

The basis of prayer

Bernard Burt

THE HUMAN EAR has great difficulty following more than one conversation at a time. Yet Scripture reveals that the God of heaven is far above us in His capabilities. The wise man taught: "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Prov. 15:3). David wrote: "O LORD, Thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, Thou understandest my thought afar off . . . For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, Thou knowest it altogether . . . Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?" (Ps. 139:1-7).

God is able to hear prayers which are offered from all parts of the earth at the same time. He is able to respond to *all* these prayers in ways which, in His infinite wisdom, He knows are best. Well might we exclaim with David: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (v. 6).

The Word of God goes further than to say that God *can* hear all prayers which are offered. The character of God is such that there is a willingness to hear prayer, but not every prayer: "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto *their* prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil" (1 Pet. 3:12). Peter is quoting from Psalm 34, which was written by David when he was in terrible trouble in the land of the Philistines (see the title of the psalm). The teachings contained in this psalm will be considered in more detail later in this article.

Solomon, in the book of Proverbs, shows clearly that there are prayers which God will not hear:

"Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out My hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all My counsel, and would none of My reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh . . . Then shall they call upon Me, but I will not answer; they shall seek Me early, but they shall not find Me" (1:24-28);

"He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination" (28:9).

The prayers which God will hear

God, having laid down the basis upon which man can approach to Him in prayer, will not change His purpose. David cried: "Hear my prayer, O LORD, give ear to my supplications: *in Thy faithfulness answer me*, and in Thy righteousness" (Ps. 143:1). God, in all His dealings with men, is true to the character which He has revealed in His Word. He is "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Ex. 34:6).

There is no doubt that God will hear prayer; the area of doubt which exist is with us: will we offer acceptable prayer unto Him? Consider now the teaching of Psalm 34 in more detail:

"I sought the LORD, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They *looked* unto Him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man *cried*, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that *fear* Him, and delivereth them. O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that *trusteth* in Him. O fear the LORD, ye His saints: for there is no want to them that *fear* Him. The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that *seek* the LORD shall not want any good thing. Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the *fear* of the LORD. What man is he that *desireth life*, and loveth many days, that he may see good? *Keep thy tongue* from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. *Depart from evil*, and *do good*; *seek peace*, and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their *cry*. The face of the LORD is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. The righteous *cry*, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles. The LORD is nigh unto them that are *of a broken heart*; and saveth such as be *of a contrite spirit*. Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all" (vv. 4-19).

The emphasised words in the extended quotation above show what the Lord requires. Man has to make an effort on two fronts; firstly, to *fear*

God, to *trust* Him, to *seek* Him and to *cry* unto Him. Secondly, and of equal importance, there must be effort in the life of that man to “walk in the light” (1 Jno. 1:7). There must be a *broken heart* and a *contrite spirit*, there must be a conscious effort to *keep the tongue*, to *depart from evil*, to *do good* and *seek peace*. If we do these things, God will be “nigh unto” us and deliver us.

Praying to God as ‘the Father’

In Old Testament times men and women prayed to God. Perhaps surprisingly, apart from Genesis 4:26, there are no clear references to prayers being offered during the first 2,000 years of man’s sojourn on the earth. The earliest records of prayer concern the time of Abraham, when he “called upon the name of the LORD” (12:8; 13:4) and asked God questions concerning the promises (15:2,3). From that time on there are frequent references to the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David and many others, offering praise to God, giving thanks to Him and entreating Him in various circumstances.

These individuals addressed God by various names and titles—Yahweh (Gen. 4:26), Yahweh Elohim (24:12), Yahweh Sabaoth (1 Sam. 1:11), Adonai Yahweh (Gen. 15:2), Eloah (Job 33:26)—but only very rarely (five occasions) as ‘Father’. In fact the term ‘Father’ is very rarely used in the Old Testament of God. It is used six times of God being the Father of Israel in an allegorical sense (for example, Psalm 68:5 and 103:13), four times in prophecy of God being the future Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (for example, 2 Samuel 7:14) and once of Jesus being the father of the millennial age (Isa. 9:6).

However, once the Son is born, the God of Israel is revealed in the New Testament Scriptures as ‘the Father’. When Jesus prayed, he addressed God in this way; for example:

“Father, glorify Thy name” (Jno. 12:28);

“Father, the hour is come” (17:1);

“Holy Father” (v. 11);

“O righteous Father” (v. 25);

“O my Father” (Mt. 26:39).

The relationship between Jesus and the Deity was literally that of Son and Father, hence it was entirely reasonable that Jesus should use the term ‘Father’ when he prayed. It is, however, remarkable (on the basis of the infrequent use of the term in the Old Testament) that, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said: “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father Which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name” (Mt. 6:9). It

is even more remarkable that the first person (other than the twelve) who was taught by Jesus that God is to be worshipped as ‘the Father’ was the woman of Samaria (Jno. 4:21-23).

After Jesus had ascended to heaven, the apostles taught the same truth: “This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of *the Father* the promise of the Holy [Spirit], he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear” (Acts 2:32,33). They presented to Jew and Gentile the fact that the Almighty Creator of the heavens and the earth could be spoken to as ‘Father’. Thus those allegorical references in the Old Testament could now become a reality for faithful individuals: “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him” (Ps. 103:13).

Prayer offered through Christ

The next stage of Jesus’s teaching to his disciples was that prayer to the Father must be offered in a particular way. Just as the incense—which represented prayer (Ps. 141:2)—had to be made from specific ingredients and compounded “after the art of the apothecary” (Ex. 30:34-38), so it should be with our prayers. This principle applies to all the words which we utter in prayer (as will be seen later), but for the moment we concentrate on the way in which we approach the One to Whom we pray.

It was in the upper room that Jesus taught his disciples that he was to be taken away from them and that they would no longer be able to make requests of him as they had done over the previous three years. Now he taught them to make their requests to the Father: “And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father *in my name*, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full” (Jno. 16:23,24).

This teaching sets a pattern of prayer for believers in Jesus that is followed throughout the New Testament Scriptures. The following examples are taken from the prayers and teaching of the Apostle Paul:

- “First, I thank my God *through Jesus Christ* for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8);
- “Now unto Him That is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church [ecclesia] *by*

Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph. 3:20,21);

- “. . . giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (5:20);
- “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father *by him*” (Col. 3:17);
- “Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate . . . *By him* therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:12-15).

It ought perhaps to be pointed out in connection with the above that there is *no* corresponding pattern in the New Testament of prayers addressed directly to Jesus. The apostles taught that prayer was to be directed to *God*:

- “And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice *to God* with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, Which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is” (Acts 4:24);
- “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and *pray God*, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (8:22);
- “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church *unto God* for him” (12:5).

The churches of Christendom, having invented a Triune God, offer prayers to and write hymns which address each person of their Deity as they see fit. Those whose understanding of God and His Son is based on the revelations contained in the Scriptures ought not so to do. Our prayers ought to follow this Scriptural pattern and be addressed to God (as “Our Father”), being presented through our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since many of our hymns are prayers, it follows that the same Scriptural guidelines should apply, and that those who are responsible for the choice of hymns should be guided by the prayer-patterns in the Word of God, rather than preference for a particular tune or a form of words which is not based on the principles of Scripture.

Praying in accordance with God’s Word

Mention has already been made of the parallel between prayer and the offering of incense. Both have (or should have) several constituents. Both are (or should be) associated with sacrificed lives.

Both ascend up to God and should be pleasing and acceptable to Him.

The way in which our prayers should be offered to God (that is, through the Lord Jesus Christ) having been considered, we now move on to look at what might be called the ingredients of prayer. The incense was made from specific ingredients (Ex. 30:34-38); what are (or should be) the ingredients of our prayers? Some of these matters will be developed elsewhere within this issue, but praise, a recognition of the holiness of God, thanksgiving and petitions can all be found within the prayers of the faithful as recorded in the Scriptures.

How, then, did these spiritual apothecaries compound their prayers? It is not difficult to find out. Take an example of Scriptural prayer, and, through the use of marginal references, search out where the one who was offering the prayer found his or her ingredients. Nehemiah’s prayer in chapter 1 of his book is presented in the table overleaf as a typical example.

The passages which Nehemiah quotes show, in their contexts, what he was seeking in his prayer. He was aware of the Seventy Weeks Prophecy in the Book of Daniel, and the decree of Cyrus which had initiated the rebuilding of the temple. Yet the terms of Daniel 9:24-27 required the king of Persia to issue a decree “to restore and to build Jerusalem” (v. 25). This was what Nehemiah sought, so before he went in to the king he compounded a prayer which was based on God’s revelation of His character, His purpose and His promises.

This wonderful prayer climaxes in Isaiah 26:8, where the context from verses 1 and 2 is as follows: “In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in”. Thus we see that what Nehemiah really wanted was the spiritual salvation of the nation. This is also made evident in the words of his enemies when he arrived at Jerusalem: “When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel” (Neh. 2:10).

Yet for all of this Nehemiah had actually to go before the king (with a sad countenance!) and ask for the decree to be issued. In what strength did he do this? The answer is in Isaiah 26:3: “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace [literally

Nehemiah 1	Ingredient of prayer	Source
v. 5	O LORD God of heaven	Cyrus—Ezra 1:2
v. 5	the great and terrible God	Daniel—Dan. 9:4
v. 5	That keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and keep His commandments	Moses—Deut. 7:9
v. 6	Let Thine ear now be attentive	Solomon—2 Chron. 6:40
v. 6	and Thine eyes open	Solomon—2 Chron. 6:40
v. 6	and confess the sins of the children of Israel	Daniel—Dan. 9:20
v. 6	both I and my father's house have sinned	Ps. 106:6
v. 7	We have dealt very corruptly against Thee	Daniel—Dan. 9:5
v. 7	which Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses	Moses—Deut. 28:15
v. 8	If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations	Moses—Deut. 4:25-27
v. 9	but if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments	Moses—Lev. 26:39-42
v. 9	though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven	Moses—Deut. 30:4
v. 9	unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there	Moses—Deut. 12:5
v. 10	Now these are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great power, and by Thy strong hand	Moses—Deut. 9:29
v. 11	let now Thine ear be attentive	Solomon—2 Chron. 6:40
v. 11	who desire to fear Thy name	Isaiah—Isa. 26:8

'peace, peace'], whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee".

Oh that we could so frame our petitions "in accordance with His will" and go forward in our lives in such confidence!

The privilege of prayer

Children are always making requests of their fathers: "what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father Which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?" (Mt. 7:9-11). Human fathers think that they know what is best for their children (sometimes they are right and sometimes they are wrong!), but our heavenly Father knows

absolutely what is best for us. How foolish are we, then, if we neglect the privilege of speaking to Him and saying, "Our Father Which art in heaven . . ."! We should heed the counsel and example of the Apostle Paul:

"[continue] instant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12);

"give yourselves to fasting and prayer" (1 Cor. 7:5);

"ye also helping together by prayer for us . . ." (2 Cor. 1:11);

"I . . . cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers" (Eph. 1:15,16);

"praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" (6:18);

". . . in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6);

“... we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you” (Col. 1:9);
 “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (4:2);
 “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17);
 “. . . we pray always for you” (2 Thess. 1:11);
 “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men” (1 Tim. 2:1);
 “I will therefore that men pray every where,

lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (v. 8);

“. . . without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day” (2 Tim. 1:3);

“I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers” (Philem. v. 4).

It is evident that Paul understood and constantly resorted to the privilege of prayer. Let us go and do likewise.

The importance of prayer

John Nicholls

THE IMPORTANCE of prayer in the first-century ecclesia is shown in Acts 1:13,14, when the apostles came together after the ascension of Christ and “continued with one accord in *prayer* and *supplication*, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren”. At this time the whole Jerusalem ecclesia, which numbered 120 (v. 15), met to replace Judas Iscariot, and, after they had *prayed*, Matthias was chosen by casting lots (vv. 24,25). Just a few days later, at Pentecost, the same Jerusalem ecclesia baptized 3,000 believers, who “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in *prayers*”. They “had all things common”, and praised God (2: 41-47).

Prayer in the Jerusalem ecclesia

The next chapter of Acts also underlines the important part prayer played in the Jerusalem ecclesia, for we are told that Peter and John “went . . . into the temple *at the hour of prayer*, being the ninth hour” (3:1, cf. Ps. 55:17), healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and preached Christ. When they were imprisoned by the hostile priests and Sadducees, and then released, the ecclesia was moved to lift up its *voice in prayer* with one accord (4:24-31). This wonderful ecclesial prayer of thanks and praise to God for the deliverance of their beloved elder brothers Peter and John was answered by God shaking the place where they were assembled, and by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enable the believers to preach the gospel with boldness.

When seven brethren were selected to organise welfare work in the ecclesia, they were dedicated to the task by *prayer* (6:6), and the apostles

said that this would enable them (the apostles) to give themselves “*continually to prayer*, and to the ministry of the Word” (v. 4).

The value placed on prayer by the first-century ecclesia is vividly illustrated in the events recorded in Acts 12, when the Apostle Peter was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa I. It was apparently Herod’s intention to put Peter to death when Passover was ended, but we are told that, during the time of Peter’s imprisonment, the ecclesia *prayed* “without ceasing” (v. 5) for their beloved apostle. It is clear from the narrative that this prayer involved an all-night ecclesial vigil, because, when the sleeping Peter was rescued from prison by the angel of the Lord at night (v. 7), many of the ecclesia were praying for his release at the same time in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark (v. 12). How many of us have participated in such intense and lengthy prayer meetings as this? Do we have a faith as strong as our early brethren and sisters must have had?

Incense and prayer

This brief survey of the first few chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, covering the time when the ecclesias were beginning to be established, confirms the important part prayer played in both ecclesial life and the lives of individual saints. These early Jewish brethren and sisters would have been familiar with the teaching of the Old Testament about prayer, particularly the instructions about the priests’ offering of incense. Although it was the role of the priest to offer incense on the altar, the nation of Israel had to supply the ingredients of the incense and support the priest. They were united with the priest in his