

# We Talk to God in Prayer

*Scripture texts are from the King James Version of the Bible*

## The shape of prayer

Usually when people ask about prayer their questions are about the details of prayer, such as, "How should I pray? What words do I use? How long should I pray? When do I pray? Where do I pray?" These questions can be good, but they must not lead us to be so concerned about the mechanics of our prayers that they strangle the joy of talking to God, which can then paralyze our efforts.

And yet, if it is true that God's children pray out of a love for God, ... if it is true that those who pray respect His sovereignty and majesty, ... if it is true that those who pray truly believe that God is listening to them, ... if it is true that those who pray are concerned about the matters about which they talk to God, ... if it is true that those who pray want God's will to be done, ... if it is true that those who pray care about the people for whom they pray and greatly desire that God bless them, then we understand why they have a concern to pray in a way that honors and pleases Him. With this in mind, it is proper to think about the form of their prayers, as it helps them to serve God as faithfully as possible. To this end we shall briefly look at the Bible's place in prayer and the questions of when and where we pray.

How do we pray? The place of God's word, the Bible

The key to answering questions about the content and form of prayers that please God is God's word the Bible. In short, the answer is, "Use God's words in your own prayers." God's words express the thoughts and intents of our hearts better than our own words do because God who wrote the Bible understands us better than we do ourselves.

Does that mean that our prayers are only quotations from the Bible? What about our own words? Where do they fit in? Our own words will dominate our prayers. That is expected and is as it should be. The reason is that we talk to God as a friend, expressing all our own thoughts and feelings about the immediate and detailed issues of life as we encounter them each day. Our prayers should flow spontaneously out of our hearts. They should express things that maybe we have not even thought out carefully previous to our time with God in prayer.

However, true believers spend time in the Bible. Their conversation with God is not a one-way street. Listening to God, who talks to them in the Bible, is also part of their conversation with Him. As they spend more and more time in the Bible, God's words, both the vocabulary and the syntax, become part of their thoughts. They begin thinking about what God says, and begin to think about it in the way God says it. God's word shapes their thinking and their speech, including what they say to God in prayer.

More than that, the Bible mentions some specific things about what we believers ought to say when we talk to God. The Bible tells us to address God as "Our Father" as we pray (Matt. 6:9). This is one command of the Bible which shapes our prayers. It also recognizes the fact that God is not a "buddy" with whom we hang out and chew the fat, but that we are talking to the Almighty Creator of the universe. The Bible also tells us to pray in Jesus' name. This command is given, not in order to attach a proper ending to our prayers as someone would end a letter, but to recognize that Jesus has sacrificed His own life in order to make a way for us to the Father (John 14:13; 16:23). This recognizes the great mercy of God that allows us to come boldly to the throne of grace. The Bible also tells us to pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14). This does not mean just to use the words "according to Thy will," but to desire and trust that God's will be done, no matter what it is that we might want.

As God's people grow in grace, their prayers are more and more shaped by God's word. But this does not mean they parrot some biblical formula. The Bible warns against prayers of vain repetition (Matt. 6:7). For example, some people encourage those people to whom they witness to pray the "sinner's prayer," as if once certain words are spoken, their salvation is assured. In another example, some people use the "Lord's prayer" as their chief expression of prayer, as if the prayer is especially holy and will assure that they are heard by God. In one more example, some people use some convenient phrase at the dinner table day after day, without any change, as if in the exercise of saying "grace" they have paid their dues and are assured of God's blessing, at least during the meal they are about to eat. These are all wrong

ways to use the gift and privilege of prayer. We must keep in mind that prayer is talking to God. No one talks to a friend in some artificial formula. God has not given His people the Bible to be used as a ritualistic prayer book or mindless mantra. Instead, He intended it to help them express what is upon their own hearts.

Let us now consider and set aside a commonly held but wrong notion about prayer and its relationship to the decisions people make. Sometimes people will make and follow a decision, confident that they have made the right decision and that they have God's blessing inasmuch as they have prayed about the matter beforehand. It is as if their exercise of prayer sanctifies their decision and justifies any actions that follow from that decision. For example people sometimes will say, "Well, we prayed about this matter, so we are confident that this is right thing to do." However, too often people who pray about a decision already have made up their minds about what to do and are not willing to honestly face all that the Bible teaches. Too often people ignore, dismiss or distort verses which not only contradict their cherished understanding of what the Bible teaches, but also contradict their intended actions. The effort of prayer does not guarantee that people are following a faithful course. Only if people are faithful to all that the Bible teaches will their decisions match God's will, no matter how fervent their prayers may be. We are not implying that perfect faithfulness to every detail in the Bible is a prerequisite to prayer. That is not expected or possible on this of eternity. However, people must be open to whatever the Bible teaches and be willing to change their minds and actions as God brings verses from all parts of the Bible to their attention. Prayers must come out of a heart that is humbly submissive to the whole Bible, not just an outward formal submission, but a true submission that says, "not my will but Thine be done."

We should also add a brief comment about obedience to the Bible and its relationship to prayer. Exodus 3 and 4 describe an extended conversation between Moses and God about Moses' assignment to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery to Pharaoh and into the wilderness. After quite a bit of dialogue God said "Now therefore go" (Exodus 4:12), with the intention that Moses would begin his journey. And yet Moses continued to stay put and talk to God. God became angry at Moses for his procrastination, his faithless delay to obey God's command. Of the many things these chapters teach us, this one fact applies pointedly to prayer. The prayers of Moses were no substitute for his obedience.

God delights to hear His people as they talk to Him. But if they would rather be full of their own words, especially when God has shown them what to do from His word, then at that point they show that they are in love with their prayers more than with God. Prayer is the proper preparation for beginning any assignment God lays before His people. But prayer is not the substitute for doing that assignment. Prayer can continue to be part of believers' lives, even as they roll up their sleeves and go to work according to God's will. We could call it "prayer on the move." Only when God's people do what He calls them to do, will they show that they truly trust Him. Only by their obedience, do they show that they believe God designed and understands the assigned job better than they do. Only by their actions, do they show that they believe God will go with them and help them fulfill that job.

We must also mention that God's people can pray about absolutely anything. Nothing is too unholy or too small and unimportant to be part of their conversation with God. But as always, the prayers of God's people reveal the time they have spent in the Bible. Therefore, the spiritual priorities of the Bible, not only for their own souls but also for the souls of others, are reflected in their prayers.

When and where do we pray?

The chief counsel in prayer is, "Do it!" Don't just talk about it, "Do it!" Don't just read books about it, "Do it!" Don't worry about how long your prayers are or what you say. Don't worry about where you are or who is with you. The best advice is, "Just do it! And do it often!" How easily do you succumb to the tempting ease of slothfulness? How quickly are you preoccupied with the many details of your earthly life? How prompt are you to answer the call of its urgent demands? If you are God's friend, you must let nothing delay or replace your abiding conversation with Him.

The concerns we express in prayer are important both to us and to God. But that does not mean our prayers must necessarily be long. They may be at times, but more importantly we should pray often. Short prayers of help when we are in the middle of a struggle with sin or the target of affliction, short prayers of confession when we mourn the works of our flesh, short prayers of concern when the needs of others come to mind, short prayers of thanksgiving when the wonders of God's creation impress us, short prayers of praise when we become aware of His gracious arrangement of time and events for the blessing of His people, are all part of our life-long conversation with God. If we expect to spend an eternity in the presence of God extolling His virtues and giving Him thanks, we better have the desire to talk to Him freely and often now (Psalm 55:17).

Prayer should be our constant companion, for we should be inclined to pray any time and any place. We

should pray for wisdom and faithfulness as we face any problem or challenge in life. We should pray for courage and strength as we are in the middle of a problem or challenge. We should pray for forgiveness and thankfulness as we complete a problem or challenge.

There is a place for prayer in public, especially in a service of congregational worship (Psalm 22:22-25, 34:3). The Father expects His people to pray as part of their mutual support and as part of their witness to the world. But we must be aware that there are dangers associated with public prayer. First, prayers offered out loud in a group can easily lead to gossip. There are things with which a person may be struggling and which are best kept private. A session of public prayer is not a place to broadcast those things for all to hear. Secondly, in a session of public prayer, when there are both men and women present, women ought not to pray out loud. Sometimes, as in a clearly private and casual session of prayer, a time not confused with group worship, it might be proper for women to pray out loud. However, it is best to avoid the appearance of women assuming a role of leadership in spiritual things. This counsel accords with the attitude of humbleness that must be the basis of prayer. Thirdly, those people who pray in public should be careful to avoid a show of holiness. The other people in a prayer session are not only prayer companions but also an audience of what the prayer leader is saying, and it is too easy for someone who prays to want the approval of those who hear him. All who pray in public should take heed that the focus and honor be on God alone. Even in prayer, may those who pray decrease and God increase.

There is also a place for private prayer. In fact, private prayer should be a Believers's main exercise of prayer (Matt. 6:6). Nevertheless, private prayer has its own dangers of which we must be aware. First, private prayers are not works of martyrdom and self-denial. People must not have a good feeling of self-congratulation for being diligent in prayer. Secondly, people should never advertize their efforts of prayer. God's people must be careful to guard what they say to others so that they do not mention their prayers in such a way that they impress others. After all, shouldn't a person be more concerned for what he prays, rather than for what others think of his prayer? Even in prayer, may God get all the glory.

#### Prayers of petition

Prayers include worship and praise to God. Prayers include confession of personal sin. Prayers include thanksgiving for all that God has done, is doing, and will do for the benefit of His people. And prayers include requests for ourselves and for others. As long as we live in this sin-cursed world and in these bodies of flesh, we will be driven out of need to ask God for many things in prayer (Psalm 32:5,6). Most believers understand prayers of worship, praise and thanksgiving in a correct biblical way. Also most Believers understand prayers of confession in a correct Biblical way. However, prayers of petition are often misunderstood, even by some true believers. Let us make sure that we understand what it means to ask God for what we need.

#### Setting aside some wrong ideas

First of all, God is never bothered by or tired of our requests. Some people have stated that after we go to God in prayer, we must leave our request with Him and not return with the same request. They say that to pray again for the same thing shows a lack of faith. Is that true? Absolutely not. The Bible teaches persistence in prayer (Luke 11:1-13). It is not that we must assault the bastions of Heaven and wear down God's resistance with our requests. Rather, we recognize that we have nowhere else to go (John 6:68). So we go to God repeatedly, for He is our last and only hope. Also, we go to God over and over for the same thing because we pray for that which matters to us and for which we believe matters to God also.

In the second place, the purpose of believers' prayers of petition are not to educate God about some need His people have. God's people are not His teachers or informants. God knows His people's needs (Isaiah 65:24, Matt. 6:8), far better than they do themselves. This reality does not demotivate God's people but encourages them to pray because they know He really understands their requests. In fact, God can even listen to the yearnings of their hearts that they can't find words to express. In His amazing wisdom and grace, God responds to the petitions of His people and provides for them far more than what they can ask for in prayer (Eph. 3:20,21).

In the third place, prayers of petition are not devices people can use to bargain with God to get what they want, either for themselves or for the benefit of someone else. Promising God something in return for His blessings is foolish. At the very least the person who prays should recognize that he is not so in control of things that he can be sure to hold up his end of the deal. But more than that, when a person bargains with God, he reveals a lack of trust in God. Instead of a humble request that God's will be done, he is pushing for what he thinks is best. Such a person has replaced a trust in God with a trust in himself. Such a person has replaced glorying in God with pride in his own designed solutions and plans.

In the fourth place, we must not have the notion that prayers of petition are like orders to some heavenly mail order company. Nor should we think that when people pray to God, it is as if they must get the attention of a cosmic clerk who waits until He is asked to fulfill their requests. God always takes the initiative, both in creating the desire for prayer in His people and in fulfilling their needs as He knows best.

I would like to consider and set aside another wrong idea concerning the dynamics of prayers of petition. But in order to make sure we are thinking correctly, we must spend some time on a careful and more extensive explanation of it. The wrong idea is based upon a loose understanding of James 5:16. This verse is often interpreted as being equivalent to the phrase "prayer changes things." The wrong impression many people have about prayers of petition from this point of view is that God alters His plans based upon the earnest prayers of His people.

However, we must face the fact that God's plans are fixed in Heaven (Psalm 119:89, Isa. 46:10). He alone knows what it is and does not need to be informed by men (Isa. 40:13,14). He knows what is best for His people, has always known what is best, and has the wisdom and power to see to it that all things go according to His perfect plans. In fact, the Bible says that God provides for the needs of all of His people even before they ask Him (Isa. 65:24).

One reason many people have a wrong idea about prayers of petition is that they think they can make a one-to-one correlation between a specific prayer and what happens around them in the world. They look for specific physical evidence in this world that God has answered a particular prayer. For example, when they are sick, have a need for a job, or grieve because someone they love is living as an unbeliever, they pray for help and expect to see evidence that God has heard their prayer. However, just as it is true that salvation is a totally invisible spiritual work of God, so is it true that God provides no physical reinforcements for a Believers's life of faith (II Cor 4:18, 5:7).

Not only that, a believer does not know enough to be able to ever make a definitive correlation between a specific request and a specific event in this world.

The universe is far too complex for a believer to understand how the many different parts must work together as God's perfect will decrees. God certainly works things out to the promotion of His will and the benefit of His people, but no one can analyze the physical events in the world and say which specific events are a direct answer to a certain prayer. Perhaps in time, from a perspective of years and maturity, a person may see the wisdom of God as He arranged things to work out for the best. But no one is as wise as God. No one can see exactly what must be done or know how to go about doing it. Therefore, no one can know exactly how to pray and know exactly what earthly events correspond to his prayers.

Believers know many things that are revealed in God's word, and that can give them the insight they need to shape their prayers. For example, they understand that the proclamation of the Gospel is the proper subject of their prayers. The prayers of believers that include evangelism are honored. However, even in that case, believers do not always know how God will use a witness in a specific physical situation. If they imagine they know the best way to witness and pray in order that events may go according to their understanding of the situation, it may very well be that God has something better in mind.

### Praying with Thanksgiving:

Philippians 4:6,7 gives us some help as we try to understand prayers of petition properly (or as the verse calls them, prayers of "supplication"). The words in Philippians 4:6, "Be careful for nothing," do not mean that a believer ought to be casual in what he does, not really caring if things turn out badly. Rather, they mean that a believer must not be full of care, or anxious. To sustain that attitude, Paul's counsel is "in everything ... let your requests be made known unto God." The words are not "for everything" but "in" everything. That is, the counsel is, "no matter in what situation you find yourself, even difficult ones, speak to God."

Incidentally, verses 6 and 7 do not imply that it is believers' prayers that create the peace of their minds and hearts. Peace is a result of the real work that God has done to save His people as well as the real work that God continues to do both in their hearts and in their environment in order to prepare them to live as Believers in this world and the next. Prayer keeps the reality of God and His blessings in their minds so that they do not forget and become anxious when they suffer the afflictions that He gives them to endure.

Two important words which help us understand God's counsel in Philippians 4:6,7 concerning prayers of petition are "with thanksgiving." These words mean not only that we thank God for the help He has provided in the past, but also as we read here, we thank God at the same time we offer our petitions. That is, we are thankful before we have finished our request. The idea is that a believer knows something

about the Person to whom he prays and so is able to give thanks without seeing the future events take place which might be understood as an answer to his prayer. In fact, a believer might move from a geographical area or even die before he knows the full story of how God works His will in the problems for which he had besought the Lord. A Believers does not pray with the expectation that he will necessarily witness and understand the events that are answers to his prayers. Rather, a Believers prays with the confidence that God is in control and guides all things wisely.

Thanksgiving is not necessarily a response of the petitioner to his recognition of the specific event that he thinks is an answer to his prayer, but a response of trust in and love for Him who is recognized as always doing what is best. It is also a response of maturity. For as a believer grows in his understanding of the Bible and his obedience to what he finds therein, he will learn that God's will is always done.

A mature believer's prayers will be shaped by the will of God, not just that he routinely repeats a phrase such as "according to thy will," but that his heart and mind are under God's control. A mature believer knows that God's will is ultimately His business and so he prays patiently and humbly because he trusts that God is wise and able to do what is best. As a believer prays for God's will to be done in his own life, he is confident that, no matter how confusing and discouraging the physical circumstances, God is faithful and will provide all that is needed to do it (Phil. 4:19).

In addition, a mature believer knows that it is his business to obey those specific principles which God has revealed in His word. Rather than try to make a rigorous connection between his prayers and the events in this physical world, a mature believer knows that God has given him a specific job to do and that he should be busy with his assignment.

Perhaps someone might say, "Well then, are you saying that, for example, if we pray when we suffer we should take the abuse stoically and just say, 'As God wills' instead of expect God to send some relief?"

Not at all. Believers are burdened by their own sufferings and also have a concern for the problems of others. They must take everything to the Lord in prayer. But they also know that the best solution is in the mind of God. Believers want God's will because it is the best for themselves and others; and as they pray, they learn to trust in Him who has done a good work in them so far and will complete it according to His perfect plan.

Perhaps someone might say, "Why pray if God does His will no matter what? Wouldn't we be discouraged from praying since we address a sovereign God?" For one thing, God commands believers to pray (I Thess. 5:17), and their prayers are evidence of their obedience. Also, God decides to use the prayers of His people as a tool. In some mysterious way, God uses them to further His ends, much like He uses preaching to bring people into His Kingdom, even though He does not have to do it that way. Believers have the privilege and the joy of participating, through their prayers, in the eternal and world-wide plan of God. But most important of all for believers is the thrill of knowing that they can converse with God who means so much to them and who is so tender and understanding. Their joy is not that they can see the specific results of their prayers, or that they can change the course of events by means of their prayers. Rather, their joy is that they can lay all the needs and desires of their heart in the hands of God. It is their joy that they can talk to Him who loves them, who wants to listen to everything they have to say even though it may not be worded properly or even wisely, and who can help them even when they do not know themselves what is best.

How tragic it would be if our joy were dependent upon our evaluation of the physical circumstances of life and the proper choice of words in our prayers. How would we know if our analyses and our prayers were correct? How wonderful that our joy is in God Himself! We know that we can rejoice in all things, no matter what happens in our lives and no matter how incomplete or faulty our prayers are. The reason is that we are under the care of a mighty, wise and loving God.

## In Conclusion

In prayer, Believers gratefully and humbly express their praise to God for the grace and mercy He has shown them in Jesus Christ. In prayer, together with personal Bible study, Believers find the wisdom and strength they need to sustain their faithful walk in this sin cursed world. In prayer, Believers express the concerns they have for the souls of other people. Above all else, Believers pray because they love to talk to their heavenly Father who loves them, who tenderly welcomes them into His presence as His dear children and who eagerly encourages them to cast all their cares upon Him as well as share all their joys with Him. God's children love Him because they know He understands and cares about all that they say to Him.

I love the LORD, because he hath heard

my voice and my supplications,  
Because he hath inclined his ear unto me,  
therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.  
Psalm 116:1,2

## The Holy Spirit and prayer

Understanding Romans 8:26-28

Trying to examine and understand all that the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit's role in the prayers of God's people is too big a job for us to tackle now. But we must look at one passage which is often mentioned, namely Romans 8:26-28. Let us try to understand it as accurately and clearly as we can.

Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

Although we have a soul which desires to please God, we groan because we are still encumbered by a body which does not. We long for the time when we will be relieved of our sinful flesh and put on immortality (II Cor. 5:1-9, Phil. 1:21-23). For that reason "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities."

The idea of the words "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" is not that we are not smart enough or that the troubles of our lives are so great that we cannot think of the right words to pray and therefore the Spirit must make up the difference. Rather, the verse says that "we know not what we should pray for." That is, we lack the proper information to pray exactly as we ought. Remember, prayers should be according to God's will (I John 5:14,15). No matter how wise we are, there are things we can never pray for "as we ought" because we do not know all that God knows. Only God can pray perfectly according to His own will. Therefore, it is not just that we do not pray in the right way (although that is a problem), but that we do not know what only God knows. And so the verse states, "the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (by men)" because men do not know what God knows.

For example, a believer could pray and pray for the relief of some great stress in his life, and yet that stress could lead to his death. After all, no one is saved with a promise to lead a life of comfort in this world. In another example, a believer could pray and pray for the salvation of someone, and yet that person may die as an unbeliever. The reason is that a person does not become saved because of the amount or the kind of prayers that have been offered to God on his behalf. Nor does someone remain lost because the prayers for his salvation were too few or not offered properly. Only God knows how a stressful situation will further His plan, only God knows who are His elect. Although believers may not always know what God's will is, they do know that "all things work together" for the spiritual benefit of the elect (Rom. 8:28). The tremendous comfort of Romans 8:26 is that God does know all things, and when His Spirit prays, His will always comes to pass. God knows what His will is in every situation. When the Spirit prays for something, it is a certainty that it will be done because the Spirit knows all things (I Cor. 2:9-11), especially who will be saved. Therefore, verse 26 emphasizes the sovereignty of God, that He is wise and able to fulfill His loving plans for his elect.

The word "as" seems to imply that verse 26 teaches the idea that we are ignorant about the manner of prayer. However, our ignorance is not about the right liturgical form or physical posture as we pray, but about the right spiritual content. We know that we must reverently honor God, lovingly thank God, humbly ask for His forgiveness and patiently beseech Him for the benefit of others - including our enemies. The Bible tells us much about prayer. Nevertheless, there is much about the fulfillment of God's gospel in history that we do not know and cannot know because we do not perfectly know the mind of God. Because of that ignorance, we are not always able to pray exactly according to the will of God. Our desire is that God's will is done, but we do not always know what it is and so cannot pray as we ought. It is the testimony of Romans 8 that the Spirit, who does know the mind of God, prays for us that God's will be done.

Romans 8:27, "And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

The Spirit knows that believers are encumbered by a sinful body. He knows that they sin and need help, not only for their salvation (Isaiah 65:24), but also for their lives as Believers (Rom. 7:24,25, Col. 2:10, Phil 2:13). As they struggle in this world, they rejoice that God is sovereign, knowing all things and able to do all that is necessary to help them (Psalm 94:17-19, 103:10-17, 124). They want to do God's will and sometimes do not. They want to cry out to God in prayer and sometimes cannot because there are things they do not know.



The wonder of the gospel is that believers' problems become God's problems. He changes their hearts to desire His will even though they may not always know exactly what His will is. God understands their deficiencies in prayer. Their imperfect prayers do not harm their relationship as children of God. God is ready to help. In grace His prayers mingle with their prayers (Rev. 5:8, 8:3,4) because His Spirit also prays perfectly according to God's will on their behalf. The reason that the Spirit intercedes perfectly is that God knows His own mind (I Cor. 2:10,11). The confidence and joy is that the prayers which the Spirit makes "for the saints" are always answered exactly as He utters it, for He prays "according to" what God wills.

Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

It is important to understand this verse as it fits into the logic that flows from the verses just before it to the verses that follow it. By comparing verse 28 with verse 26 we notice that although "we know (oida: understand with our mind) not what we should pray for as we ought," nevertheless "we know (oida) that all things work together for good to them that love God." Our assurance "that all things work together for good" today and our hope "that all things (will) work together for good" tomorrow is based upon the fact that, although we groan under the burden of our flesh (Rom. 8:23) and we live in a broken world that groans under the curse of sin (Rom. 8:22), we nevertheless have the comfort that the Spirit also groans as He calls upon God to fulfill His eternal will for His people. And the Spirit knows that will perfectly because, as God, He carefully designed it before the foundation of the world. Therefore, Paul can write in verse 28, "we know" that our present struggles will end in a future total victory because, according to Romans 8:29 and 30, the eternal plan of God, of which the Spirit groans in prayer to God, will be fulfilled for His saints (Rom. 8:39).

Believers' present struggles are no hindrance to the complete fulfillment of God's will for their lives or His plan for the ages. The victory of God's righteousness is not dependent upon the faithfulness of His people nor upon their prayers, neither of which are perfect. Rather, it depends upon His wisdom and ability, for He is in control of all things.

Believers may not know exactly what God's will is, but they know that it is "for good," that is, for their good. This knowledge is the comfort of those who struggle now in the flesh. They know that "all things work together for good." That is, all the good things, now and in the future, for which the Spirit prays on their behalf, will always come to pass exactly as He prays, for the Spirit knows the mind of God, being God Himself.

The good things are only for "them who love God," that is, for those who are saved. Only believers are "the called according to his purpose." The blessings God has planned are only for those in whom God has placed His love and who now live with the right heart. The words "according to his purpose" refer to the salvation purpose or objective of God, as verses 29 and 30 emphasize.

### Prayer in time of sickness

Understanding James 5:13-16.

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Verse 13 covers all human situations. In affliction, God calls His people to pray. In those times that make God's people merry, they are called to "sing psalms," which are musical prayers in as much as God's people sing "psalms ... to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19). In bad times and good, prayer is always in season. But it is the bad times, especially times of sickness, which is such a personal concern, that remind us of our weakness and our dependence upon God. Therefore, beginning with verse 14, the book of James turns its attention to the place of prayer in times of sickness.

In the phrase, "Is any sick," the word "sick" can mean physically sick as in Mark 6:56 or John 11:1. Other times it can mean spiritually weak as in Romans 4:19 ("being ... weak" in the faith) or Romans 14:1 ("that is weak" in the faith). As we shall see, we do not have to choose one meaning over another because both meanings will fit into the logic of the verses for at least two reasons. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that even if a man suffers from physical illness, he always has a spiritual need that must be met. Maybe his physical illness was induced by a spiritual problem. Or it could have been that the spiritual need existed before and the physical illness exacerbated it. In any case, spiritual

encouragement is always needed to help a man sustain his believers witness amid physical illness. Secondly, we must recognize that no matter what the physical situation may be, the job of the church is to provide what no other organization in the world can or desires to provide, the spiritual balm that soothes the sin-sick and discouraged soul.

The counsel of James 5:14 is to "call for the elders of the church." Why? What can they do? A better question is, "What should they do?" That is, "What does God expect them to do?" One thing that they must do is "pray over him," for they know that in all situations, including physical ones, the most important concern is the establishment and strengthening of a man's walk with God. The expectation is that the elders have the wisdom that only God can give, that as men who are saved they seek the Lord's will in all things. Although the elders do not know what the outcome of the sickness will be, they trust God in this situation and pray that the man who is sick will also learn to humbly trust in God's will, a trust expressed in James 4:15 by the words "if the Lord will." Incidentally, with this in mind we can look ahead and understand the opening lines of James 5:15 as, "if the Lord will, the prayer of faith shall save the sick (man)."

The elder wants both for himself and for the man who is sick an attitude of rest and patience. Therefore, the word "them" properly refers to the elders and the man who is sick. The goal of the elders is that the sick man will pray with them to God who does all things well. If the man is physically sick and not saved, the elders ought to pray that God will use the sickness to bring him to his spiritual senses and eventually to salvation. If the man is physically sick and saved, the elders ought to pray that God will comfort the man as He allows him to recover or as He brings him home to heaven, according to His will. If the man is not physically sick but spiritually sick, then the elders ought to pray for the Lord's grace if he is unsaved, or for spiritual strengthening, if he is saved. In all cases, it is the hope of the elders that their prayers and the prayers of the man to whom they minister match each other.

James 5:14 states that the elders must also anoint the man with oil. This verse has been used to support the idea that a man who is about to die can obtain some last minute spiritual benefit by being physically anointed. But the anointing in view here has nothing to do with physical anointing. Comparing this verse to Luke 4:18, we arrive at the conclusion that to anoint means to bring the gospel. In keeping with our view of the elders' spiritual job, we arrive at the idea that their first responsibility is to bring the message of the gospel to a man who is facing a crises in his life. Elders must bring the oil of gladness, the spiritual balm of Gilead that comes only out of the word of God. If the sick man is facing a physical crisis, then the elders must help the man examine himself to be sure that he is saved, in as much as his illness may mean that he has only a few days to be sure he is right with the Lord. If the sick man is facing a spiritual crisis, the gospel is his comfort and guide out of fear and depression.

The words "prayer of faith" in James 5:15 refer especially to the prayers of the sick man who is responding to the spiritual message brought to him by the elders, in a time he is most sensitive to spiritual issues because he is facing either a physical crisis, a spiritual crisis or both. Verse 14 does call the elders to pray, but in verse 15 the prayer of the sick man is in view. The words "shall save the sick man" fit into our line of thinking if we understand that God saves the souls of only those who cry unto Him, for only those who seek Him will surely find Him (Jer. 29:13, John 6:37, Heb. 11:6). No one is saved by the cry of a proxy who prays on his behalf, even if that proxy has the authority and reputation of a faithful elder. Instead, a person must pray to the Lord on his own in order to find grace in time of need.

While we have been generously allowing the possibility that the man whom the elders visit may have a physical sickness as well as a spiritual sickness, we must recognize that only a spiritual sickness is in view in James 5:15. Unfortunately, James 5:15 has been used to justify the idea that believers can expect miraculous physical healing by God in response to their faith. This idea has even led to the accusation that a man's failure to obtain physical healing is an indication of the weakness of his faith or the deficiency his prayers. However, this notion cannot be supported by the Bible. The word "sick" in the phrase "shall save the sick man" is not the same word found in verse 14. It is, instead, a word used only three times in the Bible, here, in Hebrews 12:3 ("be wearied") and in Revelation 2:3 ("hast ... fainted"). The sense of the word is spiritual weariness or fatigue. This thought, in turn, fits well with the phrase "and the Lord will raise him up." We can think of this phrase as referring to salvation by comparing it to Colossians 2:12,13, 3:1, or to the promise of the bodily resurrection at the end of time by comparing it to John 6:39, 40,44, 54: 11:24 and II Corinthians 4:14. Verse 15 completes the thought by saying that a man who is saved, who has the promise of the resurrection, now in his soul and eventually in his body, is a man who has all of his sins forgiven.

Verses 14 and 15 can be understood together to mean that whatever may be troubling a man, the elders must be called to deal with the spiritual issues of his life. If he heeds the gospel call that they bring, then he will receive the best medicine, escape from condemnation and eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is the best possible news for anyone who is sick, physically or spiritually. That is the cure



that all men ought to seek. That kind of remedy is eternally lasting.

At this point we ought to set aside a possible misunderstanding. We are not implying that the elders do not have to be sensitive to or sympathize with the physical distress of people in the church. The question is "What is the most important thing to do when someone is sick, physically or spiritually? What is the commandment of God for the elders?" One thing is for sure, the elders are not meant to fill the role of a medical doctor. They are called to help a man face the urgent spiritual issues of his life during times of physical and spiritual crises. In fact, it is the time of physical crisis that the spiritual issues are especially important. If the elders do not help the man spiritually, who will? Maybe a Believers friend or relative will, but it is the duty of an elder to guide people to the Lord. The point of these verses is "call the elders," for others will call the doctors.

Verse 16 continues the thoughts of the previous verses. The word translated "confess" is a combination of a prefix that means "of (or, "from") the same" and a root that means "logic." We could render the words "Confess ... another" as "say to one another the same things about your sins that God does." In other words, the idea of verse 16 is not that we must confess our faults to other people in public, nor that we must tell a person how we have sinned against him, even if it is a secret sin of which the person is not aware. Rather, the idea is that we must say to others the same things about our sins that God says in His word. We must agree with God that "I am a sinner" as the publican did. Any specific statements about sins are between God and His wayward children. There is a private life of sin that we confess to God. And there are Biblical statements of sin that we agree to in public. Anything more than that leads to a public focus upon self, even if it is upon a person's sins, that promotes pride rather than repentance.

We could add that James 5:16 has been used to support the idea that a man ought to confess his sins to other men. In fact some people even extend this idea, teaching that men ought to confess their sins to someone who can in turn bring their penitent plea to God on his behalf. This is a terribly distorted and harmful view of what the Bible teaches (I Tim. 2:5).

The call to prayer in verse 16 is similar to verse 14. The objective is the spiritual restoration of people, for that is how we must understand the word "healed," as it is used in Jeremiah 17:14 or I Peter 2:24. The words, "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" in the last part of verse 16 is a comment on this call to prayer. This phrase does not imply that the prayers of a man who is a particularly strong Believers are especially effective, even more effective than the prayers of other Believers.

The words "righteous man" refer to someone who is righteous before God. Who is that? Anyone who is saved, anyone whom God has made righteous by His gospel. A saved man desires in his heart that God's be done. While he resides in his flesh on earth he prays imperfectly to that end. But in his heart and soul a saved man prays earnestly that God's will be done. The fact is that God's will is always done. Therefore, verse 16 is saying that a believer, any believer, has the same spiritual interest in others as God does, and his spiritually centered prayers will be effectively answered in God's time and way, as God fulfills His spiritual plan for all men. For some men the plan includes salvation, which in its highest sense is a plan that "availeth much."

Pray without ceasing, plead to our Father that ye may be saved and all our brothers, mothers and sisters.

**To Him be all glory and power and praise. Amen.**