point of this parable is quite simple. Jesus pointed out that even a corrupt, unjust judge was willing to do what the widow wanted because of the widow's continued persistence. Even though the judge was evil and didn't care about the widow at all, he was still willing to help her just to get her to leave him alone. Her continued persistence had driven him so crazy that he was finally willing to do whatever she wanted.

God, however, is *not* an unjust judge. He loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for us. He is perfect in judgment, justice, and wisdom. If even a *wicked* judge would hear a persistent request, how much more will the Lord hear our persistent prayers! God may delay answering our prayers for a time, but He does hear us and He is attentive to our cries.

When we pray and it seems that God does not hear us, we ought to continue to cry out to God and seek Him. We should be persistent and not give up. That is, after all, what Jesus taught us to do. He said that men ought *always* to pray. Giving up on prayer is simply the wrong thing to do.