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Does God Hear Prayer?

The Bible Gives the Answer

NOBODY who is even faintly religious would deny that prayer is part of the religious life. People who have had little to do with a church, who have seldom picked up a Bible, who have given scant attention to God, will, faced with a crisis, turn to prayer. Many a helpless individual, faced with the stark reality of death, has gone down on his knees in prayer. It sometimes comes as a surprise to discover that some of the most powerful men in history have been men of prayer.

What is Prayer?

What then is prayer all about? Is it just an exercise in bringing pleasant thoughts into the mind? Is it a way of miraculously solving impossible situations? Is it a religious ritual by holy people on behalf of the rest of us? Is it the public recital of noble thoughts and ideals or the repetition of certain forms of words?

This booklet is concerned with *Bible* teaching on the subject. This is because those who are truly followers of the Lord Jesus Christ must, like him, be guided in all matters of faith and practice by what the Bible teaches. For the Bible consists of "the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15, R.S.V.).

The Bible leaves us in no doubt that believers ought to pray:

"Men ought always to pray and not to faint" (Luke 18:1).

"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

"In everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6, R.S.V.).

To fail to pray is regarded as a sin; Samuel the prophet declared:

"God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (1 Samuel 12:23).

The Starting Point

So how does prayer start? Its springboard is *need*. We may be having great difficulty in coping with life; we may be faced with seemingly insuperable problems; we may be conscious of our failings and desire some kind of spiritual cleansing; we may be trying to search out the meaning of life. In

fact the very problems which confront us have a significance in emphasizing to us that for all man's great achievements, we are frequently helpless in the midst of human failure. Failure is more often at the start of the road to God than success.

In the Gospels we read of men who commanded great armies, of people in high office in government, of mothers and fathers seeking the best for their children, of farmers and fishermen, tradesmen and craftsmen -- people of all types and backgrounds who sought out the Lord Jesus Christ because some need or other could not be fulfilled elsewhere. And as we see Jesus always finding time to listen, to advise, to help, we see how he reveals to us the character of his Father:

"Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:7, R.S.V.).

The Bible makes it clear that God *wants* to help us. We should never feel that it is only good people that He will hear. In fact if we think we are rather good and managing quite well on our own, the chances are we shall be less inclined to rely upon God.

Two Men ...

Jesus told about two men who went up to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. One was a Pharisee -- a member of a leading religious sect of the day. The other was a tax-collector. Since the land of the Jews was occupied by the Romans, we can imagine that a Jew collecting taxes on behalf of the hated invaders was treated with contempt. So the parable portrays a member of the religious establishment and an outcast. But Jesus says the Pharisee prayed "with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes (i.e. 10% given to the religious authorities-the temple) of all that I get'." Obviously this man thought he was doing a good job for God and expected to be commended.

"But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' " (Luke 18:9-13, R.S.V.). This man's circumstances had made him keenly conscious of a sense of personal failure. In that frame of mind he begged God to help him. Jesus tells us that his prayer did far more good than the boasting of the Pharisee.

God's Mercy -- Man's Need

The seven words of that man's prayer perfectly summarize the right approach to God. It begins with God and ends with "me, a sinner". God and the sinner are brought together through the divine mercy. W. F. Vine writes of the word *mercy*: "It assumes need on the part of him who receives it, and resources adequate to meet the need on the part of him who shows it" (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*).

So we pray because we are conscious of a need and we recognize that God alone can meet that need. To accept that God can do what we cannot do is to bow to His greatness, to acknowledge His infinite wisdom. This is *praise*. Praise, when it finds expression in words, is an attempt to describe the ways in which God is superior to man; it is to give God glory. Through praise we reflect on what God is, and what resources He has to meet our need.

Listening to God

Since God knows best, we must listen to what He says to us. Through the Bible God speaks to us. The Psalmist could say: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). The Lord Jesus stated: "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The apostle Paul

wrote: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect" (2 Timothy 3:16).

It is vital to realize that prayer cannot be divorced from a knowledge and understanding of the Word of God. For prayer is communication with God. The communication is two-way. It is not enough that we should speak to God. He expects us to listen to Him. In fact, we shall often be better occupied meditating on His Word than trying to talk to Him at great length. The Bible itself warns:

"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" (Ecclesiastes 5:21).

The Lord Jesus himself emphasizes this point:

"When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Matthew 6:71).

We must not come to God full of ourselves, ready to tell Him what *we* think. That would be like the person who asks a question, not because he wants to know the answer, but because he wants the opportunity to air his own knowledge. If we come to God as those who do not know the answers and believe that He does, then what folly if we ignore what He has already told us through the Scriptures! Rather we must read them regularly and reflect on them in order that we may attune our minds to the mind of God, as the words of a hymn direct us:

*"Inspirer of the ancient seers,
Who wrote from Thee the sacred page,
A light for all succeeding years,
A lamp in this degenerate age:
Wisdom to us Thy words impart,
And with Thy comfort fill our heart."*

The many examples of prayer in the Bible make it clear that God responds only when man prays in accordance with His will. After all, God knows best what is in man's interests and can control events accordingly.

Old Testament Examples

Elijah, for example, was "a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain: and it rained not in the earth by the space of three years and six months" (James 5:17). What was the point of God responding to such a prayer? When we read through the narrative of 1 Kings 16:29 onwards we discover that the people of Israel-God's witnesses-were in desperate need of reformation. The point of Elijah's prayer and God's response was to make the king and people realise that only by submitting to God would they be able to survive. The prayer of faith was designed to bring healing from the sickness of sin, to convert sinners from the error of their ways.

Just as there had been a special demonstration of the power of God when Israel were brought out of Egypt under Moses, so during the period of Elijah and Elisha there was a spate of miraculous activity to accompany the working of God's prophets. Elijah's overriding concern was that God's will should be done, and his prayer was answered because it accorded with God's will at that time. (There was of course another epoch of miraculous activity associated with the ministry of Christ and the apostles.)

Daniel's prayer, recorded in Daniel 9, is another example of prayer which was fully in tune with the will of God. From the beginning of the prayer we see how right was Daniel's attitude. At the time,

Daniel was living in Babylon in exile with the Jews. The nation was suffering the consequences of failing to heed God's earlier warnings to serve Him faithfully. Daniel, praying on behalf of his people, accepts that God is righteous and that his people need forgiveness for their sins. This leads to his request in verses 16 and 17 that God should once more restore the fortunes of Jerusalem, which would mean the end of enforced exile.

Two points can be noted: firstly, anyone familiar with earlier writings of the Old Testament, and in particular the first five books of Moses, will realize that phrase after phrase of Daniel's prayer echoes what has gone before. Daniel is praying as one who has filled his thinking with God's thinking -- and he has done this by regular reading of the books of the Bible which then existed.

Secondly, his prime petition-that his people should be forgiven and allowed to re-establish themselves and their worship in Jerusalem-was something that Daniel knew God had promised He would carry out. Jeremiah, for example, had prophesied:

"For, lo, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the LORD: and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it" (Jeremiah 30:31).

In addition, Daniel knew from Jeremiah 25:11-12 that the period of captivity would last 70 years. Since the people were not taken into captivity all at once, he did not know exactly when the 70 years would end. But he knew approximately, as a result of which he fervently prayed that God's will should be done soon.

So Daniel prayed as a man who had humbled himself before God, who listened to God and became thoroughly familiar with what God had revealed in His Word and who prayed in harmony with what he knew to be the will of God. He was the sort of person referred to when God earlier declared:

"To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

A Right Relationship with God

Effective prayer assumes and depends upon a relationship with God. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Such knowledge is to be found, in the first instance, in the inspired writings of the Bible-and nowhere else. But to know God is not simply to know about Him. When a husband and wife know each other, they do not just have in their minds a pen-portrait of their partner. Their knowledge is intimate and deep, because of the nature of their relationship. It depends upon continued, regular contact, the acceptance of responsibilities and the desire to grow in knowledge and understanding of each other.

To acknowledge one's need as a sinner, whose imperfection is in marked contrast to the glorious perfection of God's character; to develop that "poor and contrite" spirit, which desires to be moved by the power of God through His Word, as the leaves on a tree tremble at the passing of a breath of wind; to realize from the knowledge of God's gracious dealings with men and women of past ages that the same grace can be extended to us today-this is to begin the process of praise and thanksgiving which marks the beginning of uttered prayer.

There is no room here for the casual or the careless. God is in heaven, man upon earth. We cannot assume familiarity or presume upon His loving kindness. It is God's to command, ours to obey. We cannot call God "Our Father", without at the same time hallowing His name. And we cannot do that unless we seek to do His will upon earth as it is done in heaven. If we *are* to benefit from the

privilege of being called His sons and daughters, we must, after serious consideration, come within His family:

"Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (1 John 2:3).

Response and Responsibility

As our knowledge of God's commandments grows, so we learn the need for repentance-sorrow at our personal sin and inadequacy and a commitment to turn away from sin. We learn of God's love in providing a perfect Son, "the way, the truth and the life", through whom alone men may come to God. We learn that to be associated with that saving work we must be born again, that is, we express our faith and obedience by baptism-immersion into water as a symbol of our association with the death of Jesus and with his resurrection, as we rise from the water to "newness of life". "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). As newly born sons and daughters of God we seek to behave according to His high standards. There is held out to us the hope of sharing Christ's glory when he comes to rule over the earth in peace and righteousness:

"Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God . . . when he shall appear, we shall be like him" (1 John 3:1,2).

Belief, repentance, baptism, a life of faith, the hope of eternal life granted at the judgement after the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, when he will establish the kingdom of God and fulfil the hope of Israel-this is but a brief summary of what we need to understand if our commitment to God's family is to have any real meaning.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer was uttered in response to his disciples' request for instruction in prayer. Clearly the prayer given by the Lord is not something to repeat vainly, like a magical incantation.. Its true meaning can only be appreciated by those who know the teaching of Christ, have committed themselves to his discipleship and have become children of God, hallowing thereby His name and striving to live in anticipation of His coming kingdom when all the world will be governed according to His will.

It is good that we should meditate upon the weight of those solemn words:

"Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10)

What to Pray for

For many people prayer consists of asking God for favors. For some the proof of whether God is actually there or not consists of testing out whether God will grant a particular request. Did not Jesus say: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find" (Matthew 7:71)

We are told how Jesus welcomed little children and took them up in his arms. In this he reflected the character of his Father, who welcomes all who seek Him in sincerity and simplicity. But whereas the particular purpose of God at the time of the Lord's ministry and during the subsequent establishment of the ecclesias involved frequent miraculous signs that this was indeed the Lord at work, we shall be sadly misled if we expect God to work a miracle in response to every request we make.

This is not to say that God's power is not demonstrated today, or to imply that God is not interested in us. There is a children's prayer which simply states a truth:

*"God always listens whenever we pray,
He's never too busy to hear what we say.*

"Thy will be done"

No prayer is disregarded when it comes from those who sincerely seek the Lord. But the answer is not always Yes; it may be No, or Wait. What is vitally important is that we keep on praying, thinking over God's ways and, with the help we gain from His Word, coming to terms with the situation. When Hezekiah received a threatening letter from the commander of the Assyrian forces, his reaction was to **"spread it before the Lord"** (2 Kings 19:14). So, too, we should talk out our problems before God. At the very least, it will help us to get them in perspective.

But prayer does not produce instant answers to every request. Imagine the chaos if it did, since often God-fearing folk are praying for exactly opposite things. One person might be praying for sunshine for some important event; another for rain to water vitally needed crops. Someone may be seriously ill. One relative might pray for his recovery; another that he should peacefully die.

We tend to see things very much from a human perspective, finding it hard to step outside the arena of our immediate needs to gain an overall view. Yet often, after years of bitter disappointment because some hope or ambition has not been realized, we may look back and feel that, after all, things turned out for the best. And even if we never do understand the meaning of certain experiences, we have the assurance that **"all things work together for good to them that love God"** (Romans 8:28).

Of course some of our requests are petty and even selfish. We cannot expect the Almighty to perform conjuring tricks for us. James warns those with such a limited view: **"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it on your pleasures"** (James 4:3).

Praying for Others

What is more difficult is that our request may be of an entirely selfless nature, on behalf of some thoroughly worthy cause. Very often such prayers arise from the desire to alleviate suffering, which it is felt a God of love would naturally want to do. It is not so easy to explain why such earnest requests are sometimes disregarded.

But the fact is that as a result of man's imperfection, or sin, the whole creation has been subjected to "bondage", as the Bible puts it. In other words, we are enslaved to a system which does not function perfectly as a result of the separation from God which sin has caused. Thorns and thistles grow up as well as beautiful flowers and wholesome vegetables. The human body is capable of the grace of a ballet dancer or the speed and stamina of an Olympic runner. But it can be handicapped from birth, be prone to infection and terrible diseases.

As the apostle Paul puts it: **"The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain"** (Romans 8:22). Around us are constant reminders that we are in an imperfect world; without these reminders we would forget our moral and spiritual imperfection. Just as certain fish can adapt to living in polluted waters, so man could adapt to living in a world of muddy values and murky principles, if he did not experience the regular shock of situations which cry out to him of his need to be saved. In the face of such situations, people tend to get on their knees.

Of course, many of the problems can be traced directly to human sin and stupidity. The pregnant mother who smokes must bear the responsibility for any damage she causes her baby. But many of the evils which afflict us are not of our own personal making, nor are they always the result of foolish collective policies or wicked systems. In a world that has separated itself from God, both social and natural laws are affected by the curse of sin. Even the man who puts all his trust in God will suffer the consequences. The book of Job is a vivid dramatization of this truth. Catastrophes will not be fairly distributed in such a world; nor will life's bonuses:

"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill . . . as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them" (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12).

God Cares

What we must realize is that God has not abandoned us in this situation. He asks us to trust Him, to believe in His Word, to obey His commandments as far as we are able and to look forward to a time in the future when He will intervene in human affairs to establish a society which *will* be governed by just and fair laws, in which nature itself will ultimately be in harmony with its perfect Creator.

We must understand therefore that God's concern for us is to do with our *eternal* welfare and it may not be best for us to have every problem, big or small, solved instantly. The very set-backs of life can be turned to advantage in the development of our characters:

"We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3, N.I.V.).

The experiences of our present life can find meaning in the context of God's eternal plan. In the kingdom of God, we shall be able to look back, by God's grace, and see the value of even the most testing crises in our lives. So Paul the apostle could write:

"We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:16, N.I.V.).

Paul could write from personal experience. He had suffered many trials in the course of his preaching work (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29) and, to make matters worse, he had some kind of physical disability which handicapped him further. He states that three times he prayed to God that this "thorn in the flesh" might be removed. But then he came to accept that, after all, the very weakness which afflicted him made him all the more aware that his own strength was insufficient: he must depend upon the power of God:

"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. I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, than am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

"Learning all the worth of pain"

God never allows us to be tested more than we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13) and the Bible reveals

how God Himself is personally affected as He enters into the feelings of human experience (see, for example, Isaiah 63:9; Acts 9:4). There is no greater demonstration of this than in the willing suffering of God's only beloved Son, who "when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously". The Lord was greatly strengthened throughout his life by prayer, not least in the hour of keenest trial:

"In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered, and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:7-9).

Here our theme is vividly exemplified. It could be said that the Lord's prayer was *not* heard, for the suffering was not removed. Scripture, however, clearly states that he *was* heard, but it was not in God's will that the experience should be removed. What good, then, was it to pray? The Gospels record that in the very process of laying his situation before his heavenly Father, even in the midst of his mental agony, Jesus was actually coming to terms with the necessity of the cross he was to bear:

"Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: *nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done*" (Luke 22:24)

A Source of Strength

But this was not all. Prayer is not only the way we may sort out our problems in God's presence. It can provide a very real fortifying power:

"And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him" (Luke 22:43).

Our prayers, then, must not be selfish, though we may lay all our problems before the Lord. Even in our best and apparently selfless requests, we must accept that God knows best: "*Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?*" (Job 2:10). Whatever we ask must be conditioned by the Lord's phrase, "*nevertheless not my will, but thine be done*". This does not apply, of course, when we are asking God for things which He has clearly declared to be His will. It is unnecessary, for example, when we pray for the coming of the Lord, to add "if it be thy will", since we know it *is* God's will.

Even though God may not choose to work a miracle on our behalf as we would like it to work, it is not because He does not care. It is because He is working in us the miracle of transforming our characters to be like that of His Son. For the true believer, there is nothing that can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus:

"*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me*" (Psalm 23:4).

The petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread", reminds us of how simple and unadorned are our basic needs-and reminds us too of our overriding need of that living bread from heaven which we eat when we share the self-sacrificing life of our Lord: "*The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world*", said Jesus (John 6:51);

*"Lord, who Thyself hast bidden us to pray For daily bread,
We ask thee but for grace and strength this day Our path to tread."*

Practical Consequences

We have already seen that to make our prayers effective, we need to think in harmony with the mind of God. Right thinking will have practical consequences. The first commandment is to love God; the second to love our neighbor. The second is the consequence of the first and must result in practical concern for the welfare of others.

"**Forgive us our sins**", the Lord taught his disciples to pray. Indeed, without that forgiveness of sins we cannot enjoy the relationship with God which enables us to address Him as "**Our Father**". We have to accept the practical consequence of asking God for forgiveness. Firstly we are told, "**He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved**" (Mark 16:16). Following from this act of faith, we are no more "**strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God**" (Ephesians 2:19). That relationship with those who are now our brothers and sisters in the Lord makes demands upon us and requires us to exercise our responsibilities as members of God's family. And this in its turn requires us to show love and compassion to all men, preaching the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ by word and deed.

The Lord emphasized these practical consequences when he added to the words "**Forgive us our sins**" the heart-searching confession, "**for we also forgive everyone who sins against us**" (Luke 11:4, N.I.V.). The Bible roundly condemns those who honor God with their lips but have hearts that are far from Him. "**Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth**" (1 John 3:18). Prayer *cannot* be effective if we are acting in ways that are patently inconsistent with the relationship we claim with God through our prayers.

A Concern for Others

"**I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing**", Paul advised Timothy (1 Timothy 2:8, N.I.V.). The person who bears a grudge against his brother, or is refusing to speak to him, or stirs up trouble against him, cannot expect God to forgive him. "**If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift**" (Matthew 5:23-24). This is the teaching of Jesus.

The apostle Peter makes a similar point, this time emphasising the importance of right relationships in our homes and the exercising of our responsibilities within our families:

"**Husbands be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers**" (1 Peter 3:7, N.I.V.).

It is good that in our prayers we should bring before God the needs of others. Not only will this in itself help us to see our own problems in perspective, but it will remind us of our responsibility to do something for those about whom we pray. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers he recalled how regularly he prayed on their behalf, but he also recalled the practical steps he took to minister to their needs when he sent to them Timothy, "**to establish you and to comfort you concerning your faith**" (1 Thessalonians 1:2; 3:1-3; see 3:9-13).

People receive great strength from the knowledge that prayers are being offered on their behalf and many can testify to the ways in which prayer has opened up doors of opportunity;

*"With confident and humble mind,
Freedom in service I would find,
Praying through every toil assigned,
Thy will be done."*

"Lead us not into temptation"

This petition is directly connected with the need for forgiveness of sins for our relationship with God to be sustained. In prayer we need to review our spiritual progress before the Lord, confessing to Him our failures, in the knowledge that those who have entered into fellowship with Him through the Lord Jesus are assured of the forgiveness of those sins: **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:9).

Naturally, we are not expected to go straight out and deliberately commit the same sin, though it is very likely that in spite of our best endeavors, we shall often fail. There is a distinct difference between deliberate and calculated sin and sin which recurs because of weakness. Watching is frequently associated with prayer. It implies alertness, being on our spiritual guard, a determination to avoid falling into the snare of sin. So Jesus exhorted his disciples: **"Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"** (Matthew 26:41). If we pray for help to avoid sin, we shall certainly receive that help if we allow ourselves to be influenced and guided by God's Word, if we associate with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, if we avoid those situations which we know will weaken our resolve.

When, Where and How?

There is no aspect of the spiritual life which is not touched by prayer. Therefore to "pray without ceasing" is not about non-stop talk to God. The point is that every moment of our lives should be lived in the consciousness of the presence of God.

Nevertheless, we do well to set aside certain times when we concentrate our minds in communion with God. The law of Moses prescribed that the High Priest should burn incense, a symbol of prayer, morning and evening. It is good that we should begin the day with God and that we should review before Him the day's activities before we go to bed. Mealtimes provide an opportunity, particularly when we are with our families, for more than a perfunctory saying of grace -- an opportunity to speak to God with our families about various needs and concerns. Other opportunities will arise in accordance with each person's circumstances and commitments. It is not necessary to adopt a particular position for prayer. We may be able to kneel by our bedside at night; in other circumstances we may be standing, sitting or flat on our backs. When Nehemiah stood in the presence of the king of Persia and was given the opportunity to make a request on behalf of his people, he first made a silent request to God for help (Nehemiah 2:4). How well this reveals the practical nature of prayer. There is no circumstance in which it is not helpful.

When we read the life of the Lord Jesus, we see how much prayer was a part of his daily experience, the source of renewal, guidance and strength that enabled him to fulfil his taxing rôle. We have glimpses of him on a mountain alone, spending all night in prayer before making momentous decisions, or seeking help before an exhausting preaching tour. If ever there was a man whose life exemplified the power of prayer, it is the Lord. If, as we should, we feel inadequate in our efforts to commune with God and to express those innermost longings that lie in our hearts, then we have the

consolation of knowing that if we have given him our allegiance, he will bear our feeble efforts into the presence of his Father, perfecting that which is lacking:

"He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

Prayer and Fellowship

We have an individual responsibility to cultivate the habit of prayer and this responsibility extends to our families. We have already seen that effective prayer must lead to acceptance of the Gospel through belief and baptism, with the responsibilities which follow as a result of becoming members of the family of God. Jesus himself prayed for the effective witness of those who, through the preaching of the word of truth, should be united together (John 17:17-23).

Praying Together

Men and women who are united on the basis of the teaching of the Lord must certainly pray together. We read how those who were baptized on the day of Pentecost after the preaching of Peter "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). When the believers met together, as they did on the first day of the week for remembering the sacrifice of Christ through the breaking of bread, and at other times whenever opportunity permitted, prayer was a natural part of their worship and witness. Some moving scenes are presented to us in the Acts of the Apostles as the disciples strengthened one another, often in trying circumstances. We read of the apostle Paul urgently reminding the elders of Ephesus of their responsibilities: "And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down and prayed with them all" (Acts 20:36). Later on the same journey, Paul and his companions stopped briefly at Tyre. They did not hesitate to look up the disciples there and when they came to leave, "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" (Acts 21:5).

It is, of course, possible for a person to live in isolation from his brothers and sisters in the Lord. Visits, letters, telephone calls are all possible to help maintain vital fellowship. But when we can meet regularly together to share in the work and witness of "the household of faith" we are without excuse if we shirk our responsibilities. Besides failing in our duty to strengthen others, we shall ourselves be denied the power which comes from united prayer and worship:

*"Wherever in the world I am, In whatso'er estate,
I have a fellowship with hearts To keep and cultivate;
A work of lowly love to do For him on whom I wait."*

The Blessings of Prayer

What blessings flow from the fellowship which is possible for those who seek the will of God through His Word and are united by their association with the person and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ! A study of the lives of great men in Bible times reveals how the practice of prayer was woven into the pattern of their lives. How wonderfully David, for example, was able to triumph over the turmoil of his life and achieve a state of calm and joyful assurance on the basis of his faith in the Lord. The Psalms which he wrote provide numerous examples of the power of prayer:

"O taste and see that the Lord is good; Blessed is the man that trusteth in him" (Psalm 34:8).

The Lord God Himself challenges us to test for ourselves the benefits of that trust and obedience which is the basis of true worship:

"Prove me . . . saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:10).

An invitation is extended to each one of us that we, "by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving" may come to share the hope of the Gospel, as a result of which "the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

Are you willing to pray the words of the Psalmist that follow?

"Let thy mercies come also unto me, O LORD, Even thy salvation, according to thy word" (Psalm 119:41).

MICHAEL G. OWEN

*Begin the day with God
Kneel down to Him in prayer;
Lift up thy head to His abode,
And seek His love to share.
Open the Book of God;
And read a portion there;
That it may hallow all thy thoughts,
And sweeten all thy care.
Go through the day with God,
Whate'er thy work may be;
Where'er thou art, at home, abroad,
He still is near to thee.
Converse in mind with God;
Thy spirit heavenward raise;
Acknowledge every good bestowed,
And offer grateful praise.
Conclude the day with God;
Thy sins to Him confess;
Trust in the Lord's atoning blood,
And plead His righteousness.
Lie down at night with God,
Who gives His servants sleep;
And when thou tread'st the vale of death,
He will thee guard and keep.*

Several of the quotations in italics are from *The Christadelphian Hymn Book*, as follows: p. 4, no. 120; p. 14, no. 105; p. 15, no. 106; p. 18, no. 89.