

## BIBLICAL CHALLENGES 2007 (05).

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### Introduction.

In our last study we began to look at the Biblical challenge of prayer. We saw the Biblical priority given to prayer. Prayer is on that “first and foremost” list in the Bible. Paul said that first and foremost we must pray. (*1Tim.2:1*). This “first and foremost” priority was exemplified in the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, we saw from *Lk.18:1* that the Lord Jesus made it clear that prayer was a Divine necessity in the life of the Christian. And to fail to pray was to give in to evil. The Word of God commands us to continually bring ourselves to prayer at all times. (*Eph.6:18*). The Word of God commands us to be devoted to prayer. (*Col.4:2*). We saw in *Matt.6:5-7* that the Lord expected His disciples to pray. He said to them three times, “when you pray.” Once again, we noted that this Divine necessity for prayer was exemplified by our Lord during His time on earth.

We also noted the seriousness of the sin of prayerlessness. I want to set one example of prayerlessness before you. Turn to *2Chron.16*. In *2Chron.14* we are told that Asa became king over Judah. He was a good king. The testimony is that “Asa did good and right in the sight of the Lord his God.” (*2Chron.14:2*). When the Ethiopians attacked Judah, Asa sought the Lord in prayer and the Lord answered and routed the very powerful Ethiopian army. (*2Chron.14:11-12*).

The Lord blessed Asa’s rule over Judah. He brought about many good reforms among the people. The worship of the Lord brought great joy in Judah. (*2Chron.15:15*). In the thirty-sixth year of his reign, Asa faced war again. And instead of seeking the Lord, Asa turned to the king of Aram for help. The Lord sent His prophet to rebuke Asa for his

folly and forgetfulness regarding God's goodness in the many wars he faced. (*2Chron.16:7-10*).

When King Saul disobeyed the Lord, the prophet Samuel rebuked him with these words, "You have acted foolishly." (*1Sam.13:13*). The prophet Hanani would rebuke King Asa with the very same words, "You have acted foolishly." (*2Chron.16:9*).

Asa responded with great anger and imprisoned the prophet and began to oppress the people. Three years later Asa got sick. Note *vs.12*. (**read**). Note carefully the sad statement that expressed the state of prayerlessness in Asa's life. We read, "His disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord." He would suffer for two years before he died.

What a tragic story of sin, folly, pride and prayerlessness in a man who, for the greater part of his life, knew God and walked with God and whom God had tremendously blessed. In an act of absurd defiance he refused to humble himself, repent and turn in prayer to the only One who could help him. That is what prayerlessness is all about – it is an absurd rejection of and / or defiance against God.

We have been praying that we truly become a praying church; that the truths concerning the Biblical priority of prayer and the Divine necessity of prayer would grip our hearts and we would see the practical outworking of these things. I want to thank God for His answers to our prayers and for the growth we have seen in the mid-week prayer meeting. I exhort you, let us not grow weary and lose heart, because the Lord's promise is that in due season we shall reap if we do not quit.

The **third** point we looked at was the question : What does the life of prayer reveal about you as a Christian? We took note of the following answers :

- 1). The life of prayer reveals that you believe in the one true and living God.
- 2). The life of prayer marks in you the character of godliness.
- 3). The life of prayer reveals that you recognize and wholly embrace the truth that

God is sovereign.

- 4). The life of prayer is your testimony that you need God.
- 5). The life of prayer reveals the presence of godly humility in you.
- 6). The life of prayer reveals your submissiveness to the will of God and your commitment to do the will of God.
- 7). The life of prayer reveals your desire to be like Christ.

### **Prayer Is Not Magic.**

With this brief review I want to turn your attention to some other concerns I have about this subject of prayer. There is a pervasive mindset in all religions that prayer is some kind of spiritual magic that can be used to manipulate whatever Divine being or beings there are in the universe and get Him or them to do your bidding. Let me use another imagery to make my point. For many, prayer is like a cooking recipe. If you have the right ingredients and follow the instructions, you should be able to cook a meal or bake a cake. In like manner, the belief is that if you have the right spiritual ingredients and follow the instructions, you should be able to get whatever God or gods there be to answer your prayer requests.

This mindset that prayer is some kind of spiritual magic has invaded the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. True Christians have been influenced by it and are guilty of living according to this mindset. The most heresies about prayer you can find in our world today are being spread via radio and TV. When we listen to these heresies, like it or not, we are influenced by them. I am absolutely amazed to hear true Christians binding, rebuking and casting out Satan and the forces of darkness. Satan has been bound and it is Jesus who bound him. Satan has been cast out and it is Jesus who cast him out.

Radio and TV preachers have taken verses that relate to prayer out of their context and use them to build and teach their heretical doctrines on prayer. Some have done the same with verses that have nothing to do with prayer. For example, they tell you that in

**Matt.7:7** Jesus said all you have to do is ask and it will be given to you. So ask, and it will be given to you. Some will combine this with **Jas.1:6** and assure you that if you ask in faith and do not doubt, you will receive what you ask for.

Some have gone a step further into new age thinking and said asking in faith means you must visualize what you want. Visualize it, ask for it, do not doubt, and you will most certainly get it. The idea is, if you are praying for a car, visualize it – see the car in your garage. See yourself driving that car. Some say you must not only ask. You must also speak it into existence by the so-called creative word God has given to you.

Brethren, I do not want to spend time here trying to break down and ridicule these radio and TV preachers and teachers. So let us move on. The **first** fact I want you to understand is that there is no promise in God's word that says God will hear and answer the prayers of the wicked. In **Prov.1:28** we read concerning the wicked, "They will call upon me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently but they will not find me."

**Prov.15:8 (21:27a)** says, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, But the prayer of the upright is His delight." **Bruce Waltke** commented, "*The wicked hope to manipulate God by ritual magic, not to obtain His mercy by confessing and renouncing their sin. They are willing to offer everything except what the Lord asked for, their heart. In their darkened reasoning, they think God must change and lower His standards to accommodate them.*"

**Prov.28:9** says, "He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination." This verse speaks about apostates who have turned away from God and made themselves deaf to God's word. God, in turn makes Himself deaf to their prayers. If their prayers are an abomination to God, if their prayers are repugnant to God, how much more their lives are an abomination and repugnant to God!

So what do you say to people who are clearly non-Christian and rejecters of God's word, but who claim that they prayed and God answered them? There are no specific examples in Scripture that I am aware of where God answered the prayer of some wicked person. There is, however, what we may regard as a few indirect illustrations. There is the complaint of Cain that the punishment God placed upon him was too great to bear. And the Lord gave him some relief. (*Gen.4:13-15*).

There is the very sad example of the disobedient King Saul. Saul knew for a fact that the Lord had rejected him and had ceased to hear and answer his prayers. (*1Sam.28:6, 15*). But he pressed the issue by seeking the help of the witch of Endor. The Lord intervened and granted the wish that Samuel be conjured up. The witch got the shock of her life when Samuel appeared and Saul got his answer but it was an answer of very bad news. (*1Sam.28:19*).

The book of Judges is a repetition of the Lord judging and punishing the nation of Israel for their wickedness and then giving heed to their cries and rescuing them. But the day would come when the Lord would declare, "Even though Moses and Samuel were to stand before Me, My heart would not be with these people." (*Jer.15:1*). Moses and Samuel were the two greatest prayer intercessors Israel ever had. Now, God is saying, if Moses and Samuel were to stand together before Him and intercede, God would not answer and help the Israelites.

Jeremiah asked the Lord, "what am I to tell them?" And the Lord answered, "Those destined for death, to death; and those destined for the sword, to the sword; and those destined for famine, to famine; and those destined for captivity, to captivity." (*Jer.15:2*). The warning that comes to you loud and clear is : beware of becoming presumptuous with God.

In the N.T. we have the example of the Syrophenician woman. (*Mk.7:24-30*). We are told this woman was a Gentile. Matthew described her as "a Canaanite woman".

(*Matt.15:21-28*). This woman was in a crisis over her daughter's illness. She embraced the concept that she was a dog begging for crumbs. And the Lord granted her request.

My answer to a non-Christian's claim that God has answered their prayer is as follows : God is a gracious, merciful and compassionate God. If in His sovereign mercy He has decided to give heed to your cries in your crisis, that's His prerogative. But that is no basis for you to become presumptuous and think that God is favorable towards you or that you are some kind of special wicked exception with God. That is no basis for you to presume that you are not so bad after all and that God somehow has given His approval to you and your lifestyle.

The wicked must also understand that God answering their prayer may also be a two-edged sword. The first edge is God giving you the help you need. But the second edge is what He did to Pharaoh. Each time God removed a plague from Pharaoh, He used that blessing to harden Pharaoh's heart and bring him to the final plague of death and destruction. (cf. *Exod.10:1, 20, 27*). So, let the wicked beware when they make the boast that God has answered their prayer.

The non-Christian's attitude must be the attitude manifested by King Manasseh. Please turn to *2Chron.33:10-13*. (read). Manasseh was one of the most wicked kings who ever ruled over Judah. He ruled for fifty-five years. He succeeded his father, King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a godly king. Manasseh's great wickedness is briefly described in *vss.1-9*.

Coming to the end of his life, the Lord brought severe judgment upon Manasseh. God's judgment brought great distress in his life. In his distress he humbled himself before God and cried to the Lord for mercy. God answered his prayers and restored him. In turn, Manasseh repented and in the remaining few years of his life he served the Lord and restored the true worship of the Lord in Jerusalem.

What a contrast we have between Asa and Manasseh! Asa served God most of his life and then became proud and prayerless. He acted as a fool and died as a fool. Manasseh was exceedingly wicked most of his life, but then he humbled himself and repented and prayed. **2Chron.33:13** says God was moved by Manasseh's prayer and answered him. And Manasseh would serve God faithfully in the remaining years of his life.

This brings to the **second** point I wish to deal with. **Prov.15:8** says, "the prayer of the upright is [God's] delight." **Vs.29** says, "[God] hears the prayer of the righteous." The psalmist, conscious of God's delight in the prayers of His people, prayed, "May my prayer be counted as incense before You." (**Psa.141:2**). In other words, may my prayer be pleasing to You and a delight to You as incense is.

There are two important words in the verses I have set before you. They are "**upright**" and "**righteous**". These two words are also used to describe God. **Psa.7:11** tells us God is righteous. **Psa.25:8** tells us that God is upright. Note carefully that the prayer that pleases God, the prayer that delights God is the prayer that comes from those who are upright and righteous. This brings before us what I said earlier : prayer reveals in you the character of godliness.

Now, if as a Christian you are not pursuing an upright and righteous life before God, if your life is not as incense before Him, what will happen to your prayers? We noted earlier **Waltke's** comments that the wicked believes God will change and lower His standards to accommodate them. Now let me rephrase my question as follows : **If** you are able to exercise faith, even faith as a mustard seed, will that cause God to lower his standards and accommodate your prayers? (**Matt.17:20**). Will the removal of all doubt and anxiety from your heart cause God to lower His standards and accommodate your prayers? (**Phil.4:6-7; Jas.1:6; Matt.14:31**).

Will the presence of earnestness and fervency in your prayers cause God to lower His standards and accommodate your prayers? (**Jas.5:17; Acts 12:5**). What if you carefully search the word of God for His revealed will concerning a matter and then methodically

line up and argue your case before God in prayer? (*1Jn.5:14*). Will that cause God to lower His standards and accommodate you?

The sad truth is this : professed Christians who are not pursuing an upright and righteous life do believe that God will accommodate them, lower the standards and answer their prayers. But it is very important for you to note the serious contradiction here. A Christian on his knees before God is supposed to be an upright and righteous person. A Christian on his knees is declaring the godliness of his character.

A Christian who is praying but not pursuing an upright and righteous life is a living lie. Such a Christian is daring to come before the very throne of God and saying to God, “*I want You to lower Your standards and accommodate me and answer my prayers.*” Such a Christian is the very epitome of presumptuousness before the sovereign thrice holy God of heaven.

Let us get a couple facts very clear in our minds. *Firstly*, when God answers the prayer of any person, regardless of how upright and righteous that person is, that is an act of sheer grace on God’s part. The psalmist testified, “I am a godly man.” (*Psa.86:2*). Yet he recognized the fact that when God answers his prayers, it is an act of sheer grace on God’s part. Let us note a sampling of some of the expressions of his prayers :

*Psa.4:1*, “Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.”

*Psa.17:6-7*, “I have called upon You, for You will answer me, O God;  
Incline Your ear and hear my speech. Wondrously show Your  
lovingkindness, O Savior of those who take refuge at Your  
right hand.”

*Psa.25:16*, “Turn to me and be gracious to me.”

*Psa.27:7*, “Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice, and be gracious to me  
and answer me.”

*Psa.30:10*, “Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me.”

*Psa.86:2-3*, “Preserve my soul, for I am a godly man; O You my God, save Your servant who trusts in You. Be gracious to me, O Lord, For to You I cry all day long.” Note that – the psalmist is godly and trusts in God. Yet he recognizes that in the final analysis, for God to answer his prayers, God must be gracious towards him.

I want you to note two more passages and try not to miss the amazement if the psalmist’s voice :

*Psa.113:5-6*, “Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned on high, who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in the earth?”

*Psa.138:6*, “For though the Lord is exalted, yet He regards the lowly.”

There are several facts to note here. **Firstly**, “**grace**” means that God does not owe you anything, and that includes answers to your prayers. You may think that you somehow deserve answers to your prayers. But “**grace**” means you do not deserve any answers to your prayers. And when God answers, He is doing for you that which you do not deserve. **Secondly**, “**lovingkindness**” is that rich Hebrew word *hesed*. It speaks of God’s lovingkindness, mercy, goodness and faithfulness. *Hesed* is the foundation of God’s character and all His actions as *Psa.136* makes clear. **Thirdly**, “wondrously show” (*Psa.17:7*) tells us that God acting in lovingkindness towards you in answering your prayers marks out God as distinct and amazing.

**Fourthly**, God must humble Himself to listen to your prayers, take note of them, and in a demonstration of regard for you, answer those prayers. What these verses are telling us is that God’s gracious answer to your prayers should fill your heart with awe, amazement, worship and thankfulness for this wondrously amazing God. And when He does not

answer, you must bow before Him with humility and worship and declare, *“Nevertheless, not my will, but Your will be done.”*

The **second** fact I want to make clear to you is that there is no promise in God’s word that He will lower His standards to accommodate your prayers. The standards clearly demand holiness towards God and holiness towards your fellow man. You cannot claim to be holy towards God and at the same time be unholy towards your fellow man. Let me illustrate.

*1Jn.4:20* says, “If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” Note the verb **“cannot”**. It speaks of that which is impossible.

Now, the person you are dealing with may strongly protest and declare, *“But I do love God. As a matter of fact, I know I love God.”* But God’s answer is, you are a liar because you are claiming that you are able to do that which God has declared to be impossible. I want you to understand this point in *1Jn.4:20*, let it sink in and take it very seriously. If your life is a living lie, beware. *Rev.21:8* says, “all liars will have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear what you will experience with your prayers if you are not holy towards God and towards your fellow man. Let me illustrate again.

In *1Pet.3*, Peter deals with the husband / wife relationship. And in *vs.7* Peter said to the husband, “show [your wife] honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.” The idea is that if you do not, your prayers will hit a road block. Your sinful behavior will cut in on your prayers and stop their movement forward. Peter’s principle also applies to wives in their dealings with their husbands.

The problem today, as we have already seen, far too many professed Christians are deliberately lowering the standards God has set. They are lowering the standards by choice because they are choosing not to obey God's word when it is not convenient to them. They are choosing not to obey God's word when it does not suit their fancy, when it is not to their advantage. But at the same time they are trumpeting that they know that God is answering their prayers. Beware. Remember Pharaoh.

God knows that we are not perfect. God knows that we will sin. But this truth is the very opposite to what I am speaking about. You cannot make the deliberate choice to disobey God's word and then declare, *"God knows I am not perfect. The Bible says that Christians will not be perfect and that Christians will sin."*

*1Jn.2:1* makes it clear that the Christian must choose not to sin. The Christian must pursue a life of choices that says he / she is choosing not to sin. And it is to such people God has said that if you sin, you have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

This study is not finished. As your notes will show, the Lord led me differently this morning. But, Lord willing, we will finish the study of this matter I have raised. But in closing I want to remind you of the three kings we must keep in mind : Saul, Asa, Manasseh.

Saul chose the path of disobedience and God forsook him.

Asa chose the path of obedience to God but then became presumptuous. In his old age, when he should have been an outstanding godly example, he fell and paid a heavy price. A lifetime of walking with God is no guarantee that you will walk with God in your old age. Beware.

Lastly, Manasseh chose the path of a lifetime of rebellion against God. But God judged him and he repented with humility and God forgave him. Do not try to follow

Manasseh's example of sin and repentance. That God met Manasseh with grace is no guarantee that God will meet you with grace. But we all need to live day by day with humility and repentance before God. God's promise is this : "To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word." (*Isa.66:2*).