

## BIBLICAL CHALLENGES 2007 (04).

February 11, 2007.

### Introduction.

As a Christian, your incontestable priority must be God. In virtue of this, your love for God must be incontestable. And your desire and delight to know God must be incontestable. Last Lord's Day we looked at this matter of pursuing the knowing of God. Very importantly, this pursuit of knowing God must be rooted in the truths God has revealed about Himself. These truths are recorded in the book we call the Bible. But we saw that the objective knowledge God has revealed about Himself must become our experiential knowledge of God.

God has revealed in His word what He has done in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, concerning salvation. He has made it plain that if a sinner repents of his / her sins and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, he / she will be saved. This salvation is also described as knowing God and Jesus Christ, whom God has sent. (*Jn.17:3*). The focus here is experiential. The Christians knows, both objectively and experientially, that he / she is saved. Sadly, for far too many Christians, this knowing of God ends with their conversion. The Biblical reality is that this saving knowing of God should be a beginning, the beginning of a life that comes to know God in an increasingly greater manner. It should be a life that is increasing in the riches of the reality of knowing God. Instead it becomes a life of spiritual poverty and all that is associated with that spiritual poverty.

It is not my intent to spend time reviewing our last study. A taped or CD copy of the sermon is available for anyone who desires a copy. There are a couple points, however, that I want to touch upon briefly. *Firstly*, I stated that I have believed and continue to believe that the God who spoke to and guided the great men and women of faith in the

Bible and in history continues to do the same today and can do the same for you. At the same time I emphasized that I do not believe in an open canon and ongoing revelation.

I want to share with you a paragraph from the book, ***Exiles of Hope***, which a number of you have read. This book is ***Volume 2*** of the author's account of the sufferings Christians has had to endure and still endure in China. As an aside, guess who is prevailing in China? The Chinese government vowed to wipe out Christianity in China. The latest statistical update has revealed that there are over 300 million Chinese Christians in the underground church. Now, let me share the quote.

The author wrote in the introduction, *"Typically the Western Church is unaccustomed to the way God reveals Himself to seeking people in Asia and the Muslim world today. In those regions there are a multitude of verifiable incidents of God revealing Himself to people in dreams and visions."*

The author said some people in the West question these experiences but, he added, *"there are several instances where God revealed an urgent message to believers, especially in times of danger. As believers obeyed the leading of the Lord, some very unusual things happened, and under the most difficult circumstances. These incidents are not the figment of my imagination; they are things that actually happened as believers trusted in the Lord completely. In no instance are the dreams associated with revelations of new truth, for God has fully revealed Himself in Scripture and nothing else can be added; rather, they are instances where God gave guidance to His trusting and obedient followers."*

***Secondly***, I want strongly re-emphasize that the time of half-hearted devotion to God must come to an end. God will not accept half-hearted devotion. God will not accept double-minded devotion. God will not accept a devotion of convenience. God will not accept a devotion that relegates Him from first place in your priority list. I remind you that a devotion that fails to give to God an incontestable priority is idolatrous and

spiritually adulterous. Take heed that when you think you are standing that you do not fall.

### **The Priority Of Prayer.**

This morning I want to turn your attention to **the priority of prayer to God**. Prayer belongs to the very foundation of your life as a Christian. The Christian life is begun in prayer, the prayer that cries to God for salvation. The Bible makes it clear that the Christian life must be continued rooted in prayer. It is an unquestionable fact that the life of prayer is the life that glorifies God.

On the other hand prayer is one of the greatest battlegrounds in the Christian's life. It is the place where defeat comes most often. But it is the place of battle in which you must not and cannot quit. **Edmond Hiebert** wrote, *"Prayer unites puny man to Almighty God in miraculous partnership. It is the most noble and most essential ministry God gives to His children – but is the most neglected."*

Turn to ***1Tim.2:1-4***. (**read**). Paul wrote this epistle to instruct Timothy on how the church must conduct itself. Look over to ***1Tim.3:14-15***. (**read**). At the top of the list on how the church must conduct itself, we find prayer. In ***1Tim.2:1*** we meet the word **"first"**. In our last study we saw that first and foremost we must love God and seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Now we see that prayer to God is being given the same kind of priority. When Paul said **"first of all"**, Paul was setting before us that which must be first in all the matters of church conduct that he was about to deal with. Prayer must be first in sequence and importance for the individual Christian and for the church.

This priority for prayer is also seen in the life of our Lord. In ***Mk.1:35*** we read, "In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there." **"In the early morning"** would be

anywhere between **3 a.m.** and **6 a.m.** But Mark added, “while it was still dark” or more literally, “**at night very much**”. The idea is that the time Jesus got up to pray was closer to **3 a.m.** than to **6 a.m.** Mark’s Greek expression is clumsy but graphic and emphatic and it indicates that even after a demanding day Jesus did not take a deserved rest. (**France**). He got up to pray.

This priority for prayer is seen in the life of David who declared in *Psa.109:4*, “I am prayer.” In other words, I am the personification of prayer. I embody what prayer is all about. This priority for prayer is seen in the life of Paul who declared that he and his fellow workers prayed night and day. (*1Thess.3:10; 2Tim.1:3*).

**Prayerlessness** is a serious sin. At best prayerlessness is a declaration of one’s independence from God. It is a declaration that you do not need God. In the words of **William Henley’s “Invictus”**, You are the master of your fate. You are the captain of your soul. In the words of the song, “**I did it my way**”, you, and not God, are the one who plans and charts the course of your life. You, and not God, are the one who determines every step you take. And you are not one who kneels before any God.

At worst, prayerlessness is atheism. Prayerlessness is the declaration that there is no God. Life begins with man and ends with man. Pharaoh said to Moses, “Who is the Lord that I should obey [Him]?” (*Exod.5:2*). Pharaoh got his answer as he was tumbling to his death in the swirling waves of the Red Sea. The prayerless man’s question is : “*Who is the Lord that I should kneel before Him and pray to Him?*” The answer is certain to come. But it will not be the kind of answer that he would like.

## **What Prayer Reveals?**

What does the life of prayer reveal about you as a Christian? The **first** and most obvious answer is that you believe in the true and living God who is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (*1Thess.1:9; Heb.11:6*).

**Secondly**, the life of prayer marks in you the character of godliness. *Psa.86*, is a prayer of David. And in *vs.2* of his prayer to God David declared, "I am a godly man." But his prayer made it clear that he is not merely a godly man. He is a godly man whose trust, hope and confidence are in God who does wondrous deeds. (*vss.2, 10*). And he is the very opposite of arrogant men who have not set God before them. (*vs.14*). David knew that the life of prayer and God answering his prayers demanded of him godliness.

There are three points I want you to note here. **Firstly**, *Psa.18:41* says concerning the wicked, "They cried for help, but there was none to save, Even to the Lord, but He did not answer them." *Prov.1:28* confirms God's attitude towards the wicked and their prayers. The verse says, "Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently but they will not find me."

**Secondly**, in *Isa.1:15* the Lord said to apostate Israel, "So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen." In *Lamen.3:44* the prophet lamented in the context of Israel's apostasy, "You have covered Yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through."

**Thirdly**, we have seen that the psalmist is a godly man whose trust is in God. But the godly psalmist also knows this fact, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear." (*Psa.66:18*). On the other hand, the psalmist knew he was a godly man who was not guilty of such things. And so he added, "But certainly God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer." (*vs.19*).

**Thirdly**, the life of prayer reveals that you recognize and wholly embrace the truth that God is sovereign. As the sovereign God you are totally dependent upon Him. As the sovereign God you are dependent upon Him for life. (*Deut.32:39*). You are dependent upon Him for strength. (*Deut.8:17-18*). You are dependent upon Him to make your life prosper. (*ISam.2:7-8*). You recognize that God can hinder, stop or completely destroy any plan you can make. (*Prov.16:9; 19:21; Isa.43:13*). Paul's question to the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (*1Cor.4:7*), is the

principle that governs your mindset. David understood and lived by this mindset. David said in *1Chron.29:14*, “For all things come from Your hand, and from Your hand we have given You.”

**Fourthly**, the life of prayer is your testimony that you need God because you recognize and acknowledge that apart from God you are nothing and you can do nothing. (*Jn.15:5*). And you confess with Paul everyday in your prayers, “Lord, I am what I am only because of Your grace and by Your grace.” (*1Cor.15:10*).

**Fifthly**, the life of prayer reveals the presence of godly humility in you. The primary posture of prayer is kneeling. To kneel is a mark of humility. To prostrate yourself before God in prayer is an act of humility. *Prov.16:5* says “the proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord.” The Greek verb **aiteo**, translated “ask”, that is used so often in the Bible within the context of prayer is an act of humility.

**Aiteo** is a submissive and suppliant term. It is consistently used to refer to an inferior seeking for something from a superior; of a beggar asking for alms from a potential donor; of a child seeking for something from a parent; of a subject seeking for something from a ruler; and of a man seeking for something from God.

The reality is that when you come before God in prayer, on your knees or prostrated before Him, you are primarily a beggar before this holy, majestic, sovereign God who is enthroned in the heavens. And before you begin think of any other relationship you have with God for prayer, before you become presumptuous, consider very carefully and with deep and sincere humility that you are an unworthy beggar before the King of heaven and earth.

When Jesus prayed He never used the verb **aiteo**. He used **erotao**. Why? Jesus’ prayers and petitions were not the prayers and petitions of a creature to the Creator. Jesus’ prayers and petitions were the prayers and petitions of God the Son to God the Father. In asking, Jesus was fully conscious of His equality with His Father. We are told

that **erotao** “provides the most delicate and tender expression for prayer or request with the one asking and the one being asked being on equal level, such as the Lord asking the Father.” (Zodhiates).

To see this contrast, please turn to **Jn.14:13-14, 16.** (read). In **vss.13-14 aiteo** is used because the disciples are asking the Father and the Son. In **vs.16** Jesus is asking the Father and the verb **erotao** is used. In the Lord’s high-priestly prayer in **Jn.17**, **erotao** is used in **vss.9, 15, 20.**

**Sixthly**, the life of prayer reveals your submissiveness to the will of God and your commitment to do the will of God. The classic example of this is our Lord’s prayer in the hour of His greatest crisis. He ended His prayer by saying, “yet not My will, but Yours be done.” (**Lk.22:42**). He was submissive to the will of God. And He went out and did the will of God.

**Lastly**, the life of prayer reveals your desire to be like Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ came to this earth as a man. He was fully man like you and I. He was a perfect man but without question a man. As a man He was completely dependent on His Father. He expressed that dependence through a life marked by prayer. Consider with me the following verses.

**Matt.14:23.** “And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain to pray.”

**Mark 1:35.** “And early in the morning, while it was still dark, He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there.”

**Mark.6:46.** “*And after bidding them farewell, He departed to the mountain to pray.*”

**Luke 3:21.** “Jesus was baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened.”

**Luke 5:16.** “*But He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.*”

**Luke 6:12.** “Jesus went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.”

**Luke 9:28.** “Jesus took along Peter and John and James, and went up to the mountain to pray.”

**Luke 11:1.** “And it came about that while He was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray”.”

**Luke 22:44.** “And being in agony He was praying very fervently.”

**John 17:1.** We are told here that Jesus lifted up His eyes to heaven and prayed to his Father.

My questions to you as we close this point are : **(1).** Do you pray? **(2).** What do your prayers reveal about you? Let me breakdown that second question : What do your prayer habits reveal about you? What do the contents of your prayers reveal about you?

Let us not be fooled. There are many who claim to be Christians and who pray every day, but their prayers do not reveal that they are godly humble seekers after God who are submissive to the will of God and committed to doing the will of God. Their prayers are insincere and their very act of praying is an act of sin against God. You ask, “*Is this really possible?*”

Let me illustrate from God’s word. In **Matt.6:5** Jesus warned against the prayer habits of the Pharisees. He said, “When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men.” Here, the very act of praying was sinful. By their prayers the Pharisees were serving men and seeking the praises of men. In **Lk.18** we have another example of sinful insincere praying. In **vs.11** we read, “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself.” Take note to whom he was praying while he professed to address God. He was praying to himself.

The man who prays sincerely never plays to the audience listening to him. He is praying to God. And it does not matter that his prayers are weak and his expressions are poor. If weak prayers and poor expressions make you ashamed, then you are not praying to God. By your prayers you are playing to the audience. And your prayer becomes an act of sin and an abomination to God.

### **The Biblical Necessity Of Pray.**

We come now to consider the Biblical necessity of prayer. Please turn to *Lk.18:1*. “Now [Jesus] was telling [the disciples] a parable to show that at all times they ought to (must) pray and not lose heart.” Several things must be noted here. *Firstly*, the Greek word translated “at all times” or “**always**” stresses continual action or perseverance in prayer. *Secondly*, the verb “ought” or “**must**” emphasizes the Divine necessity placed upon us in this matter of prayer. The verb is present tense and stresses the fact that this Divine necessity placed upon us in this matter of prayer must always be present in our lives as Christians. You ought to pray at all times. You must pray at all times. It is divinely necessary for you to pray at all times.

*Thirdly*, the verb “to pray” is also present tense and also stresses continual action. But the verb is middle voice and the emphasis is as follows, “at all times they ought to continually bring themselves to pray.” “**At all times they must continually bring themselves to pray.**” The emphasis is on you continually bringing yourself to this “**Divine must**” of prayer.

**What is the primary point Jesus is making here about the life of prayer?** It is that God demands from us perseverance if we are to have a Biblically oriented life of prayer. Our lives must manifest a daily monotonous unbreakable pattern of bringing ourselves to God in prayer. It is the kind of daily monotonous pattern we find in the life of Daniel who persevered in this daily pattern even when his life came under threat. We are told that Daniel “continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and

giving thanks to God.” (*Dan.6:10*). The apostle testified to praying for individuals and churches night and day. (*2Tim.1:3*).

*Fourthly*, Jesus said, “at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.” The verb “to lose heart” also means “**to give in to evil; to become weary; to become a coward**”. The opposite of persevering in prayer is losing heart. The primary result of losing heart is ceasing to pray. Real Biblical persevering prayer demands of us real courage. It takes real courage to trust God and cast our burdens upon Him and leave our cares in His hands.

**Celsus Spicq**, commenting on *Lk.18:1*, wrote, “*in the most desperate circumstances they must continue to ask doggedly and intensely and never desist.... [Losing heart] is not so much a matter of omission as of relaxing one’s efforts, losing heart in the midst of one’s difficulties, letting go, interrupting one’s perseverance before attaining one’s goal; giving up rather than continuing to fight.... One must not give in to the apparent uselessness of appeals to God and succumb to exhaustion, but on the contrary overcome fatigue and continue without yielding or softening.*”

In *Eph.6:18* Paul wrote, “pray at all times.” The verb carries the same meaning we saw already, and that is, “**continually bring yourself to pray**”. The word “**time**” includes the ideas of “**occasion and opportunity**.” In other words, praying at all times includes the ideas of also making use of all the occasions for prayer and all the opportunities for prayer.

In *Col.4:2* Paul wrote, “Devote yourselves to prayer.” The verb “**devote**” also means “**to adhere to; to persist in; to busy oneself with**.” Once again the command calls for perseverance in prayer and we may translate, “continually devote yourselves to prayer.” In *1Thess.5:17* Paul wrote, “Pray without ceasing” or more literally, “continually bring yourself to prayer without ceasing.” The focus here is not on

uninterrupted prayer but on constantly recurring prayer. The practice of prayer is pictured as having a hacking cough. Once again the focus is on perseverance in prayer.

The key question for you as a Christian is not : **Do you pray?** The Lord Jesus expected His disciples to pray. And so, in giving them instructions about prayer, He said to them in *Matt.6:5*, “when you pray”; *vs.6*, “when you pray”; *vs.7*, “when you are praying.” The key question is not **“Do you pray?”**

The key question here is : **Is your prayer life marked by perseverance?** Are you seeking God in prayer in the good times and in the bad times; when it is convenient and when it is inconvenient; when you know that the Lord is near and when you know that He is not near? Are you bringing yourself, regardless of how you feel, with perseverance to the place of prayer? This is the key issue. If you claim to be a Christian but your life is marked by prayerlessness, then you have a big problem. A prayerless Christian is an irreconcilable contradiction. It is like saying that you are a Christian but also an atheist.

Now, in closing, I want to set the following before you. **Firstly**, first and foremost you must pray. As a Christian, prayer is your priority. Because of this fact, you should pray with the disciples, “Lord, teach [me] to pray.” (*Lk.11:1*). The context of this request tells us that Jesus was praying in a certain place. It seems clear that the disciples were hearing Him pray. When He was finished praying the disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” The request has a sense of urgency in it because the verb **“teach”** is a command. This request is urgent because the request is important. We all have that sense that we really do not know how to pray. And we need to ask the Lord, with a sense of urgency, “Lord, teach me to pray.”

In asking the Lord to teach you to pray, you should also make it your business to study the whole subject of prayer from the Bible and from the reading of good books that deal with the subject of prayer. If you want the Lord to teach you to pray, you must begin to fill your mind with knowledge concerning prayer. Diligently seek to understand what

prayer is, what Biblical praying is, and what it means to pray according to the will of God.

It is important that you learn what it is to pray according to the will of God because the Lord's clear promise in *1Jn.5:14-15* is, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Just for your information, in each instance the verb "ask" is *aiteo*. Two years ago I dealt with this point of praying according to God's will as part of a sermon. If you so desire, I can deal with again in a Sunday School class. You will have to let me know what is your desire.

**Secondly**, you should diligently seek to make use of all the occasions for prayer and all the opportunities for prayer. You never know what will happen when you seize opportunities for prayer and / or when you are present for the times that are set aside for prayer. In *Acts 1 & 2* intense persevering praying by the **120** disciples ended in the Pentecost revival. But Paul tells us that after the resurrection there were over **500** disciples who saw the Lord. (*1Cor.15:6*). Did they miss out on the immediate blessings of this great event?

In *Acts 4*, when the apostles came under threat from the Jewish religious leaders, they called a church prayer meeting. And the result was a special visitation from the Holy Spirit. In *Acts 10*, Cornelius' devotion to prayer resulted in a visit from an angel sent by the Lord. In *Acts 12*, Peter was arrested by Herod and facing death. The church gave itself to earnest fervent prayer. The result was the miracle of Peter's release and the death of Herod.

**Thirdly**, from time to time you should carefully plan to set aside time for special seasons for prayer and even fasting. We see such deliberate planning exemplified in the life of our Lord. In *Mk.6:45-46* we are told that Jesus sent the crowds away, sent His disciples to Bethsaida and He went to a mountain to pray. In *Lk.6:12* we are told that Jesus

“went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.” Note carefully that He went alone.

If the Lord needed such times of special prayer and to be alone with God, how much do you and I need such special times of prayer! I know I have not said much about fasting over the years and more than ever I am conscious of the fact that I need to. And Lord willing, I hope to do so soon.

**Lastly**, it is vitally important that you should get some prayer partners. Once again this principle is exemplified in the life of our Lord. His special prayer partners were Peter, James and John. They were not the best of prayer partners because time and again they would fall asleep during times of prayer. But weak and disappointing as they were, the Lord persevered with them until the very end. Let me share with you two examples.

In *Lk.9:28* we are told that the Lord “took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.” And *vs.32* tells us that Peter and his companions were overcome with sleep. In *Matt.26:37-46* the Lord is facing the greatest crisis in His life. He is in the garden of Gethsemane and preparing for the cross. He took Peter, James and John with Him to pray. He told them, “keep watch with Me.” But in a quick time they were sound asleep. And with a note of deep disappointment He said to them, “you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying....” But guess what? In a short time they were sleeping again.

The Lord promised in *Matt.18:19*, “I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.” Having a prayer partner calls for transparency and honesty. It is amazing how shame rooted in foolish pride can rob us of the much needed prayers of others.

Others must not know that we are weak. Others must not know that we are struggling with sin. Others must not know that we are physically sick. Others must not know that we have deep spiritual struggles and battles. We put up that stupid bravado that we are

doing great when our hearts are crying out for help. You are afraid of what people may think and / or say about you. You are afraid that they may gossip. So who cares what they think and / or say? Who cares whether they gossip?

If they think evil of you and gossip, God will judge them. If they gossip but also pray for you, God will answer and vindicate you and cause you to prosper. If they do not pray but only gossip, God knows your pleas for prayer and cries for help and He will come to your aid, rescue you, vindicate you and prosper you. It is utterly foolish to worry about what people will think and / or say about you and you rob yourself of God's help and blessings.

The Bible is clear on this fact : those who ask for help will get it. Those who seek for help will get it. Those who are proud and silent will not get help. You say, but God knows your heart. Yes. But God also said that you must ask.

To those who are not Christians, God has promised to hear only one prayer from you. That is the prayer of repentance and plea for salvation. The tax collector cried, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." And Jesus said his prayer was heard. (*Lk.18:13-14*). If God answers any other prayer you may pray to Him, it is not because He approves of you, it is because He is being merciful towards you in your time of crisis. Such answers from Him in times of crisis must not make you presumptuous. They should drive you to seek and come to know such a merciful and good God.

