

ASK AND RECEIVE

OUTLINES ON PRAYER

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1. ASSURED ANSWERS TO PRAYER

Ask and it will be given unto you... (Matthew 7:7).

This is the first time Jesus commanded his disciples to ask. At the same time he assured them that God would give what they asked. Prayer is wasted breath unless God answers prayer. The ancient Hebrew prophets ridiculed men who prayed to idols that could not hear or speak. The Lord God of Israel was a prayer hearing and prayer answering God. Here the Son of God himself assures us of answers.

If you isolate these words from their context they sound like blank checks. God has already signed them and we can fill in any amount we please. That isn't true. We can extract the meaning of Jesus' words by asking three simple questions.

1. Ask whom?

Jesus supplies the answer: "Your Father in heaven."

Prayer is conversation. Jesus earlier instructed his disciples, "When you pray, say..." Praying is saying. Prayer is talking to God. In verse 11 Jesus makes it clear that prayer is a Father and child conversation.

A kind father delights in the requests of his children. He isn't angered or annoyed because they come to him saying, "Give me..." Fatherhood involves providing for the children's needs.

A wise father sometimes denies the requests of his children. If granting their wishes would be harmful to them, he says, "No," but he still values the conversation with them and enjoys the relationship from which it springs.

A rich father is honored by the requests of his children. His resources are adequate for their needs, and he is pleased when they recognize his ability to care for them without bankrupting himself.

God is such a Father. He is too kind to ignore our requests, too wise to give anything that would destroy us, and too rich to be embarrassed by our most expansive asking.

2. Ask what?

Again Jesus supplies the answer: “Good gifts.” He reminds us that earthly fathers who are evil will give good gifts to their children. “How much more” will the heavenly Father “give good gifts to those who ask him!”

This does not mean that we can receive anything we think is good. The Father himself determines what is good and what is not. He sees clearer and farther than we can, and he knows whether the gift we ask for is good.

“Good things,” in the light of the context, are all that we need to live the kingdom life described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

In Luke’s Gospel we read, “How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.” The Father’s supreme gift to us is the Holy Spirit, the power by which we live and work for God acceptably. The best gift includes the good gifts.

3. Ask why?

Some argue that since the Father knows our needs and loves to supply them, we shouldn’t have to ask. Why doesn’t

God simply bestow his gifts without making them answers to prayer? Jesus had just told the disciples, “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (6:8). But he went immediately on to teach them the prayer that includes, “Give us today our daily bread” (6:11). We may be sure there are good reasons for asking.

For one thing, we are stewards, not lords. Man’s first sin was an attempt to act independently of God, to despise stewardship and grasp at lordship. Man sought to take without asking, to take what was forbidden, as if he knew better than God what was good for him. Asking keeps us reminded of our dependence, keeps us reminded that God knows what is best for us.

For another thing, prayer is grounded upon God’s mercies not upon our merits. God owes us nothing. We do not deserve the least of his favors. He could have justly damned us all for our sins. Asking keeps us aware of his grace.

Compelling us to ask is a divine strategy for molding us into the kind of children we should be--not spoiled brats but grateful and obedient sons and daughters of a gracious and generous heavenly Father.

Asking honors the Father for the person he is--kind, wise and rich.

Not asking impoverishes and disfigures the children, warping them into arrogant sinners who should be humble saints.

One last thought: Asking is not begging. God is willing to give, so begging is needless. He can't be pressured into giving unwisely, so begging is futile.

2. PRAY FOR WORKERS

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field (Matthew 9:38).

The personal and public ministry of Jesus was limited. Aware of his time constraints Jesus largely confined his preaching to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” and seldom entered Gentile territories.

The compassion of Jesus, however, was unlimited. He had “other sheep” to reach and keep, including Gentiles. He would send his disciples into “all the world” because, as the song says, “He’s got the whole world in his hands”--and in his heart. The harvest field is global.

1. We are commanded to pray for workers.

Jesus does not say, “Pray for the harvest.” This does not mean that we are never to pray for those who have not yet found him as their savior. “He always lives to intercede for them,” and in this he is our prayer model.

Here, though, Jesus says, “Pray for harvesters to be sent.” He implies that adequate workers will insure the harvest. The field is the world and it’s a big world! Many harvest hands are needed. Our vision, as we pray, must be global.

2. We are part of the answer to those prayers.

Jesus called and sent those who prayed. The sending of “the twelve” is recorded by Matthew right after Jesus commanded them to pray for harvest hands. They were to be partial answers to their prayers.

Jesus recruits harvesters from intercessors. There is a sound logic in this strategy. After all, only those who care enough to pray will be willing enough to work.

If we don't pray often for harvesters, we will after we enter the field as harvesters. We will soon realize that much more help is needed, and the immensity of the task combined with the paucity of laborers will drive us to our knees.

Jesus is Lord of the harvest. The world is his harvest field. Christians are his harvest hands. It's just that simple; it's just that challenging. Pray. Then grab your tools and go to work.

3. PRAYER COMPLETES JOY

I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:23-24).

Prayer can result in complete joy. The writings of John, in what they say about complete joy, reveal the kind of prayers that result in complete joy.

1. Joy is complete when Jesus is number one.

When certain disciples of John the Baptist complained about the defection of crowds from John to Jesus, this is what the Baptist said: “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less” (3:29-30).

When honoring Jesus above all other persons is our priority, our prayers will bring complete joy, for his company and his cause will matter more than all else in our lives.

2. Joy is complete when we abide in Jesus’ love.

Jesus spoke of the Father’s love for him and his love for the Father. Then he told his disciples: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (15:11-12).

When we love Jesus with all our hearts, and love each other as he loves us, prayer will be a completely joyful experience.

3. Joy is complete when we are protected from the evil one.

When praying for his disciples Jesus said to the Father: "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.... My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:13-15).

"The evil one is Satan," the adversary of Christ and the tempter of his disciples. He delights in the infection of guilt and the destruction of joy. The prayers of Jesus and our prayers in the spirit and content of Jesus' prayers bring us strength against Satan's power and plots.

4. Joy is complete when our Christian fellowship is unbroken.

In his first letter John writes: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete" (1 John 1:3-4). In his second letter he writes, "I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12).

When we meet together, talk together and pray together our fellowship as believers engenders complete joy.

Pray for these blessings and you will receive them.

Receive these blessings and your joy will be complete.

4. WHAT IS “WHATEVER”?

If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer (Matthew 21:22).

The hungry Christ sought figs from a tree that had leafed out. This leafing out usually occurred at the time figs appeared, and green figs, though not highly desirable, were eaten. Disappointed by its false appearance Jesus said, “May you never bear fruit again.” “Immediately the tree withered.”

The disciples were amazed at how quickly the tree died. Jesus used the incident to teach a lesson on prayer and faith. He tells them that if they have faith they will be able to wither trees and remove mountains. Indeed, “whatever” they ask for they will receive.

1. “Whatever” sounded like *carte blanche* but wasn’t.

The withering of the tree was an actual occurrence, but in the prayer lesson the tree and the mountain are metaphorical. Jesus is telling us that prayer with faith can remove the obstacles we encounter as we carry out the mission he assigns. In the context, two such obstacles appear.

One obstacle is his enemies’ opposition. Jesus cleansed the temple, driving out those who were merchandising religion. He then made the temple the venue of a teaching and healing ministry that elicited praise from excited children. This angered the priests and scribes who muttered objections to what Jesus was doing. They demanded to know the source of his authority.

The tree that appeared fruitful but proved to be an empty show symbolized these hypocritical religious leaders in their opposition to the authority and ministry of Jesus.

Another obstacle was his disciples' doubt. If his disciples "have faith and do not doubt" they can remove through prayer the hindrances to their success as the mission-sharers and message-bearers of Jesus. Simply to pray when opposition is encountered is not enough. Receiving is the issue of believing. Just as "faith without works" is dead, so also prayer without faith achieves nothing.

2. "Whatever," therefore, is less than some think and more than many achieve.

You can't get anything you want just by asking the Lord for it. Answers to prayer require faith, and you cannot believe for what the Lord does not promise. Prayer is not a magic formula. True prayer is asking for what the Lord wills and what the Lord's work needs. Prayer is not a device for enriching ourselves independently of his will and work. You can ask "with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures," but God will not grant your selfish wishes (James 4:2, 3).

"Whatever" includes all that God wills for your life as a follower of Jesus Christ. "Whatever" excludes all that God does not will and that you do not need in order to serve him effectively and fruitfully. To phrase it differently, "whatever" is not anything you want; "whatever" is everything God wills.

Whatever stands in the way of our service to Christ as we share his mission in the world can be withered or removed by believing prayer.

No amount of prayer will keep opposition from happening, and often it will stem from people who are officially religious and politically powerful, but whose motives and lives are contrary to the teachings of Christ. We are not to be intimidated by them or to regard them as invincible. Instead, we are to counter them with believing prayer and God will grant us success in spite of their malicious efforts to defeat us. The reason and result of our asking is “mission accomplished.”

“Whatever” is not a stamp of approval on our desires; it is the assured provision of what is needed for the Lord’s work to succeed.

5. PRAYING THROUGH

***...she kept on praying...* 1 Samuel 1:12.**

Winning out comes from hanging on. In any endeavor, to give up is to lose out. Persistence is the key to success, even in prayer.

Bulldog faith can endure all opposition. Opposition to prayer is always present and often strong. Our will to pray, reinforced by the power of the Spirit and the example of Jesus can prevail.

1. A wrong assumption.

"Eli observed her mouth..." Hannah's lips were moving but her words were inaudible. Eli made a common mistake; he judged her by outward appearances. Appearances are often deceptive, and judgment, therefore, is often wrong.

Had he inquired instead of assuming, he might have helped instead of hurting.

2. A false accusation.

"How long will you keep on getting drunk?" The priest's question was harsh and judgmental to a woman who needed encouragement and hope.

Jumping to conclusions is bad exercise. Judgment must be left to God who knows the heart. Our assessment of a situation is nearly always based on incomplete and inadequate knowledge.

Most of us have known the sting of being falsely accused. Memory should lay a finger on our lips when we are tempted to pronounce judgment.

2. A strong assurance.

"Her face was no longer downcast." When the priest stopped accusing and started listening, he joined her in the prayer. His words were heartening to Hannah, and she left with renewed hope and faith.

God spoke through a fallible man. The imperfect messenger did not rob the message of its power. The word of God was sufficient for changing Hannah's situation.

The message to us is twofold: Leave judgment to the Lord. Keep praying until the Lord answers.

6. MISERABLE MAN; MAGNIFICENT PRAYER

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "O God, please heal her!"

(Numbers 12:13).

Miriam displayed both greatness and pettiness in her life. That's not unusual, is it? In this particular story we see Miriam at her worst and Moses at his best.

1. The odd description of Moses.

If Moses is the author of the first five books of Scripture, as many believe, it would seem like a contradiction for him to refer to himself as "a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."

Some solve the problem easily. They deny that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. Others suggest that this one statement is an "editorial insert" by a later writer who greatly admired Moses.

A more attractive approach regards the Hebrew word underlying "humble" to be the word for "miserable." Given the people he led and the complaints he got this could be true as a self-estimate. He who has never been falsely accused has never been the pastor of a church.

2. The foolish revolt of Miriam and Aaron.

Miriam instigated the revolt and Aaron joined her. The issue of Moses' wife was a smokescreen. The real issue was authority. Miriam and Aaron were jealous of the authority wielded by Moses as God's chosen leader for Israel at this stage of the young nation's life.

People who crave power will always resent those who have power. Poor Moses, he had been criticized with such frequency

and hostility that at one time he told the Lord, “If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now.” Worse than the ingratitude and clamor of the people, though, was this revolt by family members.

3. The decisive action of the Lord.

The Lord commanded Moses, Aaron and Miriam to stand before him. He defended Moses, calling him “my servant.” He commended the faithfulness of Moses and described the “face to face” communion he enjoyed with Moses.

Having defended Moses he punished Miriam. She stood there suddenly smitten with leprosy in an advanced stage. That rendered her “unclean” by law and disqualified from service to Israel. The Lord's anger, usually slow, was swift and terrifying in this case.

Aaron was jarred, and instantly asked Moses for pardon and prayer.

4. The magnificent prayer of Moses.

Moses' prayer is a splendid model. It was urgent, brief and specific.

His prayer respected God's sovereignty and power. He didn't demand; he pleaded from heart depth: “O God, please heal her.”

The Lord responded both in mercy and in judgment. He stayed and reversed the leprosy, but insisted on a seven day exile from the camp which halted the people's march. While they waited they learned some valuable lessons: 1. God knows what he is doing in the persons he chooses. 2. Petty jealousy

disrupts the peace and the progress of God's people. 3. Our wisest reaction to mistreatment is to pray for all those who have wronged us.

6. A LIFESAVING PRAYER

So Moses prayed for the people (Numbers 21:7).

Moses was a man given to prayer. Like Abe Lincoln, he was driven to his knees because he had no where else to go for needed help. Both his enemies and his allies gave him plenty to pray about. Any leader of God's people who neglects prayer will multiple his problems.

1. A rebellious people.

The Israelites were impatient with God's guidance. He chose their route and they griped because it was a hard journey.

They were ungrateful for God's provisions. He kept them alive with manna from heaven and water from rocks, but they bellyached for meat.

They were chastened by God's judgments. He “sent venomous snakes among them.” The meat arrived alive and the gripers began to drop dead. “Many Israelites died;” enough to scare the others into a prayer meeting.

2. A gracious prayer.

The people alternated between blaming Moses for all that went wrong and begging Moses to pray for things to turn right.

Moses prayed for those who wronged him. He didn't ignore them, scold them or threaten them. He just prayed for them as he had often done before. The wisest and best thing any Christian leader can do is pray for his critics. He can't avoid criticism but he can let it turn him sour or make him mean. Loving critics enough to pray for them is the only way he can bring about their deliverance and his.

3. A curious panacea.

The Lord provided, in answer to prayer, a strange remedy. A snake was to save the snake-bitten. This snake would be fashioned from bronze, which is associated with judgment in Scripture, mounted to a pole, prefiguring the cross, and placed where any snake-bitten Israelite could see it.

To the strange remedy was added a simple condition. Those who were facing death could be saved by simply looking to the uplifted snake. This took away all claims of merit and included all classes of people. The remedy was gracious and effective.

This reminds us that the sinless Jesus was “made sin” for us that we might be reconciled to God through his death on the cross. By looking to him in faith we are rescued from sin and death.

Here’s a special lesson for us. God saved the guilty rebels but not until someone prayed for them. Whom should we pray for today?

7. WORST PLACE ON EARTH TO BE

Then the Lord said to me, "Do not pray for the well-being of this people (Jeremiah: 14:11). Then the Lord said to me: "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people (Jeremiah 15:1).

The Bible is studded with exhortations to pray. Prayer is recognized as a serious responsibility and a power link between the might of God and the needs of people. That the Lord forbids prayer by anyone for anyone is shocking. The worst place on earth to be is beyond the reach of prayer.

1. Three times intercession was forbidden (7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

God patiently endured the nation's dismissal of his prophets and their dire warnings of coming judgment that only genuine repentance could deflect. Prayer had often moved God to withhold judgment, extending the nation's probation and repeating its opportunity to escape destruction.

Now God was exercising a "three times and out" policy. His patience had reached its end. He must teach by judgment what the people had stubbornly and repeatedly refused to learn from mercy. Their stony hearts and stiff necks had made prayer a useless strategy.

Any sinner is in serious trouble when God takes the burden of intercession from the hearts of those who love him or her.

2. Three effective intercessors were rejected (15:1).

Not even Moses, Samuel and Jeremiah could prevail in prayer for Judah at this point in her covenant-breaking history. These were mighty intercessors. God would have dismantled Israel as far back as the golden-calf rebellion except for the prayers of Moses. The disobedience of Saul with its down-dragging effect upon the nation would have brought utter destruction apart from the effectual prayers of Samuel. Jeremiah, whose eyes became “rivers of tears” as he wept and prayed for his people was all that had kept the axe of judgment from striking the roots of the nation in his day.

Judah had passed beyond the help of prayer when God said, “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people.” The problem was not that God’s heart had become hardened; rather, the hearts of the people would not soften.

The passage tells us plainly that judgment can become inevitable. Until we are told not to pray for our unsaved loved ones, however, we should continue to intercede earnestly and persistently for them.

8. THE PRAYER OF ELIJAH

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again (1 Kings 18:36-37).

Elijah was an ordinary man. Hundreds of years after Elijah lived, the apostle James wrote, "Elijah was a man like us." This ordinary man did some extraordinary things. He closed the heavens, shutting off the rain for over three years. He then opened the heavens, the rains came and "and the earth produced its crops." He did these things as a man of prayer.

1. Elijah prayed unselfishly.

His first concern in praying was the glory of God. He wanted answers that would let people know that the Lord was God, the one who created and controlled the universe, in contrast to the false gods made by men who often dropped to their knees to worship what they had whittled.

His second concern in praying was the welfare of the people. Turning them back to God was the purpose of his ministry. He sought nothing for himself, everything for them. He knew their happiness was rooted in holiness, in belonging utterly to God, and he preached and prayed to awaken them to that truth.

Answers to prayer depend as much on motives as on contents. Why we pray matters as much as what we pray for. If selfish prayer is answered, God is bringing judgment. If unselfish prayer is answered God is bringing mercy.

2. Elijah prayed confidently.

He had no doubt to mix with his faith. God had spoken. He had done “all these things” at God’s command, and God would vindicate his ministry by answering his prayers.

Elijah made things harder by having the sacrifice, the wood and the altar soaked with twelve “large jars” of water. He was praying for fire and complicating the answer with water. How demented he must have seemed to the prophets of Baal and the people of Israel.

Elijah knew that God could do the seemingly impossible. He wanted the lesson to be unforgettable in the minds of the onlookers.

3. Elijah prayed briefly.

The Baalites prayed for hours. They cried aloud and tried to impress their god with their sincerity (and desperation) by mingling their blood with that of their sacrifice. Nothing happened. Praying to a log won’t help just because someone carved a face on it and called it god.

Elijah, in deliberate contrast, prayed briefly and radical changes occurred. The fire fell, consumed the sacrifice, scorched the altar and evaporated the water. The people fell to the ground exclaiming “the Lord is God.”

The strength of prayer is not its length. Effective prayer, prayer that results in needed changes, is measured by its sincerity and faith.

The Lord worked through a man "just like us." Will he not work through us if our prayers are just like Elijah's?

9. JESUS, A PRAYING MAN

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons (Mark 1:34-39).

"He prayed." Therefore, we should pray. All arguments against prayer break upon the anvil of this truth--Jesus prayed. He knew God and people and himself better than we do. If he needed to pray, how much more do we!

1. Think of when he prayed.

On this occasion it was "very early in the morning."

At this hour interruptions were less likely to occur. Pray before the household stirs and gain strength for whatever that stirring brings about.

At this hour, too, the day's activities had not consumed his time and strength. The day before had been long and its demands heavy. Prayer reinforced him for other such days.

2. Think of where he prayed.

He chose "a solitary place."

Such places are frequently hard to find in the constant coming and going of people in our lives at home, work, school,

wherever. Though hard to find they must be found, for we need our communion with God.

Solitude is necessary for most lovers to commune. Some moderns delight in public displays of passion, but those who love the deepest prefer the most privacy. Love that has to show off is neither genuine nor profound.

3. Think of why he prayed.

He speaks of villages “somewhere else” and expresses his desire to “preach there also.” His praying was mission-related.

Prayer replenished the energy needed to fulfill his mission. Prayerless lives will be fruitless lives.

Prayer strengthened his commitment to that mission. He knew what it would cost him, and prayer buoyed his resolution to meet that price with courage and without complaint.

4. Think of what he prayed.

“That is why I have come,” Jesus said. There was purpose--a “why”--to his daily life and he prayed for all that was related to the fulfillment of that purpose.

Content is left unspecified on this occasion, but we can imply the content of many of Jesus’ prayers from those places where it is named. From other scriptures we know that he prayed for the unsaved (Hebrew 7:25), for the backslidden (Luke 22:32) and for the unsanctified (John 17:17).

We will never pray amiss if we pray for those for whom Jesus prays.

To follow Jesus is to adopt his prayer habits.

To share his praying is to share his power.

10. THE PRAYER FROM THE CROSS

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23: 34).

Who were “they”? They were the soldiers who nailed him, the onlookers who mocked him, the priests who ridiculed him, the criminals who flanked him, and the disciples who forsook him. “Forgive them,” he prayed.

His death and prayer were for us too.

1. Only from the cross could this prayer be uttered.

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). “We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Eph. 1:7). Had not Jesus borne our sins we could never have been pardoned.

Ignorance often explains sin but never excuses sin. “I know that you acted in ignorance,” said Peter to the temple crowd he charged with the death of Christ (Acts 3:17). “I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief,” said Paul of his days as “a blasphemer and persecutor” (1 Tim. 1:13). Ignorance explains but does not exonerate.

The Law provided for the forgiveness of sins committed in ignorance of the Law. But sacrifices were required before God would forgive. Sin provokes his wrath, and pardon awaits atonement.

2. Only by God’s grace can this prayer be answered.

The penitent thief was forgiven. He certainly had no merit of his own. He pled for mercy and found paradise! Grace alone brought his salvation.

We can never deserve forgiveness. God can pardon only because Christ “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). As a song writer expressed it, “My hope is built on nothing less / Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Grace is not bestowed arbitrarily or capriciously. All for whom Jesus prayed were not forgiven. Only those who repented and believed found mercy. For the rest, the sacrifice served to aggravate their guilt and insure their damnation. Someone long ago observed that one dying thief was saved that none might despair, but only one that none might presume.

Christ prays for you. Like the dying thief who found pardon, you should pray for yourself. If you reject Christ’s death for your sins, you will die in your sins. Nietzsche scorned the cross as a symbol of weakness. He went mad, and in his last days a Christian nurse took care of him. “Significantly--and tragically--he who rejected the Crucified signed one of his last letters ‘The Crucified’.... He who rejects the Cross selects his own. There are no alternatives” (Carl Henry).

11. PRAYING AMISS

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but, to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared" (Mark 10:35-40).

The disciples had been told to listen to Jesus. Instead, they listened to their own ambitious hearts.

1. A wrong approach to prayer.

"We want you to do for us..." That's a bad start for any prayer. Selfish prayer seeks to exploit Jesus, not exalt him. Prayer cannot manipulate him but it can condemn us.

The approach Jesus taught was, "Your will be done..." Not what we want, but what God wills, is the purpose of true prayer. Prayer is not meant to be a way of coaxing favors out of God. It is a way of finding out and yielding to his will for us.

If Jesus first says, "What do you want me to do for you," we are freed to insert our personal desires, which may or may

not be granted. If we start off with our wants we are on the wrong foot before we can take the next step.

2. A gentle reproach to prayer.

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. Our ignorance of ourselves, of the future and of God can prompt some foolish requests.

Jesus tells them frankly that they are not ready for high places in his kingdom. The high places belong to the humble who aren’t seeking recognition and clout. The high places in the church sometimes go to the highest bidders, the shrewdest campaigners, or those with the most friends in high places. This is never true in the kingdom of God.

James and John lacked the humility and bravery those places required. The time would come when they were ready: “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,|” Jesus said. At that time they would seek the honor of being Jesus-like servants and count it an honor to suffer for Jesus’ name and work.

Jesus expected his followers to pray. He teaches his followers to pray. If we make prayer “a letter to Santa Claus” we are in serious danger of straying. If we make prayer a means of submission to his will and concern for others we are praying “on target.”

12. THE LORD'S PRAYER

This, then, is how you should pray... (Matthew 6:9-13).

The context begins, "When you pray..." Prayer is assumed, not argued. God's children will pray. The subjects and issues of our praying emerge in the text.

1. Our Father.

God's best name is "Father." He is love, but not soft love. In prayer Jesus called him "holy Father" and "righteous Father" (John 17:1, 11, 25). Our Father is a king; we are a kingdom. Either he or "the evil one" will rule our lives.

2. Our family.

In prayer we say "us" and "our." When we come to the Father, even singly and privately, we do not forget our brothers and sisters. Prayer is intensely personal but also intensely social. Prayer discourages selfishness.

3. Our food.

Prayer recognizes the Father as the source of our bread. Back of the natural processes that produce bread is the Father's will. He doesn't drop it out of heaven. He empowers us to earn and to share our daily bread.

4. Our forgiveness.

Matthew reads "debts;" Luke reads "sins." Sin as a debt to God is a familiar and frequent metaphor. We cannot pay; he must forgive. The grace of God creates the church as a community of forgiven and forgiving persons.

5. Our foe.

"The evil one" is Satan. The story of our Lord's temptation (4:1-11) shows the evil one's strategy and illustrates the means of our deliverance. The prayer recognizes that God limits the enemy and increases our strength.

The verses that follow (14-15) are important to remember whenever we pray. Our relationship to God is reflected in our relationship to others. We cannot be right with him and wrong with them.

13. A PRAYER BREAKFAST MESSAGE

Give us today our daily bread (Matthew 6:11).

In life, many things are desirable, but few things are necessary. This brief portion of scripture sets before us three basic concerns.

1. Bread is basic to life.

The Bible condemns theft but observes that “Men do not condemn a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving” (Proverbs 6:30).

In our culture, where barter systems disappeared long ago, money is nicknamed "bread."

These two facts recognize the truth that bread is basic to life.

Tempted to turn stones into bread when hungry, Jesus responded, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4). Without bread, though, man does not live, period.

2. Prayer is basic to bread.

We are taught to pray for our daily bread because bread is God’s gift.

Maltbie Babcock wrote:

*Back of the loaf is the snowy flour,
And back of the flour the mill,
And back of the mill the wheat, and the shower,
And the sun and the Father’s will.*

Pray recognizes our dependence on the creator, and channels our gratitude to him.

There is no true life without prayer.

3. Fellowship is basic to prayer.

Prayer is talking to God and implies that one is on speaking terms with him.

Prayer also demands that we be on speaking terms with one another. Notice that our Lord's injunction to forgive those who sin against us follows in the model prayer (v. 14).

We need each other for bread and prayer--and this is authentic living.

Bread, prayer, fellowship--these are why we are here today. We could not have a better reason to be here.

14. A HUGE PRAYER PROMISE

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you (Matthew 7:7).

This is a frequently misunderstood and misused promise. Many who read it react to it as if it were a blank check. All you have to do is pray X number of times and, *voila!* You can get anything your little heart desires from God. But--

1. The promise is *cart blanche* only when we ignore the context.

The story of Jesus' temptation, told in chapter 4 of this Gospel, shows us how the devil uses scripture by yanking it from context, and how Jesus rebuts temptation by resorting to scripture in context.

This is indeed a great prayer-promise, and it does open a treasure chest of possibilities, but only in context. Its context is the whole "Sermon on the Mount." The context includes the beatitudes. It includes the command to love others as God loves them. It includes the model prayer whose first petition honors the name and seeks the will of the heavenly Father. It includes the command to lay up treasures in heaven and not on earth. It includes prohibitions against carrying grudges, against seeking revenge, and against judging others. It includes a warning against hearing but not doing the words of Jesus.

The promise is certainly no blank check. It is addressed to those who, staggered by the moral challenge of the Sermon, seek power by which to live out the Sermon in daily affairs and in difficult situations.

2. The promise concerns "good gifts" for God's obedient children.

Jesus reminds men with evil hearts that they "give good gifts" to their children. God, who is only, always and perfectly good, will respond with greater love than even the best of parents. He will give good gifts to his children when they ask for them.

Again, this is no blank check, nor does it guarantee a soft and pleasant life. The truth is, only God knows what is really "good" for us. Some times the good comes roughly wrapped. The psalmist had occasion to say, "It was good for me to be afflicted" (Psa. 119:71). Affliction created his opportunity to further learn the word of God. Paul said, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). Most of us know that only when we look back on some bad things that were included in "all things."

Walk with the Lord for years and you will review life and confess that he was good both in what he gave you and in what he withheld from you. So when you "ask," "seek" and "knock" you may well expect life to have some rocky miles and painful experiences. Jesus said, "My Father loves me," and he was speaking of his coming abuse and death at the hands of wicked men when he affirmed the Father's love.

The Father knows that it is good for us to ask sincerely, to seek diligently and to knock persistently. To have his "good gifts" handed to us in lives divinely screened from trouble would turn us into spoiled brats.

Here is the long and short of the promise: God's character guarantees the promise. Our characters can frustrate it. We can ask and receive, seek and find, knock and have the door opened--but only when we are honestly striving to live by the teachings of Jesus in this serious and searching "Sermon on the Mount."

15. A LIFESAVING PRAYER

So Moses prayed for the people (Numbers 21:7).

Moses was a man given to prayer. The people he served gave him plenty to pray about. (I draw no contemporary comparisons from that fact--well, maybe a few.) Moses prayed and the Lord spared idolatrous Israel. Moses prayed and the Lord spared leprous Miriam. Because Moses listened when God spoke, God listened when Moses spoke.

See in this ancient story:

1. A rebellious people.

"They spoke against God and against Moses," not once but again and again. Ironically, they desired the prayers of the very man they so often made miserable.

They were impatient with God's guidance. "The people grew impatient on the way." Their "way" was chosen by God, whose guiding presence was symbolized by a radiant cloud. When the cloud rested the people set up camp. When the cloud moved the people broke camp and marched on. They wanted to choose their own route, to take charge of their own lives.

They were ungrateful for God's provision. Manna had been miraculously provided to keep them from starvation. Potable water also had been provided to keep them from death by dehydration. Now they exclaim, "There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

They wanted to be petted and pampered, not disciplined and toughened. Such a course would have made them easy prey for belligerent enemies.

They were chastened by God's judgment. Earlier the people had grumbled for meat and God had sent quail to them. This time, however, he sent them snakes, venomous snakes as bad-tempered as the people, and the snake bites were proving fatal. God delights in mercy, but when his mercies go unappreciated he will teach through judgment what people refused to learn from mercy.

2. A gracious prayer.

The stricken people confessed their sins and urged Moses to plead for them. "Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." Without hesitation "Moses prayed for the people."

Moses prayed for those who had wronged him. His reactions were determined from above, by the will of God whom he faithfully served. His decisions were determined from within, dictated by his own heart and not by the people's attitudes and actions. His prayers were marked by a huge compassion and a repeated forgiveness.

Moses prayed as he had prayed before. This was not the first time, nor would it be the last time, that he prayed for the very people who had mistreated him. And each time he prayed, not for God to give them their just deserts, but that God would have mercy on them, that he would accept them, forgive them, and continue to guide and provide them.

Moses possessed the patience and the gratitude the people lacked. How fortunate for them that he did, for at times all that stood between them and annihilation were the prayers of

this despised leader who loved those who did not love him, and prayed for those who could not pray for themselves.

3. A curious panacea.

A strange answer was give to Moses' prayer. God told him to fashion a bronze snake, mount it on a pole, and place it in a highly visible location. Any snake-bitten Israelite who looked to that bronze snake was delivered from death.

A snake to save the snake-bitten was a strange remedy indeed. The people could not understand it. I doubt that Moses understood it. But God knew that "in the fullness of time" he would send his "one and only Son" into the world. That Son would call himself "the Son of Man," and he would say, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). And Paul would write that God sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering" (Rom. 8:3).

The strange remedy was made available upon a simple condition--just look at the uplifted snake. "When anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived." Looking is easy to do. Even a child can look. The best and worst of men and women can look.

The bronze snake was God's way of reminding people that we are saved by what he does for us, not by what we do for him. We are saved by his grace, not by our good works. We look to the uplifted Son and we are saved from the lethal poison of our death-producing sins. We have guilt but no merit. Salvation is

by grace through faith. It is mercy-based, not merit-based, and the condition for receiving it is simple.

The ancient story is gospel, good news for us today. It drives home the wonder of wonders—that God saves guilty rebels.

The story also reminds us that none were saved until someone prayed for them. Someone prayed for you. Who are you praying for?

16. A PRAYER FOR LOVING AND LIVING

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ--to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9).

Paul prayed frequently, joyfully and affectionately for the church at Philippi (vv. 3-8). In the providence and purpose of God by which this epistle became part of our Bible, it is also a prayer for us.

A preacher's intercession is as vital as his proclamation. To know what the apostle prayed for is to know the kind of life he desired for the church. To know the life he desired is to know the life God wills for us.

1. Paul prayed for deep, insightful loving.

He prayed that love would abound "in knowledge and depth of insight." We have a familiar adage, "Love is blind." The apostle's prayer refutes that notion.

Love should be intelligent. Love should not inspire foolish lives. Love's expression should demonstrate common sense and growing awareness of what God is like and what he wants us to be like.

Love should seek the excellent. Paul prays for insightful love that discerns "what is best." Our goal as followers of Christ is not merely the good but the best. Our Lord offers the best and deserves the best.

Certainly, we are to distinguish between good and bad. The enemy of the best is not always the bad; sometimes it is the

good. Excellence should be wedded to intelligence in Christian love. The challenging slogan of the Army's recruiting efforts should be our goal--"Be all that you can be." Be as much like Christ as you can be.

2. Paul prayed for high, moral living.

He prays for believers to be "pure and blameless."

Christian life should be sun-proved. The word "pure" translates a Greek word fashioned from a noun--the sun--and a verb--to judge. It refers to that which can be approved when tested in the strongest light.

God has some strong lights by which our lives are tested. One is conscience. Another is Scripture. And the most revealing of all is the light of final judgment, where every attitude and action is shown for what they really were. In that light no sin can be rationalized, justified or excused.

Christian life should also be God-pleasing. The apostle prays that the disciples of Christ may be "filled with the fruit of righteousness" and live "to the glory and praise of God."

Living to the praise of God includes refusing to gain the praise of men by any moral compromise. A God-pleasing life is on a collision course with a God-despising, Christ-rejecting, self-indulging world. We naturally desire acceptance and approval, but to win them by adopting the world's low standards of behavior is to self-destruct spiritually.

Such love and life come "through Jesus Christ." They are products of his grace. They are the fruit of his spirit. He enables what he commands.

Such love and life are not ephemeral and episodic. They can endure "until the day of Christ"--the day he comes as our righteous judge to complete the salvation of his people.

Jesus Christ is the power that fulfills this prayer. That power is abundant and available, here and now.

17. A GOOD PRAYER TO BORROW

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet....Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy (Habakkuk 3:1-2).

Notice the phrase "On shigionoth" that precedes this prayer, and word "Selah" that follows the reference to God's "coming" in verse three. The precise meaning of these words has been lost. The terms are generally conceded to be musical directions. If so, the prayer of Habakkuk, in the process of time, became a psalm used by Jewish worshipers long after Habakkuk was gone.

The prayer fits well our own day and time.

1. Renewal, the subject of this prayer, speaks to our need.

Habakkuk lived and preached during a bad time in Judah's history. Weak and rotten kings had ruined the good work of strong, reforming kings. Politics had become woefully corrupt and the land was filled with growing wickedness, injustice and violence.

The prophet grieved over this situation, disturbed because God seemed to ignore conditions that called for judgment. When he cried out to God about the matter, the divine response was startling: God would indeed impose judgment. He would bring a pagan army against his people, and Judah would be destroyed and exiled.

Habakkuk cried out again. How could God allow a nation even worse than Judah to destroy Jerusalem, batter down the

temple, and take captive the chosen people? God let the troubled prophet know that he was sovereign over all the earth. He could choose and use any nation he desired to discipline apostate Judah. God was both sovereignly righteous and righteously sovereign.

In the face of impending judgment the prophet realized that Judah had one hope. They could be renewed only by a divine deliverance, by a second Exodus. The Babylonian Captivity would annihilate Judah unless God had compassion on them and restored them to their own land and life again. That renewal, that revival, is the subject of the prophet's earnest prayer in chapter three. The prayer recalls in energetic and dramatic words the Exodus, and almost sobs the petition, "Renew [your deeds] in our day...in wrath remember mercy." No one could survive such holy wrath unless an equally holy mercy restrained it.

Today our nation is filled with wickedness, injustice and violence. We have ripened ourselves for judgment. A sin-hating God, a righteousness-loving God, zealous for the honor and glory of his name, cannot forever withhold the justice and punishment our sins evoke. As someone described England in John Wesley's day, we can describe America today: the nation is asleep in the dark and the church is asleep in the light. We need revival. On levels both individual and communal, we need a renewal of the awesome, compassionate deliverance that only God can bring about.

2. Rejoicing, as the issue of faith, speaks also to our need.

Habakkuk speaks of the Lord's prior deeds of creation and covenant making. He describes in eloquent language how the Lord "came out to deliver [his] people." Having freed them from bondage, he entered into a covenant to be their protector and defender if they lived in obedience to his commands.

The prophet said, "I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord." In the New Testament we read, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). This is how we came to saving faith. We heard of the mighty saving acts of God in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. We put our trust in him and he forgave and adopted us.

Like the prophet of old, therefore, we can "wait patiently" for God to act both in judgment and in mercy. Recalling his former actions, we can trust him to "renew" his interventions and deliverances in the worst of times. We can wait for him to come from unexpected places and perform undeserved miracles. Unlike an idol that has "no breath in it," and cannot hear and answer prayer (2:18-20), our God lives as sovereign over all nations and through all time. Our faith and hope can find their resting place in him. We can rejoice in the midst of the storms.

Borrow this prayer! We need revival as surely as did ancient Judah. Act upon it in faith! Live victoriously, whatever your present problems. Say with Habakkuk, "The Sovereign Lord is my strength." In that strength we can track the high places of the spirit like sure-footed deer climbing "the heights"

(v. 19). God keeps his word. He is a rock when times are awash with violence and disaster. He alone is our hope, and he can sustain us in the darkest hours and on the roughest paths. In a hell bound world we can live heaven bound lives. Our hope is not in changing circumstances but in the unchanging God.

18. AN OLD PRAYER FOR A NEW CRISIS

O Lord, hear my prayer... (Psalm 143:1).

Psalm 143 is called "A psalm of David." Either he wrote it or collected it from another source. In either case, he was a great man of prayer and this is a great prayer for us to adopt.

"O Lord, hear..." Hearing is not overhearing. The psalmist is calling for personal attention to his cry. He wants to be answered, to be helped, and so he prays, "Come to my relief." Hearing him would mean undertaking for him. He is praying for the Lord to initiate action on his behalf. "Hear" my prayer" equals "Do something for me."

1. This is a wise prayer.

Wisely, it is a prayer for mercy. The psalmist labels it, "my cry for mercy." He wants undeserved favor. He wants help from God as a gift. He wants what he hasn't earned.

He emphatically disavows justice. "Do not bring your servant into judgment," he prays, "for no one living is righteous before you." He is the Lord's servant, but his service has not placed the Lord in debt to him. He has not been a perfect servant. He has not rendered perfect service. If his life had been perfect, even that would not have obligated God. Perfect devotion to his will and perfect execution of his will is what our creator should receive from us. Doing our duty doesn't make the Lord our servant.

We are never able to command him on the basis of our just deserts. We can only cry for mercy. Jesus said to his disciples, "When you have done everything you were told to do, [you]

should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:10). Only mercy can save us. Justice would destroy us.

In the situation that threatened his life and prompted his prayer, he needed wisdom as well as power; he needed enlightenment as well as energy. Doing something is never enough, for things can be wrongly done as well as rightly done. We need both direction and dynamic.

Mercy received can be wasted by ignorance. Guidance is both needed by us and promised to us. James wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (Jas. 1:5). Divine favor and human folly are poorly matched. Mercy and wisdom is our need.

2. This wise prayer is also an urgent prayer.

The psalmist prayed for deliverance. His life was in danger. Enemies pursued him. Killing him was item number one on their agenda. In sheer desperation he pled, "Answer me quickly, O Lord." Come morning he would be a goner unless God intervened. The cry for "rescue" speaks of a situation with datelines and deadlines, and the prayer is suited to them.

The psalmist's prayer lacks details. That frustrates our curiosity but it serves our need. When we borrow his prayer, we can fill in the blanks with our own troubles. David said, "I...consider what your hands have done. I spread out my hands to you." When our hands are helpless we can call on the One whose hands are strong enough to grasp and change our lives.

Human memory is an aid to faith. "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works," the psalmist said. When we remember past answers to prayer and past deliverances from trouble, our confidence grows for present help.

Divine love is the hope of prayer. The hope of deliverance is grounded on the Lord's "unfailing love." Our names carry no weight at heaven's throne, and therefore the psalmist prays, "For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble. In your unfailing love, silence my enemies." God honors himself by helping us. God vindicates his choice of friends by overthrowing their enemies.

"I am your servant." The closing words are wisely chosen. Those who serve God, and they alone, may claim the promises given in his word and assured by his works.

19. JESUS' PRAYER FOR OUR SANCTIFICATION

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (John 17:17-19).

Jesus offered this prayer in the shadow of his coming death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The person who prayed and the mission he assigned make this prayer vital and not optional.

We must seriously to allow the Father to answer the prayer in our lives.

1. The personal significance of sanctification.

"I sanctify myself," said Jesus. Whatever sanctification means, its meaning is personal. As individuals we can be sanctified.

Earlier in the prayer Jesus said, "They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me." He sanctified himself as a person in relationship with the Father. He was "from" the Father.

We are to be sanctified as persons in relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours." Elsewhere Jesus said, "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world." The world has its own. By the world is meant society under the power of sin, society in revolt against God. Jesus is praying

here, not for those who belong to the world but who belong to him and to the Father.

In short, sanctification is something God does for those who have become followers of Jesus Christ. It is a personal experience for them. Those who belong to the world can have an experience of conversion, a change of ownership. Those who have made this change can have an experience of sanctification.

2. The missional significance of sanctification.

Jesus was sent into the world by the Father. In turn, Jesus sends his disciples into the world. "Sent" implies a specific mission. His mission was to create the gospel by making salvation possible through his atoning death and risen life. Our mission is to proclaim the gospel that others may come to know him as their savior and Lord.

For the sake of his mission Jesus sanctified himself. The root meaning of sanctification is separation from the common or profane to the sacred, to God. This separation involves our devotion to the will and work of God, to what the Father calls us to do. Jesus sanctified himself; he set himself apart, devoted himself to the Father, in order to accomplish his mission; in order to fulfill the purpose for which he had been sent into the world.

For us this devotion requires cleansing. Unlike Jesus, we are not holy by nature but only by grace. Native to our hearts is self-centeredness and self-indulgence that will retard our mission. From this inner sin we must be cleansed by the

sanctifying grace of God. We must offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices and obedient servants. Upon that offering he will send the purifying flame of his holy presence.

We are sanctified by "the truth," which is God's "word." His word is first of all Jesus himself, who said, "I am the truth." His word is also Scripture that informs us of Jesus and attracts us to Jesus. The commands and promises of the Bible, in its call to holiness, are actuated in our lives as we believe the truth. Then are we "truly sanctified." Then are we mission-ready.

20. THE PRAYER OF JONAH

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God (Jonah 2:1).

I do not think of Jonah as a great man of prayer. However, Jonah is easy to identify with because he prayed hardest when threatened most. Too many people look up to God only when they are down in the dumps.

Before we look at his prayer, underline the two phrases, "The Lord provided" and "Jonah prayed." They are quick reminders that human need and divine supply are linked together by prayer.

Jonah's prayer reinforces two easily stated but easily forgotten truths.

1. God will go to any length to reach us.

Jonah prayed "from inside the fish." He was in that dark and dreadful place because he had foolishly attempted the impossible--to run away from the Lord. The Lord had given him an assignment that he found unpleasant and he tried to escape it by taking a sudden ocean journey.

The Lord pursued him with "a great wind." No, the great wind was not a preacher, though the Lord does use preachers to pursue people. The "great wind" was "a violent storm" that threatened to capsize the ship. When reluctant sailors pitched Jonah overboard, the Lord pursued him further by "a great fish" that swallowed him without chewing him first. Was he worth all that trouble? No, but "God is love." He cares about us and seeks our highest welfare, which is always found in obedience

to his will. He will go to any length to reach us, even if it means chasing us with storms and feeding us to fish.

The New Testament tells us that Jonah in the belly of the fish became a "sign" of Jesus in the tomb. Of course, Jonah remained alive, but Jesus died, was entombed, and was raised to life again in three days. The greatest length to which the Almighty has ever gone to save us from sin and self-destruction is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In his prayer Jonah refers to his situation as "the depths of the grave" and "the roots of the mountains." That's about as low as you can get, but the Lord reached him even there, because

2. God is never any length from us.

Jonah said, "I called for help, and you listened to my cry." God is always within hearing distance.

Jonah also said, "I have been banished from your sight," but that was not true. God is always within seeing distance.

To the sailors who tossed him overboard Jonah had earlier confessed, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." The maker of all is present to all that he has made. Nowhere in creation can you escape the creator's presence. He sees you and hears you wherever you are.

This being true, the worst of times and places are never barriers to prayer. As Paul declared, men can "reach out for him and find him" because "he is not far from each one of us." Indeed, "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts

17:27, 28). God is just as close to us as the air about us and the air within us, even the hot air.

Because God is always "here and now," we can pray when we can't do anything else. When our situation seems utterly helpless, we can raise a prayer, voiced or unvoiced, to the Lord who pursues us with fathomless mercy.

Yes, we can pray when there is nothing else we can do, and God can save us when no one else can. "Inside the fish" Jonah was beyond the help of any friend. But the Lord saw him, heard him, answered him and rescued him. As Jonah expressed it, "You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God."

God brings us up from the pit by first going down into the pit with us. That is the meaning of grace, the meaning of the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection. In Jesus, God entered into our humanity and our history, and he experienced our weakness and weariness. He triumphed over sin and death, and he eagerly shares that triumph with all who call upon him in hope and faith. Prayer links human need to divine provision.

21. SAMUEL, A PRAYING LEADER

He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him (1 Samuel 7:9).

As a messenger of God to Israel, Samuel called them to whole-hearted repentance. They were to destroy all idols and serve the Lord only. Unless people are penitent, prayer is powerless. Every great revival in church history began when the people confessed and forsook their sins.

1. God is near when prayer is sincere.

Menaced by the Philistines, the Israelites pled with Samuel to plead with God. "Do not stop crying out the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistine." They did not pray themselves for they had not obeyed God and could not occupy praying ground. Samuel had remained loyal to God and his prayers were utterly sincere.

As a mediator, Samuel faithfully prayed for the people. He prefaced his prayers with a sacrifice, offering to the Lord "a suckling lamb." While he was engaged with this ritual the aggressors aligned themselves for battle. When they did, Samuel "cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him." The Lord, as always, was "only a prayer away" from a sincere petitioner.

We are told that Samuel prayed; we are not told what Samuel prayed. This very silence contains a vital lesson. The strength of prayer is not in our words but in our attitudes. True, Jesus taught his disciples a prayer, and we use those precise words often in our prayers. But Jesus also prayed in other

words, and from reading Acts and the Epistles we know the disciples also prayed in other words. The words are secondary, the attitude is primary. God is near when prayer is sincere.

2. Whom God defends no enemy defeats.

The Philistines had greater man-power and greater fire-power than did the quaking Israelites. They must have expected a swift and decisive victory. Instead, they were panicked and routed by a sudden thunderstorm. The Israelites, realizing that this storm was God's response to Samuel's intercession, gained a sudden and savage confidence. They "rushed" and "pursued" the enemy, "slaughtering them."

When God was implored, the enemy was subdued. God turned weapon-wielders into targets, and Israel scored a war-ending victory. "Throughout Samuel's lifetime" the Philistines submitted to a reluctant peace with God's people.

Samuel knew that victory was the Lord's, not Israel's and not his. To keep the people reminded of this, he set up a memorial stone and named it "Ebenezer," the stone of help. "Thus far has the Lord helped us," he said, implying that a penitent and praying people would continue to have divine resources that assured them of triumph.

"If God is for us," exclaimed Paul, "who can be against us?" Whom God defends no enemy defeats.

3. The altar is necessary; all else is accessory.

Life is complex of relationships, and the most significant of all is our relationship to God. We maintain and deepen that relationship through prayer. For that reason, Samuel was an

altar-builder at home and away. He improvised an altar on the field of battle. He maintained a permanent altar "to the Lord" at his home in Ramah. His work as a judge took him on annual circuits, but he always returned to his home and his altar.

As a mentor to Israel, Samuel modeled life's true priority. He was first, last and always a praying man. To this essential relationship, so carefully sustained, all other activities of his life were subordinated. If we keep our relationship to God right, other relationships will not be wrong. Those who pray sincerely will live faithfully.

Samuel's life reminds us that God uses one to affect many; that an intercessor is a notch above a warrior; and that a praying leader is the best kind to follow.

22. A PRAYER CHALLENGE

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective
(James 5:16).

I want us to look at a challenge to prayer, because prayer is where promises and commands converge in Christian experience. We are commanded to pray and we are promised blessings in answer to prayer, yet our prayer lives are often spasmodic and ineffective.

The first disciples of Jesus came to him saying, "Lord, teach us to pray." The school of prayer has few "A" students and no graduates. All of us need to pray and to pray about our praying. There are no revivals in the absence of prayer. Give attention, then, to these simple words from the hard-hitting letter of James: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

1. The text raises a question: Who is "a righteous man"?

He is not a super-saint. We know this because Elijah is cited as a model, and Elijah was "a man just like us." When we check him out in the Old Testament we find that he was subject to doubt and discouragement. Once he was so shaken by circumstances that he ran for his life from an angry woman and then, too tired to make any more miles, he crawled under a bush and prayed to die.

The passage from James implies that a righteous man is one who trusts God, for it speaks of "the prayer offered in faith." This doesn't mean faith in prayer or faith in oneself as a praying person--it means faith in the God who answers prayer.

The righteous man is not one who denies sin or covers sin, for the passage says, "Confess your sins." Honesty before God is a condition for obtaining mercy from God. As the book of Proverbs puts it: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

Add these truths together and this is the sum: A man or woman who trusts God and quits sin can pray with life-changing results.

2. The text raises another question: What is "powerful and effective" prayer?

For one thing, it's prayer that is real, not merely routine. Of Elijah it was said, "He prayed earnestly..." He didn't mumble a quick and lifeless repetition; he "prayed in his praying" as the original language indicates. There was urgency and energy in his praying.

For another thing, it's prayer that claims a promise, but doesn't presume a claim. Go back to 1 Kings 18, where Elijah's experience is recorded, and you will read that "the word of the Lord came to Elijah." It was a word of promise, "I will send rain on the land." Elijah was claiming a promise. He had no claim on the Lord because of his obedience; we owe full obedience to the Lord. Doing our duty doesn't oblige him to hand out any bonuses or favors.

And one more thing--it's prayer focused upon a need, not scattered in all directions. In the passage from James the focus is on healing and forgiveness. In any case, when we petition

God we need to home in on some word from him, for faith is "taking God at his word."

It all adds up to this: Prayer that prevails is prayer that rests in God and not upon itself. One of my seminary professors was asked, "Do you believe in the power of prayer?" His answer was, "I believe in the power of God who answers prayer." It is God's words to us and not our words to him that supplies to prayer its power, its effectiveness to bring about changes.

Enough talk about prayer. Let's pray.

23. WHEN YOU PRAY SINCERELY, EXPECT THIS

When Solomon had finished building the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had achieved all he had desired to do, the LORD appeared to him a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. The LORD said to him: "I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

"As for you, if you walk before me in integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel'" (1 Kings 9:1-6).

God's response to Solomon's prayer is typical, for God always acts in character. His responses always reflect his essential being. Therefore, the passage teaches us what we can expect when we pray sincerely.

1. We can expect a hearing.

God said, "I have heard the prayer..." He didn't hear because it was the king who prayed, for God is no respecter of persons. The prayer of his humblest child is as quickly heard and as gladly answered as are the petitions of rulers.

2. We can expect an answer.

God said, "I have consecrated this temple..." That was Solomon's desire in praying. The Father delights in granting the requests of his children, when those requests are unselfish.

3. We can expect a demand.

God said, "As for you...do all I command..." Prayer is not intended to replace God's will with ours. It functions to align us to his will, which is always our highest good. When we pray he will issue demands; he will make known his will.

4. We can expect a promise.

God said, "I will establish your royal throne..." He gives us "great and gracious" promises to challenge faith and inspire hope. They vary from person to person, from place to place, and from purpose to purpose. He gives us words to live by when we converse with him.

God's response to Solomon is encouragement to us. It tells us what to expect from him, and what to attempt for him.

God's promises to us are conditioned on our obedience to him. If we served other gods we forfeit the promised blessings.

24. WHEN PRAYERS END

This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse (Psalm 72:20).

There are times when prayers must end. There is never a time when praying should end.

1. Prayers end when they are intended for publication.

The prayer was one of David's collected prayers. He surely collected some of his own, and may have collected some borrowed from others. Since they were published--and thank God they were--they had to be concluded.

Some Christians dislike (and some even disdain) prayer books. Others, across centuries of time, have used them with great benefit. Reading the prayers of others is not a substitute for our own praying, but it may help to direct our lives in Christ, and we need all the help we can get.

2. Prayers end when the praying person dies.

Perhaps prayer will be made in heaven or in hell. Jesus told a story of a rich man who died and went to hell and pled with Abraham to send him some relief from torment.

Death is "amen" to prayer as we know it on earth. Embodied, threatened and confused, we need the resource of prayer to keep us connected with God who resources our lives. Beyond death, we are "present with the Lord" in a new and greater intimacy, and lack nothing to keep all relationships in sound condition.

3. Prayers end when action must begin.

Prayer does not bring escape; it does bring enablement. The burdens we must bear and the battles we must fight do not disappear in a cloud of prayer. But we go from prayer with renewed strength to meet life's challenges and death's coming.

This was modeled by Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane. He rose from prayer and said, "Enough. The hour is at hand," and moved forward to meet those who would arrest, torture and execute him.

Prayers often end too soon, for many of us do not pray enough.

Thinking and talking about prayer is never enough. We need to pray now before going back into the action of daily life.

25. SHORT PRAYERS, LONG ANSWERS

O Lord, be my help (Psalm 30:10).

Scholars call this a psalm of thanksgiving. Among the blessings for which we should thank God are long answers to short prayers.

1. "Short prayers are long enough."

Someone said, "Short prayers are long enough." I can no longer recall who said it, only that it was part of one of the best sermon outlines I ever saw.

Peter cried, "Save me, Lord," and was snatched from drowning. That may have been the shortest prayer he ever prayed, but it brought an answer that preserved his life for a fruitful future ministry.

What matters is the strength of our God, not the length of our prayers.

2. The Lord's help is strong enough.

He can snatch us from the edge of death. The psalmist said, "You brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit." He had a near-death experience from which prayer brought deliverance.

One day the Lord will even snatch us from the grave. Jesus said that his voice would call the dead from their graves to face final judgment, to receive eternal residence. The dead will not respond to your voice but they will to his voice.

No power is greater than the power that raises the dead, so if Jesus helps us we cannot be defeated. He is more than a match for our circumstances.

Divine help will not only be strong enough, it will also be long enough. The psalmist declares that "his favor lasts a lifetime." That's as long as we will need the help for which we cry out to God.

26. A PRAYER FOR REVIVAL

I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day...in wrath remember mercy (Habakkuk 3:2).

This prayer from ancient times is just as relevant as today's dinner.

1. An appeal for revival.

"Renew [your deeds] in our day."

Habakkuk knew that only a revival could save Israel from impending judgment. Israel had sinned boldly, deeply and persistently. They had adopted pagan gods, pagan values and pagan pleasures--all in defiance of a holy God's demand for a holy people.

Now a pagan army is poised as God's agent of punishment. The prophet sees that nothing can save his people from total destruction except a renewal of God's merciful, delivering work. Such work had brought Israel into existence. Such work alone could keep the nation from non-existence.

This prayer should be ours. The gods, values and pleasures of our nation are perverse. The sins for which Israel was indicted by the prophets are the sins of our nation also.

The church has been corrupted by the prevailing culture. Its worldliness ripens the church for judgment. Only revival will save us. And revival always begins with individuals praying, repenting, obeying and trusting God.

2. The alternative to revival.

“In wrath remember mercy.” Unless there is revival God’s wrath will be poured out in righteous destruction upon a disobedient people.

Wrath is already at work, for evil brings its own punishment. Millions are scarred by abortions. Millions are dying of AIDS. Millions are shattered by divorce. Millions are destroyed by drugs. Millions are bankrupted by greed.

Unless there is a turning to God, wrath will become complete; the destruction will be total. God “cannot tolerate wrong.” He is holy. He will avenge the rejection of his word by defiant sinners.

The alternative to revival is wrath. The alternative to wrath is mercy. But mercy is conditioned on repentance and faith. Judgment begins at the house of God. Repentance must begin there. Intercession must begin there. Faith must begin there. Only a renewal of the church will enable it to reach a dying world.

“It is time to seek the Lord.” Let us pray, let us repent and let us believe.

27. CHRIST HAS PRAYERS TOO!

...he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:25).

We are not alone when we pray. Christ lives to intercede. Everyone on your prayer list is on his. You are simply casting your petitions into his ongoing stream of intercession.

1. Christ prays for sinners.

From his cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). This does not mean that sinners are saved without responding to divine grace. At Pentecost those who crucified Jesus were called to repentance and told, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21, 23, 38).

If you join your prayer and faith to his, at that junction God will meet you with forgiveness and peace.

2. Christ prays for backsliders.

Having predicted Peter’s denial, Jesus said, “But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Remembering the words of Jesus, Peter was recovered from his spiritual lapse and became a tower of strength for his persecuted brothers and sisters.

Backslider, the Son prays for you, and when you return to the Father you will be restored to favor and freedom and fellowship.

2. Christ prays for believers.

In the shadows of his approaching cross, Jesus prayed for his disciples: “Father, sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

He desires a pure, strong, devoted and committed church to extend his mission in the world.

When those disciples met in prayer at Pentecost, the prayer of Christ was answered. “God, who knows the heart,” gave “the Holy Spirit to them” and thus God “purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8-9).

Believer, when you pray to be sanctified “through and through” you are echoing the prayer of Christ. God will answer with cleansing and energizing power.

Think of it--the one who died for us now lives to pray for us. What courage, faith and hope this should give us when we pray for ourselves and for one another.

28. PRAYERS, HIS AND OURS

You may ask.... I will ask... (John 14:12-20).

The riches of this portion of John's Gospel are immeasurable. Some of its wealth lies in the subject of prayers, those of Jesus and ours.

1. Our conditioned prayers.

Jesus said, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (v. 14). That sounds like unconditional carte blanche, but the context provides restrictions.

We may ask for anything that glorifies the Father. "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father (v. 13). The purpose that drove Jesus' life was glorifying the Father. He will not lend his name to petitions that cannot be aligned to that purpose.

We may ask for anything that emulates the Son. "Whoever has faith in me will do what I have been doing" (v. 12). Jesus is not only our master, he is our model. God's intention is to remake us in the image of his "one and only" Son. If what we seek in prayer won't help us to become more like Jesus, no answer is promised.

We may ask for anything that originates in love. "If you love me you will obey my commandments" (v. 15). Life mastered by love is God's will for all his children, for "God is love." We cannot expect loveless praying to carry any weight with God.

Let's sum all that up: It is not possible to truly pray "in the name of Jesus" for anything that dishonors the Father, that

contradicts the Son or that opposes love. Such prayers would be false to his name.

2. His confident prayers.

Jesus said, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you...” (v. 16).

Jesus prays with confidence. “I will ask...and he will give.” He fully expects to be heard and answered.

Jesus prays with confidence for the Counselor. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor...” He refers to the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit makes Jesus present: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (v. 18). “On that day... I am in you” (v. 20). Jesus is God with us and the Spirit is God in us. Jesus, within the constraints of a human body, could only be with a few disciples at any one time or place. Jesus, present in the person of the Spirit can be with all his disciples in all places at all times.

The Spirit abides with us forever: “...to be with you forever...” (v. 16). Jesus had to say, “I am going away.” The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Jesus, will never have to go away. This is why God can promise, “Never will I leave you,” and Jesus can promise, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The Spirit is the gift that includes all lesser gifts. In his “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus said, “If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?” Luke’s Gospel reads, “how much more will your Father in

heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13). The best includes the rest.

The prayers and promises of Jesus are for "anyone who has faith in me" (v. 12). Does this include us? We do not receive if we do not believe. Our doubts can cancel our petitions unless our trust cancels our doubts.

29. CHRIST PRAYED FOR YOU

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17).

Christ prayed for his disciples in the shadow of his approaching cross. Sanctification cannot be dismissed as optional or trivial. His prayer commands our interest if we want his best for our lives.

1. The God to whom he prayed.

Four times Jesus calls him “Father,” once “Holy Father,” and once “Righteous Father.” Sanctification is something God does from a Father’s heart of love, from a Holy Father’s desire to reproduce his character in his children, from a Righteous Father’s concern to destroy sin and enthrone righteousness.

2. The men for whom he prayed.

His prayer speaks of their relationship to the world. They were in the world but not of it (vv. 11, 14, 16). They were hated by the world but needed by it (vv. 14, 15, 21). They were being sent into the world (v. 18) to convince the world of Christ (vv. 21, 23). Sanctification would insulate them against the world and activate them toward the world.

The prayer also speaks of their relationship to God’s word. They had been given the word (vv. 8, 14) and had obeyed the word (v.6). Now they are to be sanctified by the word (v. 17). Those who have the word and face the world need to be sanctified.

3. The work for which he prayed.

“Sanctify them”--that is, cleanse them from sin and devote them to God. God does the work. The word instruments the

work. The word exposes our need, reveals God's provision and inspires our faith. We are sanctified in and by the word that is truth.

Christ prayed for you. Has the prayer been answered? You are in the world to serve the world. You have the word to give the world. The mission calls for sanctified missionaries.

Holiness means happiness, for God provides it as Father. Holiness means usefulness, for the world will not believe unholy witnesses.

Pray for yourself as Christ prayed for you.

30. IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL'S INTERCESSION

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

“Sanctify” means to devote to God and to purify from sin. The prayer is for God to claim and cleanse a people to be his own. Let us examine some implications of the prayer.

1. The phrase “God of peace” implies justification by faith.

Only the justified know God as the God of peace (Rom. 5:1). The wicked have no peace. They may know God as the God of holiness, justice, and mercy, but not of peace (Isa. 57:19-21). Peace comes only when sins are forgiven. The prayer is for Christians.

2. The phrase “God himself” implies human inability to deal with sin.

God must sanctify us. We cannot cleanse our inner lives nor devote ourselves utterly to God. Only God knows the human heart (Jer. 17:9). Only God can cleanse the heart (Acts 15:8-9). We can reform, perform rituals, exercise disciplines and learn doctrines--but none of these exertions will sanctify us. The work is God's.

3. The phrase “through and through” implies a complete victory of God over man's sin.

The whole man, “spirit, soul and body,” can be sanctified and kept blameless until “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Deliverance from all sin (not from all its consequences) is possible for all time, for it comes through divine power, not human resources.

Our sin is stubborn, our strength is small, but our God is almighty. “He will do it.” He does it when we believe. We are sanctified as we are justified--by faith. Faith says, “He can, he will, he does!”

31. Prayer and Promise

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Verse 23 is a prayer, not merely a pious wish. Verse 24 is a promise, not simply a vague hope. Concern for the church (prayer) is wedded to confidence in God (promise). To be sanctified wholly, intense desire must be joined to stubborn faith.

1. The prayer (v. 23).

Two things call for attention here--the name of God and the need of the church.

God is named as “the God of peace.” The name tells us that God has peace in himself and gives peace to his people. God wills the wholeness and unity of man. The name tells us also that those addressed were converted people. Peace with God results from justification by faith (Rom. 5:1). These Christians were aware, though, of an inner dispeace. They needed to be sanctified wholly by the God who had justified freely.

To be sanctified wholly relates to inward character. It refers to a crisis of cleansing that removes sin. The root meaning of the verb is “unearth,” and the tense used points to decisive, completed action. We can be made holy “through and through” here and now.

To be kept blameless relates to outward behavior stemming from inward character. It refers to a process of living that anticipates judgment. “The coming of our Lord” gives urgency to the quality of daily life.

2. The promise (v. 24).

Again, two things engage our thought--the faithfulness of God and the faith of the church.

“The one who calls you is faithful.” He willed the holiness of his people from eternity and for eternity (Eph. 1:4). We can count on him to carry out his purpose.

“He will do it.” As John Wesley put it, the faith by which we are sanctified wholly is a strong conviction that God can do it, that he will do it, and that he now does it.

The secret of victory in our quest for a clean heart and a constant life is prayer and promise joined in holy wedlock. Here and now you can be sanctified wholly. Today and tomorrow and forever you can be kept blameless. Pray and trust for the promised grace.

33. IN PRAYER TOGETHER

They all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14).

Here, for the first time, we can eavesdrop on a praying church. The incident speaks volumes on a timely subject.

1. Prayer as a universal activity.

“They all” prayed. They were all different but had this in common--they needed to pray and they could pray and they did pray.

Present among them were apostles and non-apostles, men and women, named and unnamed disciples of Jesus. This teaches us that everybody needs to pray. And everybody can pray for they all have access to God through Christ, and prayer is conversation with our Father who welcomes all and understands all.

2. Prayer as a corporate activity.

They all “joined together...in prayer.” They made prayer a family activity and this was pleasing to God.

This is the first recorded instance of corporate prayer in church history. Praying together recognizes (1) our mutual participation in Christ; (2) our mutual dependence on God; (3) our mutual responsibility for mission; and (4) our mutual concern for one another.

Few benefits and privileges exceed corporate prayer.

3. Prayer as a frequent activity.

These believers were “constantly in prayer.” Frequent praying attests our continuing needs: (1) The need for adoring and praising God; (2) the need for courage to survive in a hostile

environment; (3) the need for power to persevere as witnesses to Christ.

That we need to pray is obvious; that we need to pray together is less obvious but no less significant, as the whole of Scripture shows.

The church began its life in prayer. Without prayer its life would end. We pray or die. Prayer is the vital breath of believers. Praying together is the special strength of believers.

34. THE GOD TO WHOM HANNAH PRAYED

Then Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the Lord..." (1 Samuel 2:1).

Hannah was persistent in prayer and profuse in praise. The two seem to live together or not at all.

Who God is, not who Hannah was, made prayer effective.

1. God is unique.

"There is no one holy like the Lord..."

Divine holiness is absolute. Human holiness is relative. The human is made possible by the divine but never matches or transcends its source.

Only God is holy. So scripture teaches, but the world has never admitted this truth. Other gods are unholy, therefore unhelpful. They can sit unblinking and unspeaking on a shelf, but they could never open a barren womb for a praying woman.

2. God is almighty.

"The Lord brings death and makes alive..."

He creates life and allows death, the ruler of both, the servant of neither.

As the Almighty he determines the outcome of events. Whether Hannah would bear a child depended upon his decision, not hers, not Elkanah's. Samuel was born, not a product of blind chance but by the permission and power of God.

As the Almighty he determines the final destiny of persons. He seats rulers upon thrones and flicks them from thrones as he

wills. His power transcends their deaths and appoints them to eternal destiny beyond death.

3. God is merciful.

"He raises the poor from the dust..."

He champions the "under-classes" and stubbornly disdains all earthly caste systems.

Whom the world hates, God loves. When Jesus came to "exegete" the Father, he scandalized the upper-crust by his friendship with "sinners."

Whom sin has debased, God redeems. That leaves no one out; high or low, rich or poor, wise or foolish, believing or unbelieving. God loves all; Christ died for all; the gospel addresses its demands and promises to all.

4. God is inescapable.

"The Lord will judge the ends of the earth..."

God can be ignored but not eluded. He can be resisted but not defeated. Wherever you are he is; whatever you do he knows. His presence everywhere and his knowledge of everyone make him the only one qualified to judge us all. He reigns over all the earth, holds accountable every person, and will judge all without exception and without partiality.

The character of God gives prayer its value and power.

Like Hannah, we need to continue praying and praising.

THE PRAYERS OF KINGS
MESSAGE OUTLINES
W. E. McCumber

1. SOLOMON'S PRAYER FOR WISDOM

That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

Solomon answered God, "You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now, LORD God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?"

God said to Solomon, "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have" (2 Chronicles 1:7-12).

Praying kings are unusual. Crack a few history books and you will find very few kings distinguished for praying. It would be bad for God to have said to most of the nations' rulers, "Ask for whatever you want...." What most of them wanted were more power, more riches, and more dead enemies. Take Josef Stalin, for example. He actually schooled for the priesthood as a young man, but entered politics instead and piled up dead people by the thousands.

King's prayers are unusual. For the most part those who prayed did so on state occasions, and their prayers were more like speeches. We are going to look at some of the prayers offered by kings named in the Bible. A good place to begin is with Solomon's prayer for wisdom.

1. The prayer was humble in spirit.

The young king frankly admitted his feelings of inadequacy at he face the immense task of governing the people chosen by God to be a light of the nations. He wasn't sure that anyone was equal to the task now imposed on him, but he was sure that he needed all the help God could give him.

Like Israel's first king, Solomon began his reign as a man "little in [his] own eyes." And like Saul he became too big for his britches, proud, arrogant and self-willed, only to be rejected by the God who at first granted his prayers.

2. The prayer was unselfish in content.

Solomon didn't ask for riches, power or longevity. His only concern--or at least his major concern--was for wisdom that he might rule well. To make wisdom a priority was to display a measure of wisdom already possessed. To ask for wisdom, not as a tool for self-enrichment but for the sake of those whose lives were in his care, was a rare and admirable request.

Much prayer is self-centered and self-indulgent. It's like a child's wish-list for Santa's gifts. It is filled with "I," "my" and "mine." Jesus taught his disciples to say "us" and "our" when they prayed.

3. The prayer was exceeded by its answer.

God was so pleased by what Solomon requested--and by what he didn't request--that he promised him more than he had requested. He would grant the wisdom Solomon wanted, but he would throw in as a bonus "riches and honor" that would exceed the kings before him and those who would follow him. In so favoring the king the Lord improved the economy of the whole nation. We are told that Solomon "made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones."

He got vastly more than he asked for because his asking sprang from humility and unselfishness.

Think about this: The New Testament promises wisdom to all of God's people. James wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."

God treats the humblest peasant as he does a king! He is concerned about all our lives and plays no favorites in dispensing wisdom. We can live effectively if we pray humbly and unselfishly and believingly.

2. SOLOMON'S DEDICATORY PRAYER

“O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth--you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it--as it is today.”

But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive....

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple (2 Chronicles 6:12-15, 18-21; 7:1).

God without a temple is easily forgotten. The outstanding achievement of Solomon's reign was the temple, a house where God would meet with his chosen people to renew the covenant and reinforce their lives.

A temple without God is easily destroyed. Bereft of his presence it becomes nothing more than a human achievement, an organized pile of wood, stone and metal. When God's glory had departed, the temple quickly became the prey of heathen troops.

1. The prayer accents the might of God.

No space can contain him. The vast heavens, much less the earth, could never form a boundary within which God must live and work. The surrounding nations worshiped many gods, each with his little "turf" to jealously claim and defend. The God of Israel was not made by Israel and could not be assigned a space to restrict his activity. He overflowed all time and space.

Just as no space could contain him, so no place could exclude him. He would dwell with his people, but they could never shut him in or out of their lives. No geographical, political or social areas were "off limits" to him. Everywhere he was present as deliverer or destroyer.

2. The prayer accents the mercy of God.

Mercy will be needed by all. Israel was not chosen for their moral or spiritual excellence. Like all people on earth they had sinned against God and had incurred his holy wrath. Indeed, if light graduates guilt, if privilege graduates guilt, they were "top of the chart" sinners. Never would they be able to say, "God occupies the temple we built because we are better than all other nations." Solomon labeled his prayer "a plea for mercy" and regarded the temple as a focal point for God's forgiving grace.

Mercy, needed by all, would be granted to all. King and commoner alike would know “the joy of sins forgiven.” What cannot be deserved by any can be justly distributed to all. All sin offends God; all forgiveness exalts God. Man is always God’s beneficiary, never God’s benefactor.

Where prayer ended, answers began. Solomon’s prayer was immediately answered by a fire that consumed the sacrifices and signified the covenant-keeping character of God.

When fire fell, glory filled the temple. It is the glory of God to hear and answer prayer. It is the glory of God to judge and forgive sin. It is the glory of God to promise and fulfill. It is the glory of God to fill space without being confined by space. He is forever a mystery, a power and a love.

3. ASA'S PRAYER FOR MILITARY HELP

Zerah the Cushite marched out against them with a vast army and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. Asa went out to meet him and they took up battle positions in the Valley of Zephathah near Mareshah.

Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, "LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. O LORD, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you."

The LORD struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah. The Cushites fled, and Asa and his army pursued them as far as Gerar. Such a great number of Cushites fell that they could not recover; they were crushed before the LORD and his forces. The men of Judah carried off a large amount of plunder (2 Chronicles 14:9-13).

Israel faced a mighty army. Our translation calls it “vast” and that means vast compared to Israel’s much smaller defense force. Facing that mighty army, however, Israel trusted a mightier God.

1. Asa’s prayer contained an honest self-assessment.

The beleaguered king described Israel as "powerless against the mighty..." As we would say today, Israel was out-manned and out-gunned. They would fight but could not win. As casualties mounted their defeat would be hastened.

When we are talking to God all bluffing is futile, all groundless optimism is silly. He knows exactly what we are up

against in every battle. Bravado is an empty boast from wasted breath. An honest cry for help out of a frank awareness of inadequate resources is what God wants to hear. Unless we really need him we should get on with the fighting, not stop for the praying. Because we need him, we had better preface the fighting with praying.

2. Asa's prayer also revealed a heartening God-consciousness.

"Lord, there is no one like you..." The mightiest God assured the weakest army of victory. King and people believed in the power of God. Moreover, they believed in his exercise of power on behalf of the powerless. The king and his troops became "the Lord and his forces," and that made them invincible.

Believing in the power of God, the army of Israel fought in the name of God. He authorized their attack and enabled their victory. The enemy was pursued, pounded and plundered. Israel not only won, they won big. Their victory was conspicuous. They could say what Paul would centuries later write, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Learn this. Believe this: Whom God chooses to help men cannot defeat--nor can women.

4. JEHOSHAPHAT'S PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE

Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard and said: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, 'If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us'.... For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chronicles 20:5-12).

Sometimes all we can do is pray. At all times prayer is a major strategy for the believer. Prayer is not a last resort. It is a first reaction, perhaps a first impulse, for those who follow Jesus seriously.

Prayer prevails because God is faithful. He has made promises of deliverance and provision with full intention of keeping his word. In this prayer of King Jehoshaphat there are some lessons to learn and remember.

1. Example inspires.

Jehoshaphat was the son of Asa who was a praying king. He often communed with God through the means of prayer. Asa

prayed for deliverance when his army was confronted by a superior force of men and arms. His prayer prevailed and that victory no doubt steadied the faith of Jehoshaphat when his troops were challenged by a confident coalition force that sought the destruction of Israel.

2. Trouble unites.

When Jehoshaphat called for a service of prayer and fasting, “all the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones stood there before the Lord.” They had come to seek God’s help. Driven by a common need they wisely suspended their differences and joined forces for the conflict. When the church is assaulted by the world our unity becomes more significant than our diversity. We unite with other believers in common cause against those who oppose the work of the Lord.

At times we have no power; at all times God has all power.

3. God hears and helps.

The service of prayer and fasting closed with audible praise. “Some Levites ...stood up and praised the Lord, the God of Israel, with a loud voice.” They were fully conscious of their desperate situation, but they were just as conscious of the Lord’s power and protection. “You rule over all,” the king affirmed, “and you will hear us and save us.” There is a faith that disregards logistics and statistics, that refuses to knuckle under to majorities and probabilities. God honors such faith.

“Our eyes are upon you,” the king declared. They knew their weakness and the enemy’s strength. They looked to the

God whom no one could withstand and were confident of victory.

Our certainty in an uncertain world is God's word.

Our victory comes by trusting that word.

5. HEZEKIAH'S PRAYER FOR WORSHIPERS

Although most of the many people who came from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, "May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God--the LORD, the God of his fathers--even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary." And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people (2 Chronicles 30:18-20).

Hezekiah was one of the best kings, overall. He sparked some powerful reforms, and was best known and most admired for two achievements.

He opened the temple. The house of the Lord had been shut for a long time. It had fallen into disrepair and was filled with clutter. At his orders the priests and Levites opened the doors, cleaned out the trash, and restored the furnishings.

Having restored the venue of worship he reestablished the Passover, the great central religious feast that Israel was to observe annually. Couriers traveled throughout the nation, urging people to convene at Jerusalem and celebrate the neglected rituals. This Passover furnished the occasion for the king's prayer we are examining.

1. The worshipers ignored the rules.

Their disregard for all the rituals that prepared them for the Passover did not arise from unbelief or rebellion. Their negligence was circumstantial, not intentional. Two reasons for this breach of law were paramount.

They faced a shortage of time. They had traveled a long distance and they had limited time to be away.

They also were driven by a sense of need. The prior folly of sacrilege and idolatry that caused the closing of the temple and the suspension of the Passover had brought judgment upon the nation. Many of them became captives to foreign military forces and were exiled from their homeland. Hezekiah firmly believed that restoration of the Lord's house and worship would provoke his compassion and forgiveness and lead to the deliverance of the captives.

2. The intercession transcended the rituals.

Hezekiah prayed for the worshippers. That "the Lord heard and healed the people" suggests that some form of illness beset them for violating his commands.

The prayer acknowledged the people's failure. Hezekiah did not blink the truth. He did not attempt explanation or excuse. He was not trying to inform the Lord, for he well knew that the Lord was completely aware of the situation. Hezekiah simply asked for "pardon." Our need as sinners is forgiveness, not vindication.

The prayer acknowledged the Lord's goodness. It is addressed to "the Lord who is good." Pagan gods were not all or always good. They shared the sins of their guilty devotees. Israel's God was "the Holy One," and every word in the title should be emphatic. God is good in what he bestows and in what he withholds. He is good in what he commands and what he promises. He is good in his acts of mercy and in his acts of

judgment. He is good in his essential being and in all the doing that flows from it.

God heard and answered the prayer. He forgave and healed the people. This does not imply indifference to their violations of his laws; it is a tribute to divine compassion upon undeserving sinners.

Hezekiah prayed for the pardon of “everyone who sets his heart upon seeking God.” Our heart-set determines our lifestyle. Paul exhorts Christians to set their minds “on things above, not on things of earth.” Life is inner directed. The heart set upon God cannot be content with anything in life contrary to his will.

Our reality is more important than our rituals. We can flawlessly perform religious rituals even when our hearts are far from God. Rituals are impotent--worse, they are condemning--unless they symbolize true faith and committed life.

6. HEZEKIAH'S PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE

Sennacherib's officers spoke further against the LORD God and against his servant Hezekiah. The king also wrote letters insulting the LORD, the God of Israel, and saying this against him: "Just as the gods of the peoples of the other lands did not rescue their people from my hand, so the god of Hezekiah will not rescue his people from my hand." Then they called out in Hebrew to the people of Jerusalem who were on the wall, to terrify them and make them afraid in order to capture the city. They spoke about the God of Jerusalem as they did about the gods of the other peoples of the world--the work of men's hands.

King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz cried out in prayer to heaven about this. And the LORD sent an angel, who annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons cut him down with the sword (2 Chronicles 32:16-21).

Insulting God is suicidal. In letters and speeches Sennacherib and his officers had spoken contemptuously of "the God Hezekiah," "the God of Jerusalem." They sought to drag the creator of heaven and earth down to the level of gods created by men, false gods who had proven incapable of rescuing their devotees from the army of this marauding monarch.

Consulting God is redemptive. King Hezekiah prayed to the insulted God, and he dispatched an angel of divine judgment who “annihilated all the fighting men...of the Assyrian king.”

1. The cry for help.

“Hezekiah and...Isaiah...cried out in prayer.” King and prophet united in calling on God for help. A prayer partner is a powerful ally. Two persons who agree in prayer for what they seek from God will be heard. Jesus taught this, and he knew more about prayer--and about praying alone--than any other person who ever petitioned God.

Prayer is a situation in which “it is not good for man to be alone.” He needs a helper, someone who shares his pain, his burden and his faith. When we serve the Lord within the community of faith that is the church, such a helper can always be found.

As these partners in prayer called upon God their faith was grounded in the promises of God. They did what they could to fortify the city and to inspire its defenders, but their faith was not in their strategies, their troops or even in their prayers. Their trust was in the Lord who said, “I will defend this city and save it.”

2. The conqueror from heaven.

“And the Lord sent an angel.” He had “legions” under his command, but one was enough. One angel was mightier than the whole pagan army.

According to the Bible, angels are God’s agents in dispensing mercy and judgment. This unnamed warrior-angel

was in the service of judgment upon the Assyrians as a means of mercy upon Israel.

How the angel decimated the Assyrian army we are not told. (All the troops who ever dined on Army food know how it could have happened.) On the morning of his planned day of battle Sennacherib woke up, looked around, and saw dead bodies in vast numbers. Shaken and frightened, he turned tail and scurried home followed by his vaunted “invincibles.”

He had boasted that the God of Israel was helpless to deliver them from his hand. Now he was helpless before the power of the God he insulted, and his own gods were helpless to avert his defeat. In the calm statement of some Jewish historian, “he withdrew to his own land in disgrace.”

The once-mighty monarch went into “the temple of his god.” Was he there to pray? To seek an explanation? To scold the god who failed him? We don’t know, but we are told that some of his own sons “cut him down with the sword.” He died before a god who just sat there doing what he did best--which was absolutely nothing.

7. MANASSEH'S PRAYER FOR DIVINE FAVOR

The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.

Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah.

He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to the LORD their God (2 Chronicles 33:10-17).

A good father may have a bad son. Manasseh's father was Hezekiah who gets good press in the Scriptures. For most of his life he honored the Lord and when he died he was honored by

the people. Manasseh was not a chip off the old block. The first paragraph of chapter 33 begins by telling us that “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord,” and ends by telling us that “He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger.” He led the nation astray by filling the land with pagan idols and pagan rites.

A bad situation may have a good effect. God brought judgment upon king and people, allowing Manasseh to be captured, shackled, deported and humiliated. In those depths of depression and shame he turned to the Lord in prayer.

1. God will hear and answer the worst of persons.

The hearing is conditioned upon a humbling. When sinners learn from judgment what they refuse to learn from mercy, God hears their cries of distress and changes them and their situations. When Manasseh humbled himself before the Lord and prayed to him, “the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea.”

When the Lord first spoke to him and his people “they paid no attention.” So gracious is the Lord that he listened to those who had stubbornly refused to listen to him. He brought the disgraced monarch back to his capital city and his forfeited kingdom. We read, “Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God.” None of the pagan deities could forgive and rescue the wicked king. The living God of Israel is both powerful and gracious. That’s why we are meeting in church this morning and not in hell.

2. When sin is gone its consequences remain.

Our past emerges in some other persons' present. Manasseh's personal changes did not revoke his earlier wicked influences upon the people. He did initiate some significant reforms. He fortified the city, restored the temple, reinstated the worship demanded by the covenant, and "threw out" the idols that had polluted the place of worship and the worshipers. Nevertheless, a five-year eraser could not remove a fifty-year record.

Consequences of our sins will plague us to our graves. They cannot annul God's pardon, but neither can we annul their bad effect upon family and friends.

Manasseh came to the throne at age twelve and occupied it for fifty-five years. How different Israel's history could have been if Manasseh had come to God as soon as he came to the throne.

He teaches by negative example these important lessons: Come to God while you are young. Cling to God when others forsake him.

In a positive way he teaches this: God will hear our prayer for mercy and pardon at any age and from any circumstance. Past evils cannot rob us of future blessings if we repent and believe.

.

**THE LORD'S PRAYER FOR HIS CHURCH
MESSAGE OUTLINES ON JOHN 17
W. E. McCumber**

THE LORD'S PRAYER (1)

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed..." (John 17:1).

This portion of John's Gospel is holy ground indeed. Here we are allowed to overhear Jesus at prayer for himself, for his disciples, and for all his followers throughout time.

The passage begins, "After Jesus said this..." He had been talking to his disciples about God and now he was talking to God about his disciples. Much of human life is conversation. We need to converse with God more frequently in order to converse with people more helpfully.

"He looked toward heaven and prayed..." His outlook was grim. He was facing arrest, trials and the horrible death of crucifixion. The uplook, however, was good. The Father was with him, to hear and to help as he confronted the severest ordeal of his life.

1. Jesus talked to Father about glory.

He talked about the glory he had enjoyed with the Father: "Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (v. 5). He had laid aside that heavenly glory for earthly misery. He came to earth as a man among men, to live for us, die for us and be raised again for us. As the eternal Word of God, who was with God and was God "in the beginning" (1:1), he had lived in a realm of glory beyond our imagination. Now, as he faces the cross, he prays to be restored to that glory--to experience the Father's presence in that intimate and immediate sense.

He talked about the glory he had brought to the Father: "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (v. 4). Human beings were created to serve God, to do the Father's will "on earth," as it is done "in heaven." The Father is glorified when his will is done, when the work he assigns is completed. At a cost to himself that defies calculation, Jesus demonstrated the meaning of sonship by full devotion to his assigned task. He had been homeless, harassed and hungry as he pursued his work, and soon he would be stretched in awful anguish upon a shameful cross, dying as he had lived--to the glory of God.

He talked about the glory he needed from the Father: "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (v. 1). He is praying for the Father's presence and power to sustain him during the brutal treatment and cruel death that he was about to undergo. In the Gospel of John the glorification of Jesus does not begin with his resurrection and ascension. It begins with his death as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

2. Jesus talked to the Father about gifts.

Jesus talked to the Father about the gift of authority: "For you granted him authority over all people..." (v. 2). Jesus has been made the Lord of all, and therefore he determines the final destiny of all. The sin question has been made the Son question. Those who believe in the Son of God are forgiven; those who reject the Son of God remain alienated from God and in danger of eternal destruction.

Jesus talked to the Father about the gift of persons: "You granted him authority over...all those you have given him" (v. 2). The true church is comprised of all those persons whom the Father has given to the Son.

John's Gospel makes it crystal clear that these persons have been given to Jesus by an act of God that separates them from the world (v. 6). They are loved by the Father but hated by the world. Being given to Jesus makes them different, and being different makes them unpopular with the unchanged.

They are not given to Jesus because of their worth; in fact, it is being given to Jesus that creates their worth. The giving is an act of divine grace, not a reward for human merit.

Jesus talked to the Father about the gift of life: "For you have granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him" (v. 2). The Son exercises his given authority by giving eternal life to those who believe and obey him.

In this portion of his prayer Jesus furnishes us with the nearest thing to a definition of eternal life to be found in Scripture: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (v. 3). Eternal life is not a gift that we can receive and keep apart from our relationship with God. Eternal life is knowing God in the sense of intimate fellowship with him. It is relational and conditioned upon continuing faith and obedience. Those who disbelieve and disobey do not have eternal life.

That Jesus prayed means we should pray. We should pray, as did he, for ourselves and others. We should pray for the Father's glory in the lives of his children. We should pray for Father's glory in the mission of the church. We should pray to live and die to the glory of God.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (2)

I pray for them. I am not praying for the world... (John 17:9).

We listened to Jesus as he prayed for himself. Now we can listen to him as he prays for his disciples. His prayer for them is considerably longer than his prayer for himself. How like Jesus that is! Even when he faced the deepest crisis of his earthly life he was more concerned for his followers than for himself. Jesus lived and died for others. We could expect the major portion of his praying to be for others.

He said, "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world." As you overhear this intercession you quickly realize that Jesus stresses the distinction of his disciples from the world. "They are not of the world," he says, and for that reason "the world has hated them." He is leaving the world and returning to the Father, but "they are still in the world," facing hatred and opposition, and therefore he prayed for them.

1. Jesus prayed for their security.

"Holy Father, protect them" is his plea. He had "protected them and kept them safe." Now he places them in the Father's keeping,

Protection does not mean being spared from conflict and wounds. It does not mean living and working unscarred. It means that the Father's purpose for them will be effectively carried out in spite of the devil's malignant efforts to defeat their mission. Shortly before he prayed for them Jesus told the disciples, "In the world you will have trouble." A world that

rejected and crucified him would not put out a welcome mat for them.

He knows the "evil one" will attack them. He prays the "Holy One" will protect them.

The "evil one" is a reference to the devil. Many do not believe the devil exists. "Uncle Bud" Robinson had the right answer to a man who told him, "I've never met the devil." Bud said, "Two fellers traveling in the same direction hardly ever meet." Walk with Jesus and you will soon discover the hatred and power of the devil. He can trouble you but he can't defeat you, for Jesus prayed for your security.

2. Jesus prayed for their sanctification.

"Sanctify them by the truth," he prayed, adding, "Your word is truth." To be sanctified is to be made holy by the power of God's word.

Jesus said, "For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." To sanctify himself meant to separate himself to the task for which the Father sent him into the world-- the task of saving us from sin through an atoning death. Complete devotion to the will of God is a basic definition of holiness.

Sanctification means that but more than that in the case of his disciples. It involves a deep inward cleansing from sin, from that pollution of self which leads to a perversion of self which seeks to displace God's will with our wills at the control-center of our lives.

Jesus was sending them into the world to continue and extend his mission. The "evil one," fighting them from without, was all the opposition they could handle. They didn't need to be weakened or betrayed by evil within. Consecration to their mission would require a cleansing from inward sin. The gift of the Holy Spirit as their power for mission would be a heart-purifying force within, giving them strength and stamina for their task.

He prayed for his disciples to be secured and sanctified. The prayers are closely related. By sanctifying us the Father secures us.

The answer to Jesus' prayers has been provided. The context of his prayers was his promise to send the Spirit to indwell the disciples as a guide into all truth. The Spirit has been outpoured. He interprets and applies the word of truth to our hearts, and by that word we are cleansed from sin, energized for service and protected from Satan.

Jesus sends us into the world. The "evil one," who is "the prince of this world," opposes our mission. The Holy One, who is mightier than the evil one, has come to sanctify and secure us. Don't just sit there! "Be filled with the Spirit."

THE LORD'S PRAYER (3)

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for them who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one (John 17:20, 21).

Church growth began with the message of the apostles. As they preached and taught, others believed and were added to the church.

Their message became the New Testament. All who have known and followed Christ since its creation are included in this prayer.

The burden of his prayer, in verses 20 through 26, is for their unity and their glory. They are to receive glory on earth and in eternity, the glory that the Father gave to the Son. Intimate fellowship with Father and Son through the indwelling Spirit is the glory that believers share as they serve Jesus in this world and behold Jesus in the world to come.

What especially gripped me as I mulled over this passage was the unity of believers.

1. We are one with yesterday's church.

Those who heard the gospel and followed Christ in previous generations--we are one with them.

We have the same source of life. "I am the life," said Jesus. "I am the vine," said Jesus, "and you [my disciples] are the branches. There is just one vine and it gives life to all the branches. Some of those branches are now in heaven and have been there for hundreds of years as we measure time on earth.

But we are related to them, one with them, as surely as we are to all the believers who are presently living on earth.

We have the same mission in life. Their mission was to make Christ known through the message of the gospel. That is still the mission of the church and will ever be. We are a part of what they did and they are a part of what we are doing. We have inherited from them and they are invested in us. Every time the church on earth enlists another recruit for Christ, the church in heaven rejoices with us.

We have the same resources for life. Those who went before us thrived and grew through the power of the Spirit and the word of God. Our tools may be different, and more sophisticated; our methods may be different and more psychologically astute; but the message and the power of the message remain the same century after century. Our automobiles and tractors and computers and sound systems would make their eyes pop out, but they would be at home in our praises and our preaching.

We are debtors to yesterday's church. We are inheritors with yesterday's church. We are one with yesterday's church.

2. We are one with tomorrow's church.

The church will always be. As long as the world stands, as long as sin continues, as long as sinners need divine forgiveness and character changes, the church will be in their midst making known their redeemer. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Built into ancient gates were council rooms. Marching out of ancient gates were armies. Jesus was saying, in effect, "The strategies and forces of evil will never drive the church from the earth." One day the Lord will hang an "Out of Business" sign on the gates of Hades, but evil will never nail such a sign on the church. Until Jesus comes again, the church will persist and the church will prevail.

Another sign that will never hang on the church is "Under New Management." Jesus is the Lord of the church; not a pope, not a gaggle of bishops, not a coalition of bossy lay-persons, but Jesus himself. He said "my church" and he will never disown it and never discard it.

Think of what it means for us to be one with the church of the future. Our mission, the mission handed down to us from yesterday's church, will create tomorrow's church. As our generation faithfully proclaims the gospel, as the next generation blows that same trumpet--and the next and the next until Jesus comes--the church of today will continue to be God's way of producing the church of tomorrow.

What an opportunity and responsibility are ours. We must be true to our mission so that tomorrow's church will come into existence and be the message-bearers and incubators of the church yet beyond them.

We are debtors to tomorrow's church. We are patterns for tomorrow's church. We are one with tomorrow's church.

Jesus prays for our integrity, for our unity with the church behind us and before us. What a rich heritage and rich future is

ours! Let us not betray that heritage and future. Let the prayer of our Lord be answered in us. Amen.

PRAYER LESSONS FROM JOHN 17

BIBLE STUDY OUTLINES

1. SETTING AND SUBSTANCE

John 17:1-5.

1. The setting of the prayer.

“After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father, the time has come.’”

Having talked to disciples about God (ch. 14-16), Jesus now talks to God about them. Looking toward heaven was a common gesture for a praying Jew (cf. Ps. 121; Jn. 11:41). Prayer looks to God, not for God; he can't be located spatially. Looking up recognizes his transcendence (cf. Ps. 123:1-3).

“Father” was Jesus' favored name for God and the one he taught us to use when we pray. It suggests the privilege of a marvelous intimacy with God.

“The time has come” refers to the closing events of his earthly ministry--“the hour” toward which the Gospel events had steadily moved (2:4; 12:23; 7:30; 8:20; 13:1).

2. The substance of the prayer.

“Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.”

“Glorify your Son...” The petition looks to his triumph over sin and death, to the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension as saving events that complete the earthly mission given him by the Father.

“That your Son may glorify you,” i.e. may render total obedience to your will--even obedience unto death. Glorifying God is inseparable from the obedience that affirms his sovereignty as God. Jesus receives glory in order to give glory, not as a reward for giving glory.

“For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.”

God granted authority to Jesus to reveal and exercise divine lordship over creation. His rule is universal--“over all people.”

“Eternal life” is equivalent to “salvation” in John’s Gospel. Jesus was given authority to give this life to all who trusted in him.

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Eternal life is knowing God by personal acquaintance. “The only true God” is the ultimate reality, and Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of that reality.

Jesus was fully conscious of being “sent” by the Father. Over 40 references to his being sent are found in John’s Gospel.

“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

He glorified the Father by fulfilling his mission on earth. He prays to be glorified by restoration to his place in heaven. His death is so imminent that he refers to it as already accomplished.

Prayer Lessons for us:

Jesus prayed as Son and servant of the Father. These relationships teach us how to pray.

(1) Here we learn the ground of our prayers: we pray to the Father in the name of the Son. We have no claim upon the Father’s mercy or favors apart from Jesus Christ.

(2) Here we learn the pattern for our prayers; we pray primarily for the Father's glory and secondarily for our needs. As Jesus taught, we first pray for the hallowing of the Father's name and the doing of the Father's will, and then we can pray, "Give us..." and "Forgive us..."

(3) Here we learn the condition of our prayers: we can pray with confidence when we obey with alacrity. "Faith without deeds is dead," James declared (2:26), and prayer without faith is futile. Disobedience negates prayer. It reduces prayer to cold rituals and vain "babbling."

The relationship of Jesus to God, and our relationship to God through Jesus, enables us to pray with veracity, authority and expectancy.

2. THE GOD TO WHOM JESUS PRAYED

John 17: 1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25.

1. Jesus called God “Father” every time he prayed.

The one exception is found in Matthew 27:46. “Father” expresses his personal and intimate relationship to God. He first used the name in boyhood (Luke 2:49), and continued to use it in and after death (John 18:11; 20:17, 21). We are not surprised to hear “Father” from the lips of him whom God called “my Son.” He was the “one and only” Son of God. How marvelous, though, that we are permitted and encouraged to use the word! The Holy Spirit witnesses to our place in the family of God when he incites us to cry, “*Abba, Father*” (Rom. 8:14, 15).

2. Jesus called God “Holy Father” just this once.

The adjective follows naturally upon the reference to God’s presence and glory (v. 5). In Israel, the special place of his presence was the “Holy of Holies”--the inner sanctum of the Temple. God is “the Holy One” who covenants to protect and preserve those whom he makes holy. He assumes full responsibility for those adopted as his children. He is petitioned by Jesus to make them holy in person for the sake of their mission (vv. 17-19).

3. Jesus called God “Righteous Father” just this once, also.

The name implies that God always acts justly. God’s actions, therefore will vindicate those who know him against those who do not know him--those who reject the Son whom he

has sent, and hate the disciples whom the Son, in turn, sends into the world.

Prayer Lessons for us:

(1) We have access to the Father, which means access to forgiving and adopting love.

(2) Our access to the Father is through Jesus, the Son of God who revealed him to us and reconciles us to him.

(3) That access can be barred by sin, for sonship is defined by obedience, not by privilege, as Jesus showed in his temptation (Matt. 4:3-4).

3. THE FATHER'S GIFTS TO THE SON

John 17:4, 6, 8, 22.

1. The Father gave him work.

“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”

Jesus did not come at his own initiative or with his own agenda. His work was assigned by the Father and completed in order to glorify the Father. The church extends the mission of Jesus (v. 18; cf. 20:21)--a given task which the church is not at liberty to discard or to alter.

2. The Father gave him disciples.

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world.”

They were chosen by him before choosing him (6:37; 15:16; Acts 18:9-10; Eph. 1:4). To them Jesus revealed the Father (14:9-10), and of them he comprised his family (Mark 3:31-34; Heb. 2:11-13). He is God's gift to us, and we are God's gift to him.

3. The Father gave him words.

“For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them.”

Jesus came with messages from the Father and his disciples accepted them (cf. 7:16; 8:28; 8:47). These words--echoed, amplified, explained and applied--became their message. The church's given task involves a given message, for which the church dare not substitute the words of other men.

4. The Father gave him glory.

“I have given them the glory that you gave me.”

In John’s Gospel the glorifying of the Son begins with the crucifixion, not the resurrection. Jesus gives to his disciples the glory of sharing his sufferings in order that the mission and message may reach to all nations.

To share his sufferings is to share his glory, now and forever (2 Tim. 2; 10-12; 1 Pet. 4:13-14; 5:1-4, 10).

Prayer Lessons for us:

(1) We are given to a praying Christ; we must be praying disciples (Matt. 10:24-25).

(2) He under girded his mission and message with prayer. To extend that mission and to share that message requires us to be persons of prayer (15:16).

(3) To share his work and words will occasion suffering, and prayer will sustain us in bearing that suffering (1 Pet. 2:23; Luke 23:46).

4. THE PRAYER CONCERNS OF JESUS

John 17: 9, 11, 14-17.

1. Jesus prayed for the safety of his disciples. “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name.”

He was leaving the world; they were remaining in the world. The world would be hostile to them, for they were “not of the world.” Protection implies assault and defense. His disciples would not be spared conflict, wounds or death. He wants them safe from a loss like that of Judas (v. 12). To protect them is to preserve them in their distinction from the world. The power of the Father’s name would be adequate to secure them against eternal loss.

2. Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples. “That they may be one...”

The phrase occurs again at verse 21, where Jesus is praying for his future disciples. The unity is not one of institutional membership, but of shared life and purpose and ministry, which is modeled in the relationship of Father and Son. Spiritual unity is not created by human mutualities of race, class, politics or religion. This unity is created by the word of God given to and received by the disciples (v. 6).

3. Jesus prayed for the purity of his disciples. “Sanctify them...”

He prays that the Father will consecrate them to their mission in the world. This requires moral purity. In the Old Testament sanctification is largely ceremonial; in the New

Testament it is experiential--“truly sanctified” (v. 19). Being sanctified has an inner and moral dimension, which requires a gracious inner cleansing, for by nature human hearts are corrupt and selfish. Life flowing from polluted springs is not adequate for the task of extending Christ’s ministry in the world.

Prayer Lessons for us:

(1) What concerned the Lord should concern us, and passionately so. Our prayers for ourselves should echo his prayers for us. He knows our needs better than we do, so his prayers are the safest models for our praying.

(2) Our distinction from the world includes our access to the throne of grace. The privilege of audience with God is too sacred and valuable to neglect. A praying Christ is poorly represented by a non -praying church.

(3) We should pray for protection from defeat, not protection from battle. We cannot abandon the world but we must be armed against it.

(4) We should pray as a united family, resolutely putting aside quarrels, competition, ambition and jealousy,

(5) As those who have received the word and now must share the word, we need to under-gird our ministry of witness with constant prayer and sustained purity.