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When Men Call Upon God

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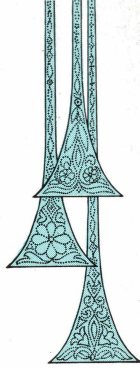
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When Men Call Upon God



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When Men Call Upon God

Last year a well-known religious figure wrote a provocative article published throughout the world in which many modern attitudes toward prayer were strongly criticized. Special attention centered in the selfish prayers one hears so often. The writer's principle idea, however, came in the following statement. "We have killed prayer by making it phony. We have made it phony by not really meaning what we have said in the form of prayer" (p. 10, *Saturday Evening Post*, August 27, 1966). The author also voiced some questions that you may have recently asked. "What is prayer supposed to be and do? Why pray at all?"

Have you ever thought about when men began to call on God? When did prayer become a part of man's earthly activity? The Bible answers this question in the last verse of *Genesis*, chapter four. After recounting the birth of Adam's third son, Seth, this verse says, "Then began men to call upon the name of Jehovah" (*Genesis* 4:26).

Men began praying to God after the rebellion in Eden. Prayer became an important part of man's life

after he could no longer enjoy open and full communion with God like Adam and Eve had known before their disobedience in the Garden. No plea sounds more like the separated people we are when sin abounds in our lives than that continual refrain from the *Psalms*, "Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth" (*Psalms* 39:12). No wonder we learn throughout the Bible of the relationship between our obedience to God and His willingness to answer our prayers (*II Chronicles* 7:13-15; *John* 9:31; *James* 5:16).

To get at the real meaning of prayer, to gain a more realistic approach to prayer, and to come to a greater conviction about the importance of prayer, I want us to turn through the Bible looking at some of the things for which men have called upon God.

We praise and thank God in our prayers. David provides a worthy model of such attitudes toward God. The King of Israel had decided that a permanent center of Jewish worship was needed. But God intervened in his plans for the building of the Jerusalem temple. God revealed to the King that his son Solomon would have the privilege of building this center of worship. Upon receiving this information David immediately turned to God with the prayer of praise and thanksgiving recorded in *II Samuel* 7:18-29. First, David speaks of his unworthiness to approach God even in prayer. "Who am I, O Lord Jehovah, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far" (Verse 18). He realizes that he prays to the God who knows, and this creates a profound humility. "And what can David say more unto thee? For thou knowest thy servant, O Lord Jehovah" (Verse 20).

Second, David recognizes and honors God's greatness in his prayer. Jehovah is unique, David says. "Wherefore thou art great, O Jehovah God: for there is none like thee, neither is there any God besides thee, according to all that we have heard with our ears" (Verse 22). Jehovah is magnificent, he further prays. "And let thy name be magnified for ever, saying, Jehovah of hosts is God over Israel; and the house of thy servant David shall be established before thee" (Verse 26).

Third, David's prayer of praise and thanksgiving reveals his deep respect for the standards by which God's goodness is known in men's lives. "For thy word's sake," he prays, "and according to thine own heart, hast thou wrought all this greatness, to make thy servant know it" (Verse 21). Whenever God's Word is obeyed and His eternal purposes honored in our lives, God answers our prayers.

Fourth, David's praise and gratitude in this prayer arise in response to God's revelation. "For thou, O Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, hast revealed to thy

servant, saying, I will build thee a house; therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto thee" (Verse 27). This is the New Testament doctrine of God's saving grace. As in God's revelation to David of His plans for the temple, so God revealed to us His plans for our salvation in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:1-9). Our prayers today are a response to God's initial expression of concern for us.

Fifth, David closes this prayer of honor and thankfulness with a petition for God's continuing help, for the fulfillment of God's gracious promises. "And now, Lord Jehovah, thou art God, and thy words are truth, and thou hast promised this good thing unto thy servant: now therefore let it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee: for thou, O Lord Jehovah, hast spoken it: and with thy blessing let the house of thy servant be blessed for ever" (II Samuel 7:28, 29).

We also make requests of God in prayer. Hezekiah, a King of Judah, prayed for the safety of Jerusalem when threatened by Sennacherib and the Assyrian army (II Chronicles 32:1, 20-23). His prayers, along with the prayers of Isaiah the prophet, were answered in the rout of the Assyrians. Judah responded in worship and praise of Jehovah.

Later the same King Hezekiah faced the end of his life. He immediately implored God for an extension of his physical life. God sent His answer through Isaiah telling the King that he had fifteen more years to live and reign. This time, however, Hezekiah did not respond as did Judah when God delivered the nation from Assyria's clutches. In fact, the very opposite occurred in his life. Listen to the entire story from *II Chronicles* 32.

In those days Hezekiah was sick even unto death: and he prayed unto Jehovah; and he spake unto him, and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up; therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem (II Chronicles 32:24-26).

God answered Hezekiah's prayer for life but Hezekiah responded to God's answer with the wrong kind of life!

Several hundred years later Judah faced a similar threat from Babylon. The people had drifted so far from God that the seventy years' captivity in Babylon resulted. During this time Jeremiah was one of God's major spokesmen. He wrote to the Jewish captives at Nineveh instructing them to pray for peace in Babylon. "And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive," God said through Jeremiah, "and pray unto Jehovah for it; for in the peace thereof shall ye have

peace" (Jeremiah 29:7). In this same context, notice that God's people were also told by David to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces" (Psalm 122:6, 7).

When we pray we make requests of God: for our physical well-being; for deliverance from our enemies; for peace within the land; and for strength to perform the tasks at hand.

We also remember others in our prayers to God. The New Testament is full of such examples and admonitions. Paul assures the Christians at Corinth, "Now we pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we may appear approved, but that ye may do that which is honorable, though we be as reprobate" (II Corinthians 13:7). James instructs Christians, "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working" (James 5:16).

We pray for those who labor with special responsibilities in the Kingdom of God. Twice, in two different letters to the Church in Thessalonica, Paul requests, "Brethren, pray for us" (I Thessalonians 5:25; II Thessalonians 3:1).

The New Testament also instructs us to pray for all men. Hear Paul's words. "I exhort therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings, be made for all men; for kings and all that are in high places; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity" (I Timothy 2:1, 2). Not only are we to remember government leaders in our prayers but Jesus teaches us to pray for our enemies. "Ye have heard that it was said," Jesus states, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45).

One of the most moving examples of intercessory prayer appears in the tenth chapter of *Romans*. The Apostle Paul reveals his deep personal concern for the conversion of his fellow Jews as he says, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my supplication to God is for them, that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1). It's interesting that Paul's prayer reveals clearly that such prayers do not effect salvation. He states in the next verse why his people were not saved. "For being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3). Our prayer today for every unsaved person is this: "May God's righteousness manifested in

the proclamation of Christ be accepted by your obedient surrender."

The Jerusalem church possessed the Christ-like concern for others that prompts prayer for them. When Peter was arrested following the death of James, Luke tells us that "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made earnestly of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12:5). Later, when Peter was freed by God, he came to John Mark's house, "where many were gathered together and were praying" for him (Acts 12:12). Intercessory prayer gripped this earliest Christian group whenever the need arose in any life they knew.

A Study of the New Testament church also reveals that spiritual and moral leadership arises out of prayer. In the early days of the Church "there arose a murmuring of the Grecian Jews against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration" (Acts 6:1). The apostles proposed that seven men of the Jerusalem congregation be selected by the group to take care of this work. "But we will continue steadfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the word," the apostles said (Acts 6:4). When the seven had been chosen, Luke tells us that "they set (them) before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands upon them" (Acts 6:6). This is the first instance of leadership outside the apostolic circle in the Jerusalem church. It arose in the midst of prayer!

The unusual congregation at Antioch in Syria received a special directive regarding the missionary ministry of Paul and Barnabas. Listen to *Acts* 13, verses two and three. "And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:2, 3). The great missionary trips of the Apostle Paul started at this point, with the church at Antioch engaged in prayer!

Later, when Paul's first missionary trip came to a close, he returned to each of the congregations established by his preaching. Listen again to *Acts*. "And when they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed" (Acts 14:27). When the first local leadership was appointed in Jerusalem, when the missionary efforts of the Apostle Paul began, and when the new congregations resulting from Paul's ministry were "organized," much prayer occurred. In the creation of spiritual leadership within the Church prayer was an imperative!

We have suggested four areas of attention "when men come to God." We praise and thank Him in prayer.

We make requests of Him when we pray. We remember others in our prayers to God. And spiritual leadership arises out of dedicated prayer.

Sir Walter Raleigh once made a request of the Queen of England, to which she replied, "Raleigh, when will you leave off begging?" Sir Walter replied, "When your Majesty leaves off giving." Needless to say, the Queen responded favorably to Raleigh's request. In the *Epistle of James* we read, "But if any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord; a doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1: 5-8).

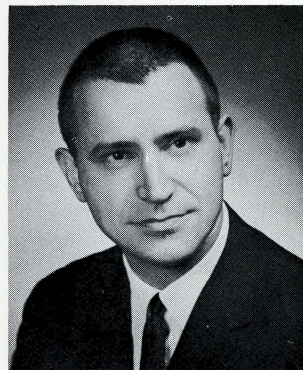
Jesus provides the key to this kind of confidence when He talks of the relationship between the vine and the branches in *John 15*. After describing Himself as the vine, His Father as the husbandman, and His followers as the branches, Jesus says, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). We have again arrived at the question of obedience. Am I God's obedient son? Have I surrendered to Jesus as my Lord? Is God's Word my guide for life? Remember the words, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you"?

Jesus pointedly directed, as He commissioned His apostles for their worldwide task of evangelism, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned (Mark 16:16). Jesus also clearly stated the necessity of a complete change in one's affections and allegiances. "I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish" (Luke 13: 3). Jesus wants you and me to make it clear where we stand with reference to Him. "Every one therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). He insists on our baptism into a living relationship with Him and into membership in the Kingdom of God. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Only two questions seem appropriate at this moment. First, are you a follower of Christ? By that I mean, have you obeyed His explicit New Testament directions, as just noticed in this study? Second, are you praying honestly and sincerely according to Biblical instructions? By this I mean what James meant when he said, "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working," and what Jesus meant when He said, "If ye abide in me,

and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7).

Let me close with this thought: "If you cannot pray over a thing, and cannot ask God to bless you in it, don't do it. A secret that you would keep from God is a secret that you should keep from your own heart."



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.