

WINTER 2020 NEWSLETTER
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ACCEPTABLE PRAYER

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” James 5:16

“Pray for me.” Perhaps this request has been made of you recently by a friend or acquaintance. Usually, it is prompted by some difficult experience or decision or by an illness the person is facing or from their concern for a family member or friend. As the slogan goes, “Prayer changes things,” so you agree to add your voice to those who are asking for God’s favor. How should you pray? For what should you ask?

If the answer to these questions seems obvious—ask for healing, or ask for that better job or financial security—how confident are you that your prayer will be answered? God is happy to have us pray, right? Will He give us what we ask for? What if our prayers are not answered the way we expect; will our faith be shaken? Is there such a thing as an unacceptable prayer?

Many wonderful prayers are recorded in the Old Testament that we know were answered by God because we have the historical record. The Jews were brought into a special relationship with God as servants through the Law Covenant. Paul wrote, “Moses was faithful over his own House,” a servant over the House of Israel. (Hebrews 3:1-6) The Jews were invited to have a share in God’s care and were promised that everything would work together for their good so long as they faithfully obeyed His statutes. (Deuteronomy 28) God told them, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: **therefore I will punish you** for all your iniquities.” (Amos 3:2)

As we read the record of the people of Israel, we find that they were the most chastened people of history. They received the most wonderful experiences and the harshest disciplines, but through it all, God was with them and heeded their prayers. The Gentiles, in

the meantime, were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and **without God** in the world.” (Ephesians 2:12)

Just as the Jews were called into a relationship with God through a Covenant, Christians during this Gospel Age are similarly called to enter a special Covenant with Him. God is now calling a Bride for Christ. (Acts 15:14; John 6:44) Paul wrote, “I therefore urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercies, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and pleasing to God, for this is the reasonable way for you to worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but continually be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may be able to determine what God’s will is—what is proper, pleasing, and perfect.” (Romans 12:1,2 *International Standard Version*)

The first step in developing an acceptable prayer life is to answer God’s call to present yourself a “living sacrifice.” This is more than just accepting Jesus and attending church on Sundays. It implies a total dedication that can say with the Psalmist, “I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:8) It is a mistake to think we can live a consistently sinful lifestyle and expect God to hear our prayers. Peter wrote, “be holy in every aspect of your life, just as the one who called you is holy.” (1 Peter 1:15 /SV) God is always pleased to hear thanks and praise from anyone, but only those who have made a “covenant with [him] by sacrifice” have the right to expect special guidance or favors.

Prayer is our personal line of communication with the Creator of all things. Keeping this in mind will help us to appreciate the value of

keeping the link open and very special. Looking to Jesus we have the best example of how to pray. Jesus prayed often and when he prayed, he might spend hours communing with his Father. One notable element in Jesus' prayer life was that he sought a private place in which to pray.

Before Jesus chose the twelve apostles from amongst those disciples who were following him, Luke tells us that "he went out into a mountain to pray and continued all night in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12,13) Mark and Luke both make note that Jesus withdrew to a "solitary place" to pray. (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16) In his last hours of life, Jesus left his disciples waiting for him while he went deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray alone. Jesus told his disciples, "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men." (Matthew 6:5,6) Instead he told them to "enter into thy closet" and pray in secret.

The Gospel writers give us a glimpse of Jesus' prayer life but very few of Jesus' prayers are recorded. When he raised Lazarus, Jesus spoke a prayer of thanks to his Father for the people to hear, but he also refers to a portion of the prayer that was not for their ears. Jesus' prayer found in John chapter 17, was given in the hearing of his disciples. In it he prayed that God would keep them from the evil in the world by setting them apart through the truth. He prayed that they would be "one" as he and his Father were one. Since Jesus knew he would soon be arrested and put to death, he wanted his disciples to hear his petitions to God on their behalf so they would be strengthened for the ordeal ahead.

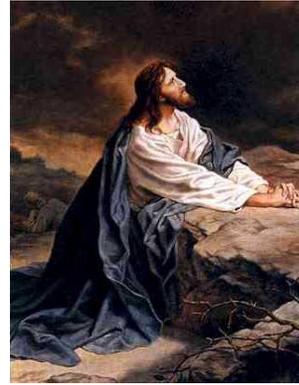
Our prayers should also be in accordance with God's will and purposes and not for our temporal advantage. Jesus told his disciples, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." (John 14:14) And "Most assuredly I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." (John 16:23 NKJV) These words of Jesus have been used by preachers of the "prosperity" gospel to foster the idea that Christians should expect earthly gains, but Jesus meant them to tell his disciples that they would soon experience a different relationship with God. Jesus told them, "At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you, for the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God." (John 16:25-28)

Soon Jesus would finish his sacrificial work in the world and by the completion of his sacrifice open the way for his disciples to come to God under a Covenant of Grace rather than of Law. God engaged to treat them as sons, no longer as servants; nor as opposers or enemies, but as children. "God dealeth with you as with sons." (Hebrews 12:7) This new relationship with God was symbolized by the fiery tongues which came upon them on the Day of Pentecost. (Acts 2:3,4) With this assurance that God will deal with His people as with sons, we might be surprised that the saintly have not generally been blessed as have the unsaintly, with money, health, or temporal prosperity. Is it because we do not ask or is there another reason?

We are not sons of God simply because we answered an altar call but because we have dedicated ourselves to God. The Bible calls

these New Creatures. The New Creature is the special thing in God's sight, the interests of which are often best served by experiences which are not pleasant to the flesh. God wishes these sons to have the proper training to bring them to the required development as sons of God in heaven. This means that they must all follow in the footsteps of their Master, putting aside their own wills and accepting the will of God as their own. Another of Jesus' recorded prayers shows us how he set the example for us in this regard.

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane on the last night of his life is recorded in Matthew 26:38-46. "Then saith he unto them [the



Apostles], 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.' And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, 'O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.' ... He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.'

Jesus repeated the second prayer once again and returned to his companions saying, "behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

Luke's account (22:39-46) tells us that our Lord was in great agony and an angel came to comfort him. We do not know definitely what the "cup" was that he wished removed. He had come to die, to give his life as "a ransom for all." (1 Timothy 2:5,6) He had repeatedly told his disciples he would be killed. (Luke 9:22; John 3:14; 12:32) But there was some element connected with it that he would have liked removed. Perhaps the shame of dying like a criminal. Perhaps being accused of blasphemy against his beloved Father. We cannot know for sure, but we do know the answer to his prayer was "no."

The important element in this prayer of Jesus, and an element that should be in all our requests of God, is found in the words, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." God is not our genie, bound to grant us all our wishes. Some preachers encourage their congregants to use a tone of demand in their prayers. Have you experienced this? Have you been encouraged to boldly "claim" God's blessings? Imagine your child or a subordinate at work using such a tone while asking a favor from you!

The Apostle John assured us that God answers every prayer that aligns with His will. (1 John 5:14) However, his answer might be yes, or no, or wait. Remember Jesus' first words in Matthew 6:9, "Hallowed be thy name." We must always approach God humbly, acknowledging His superiority and omniscience. God, who sees the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10) knows what is best for us and how best to help us to grow in the spirit. He knows whether we as New Creatures will be most profited in the abundance of wealth or in the absence of wealth; whether we as New Creatures will be most profited in the possession of health or otherwise. We are not to tell God what we wish. We are to give up our will in order that His will may be done.

The Apostle James wrote, "You ask for something but do not get it because you ask for it for the wrong reason—for your own pleasure." (James 4:3 *ISV*) As fully devoted children of God our primary concern should be the development of the fruits of the spirit. (Galatians 5:22,23) As to the material things, Jesus said, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him." (Matthew 6:8,32,33) Do you trust Him?

The prayers of God's people should not be for temporal things. We know of no Scriptural illustration where the consecrated sons of God asked definitely for temporal things and received an answer. We remember that St. Paul prayed three times very earnestly for the restoration of his eyesight. God did not give him the thing he asked for but gave him that which would be better for him as a New Creature — sufficient grace. Paul's affliction of poor eyesight, watery eyes, would help to remind him that he was once a persecutor of the Lord's people. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10) Having learned that lesson, the Apostle did not pray for such things again. Instead, when Timothy suffered from an infirmity, Paul counseled him to use common remedies for his trouble. [*Healings were done as signs for non-believers.*] (1 Timothy 5:23) Doubtless it was to our benefit that Paul had prayed those three improper prayers to learn the lesson. We understand from this that we also should be in the attitude to say, "Lord, Thou knowest what I have need of. Give what is best."

So, when asked to pray for someone, how should we pray? What examples do we have to guide us?

Paul prayed for the continuing spiritual growth of the Philippian brethren, "And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent;...being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1:9-11) His continuing prayers were for the spiritual health and development of the churches: "For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1:9-12; see also 2 Thessalonians 1:11; Philippians 1:4) He asked the brethren to pray for him, as well, regarding the advancement of his work spreading the gospel. (2 Thessalonians 3:1; Hebrews 13:18)

John showed us that being in harmony with the will of God and faithfully trying to please Him is critical to having our prayers answered. "Whatsoever we ask, we received of him, **because we keep his commandments**, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." (1 John 3:22)

Another example of Apostolic prayer is when Peter counseled Simon, a convert in Samaria, to pray for forgiveness for his evil thought that he could purchase the power of God with money. (Acts 8:9-22) Also, when Peter and John were arrested, the brethren prayed for boldness to speak the word of God, (Acts 4:23-31) and we are told they prayed for Peter when he was in prison. (Acts 12:5)

Our key scripture, "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," comes from a context in James 5:13-20 which has been used to support prayers for healing the sick. As this would be the only passage of scripture advocating physical healing of the Lord's people, we must ask, does it in fact teach that or is there another meaning? Since we have found that the Lord's people are not encouraged to pray for temporal blessings and are encouraged to accept their experiences as God's will for them, there is strong evidence that the "sickness" spoken of here is not physical but spiritual.



The word translated "sick" in verse 14 is Strong's Concordance #770, *astheneo*, "to be feeble." Thayer's Greek Lexicon adds, "to be weak, to be without strength, powerless, to be weak in means, needy, poor, sick." Clearly, there is a breadth of meaning in the word translated "sick." The passage begins (v.13) by contrasting one who is "afflicted" (*kakopatheo*, endure hardship) with another who is "merry," (*euthumeo*, cheerful) opposite mental states. Verse 15 introduces the idea that sins have been committed in connection with this "illness" and (v.16) counsels the confession of faults along with prayer. The passage states the conclusion, "he which converteth (Strong's 1994) the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death (Matthew 10:28) and shall hide a multitude of sins." (v.20) The focus of the passage is strongly on **sin**. The Lord used a similar term to Peter before his denial of him, "when thou art converted (Str. 1994), strengthen thy brethren." (Luke 22:32) The prayers and counsel of spiritually strong brethren have special effectiveness for one in the depths of discouragement.

In the prayer the Lord taught his disciples, there is no such request as, "My shoes need to be replaced with new shoes," or "Help my aching back." The world might pray for these things; but we are children of God and are to conform our prayers to what He has said. We are to take for examples the prayers of Jesus and such prayers as the Apostles offered. By following the guidance of such prayers, we will be telling God we are depending upon Him, seeking to have no will of our own – merely sinking into His will, asking that His will be done in all our affairs. Then we are to live and act according to that will and according to those prayers.

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HOW GOD ANSWERS PRAYER

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