

Prayer



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Prayer and Contemplation

Now therefore, restore his wife to the man. For he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live. And if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours. (Genesis 20:7 MKJV)

And Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave women, and they gave birth. For the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.
(Genesis 20:17-18 MKJV)

The circumstances are that Abraham has said Sarah was his sister and she has been taken into Abimelech's harem. God appears to Abimelech in a dream and tells him to restore Sarah to Abraham or he will die. Abimelech restores Sarah and generously compensates Abraham. Abraham honors the restoration by praying to God, and consequently Abimelech's wife and slave women become fertile and give birth.

These verses are the first specific references in Scripture to someone "praying for" someone else in the conventional sense. (Abraham's discussion with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 does not use the term "pray or prayed" and is perhaps more of a personal prophetic spiritual encounter). The first uses of a word or concept are very important in Scripture and this passage makes a few key points about prayer.

1. The prayer is a spiritual response to a divine revelation (in a dream).
2. Abraham is praying for someone that has done him an injury. The first verses on prayer in the NT are also "pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44)
3. The prayer is positive in nature - a prayer to God for healing.
4. The prayer averts judgment.
5. The prayer is based on true repentance (by Abimelech).
6. It is answered by God.
7. It gives something to Abimelech (children) that Abraham lacks himself and deeply longs for.

Thus we see that God both initiates and concludes the process with the prayer being the 'fulcrum' around which the whole action turns. There is the clear implication that unless Abraham prays the prayer the whole of Abimelech's family and court will remain sterile and that Abimelech himself may perish. In this case there is real power in prayer.

Now note that this is not shamanism or magic. Fertility was not a "power" that Abraham possessed in himself - because he was quite unable to have children of his own by Sarah even though Abraham wanted it very badly. The opening of the wombs was God's doing, at Abraham's influence.

Thus the power is always God's, and Abraham could influence God in certain ways at certain times (of God's choosing). Abraham could not force God to do anything. Abraham's ability to influence God was totally under God's control. Just as a child may influence a parent, but under normal circumstances a child does not absolutely control the parent. The parent decides how far he or she is willing to be influenced by the child. So God can be influenced by us, but He decides just how much He will grant.

God creates a situation whereby His actions are conditional on a human being asking Him to act. Now many actions of God are not conditional on us praying for instance the sun rises without us praying for us to do so. But God makes some of His actions conditional on our obedience and our prayers. God set two conditions for healing - Abimelech's repentance and obedience and Abraham's prayer.

Abraham only prayed for Abimelech after the restoration and compensation was complete. After Abimelech obeyed God, then Abraham prayed and people were healed. Thus the prayer was in line with God's justice and was an expression of God's mercy.

For Abraham the prayer represented a generous and godly act on behalf of someone who had taken his wife into a harem (but not touched her). In fact Abraham is largely in the wrong here for saying that Sarah was his sister. Abraham has to pray for his former enemy, and pray for him to have children, which is the very thing that Abraham himself most desired.

It seems to be God's way that we often have to pray for others to have what we most desire before we are given it ourselves. If you are sick, pray for others to be healed, if you are poor pray that others may be rich, if your church is not growing, pray that the church down the road will grow, if you want a promotion pray that your co-workers will be promoted. This generous and positive spirit will go a long way toward gaining you the reward that you seek.

We may also notice the obvious – that the prayer was for a specific positive answer to a pressing real world situation. The prayer was not a vague abstraction or a mere mental state. Everyone would know when the prayer was answered because people would be healed. The vast majority of prayers in the Bible are for concrete answers to pressing real world situations; they are 'give us this day our daily bread' kind of prayers. Prayer is meant to have observable effects. Mountains are supposed to move - the sick are healed, the dead are raised, demons are cast out, miracles happen.

Prayer is about God becoming responsive to the requests of human beings - without His ever being manipulated by them. Prayer is God entering into our world and changing it in positive and just and moral ways at our request. Prayer is also a way that God gets to show His glory. When the wombs are closed and nothing works and the world is barren and death is at the door a single prayer can change everything and bring restoration, healing, fertility and joy and avert death and judgment. When prayer is answered God is seen, and God is glorified. Prayer is the power and character of God becoming visible in our most difficult life situations. And prayer tells us that God loves us and seeks personal relationship with us because He listens to us and to our requests.

The Servant's Prayer

"LORD, God of my master Abraham," he prayed, "grant me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. I am standing here at the spring where the daughters of the men of the town are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I say, 'Please lower your water jug so that I may drink,' and who responds, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels also'--let her be the one You have appointed for Your servant Isaac. By this I will know that You have shown kindness to my master." Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah--daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor--coming with a jug on her shoulder.

Now the girl was very beautiful, a young woman who had not known a man intimately. She went down to the spring, filled her jug, and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me have a little water from your jug." She replied, "Drink, my lord." She quickly lowered her jug to her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I'll also draw water for your camels until they have had enough to drink." She quickly emptied her jug into the trough and hurried to the well again to draw water. She drew water for all his camels while the man silently watched her to see whether or not the LORD had made his journey a success. (Genesis 24:12-21 HCSB)

Eliezer, Abraham's principal servant, is sent to find a wife for Isaac from among the cousins of Abraham located in the town of Aram-naharaim. He journeys to the city and stands by the well with his ten camels, each of which could drink around 25 gallons of water. He prays a prayer for success and guidance and makes the request that the girl he asks for a drink of water will also be willing to water the camels - which would have involved drawing 250 gallons - or about 4 to 5 large 55 gallon drums worth! Rebekah does so and eventually becomes the beloved wife of Isaac.

We find that:

- Praying for success in a mission is OK with God.
- Praying for ordinary life situations such as finding a partner is OK with God.
- That God is happy to guide even by the means of "putting out a fleece" or a test.
- That sometimes prayers can be immediately answered in a very clear way.
- The prayer is brief and uses ordinary words, not special theological language.
- The prayer is prayed at the well, in the midst of everyday life.
- There is no special location, ceremony or ritual associated with the prayer.

Eliezer knew that the mission was a delicate and diplomatic one and so he asked God to guide him and to help him be successful. This is good practice for any Christian. Our work and our major decisions and even some minor ones should be committed to the Lord in prayer!

Now this prayer is answered even while Eliezer was praying. In pagan thought this would have meant that Eliezer was using "the right incantation" or magic formula. But we find no evidence of any such special language, and the prayer is not prayed at a sacred site (rather at the busiest place in the village), nor is not prayed by a special holy man, or using any high theological language. There is no hint of sacred clothing, beads, spells or anything else. The right bride is secured without resorting to love potions, magic or charms.

The prayer is brief, concise and to the point and does not employ “vain repetition” or try to flatter God, or manipulate the deity in any way. It is a straightforward, unpretentious prayer that would take about twenty seconds to say. Indeed most prayers in the Bible are less than one minute long, even John 17 would take only three minutes or so to say! God wants us to communicate with Him in an intelligent, brief and truthful way.

The fact that God is accessed and clearly and immediately answers a prayer without using any of the usual religious procedure of the times is a major shock to the prevailing tribal world-view of the ancient Middle East. It was revolutionary to think of God as being available to an ordinary servant doing an special errand for his master.

This prayer tells us that God hears the prayers of 'everyman' – the ordinary chap who wants success in the vital matters of daily existence. The businessman on a trip, the student doing an exam, the car mechanic trying to run his small business, the sailor on the high seas or the soldier in the trenches.

Only a small percentage of the prayers in Scripture are theological masterpieces prayed by priests in the Temple. The vast bulk are brief prayers prayed by people like David or Jabez or Nehemiah as they tackle the pressing issues of life.

Of course Eliezer was at the center of one of the many small dramas of God's redemptive plan – as Rebekah would become the mother of Jacob, who would be known as Israel, and would be an ancestor of the Messiah – Jesus. Isaac needed a God-fearing wife, this was absolutely essential and God made sure that it happened! When we are part of one of God's plans – it is then that we see the most spectacular answers to prayer.

You are more likely to see prayers answered in powerful ways if you are doing things for the Kingdom of God. It is when you run a Vacation Bible School or participate in a city-wide crusade, or need the funds for your bible college fees that you are most likely to see God move suddenly and powerfully.

So we see that God answers the straightforward prayers of ordinary folk when they go about faithfully doing His will and that no special place, ritual or form of language is needed. We can be heard by the Lord and have our prayer answered immediately by Him, even if we are a tired and thirsty traveler by an ancient well.

Prayer and Contemplation – 3

Now the people began complaining openly before the LORD about hardship. When the LORD heard, His anger burned, and the fire from the LORD blazed among them and consumed the outskirts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and he prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. So that place was named Taberah, because the LORD's fire had blazed among them. (Numbers 11:1-3 HCSB)

As we look at some of the initial bible verses about prayer we come across these very strange verses in Numbers. The people complain about hardship, God unleashes holy fire and starts burning up the outskirts of the camp, the people run to Moses, who prays, and the fire then dies down. I must admit that I have never seen or even heard about anything like this in modern times.

It seems that the Israelite camp was accompanied by a powerful holy angel who was easily offended by inappropriate and unholy behavior:

"I am going to send an Angel before you to protect you on the way and bring you to the place I have prepared. Be attentive to Him and listen to His voice. Do not defy Him, because He will not forgive your acts of rebellion, for My name is in Him. But if you will carefully obey Him and do everything I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes. (Exodus 23:19-22 HCSB)

For the LORD your God walks throughout your camp to protect you and deliver your enemies to you; so your encampments must be holy. He must not see anything improper among you or He will turn away from you. (Deuteronomy 23:13-14 HCSB)

This is very similar to the concept in tribal areas around the world where 'taboos' are special rules that are enforced by the spirit world. If one of these taboos is broken then the spirits themselves will punish the offender with illness, madness or misfortune. This concept was very common in early Greek literature and is even found among tribes in Papua New Guinea today. Taboos are wide ranging and can include eating forbidden food, trespassing on a sacred area, or disrespecting tribal customs.

It seems that this 'taboo' culture was present at Israel's early stages of religious development and resulted in spiritual categories such as 'clean' and 'unclean'. Christ later abolished such categories (Mark 7, Acts 10).

The Exodus is full of instances of immediate divine punishment when a taboo was violated or when God or Moses were disrespected. They range from Miriam's leprosy to the earth opening up under people and swallowing them whole (Numbers 16:1-40). In fact the book of Numbers has many such incidents.

The book of Numbers also has Moses interceding to stop plagues and other punishments inflicted by God (or His angel) when Israel rebelled. Dathan and Abiram and 250 others were swallowed alive by the earth for challenging Moses' spiritual authority, but the next day the people were angry:

The next day the entire Israelite community complained about Moses and Aaron, saying, "You have killed the LORD's people!" When the community assembled against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the tent of meeting, and suddenly the cloud covered it, and the LORD's glory appeared. Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting, and the LORD said to Moses, "Get away from this community so that I may consume them instantly." But they fell facedown. Then Moses told Aaron, "Take your firepan, place fire from the altar in it, and add incense. Go quickly to the community and make atonement for them, because wrath has come from the LORD; the plague has begun." So Aaron took his firepan as Moses had ordered, ran into the middle of the assembly, and saw that the plague had begun among the people. After he added incense, he made atonement for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was halted. But those who died from the plague numbered 14,700, in addition to those who died because of the Korah incident. Aaron then returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting, since the plague had been halted.
(Numbers 16:41-50 HCSB)

This is truly terrifying! God, through the accompanying angel was disciplining the Israelites in the sternest possible manner – and no complaining was allowed! Aaron, as the priest, had to rapidly intercede with God, by offering incense and stopping the plague.

Going back to our original verses where God responds with fire when the people complain about their hardships and Moses prays and the fire ceases. We see that godly prayer was the means for stopping the wrath of God in action. Prayer, which seems at first seems so weak and ineffectual, can even put the brakes on the wrath of God.

Now we as Christians are under the blood of Christ and are taken out from under the wrath of God. Our churches are not burned by fire whenever the congregation grumbles! God has covered our sins and while we experience His discipline as sons (Hebrews 12) we never experience His holy anger that consumes everything in its path. We can come boldly before the throne of grace:

Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens--Jesus the Son of God--let us hold fast to the confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time.
(Hebrews 4:14-16 HCSB)

As Christians there is a place whereby we can pray for God to have mercy on someone who has sinned:

Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will cure the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up. And if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him. Confess faults to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous one avails much.
(James 5:14-16 MKJV)

And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the

petitions that we desired of Him. If anyone sees his brother sin a sin not to death, he shall ask, and He shall give him life for those that do not sin to death. There is a sin to death, I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not to death.
(1 John 5:14-17 MKJV)

Even in the Christian community there was a need for confessing sin and being prayed for and forgiven so that the grace of God could flow in healing. If a person commits a sin, and another prays for him, then God will “give him life” 1 John 5:16, 17).

Even though the age of taboos and of immediate spiritual retaliation by God has passed there is still a place for interceding with God on behalf of those who have sinned. We can bring mercy and grace to bear and stop situations getting worse – just through our loving and forgiving prayers.

I do not want to frighten anyone, but I do think that we should take sin seriously - as both Jesus and the apostles did. I think our modern rationalism has caused us to lose some of our holy awe and to lack the proper respect for God.

Nevertheless this is about prayer – and prayer brings us grace and mercy in times of need, and mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13) so let us pray that God will be merciful to those among us who have sinned.

Prayers and Plagues

Exodus 8:12-14 MKJV And Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh. And Moses cried to Jehovah because of the frogs which He had brought against Pharaoh. (13) And Jehovah did according to the word of Moses. And the frogs died out of the houses, out of the villages, and out of the fields. (14) And they gathered them in heaps and heaps. And the land stank.

Exodus 8:30-31 MKJV And Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to Jehovah. (31) And Jehovah did according to the word of Moses. And He removed the swarms from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people. There remained not one.

Exodus 9:22-33 MKJV And Jehovah said to Moses, Stretch forth your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, upon man, and upon beast, and upon every herb of the field, throughout the land of Egypt. (23) And Moses stretched forth his rod toward heavens. And Jehovah sent thunder and hail, and the fire came down to the ground. And Jehovah rained hail upon the land of Egypt. (27) And Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, I have sinned this time. Jehovah is righteous, and I and my people are wicked. (28) Pray to Jehovah, for it is enough. Let there be no mighty thunderings and hail. And I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer. (29) And Moses said to him, as soon as I go out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands to Jehovah. The thunder shall stop, and the hail will not be any more, so that you may know that the earth is Jehovah's. ... (33) And Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and spread abroad his hands to Jehovah. And the thunder and hail stopped, and the rain was not poured upon the earth.

In these three verses we see spectacular and immediate answers to prayer by Moses. In two of them we see the phrase “and Jehovah did according to the word of Moses...” this is a clear case of prayer as delegated authority from God.

God gives Moses a certain amount of spiritual authority, and in that realm, what Moses says goes – and God will back it up. This is just like in a large corporation, if a trusted manager fires someone for misbehavior then the “big boss” will stand behind the manager's decision all the way. God stood behind Moses' decisions and backed them up.

We see an increasing boldness in Moses as he becomes aware of having God's backing, at first he pleads and cries out (Exodus 8:12-14), next he prays (Exodus 8:30-31), finally he just takes his rod and spreads out his hands and things stop (Exodus 9:33). Moses was no longer a mere supplicant, instead he was actually an independent enforcer of the will of God.

Christians are sometimes too fond of asking permission from God. Sometimes God just wants us to act decisively in His delegated power. God has given us authority to heal, cast out demons and do works of power in His name. We do not have to 'ask for permission' before we cast out a demon. We just need to rebuke it in Jesus' name! We have the power and God will always back us up when we use it. In fact many of the prayers in the New Testament are in command format e.g. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk...” (Acts 3:6) and this format indicates that the apostles are exercising delegated spiritual authority on God's behalf.

That immediately raises the question of how much power has God given to us and when can we use it? Jesus seems to strongly indicate that our authority is according to our faith:

Matthew 17:20 MKJV And Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief. For truly I say to you, If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to there. And it shall move. And nothing shall be impossible to you.

Matthew 21:21-22 MKJV Jesus answered and said to them, Truly I say to you, If you have faith and do not doubt, you shall not only do this miracle of the fig tree, but also; if you shall say to this mountain, Be moved and be thrown into the sea; it shall be done. (22) And all things, whatever you shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.

(Note that we do not ask God to move the mountain, we use delegated authority to tell the mountain to move 'say to this mountain'.)

Moses had a close relationship with God that caused him to humbly trust God and to have great faith and thus great spiritual authority. We tend to think that we need to be either very virtuous and saintly or very learned and full of theology before we can have such faith. However both Scripture and church history testify to the fact that sometimes unlearned ordinary believers can also have great faith.

Faith comes from taking God seriously and paying heed to His Word implanted in our souls. Faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of Christ. Faith is not an emotion (though it may produce emotions or be associated with emotions). Faith is an abiding secure decision of the will to truly trust and believe God.

Moses had taken on God's commission to liberate the Israelites from Egypt and to use the special rod that God had given him for this purpose. Moses knew that this was totally God's enterprise that what needed to be done for its success would have God's approval. As Hudson Taylor used to say: "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply". God's calling is God's enabling and God's empowering.

If God has called you to a particular ministry then you can act in His delegated power to complete the work that is required. If your task is set up a city-wide crusade then God will be with you and empower you to do all that is required to make that a success.

There is of course the 'fine line between faith and folly' that can be summed up as follows:

1. Faith is believing what God has said
2. Unbelief is refusing to believe what God has said
3. Folly and presumption is believing God has said something when He has said nothing of the kind.

For instance I do not believe that anyone can 'have faith' to win the Powerball lottery – that would be a clear case of folly and presumption.

Anyway the lesson from today's verses is that God is with us and gives us delegated spiritual authority to carry out His will, and that He will back up our decisions, answer our prayers and move mountains at our command.

Intercession for God's People

Exodus 32:7-14 MKJV And Jehovah said to Moses, Go! Get down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, are corrupted. (8) They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made them a molten calf, and have worshiped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, These are your gods, O Israel, who have brought you up out of the land of Egypt. (9) And Jehovah said to Moses, I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. (10) And now leave Me alone, so that My wrath may become hot against them and so that I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation. (11) And Moses prayed to Jehovah his God, and said, Jehovah, why does Your wrath become hot against Your people whom You have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? (12) Why should the Egyptians speak and say, He brought them out for harm, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and be moved to pity as to this evil against Your people. (13) Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever. (14) And Jehovah repented as to the evil which He spoke of doing to His people.

Exodus 32:31-35 MKJV And Moses returned to Jehovah, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made themselves gods of gold. (32) And now will You forgive their sin! And if not, I pray You, blot me out of Your book which You have written. (33) And Jehovah said to Moses, Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. (34) And now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. And in the day of My visitation I will visit their sin upon them. (35) And Jehovah plagued the people because they made the calf, which Aaron made.

I stand amazed at Moses' dedication to his people! Through thick and thin He prays for them even though they infuriate him with their stubborn sinfulness. What pastor coming back from a mountain-top spiritual retreat with a great spiritual message would like to see a large golden calf in the middle of the sanctuary and the people engaged in immoral pagan worship!

But Moses prays for them and even puts himself on the line between them and God. God even seems to calm Moses' dramatic zeal a bit: "And Jehovah said to Moses, Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. And now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you."

In other words "Your job is not to sacrifice yourself, rather your job is much more prosaic - now get on with leading My people." This is a helpful reminder that our calling is often to the less spectacular elements of the ministry and that "burning out" is often not as useful as "staying the course faithfully".

Moses has become so bold in prayer that he dares to respectfully disagree with God! Jehovah, why does Your wrath become hot against Your people whom You have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

Moses has discovered the Reasonable God – that is that we have a God who can be reasoned with. A God who is amenable to persuasion and is not merely a pompous Middle Eastern dictator (e.g. Pharaoh) in heavenly garb! God is all-powerful but He is not a petty tyrant. Of course God always has the decisive final say.

Moses has a real relationship with God. **Exodus 33:11 MKJV** And Jehovah would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. Dialogue seems to be part of this relationship with God and issues are discussed between Moses and the Lord:

Exodus 33:12-17 MKJV And Moses said to Jehovah, Behold, You say to me, Bring up this people. And You have not told me whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight. (13) Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found grace in Your sight, make me see now Your ways, that I may know You, that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people. (14) And He said, My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest. (15) And he said to Him, If Your presence does not go with me, do not carry us up from here. (16) For in what shall it be known that I and Your people have found grace in Your sight? Is it not in that You go with us? So we shall be separated, I and Your people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth. (17) And Jehovah said to Moses, I will do this thing also that you have spoken. For you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.

Here we see God saying to Moses: For you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name. This is about as clear a statement of personal relationship as you can get! Moses was able to intercede for the people of Israel because Moses knew God and was known by God.

Moving forward to the New Testament – we who have believed in Jesus have received grace upon grace and are given the authority and power to become sons of God and co-heirs with Jesus Christ. God has given us grace and knows us by name. We are in a similar spiritual position to Moses, not because of our own power or godliness, but only because of the shed blood of Jesus and faith in His name!

God has called us to be “kings and priests” (1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6, 5:10) and that means that we a) have authority and b) that we have direct access to God to intercede for others.

The New Testament is very bold in describing our priestly access to God and says that we can “come boldly before the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16) and that we have “this access in which we stand” (Romans 5:1-5). So we are in a position where we can turn God's wrath away from certain situations and intercede for kings and governments and those in authority, or pray for laborers to be thrust out into the Harvest.

Moses reasoned with God on the basis of God's glory, God's character and the fulfillment of God's plans. Thousands of years later we also can stand on the numerous promises of Scripture (which were not written in Moses' day) and on the shed blood of Jesus Christ. When the people of God fail badly, when nations turn to sin, when the world disappoints us, it is then we can come to a patient, kind and gracious God and ask for mercy.

Samson's Prayer for Revenge

Judges 16:25-31 MKJV And when their hearts were merry, it happened that they said, Call for Samson and he will make sport for us. And they called for Samson out of the prison house. And he made sport for them, and they set him between the pillars. (26) And Samson said to the lad who held him by the hand, Allow me to feel the pillars upon which the house stands, so that I may lean upon them. (27) Now the house was full of men and women. And all the lords of the Philistines were there. And on the roof were about three thousand men and women who watched while Samson made sport. (28) **And Samson called to Jehovah and said, O, Lord Jehovah, remember me, I pray You, and strengthen me, I pray You, only this once, O God, so that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.** (29) And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was held up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. (30) And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself mightily, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those he killed in his life. (31) Then his brothers and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the burying-place of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.

A broken and blinded Samson cries out to God for strength so that he might be able to take revenge 'for his two eyes'. Now we know the outcome, but what were some ways in which God might have answered Samson's prayer (but did not)?

1. Sorry Samson, you really messed up, I am not answering your prayers any more.
2. Samson, asking for revenge is unspiritual and petty, I will not give you physical strength - instead I will help you to meekly bear your humiliations which will be good for your soul.
3. Samson, your wording is incorrect, you must use more flowery language if you expect me to hear you.
4. Samson, why all this anger, why don't you share the gospel with them instead?
5. No can do, once the hair gets cut the power is gone, you lost your anointing and you are powerless forever – it is the hair that counts.
6. Maybe later - Samson I think you should suffer a little longer and be patient, it will be good for your soul.
7. Samson you should stop worrying about your two eyes and be more concerned with My glory.

Now God did NOT answer Samson in any of these cold, heartless and super-spiritual ways! God honored Samson's manly dignity and his desire to die an honorable death. God looked on the heart cry and had mercy on Samson's miserable and wretched imprisonment. God is NOT cold, aloof, petty or judgmental. And God is not afraid of creating a bit of a mess.

The seven wrong responses above are typical of some kinds of Christians who run around wanting everyone to be perfect in some idealized way that fits their doctrinal misconceptions. God is not like such people. God is not like the Pharisees, the scribes or the Sadducees. God is like Jesus. God recognizes our humanity and hears the deepest cries of our spirit.

God answers our prayers just as we are. God comes through for us no matter how blinded, broken, sinful, enchained and humiliated we may be. God does not require that we be perfect

before we are heard in Heaven - or that we pray a prayer with the highest and most proper theology.

Some may say that Samson did not “deserve” to have his prayer answered - yet it was answered, because God is kind and gracious and loving. Even in his disgrace and humiliation God was still in relationship with Samson. Samson may have been ashamed of Samson, but God was not ashamed of Samson and He stood by His hurting servant.

There is a school of thought that says that prayers should always be positive and not be about our hurt, anger or feelings of injustice. According to this view it is OK to pray for the salvation of Namibia but we should not ask God to take revenge on the criminal who raped our daughter. In such cases we should just accept the evil and forgive and move on dealing with our anger ourselves and not letting anger, revenge, hurt and humiliation enter into our prayer life. This view is false and is plainly contradicted in about half the Psalms and even in the New Testament, here are just three brief examples:

Psalms 88:1-7 MKJV ... O Jehovah, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before You. (2) Let my prayer come before You; bow down Your ear to my cry. (3) For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near the grave. (4) I am counted with those who go down to the Pit; I am like a feeble man; (5) free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom You remember no more; and by Your hand they are cut off. (6) You have laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. (7) Your wrath lies hard on me, and You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah.

Psalms 144:5-8 MKJV Bow down Your heavens, O Jehovah, and come down; touch the mountains, and they shall smoke. (6) Cast forth lightning and scatter them; shoot out Your arrows and destroy them. (7) Send Your hand from above; rescue me, and deliver me out of great waters, from the hand of a foreigner's sons; (8) because their mouth has spoken vanity, and their right hand is a right hand of lies.

Revelation 6:9-12 MKJV And when He had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God, and for the testimony which they held. (10) And they cried with a loud voice, saying, Until when, Master, holy and true, do You not judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (11) And white robes were given to each one of them. And it was said to them that they should rest yet for a little time, until both their fellow servants and their brothers (those about to be killed as they were) should have their number made complete. (12) And when He had opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake. And the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood.

God is not a neat, precise fussy old woman who picks holes in everyone's behavior. God is big-hearted, real, strong and able to deal with battles, wars, messy justice and the stuff of life. God did avenge Samson and David and He will avenge the martyrs under the altar in due time. It is not for us to take our own revenge, but we can trust that God will understand our hurt and hear our prayer.

God listens to our spirit and to our cry for connection with Him. God heard the deep cry of Samson's soul, recognized it for what it was, and granted it. It was a spiritual transaction that occurred out of the sincere depths of the honest and open relationship that was between God and Samson. God does not want us to 'fake' our spirituality. He wants us to be open and honest with Him, even if it is as negative as Psalm 88 (read it sometime).

Our prayers need to be from our real self, and not from our imaginary spiritual self. The imaginary spiritual self is created when we conform to others and become concerned with earning 'brownie points' in church. It can become so much of a part of us that we identify with it, deceiving both ourselves and others – but not God. The Pharisee in Luke 18 who starts his prayer “I thank you Lord that I am not like other men” was celebrating this imaginary spiritual self. However it was the publican that prayed “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner” (from his real self) that went home justified!

The concerns of our real self are often not very lofty and sometimes we may even feel a little ashamed of them. They may involve a lot of health, wealth and happiness stuff or be painful personal issues with our family, friends and networks of relationships. God still honors this, while also helping us to pray for His Kingdom. In 1 Chronicles 4:9,10, Jabez prays a real and simple prayer for everyday concerns and yet he was heard!

God is a God of real people praying real prayers in the midst of real-life situations and He honors and answers such prayers. God is not cold, aloof or super-spiritual and He is not checking your prayer for its grammar and theology. God is listening to the real, earnest desires of your heart hoping that when the critical moment comes you will call on Him for the mighty strength that only He can provide.

Negative Prayers

Psalms 88:1-18 MKJV A Song. A Psalm for the sons of Korah. To the Chief Musician. On Mahalath, to make humble. A Poem of Heman the Ezrahite. O Jehovah, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before You. (2) Let my prayer come before You; bow down Your ear to my cry. (3) For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near the grave. (4) I am counted with those who go down to the Pit; I am like a feeble man; (5) free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom You remember no more; and by Your hand they are cut off. (6) You have laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. (7) Your wrath lies hard on me, and You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah. ... (13) But to You I have cried, O Jehovah; and in the morning my prayer shall go before You. (14) O Jehovah, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? (15) I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up; while I suffer Your terrors, I pine away. (16) Your fierce wrath goes over me; Your terrors have cut me off. (17) They surrounded me like waters all the day long; they have come together around me. (18) You have taken lover and friend far from me, and those who know me into darkness.

As I browsed the supermarket shelves I came across a controversial book called *The Secret* which got 2 whole episodes of Oprah dedicated to it. Its whole message is the "Law of Attraction" - that we get what we picture intensely and think about, and that we should never picture negative things or they will happen to us. According to *The Secret* it is the positive condition of our psyche that answers our prayers and by implication not a sovereign and compassionate Father in Heaven.

The Bible never tells us to go around 'being positive' and many of the Psalms are heart-rending cries from the depths of people's souls. For instance Psalms 22, 44 and 88 are cries of great desolation and grief which do not paint "pretty pictures" of reality. The Bible is always honest, truthful and realistic. Job was rewarded by God not because he was happy, positive and so forth (he wasn't) but because he was honest, faithful and held on to God in the midst of pain and trial. And the cry of Jesus on the cross "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.." is the precise opposite of most New Age thinking.

So pervasive is this New Age thought that I am going to take this whole study to debunk it and then to replace it with a biblical perspective.

Firstly Christian prayer is directed to Heaven, to the Father, who is upon the Throne and who acts with authority. Prayer is not attraction to us, it is instead a dealing with God. It is dealing with a holy authority. We either request that authority (God) to act on our behalf, or we use authority that He has already given us (as in command prayer). God is not an abstract principle of thought, rather He is an intelligent and wise being who can see past a person's mental images and emotional states and who answers requests according to His will. God is personal and relational and external to us.

Secondly while we need to have faith that God will act we do not need to be in a certain emotional state for Him to do so. God often rescues people who are in utter despair! The Psalmist says in Psalm 88: O Jehovah, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before You. (2) Let my prayer come before You; bow down Your ear to my cry. (3) For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near the grave. (4) I am counted with those who go down to the Pit; I am like a feeble man;

We can see that the Psalmist had faith and trust in God and was a prayerful person but his situation was desolate and awful and that is how he felt. God wants real live saints not self-deluded perpetual positive thinkers!

Thirdly the doctrine of attraction short-cuts character formation and induces people to live in a hyped-up version of virtual reality where it is the picture in the mind that counts – not the character of the heart; and where good things come to those who vividly imagine them! But the Bible says good things come to those who wait in faith and who lead righteous lives.

Psalms 84:11 MKJV For Jehovah God is a sun and shield; Jehovah will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

Fourthly Scripture teaches us the Protestant work ethic of leading wise, honest, diligent lives and doing good high-quality work which is justly rewarded by God and man. There is no work ethic in imagination! Trying to magically attract wealth, instead of earning it, is covetousness and idolatry!

Fifthly Christian prayer is in the spirit and is conscious and intelligent and pointed and deep and profound. Christian prayer is not a mere subconscious influence on reality! Christian prayer is the expression of the soul to God, via the spirit and is a decisive conscious act.

Getting back to the 'negative' prayers and prophecies such as Psalm 88, the book of Job, Lamentations, Psalms 22, 42, 43 and the judgments of the prophets and the doom of Revelation. These are inspired words from God - realistic, faith-filled cries for justice, mercy, deliverance and relief from persecution! God can cope with such! In fact God inspired them! They are His encouragements to us so that we can hold onto our faith in the darkest of hours.

We have a powerful, redeeming, rescuing Father in Heaven who can deliver us from the trials and troubles of life and who answers the groaning of His people (not just their positive images). We can be honest with God, and real with God and we can let Him know our pain and distress. We do not have to pretend with the God who knows all things!

The Fountain of the Praying One

Judges 15:18-19 MKJV And he was very thirsty and called upon Jehovah and said, You have given this great deliverance into the hand of Your servant. And now shall I die with thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised? (19) But God cut open a hollow place and water came out there. And he drank, and his spirit came again, and he revived. Therefore, its name is called Fountain of the Praying One, which is in Lehi to this day.

Samson has just killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey and is appropriately tired, exhausted and thirsty. Samson cries out to God and complains that he is about to die of thirst, so God provides by opening up a spring so Samson can drink, a spring that exists to this day.

Ministry can tire us out and we can become spiritually dry and parched. At such times God will open a spring of refreshment that will not only bless us, but will bless those who come to that same spot in the future. These springs of refreshment are often opened up through prayer!

Acts 3:19 MKJV Therefore repent and convert so that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

The Fountain of the Praying One is the source of revival! It is prayer that opens up the heavenlies so that times of refreshing may come. In fact every major revival has been preceded by times of earnest prevailing prayer!

You have given this great deliverance into the hand of Your servant. And now shall I die with thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?

Samson's prayer is one of earnest immediacy. It is not terribly reverent or polite, in fact it seems like a rather blunt complaint directed straight to God. It is Samson's human spirit speaking straight to God Himself. Even so it is a humble prayer that acknowledges that the victory over the Philistines was wrought by God.

God understands such rough reverence, and knows Samson is a warrior and not a poet. God looks past the lack of theology, and the absence of the titles and names of God, and answers the prayer anyway! It is not a pretty prayer but it still worked a miracle - much as the 'Lord help me' prayers of people in tight situations around the world are heard and answered every day.

God refreshed Samson physically but He wants to refresh us spiritually. He can open up a place, right there in the midst of the battlefield, where you will find rest for your souls. You do not have to hike off to a monastery (thought that still may be worthwhile), God can open up a spring that will bless you and bless others.

It might be a good friend or a small group that you join, or a good church, or a website or daily devotional like this one that speaks to you as you go about your ministry. God may show you new truths or open up your spirit to receive more and more from Him.

Such sweet places of refreshment often have to be brought into existence by earnest prayer. I do not know why it is so hard to find a good church, bible study group or prayer partner but part of the reason may be that the Devil works hard to keep us from grace.

Sometimes the spring of refreshment may be a biblical truth such as the sovereignty of God or the filling of the Holy Spirit. These truths can bless us and sustain us and when such light breaks forth from the Word of God it continually refreshes other people down the centuries.

The place of the spring is also the place of utter exhaustion and desperation. Samson was not just asking for a drink from a tap that he could turn on himself. He was on a mountain or hill (Ramath-Lehi, the Hill of the Jawbone) and not in a valley where the streams naturally run. He was in a hard, difficult and challenging place and that is precisely where God opened up the Spring Of The Praying One.

Notice that when Samson drank 'his spirit came again'. In the early days of the OT the spirit was strongly associated with physical vitality so when a person was tired and weak it was because their spirit had partially departed, and when the spirit totally departed they were, of course, dead. The Spirit produces spiritual vitality and energy in ministry. If we are 'low-batt' in our service it may well be that we need a drink from the Fountain of The Praying One.

Sometimes Christian workers are so busy that they do not realize that they are spiritually drained until they become lethargic, sick, emotional and irritable. I think daily quiet times and regular planned retreats about once every three months (for a day or two) are essential. Back in the days of the apostles life would slow down naturally during winter or during a Sabbath, a festival or a long journey at sea. When Paul got too frenetic God would throw him in prison! (And he would write epistles instead). In modern life the quiet patches are few are far between and so we need to plan for them and make time for them.

If we keep on going without drinking from the living waters we will 'fall into the hands of the Philistines' – that is we will fail in ministry and end up being a huge disgrace rather than being a mighty victor. In fact it is often just after the might victory that some preachers fall into sin! They let their ego get the better of them! They did not cry out to God for even more of His Spirit! Spiritual defeat will rapidly come to us if we go on in spiritual dryness and do not take care of our thirst for God.

Gideon's Fleece

Judges 6:36-40 MKJV And Gideon said to God, If You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said, (37) behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the grain-floor. And if the dew is on the fleece only, and dry upon all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said. (38) And it was so. For he rose up early in the morning and gathered the fleece together, and wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water. (39) And Gideon said to God, Let not Your anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once. I pray You, let me test but this once with the fleece. Let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. (40) And God did so that night. For it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.

Gideon is about to lead Israel into a do-or-die battle with the Midianites, Amalekites and all the 'sons of the East'. He has just had an extended visit from the Angel of the Lord who has commissioned him to deliver Israel:

Judges 6:12-16 MKJV And the Angel of Jehovah appeared to him, and said to him, Jehovah is with you, mighty warrior. (13) And Gideon said to Him, O, my Lord, if Jehovah is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not Jehovah bring us up from Egypt? But now Jehovah has forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. (14) And Jehovah looked upon him and said, Go in your might, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you? (15) And he said to him, O, my Lord, with what shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. (16) And Jehovah said to him, Surely, I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.

The angel then consumes a food offering by fire and vanishes and then God speaks again and tells him to pull down the altar of Baal and to sacrifice his father's second bull on it - and Gideon does this that night. Gideon is being prepared by God to do battle - but is still trying to muster courage. It is no small thing to go overnight from a village-level role in a small tribe, to national leadership and full-scale war. Gideon needs some additional certainty as he undertakes this risky transition and so he devises the test of the fleece.

The idea of the 'fleece' is that it is a very low probability event that is run in both directions for added certainty. For just the fleece to be soaking wet and the ground to be completely dry might say be a one in a twenty chance. And for the ground to be completely wet and the fleece completely dry might be say a one in fifty chance. But probabilities are multiplied not added so both occurring together is a one in a thousand probability!

A modern example might be:

- a) 'If I drive on the 405 freeway at peak hour and it is completely free and clear'
- b) 'If I drive on the 405 freeway at 2am in the morning and it is totally in gridlock'.

Both are very low probability events running in opposite directions. Combined they might have less than one in ten million chance of occurring.

Gideon was aware that this seemed to be close to the limits with God and so he asks God for mercy in doing so. And Gideon said to God, Let not Your anger be hot against me, and I will

speak but this once. The fleece is something that should be used somewhat sparingly, and generally only when a high level of certainty is needed for a serious matter.

Ideally the fleece should involve something that only God can do and which you cannot influence the outcome of (say by hinting to someone) and it should be completely private between you and the Lord so other people cannot carry it out on your behalf. To say 'if i do well on the job interview I will take that as a sign that the job is for me' is thus NOT a good "fleece". It is not a low probability event and you can easily influence the outcome.

Something like 'if the pastor preaches on Judges 6 next week' (when currently he is say teaching Psalms) would be a low probability event that you have little chance of influencing but which God could easily and harmlessly bring about.

Anyway the point of Gideon's prayer is that God will do everything that is required for us to carry out His will once we are up and moving in that direction (Gideon had already pulled down the altar and blown the ram's horn). God understood Gideon's uncertainty because it was not grounded in unbelief but was simply based in normal human caution. Gideon was ready to go to war, He just needed to be sure.

When you are already moving in ministry according to the will of God you can ask mighty things from God and He will hear you. God will even hear your need for reassurance as you move into new and difficult territory.

Guidance comes to the moving missile and not to the one sitting in the silo. The ten spies who refused to go into the Promised Land got no guidance and no miracles. They refused to move in the first place. A stopped saint gets no directions.

Gideon was a mighty warrior entering into his destiny. He was a believer who acted on his beliefs. He was obedient to the heavenly calling. When the fleece was finally confirmed he went to war that day. God blesses men and women of faith-filled action.

Prayer for guidance is dependent of faithful obedience and a steadfast and obedient heart. If God knows you will obey He will send you all the guidance you need, even in an extraordinary way.

Ebenezer – Jehovah Has Helped Us Until Now

1 Samuel 7:7-15 MKJV And the Philistines heard that the sons of Israel had come together to Mizpeh. And the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And the sons of Israel heard, and they were afraid of the Philistines. (8) And the sons of Israel said to Samuel, Do not cease from crying to Jehovah our God for us, so that He will save us out of the hand of the Philistines. (9) And Samuel took a suckling lamb, and offered a whole burnt offering to Jehovah. And Samuel cried to Jehovah for Israel, and Jehovah answered him. (10) And it happened as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. But Jehovah thundered with a great noise on that day on the Philistines, and troubled them. And they were beaten before Israel. (11) And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued the Philistines, and struck them as far as below Beth-car. (12) And Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Jehovah has helped us until now. (13) And the Philistines were beaten, and they did not come any more into the border of Israel. And the hand of Jehovah was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. (14) And the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were given back to Israel, from Ekron even to Gath. And Israel delivered its borders out of the hand of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. (15) And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

This was quite a spectacular answer to one man's prayer! Samuel offers the Lamb, God thunders, the Philistines are defeated and Israel has many years of peace! Of course the Israelites still had to do plenty of fighting but the victory was definitely the Lord's!

God HELPS – and His help is decisive and measurable so that Samuel could set up a stone pillar and say 'thus far has the Lord helped us'. Ebenezer means 'stone of the help'!

Interestingly the place of God's help is PRECISELY the same place where Israel was grievously defeated and where the Ark of the Covenant was captured:

1 Samuel 4:1-3 MKJV And the word of Samuel was revealed to all Israel. And Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside **Ebenezer**. And the Philistines pitched in Aphek. (2) And the Philistines put themselves in order against Israel. And the battle was joined. And Israel was beaten before the Philistines. And they killed about four thousand men of the army in the field. (3) And when the people had come to the camp, the elders of Israel said, Why has Jehovah beaten us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of Jehovah out of Shiloh to us, so that when it comes among us it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.....

1 Samuel 4:10-11 MKJV And the Philistines fought, and Israel was beaten, and each one of them fled into his tent. And there was a very great slaughter, for there fell thirty thousand footmen of Israel. (11) And the ark of God was taken. And Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were slain.

1 Samuel 5:1-2 MKJV And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from **Ebenezer** to Ashdod. (2) And the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it beside Dagon.

(Of course the history of 1 Samuel was written later - probably by Ezra, using court documents, so Ezra could call the place Ebenezer in the battle narrative even though it was not named that until a bit later, after the victory.)

So we see that God helped Israel back on their feet, at the very point where they had failed Him, deserted Him, and lost the glory of the Ark of the Covenant! This is our redeeming God! He takes us at our point of failure and makes it His point of victory!

So what was the difference between the defeat and the victory? There were four factors a) a more godly spiritual leader (Samuel instead of Eli)
 b) wholehearted repentance and purity of heart
 b) intense prevailing prayer
 c) the blood of the lamb

The last two are seen in verse 9:

And Samuel took a suckling lamb, and offered a whole burnt offering to Jehovah. And Samuel cried to Jehovah for Israel, and Jehovah answered him.

And a few verses earlier we see the repentance of Israel and the wonderful spiritual leadership of Samuel!

1 Samuel 7:3-6 MKJV And Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel saying, If you return to Jehovah with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts to Jehovah, and serve Him only. And He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. (4) And the sons of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and served Jehovah only. (5) And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you to Jehovah. (6) And they were gathered to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured out before Jehovah, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against Jehovah. And Samuel judged the sons of Israel in Mizpeh.

The defeat at Ebenezer occurred during the tenure of Eli (the high priest, and the chief spiritual leader before Samuel) and there is no record of him offering any sacrifice or making any prayer. It seems that even his sons were corrupt. Indeed Eli dies after news of Israel's defeat, while Samuel's great leadership is confirmed by Israel's victory at Ebenezer!

Is your church languishing? Has the glory departed? Are the people materialistic and covetous – which is idolatry (Ephesians 5:5) ? Do you need spiritual victory? Then preach them through to it! Be their Samuel and bring them into order! Exhort them to purity of heart and devotion to God! Preach repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Preach for revival, pray intensely and cry out to God for revival and show them the mighty power of the blood of the Lamb!

God will help you when your hearts are pure before Him and are washed with the blood of the Lamb!

Revelation 12:11 MKJV And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony. And they did not love their soul until death.

Establishing the Prophetic Word

2 Samuel 7:18-29 MKJV Then King David went in and sat before Jehovah. And he said, Who am I, O Lord Jehovah? And what is my house, that You have brought me here? (19) And this was yet a small thing in Your sight, O Lord God. But You have spoken also of Your servant's house for a great while to come. And is this the manner of men, O Lord God? (20) And what can David say more to You? For You, O Lord Jehovah, know Your servant. And now, O Jehovah God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant, and concerning his house: establish it forever, and do as You have said. (26) And let Your name be magnified forever, saying, The Jehovah of Hosts is the God over Israel. And let the house of Your servant David be established before You. (27) For You, O Jehovah of Hosts, God of Israel, have revealed to Your servant, saying, I will build you a house. Therefore Your servant has found in his heart to pray this prayer to You. (28) And now, O Lord Jehovah, You are that God, and Your Words are true, and You have promised this goodness to Your servant. (29) Therefore, now, let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, to be forever before You. For You, O Lord Jehovah, have spoken. And with Your blessing let the house of Your servant be blessed forever.

The word of the Lord came to Nathan the prophet and he spoke to David saying that the Lord would establish his throne forever and 'build him a house' (i.e. a dynasty). David's reaction is of course a prayer of great thanksgiving. Yet David also asks something: 'establish it forever and do as You have said' and then continues with phrases asking for blessing and for the word of the Lord to come true.

Now this may seem unusual. After all, Nathan had given the word, why not just accept it and move on? Why ask God to establish what He has already promised?

That is a rather 'mechanical' view of prophecy and of the Word of God. The word of God is not an automatic machine, it is a living and active thing, a spiritual thing, and is even likened to a 'seed' which is sown and which grows (in the parable of the Sower in Matthew 13). The saints do not just receive the word of the Lord, they imbibe it, they nurture it, they interact with it and cherish it and meditate upon it. It dwells richly within them (Colossians 3:16) and bears much fruit (John 15:1-7).

Part of this nurturing of the word of the Lord is praying over the personal revelations and words that God brings into your life. (Now, just to be clear I am not equating these with Scripture or with the major prophecies such as Isaiah or Revelation). When the Holy Spirit reveals something might to you, you then need to pray over it and nurture it in the Spirit. For instance if God tells you that one day you will start a bible college in Zimbabwe, you should not just think 'O yeah, maybe that might happen if the Lord wills'.

Rather you should pray over it, think upon it, meditate over it, check it with some mature Christians, and take it altogether seriously and tell the Lord "O Lord establish Your Word about that bible college I am to start in Zimbabwe." Do not be ho-hum, and so-so and skeptical about such things or you will miss out on the mighty things and wonderful miracles that God wants to do through you!

Doubt, skepticism and unbelieving rationalism are mere protections from disappointment. But they achieve the precise opposite. By killing the dream cold they actually ensure disappointment!

We need to develop the sort of faith that believes the personal promises of God that are revealed to you through the Spirit and through reliable men and women of God. We need to be like David who richly receives the implanted prophetic word with praise and thanksgiving and who asks God to make the living Word grow strong and become established, not only in his own life, but in the lives of his descendants.

And let the house of Your servant David be established before You. (27) For You, O Jehovah of Hosts, God of Israel, have revealed to Your servant, saying, I will build you a house. Therefore Your servant has found in his heart to pray this prayer to You. (28) And now, O Lord Jehovah, You are that God, and Your Words are true, and You have promised this goodness to Your servant. (29) Therefore, now, let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, to be forever before You. For You, O Lord Jehovah, have spoken. And with Your blessing let the house of Your servant be blessed forever.

David does not doubt but rather affirms the truthfulness of God's words O Lord Jehovah, You are that God, and Your Words are true, yet David also asks for the promised blessings to come and to be made full. This is not a contradiction, instead it is an interaction! David receives and believes God's Word and then goes deeper, demonstrating his faith by taking the word to heart and asking for its complete and utter fullness!

We see the totally opposite reaction with another king and another prophet in 2 Kings:

2 Kings 13:14-19 MKJV And Elisha had fallen sick with his illness in which he died. And Jehoash the king of Israel came down to him and wept over his face. And he said, O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen of it! (15) And Elisha said to him, Take bow and arrows. And he took bow and arrows to himself. (16) And he said to the king of Israel, Put your hand on the bow. And he placed his hand. And Elisha put his hands on the king's hands. (17) And he said, Open the window eastward. And he opened. And Elisha said, Shoot! And he shot. And he said, The arrow of Jehovah's deliverance, and the arrow of deliverance from Syria. For you shall strike the Syrians in Aphek until it is finished. (18) And he said, Take the arrows. And he took them. And he said to the king of Israel, Strike on the ground. And he struck three times and stopped. (19) And the man of God was angry with him, and said, You should have stricken five or six times, then you would have stricken Syria until it was finished. But now you shall strike Syria three times.

Jehoash was half-hearted and did not enter fully into the prophetic promise coming from the mouth of the dying Elisha. This was a potentially powerful moment and it was largely wasted! If Jehoash had really believed, if the word had gone deep within him and taken root, then he would have struck the ground five or six times and had complete victory. Instead he just humored the old prophet and eventually entered into defeat.

When God speaks a clear word to you – write it down, type it up, put it on the wall of your office, pray over it, dwell upon it, think it through and all its implications, and praise and thank the Lord! And ask Him to establish it and bless it and confirm it and settle it and ensure that it comes true! These personal words are in a different category from Scripture which must come true. Scripture does not depend on our faith to come true. Jesus will still return even if no one believes that He will! But personal destiny depends on an adequate faith response. You need to be like Abraham who believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness!

Ezra's Prayer for Safety

Ezra 8:21-23 MKJV Then I called a fast there at the river Ahava, so that we might humble ourselves before our God, in order to seek from Him a right way for us and for our little ones, and for all our goods. (22) For I was ashamed to ask of the king troops and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way, because we had spoken to the king, saying, The hand of our God is on all those who seek Him for good, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him. (23) So we fasted and prayed to our God for good. And He was pleased to hear us... And we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and from ambushers by the way.

Ezra the scribe was traveling hundreds of miles through bandit country with literally tens of millions of dollars worth of treasure:

Ezra 8:26-27 MKJV And I weighed into their hands six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels of a hundred talents, of gold a hundred talents, (27) and twenty basins of gold of a thousand drams, and two vessels of fine copper as desirable as gold.

If the Babylonian talent of about 75 pounds is used then we have 7500 pounds of gold which is 120,000 ounces by 650 dollars an ounce (current world price) = \$78 million

The silver is $(650 + 100) = 750$ talents $\times 75$ lbs = 56250 lbs $\times 16$ oz/lb = 900,000 oz \times \$13 per ounce = \$11.7 million

Thus the total of the gold and silver alone is \$89.7 million. On top of this were the other provisions Artaxerxes provided which also included huge quantities of wheat, wine, oil and salt (Ezra 7:12-28). This of course presented a massive security problem for the returning Jews. Artaxerxes offered an armed escort but Ezra refused it because he had called on God for safety (the additional factor that the heavily armed soldiers may have been tempted to take off with all the loot is not mentioned).

For Ezra prayer and fasting would be the answer to their security problem (not guns and goons but God alone). Ezra was not complacent. He did not just shrug his shoulders and say 'as the Lord wills'. He took the security situation both seriously and spiritually – and called the people to prayer and fasting by the River Ahava in Babylon. The goal of this prayer and fasting was humility in their hearts and favor in God's eyes. They sought a 'right way' – the Hebrew word yashar is perhaps better translated a 'straight' in this context – that is a 'straight and good' way. God answered this prayer and the goods were safely delivered to Jerusalem for use in rebuilding the Temple.

Ezra truly believed in the real power of God to intervene in human affairs (such as ensuring physical safety). That is why he said to the King: The hand of our God is on all those who seek Him for good, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him. This was not just a theological statement or doctrine! Ezra fully expected the powerful hand of the Creator God to be with the returning exiles (and it was).

Prayer and fasting and humbling ourselves before God are ways that we can enter in to the goodness of God: So we fasted and prayed to our God for good. And He was pleased to hear

us - and prayerlessness and indulgence and arrogance of course have the opposite effect! We need to sanctify ourselves before the Lord if we are to be in that lowly position whereby God can pour down His great goodness upon us!

Prayerlessness, indulgence and arrogance are common in self-confident 'Laodecian' churches:

Revelation 3:14-20 MKJV (14) And to the angel of the church of the Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Head of the creation of God, says these things: (15) I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I would that you were cold or hot. (16) So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (17) Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, and do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, (18) I counsel you to buy from Me gold purified by fire, so that you may be rich; and white clothing, so that you may be clothed, and so that the shame of your nakedness does not appear. And anoint your eyes with eye salve, so that you may see. (19) As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; therefore be zealous and repent. (20) Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him and he with Me.

We need to repent of these things, and cease from relying on wealth and power and human strength, and start believing that God alone can be our security when we walk with Him in prayer and fasting and in true humility!

What are we relying on for our protection in life? Is it the blessing of the Lord? Now I am not asking you to throw out your alarm system or to drive recklessly on the freeway – there is a proper prudence in life. Yet as a missionary I have had to live in some very dangerous parts of the world unarmed and unprotected (by human standards) and I can testify to the Lord's hand of grace in such matters.

Ezra felt that the bodyguards would have been a poor testimony to the power of God. Ezra truly wanted God to get all the glory so he refused human help – and God did get all the glory when it actually worked out!

Let's be humble, prayerful, God-reliant Christians who stake themselves entirely upon the Lord so He can get all the glory from our lives!

Hezekiah's Prayer for Recovery

2 Kings 20:1-7 MKJV In those days Hezekiah was sick to death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, So says Jehovah, Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live. (2) And he turned his face to the wall and prayed to Jehovah, saying, O Jehovah, (3) I pray, O Jehovah, remember now how I have walked before You in truth and with a sincere heart, and have done good in Your sight. And Hezekiah wept with a great weeping. (4) And it happened, Isaiah had gone out into the middle of the court, the Word of Jehovah came to him saying, (5) Return again and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, So says Jehovah, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of Jehovah. (6) And I will add fifteen years to your days. And I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria. And I will defend this city for My own sake, and for My servant David's sake. (7) And Isaiah said, Take a lump of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.

Let's look at the sequence of events here:

- a) Hezekiah is mortally ill.
- b) Isaiah the prophet goes and says "Thus says Jehovah...you will die and not live.."
- c) Hezekiah weeps much and prays to God
- d) God speaks to Isaiah as he was going out into the middle of the court
- e) God reverses His decision and adds fifteen years to Hezekiah's life and many blessings

Later on Hezekiah asks for sign that he would be healed and in response the sun goes backward ten steps on the sundial of Ahaz.

There are quite a few 'theological problems' here! Is Isaiah a false prophet for saying that Hezekiah would die - and he did not? Is God fickle – deciding one thing one minute and giving in when the King sheds a few tears? Why would God make the sun (or at least the shadow) go backwards just to satisfy Hezekiah's need to know he would be healed? Or indeed – why didn't God reveal the cure (the cake of figs) right at the beginning and save all this hassle?

The answer to this is that the Bible does NOT present us with the 'absolute' God of the philosophers and the theologians - but with the interactive God of the saints! To realize he famous philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal came to realize this as he was reading John chapter 17 (Jesus prayer to the Father on behalf of the disciples):

From about half past ten at night to about half an hour after midnight,
FIRE

"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob," not of philosophers and scholars

Certitude, heartfelt joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

God of Jesus Christ.

The world forgotten, everything except God.

"O righteous Father, the world has not known You, but I have known You" (John 17:25).

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

God interacted with His good King Hezekiah through the illness, the prayer, the prophet, the prophecies and the sign. The common thing in all this process is God wanting Hezekiah to

communicate with Him, even during a crisis – even in the midst of a terminal illness that seemed 'just so unfair'.

Hezekiah threw his kingly pride and dignity out the window and humbled himself before God with tears and much weeping. Hezekiah dug deep into his soul and poured himself out to God in a vehement and fervent prayer for grace. He was not proud, presumptuous, lackluster or tepid in his prayer. Instead he prayed with all his heart!

As we have seen before this kind of 'prayer of desperation' where a person entirely throws themselves upon God, is often heard in Heaven and accompanied by miracles. From Jacob's "I will not let you go unless you bless me" to the Syrophenician woman's pleas on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter – it is those who are in most in earnest that prevail before the throne of God.

James 5:16-18 MKJV The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous one avails much. (17) Elijah was a man of like passion as we are. And he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for the time of three years and six months. (18) And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth caused its fruit to sprout.

God dwells in heaven but He is not like the stars and the planets in their fixed orbits! God interacts with His creatures! God is not controlled by us, but He IS responsive to us (within His limits of course). But God set those limits very wide for good King Hezekiah! Even granting a major physical miracle at his request. As God build up a relationship with His saints they learn to be bold and to ask great things from God and to attempt great things for God.

You can get in all sorts of logical tangles over how God treated Hezekiah or you can see it from another angle – as an interactive relationship between a faithful servant of God and his Master. Hezekiah's experience told Him that God was merciful and so He called upon that mercy. And God responds consistently to cries for mercy – by granting them!

God was consistent in nature. That is the important thing. To say God was 'inconsistent' because one minute He says that Hezekiah is going to die and five minutes later He tells Hezekiah he will live – is to miss the point. God always cared for Hezekiah. Enough to send Isaiah to speak to him (who was certainly not a false prophet) and enough to challenge him to seek His mercy, and enough to respond to the cry for mercy as soon as it left Hezekiah's lips.

This makes God seem a bit more complex – but He is complex and we should never presume to forget that! God hems us in so that we seek Him on a personal level not just on a logical or intellectual level. God wants to be the God of our whole life and all its events and seasons and problems, not just the God of our thoughts alone. God does not want to be regraded merely as a 'noble concept' but rather as a Living God who is FIRE and who is present with us.

We need to pray not to some grand theological abstraction, but to the Living God, who is compassionate and merciful and full of lovingkindness and truth. Terms such as compassionate, merciful and loving imply relationship and responsiveness. Mercy is a divine response, a divine interaction. God is not some impersonal computer program relentlessly chugging away on the state of the Universe. Jesus told us to call God our Father! And not just our Father – but our Abba Father – our "Daddy"!

Even though God had said that his life was soon to end Hezekiah knew that was not the end of the matter. Hezekiah knew that God heard human beings and that God was merciful and that

God answered prayer. Hezekiah did not quietly resign himself to the divine fate. In fact he even protested his 'divine fate' – and was heard. This is one of the essential differences between Christianity and astrology. You can appeal to a merciful God, and that means that life is full of second chances such as fifteen years more life. It means life is interesting and interactive not dull and fixed 'by the iron fate written in the stars'. Astrology only imprisons you, but Christianity liberates you to be fully human and in relationship with Heaven as a child of God!

The Prophetic Prayer of Habakkuk

Habakkuk 3:1-19 MKJV A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet concerning erring ones: (2) O Jehovah, I have heard Your report; I am afraid. O Jehovah, give new life to Your work in the midst of years; in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy. (3) God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His glory covers the heavens, and His praise fills the earth. (4) And His brightness is as the light; rays from His hand are His, and there was a hiding of His strength. (5) A plague went before Him, and lightning went forth at His feet. (6) He stood and measured the earth; He looked and shook nations, and the everlasting mountains were shattered; the eternal hills bowed down. His ways are everlasting... (17) Though the fig tree shall not blossom, and fruit is not on the vines; the labor of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food. The flock is cut off from the fold, and no herd is in the stalls; (18) yet I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation. (19) Jehovah the Lord is my strength, and He will make my feet like hinds' feet, and He will make me to walk on my high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments.

In this extended prayer of the prophet Habakkuk he discusses the wrath of God, the deliverance of the righteous, and attributes, character and actions of God. It is a combination of praise, petition and thanksgiving all wrapped up into one prayer before God. It also contains some prophetic elements. It is truly the 'prayer of a prophet'!

The strange phrase here translated concerning erring ones is actually "according to Shigionoth" and probably means "a wandering song". It was the song of a wandering prophet. It is evidently meant to be sung "To the chief singer on my stringed instruments" and in the Hebrew is highly structured into groups of three words.

The theme is the deliverance of the people of God from a vast enemy. Even when God acts in wrath against the wicked the righteous will be spared, for God's wrath is not like the wild explosive anger of a mortal, rather in wrath He can remember mercy. Even though the land is devastated and "the flock is cut off from the fold" God will still be a strength to His people and cause them to "walk on high places".

These verses seem to be especially relevant to times of wrath, war, and persecution and of course to the Tribulation. Though wickedness is very strong, God will be even stronger. Even the mountains and seas must obey the Lord!

God is seen as glorious and full of light, a light that shatters the moral darkness 'like spears' and which utterly overthrows the wicked. Though disaster looms (the Babylonian invasion for Habakkuk, the End Times for us) the focus of the prophet is not on the terribleness of the problem - but on the glory of God as the Solution!

Habakkuk's attitude is that God is bigger than any problem – even that of invasion, war and destruction. Despite the economic ruin that came with it and the failure of olives and fruit and of all agriculture, the prophet was going to rejoice in God! This is impossible for us to do unless we are totally grounded in the nature and power of God as a reality in our lives.

Habakkuk fixed his focus on the glory of God and that quite simply made the problem seem small, and solvable. God would come, God would turn up for the salvation of His people – that much was certain and was sure! This is a perfect illustration of walking by faith and not by sight.

This is why we need to meditate regularly upon the Scriptures and upon the greatness of God. Unless we do so very small things can loom large as problems, such as lost pens, gas prices, annoying people, bills and so on – and they can rapidly steal our joy! On the other hand if we are truly grounded in God even war and plague and famine will not be able to upset our peace and poise in the Lord!

Habakkuk viewed God first and the situation second. He saw God's hand breaking through the chaos and confusion of the hostile nations. That which was overwhelming on the human level, was going to be handled by the mountain-moving, river-shaking power of God. Even the Babylonian astrological powers (as symbolized by the sun and moon) are immobilized, made to stand still and be ineffective, unable to prevent the onward march of God in triumph.

Let's summarize some of the lessons of Habakkuk:

1. Be grounded in the character and power of God
2. Remember Light expels darkness
3. Remember God can do two (or more) things at once – punish the wicked, have mercy on the penitent and deliver the righteous!
4. Be full of praise and thanksgiving
5. View God first and the situation second
6. Walk by faith and not by sight
7. Be absolutely sure that God delivers His faithful ones
8. Look at Him who is the Solution (not at how bad the problem is)
9. Don't let the circumstances steal your joy – praise Him anyway!
10. Claim divine security in risky situations – hind's feet on high places!