

term answer which will be much more appropriate for us; for He is not willing that any should perish. And when the answer is "No!" then a humble acceptance of the situation will be needed, because the ultimate blessing will more

than compensate for our losses and disadvantages now, as Paul wrote: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

What hinders prayer?

Trevor Maher

"Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear them in the time that they cry unto Me for their trouble" (Jer. 11:14);

"But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Mt. 6:7).

PRAYER IS ONE of the most important elements in a believer's life of discipleship. Without prayer we will not succeed in the struggle against our natures, or reach the Kingdom. The fact, therefore, that God would choose not to hear or listen to our prayer is a sobering and arresting thought. So often we take it for granted that, when we pray, our prayers will automatically be received in heaven by God through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We accept that God may not reply in the way we would prefer, but the act of praying and the assurance of it being heard is of great comfort and reassurance, bringing peace of mind.

When we read the Scriptures and meditate on them, God is speaking to us, revealing His mind and purpose. When we pray to God we are speaking to the Creator and Sustainer of all life, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and our hearts and minds are revealed to Him at this time of communication. Our **attitude** of mind, the **approach** we take, the **activities** we engage in before and after prayer—these three aspects all contribute to the acceptance or otherwise of our prayers.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and our ways are not God's ways: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9). In view of this we do well to heed the words of God through the prophet when He says, "to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word" (66:2), if we are not to have any hindrance in our prayers to God. Before looking at specific examples where God refused to hear

prayers, we want briefly to consider the symbol of prayer in the Scripture, that of incense.

"My prayer . . . incense"

The golden altar and the incense that was burned on it teach us important principles in regard to our prayers. The altar stood at the veil between the holy place and the most holy place. It stood before the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat. Twice a day, morning and evening, the priest would burn incense on the altar when he entered the holy place to trim and refill the lamps of the golden candlestick, at the time of the daily sacrifice.

The symbology of this act of burning incense is explained by other passages of Scripture: "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand" (Rev 8:3,4). Another passage in Revelation speaks of the twenty-four elders falling down before the Lamb, "having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours [the Greek is the word translated 'incense' in 8:3,4] which are the prayers of saints" (5:8). The psalmist also refers to this symbol of prayer when he says, "Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (141:2).

The times of the evening and morning sacrifice were also to be times of prayer, and so it was fitting that the cloud of incense should rise up from the golden altar then. The word translated

'incense' carries the meaning, 'to purify', and the instruction from God was that the incense was to be prepared according to His instructions so that it was "pure and holy" (Ex. 30:35). Prayer is therefore to come from a pure source, and in itself is to be a purifying process if it is to be acceptable to God. The word 'pure' means 'uncontaminated', so our prayers are not to be contaminated by the natural desires of our human nature or by attitudes influenced by the ways of the world in which we live.

Each of the four ingredients listed as being in the incense carries a symbolic meaning:¹

stacte: sacrifice

onycha: deliverance

galbanum: service

frankincense: purity.

It might be thought that it is impossible to separate our prayers from our natural desires and inclinations brought out by the troubles that press in on us. If we reflect on the examples of prayer in Scripture, though, we will see that prayer is motivated by a desire to be free of our human natures, inclinations and fears. It is driven by a desire to be nearer to God, to see God's will in our lives and the purpose of God brought to fruition. The act of prayer will lead us to say, "not my will, but Thine, be done" (Lk. 22:42).

The incense was burnt on the golden altar, which itself was lit by fire from the altar of burnt offering. When the sacrifice for sin had been made, then the incense could rise up to God. So our prayers, reflecting those ingredients of incense, must acknowledge that the sacrifice of Christ has brought us deliverance and enabled us to approach God in prayer, and that we will endeavour to serve God in purity of thought and action.

A rebellious spirit

Aaron and his sons were commanded not to offer "strange incense" (Ex. 30:9), that is, incense not composed correctly. We must therefore give careful thought to the content and manner of our prayers. Death was the punishment on Nadab and Abihu when they burnt their incense with "strange fire" (Lev. 10:1,2). The same fate was meted out to those who rebelled with Korah and had sought the priesthood in envy and with self-importance. Two hundred and fifty rebels had censers with fire and incense in them, and fire from the LORD consumed them (Num. 16:17,18, 35). Here was a sign from God that prayer from a proud, rebellious heart was not acceptable. The

censers of the rebels were melted down to make a covering for the altar as a sign that only the appointed priesthood could burn incense before the Lord (vv. 38-40). In this is a reminder that our prayers must be offered through our High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Later in the life of the nation we find the same rebellious spirit, which was to cause them to be taken into captivity, and the temple that was meant to be "an house of prayer for all people" (Isa. 56:7) destroyed. The prophet Jeremiah describes the cause of such judgement as the influence of false gods and an unacceptable life style. The prayers of the people to Yahweh were not heard or acknowledged because they had lost the purity their calling had originally given them in the sight of God. The incense, once reserved only for use in prayer and worship of the true God, was now used in the worship of false gods.

The call from the prophet to the people was, "Amend your ways and your doings . . . Trust ye not in lying words" (Jer. 7:3,4), and God said of them: "they hearkened not [to Me], nor inclined their ear" (v. 24); and: "This is a nation that obeyeth not the voice of the LORD their God, nor receiveth correction: truth is perished, and is cut off from their mouth" (v. 28). Whole families were indicted; fathers, children, women—all had been influenced by teachings and practices that were false.²

Ezekiel and Jeremiah condemned the lives of the people, their stealing, murder, adultery and false swearing, and the way they mingled their worship and prayers to the true God with practices and thoughts culled from the false gods. Whilst we may not stand accused of the extreme behaviour of the Jews prior to the Babylonian captivity, nor have idols from apostate religions in our halls, the principles they should have heeded must be found actively influencing our prayers and worship.

The fruit of our lips

The same principles apply to us, who are part of the spiritual temple, "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:20,21).

1. See "[The importance of prayer](#)" (p. 149) for more on this.

2. Ezekiel 8 describes vividly the three different kinds of apostate worship carried out in the temple in Jerusalem during the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

We are “a royal priesthood, an holy nation”, of whom it is said: “ye also, as lively [living] stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:9,5). These spiritual sacrifices include praise, and the epistle to the Hebrews shows clearly the link between prayer and the lives we live: “By him [Christ] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (13:15,16).

Therefore, whether prayer is offered individually, or collectively when we come together as ecclesias, for it to be acceptable to God it must be accompanied by a way of life that reflects the teachings of God and Christ. We must, for instance, be forgiving of those who trespass against us if we want God to forgive us our trespasses (Mt. 6:14,15). It would be hypocritical of us to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth” (v. 10), if in our own lives we failed to preach of the coming Kingdom and were rarely found to be striving to put the will of God first at all times. It would be strange of us to ask God to “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (v. 13), if we engage in activities or pursuits, or visit places or attend events, that are incompatible with the beliefs we claim to hold.

Scripture tells us that “covetousness . . . is idolatry” (Col. 3:5), so we can see that allowing the materialism of society to influence our lives could be affecting our prayers in the sight of God. Sadly, the people in the time of Jeremiah found their communion with God curtailed. Try as they might, He would not hear them. God even told Jeremiah that if he prayed for the people He would not hear his prayer (Jer. 7:16; 11:14). Their attitude to God is described by Jeremiah as, “You are always on their lips but far from their hearts” (12:2, NIV). They were not people whose hearts and minds were truly set on God; they were double-minded.

According to His will

We see in Scripture that even those who strove to serve God, and endeavoured to set their mind on the things of God, found that at certain times their petitions to God were hindered. Abraham desired that Ishmael might be the son of the covenant (Gen. 17:18); Moses sought to cross over Jordan (Deut. 3:23-25); David desired that the child born to himself and Bathsheba might live

(2 Sam. 12:16); Paul sought three times that his thorn in the flesh might be removed (2 Cor. 12:8). Whatever reason we might give for these individuals finding themselves in this position, the reality was that their desires were not in accord with the will of God. Their prayers were heard and acknowledged but the outcome was not what they sought. Their eternal salvation, however, was not jeopardised by this refusal of God to respond as requested.

We will always receive a positive answer to prayer when it echoes what God seeks to do. This is the assurance found in the words of the Apostle John: “And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him” (1 Jno. 5:14,15). Seeking the will of God in all the affairs of life—in troubles, in distress and suffering, in all matters great and small, through meditation and consideration of His Word—is our primary responsibility. Asking the question, ‘What is God trying to teach me from this experience?’, will give us the courage to pray, “nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done” (Lk. 22:42).

Having such a spirit in us will allow us to present petitions to our heavenly Father that are not lacking in faith (Heb. 11:6), nor sought for the wrong motives (Jas. 4:3). Nor will we be like those in Israel described by Hosea: “And they have not cried unto Me with their heart, when they howled upon their beds” (7:14). Prayers of self-pity because of troubles being experienced are not accepted by God. In seeking the will of God it is necessary for us first of all to acknowledge the sins that have separated us from God and that can be forgiven in His mercy through Christ Jesus.

The psalmist tells us: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered . . . unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile”. But he arrived at this state because: “I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin”. He then says: “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto Thee in a time when Thou mayest be found” (32:1-6). In confessing our sins we open up the pathway of prayer.

Psalm 51 also shows us this. This is David’s prayer acknowledging the sin of his relationship

with Bathsheba. For around a year, from the death of Uriah until sometime after the baby was born, there was a barrier between God and David. The arrival of Nathan the prophet caused David to confess his sin and to offer to God the beautiful prayer expressed in this psalm. His sin against God is acknowledged, and the plea is made for God to blot out all his iniquity. With his recognition of his sin came the words of the prophet: "The LORD also hath put away thy sin" (2 Sam. 12:13).

A contrite heart

Before praying, it would benefit all of us to read the Master's parable of the two men who went up into the temple to pray (Lk. 18:9-14). Despite his appearance of respectability, the one was condemned, whereas the other recognised his sinful state and was justified. This is what the psalmist is telling us also. God desires truth in the inward parts (Ps. 51:6), a truth that recognises what we are and our total dependence on the grace of God. He looks for this contrite heart.

The word 'contrite' links back to those thoughts we expressed at the beginning of this article on

the symbol of incense. In forming the incense the instruction was that they were to "beat . . . it very small" (Ex. 30:36). The word translated 'contrite' carries the meaning 'to beat small'. The humility necessary for our prayers to be effective is symbolised in the preparation of the incense before it was burned on the altar or in the censer: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17). We have to beat down the pride and self-reliance we naturally possess; we have to beat down the self-importance that easily takes hold; we have to beat down the self-deception that can delude us.

In the place of these we must allow our understanding of sacrifice, deliverance, service and purity to be compounded together so that our prayers can rise acceptably before God. With the psalmist we should say: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me . . . wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice" (vv. 2-8).

Praise and thanksgiving

David Burges

"It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto Thy name, O most High: to shew forth Thy lovingkindness in the morning, and Thy faithfulness every night" (Ps. 92:1,2).

AS CHILDREN of the living God by grace, we share the enormous privilege of being able to commune in prayer with the Creator Himself, through the mediation of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. An objective analysis of the *contents* of our prayers, however, might well conclude that a high proportion of them are concerned with requests to God to satisfy our needs and desires, rather than to render worship and thanksgiving to Him. The inspired psalmist quoted above declares that it is a *good thing* to give thanks and praise to the Almighty. Yet it has to be said that many, perhaps the majority, of the public prayers given on behalf of our ecclesial congregations pay scant attention to this aspect of prayer, concentrating rather on requests for blessing and guidance.

The Bible, as we might expect, gives considerable emphasis to worship, praise and giving of

thanks, and employs a wide range of original words to convey them (see Table 1). This stress upon praise is surely due to a recognition that the God Who has called us is a God of salvation, that He has reprieved all those who call upon His Name from the death penalty due to sinners, and that this should call forth from them constant confessions of sincere praise and heartfelt thanksgiving.

Being thankful

Saints, then, above all people, should be thankful. Thankfulness as a state of mind should pervade all of their attitudes and actions, and should be freely expressed in their prayers to their heavenly Father. But all of us will be aware of deficiencies in this regard, for often we find ourselves expressing dissatisfaction about some aspect of our circumstances, wishing we were someone