

WHY PRAY?

A Biblical Guide to the Power of Prayer

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Dedication

I have been immensely blessed to learn about the art and power of prayer through the lives of many precious men and women of God over the years. However, as the words on these pages were being written, I found the spirit and prayerful life of Bishop Degu Kebede, the Superintendent of the Apostolic Church International, permeate every chapter like the incense of the high priest wafting into the various chambers of the Temple.

Whether in conferences, ministers meetings or prayers for individuals, his soul-penetrating prayers have touched the throne of heaven to change people in a profound manner. In the countless conferences over the last twenty years – in the USA, Europe, or even the shores of the Galilee, Israel – I have benefitted tremendously from the mighty stirrings of prayer in his soul. He embodies the chapters in this book, and the famous passage written by another great prayer-warrior of the Bible, James:

***James 5:16** 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.*

Our burdens are lightened by the knowledge that Bishop Degu's prayers ascend to heaven for us as we endeavor to fulfil the purposes of the Lord Jesus Christ in this life. To the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ be all the glory for raising ministers whose prayerful lives prove to us that the supernatural benefits of prayer are available to all who commit themselves to lives of prayer, as did the beloved prophet, Daniel.

A Sweet Smelling Sacrifice

Gen 8:20 *And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.*

Gen 8:21 *And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.*

Prayer is to communicate with God. In the Garden of Eden, it appears that Adam and Eve were fine as long as they communicated with God. Sadly, when they engaged in a conversation with Satan, they lost the reality check that accrues from prayer, and believed that godhood was within reach. In other words, prayer is a powerful antidote to blasphemy. God informed Adam and Eve:

Gen 2:17 *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

Had they maintained a state of prayer – i.e. sought the presence of God on a daily basis, prayer would have refreshed the command of God to abstain from the fruit of the tree. Lack of prayer muddies the clarity of the word of God and, simultaneously, leaves us vulnerable to a conversation with Satan. The more we are absent from prayer, the louder will be the voice of sin and the world. Hence we can appreciate the words of David, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psalm 119:11).

Once we understand this biblical truth, it will be easier to understand why God was very pleased with animal sacrifices, such as the ones offered by righteous Noah mentioned in Genesis 8:20 & 21. People like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and many others, had a revelation of the connection between prayer and sacrifice. Let us attempt to summarize this connection first:

Prayer with blood sacrifice was an acknowledgement of the sin of Adam and Eve that we have inherited, and pointed to the death of Jesus Christ as the atonement for the sin of blasphemy.

To believe that there is only one God and that none can compare to him is eternal life, while believing that a human can become God leads to eternal death. “To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like?” (Isaiah 46:5). Now, the apostle John declares that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the true God.

***1John 5:20** And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.*

Let us tie the threads together: humans sinned by believing they could become God; death was the result. However, God in his mercy, robed himself in flesh and died for us; hence, anyone who wishes to be reconciled with God must acknowledge this unprecedented act of mercy. Prayer is the arena where the truth above is most visibly proclaimed. This is precisely the message we believe Adam shared with his children. He certainly admonished his children to pray with a blood sacrifice that points to God’s future sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary.

Gen 4:3 *And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD.*

Gen 4:4 *And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:*

Gen 4:5 *But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.*

Cain decided to pray without acknowledging the great truth of the sacrifice that pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ. In rejecting a sacrifice of flesh and blood, he demonstrated what was in his heart – that he was not a sinner and did not deserve death. This is why his works are labelled “evil”.

1John 3:12 *Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.*

It is for the reasons above that God cannot accept the prayers of individuals who do not pray trusting in the great sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are, regrettably, millions of prayers ascending to heaven right now which will be rejected by God, as was Cain's.

Let us return in conclusion to righteous Noah. It is significant that he sacrificed “of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl” (Genesis 8:20). Why would he exert himself in such a manner? Let us recall that few men were as familiar with death as Noah. After all, he was the only man in history who was informed about the impending death of all living creatures, except his family and a few pairs of each species for future propagation. How heavy a burden it must have been for him to

carry the weight of God's words "the end of all flesh is come before me"! (Gen 6:13). He lived to hear the screams of his friends and neighbors as the rising waters slowly overcame them. The first act of Noah outside the ark was to sacrifice of every clean beast and every clean fowl. What a great slaughter this must have been! One would have been aghast at the sight of so much blood and carcasses strewn across the ground outside the ark. One may wonder: why did Noah save those poor animals in the ark for 40 days only to have them sacrificed as soon as he left the ark? These animals were saved from the old world to sanctify the new world. Noah did not want to leave the ark before praying in the manner of Abel. He wished to enter the new world acknowledging his sin and trusting in the sacrifice of God – Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 9:14 How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Like Noah, the only way we can enter heaven, the ultimate new world, will be through the flesh and blood of Jesus. Why all this bloodshed? The answer reveals a cornerstone teaching of the Bible. In sacrificing "of every clean beast and every clean fowl", Noah emphasized the biblical truth "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Noah assumed the role of the "new Adam" at this moment. His first act was to pray with blood sacrifice acknowledging the guilt of Adam and the hope of redemption through Jesus Christ.

In summary, let us never cease to pray. Prayer must ascend to God through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. This shows an acknowledgment of sin and is a sweet smell in the sight of God.

Prayer is to make God our Habitation

Psalm 91:9 Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;

Psalm 91:10 There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

Prayer is to desire to live with God continually. Such a person has no attachment to any particular place on this earth, but seeks to know the address of the Almighty – and move in with him. The disciples of John the Baptist no doubt heard him speak extensively and in high praise of the Lord Jesus Christ. John was a great witness of Jesus. Such was the exalted witness that he bestowed on the Lord that his disciples' hearts pined for the day they would meet Jesus and live with him.

John 1:38 Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou?

John 1:39 He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour.

What a marvelous privilege it is to live with God – in the same house, and 24/7! For once, humans could experience what angels take for granted. We must also marvel at the graciousness of the Lord. Angels are created holy and perfect, but humans are flawed in so many ways. As such, the fact that Jesus was willing to bear with the apostles' diverse characters, flawed habits and quirks is truly amazing. A bride

who is deeply in love with her bridegroom is not fazed by habits and characteristics which those who are not in love will find intolerable in their partners. This is the reason we can dwell with the Lord through prayer: he loves us so deeply that he tolerates our imperfections and peculiarities. Let us consider the conversation on the Mount of Transfiguration.

***Matthew 17:4** Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.*

Peter wanted to dwell with God on that mountain. It appears that in wanting to build tabernacles, he wished to prolong the experience, just as Israel dwelt in tabernacles during the 40 years of wandering in the desert. He also wanted Moses and Elijah to stay. Who would not want to build the Lord Jesus, Moses and Elijah a tabernacle? This would certainly keep them a while longer. As all Bible students know, Elijah was as elusive as the wind; surely, a tabernacle would keep him put in one place, thought Peter. Prayer is to be where the habitation of God is. Hence, Peter's desire was noble, but God gently admonished him to keep his focus on Jesus, not the prophets. How many people have started with Jesus and ended up praying to prophets, angels and Mary?

***Matthew 17:5** While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.*

Actually, prayer is not just an individual desiring to live in the habitation of God. It is a two-way street: God himself desires to come and live with us where we are. When the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), he never built a house for himself, but went and lived with whosoever opened his or her house to him. “Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper” (Matthew 26:6). Remember how God visited the house of Abraham and was constrained to enter in and dine (Genesis 18)? Lot entertained the angels of God in his house. The biggest mistake the men of Sodom made was to enter that house uninvited. When God and his angels dwell in your house, no evil can befall you.

***Psalm 34:7** The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.*

The best way to know someone is to live with that person. Jesus is perfect! He invites us to live with him and, hence, become like him. This habitation of Jesus is prayer. Living with someone in the same house does not need constant verbal communication; silent communication is also educational and edifying. Prayer can take both verbal and non-verbal forms when living in the house of Jesus. Once we learn to live in Jesus’ house – the house of prayer – we will never want to leave. Such a life is an appropriate preparation for the ultimate reality: eternal life with the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Jerusalem.

***Rev 21:3** And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.*

The Lord 's Prayer (part one)

Matthew 6:9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

We are to address God as “Our Father”, according to Jesus. God is called “the Father of spirits” in Hebrews 12:9. Of all that God created in the beginning, only humans received the breath or spirit of God. “The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life” (Job 33:4). This clearly puts us in a unique relationship with God. Just as the branches of a tree have no life outside of the trunk, we cannot exist without the breath of the Father. As “Our Father”, God is not only our source, but also the one who loves, cares, provides and protects us, among others. A child who loses his father is pitied because there is a void which only the father can fill, which is why God is very concerned for the welfare of a fatherless child.

Psalms 68:5 A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.

Jesus goes on to say, “which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name”. Heaven is the “address” of our Father. In the story of the prodigal son, the Father told the eldest son, “And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine” (Luke 15:31). We should pray because the Father wants to tell us about our inheritance. He is proud to show off that which he prepared for us because of his unconditional and eternal love.

Next, Jesus says, “Hallowed be thy name”. It concerns God that his name is blasphemed daily on earth. This should also be a source of

grievance for his children, which is why Jesus admonishes us to pray that the name of God, Jesus, be hallowed. If this was not an issue then there would be no need to pray. Many do not wish to invoke the name of the Father, Jesus, in their prayers. They mention titles such as “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”, but refuse to give glory to the only name that God has revealed for our salvation – the name of Jesus. They refuse to use the name of Jesus in baptism (Acts 2:38; Gal 3:27), for example, and reject that Jesus is the Father himself (John 14:7-9). I am convinced that this grieves the heart of Jesus and he wants us to pray that his name will be hallowed.

In the days of Hannah, the name of God was disrespected and defiled regularly. In vowing to give her child, Samuel, to the Temple, it appears that Hannah prayed for the name of God to be honored, and not blasphemed by the priests in the Temple in particular. Hannah praised God and said, “the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed” (I Samuel 2:10). She knew that God would now bring justice to Israel and people will hallow the name of God once more. Let us pray for the name of Jesus to be hallowed!

***Matthew 6:10** Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

Again, we are told to pray for the kingdom of God to come. Jesus is not speaking about his final return at the end of the age as described in the Book of Revelation. That final return has been determined by God and does not need prayer to be fulfilled. The kingdom Jesus is talking about is revival unto salvation. Revival can

only happen when the kingdom of God comes. This requires preaching and hearts to open and receive Jesus.

Luke 17:20 *And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation:*

Luke 17:21 *Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.*

Luke 18:16 *But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*

Luke 18:17 *Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.*

We must pray that people around us will receive the kingdom of God as little children would. Jesus went on to say, “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven”. The will of the Father is executed diligently in heaven. Consider the angels who were sent to Sodom and Gomorrah! Note the diligence with which Gabriel delivered the message of Christ’s birth to Mary, and countless other examples of perfect obedience and execution of the will of God carried out by angelic beings. We must pray for those on the earth to fulfil the will of the Father. Observe how King Saul changed and no longer carried out the will of God. May we be guided by the spirit of Samuel who said:

1Samuel 12:23 *Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way:*

The Lord's prayer (part two)

Matthew 6:11 Give us this day our daily bread.

Every living creature is completely dependent on the Lord for its sustenance. God asked Job, “Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat” (Job 38:41). There are many flocks of ravens around our house and it always amazes me to think that God provides for them despite the extreme cold in Norway (minus 20 degrees Celsius in January). Such is his care for ravens that God has equipped them with high intelligence to survive and thrive. How much more will he provide for our needs?

Matthew 6:26 Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

After this the Lord says, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors (Matthew 6:12). In the eyes of God, we have insurmountable debts because we have not kept the Golden Law, which the Apostle Paul summarizes so beautifully:

Romans 13:9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Whenever we commit any offence against our fellow-humans, (how often have we disliked or even hated someone?) we accumulate debt in the sight of God. Only when we forgive our fellow-humans their offences against us, can we turn to the Almighty and expect him to

forgive us. Often we hear people say, “I will never forget what she did to me, but I forgive her”. Constantly remembering an offence is to feed and nourish the offence. Pray that we may forget the offence!

I recently read a story that challenged me. The writer argued that when parents work too much in order to become rich, they end up spending less time with their children at a time when their children need them the most. He narrated the story of a poor fisher who only fished enough to sustain the physical needs of his family after which he spent quality time with his wife and children. Seeing this, a highly educated graduate from a business school tried to convince him to work longer, expand his business and become rich. “What do I do after that?” asked the fisher. When told that he would be rich and could retire and enjoy time with his family, the fisher replied, “My children will not need me then and my wife or I could be dead”. I am afraid we are offending our children and the Lord if we neglect to spend quality time with them and teach them the ways of the Lord while they are young before they leave the nest.

***Matthew 6:13** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Failure to pray about temptation could mean we have become proud. Nowhere in the Scriptures do I read about Judas praying and wrestling with his greed. Pride made him think his sin was hidden even from the Lord Jesus Christ. On the contrary, Jabez was a man whose very name caused him so much concern that he prayed that his name would not become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

***1Chronicles 4:9** And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow.*

***1Chronicles 4:10** And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.*

Remember the caution and humility of Job who offered sacrifices to God and prayed for his sons *in case* they had sinned against God!

***Job 1:5** And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.*

It is such humility which pleases the heart of God and releases his blessings protecting the supplicant from unforeseen calamities. Finally, Jesus adds, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” (Matthew 6:13). This indicates that we have faith that our prayers will be answered because the kingdom, power and glory belong to God. The more certain we are of this truth, the more intense and confident our prayers.

***Heb 11:6** But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*

Not my will, but thine, be done!

***Luke 22:40** And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation.*

***Luke 22:41** And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed,*

***Luke 22:42** Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.*

God was manifested in the flesh, not only to die for our sins, but also to model the life of prayer that pleases him. In fact, no one in the entire Bible prayed as much as the Lord Jesus Christ did. The Scriptures below seem to indicate that the Lord spent more time in prayer than he did interacting with those around him.

***Luke 6:12** And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.*

***Mark 1:35** And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.*

So why did Jesus pray so much given that he alone is God almighty? Simply put, Jesus prayed not for himself, but for us. If the sin of Adam condemned all of humanity to sin and death, then the prayers of Jesus, the last Adam (I Cor 15:45), opens the door to repentance and restoration with God. There were many righteous people of God whose noteworthy prayers are recorded in the Bible. However, none of them were qualified to pray for us as they were all tainted by the sin of Adam. A good place to begin understanding the prayer ministry of the Lord Jesus is the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 59:16 And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him.

According to Isaiah, God saw that there was no one among the sons and daughters of Adam who could intercede for the world. Left with no choice, God robed himself with flesh and came to intercede for us. This is what the Apostle Paul was alluding to when he said, “To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). Notice the last part: today, we are the ones to continue Jesus’ ministry of intercession and reconciliation. This should serve as an excellent motivation for us to pray!

An individual who is righteous in the sight of God must pray for the sins of those around him or her. This is why Samuel continued to pray for Saul despite his rebellion. “Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way” (I Samuel 12:23). The tragedy of this world has always been the lack of one righteous person. “They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Psalm 14:3).

God is not only the creator of this world, but, thankfully, the Father of all of creation. He could not bear to see us without hope and mercy. He came in flesh and prayed very hard for us so much so that it appeared he sweated great drops of blood.

Luke 22:44 *And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*

Here in Gethsemane we can see what our sins do to the heart of our creator and Father. Make no mistake: our sins bring great physical and emotional distress to the Lord. So, Jesus prayed because he alone, as God, was qualified to do so. In addition to the above, note that the Lord prayed that we enter not into temptation. Remember how Adam and Eve fell! Through temptation! Adam and Eve did not even seem to perceive that they were being tempted; had they perceived, they would have prayed for strength. Only a person who is close to God can perceive temptation and pray for strength to counter.

Luke 22:31 *And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:*

Luke 22:32 *But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.*

Temptation can be defined as a person's desire to oppose the will of God. Many in this present world have long dethroned the will of God and enthroned their own wills as the only legitimate guide in their lives. Once we go down on our knees in prayer to Jesus, our own wills cannot sit comfortably on the throne, but gradually fall down before his will. How often was Daniel on his knees (Daniel 6:10), and contrast this with King Saul. The more often we are on our knees, the more certain we can be that Jesus reigns on the throne of our lives.

The prayer of Daniel

***Dan 9:2** In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.*

***Dan 9:3** And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:*

A prayerful study of the word of God led Daniel to an important discovery: that God had, in his great mercy, set a limit on the suffering and exile of the children of Israel in Babylon. Holy men and women of God, such as Daniel, lived according to a different historical worldview. They knew that their destiny was determined, not by the whims of dictators like Nebuchadnezzar, but by the God of Israel. Why was Daniel prayerfully studying the book of Jeremiah? Clearly, it was obvious that God indeed did speak through Jeremiah; the exile in Babylon was proof that Jeremiah was a true prophet. Hence, Daniel wanted to know if God had set a ceiling on the years of suffering in Babylon. Daniel is an example for contemporary believers. There is no greater motivation for passionate prayer than the mighty promises written in the word of God.

***Isaiah 34:16** Seek ye out of the book of the LORD, and read: no one of these shall fail, none shall want her mate: for my mouth it hath commanded, and his spirit it hath gathered them.*

So if the word of God determined seventy years in Babylon, what was the need for Daniel to pray with such intensity? We must understand that God's declarations – whether concerning punishment

or blessing – will not automatically translate into reality; God waits to see our response. This is illustrated in the example of Ahab, the wicked king of Israel. Ahab listened to his wife Jezebel who arranged for the murder of Naboth because he refused to sell his vineyard to him. God sent Elijah to pronounce a horrible death upon Ahab, but the intense repentance of Ahab altered the word of God.

***1Kings 21:29** Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.*

Following the above, it appears that all the promises and punishments of God are subject to the individual's response and tokens of sincere remorse. With respect to intensity of prayer, it makes sense that the more profound our belief in the truth of the word of God, the more this conviction will be channeled into prayer. It appears that Simon Magus, the sorcerer of Samaria, understood the above quite well. Although his heart was in the grip of lust, he was a strong believer in the word of God that came through the Apostle Peter.

***Act 8:24** Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.*

The word of judgement was pronounced through Peter, but Simon appealed to the power of prayer to neutralize this judgment. Perhaps he knew from the Bible that if God could forgive even the most seasoned sinner, such as Ahab, there was hope for him.

Let us now try to apply some of these lessons to our own personal lives. There are many great promises for us in the Bible but how many of us take them seriously and pray intensely to appropriate them in their lives? There was a Nigerian woman called Nneka¹. In the year 2000, she received the scripture that states:

Heb 11:35: Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.

One year later, her husband who was a pastor, Daniel Ekechukwu, died in a car accident. His body was put in the mortuary on the 30th of November 2001 for three days. His wife remembered the scripture she had received and asked for his body to be removed and brought to a conference to be prayed for. The undertaker, Darlington Manu, had contacted his father and agreed with the request of Nneka because he had heard singing and clapping coming from the corpse of Daniel. While being prayed for in the church, the body of Daniel came back to life on 2 December 2001.

How do you and I perceive the promises in the word of God? Just as every citizen in a democratic country can exercise his or her rights as written down in the Constitution, the child of God can claim the promises laid down in the word of God. Note the mighty response that Daniel received from God. Daniel repented, fasted and prayed for Israel because his own fate was linked to that of his nation. If we do not

search the scriptures and pray, we send the signal that we do not value the promises of God.

ⁱ <http://www.blazingfireministries.org/daniele.html>

Prayer - the antidote to anxiety

***Phil 4:6** Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*

***Phil 4:7** And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

“Be careful for nothing”, says the Apostle Paul. The word “careful” in Greek refers to anxiety and troubles related to cares. To live is to worry! Worry is universal to the human condition. We worry for ourselves, our loved ones and about the future. We sometimes worry that we are not worried. Some people are already anxious about 2020. Much of the negative energy we expend in worry is about things we cannot control – such as the future, which is why Jesus said, “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matt 6:34). In other words, each day has sufficient evil for us to grapple with; do not add tomorrow’s problems and evil to today’s. This will overwhelm us and lead to burn out.

The enemy’s tactic is to sow seeds of worry which grow fast and paralyze us into inaction. Cortisol is a hormone released in the body when danger is detected. If we worry, the body believes it is under attack and releases cortisol unnecessarily. This is like constantly pushing the alarm button – it will gradually undermine your immune

system leading to a raft of diseases. Like cortisol, worry undermines faith in the word of God. Remember the 10 spies who came back with an evil report? Notice what they said:

Numbers 13:33 And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.

The great promises and acts of God were diminished the moment they saw the giants. This is the source of worry – when we use our physical senses to evaluate matters. The moment we conclude, “It is impossible”, like the 10 spies, the peace of God leaves and worry moves in. You certainly do not want worry as the chief guest in your house. Some months ago, I suffered some hearing loss in my right ear and heard a constant buzzing sound. I was in perfect peace in God, but worry was knocking on the door trying to gain access by telling me, “You have tinnitus. You will soon start fainting and falling down”. I must admit to going on the internet and reading as much as I could about the ear and hearing loss etc. However, I soon realized I was getting messages from the 10 spies, and rebuked them in Jesus name! It is amazing how much worry can make you learn! It has been over a year and I am pleased to report that I have not experienced bouts of fainting, vomiting or the other symptoms worry promised.

Jesus is the Prince of peace! When he is in the house, peace reigns supreme. A peaceful person makes better decisions, sleeps well and has overall better mental and physical health than the one who worries. Notice that the Apostle Paul exhorts the Philippians not to worry, but pray and bring their supplications before the Lord – so that

“the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7). Let us make a conscious, faith-fueled decision to banish worry so that the Prince of Peace, Jesus, will return and stay in us. Not worrying is not the same as ignoring the problem. We see the storm in the Sea of Galilee, but we see Jesus in the boat with us.

***1John 4:4** Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*

Prayer is the enemy of worry! When worry knocks on the door, prayer transfers the worry to the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. When the Pharisees and authorities in Jerusalem threatened the apostles with physical violence if they continued to preach about Jesus, the sheer power of their prayers expelled any fear of the authorities.

***Act 4:31** And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.*

Prayer dwarfs worry! Prayer reverses the words of the 10 spies: it makes worry grasshoppers and us giants. Rabshakeh is the embodiment of worry. In 2 Kings 18, we read how he spoke fear to the children of Israel in Hebrew. Hezekiah’s servants pleaded with him to speak in Syrian, which they understood, so the hearts of the people would not melt. Rabshakeh replied that his plan was to speak to the people and not the leaders at all. You see, worry speaks our language! It does not speak through translators! Hezekiah was a great man of God

and a great prayer warrior. He commanded his people not to speak to Rabshakeh. Hezekiah spoke to the God of Israel, while Rabshakeh spoke to the people of Israel.

***2Kings 18:36** But the people held their peace, and answered him not a word: for the king's commandment was, saying, Answer him not.*

When worry comes, do not speak back to it – speak to Jesus in prayer. Worry becomes worried when you do not speak back to it acknowledging its presence. Why was Pontius Pilate worried? Was it not because Jesus refused to engage him and acknowledge his power? Pilate became confused; it was Jesus who should be worried, not him. Paradoxically, the silence of Jesus made Pilate worry.

***John 19:10** Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?*

Like Hezekiah, the Lord refused to acknowledge Rabshakeh. In a world that is worried about climate change, terrorism, immigration, recession and a host of unending problems, let us speak to the Prince of Peace. He will turn our worries into peace that passes all understanding.

Praying in the Spirit

1Cor 14:15 What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

The German linguist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, once said that to learn a new language is to acquire a new soul. For the purposes of this study, we who are born again are bilingual: we speak in the spirit and with the understanding, as the apostle Paul states in I Corinthians 14:15. This chapter will focus on the first language, the spiritual. There is cause to believe that Adam and his children spoke a different language before the Tower of Babel; a language that was first divinely imparted to Adam when he was created. This underscores the fact that God has always desired to communicate with us in a language of his own choosing – a pure language, one that probes the depths of divine mysteries and is not subject to misunderstandings or error. When God saw that humans no longer communicated with him, but misused the gift of language to communicate with each other alone, he confused their communication. Paradoxically, the many languages of the world today are actually a result of humans misusing the gift of language and refusing to consult God in the language he bestowed upon them.

Gen 11:6 And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Gen 11:7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

Language is power! This is why Jesus told the apostles, “But ye shall receive **power**, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:18). The person who knows how to pray in the Spirit is the most powerful individual on earth. We see this principle play out even in the lives of individuals who were not filled with the Spirit on a permanent basis and yet operated intensely in the Spirit for perhaps an hour or two.

1Samuel 1:12 And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli marked her mouth.

1Samuel 1:13 Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken.

Hannah lost herself in prayer: she was praying in the Spirit, and the result was Samuel. Samuel and his school of prophets were known to pray so powerfully in the Spirit that mighty warriors would fall down, remove their garments and prophesy. Saul sent three companies of messengers to apprehend David. Finally, he also went but ended up gripped by the power of Samuel’s prayers all the way to Naioth in Ramah.

1Samuel 19:24 And he stripped off his clothes also, and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Wherefore they say, Is Saul also among the prophets?

Notice that Hannah gave birth to Samuel through intense, spiritual prayers, and Samuel influenced the history of Israel and kept Saul from killing David by his intense prayers in turn. Spirit begets Spirit! What is born of the Spirit is very powerful indeed.

So far, we have focused on the outward accomplishments of praying in the Spirit. Let us not forget, however, that praying in the Spirit is also necessary and greatly beneficial for the new, inner man – the newborn soul. The key word is “mysteries”, as the scriptures below declare:

***1Cor 14:2** For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries.*

***Mat 13:11** He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.*

Notice that the word is in the plural – mysteries. In other words, God has many hidden spiritual treasures and those who pray in the Spirit only can unlock these treasures. As long as Jesus was physically present with the apostles, he revealed the hidden meaning of parables to them, but now one must access Jesus’ revelatory power through praying in the Spirit. Praying in the Spirit is the “Father tongue” of the newborn inner man. Do not deny him the right to speak his native language to Jesus Christ, who is the “everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6). It will bring comfort, peace, satisfaction and joy. He or she will feel at “home”!

Praying with the understanding

1Corinthians 14:15 What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

We are creatures of two worlds: the spiritual and the visible. “Praying with the understanding” is linked to the physical world that we comprehend through the five senses: touch, hearing, sight, smell and taste. As long as we live in this world, Christians will pray with the understanding that comes through experiences mediated by the five senses. It is understandable that the children of Israel felt fear and anxiety when they saw the barren desert ahead of them, but they were wrong to jump to conclusions and accuse Moses of conspiring to kill them off in the desert. When the human senses perceive danger, the right course of action is to pray, not jump to conclusions.

James 5:13 Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.

James 5:14 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:

Among others, understanding means insight. “How much better is it to get wisdom than gold and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver” (Proverbs 16:16). The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines insight as “(the ability to have) a clear, deep, and sometimes sudden

understanding of a complicated problem or situation”. The workings of nature make it plain that an Intelligent Designer has created this world. He made humans with the capacity to understand and appreciate the intelligence inherent in the created order. Hence, a person who studies this world and discovers marvelous facts and truths will praise the Creator with renewed understanding or insight. David says, “Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way” (Psalm 119:104).

There are two important aspects of understanding that should be considered: God wants us to receive insight into the nature of this world and pray with that understanding and, at the same time, understand the limitations of understanding. This may sound like a paradox, but both aspects are complementary. Consider the wisdom God gave Solomon: he applied this wisdom to understand what is good and what is evil in the sight of God. He observed the interactions of humans and received insight, which he used in turn to praise God and instruct others. For instance, Solomon stated, “Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles” (Proverbs 21:23). However, for the same reason, Solomon cautioned about the limitations of understanding when he stated.

Proverbs 3:5 *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.*

Proverbs 3:6 *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*

The above is the reason we need to pray with the understanding – while understanding is insight that adds intensity to our prayers, it is also fallible and can distort the truth. Some individuals falsely perceive the Godhead to be divided into three coequal, coeternal persons. Praying with such an understanding does not please God, for God is one and alone (Deut 6:4). Joshua, for instance, was deceived and made a peace covenant with the inhabitants of Gibeon. He looked at their bread which was moldy, the wineskins which were rent along with the clothes and shoes which looked old and concluded that they did indeed come from a far country.

Joshua 9:14 And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD.

It is for this reason that the Lord Jesus Christ admonishes, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). We must put our understanding on the altar of prayer and wait for the Lord Jesus to reveal its quality – whether genuine or false, good or bad.

In heaven, the understanding of the redeemed cannot be subject to deception because Satan, and all other sources of sin, will have been eradicated. The senses in our new, born-again bodies will express joy, wonder and gratitude in the presence of Jesus and his glory. However, until then, we are commanded to pray and praise Jesus with the understanding, however limited. We ought to lay our hands on our heads and implore the Lord to bless and guide our understanding so that he may be pleased when we pray and sing with the understanding.

The prayers of Hezekiah (part one)

2Kings 19:15 And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD, and said, O LORD God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth.

A precondition to pleasing God in prayer is to know that he is “the God”, “alone” and has made heaven and earth. Unlike many of the kings of Israel and Judah, Hezekiah never wavered in his love and faithfulness towards the one God of Israel. This was a king who took very seriously the greatest command in the entire Bible, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut 6:4). Hezekiah is often overlooked when we seek examples of the greatest prayer warriors in the Bible. This was a king who prayed more fervently than priests and prophets. We will consider three powerful prayers of Hezekiah which profoundly impacted upon the history of Israel, tested the limits of the Law of Moses, and added many years to his own life.

2Ki 19:20 Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard.

We have talked earlier about the expert psychological warfare that Rabshakeh conducted against Jerusalem. He was not exaggerating however; the King of Assyria, Sennacherib, had indeed flattened many lands and struck fear in the entire region. No king in his right mind would risk provoking Sennacherib. Nevertheless, Hezekiah was no ordinary king; he was also a man who knew the power of prayer. Such was his confidence in prayer that he simultaneously gave orders to dig

a tunnel under the city of David to divert the course of the Gihon spring. This way the waters would be contained within the walls of the fortified city and access denied to the Assyrians. We have walked through this tunnel several times in Jerusalem and been amazed at this feat of pure faith.

***2Ki 20:20** And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?*

The fact that this tunnel is one of the most visited tourist sites in Jerusalem today is a testament to God's delight in the faith of Hezekiah. The five times I have waded through this tunnel, I found myself laying hands upon the walls and asking the Lord Jesus to grant me the faith and action of Hezekiah. Hezekiah sent the scribes and priests to Isaiah the prophet and asked him to pray for Israel. This demonstrates his respect for the order of God.

***2Ki 19:2** And he sent Eliakim, which was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz.*

Furthermore, we see that Hezekiah did not solicit the help of other kings in the neighboring countries. The King of Judah, Asa, sent gold and silver from the Temple of God to Benhadad the King of Syria to help him against Baasha, the King of Israel. The King of Syria sent his captains to destroy some cities in Israel. God was very displeased with this. What a contrast with the response of King Hezekiah! The prophet Hanani was sent to rebuke Asa with these famous words:

2Ch 16:8 Were not the Ethiopians and the Lubims a huge host, with very many chariots and horsemen? yet, because thou didst rely on the LORD, he delivered them into thine hand.

2Ch 16:9 For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. Herein thou hast done foolishly: therefore from henceforth thou shalt have wars.

God is no respecter of persons! We can learn much from the dynamics of prayer that Hezekiah employed:

- First, believe that God is one and alone.
- Then look up to heaven and see that God is infinitely greater than any threat of the enemy.
- Reach out to the anointed people of God and ask them to pray.
- Act upon your faith and build your own tunnel of Hezekiah to send a clear signal to the enemy: no surrender!
- Avoid the temptation to forge alliances like King Asa.

Once all these conditions were fulfilled, God sent one angel to decimate 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Precisely as Isaiah prophesied, Sennacherib did not shoot one arrow into the city of David. He returned to his country in a state of shock and was assassinated by his own sons while he worshipped his gods in Assyria (2 Kings 19:37). The gods of Sennacherib could not protect him, but Hezekiah's God defended his honor and his faith. Let us acquaint ourselves with the God of Hezekiah – let us pray to be inspired by the faith of this great intercessor and prayer warrior who saved Jerusalem through his prayers alone!

The prayers of Hezekiah (part two)

Isaiah 38:1 In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.

However great a man or woman is in this world, nothing and no one can exempt us from sickness and death. Furthermore, even those who live righteous lives, and are beloved of God, can and have experienced the cruel visitation of sickness and death. “Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick” (John 11:3). Let us consider some of the agony Hezekiah describes.

Isaiah 38:9 The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness.

Isaiah 38:10 I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years.

Bible scholars believe that Hezekiah was somewhere between 36 to 40 years of age at this time. To be told that he would die relatively early was the first blow to this righteous king. Moses lived to be 120, David to 80; why should Hezekiah who followed the example of his father David live only to be half his age? This sadness is evident in Hezekiah’s statement, “I am deprived of the residue of my years”. Why is the world marching in righteous indignation at the death of George Floyd in the USA this summer of 2020? Is it not because the cruel disease of racism has robbed a black, 46-year-old man of the residue of

his years? Who knows what he would accomplished had he lived to be old! Hezekiah compares the shortening of his life to a weaver's shuttle.

Isaiah 38:12 Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life: he will cut me off with pining sickness: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me.

God is the weaver and anytime he so chooses, he can cut off the thread patterns from his shuttle. What was worse, he allowed Hezekiah to pine daily with this deathly sickness towards the grave. I believe the Bible records the sufferings of this righteous king to help us understand the brevity of life and the desperate need to redeem the good days that the Lord Jesus grants us. Even Hezekiah's prayers initially appeared to go unanswered.

Isaiah 38:14 Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove: mine eyes fail with looking upward: O LORD, I am oppressed; undertake for me.

He perhaps suffered from a fever that made him delirious – he chattered like a “crane or swallow”. His eyes failed with looking upward. We often portray Hezekiah as a man who turned to the wall, prayed and swiftly received an answer. This is clearly not the case. His eyes failed with looking upward. It was at this hopeless juncture that Isaiah the prophet entered his room – the prophet became the messenger of death to the man of God, Hezekiah. “Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live” (Isaiah 38:1).

“Put thy house in order” means to prepare your spirit, mind and soul to meet the Lord. In the beginning, God first made the body and breathed his soul into it. When death visits, it also begins with the body after which the spirit and soul must follow. “Put thy house in order” means do the best you can to prepare to meet your maker. Forgive those whom you must forgive and be found at peace with your conscience and God. Matthew Henry put it well when he wrote:

Our being ready for death will make it come never the sooner, but much the easier: and those that are fit to die are most fit to live.

How did Hezekiah respond? “Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the LORD” (Isaiah 38:2). Note that although he was not expecting God to heal him because of his righteousness, living a life that is pleasing to the Lord is a source of great comfort in the face of death and gives boldness in prayer. If one has looked into the face of Jesus for many years, it will not be too difficult to see death in the face for a brief period. Here we see the perseverance of Hezekiah. If God does not answer when looking up to heaven, the prayer-warrior will turn his face to the wall and pray. Hezekiah cried bitterly. “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms” (James 5:13).

Isaiah 38:4 Then came the word of the LORD to Isaiah, saying,

Isaiah 38:5 Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years.

Isaiah 38:6 And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria: and I will defend this city.

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15). The Lord is gracious and his ears are always tuned in to the prayers of his saints who are afflicted. Isaiah the messenger of death became the messenger of life. Hezekiah received the answer to, not one, but two prayer requests – that years would be added to his life and he would live to see God defend his beloved Jerusalem from the dreaded Assyrians. “The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life” (Psalm 128:5). In addition, God himself granted him a third blessing which he did not ask for – a powerful miracle.

Isaiah 38:8 Behold, I will bring again the shadow of the degrees, which is gone down in the sun dial of Ahaz, ten degrees backward. So the sun returned ten degrees, by which degrees it was gone down.

The shadow of an ancient sundial never went backward, but forward. The sun’s rays would fall on the *gnomon*, a rod or wire, which further cast a shadow on the dial. This was how the ancients told time. God was demonstrating his lordship over time – he alone can add or deduct years from our lives. James was perhaps referring to this event when he wrote:

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

While God can change nature (the degree of the sun’s shadow), he is the unchanging God, according to James. Isaiah 38 is Hezekiah’s thanksgiving to the Lord. It is always good to write a memorial of God’s blessing. Thanksgiving and “thanksgiving” go together! Amen!

The prayers of Hezekiah (part three)

2Ch 30:18 For a multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim, and Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover otherwise than it was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, The good LORD pardon every one

2Ch 30:19 That prepareth his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary.

2Ch 30:20 And the LORD hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people.

The Passover reminded the children of Israel about their deliverance from 400 years of bondage. It pleases God when we remember and glorify him for delivering us from the power of sin. Luke records how much the Lord Jesus longed to keep the Passover with the apostles: “And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). The greatest meal God desired to share with us is his flesh and blood which saves from the power of sin and imparts eternal life.

It was this principle that King Hezekiah understood in a way few other people did. He prayed for the multitudes, who had not sanctified themselves, and his prayer was granted because he demonstrated the character of Christ – he wanted everyone to partake of the only eternal life that is in the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than frown upon and condemn the people who did not sanctify themselves, Hezekiah pitied their souls and prayed that God

would be merciful. In doing so, Hezekiah sets a great example for us. We are not called to despise those who do not live up to the standards of the law of God, but to entreat and implore the good Lord to forgive and excuse his people's many weaknesses.

Matthew 9:12 *But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.*

Matthew 9:13 *But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*

In the days when the Passover was first instituted, some Israelites had touched a dead body and disqualified themselves from observing the Passover. "And there were certain men, who were defiled by the dead body of a man, that they could not keep the passover on that day: and they came before Moses and before Aaron on that day" (Numbers 9:6). These were admirable men. Rather than just stay quiet and isolate themselves from the congregation, they appealed to Moses. Their desire and zeal to give glory to God for delivering them from bondage in Egypt was such that they decided to appeal against the very law of God.

Number 9:7 *And those men said unto him, We are defiled by the dead body of a man: wherefore are we kept back, that we may not offer an offering of the LORD in his appointed season among the children of Israel?*

Perhaps there was no one else to remove and bury the corpse, and so they did this as a matter of necessity. Perhaps the dead man was their father or relative and they touched his body overcome with grief.

Whatever the reason, one thing was clear: these men loved the God of their ancestors and to be denied the Passover would have been another devastating blow to them. Isn't it wonderful that the God of the Bible is one who searches the intentions of the heart, and not the mouth?

***1Samuel 16:7** But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.*

These men's desire to celebrate the Passover echoed with Jesus' desire to celebrate the Passover with us. Even the great Moses, the man who never moved to the left or right of the Law of God, was amazed at their zeal and answered them circumspectly.

***Numbers 9:8** And Moses said unto them, Stand still, and I will hear what the LORD will command concerning you.
Numbers 9:9 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
Numbers 9:10 Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If any man of you or of your posterity shall be unclean by reason of a dead body, or be in a journey afar off, yet he shall keep the passover unto the LORD.*

God was willing to bend his Law because these men displayed such zeal for the Passover. Hezekiah must have been familiar with this story – he knew that God wanted everyone to partake of the Passover which pointed to the flesh and blood of Jehovah himself. Like Hezekiah, let us intercede for everyone to partake of the Passover.

***John 6:53** Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.*

The altars of Abraham

Genesis 12:6 *And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land.*

Gen 12:7 *And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.*

Abraham was a man of prayer. This explains his close relationship with God and greatness in terms of his faith. In the verse above, God made a remarkable promise to Abraham – the promise of a land and seed. Abraham erected an altar to signify that he believed in the promise of God, however impossible it seemed from a natural viewpoint. The altar was the visible agreement between God and Abraham. In time to come, whenever Abraham, his seed, or even strangers passed this altar, they would know its meaning and significance. Verse 6 states that “the Canaanite was then in the land”. The Canaanites must have been confused about what Abraham was doing. I am certain that the great patriarch wisely avoided disclosing the meaning of his altar to the Canaanites. Abraham teaches us not to fear the current state of affairs but connect heaven and earth with “Abrahamic altars” of faith.

Abraham covered the Land of Canaan with such altars by faith in obedience to the command of God which said, “Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee” (Genesis 13:17). I have followed this principle in asking church

members to open their homes for prayer. This was, by the way, the same principle the Apostles of the Lord followed.

Act 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.

It is Abraham's faith which inspired me to start conferences every two months in Europe. We have built altars now in the UK, Norway, Italy, Germany, France, Holland, Hungary, Switzerland and Sweden, with more scheduled. When God wishes to do something wonderful in our lives, he will first prompt us to build an altar in the place where he will pour out of his blessing. One ought to exercise caution when speaking about personal matters, but please bear with me. About three years ago, when my family was granted a loan to purchase a house, we struggled because others outbid us. Finally, and after much prayer, we won the bid for the house where we live now, after the man who won the bid changed his mind. When signing the deed and related documents, we noticed that the former owner's surname was Hilton. We were surprised to discover that they were relatives of Conrad Hilton who started the world famous chain of Hilton hotels. His father, Augustus Halvorsen Hilton, was born in Hilton, Kløfta, Norway, and emigrated to the USA in 1870. Conrad's grandfather, Halvor Nilsen Hilton, was born in Hilton just a few hundred meters from where we live and is buried in Ullensaker church. This family of farmers now have their name on one of the most well-known buildings in the world. I could not shake off the feeling that God was saying something through all this. Like the Hilton family, our vision entails travelling and

building something (in our case, altars) everywhere in Europe and worldwide. To the above one can add the international airport at Gardermoen just 10 minutes away from our home in Kløfta as another confirmation. Travel and hotels appears the will of God for us in spreading the Apostolic message of salvation in Jesus name. We have stayed in our fair share of hotels because of this vision. I suspect Abraham would have stayed in hotels had they been common in his time rather than a tent. So next time you book a hotel before you travel to a conference, call it “Abraham’s tent”.

***Genesis 13:18** Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD.*

Bible students know that God appeared to Abraham in Genesis chapter 18 in the plains of Mamre, but how many make the connection to Abrahams’ altar in Mamre in Genesis chapter 13. In other words, an altar precedes the will of God. Do not forget: it was in Mamre that God finally gave a concrete timeframe for Isaac’s birth. “And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him” (Genesis 18:10). I wonder if Sarah laughed at this promise because she was not the one who built the altar. Understandably, only men seem to build altars in the Bible, but I wonder to what degree Sarah invested her faith together with her husband’s burden to build altars of faith in the Land of Canaan. As Abraham built altars, God began to visit them and fulfil his promises to him in the very place where he built these altars of faith.

We must clearly perceive the strategy of God in the Bible: before a sword was raised or a stone thrown, God brought a man of great faith only to walk up and down in the Land of Canaan and build altars. First an altar-builder and then a personal visit from God to the place of the altar. Tell yourself: “I am an altar-builder in Europe (or wherever God has placed the reader)”. We are all Abrahams in the sense that we will birth many children in Europe in the future through our travels and building altars of prayer. Next time you get on a plane, train or car and cross the boundaries of Europe, please pray this prayer:

Lord Jesus, I am now your Abraham! I will build an altar of faith for you as soon as I arrive in my destination. I believe in time to come that you will personally visit the place of my altar and give birth to an Apostolic church. Amen!

While the altars Abraham built in Sichem (Gen 12:6) and Mamre were for inheriting the land and his seed, the most profound altar he built was to prepare the ground for the greatest blessing God had for humanity: the sacrifice of the Son of God to make atonement for sins and reconcile us to God.

Genesis 22:9 *And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.*

Notice that Abraham “laid the wood in order” on Mount Moriah. This is also the same place God laid his wood in order – the Cross of his crucifixion. The spiritual principle is repeated and confirmed again:

where God desires to pour out a mighty blessing, an altar must be built. There are many who desire the blessings of God but where are the altar-builders? When Jesus said “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56), could he have been speaking about the sacrifice on Mount Moriah? Abraham must have known that Isaac was pointing to God’s own sacrifice because he said, “God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8).

In summary, Abraham was perhaps the greatest and most strategic altar-builder in the Bible. While men like Job and Noah built altars to thank God, Abraham built altars with a vision that encompassed all the greatest promises of the entire Bible: spiritual children for God, a land and the coming of Jesus into the world to atone for our sins. None prayed with such a burden that had such far-reaching and eternal consequences as Abraham. The greater the vision, the more diligent the efforts of the altar-builder. May we be the inheritors of the great vision and burden of father Abraham! May the eternal God, Jesus Christ, visit every one of our altars and bless them for his glory’s sake! Most importantly, may our altars line up with the will of God!

Elijah praying on Mount Carmel

1Kings 18:42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees.

Elijah had just become the most famous man in Israel. Under the direction of God, he challenged 450 of Baal's prophets to a showdown on Mount Carmel. He famously said, "And the God that answereth by fire, let him be God" (I Kings 18:24). Carmel means "garden-land". It brings to mind the Garden of Eden. Carmel is a fitting name for Elijah's mission – to take the people of God back to where they belong in the presence of the Almighty. Rather than communicate with God, our first parents communicated with the evil one. It was, then, neglect of prayer that separated them from the presence of God in Eden. As such, Elijah understood the need for fervent prayer to seal the victory on Mount Carmel and reconcile Israel with God.

1Kings 18:1 And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth.

If God had already promised rain, what was the need for Elijah's intense prayers? Note that Elijah "cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees" (I Kings 18:42). Elijah understood that all the promises of God are contingent upon reciprocity – prayer is evidence of our faith and desire to receive the promises of God. The prophet, Daniel, for example, began to fast and pray intensely when he understood that seventy years had been accomplished **19**

Babylon, according to the Book of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2). He did not idly wait for the prophecy to come true, but began to pray for the small cloud to form. One calls to mind what God said to Israel, “Put me in remembrance: let us plead together: declare thou, that thou mayest be justified” (Isaiah 43:26).

Another reason Elijah cast himself upon the ground and put his face between his knees was to humble himself and put the spotlight on God. In the immediate aftermath of the fire falling visibly from heaven, there were no doubt some who would have been tempted to deify Elijah. No one, except his servant, knew where to find him. In assuming a fetus-like position, Elijah made himself as small and dependent on God as he could. One is reminded of the reaction of Paul and Barnabas who tore their clothes in Lystra after a crippled man was healed.

Act 14:15 And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein.

The smaller Elijah made himself, the bigger the cloud grew over the horizon! The Bible records that Elijah sent his servant repeatedly seven times to check whether a cloud had formed over the sea. Seven is, among others, the number of divine accomplishment and perfect submission to the will of God.

Genesis 2:2 And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

Genesis 33:3 *And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother*

Revelation 15:7 *And one of the four beasts gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God, who liveth for ever and ever.*

Let us summarize what the prophet Elijah teaches us about the power of prayer. Firstly, prayer must immediately follow any victories that God grants us. While Ahab went to eat and drink, Elijah went up to Carmel to pray. Elijah had to make himself scarce so the Lord could receive all the glory. Furthermore, the promises of God require someone to pray intensely until a small cloud is visible. Finally, just as God rested from all his labors on the seventh day alone, those who intercede for the will of our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, must never stop laboring in prayer until his will is accomplished.

Jabez: prayer is destiny

1Chron 4:9 And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow.

All women conceive in much sorrow, for God had said, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Gen 3:16). As such, the sorrow of Jabez’s mother must have been extraordinary given that she decided to commemorate her sorrow in naming her son after her great affliction. That is all she could see. This name, no doubt, was the source of much distress for Jabez. If one needs some cheering up, the last person you would look for is someone called “sorrow”. He must have endured much bullying during his childhood. Children can be very insensitive and downright cruel. The youngest friend of Job, Elihu, was frustrated when his friends did not defend God against Job’s accusations, and he said, “Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment” (Job 32:9). In the same vein, I am afraid the mother of Jabez exercised poor judgment in naming her son “sorrow”.

So what do you do when life deals you a bad and unfair hand? Hinduism preaches the doctrine of *karma* and *samsara*. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* has this to say about these doctrines of Indian soteriology (salvation): “future births and life situations will be conditioned by actions performed during one’s present life - which

itself has been conditioned by the accumulated effects of actions performed in previous lives.” Simply put, one could be suffering in this present life because of actions committed in a previous life – of which you have no recollection of at all. Hence, 800 million adherents of Hinduism would technically believe that their life circumstances have been predetermined, and there is nothing they can do to change the status quo. This fatalism (powerlessness against destiny), if true, would be a genuine cause for “sorrow”. The generation before the return of the Lord Jesus exhibit this kind of fatalism, which the Apostle Peter warns about:

***2Peter 3:4** And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.*

So, what does Jabez teach us? A person who lives with tremendous pain, sorrow and suffering has no time for such doctrines or advice. No one could tell Jabez, “I understand what you are going through!” The Bible says about blind Bartimaeus, “And many charged him that he should hold his peace: but he cried the more a great deal, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me” (Mark 10:48). A person who has long exercised superhuman patience in the face of affliction is no longer willing to be quiet in the presence of God! Jabez had enough. He prayed:

***1Chron 4:10** And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.*

That thou wouldest bless me indeed! To be blessed by God simply means to be made happy by God. His mother did not make him happy, but God will bless and make happy. Hence, to be blessed by God means a person's source of happiness is not found in this world or its circumstances, but in Jesus. The first time the Lord Jesus taught the public was in Matthew chapter 5; and he taught about how to be blessed (Matthew 5:3-11). "Poor in spirit" (Matt 5:3) means that a person acknowledges his/her spiritual poverty without God. Note also Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." Jabez acknowledged his need for God and sought comfort in the God of Israel. And God changed his destiny! Prayer is indeed destiny!

Jabez was on a roll! He did not stop with "bless me", but went on to ask "and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me". This showed his great faith in the God of whom Paul said, "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19). We can be certain that God enlarged his territory; he must have become some kind of property owner/businessman. He did not ask for material wealth alone, but that the hand of God would be with him. One is reminded of Abraham, his father. Abraham was greatly blessed of God materially, as Eliezer told the household of Rebekah:

Gen 24:35 *And the LORD hath blessed my master greatly; and he is become great: and he hath given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and menservants, and maidservants, and camels, and asses.*

While the above was true, the hand of God was always with Abraham so much so that Kings were rebuked and punished when they mistreated him. Oh that the hand of the God of Abraham and Jabez would be with us!

Above all, Jabez prayed for the biggest affliction in his life – the evil that grieved him because of his name: “and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!” Notice that he was not the one inflicting evil on others, but the victim of evil because of his name. God granted all this to Jabez because he did not passively accept the destiny others had defined for him, but carved out his own destiny through faith and prayer. That is why his story actually is told backwards: “And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren” (1Chron 4:9). Through prayer, you and I can carve out new destinies to the glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Jacob: when God wrestles with us

***Gen 32:24** And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.*

Genuine prayer that transforms radically begins when we are left alone with God, as Jacob was. Even as a fetus in his mother's womb, Jacob was not alone; he appeared busy minding other people's business, rather than his own, so to speak.

***Gen 25:26** And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them.*

Jacob seemed to live his life “horizontally conscious” (i.e. people-centered) rather than “vertically conscious” (i.e. God-centered). In the beginning, God made Adam alone, and he was expected to find the highest cause of his existence in his relationship with God. There were no other humans around to interact with – God alone was his ultimate purpose! Jacob's problem was the opposite: he neglected God and invested much effort in exploiting and enriching himself – others were a means to his own ends.

***Gen 25:33** And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.*

***Gen 27:35** And he said, Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing.*

Jacob saw people as objects of exploitation. He used subtlety, which is *mirmah* in Hebrew, and means “craft”, “deceit”. May the Lord Jesus deliver us from *mirmah*! So, how can we be delivered from deceit? The answer is spending much time alone with God. He or she who wrestles alone with God does not need to wrestle or contend with humans. Consider the Apostles! They first spent three years with Jesus before they were deemed fit to represent him among the nations. Even the one of whom Jesus said, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47), had to first spend three years with Jesus before “graduating”. Thankfully, the God of Jacob intervened one day to change the character and course of his chosen vessel!

Gen 32:24 *And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.*

Hos 12:4 *Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel, and there he spake with us;*

How can a mortal being prevail over God? Through prayer, supplications and tears. We as parents understand the power of our children’s tears and supplications; how often have they converted our “no” into “yes”? Jacob’s great strength was his ability to quickly recognize an opportunity and his perseverance in procuring his desire. He recognized that the angel was God, and more importantly, recognized this as a monumental opportunity to change his character and become the new Abraham of his time. There are some who

perceive the presence of Jesus, but do not seize the opportunity to secure life-changing blessings.

It is significant that the scripture states, “and there wrestled a man with him”. It was this man, God, who wrestled with him – God took the initiative, not Jacob. This time Jacob did not flee as he had always done throughout his life. God helped Jacob to wrestle and subdue his rebellion. Prayer is communication with God, and in this instance, the communication had to take a violent form because the corrupt nature of Jacob was an offence to God who is holy. Have you and I had such an encounter with Jesus? Peter did! Peter was armed with a sword to defend Jesus against soldiers in Jerusalem, but a girl and a chicken defeated him (Mark 14:66-68). In the same vein, Jacob had sent even his wives ahead of him to meet the fury of Esau – he was willing to sacrifice everyone to save his own life. Only time spent alone wrestling with Jesus will deliver us from cowardice. See the bravery of Daniel and his three friends! They never wavered whether in the lions’ den or the fiery furnace. What was the secret of their strength? They spent much time alone with God in prayer!

***Dan 6:10** Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.*

May we find time to be alone with the God of Jacob before he finds us alone and desperate! May Israel arise out of the ashes of Jacob! May we proudly display the physical evidence of this great encounter!

Prayer in the house of Mary

Act 12:12 And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.

Acts chapter 12 opens with a gruesome act: the murder of the first Apostle, James the brother of John. The shrewd Herod understood that the people were baying for the blood of more Apostles, so he proceeded to arrest the biggest prize yet, Peter. What should the church do when the gates of hades threaten to extinguish the light of the Gospel? The answer is always fervent prayer.

Act 12:5 Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

Let us first understand the identity of Mary, the mother of John Mark. The Apostle Paul tells the Colossian church to receive Marcus, “sister’s son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him;)” (Colossians 4:10). Mary, then, was the aunt of Barnabas, which makes John Mark and Barnabas cousins. We are also told in the scriptures that Barnabas was a man of means; he sold his property and gave it to the Apostles.

Act 4:36 And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus,

Act 4:37 Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

We see a pattern emerging here: this was a prosperous family who decided to commit all that they had to the service of the Lord and the propagation of the Gospel. Mary had dedicated her house to the Lord Jesus for constant prayers – even at night. Her nephew, Barnabas, sold everything and laid it at the Apostles’ feet, while Mary’s son, John Mark, was also heavily involved in the propagation of the Gospel. In addition to writing the Gospel of Mark, he assisted Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys. What a blessed family! Could this be one reason that Barnabas supported and defended John Mark even against Paul? Never underestimate the power of family ties! In addition, John Mark was called “the son of Peter”. In other words, there will come a time when your spiritual and familial ties in the kingdom of God will defend you. John Mark had many powerful supporters. Above all, the family of John Mark had the power of Jesus in their lives.

Such was the power of prayer coming from this house that it overturned the decision of Herod, the ruler of the land and representative of Rome. When the church prays fervently together, the answer to our prayers will come knocking on our door. There is power in prayer in the name of Jesus!

***James 5:16** 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.*

I am glad we have a house where we pray once a month at night for the needs of the church. I am glad that many of you in this church have dedicated your homes for Friday prayer meetings – amazing things will follow the prayers in your homes.

Act 12:7 And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.

Note the power of prayer in action: an angel and a heavenly light appeared in the prison where Peter slept. When we pray for those in prison, the Lord Jesus is able to disperse the darkness of sin and evil and shine a divine light to give them hope and joy. Remember Paul and Barnabas in the prison in Philippi? Next, the chains fell off. Hallelujah! Whatever the nature of the chains of evil that the enemy has encumbered people with, prayer in the house of Mary will strike a blow at those chains.

It is significant that Peter decided to go to the house of Mary that night. Recall that there were more than 3000 souls baptized in Jesus name in Jerusalem in one day; how many more hundreds and even thousands of homes would have received Peter? Yet, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ led him to one house – the house of Mary where many had gathered to keep a night vigil of prayer.

Jesus had commanded the Apostles to go and teach all nations (Mathew 28:19), but this was obstructed by Herod. Prayers in the house of Mary facilitated the Great Commission! Acts chapter 12 demonstrates that without a home where prayers are made with fervency, the Great Commission will be hindered. Clearly, this message should encourage us to keep praying in homes for the Great Commission to be fulfilled. Our prayers have the power to release many

Peters from prison, and they will come straight to our homes of prayer.

May your home be the house of Mary!

Hannah: praying for the honor of God

1Samuel 1:11 And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.

Why pray for a child only to give him away to the Lord? Let this question guide us in our analysis of the fervent prayer and subsequent sacrifice of Hannah. Women who give up their children for adoption normally do so in order to give the children a better future; drugs, alcohol and other addictions render some mothers unfit for the demanding task of rearing children. Furthermore, women (and men) generally desire to have children so that they may derive joy from their presence; it is difficult to deny a certain selfish, but perfectly natural, dimension involved in the decision to have children. Hannah, however, was clearly fit to be a good mother which makes it quite puzzling as to why she made such a solemn vow unto the Lord – she decided to forego the joy and blessing that a longed for child would bring. Is there a clue in the verses below?

1Samuel 2:12 Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD.

1Samuel 2:17 Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD.

There are two ways to respond to a spiritual crisis in the house of God: one is to lament and complain about the sin, while the other is to see an opportunity. We must assume that Hannah was well acquainted with the spiritual crisis in Israel; she knew that Eli's sons were evil. The Bible records that because of their behavior, people not only refused to bring sacrifices to the Temple, but abhorred the entire ordinance of sacrifices. This was a spiritual crisis – the honor of God was maligned throughout Israel, and the cause was in the Temple itself.

***1Samuel 2:30** Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.*

Why would a chaste woman such as Hannah expose her child to the nefarious influence of the sons of Eli? The sons of Eli committed adultery with the women who came to the Temple. While others were scandalized and immobilized by the brazen sins of the sons of Eli, Hannah saw an opportunity. She would pray a true man of God into the Temple. At the time, God had abandoned Israel. Imagine not being able to recognize the voice of your own father! No one seemed to know what the voice of the God of Israel sounded like any more. God help us to never become strangers to the voice of our Father, Jesus!

***1Samuel 2:30** Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.*

Remember when there is a crisis in the church, God is not in a crisis – he looks for the individual whose heart is perfect towards him and has sufficient faith to pray through a change; someone who sees beyond the crisis. This is what I meant by seeing a powerful opportunity in a crisis. “The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry” (Psalm 34:15). Hannah’s faith and prayers were more powerful and far-reaching than the spiritual crisis in the Temple.

The psychologist, Marshall Rosenberg, employs the metaphor of a jackal and a giraffe in regard to conflict resolution. The field of vision of a jackal is short compared to that of the giraffe who sees further than any other land animal. The jackal is conflict seeking while the giraffe is calm and conflict shy. We all have a jackal and a giraffe in us: the question is which one dominates at a given time. Hannah had the vision of a giraffe – she prayed the most powerful prophet Israel had seen until then into existence.

In summary, Hannah saw an opportunity in the Temple while others chose to abhor the sacrifices and stay away. Through her prayers, she birthed a mighty prophet who would restore the honor of God and reconcile the people with the Temple ordinances. Her prayers were not selfish; a child for her alone, but for Israel and the honor of God. It is difficult to ignore Hannah’s question today: do you dare to pray for a Samuel?

Thank God for some unanswered prayers

Matthew 26:39 And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

Think what would have happened if the Lord Jesus' prayer was answered! There would be no forgiveness of sins; no deliverance from the power of Satan; no healing for the body and soul; no resurrection from the dead and no hope of heaven waiting for us. Actually, Jesus' prayer was not his own, but as the one who became the sacrificial Lamb for us, he took our rebellious will, wrestled with it, and subdued it to the will of God. Isaiah knew that many would misunderstand the purpose of Jesus' prayer.

Isaiah 53:1 Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

Isaiah 53:4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

Isaiah 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

When we pleaded with God through Jesus not to experience Golgotha, God, because of his great love for humanity, rejected this prayer. Someone once put it this way: Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane was not heard, so that we might be heard. Thank God for some prayers that are rejected. Every prayer prayed in hell right now is a good prayer;

sadly, these prayers are too late and will always remain unanswered. Let us consider the prayer of the rich man in hell.

Luke 16:24 *And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.*

Luke 16:27 *Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house:*

Luke 16:28 *For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.*

Not only was the rich man's prayer too late, let it be clear to anyone who prays to so-called saints that Abraham has no power to answer prayers. The apostle Paul said, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We can also add, that while we could not yet pray, or prayed ignorantly concerning God's will, Jesus prayed wisely for us. What is the duty of a father towards his children? Is it not to use his experience to protect his children from danger? Jesus asked the question, "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?" (Luke 11:11). He then went on to say:

Luke 11:13 *If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?*

Please believe that Jesus knows what is best for you and me! Never doubt God's love and care for you although some of your prayers may go unanswered. Trust the integrity and faithfulness of our God **Jes63**

Christ. David suffered much at the hands of many enemies. He prayed, “Unto thee will I cry, O LORD my rock; be not silent to me: lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit” (Psalm 28:1). God always answered the prayers of David at the right time. Few people lived as close to the gates of death as David; Goliath, King Saul, Absalom and many others tried to kill him, but he lived to be an old man, full of years because the God of Israel heard his prayers. However, there was one prayer of David that God rejected.

***2Samuel 12:14** Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.*

***2Samuel 12:16** David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.*

David recovered quickly and resumed his normal duties once the child died. This surprised the people, but not David because the honor and glory of God is infinitely greater than David’s prayer. It was better for the child to die than the name of God to be blasphemed. Was it not the same David who risked his life for the honor of God when Goliath blasphemed the name of the God of Israel? What about Abraham himself? Listen to his prayer for Ishmael:

***Genesis 17:17** Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?*

***Genesis 17:18** And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!*

Thankfully, Abraham’s prayer for Ishmael to succeed him was not heard. What would the world say? Would they not say that God was unable to miraculously grant conception to Sara and Abraham so he settled for Ishmael? Yes, Ishmael shall live, but in Arabia, not Israel! Let us always say with Jesus, “nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). Always believe that God knows your *best* interest *best*. Yes, pray as hard as you can, and never give up, but trust that Jesus is all-knowing and has your best interest at heart. All prayers to God must be fervent with no room for doubt. As long as the sheep are bleating loudly, the predators are concerned that the shepherd will be alerted and come to their rescue. Satan loves the quiet sheep. He can select the best sheep and devour as he pleases, but bleating sheep, those who make noise with the intent of attracting the shepherd, confuse and disorient him. That said, we pray fervently while accepting that we want only the will of God to be done. Prayer that pleases God is one that is fervent while simultaneously conscious that God may have something better.

Isaiah 55:9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

To trust God’s silence is to believe he is in control. It is a declaration of supreme confidence in God’s omniscience. Take the apostle Paul for instance. He told the Corinthians “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength

is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2Cor 12:9). Saul of Tarsus had become hardened with the deadness of the letter of the Law. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was his guiding philosophy – and it led him to become blind to the love and mercy of God, whom he discovered to be the same as Jesus. The thorn in his flesh was given him to make him tender and loving. The language of love is often learned only through pain and suffering. Let us read some of the most beautiful words about the nature of godly (agape) love read in many wedding ceremonies all over the world to this day:

1Corinthians 13:4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

1Corinthians 13:5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

1Corinthians 13:6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

1Corinthians 13:7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The man who was filled with hatred and misplaced zeal wrote some of the most beautiful words about love ever. How was this possible? Simply because God rejected his prayer for deliverance from whippings and affliction for Jesus. “Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep” (2Cor 11:25). Thank God for unanswered prayer! We cannot know what blessings they will bring. Thanks God for silence!

Intercession: the prayers of the Holy Spirit

***Rom 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.*

***Rom 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.*

We must pray because we have many infirmities! To be human is to be weak! Due to the Fall and entrance of sin into this world, there is imperfection written into every inch of existence, which is why we worry so much. Doctors misdiagnose, the rains fail, chromosomes fail to replicate as they should, thousands die because of drunk drivers and pilot errors, and the list goes on and on. We sometimes worry that we do not worry enough. I once remember reprimanding my son about an issue that I felt he was too cavalier about, and adding, “You should be worried!” The wise Job summarized the human condition well when he said, “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble” (Job 14:1).

God has given us a solution that is equal to the human condition of worry: pray in the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to the Romans, “the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities”. Jesus came to this earth to redeem us from sin and death, he healed people along the way, he taught them about the kingdom of heaven, and, after his resurrection, he came as the Holy

Spirit to pray for us, while dwelling in us. Let me begin with this last point first:

Col 1:26 Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

Col 1:27 To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

God be praised! He has bestowed such honor upon us by dwelling in us. This mystery – that God has now tabernacled in humans – was hid throughout the ages, but is now made manifest to us, the saints. What a privilege! Now we can pray more powerful prayers than Elijah and Moses and David put together because Christ is in in us, and prays for us. Hallelujah! Jesus wants to reassure you that he is closer to you than your own heartbeat. He is in you and me to help us pray. No one knows us better than Jesus does. He is the companion of the lonely, the comforter of the broken-hearted and the friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24).

Paul goes on to write “for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession”. I have seen professional soccer players touch the ground, cross themselves and lift up their index fingers to heaven praying earnestly, to Jesus I presume, that he should be on their side and, preferably, help the player score the final, winning goal. I am afraid this is an example of “for we know not what we should pray for”. I am certain that Jesus is not too concerned with adding more money to the account of a player like the Brazilian, Neymar, who earns one million US Dollars a week. The Holy Spirit is

in us to save us from many wasted prayers, thankfully! Jesus prays for us according to the perfect will of God.

When you are filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus wants to pray through you. He is gently pleading with us to allow him to pray – and who can pray like Jesus? The Gospel writers have witnessed his mighty prayers in Gethsemane and his all-night prayers in the hills and mountains of Galilee. The best “self-ministry” we can do is to go down on our knees and ask Jesus to intercede. There will be a stirring in your bowels which, like a mighty river, will flow up and out of your mouth in the form of tongues and will touch the throne of God. In return, the prayers, like clouds pregnant with droplets, will fall down on you as gentle showers of peace, joy and love – the fruit of the Spirit.

***1John 2:1** My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:*

The Greek word for advocate *paraklētos* connotes one who is called alongside another to assist. In a court of law, the judge could never be your lawyer, but the judge of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ, is our lawyer. God now becomes our lawyer and judge. He defends our case and passes the judgement in our favor at the same time. Praise the name of Jesus! The richest people on this earth have access to the best lawyers in the world. Thankfully, the poorest Christian has the best lawyer in the universe – Jesus Christ!

***Luke 22:31** And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:*

Luke 22:32 But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.

Let me conclude by revisiting the theme of comfort. Jesus has promised us, “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18). Perhaps one person, more than many, whose life attest to the power of Jesus’ comfort, is Joseph Scriven (1819-1886) from Northern Ireland. Just before he married at the age of 23, his fiancé drowned. Sorrowful, he left for Canada where he fell in love again and was due to marry in 1860 when his new fiancé fell sick and died. He decided to live a life of poverty dedicated to Jesus and was comforted. When he heard that his mother in Ireland was very sick, and he was too poor to visit her, he wrote a poem to comfort her which we know today as “What a friend we have in Jesus”. Only a man who knew such sorrow and the power of Jesus’ grace to comfort the brokenhearted could move the Christian world with such a powerful and timeless hymn. May the Jesus who comforted Joseph Scriven and his mother comfort us!



Joseph Scriven (1819-1886)

The widow and the unjust judge

Luke 18:1 And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus started by saying, "...men ought always to pray". Men is a generic term for all of humanity. It is our right and privilege to pray to God; whether sinners or not, all are expected to pray, according to Jesus. By praying much himself, Jesus modelled prayer and hence demonstrated for us its importance. He who needed no prayer, prayed more than any human being. To pray always means to be ever ready to pray. Consider firefighters! They are always ready to fight fires at short notice, although there might be few or no fires for a long time. To pray always is a state of mind – a state of readiness. Those who do not pray will faint. Contrast the lives of Saul and David! We have no record that Saul prayed, but David was in constant prayer and poured out his soul to God. David's house prospered because of prayer!

2Samuel 3:1 Now there was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker.

Now, Jesus introduced the parable of the widow in this way. "Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man" (Luke 18:2). That this judge did not fear God means he did not know the meaning of divine mercy. He was callous and adhered strictly to the letter of the law – which was above the law of God, in ~~h15~~

eyes. In other words, pity the man or woman who comes before this judge and expects mercy! Significantly, some people who are atheists may still mention God so as not to offend the sensibilities of a society, such as the USA, where “God bless you and God bless America!” is often uttered as a tradition rather than a heartfelt benediction or prayer. However, the judge in Jesus’ parable was so callous that he made no such pretense to follow tradition or exercise diplomacy. He was openly and proudly an atheist and said, “Though I fear not God, nor regard man” (Luke 18:4). He confessed his atheism to himself. Now, the widow must have heard about the wickedness of this judge, and yet she came to him expecting him to bend the law towards mercy, and not justice.

***Luke 18:3** And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.*

A widow was indeed a woman to be pitied in ancient Israel. The husband was her provider and defense. To become a widow was a life sentence of poverty and misery. The prophets exhorted people to remember widows. “Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). Therefore, a fear of God sensitized society to the condition of widows; but how desperate is the situation where the judge does not fear God and is unmoved by the cries of a widow! He does not care about the enemy who had committed some great wrong against her. It appears the law protected the aggressor, and the judge followed the law of humans alone, not the law of God.

Thankfully, the widow was importunate; she knew how to persevere with her cause. Jesus called the judge “unjust”: “And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith” (Luke 18:6). Perhaps he was corrupt and expected a bribe from the widow, which she could not afford. Perhaps the widow found him in the streets and demanded justice; perhaps she stood outside his grand house and shouted the same words again, “avenge me of mine adversary”. She did not make a long speech nor did she have money to hire an eloquent lawyer; all she had was five rough words, “avenge me of mine adversary”. We should not think that the educated or eloquent manage to sway the heart of God more than those whose vocabulary is limited due to their humble circumstances. Five words, like the 5 stones of David, found their Goliath.

***Luke 18:5** Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.*

Hear the unjust judge! He was more concerned for his comfort and ease than justice for this widow was. Let us now contrast all the above with the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the judge of all the earth! He is a God of mercy and showed mercy throughout his ministry. We perceive the premium that Jesus put on mercy in his teachings:

***Matthew 5:7** Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.*

***Matthew 9:13** But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*

Our confidence to approach the throne of Jesus and pray is rooted in his own words about mercy. God will never tell us to pray in vain. The God who loved us so much, and pitied us to such a degree that he came in flesh to die for us will certainly respond to our prayers. The church is not a widow: the church is the bride of Jesus Christ! Paul wrote, “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Eph 5:30). Put differently, Jesus shared this parable to drive home the following point:

If the widow had no lawyer or other help, and if the judge did not fear God and was unjust, and yet the widow was successful in her petition, how much more will the church - which is the bride of Jesus - receive answers to her prayer requests from the merciful God?

Come, let us pray always and not faint! Our God Jesus Christ is still merciful! What’s more, he bids us to come and pray to him. Why do we tarry! The widow teaches us that even an unjust, atheist judge had to hear her petition – how much the merciful God who bought us with his own blood will hear us.

Fasting and prayer

Matthew 17:19-21 Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Let us recall that the Lord had earlier given power to the apostles to cast out demons, heal the sick and preach the Gospel. They came back rejoicing and told the Lord that even unclean spirits are subject to them. Jesus responded, “Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). This response of the Lord is an important clue in understanding the later failure of the apostles to cast out the powerful demon in Matthew 17.

Before that, however, we need to be thankful for failures. Failure is never something the Christian should accept; we serve and represent Jesus who never lost a case or succumbed to a challenge. “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37). It must have been very painful and humiliating for the apostles as they helplessly witnessed the demon attempt to kill the boy. The apostles were only used to victory each time they uttered the name of Jesus over any problem. There is a great danger associated with wielding the power inherent in the name of

Jesus. Pride and self-deception can easily set in and ensnare. Now, having failed miserably, they were compelled to return to Jesus and ask, “Why could not we cast him out?” (Matthew 17:19). It is a good thing to return and inquire from the Lord! He did not want them to think of themselves as “demon-slayers” or “exorcists”, but as servants totally depended on the Lord Jesus.

Let us note that the Lord attributed their failure to lack of faith and not Satan’s strength. This point lends credence to the earlier suggestion that pride was creeping into the hearts of the apostles. Faith relies wholly on God and gives no room for human agency or assistance. Faith is dead to the flesh and all that pertains to this world, but is alive to God and his promises, as Abraham was. God does not want us to become comfortable with his power to cast out demons like some mechanical machine that predictably accomplishes what it is designed to do at the push of a button. The failure of the apostles forced the apostles to return to inquire from the Lord. May we constantly return to Jesus! Daniel was a man who embodied the principle of prayer and fasting in the Bible.

Daniel 9:2 *In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.*

Daniel 9:3 *And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes.*

In the Scriptures above, Daniel was a man more stubborn and determined than Satan was. He knew that the enemy could not keep the

children of Israel in Babylon any longer than the word of God had decreed. Fasting without declaring for how long sent a clear message to God and the demonic world – Daniel was determined to hear from God. Daniel had always been determined in regard to spiritual matters even as a child (Daniel 1) when he refused to be defiled by the king’s meat. His fasting and prayer was such that the angel Michael came to assist the other angel who was hindered by the Prince of Persia. The breakthrough could only happen because of Daniel’s determined fasting and prayer; even the Prince of Persia had to move aside. Fasting and prayer means to be more determined and stubborn than the demon who had lived for many years in the boy. In some countries today, occupying a particular residence for many years automatically grants leave to stay; it appears the demon was claiming such a right after occupying this young man since he was a child. This was his house!

In addition to the above, fasting and prayer brings unity.

Mark 2:3 And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four.

Mark 2:4 And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.

God may allow failure so the church will unite and work together. Like the man sick of the palsy, we cannot be healed all on our own; we need each other. We must carry each other’s weaknesses in prayer, as the four carried the body of this sick man. Such collective effort will remind us of our interdependence and bring a sense of humility.

Finally, to fast is to deny oneself of that which is lawful. Satan lives by the opposite principle: eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Satan fell from heaven because he was unable to restrain himself from blasphemous thoughts and actions. He dreamed of becoming like God. Ever since his fall, he has been in the business of tempting humans to indulge in excesses – greed, gluttony and every evil (Esau, Judas etc.). For Satan, self-denial is abhorrent, which is why he trembles at the sight of a Christian who denies the self.

***1Peter 4:3** For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries:*

***1Peter 4:4** Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you.*

To summarize, failure in exercising power in the name of Jesus may be a blessing in disguise. This will gently push us to inquire from the Lord and keep us from pride. The disappointment and sorrow will lead to soliciting the help of other saints and promote unity in the church. Fasting will also reignite love and passion for the Lord; Daniel repented for all Israel. In this age of technology and automation, we run the risk of transferring the same mentality to the power given us in Jesus name. Fasting and prayer has the potential to offset this complacency and keep us returning to the Lord – the source of the power.

The prayers of Esther

Esther 4:16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

Haman was an Agagite. He was a descendant of Amalek (a son of Esau (Genesis 36:12)) concerning whom God told Moses, “I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” (Exodus 17:14). True to the spirit of his ancestors, Haman’s antagonism towards the Jews drove him to plan the extinction of all Jews in Persia and Media. It is with this hindsight that we must understand why God hated Esau – on account of not only Esau’s personal hatred of Jacob and the covenant of Abraham, but the curious fact that this murderous hatred of Jews constantly reared its ugly head in the descendants of Esau, such as Amalek and Haman.

Esther 6:1 On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.

The first result of the three-day fasting and prayer program initiated by Queen Esther was the king’s discovery that Mordechai had saved his life. This is the power of prayer and fasting – the forgotten things are brought back to memory for the glory of God. King Ahasuerus could not sleep because the prayers of hundreds of thousands of Jews, whose lives were at risk, was ascending to the

throne of God. Isn't it amazing that the king made this discovery just the day before Haman came seeking for permission to hang Mordechai! Our God is always on time!

***Esther 6:6** So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?*

The first response to the Jewish nation's fasting and prayer was to give honor and power to the powerless Jews. This was concretized in the promotion given to Haman's enemy number one – Mordechai. Fasting and prayer set a divine shield of protection on the man whom Haman wanted to hang. God is good! Next, fasting and prayer emboldened Esther to reveal her identity publicly. Until then she concealed her true identity as a Jew because her own uncle, Mordechai, told her to do so for fear of persecution.

I am reminded of the former Secretary of State of the USA under President Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, whose Jewish ancestry was revealed by the newspaper, *The Washington Post*, in 1997 after she became Secretary of State, which surprised her. There is still a debate whether she really knew or not. This should not surprise anyone as Jews have always been on the receiving end of persecution ever since Pharaoh wished to destroy them. Nevertheless, we cannot hide our identity as the sons and daughters of our Lord Jesus Christ. Fasting and prayer will embolden us as it did Queen Esther.

***Mark 8:38** Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him*

also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Esther had everything most people could dream of: beauty, honor, power and wealth. She could have chosen to neglect the plight of the Jewish people. However, there is a time to declare who we are with a clear and distinct voice. Moses, we are told, chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (Hebrews 11: 25). It is worth citing the famous words of Mordechai:

***Esther 4:14** For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*

In particular I wish to encourage Christian youth. I understand the power of peer pressure. The fear of being ridiculed and ostracized is real and you may decide to neglect or compartmentalize your Christian identity in order to be included and accepted by your friends. Take heart from the example of Esther; she said, “If I perish, I perish”. Had Moses and Esther denied their identities, they would have been unknown today. Fasting and prayer gave them strength to identify with their own people, the people of God, and risk their lives for them.

We know how the story ended. It was the fasting and prayer of Esther and her people which actually finally blotted out the memory of Amalek – the family of Haman perished, 75,000 people who prepared themselves to kill the Jews died and Esther and Mordechai flourished.

Jesus praying for his church

John 17:9 I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.

Let us all who are born again according to Acts 2:38 rejoice in that Jesus prayed a special prayer for us. None of the prayers we have considered so far can be compared with the prayers of the Lord for his church. As the one who gave birth to us, and is preparing a glorious future for those whom he has redeemed with his own blood, the prayers of Jesus are unlike any other in the Bible. Others prayed for their particular circumstances – sickness, fear, enemies, children, poverty etc. The Lord Jesus prayed for our victory in this world – his prayers are what carry us along upon eagle’s wings towards heaven and eternity.

They are exclusive prayers; “I pray not for the world”, Jesus said. Like the coat of many colors that Jacob made exclusively for Joseph, our Father, Jesus, prayed exclusively for you and me. Ripping off the coat of many colors cannot diminish the exclusive love of the Father. May we draw strength from the exclusive prayers of Jesus when family, society and the powers that be fail us, as Joseph drew strength from the love of his father and the love of God!

John 17:10 And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them.

The Lord Jesus is glorified through us in this world. Anyone chosen for such an exalted purpose no doubt becomes the target of Satan, that

ancient enemy of God. This is why Jesus prayed for us so that we will focus on the holy task of glorifying his name. In Acts chapter 18, the apostle Paul suffered much in Corinth because the name of Jesus was being glorified. This brought severe persecution, but the good Lord appeared to Paul in a night vision.

***Act 18:9** Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace:
Act 18:10 For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.*

Because Paul glorified the name of Jesus, the prayers and power of the Lord propelled him forward in Corinth. And what a church he founded in this Greek city! As we set our minds on the task of glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ, be assured his prayers are with us. The ancients were concerned with progeny. Solomon said, “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth” (Psalm 127:5). Children represented the perpetuation of a family – the longer the line continued, the longer the memory persisted. When God was incensed with the Israelites in the desert, he told Moses:

***Deut 9:14** Let me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven: and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they.*

We are the children of Jesus – as we glorify him, he will preserve our memory forever in the annals of his book. There is no father who ever had as many children as Jesus does. Saul asked whose son David was; over the years many have asked whose children the Christians are. How proud the Lord Jesus must be each time they

answer “the children of Jesus Christ”! Let us be encouraged, he has prayed for us to glorify him!

John 17:11 And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.

In John 14, Jesus manifested the name of the Father to the apostles. This is why he said earlier, “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world” (John 17:6). There was now no doubt in their minds that the name of the Father is Jesus. Having fulfilled this important assignment, the Lord now prays that we will be kept in this name – the name of Jesus, as it *is* the name of the Father. As long as we understand and glorify the name of Jesus, we are glorifying the name of the Father. The prayer of Jesus remains unfulfilled when Christians make the Father “distinct” from the Son. Hence, the prayer of Jesus is for his disciples to receive the revelation that the Father is none other than Jesus – “keep through thine own name”.

Finally, Jesus was very concerned with unity in the church - “that they may be one, as we are”. The Father and the Son are not distinct persons, but one and indivisible. Even one human being can be divided in mind and soul. How often have we heard say, “My mind says x, but my heart says y?” Paul said that he was divided between going to Jesus and staying for the sake of the church. These examples have nothing to do with the relationship between the Spirit (Father) and

the Son (flesh of God). God is one in his opinions and decisions; he is never conflicted in himself as humans are.

***Isaiah 40:13** Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him?*

***Isaiah 40:14** With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?*

The Lord has prayed for this divine kind of unity in the church. We have access to this divine state of unity through the prayers of Jesus. This unity is essential for the Lord to do his work through the church. Remember how they were in one place and in one accord on the Day of Pentecost before the Holy Spirit fell! Let us do an experiment in unity! Close your eyes and ascend in the Spirit to the throne of Jesus! As we get closer to his throne, the space between us gradually constricts and disappears. Furthermore, as we keep ascending towards his throne, we feel his love growing ever stronger and breaking down all barriers between us. Ultimately, at the throne, all differences of time and space are dissolved – we are one with him. This is what the Lord Jesus prayed for, and it is our privilege to fulfill his prayers.

The prayer of Aaron

Number 6:24 The LORD bless thee, and keep thee.

The word for “bless” (*barak*) also means “to kneel” (*qal*). This is a very interesting connotation and must be studied carefully. In the eyes of God, a person who kneels is a person who will be blessed. In other words, Aaron prayed for God to teach his people the importance of kneeling before him. Is that not the ultimate aim of all preaching, teaching, worship and praise? When Korah, Abiram and Dathan accused Moses and Aaron of lifting themselves up before the congregation, note the reaction of Moses:

Numbers 16:4 And when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face.

To be blessed of God is to be like Moses – fall down before God and leave matters of judgment in his hands. May we, like Moses, learn to be quick to kneel and fall down before the face of the Lord Jesus Christ as we walk through the complex maze that is this life! For then we will be blessed of the Lord. We note the same spirit residing in the heart of the prophet Daniel.

Daniel 6:10 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforesaid.

The Lord bless thee indeed, as Aaron prayed! A person who is quick to kneel understands that God is in control, not humans. Such a person further demonstrates that God is constantly in his or her thoughts, and every action is submitted for his scrutiny. Blessed is such a person who kneels! How often have we made serious errors in responding without consulting the Lord Jesus Christ?

***Deuteronomy 5:29** O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!*

Next, Aaron goes on to bless Israel with the words, “The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee” (Numbers 6:25). It is quite certain that Aaron thought of his brother, Moses, when he uttered this blessing. “And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone: and Moses put the vail upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him” (Exodus 34:35).

All Moses did was to spend forty days and nights in the presence of God for his face to shine so powerfully that the Israelites could not bear to see his face. The moon actually has no light of its own, but reflects the light of the sun. And yet the moon is extolled in countless ways through poetry and music, among others. For instance, Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” was so named because it reminded the German music critic, Ludwig Rellstab, of the effect of the first movement to that of moonlight shining upon Lake Lucerne in Switzerland.

Sadly, we live in a time when people are more concerned with looking as young as possible with the help of every cosmetic invention imaginable. There are skin-lightening and skin-tanning creams (some brown and black people wish to become white and some white people wish to become brown). There are others who use surgical interventions to alter their God-given bodies. What we need is the light of God to cover our mortal deficiencies – both physical and spiritual just as the light of the sun covers the ragged and dusty surface of the moon and makes it shine gloriously. The moon only reflects about 3-12% of the sun’s rays and yet consider how helpful this light has been for travelers in a dark, medieval forest with only the moon’s light to show the way. The more we allow the light of Jesus to shine upon us, the more we can serve as beacons of light to guide many souls away from the rocks that cause shipwreck. May Jesus cause his face to shine upon us!

***Numbers 6:25** The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.*

A few words on the last phrase, “and be gracious unto thee”. The Hebrew word *chanaan*, also means “to pity”. To have pity on someone is to favor someone and their difficult circumstances. “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him” (Psalm 103:13). We are indeed blessed when God’s emotions are stirred up sufficiently to pity us – to be gracious unto us, as Aaron prayed. May the priestly benediction of Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel, be yours today and forever!

Praying to escape judgment

Luke 21:36 *Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.*

According to Jesus, only those who watch in prayer will escape the terrible judgment determined in the last days. Since we are witnessing many of the signs Jesus mentioned, we are the generation the Lord was warning. Let us consider three examples: the Corona virus of our days is an example of “pestilences”. “And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from heaven” (Luke 21:11). Secondly, in verse 24, the Lord talks about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jews’ exile until the time of the gentiles is fulfilled. We are clearly the generation who has witnessed the fulfilment of the times of the gentiles. Finally, consider this prophecy in the same chapter:

Luke 21:25 *And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring.*

“Signs in the sun” is significant given our contemporary focus on global warming. Today our problems come on a global scale. “The sea and the waves roaring” appears also to indicate great and negative changes in the weather pattern – something which we hear about almost on a daily basis. As the earth becomes hotter, warmer oceans are blamed for the increasing intensity of hurricanes in the USA.

The question is: how can one escape these events which are the judgment of God? The answer is prayer, according to Jesus. Let us study some examples from the pages of Holy Scripture.

***1Kings 21:29** Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.*

Prayer is equated with humility. While sin is the result of pride, and provokes the anger of God, prayer demonstrates a humble heart that fears God. Ahab had killed an innocent man, Naboth, and taken unlawful possession of his vineyard. Now, God sent the prophet Elijah to pronounce a terrible judgment on Ahab.

***1Kings 21:19** And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.*

Significantly, the same curse was pronounced upon Jezebel, Ahab's evil wife, but she never repented and died according to the prophecy. On the other hand, Ahab demonstrated a fear of God which proved that he believed and feared the judgment of God. Just a couple of chapters earlier, Ahab had witnessed the fire of God descending from heaven on Mount Carmel. He knew the God of Elijah was the God who answered by fire. Ahab humbled himself and prayed and escaped the

judgment of God. Dogs licked the blood of his wife because she never prayed.

In 2003, while preaching in a conference in the south of India, the Spirit of the Lord gripped me and I began earnestly to implore the congregation to repent because God was preparing a devastating flood to hit that area. I had no idea what I was saying, but some months later, the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean hit the same area where I had been preaching (Andhra Pradesh). An estimated 10,000 people were killed in total in India. Some brothers contacted me and reminded me about the prophecy, which I had completely forgotten by then. Fortunately, the message had been recorded on video tape and I was stunned to hear the warning from the Lord which clearly mentioned a coming devastating flood. God is merciful and does not want any to perish, but repent!

Ezekiel 33:11 Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

How many were praying in the days of Noah? How many in Sodom and Gomorrah when the angels came to judge? One can wonder what would have happened if the apostles had heeded the Lord's admonition and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane when evil was lurking round the corner. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). We must pray to escape the great coming judgment!

Changed while praying

Acts 10:9 On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour.

Peter clearly loved to pray. How many of us have ever contemplated separating ourselves for prayer while the host prepared a meal? Wanting to perhaps avoid idle chatter, Peter slipped out to the housetop to spend a few precious moments in communication with his beloved savior, Jesus Christ. While deep in prayer, the Lord began to challenge his prejudice against non-Jews. “And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:15). God challenged him with the same words three times. I wonder if Peter may have thought it was better to chat with his host while food was being prepared – this prayer session was not going according to plan. Like Peter, we often look for our favorite prayer spot and dictate the terms and process of prayer. But remember, prayer is God’s opportunity to challenge and change us!

Act 10:17 Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate.

The Greek word for doubted is *diaporéō* which can also mean “much perplexed”. Genuine prayer can and will leave us in much

perplexity on occasion. Let us borrow an analogy from the automobile world. I have often been taken by surprise at the litany of defects that car mechanics identify in the mandatory biannual European Union (EU) automobile control. The car seemed in tiptop shape; surely there must be a mistake somewhere – this will cost a small fortune. Similarly, we often engage in prayer like Peter confident that all is well; in fact, some expect the Lord to applaud their “virtuous” lives. Just as the automobile mechanics ultimately have the aim of protecting lives by making our cars safer to drive, the Lord Jesus identifies our character defects to save us from bringing harm upon ourselves and others. Prayer is God’s garage for our souls – he identifies and seeks to repair our souls and make us whole. Let us go on to consider another example of how prayer changes individuals in the Bible.

Act 13:1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Act 13:2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

Barnabas was a wealthy Levite and Saul (later Paul) was a highly educated rabbi. Simeon called Niger was a Black man (Niger is the Latinized for black) and Lucius of Cyrene was from North Africa. In other words, they came from some of the most disparate socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. What better place than this church in Antioch, Syria, to train and prepare some of the greatest missionaries of the early church! While these very diverse group of Christians

prayed and fasted together for a long time, the Lord Jesus slowly changed their characters so they could see beyond the visible and invisible differences/biases ingrained through culture and upbringing. Collective prayer changes collectively! Collective prayer requires coming together, spending quality time together and genuinely trying to understand each other.

Rugby was hated by Blacks in South Africa. Blacks considered football (soccer) their game, while rugby was associated with the oppressive apartheid regime. Black South Africans would go and cheer opposing teams rather than the Springboks (name of South African rugby team). All this changed dramatically, however, when Nelson Mandela one day wore the Springboks uniform and donned a Springboks cap. As President of South Africa, Mandela believed that sport could heal the racial divide in South Africa. He struck a friendship with the Captain, Francois Pienaar, and boosted the morale of the team before the 1995 world cup which everyone believed the mighty All Blacks of New Zealand would win. Shockingly, the Springboks won and Mandela proudly marched onto the field to congratulate his team with 65 000 white South Africans chanting Mandela's name. Mandela knew that white and black South Africans would have to find a way in the "rainbow" nation to live together; they had one country and must support their one team.

In the same vein, the Lord Jesus has only one church. He is preparing one city, New Jerusalem, for us. Jesus wanted the diverse disciples at Antioch to live together, pray together understand one

another and love one another. The Apostle Paul no doubt learned the words below while at Antioch.

***1Cor 9:20** And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law;*

***1Cor 9:21** To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.*

***1Cor 9:22** To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.*

***1Cor 9:23** And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.*

We must pray to be changed by the Lord while in prayer. Let me not leave your presence without experiencing a change, Jesus, should be our cry. If Peter had defects, how much more we! Before one can be called to reach the world, Paul knew that Jesus had to make him genuinely love all people. When Peter uttered the beautiful words below, remember it all began with prayer on the housetop in Joppa.

***Act 11:17** Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?*

***Act 11:18** When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.*

Prayer – Comfort for the future

Gen 15:10 And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.

Gen 15:11 And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Abraham was concerned for his future – it seemed to suggest a childless future so far. God was aware of this, so he in essence commanded him to offer up a prayer which took the form of a sacrifice, “And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon” (Gen 15:9). Just as it would be futile to make sense of the particulars of the sacrifice God ordered, obedience and prayer may not make sense sometimes in our walk with God – but obey and pray we must!

While Abraham was waiting for God to reveal his future and comfort him, he had to shoo away fowls which came to consume his sacrifice. The fowls represent distractions from the enemy who does not want us to wait on the Lord to reveal his will. Please do your utmost to jealously watch over any sacrifices you have made to the Lord Jesus over the years – let no fowls devour them! Having obeyed and prayed, waiting on the Lord to speak is paramount. The Bible records that Saul failed to obey the prophet Samuel who commanded him to wait for seven days until Samuel arrived and sacrificed before attacking the Philistines. Sadly, the lack of patience caused Saul to lose his kingdom.

1Samuel 13:13 *And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel forever.*

Once Abraham waited on the Lord and chased away the fowls, the Lord revealed the future of his people to him. The first great news was that he would have a great many children – a nation born to him who at that moment had none, not even Ishmael. However, they would become slaves for four hundred years after which God would judge the oppressors and deliver his children. This is truly amazing! How many can say they know what shall befall their descendants to the fourth and fifth generations? We do not know what shall befall our sons and daughters let alone their children. See the love and power of God to comfort in regard to the future! Prayer can open the doors of future comfort! It all began with obedience and prayers on the part of Abraham. Let us now consider David.

2Samuel 7:1 *And it came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the LORD had given him rest round about from all his enemies;*

2Samuel 7:2 *That the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains.*

David had a prayer in his heart – to build God a house of worship – a grand house fit for the glory of the God of heaven and earth. He shared this prayer with the prophet Nathan. That night God spoke to Nathan, not about the house that David wanted to build, but the future house that God was going to build for David. This house pointed to the coming of God in flesh, Jesus Christ, to redeem us with his own blood

and give us an eternal house in the heavens. Isn't it amazing how one man's prayers invited God to reveal the blessed future he has for all who love the God of David?

***2Samuel 7:12** And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom.*

***2Samuel 7:13** He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.*

The human condition has always been such that the future brings much concern. We all want assurance that the future will be good to us. This explains the existence of “professions” such as psychics, astrologers and so-called prophets from the beginning of time. Saul was so desperate to know the future that he broke the Law of Moses by consulting the witch of Endor. Witches and wizards exist because people cannot seem to wait on the Lord Jesus by prayer and obedience. Consider the timeline of false prophecies from Charles Taze Russell and J.F. Rutherford, leaders of the *Watch Tower Society* otherwise known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

***1878:** end of the harvest (return of Jesus and gathering of saints)*

***1881:** (date extended) A revised end of the harvest*

***1914:** end of the times of the gentiles human rulers; beginning of Christ's millennial reign*

***1918:** the new terminus; Christ “entered the temple for the purpose of judgment”*

***1925:** resurrection of the patriarchs; millions now living will never die*

1975: the worldwide jubilee; the possibility of that year heralding the beginning of Christ's millennial reign and, along with it, doom for unbelievers.

Why do such false prophets and organizations still have followers despite a track record of deception? It appears, sadly, the human desire to know the future at any cost is willing to try again and again. It seems we live by the maxim “any prophecy is better than no prophecy”. May God grant us the spirit of the prophet Daniel who fasted and waited on the Lord for 21 days! Finally, God revealed to him the great prophecies concerning the end of the Jewish exile, the coming and death of the Messiah, the antichrist’s desecration of the Temple, the final battle and deliverance of God’s people (Daniel 9). No witch, wizard or so-called prophet could reveal this – only God alone.

In conclusion, we are not called to worry about the future. The great servants of God have left us a model of prayer and waiting on the Lord. While doing so, God graciously showed them a vision of the future. The purpose was to comfort and assure them that God is in control of their future. It is interesting that Abraham wanted a child, David a house of prayer and Daniel a return to Israel, but God’s answer reveals his concern for the coming of the Messiah, redemption of sin and an eternal home of rest for the people of God. Their own immediate futures were also guaranteed by God – they would age and die well.

Gen 15:15 And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.

Dan 12:13 But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.

The effectual fervent prayer

James 5:16 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.

James 5:17 Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.

The words “effectual fervent” have been translated together from the Greek word *energeō* which Strong’s Lexicon defines, among others, as “to be at work”. This is where we get the much loosely applied term “energy”. We can all identify with being at work. Work is something that never seems to end, thankfully so, or we would be unemployed. Yet we never complain that our daily shifts never seem to finish – we gain some satisfaction from knowing that our contributions everyday are valuable and keep the wheels of society turning.

It is the same with prayers. The entire land of Israel in the days of Elijah took sin to a new level of depravity. God’s response was to raise up a man who knew how to pray energetically. The strength of sin is the flesh, and so Elijah decided to pray that God would shut up the heavens and deny Israel rain for three and a half months. Notice that James 5:16 begins with, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed”. Elijah knew that Israel would confess its faults if it was struck by severe famine.

The rationale behind Elijah's thinking is not dissimilar to the well-known tactic of boycott employed by organized laborers. Bringing the factories, schools etc. to a standstill by refusing to work reminds the owners not to take the labor (energy in our context) of their employees for granted. In the case of Israel, it appears to be the opposite: the owner of the land, God, was being neglected and abused by Israel. God wanted the children of Israel not to forget that this is his land, the land flowing with milk and honey. They were guests in his land.

***Deut 11:11** But the land, whither ye go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven:*

***Deut 11:12** A land which the LORD thy God careth for: the eyes of the LORD thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.*

***Deut 11:13** And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,*

***Deut 11:14** That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.*

***Deut 11:15** And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full.*

Because there is "comfort" in numbers, Israel became comfortable in the knowledge that the entire country rebelled against the owner of the land. This always has severe consequences. Today also the world is comfortable in its rebellion against the identity and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Remember that we often are willfully ignorant of our rebellion as we just follow what our fellow-humans are doing.

Let us consider the above by considering cobalt which is found in every lithium-ion rechargeable battery on the planet such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, electric vehicles/cycles/scooters and jet engines, to name a few. Did you know that more than 60% of the world's supply of cobalt comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo? (Kara, 2018). One source from the UK newspaper *The Guardian* documented more than 35,000 children, some as young as six, working 24-hour shifts in dark mines for 1.80 USD a day. Many have been orphaned because their parents died due to the high rates of toxicity. Now, after hearing this, it should be clear that we are all guilty of perpetuating this injustice against children in the Congo. Each time we purchase something made of cobalt, we are contributing to the suffering of these children, but we prefer to do as our neighbors are doing – turn a blind eye.

Fortunately, God always raises individuals who will not turn a blind eye. James 5:17 states that “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are”. The Greek word for “passions” is *homoioopathēs* which means “of like feelings or affections”, according to Strong. Elijah decided to “go to work” in prayer. We know from the Bible how he later energetically prayed with his whole body for rain to fall after God judged Israel with fire and brought death upon the prophets of Baal. When the spiritual situation looks hopeless, God is looking for individuals who will energetically go to work in prayer. Nehemiah was also such a man who prayed energetically and worked energetically for the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Will you go to work for Jesus?

The golden altar of incense

Exodus 30:1 And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it.

There were two altars in the tabernacle; one was the altar of sacrifice and the other was the altar of incense respectively. To begin with, blood from the first altar of sacrifice was required to sanctify the second altar of incense. “And the priest shall put some of the blood upon the horns of the altar of sweet incense before the LORD, which is in the tabernacle of the congregation; and shall pour all the blood of the bullock at the bottom of the altar of the burnt offering, which is at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation” (Leviticus 4:7).

Here is the first lesson about prayer: *one must first acknowledge the death of the Lord Jesus Christ for our sins upon Calvary before we can approach God in prayer.* In other words, it is not our deeds that empower us to approach God in prayer, but the blood of Jesus Christ alone – therefore, make sure to carry the blood of Jesus with you to the place of prayer. Did not the power in the blood of Jesus heal the woman with the issue of blood for 12 years (Luke 8:44)? To those who feel unworthy to approach the throne of God in prayer, there is still power in the blood of Jesus to transport you confidently before the altar of prayer. This truth is emphasized by the writer of Hebrews.

Hebrews 10:19 Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.

Next, we need to understand the uniqueness of each Christian's prayer in the sight of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have earlier taught that the unique formula for the incense points to the uniqueness of the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. In addition, the special incense formula also represents the uniqueness of the prayers of every child of God. God personally gave Moses and Aaron a unique recipe for the incense. It was called *sweet* incense because every child of God's prayer is unique and sweet to his ears.

Exodus 30: 9 *Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon.*

Exodus 30: 37 *And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the LORD.*

It is for this reason that we should not try to copy the prayers of others – in particular those whom we often refer to as “prayer warriors”. Your prayer, however weak and feeble you think it may be, is actually *unique* and *sweet* in the ears of Jesus. Hannah was a poor, unknown woman from an unknown family in Israel. The high priest could not even decipher her prayers, and rebuked her for being drunk. However, her prayers produced one of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel. It is not important what judgments humans pass on your prayers, but in which direction your prayers are heading, as David knew.

Psalms 141:2 *Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.*

So far the lesson has focused on the individual and prayer. The altar of incense is also about the power of collective prayer. If the prayer of one person, a Hannah for instance, can be so powerful, how much more the prayers of the church! Remember the altar of incense was the only other holy item that was placed just before the Ark of the Covenant.

***Hebrews 9:3** And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all;*

***Hebrews 9:4** Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant;*

Just as the incense constantly perfumed the Ark of the Covenant, the prayers of saints come up as a sweet perfume continuously before the very throne room of Jesus. The Bible is filled with powerful stories of God's response to the prayers of his church. We have studied the impact of the church's prayer when Peter was arrested. "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12:5).

One would imagine the prayers of Zechariah to be very powerful, but he was childless and must have given up hope. Being a priest does not guarantee immediate answers to prayers. However, one day, as he stood in the holy place, the angel Gabriel stood beside the

altar of incense. Interestingly, it took the prayers of the whole congregation for this miracle to happen.

Luke 1:9 *According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.*

Luke 1:10 *And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.*

Luke 1:11 *And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.*

Furthermore, consider this scripture:

Revelation 8:3 *And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.*

Revelation 8:4 *And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.*

Due to the prayers of the church, a third part of vegetation, the seas and rivers are destroyed. Furthermore, the earth experienced darkness for a third part of the day. This is how much God honors the prayers of the church. The world is concerned about climate change, nuclear war and global pandemics. It appears from Revelation that they ought to be more concerned with the power of the church's prayer. If the collective prayers and repentance of a very wicked nation such as Nineveh turned away the judgement of God, how much more the prayers of the church redeemed with God's own blood?

The individual and the church must understand that we are in possession of the greatest treasure ever: the power of prayer. The

purpose of this Bible study on “Why Pray” is to understand the nature of prayer and apply it wisely to further the will of God in our lives and the world in general. Do not waste this treasure! Do not underuse this treasure! Jesus himself has sanctified it with his blood and sits upon his throne in heaven eagerly anticipating our prayers.

***Psalm 141:2** Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense;
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.*

Nehemiah – Praying and taking responsibility

Nehemiah 1:5 And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments.

Having heard the depressing account about the status of Jerusalem, Nehemiah first started by praising God. This may seem strange but Nehemiah demonstrated faith in God's omnipotence – after all, God had long warned through his prophets, like Jeremiah, about the details of this judgement. This is why Nehemiah declared, "... that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments". Nehemiah knew that there was still hope in the ashes of Jerusalem. The destruction of Jerusalem was the work of God and only God could reverse the fortunes of the city. He knew the bones could live! God is always willing to hear the voice of the repentant and enter into a new covenant with him.

2Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Next, Nehemiah vindicates God by confessing his sins, his fathers' and that of the nation of Israel. Repentance points to the blood of Jesus Christ. Blood was shed for Israel to leave Egypt, and blood had to be shed for Israel to leave Babylon. The blood was concretized in the repentance of Nehemiah, Ezra, Zerubbabel, Haggai and others.

Nehemiah 1:6 *Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.*

Let us analyze the role of Nehemiah's vicarious repentance and the metaphorical connections this evokes in relation to the blood of Jesus. Nehemiah states that he was the king's cupbearer (Hebrew: *shaqah*). Significantly, he poured out wine before the king and his job was to ensure the king's drink and food were safe from poisoning among others. Picture Nehemiah holding a cup of wine looking very sad before the king. As Bible students we cannot help but think of our Lord Jesus Christ looking sadly at the cup of wine representing his blood and sufferings soon to follow.

Matthew 26:21 *And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.*

Matthew 26:22 *And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?*

However, the cup of wine representing Jesus' blood is not about sorrow alone; once we are done with soul-searching and sorrow for our sins, salvation will be ours. It was only before the cup of wine that Judas was identified and left. There is something about the blood of Jesus that identifies sin and expels it! The godly sorrow of Nehemiah turned into

joy after he talked with the king. Let us approach the King of Kings with the cup of his blood and our sorrow will be turned into joy.

Finally, once prayer is answered, a window of opportunity is given from heaven with a time limit – the recipient of the blessing must act immediately and diligently.

***Nehemiah 2:6** And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.*

Please do not waste the window of opportunity secured through prayer. The king gave Nehemiah a time limit. Here are some of his accomplishments:

- He rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem within 52 days.
- He repopulated the city of Jerusalem and purified the Jewish community –debts were cancelled, upheld biblical marriage
- Returned to Susa, Persia, after 12 years.

Nehemiah had great passion for the covenant of God. As cupbearer, he had a position of great power and privilege as cupbearers were the closest confidantes of kings in ancient days. Nehemiah's love for the city and people of God would not let him live a comfortable life among the gentiles. He prayed so hard and repented so comprehensively that God granted him favor in the sight of the king. Finally, always praying every step of the way, Nehemiah demonstrated great leadership skills and perseverance in accomplishing great things

for the city and people he loved. He teaches us to take care of the doors
prayer opens!

Jonah: The man who was forced to pray

***Jonah 1:5** Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.*

Jonah was purposely determined to neglect the need of lost souls while taking great care to safeguard his own comfort. What is the spiritual condition of a prophet whose conscience is at peace and finds sleep knowing that 120,000 have been condemned to death by God? We can outline three decisions that ultimately led to Jonah's imprisonment in the belly of a great fish. Firstly, in his disobedient state, Jonah was of no use to Israel, God's nation. Surely Jonah had responsibilities in Israel! He appears to have abandoned his leaders, mentors, students and the people for whom he was anointed prophet.

***Zechariah 11:17** Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened.*

Next, Jonah neglected the needs of the gentiles with him in the ship to Tarshish. The Lord Jesus slept in the boat in Galilee, not only because he is God almighty, but he was where he should have been – with his apostles, in Galilee and in the ministry prophesied for him. Jonah had no right to sleep – his comfort was a false one endangering

the lives of the poor gentiles. Ensure that the sleep of your minister is from God!

Jonah did not pray when he left Israel; neither did he feel the need to pray when he entered the ship to Tarshish. The sign of true spiritual maturity is talking and consulting with Jesus even when you know that your mind contests his command. Elijah was so unhappy that he left Israel and his ministry, but he went straight to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. He did not go to Tarshish, but the place where Israel was first formed as a nation; where they were given the greatest of all commands, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!”

Thirdly, Jonah was of no use to the enemies of God – the Ninevites. The danger of being the chosen people of God is to forget that all chosen people were once the enemies of God. Abram’s fathers were pagans in the land of Ur before God commanded Abram to leave his family and country. “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled” (Colossians 1:21). Remember that sometimes people become our enemies because, in a paradoxical way, they know we share the true word and love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their souls desperately want deliverance and salvation, but their flesh fights them. Many of Jesus’ disciples were his former enemies – remember the story of the Good Samaritan? Only when Jonah failed God in all three dimensions of his calling – to Israel, to the gentiles in the ship and to Nineveh – was there no other option but to cast him into the depths of the sea in the belly of a great fish.

Jonah 1:17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Just as a prison is the mercy of society for those who are unfit to live normal lives in freedom, the great fish was God's prison of mercy to Jonah. The fish was in constant motion; there was no solid ground, no stability. A prayerless life leaves one with no stability, no solid ground. Jonah could no longer determine the direction of his life. A prayerless life is one with no direction – the fish swam where it pleased, and definitely not towards Tarshish! Prayer is the source of peace and spiritual quiet – Jonah must have been defeated by the mighty rumbling sounds in the echo chamber of the fish's belly. Prayer gradually opens the windows of the soul to let in the healing light of God – Jonah was oppressed by the unrelenting pitch blackness in the fish's belly; there was no way of knowing the day or hour. Thankfully, however, Jonah finally prayed!

Jonah 2:2 And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.

Jonah 2:7 When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.

Jonah teaches us that a prayerless life brings much misery and pain. Calvary is evidence of the greatness of the compassion of God towards us. Hence we ought to pray for others to know Jesus's mercy.

Abraham: the model of intercession

Genesis 18:21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

God did not tell Abraham that he would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah at this point. God did not need to send angels to determine the sinful condition of these cities, he is all-knowing; he knew that Abraham would respond to this troubling disclosure and intercede. We read that Abraham did not disappoint God. A true servant of God will do whatever is necessary to save souls.

Genesis 18:23 And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?

Genesis 18:24 Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?

Thankfully, Abraham drew near. Just a few moments prior to this, God disclosed the fantastic news of the coming birth of his son. While we must assume that Abraham was very glad, he did not say anything. But the moment he heard about the purpose of God's visit to Sodom and Gomorrah, he broke his silence. This is a testament to Abraham's compassionate character: he was silent in regard to his own blessing, but broke his silence when he heard of the impending doom. The Lord Jesus narrated the story of the Good Samaritan who, unlike the priest and Levite, did not pass by and ignore the wounded Israelite.

Although the two people were bitter enemies, the Bible records, “But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him” (Luke 10:33).

Love and compassion for our fellow humans trapped in sin transcends any sense of nationalism. Remember that Abraham was a foreigner in the Land of Canaan. He was promised this land but he determined to intercede for the people of the land, although they were grievous sinners. Jews believe that God consulted with Abraham because these cities also belonged to Abraham. Lord give us the spirit of Abraham! He was indeed a remarkable man. With each step of the angels, destruction was fast approaching the two wicked cities. Abraham knew he did not have much time. The work of intercession is urgent and pressing. Thankfully, the Lord opened the negotiation with a concrete number.

Genesis 18:26 *And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.*

In a city of some hundreds or thousands of souls, fifty is a small, token number. God always has a standard; a city the size of Sodom was expected to have fifty righteous people. In the days of Noah, there were only 8 righteous souls – if Sodom and Gomorrah should have had 50, then 8 souls in the entire planet was a hopeless cause. I think we need to be concerned for our cities and towns. Do they meet the minimum number of God? Clearly, Abraham knew these cities well – his own nephew, Lot, lived there. We must assume that Lot kept him informed about the state of these cities, and Abraham knew he had a long

negotiating process before him because these cities did not have fifty righteous people. Abraham teaches us that we need to know the standards of God, the true condition of the objects of God's anger, and plead with God to lower his standard, to be compassionate; this is true love. Abraham truly practiced the golden rule, "love thy enemies". "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

***Genesis 18:32** And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake.*

What can we learn from Abraham's intercessory strategy? During the intercessory process, Abraham praised God as the Judge of the whole earth and, simultaneously, referred to himself as "dust and ashes". Abraham demonstrated two characteristics that are highly valued in the eyes of God: he boasted in the Lord's righteousness and he was of a contrite heart.

***Jeremiah 9:24** But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.*

***Isaiah 57:15** For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.*

Once the number was brought down to 10, God left. Intercession is initiated by God, but remember that God will not

negotiate indefinitely! When you feel the Spirit of Jesus laying a burden for souls upon you, there is a window of opportunity to negotiate the mercy of God. The angels are getting closer to the objects of God's anger. Abraham did his part; he negotiated the number down to 10. Surely, he may have thought, Lot must have taught his family the ways of God – and there must be a minimum of 6 other righteous souls in these two cities: 3 in each city.

Teaching your family about the ways of God, as Abraham was complimented by God, will add to the overall minimum number that will spare the city. How wrong Abraham would be proven! But were his prayers in vain! Not at all! Let us remember Abraham's bargaining position: "And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:23). His prayers did deliver the entire family of Lot, although his wife and two children were wicked.

***Genesis 19:16** And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the LORD being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city.*

The prayers of Abraham became the hands of the angels that laid hold of Lot's family. There was no other reason to show mercy to Lot's wife and children but the intercession of Abraham. Abraham could not save the two cities, but his prayers delivered three wicked souls, although Lot's wife destroyed herself. Our intercessions may not save entire cities, but they can save a few precious souls.

Prayer for peace and evangelism

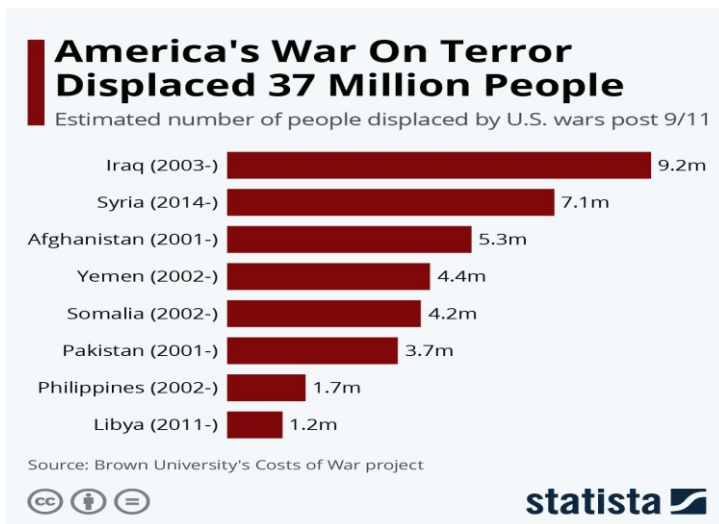
1 Timothy 2:1 exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;

1 Timothy 2:2 For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

The apostle Paul was a man familiar with the ways and state of the world in his days. His background was unique: a religious Jew, with a Greek education and Roman citizenship, and now preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ in world colonized by Rome. He was acutely aware of the global nature of his world – what happened in Rome affected the Gospel and hence the salvation of souls. We are to pray for Kings and those in authority, first and foremost, so “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”. Let us for moment briefly consider the importance of this sentence.

We are blessed to live in a country like Norway. It has become synonymous with peace, wise leadership and prosperity. As such, there is the fear that we take this peace for granted and forget that we live in an oasis of peace surrounded by a world in crisis. War and conflict creates fertile ground for vices such as corruption, deception, distrust, vengeance and the breakdown of law and order. This is the opposite of leading a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

There are more than 40 armed conflicts currently in the world. If one were to add non-state conflicts, the number would increase further. For a country to declare war is easy, but the long-term devastation this causes to innocent civilians is often forgotten. While we were witnesses to the horrific acts of terror on 9/11 (Twin Towers), and the US reserved the right to defend its citizens and respond to the attacks, it was difficult in the heat of the moment to know that 37 million people, most of whom were innocent, would be displaced in the Middle East because of the ensuing “War on Terror” (see map below; source: Brown University, 2020).



As the figure above demonstrates, one cannot determine the unintended consequences of war. These very same countries disintegrated and their impoverished and desperate citizens came knocking on the doors of the West seeking refuge. Aggression, hate-mongering and war are values that are in direct opposition to the spirit and ethos of the Lord Jesus Christ, who commanded us the following:

“But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Christians do not follow politicians, we follow Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, and pray for politicians to follow peace. I believe this should be our guiding principle as we are a few days away from knowing who will be the next US President. Pray for peace to prevail, for the sake of the Gospel!

1 Timothy 2:3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour

1 Timothy 2:4 Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

We can all acknowledge that peace is a necessary condition for the Gospel to flourish. Notice how the life of our Lord Jesus Christ was negatively impacted by the political situation of his day. “And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12). The Lord was a refugee in Egypt because of a despotic ruler in Israel, Herod. He grew up in Nazareth because Judea was politically too risky. God did not call us to condemn rulers, but to pray for them so that peace and tolerance will prevail. In this regard, James Madison (later 4th President of the USA) and the Founding Fathers of the USA were prudent in writing:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (US Constitution, Bill of Rights, First Amendment).

In the 19th century, the French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the importance of religious freedom in the maintenance of US republican institutions. One reason, according to some scholars, for the vibrancy of faith in the USA compared to Europe, is precisely the separation of church and state. The Lord Jesus himself proposed such a separation or distinction:”

Mark 12:17 And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

Caesar put his image on coins, and so they belong to him. God put his image in human spirits, and so we must pray they will acknowledge him. Caesar uses force to demand his tax, God asks us to pray and preach the Gospel to them. Salvation is always for the “whosoever wills”. In conclusion, we ought to pray for the peace of all men.

Jesus died for all humans everywhere – a testament to the fact that God loves all people equally. Due to this, we can have no enemies – only estranged brothers and sisters who must be won over through the example of Jesus Christ and prayer. In short, the Christian must make every effort to live in harmony with the vision of the world outlined by the prophet Isaiah – a vision of perfect peace through Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 11:6 *The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.*

Isaiah 11:7 *And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

Isaiah 11:8 *And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den.*

Isaiah 11:9 *They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.*

Isaiah 11:10 *And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.*

The prayer of Cain

Genesis 4:13 *And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.*

Genesis 4:14 *Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.*

Cain has gone down in biblical history as the embodiment of sin, a metaphor for wickedness. For instance, John writes, “Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous” (I John 3:12). Despite this, a careful reading of Genesis chapter 4 shows us a different side of him; while he was wicked, yet he was wise enough to seize the moment to plead with God to show him some mercy – to give him some hope in his wretched condition. A secular song had the refrain, “We didn’t start the fire, it was always burning since the world’s been turning”. Cain didn’t start the fire, it was Adam and Eve – he was now reaping the harvest of what his parents had sown.

This message in no way intends to vindicate Cain. However, are we better or holier than Cain? Are we not all potential murderers of our brothers and sisters? Does not the felon who just shot his fellow-brother have the right to beg his God for some clemency, some mercy when the rest of the world has no more mercy to offer? Have we not often

considered our sins in light of the word of God and cried out, “My punishment is greater than I can bear”. Cain did the right thing; he pleaded with the God of mercy.

Genesis 4:15 *And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.*

The Hebrew word for “mark” is *'owth* and refers often to a miraculous sign in the Bible. For instance, Psalm 105:27 states, “They shewed his *signs* (*'owth*) among them, and wonders in the land of Ham”. This is very significant: the mercy of God appeared in a visible form of a miraculous sign on Cain. In answer to Cain’s prayer, “My punishment is greater than I can bear”, God placed a divine sign upon him to give him hope. What was this sign? We are not told but there is a clue in the promise given to his father and mother.

Genesis 3:15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

The sign upon Cain clearly must have pointed to the promise of the “seed of the woman” to come. It is he who will carry the weight of the punishment of Cain. Could the sign have been the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ? We do not know, but this is a tantalizing prospect. The weight of sin on Cain’s and our shoulders is too heavy to carry. See how we stagger through the pages of history! See how we cannot stop hating and killing our sisters and brothers! We are the children of Cain

in the flesh – this is our identity outside of Christ. But thankfully, the one and only God was manifest in flesh for one purpose – to carry the sin and weight of our punishment to Golgotha.

***John 19:17** And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha.*

Jesus bore the weight of Cain and our sins on the Cross of Golgotha! The seed of the woman, Jesus Christ, paid the gruesome price for the sins of Cain and us. Remember there were very few people in the earth in the days of Cain. His horrible sin was easily and quickly publicized. Everyone knew these brothers – everyone was closely related back then. We can just imagine the collective anger against Cain. However, the moment they saw him, the miraculous sign God imprinted upon him, made them leave him alone. The divine sign said, “Do not touch Cain! God will pay for his sins in due time!” Oh the mercy of God!

***Rom 5:6** For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.*

***Rom 5:7** For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.*

***Rom 5:8** But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

***1Timothy 1:15** This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.*

Never cease praying to him! Not everyone may have a testimony, not everyone may praise him, not everyone may say they know him, but everyone can pray – it is the most basic of spiritual

human rights. If Cain's prayer was answered, our prayers will be heard too!

***Psalm 130:3** If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?*

***Psalm 130:4** But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.*

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians

***Ephesians 1:15** Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints,*

***Ephesians 1:16** Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;*

***Ephesians 1:17** That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.*

The church of Ephesus was commended by the apostle Paul for their faith and love. Undoubtedly, these are among the greatest virtues of the Christian faith. Paul himself famously wrote to the Corinthians, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (I Corinthians 13:13). And despite this, Paul declares the need to pray for the Ephesians to receive the “spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him” (Ephesians 1:17). It is our privilege to study and pray to explore the reason why Paul was so concerned for these graces. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines wisdom in the following way:

The ability to use your knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgments.

Paul does not mention wisdom alone, but includes revelation in the same sentence. We will need to look at both words together to arrive at the fullest meaning of Paul's prayers and concern for the Ephesians. We will, then, need a working definition of the word “revelation” too.

The act of making something known that was secret, or a fact that is made known (Cambridge Dictionary).

Let us now attempt to synthesize the two definitions: Paul prayed for the Ephesians to have the ability to use spiritual knowledge and experience together with divine revelation to make good decisions and judgements for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us consider one clear example from the Bible that reveals what happens when faith and love are not combined with prayer for knowledge, experience and revelation.

***Joshua 9:14** And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD.*

***Joshua 9:15** And Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live: and the princes of the congregation sware unto them.*

During the conquest of the Land of Canaan under Joshua, some Canaanites from the area of Gibeon, decided to deceive Joshua and the Israelites into a peace treaty. Although they lived about three days journey away, they made their clothes old and their bread moldy in order to give the impression that they lived in another country further away. They even mentioned the great victories that God gave Israel which all impressed Joshua. Sadly, this was a case of blind faith and love – faith in the story of the Gibeonites and love for the God of Israel, who, as soon as pagans praised him, settled the issue for Joshua. The truth is: God is not glorified in our naiveté and gullibility.

***Matthew 10:16** Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*

***2 Corinthians 11:13** For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.*

2 Corinthians 11:14 And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.

Knowledge of God is paramount! One cannot just get by with faith and love for Jesus without knowing who he is and his will. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children” (Hosea 4:6). You will meet Christians who promote unity and oneness to the detriment of the true knowledge of God. They say, “Let us not fight about doctrinal issues. The most important thing is to love Jesus”. This is blind faith in a unity that God has not blessed! Let us review the great truths of the Bible: God is one and not a Trinity (Deuteronomy 6:4); the same, one God was manifested in flesh and his name is Jesus: not a so-called “God the Son” (John 1:1,14); baptism is essential for salvation and must be administered in the name of Jesus alone (Acts 2:38); one must be filled with the Holy Ghost with the divine utterance of tongues following (Mark 16:17; Acts 2:38).

Wisdom is to apply the knowledge of God above to win souls for Jesus Christ and discern the spirit of falsehood. “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise” (Proverbs 11:30). Finally, revelation is to wait upon the Lord even when we have knowledge and wisdom. Revelation is the sign of the humility of the Christian who refuses to rely upon what he or she may believe to be incontrovertible. It says, “While everything seems to point in a certain direction, I will yet pray and wait upon the Lord to reveal any hidden matters”. The case of the prophet Samuel is instructive;

1Samuel 16:6 *And it came to pass, when they were come, that he looked on Eliab, and said, Surely the LORD'S anointed is before him.*

1Samuel 16:7 *But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.*

If a prophet of Samuel's stature was prone to deciding with his eyes and human judgement, let us humbly pray to wait on the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is infallible – incapable of any mistakes. In conclusion, we must understand the burden the apostle Paul felt for the Ephesians. Guided by the revelation of the Lord Jesus, he was aware that a spirit of deception would creep into the church after he would leave.

Act 20:29 *For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.*

Act 20:30 *Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.*

This was the reason for his prayers. Survival guides advise making yourself bigger, throwing stones, making noises and never turning your back at a wolf as the way to deal with a wolf-encounter. God has not called us to run away from spiritual wolves, but throw the rock of the Word of God and make ourselves bigger through divine wisdom and revelation. Let us pray for the spirit of knowledge, wisdom and revelation!

Pray ye the Lord of the harvest

***Luke 10:1** After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come.*

***Luke 10:2** Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.*

The scriptures above remind us that the Lord Jesus appointed more than twelve individuals to preach and demonstrate the power of the Gospel during his earthly ministry. Clearly, this goes to show that twelve apostles alone were insufficient. We would also do well to remember that there were 120 disciples in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:15). While the 12 apostles were uniquely called and anointed to be witnesses of the life and message of the Lord, the Gospel could not have spread without the efforts of many others whom Jesus called and commissioned.

***Luke 10:1** After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come.*

Note that the Lord intended to visit every place where the 70 evangelists declared his name. Let us say that 35 pairs of evangelists (two and two) preached in 10 places each. This would mean the Lord visited 350 places in Israel. The Lord lived what he preached: “And he said unto them, I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent” (Luke 4:43). There seems to be a principle here: Jesus comes where someone has gone before and declared his name by

faith. Until that happens, the Lord remains hidden; although he is in our midst. Let us illustrate this with the story of John the Baptist. This man spoke mightily about Jesus while the Lord was in the midst of Israel and obscure. For Jesus to be revealed, someone has to start glorifying him. As John daily talked and praised Jesus, the Lord drew nearer to where John was baptizing in the river Jordan. Then one glorious day:

***John 1:36** And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith,
Behold the Lamb of God!*

***John 1:37** And the two disciples heard him speak, and they
followed Jesus.*

All that is needed for the Lord Jesus to visit a new place is for the Christian to travel there and draw attention to his name. Jesus will certainly visit that place. So what is hindering us from following this model? Lack of prayer, according to Jesus! Again, there is no better example of someone who embodied the core of this message than John the Baptist. John's entire life was a prayer for God to reveal himself to his people Israel. His spartan life – locusts (trusting God with unstable provision of food), camel's hair (represents repentance) and residence in the inhospitable wilderness of Judaea, all was a prayer for the Lord of the harvest to come to his people. Keep in mind that John was the son of a priest, Zechariah. However, he did not seek recognition through his lineage but preferred the depersonalized “voice in the wilderness” to anonymize himself and hence give all the glory to Jesus only. Jews were proud of their long lineages: son of son of ... etc. John was by faith the “son of the voice” (Word of God, Jesus).

John 1:22 *Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?*

John 1:23 *He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.*

John teaches us a valuable lesson if we wish the Lord of the harvest to visit our cities and towns. It is not enough to pray for the Lord to visit, our lives must reflect our desire. John was not living a normal life – he did not even eat grapes as a Nazarite, nor did he wear normal clothing. It is as if he was in mourning until God showed himself to his people. Why would the son of a priest eat locusts and not the tender loins of bulls and lambs? Because of Jesus! Even when he was in prison and his ministry crowned with success, John wanted to double-check that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Before we criticize him remember that his entire life from birth to death was lived for this one purpose – to reveal God to the world. John was condemned to die not because of Jesus, but Herod’s adultery. And yet John wanted to talk about Jesus before he died, not Herod! When it is time to leave, review your relation with Jesus, not the politics of this world. There will be many new Herods, but one King Jesus! What focus John displayed! John’s life and ministry highlighted three main characteristics which drew Jesus to where he was:

- He talked about the identity and ministry of Jesus.
- His life was one of perpetual repentance and self-denial.
- He quickly commanded his disciples to follow Jesus.
- While in prison, he was concerned to verify Jesus’ identity.

Let us pray the Lord of the harvest to be his John the Baptists!

The prayer life of Daniel

Daniel 6:10 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.

It is often the case that humans desperately seek the face of God only when disaster threatens. Before that, God is someone for the very religious alone. Not so with Daniel! The key phrase in the scripture is “as he did aforetime”. The secret of Daniel’s success, both as a man of God and as a statesman in Babylon, was his regular and consistent prayer life. In this pattern of faithfulness, Daniel reflected God’s consistent faithfulness toward humankind.

1Thess5:24 Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.

The faithfulness and consistency of God is written into every aspect of existence. No one has gone to bed at night worrying that the Sun may not rise the next day; we do not panic at the fact that the Earth spins at 1670 kms/hr fearing we may fly off its surface (we travel at the same speed); which farmer refrains from sowing seed for fear the seed will not grow?; does a fetus grow in the womb because the mother worries herself sick?; who leaves the house skeptical of the ground – that it may without warning open up and swallow you? The list goes on and on – the faithfulness and consistency of God is etched into every dimension of being, and Daniel’s prayer life was an acknowledgement and

celebration of God's faithfulness. Before Christ, he embodied the words of Christ about worry.

Matthew 6:26 *Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?*

Matthew 6:27 *Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?*

Daniel knew the decree which had been signed could never be altered (Daniel 6:8). However, he also wanted the Medes and Persians to know that the Law of his God could never be altered too. "And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Luke 4:8). Why worship a god who will be cast into the Lake of fire by Jesus Christ (Revelation 20:10)? Daniel, through his dedicated and unswerving life of prayer, overturned the decree of the King.

Daniel 6:25 *Then king Darius wrote unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you.*

Daniel 6:26 *I make a decree, That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.*

Let us summarize thus far: because God's faithfulness is evident in the regularity of nature's provision for us, he expects us to demonstrate our gratitude through a life of regular and faithful prayer. Next we will consider how consistency is not a call to boredom, but a catalyst for miracles to occur. Where there is regular and faithful

prayer, the conditions are fulfilled for divine intervention to the glory of God. Daniel's structured and disciplined prayer life was the antecedent for the world famous encounter with the lions.

***Daniel 6:22** My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.*

A quiet, private life of prayer is the precursor of mighty miracles. This is why Daniel and his three friends never left their private devotions three times a day in Babylon – it was the secret of their great power. The Book of Daniel is really a narrative of men who prayed faithfully and received powerful divine visitations and miracles in response. How else can a righteous person live in a pagan country with capricious megalomaniacs such as Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus? There was another man in the pages of the Bible who lived a life of regular and quiet devotion to God until he was old when an awesome miracle transpired.

***Luke 1:11** And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.
Luke 1:19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.*

In conclusion, a regular life of prayer honors God's faithfulness towards humanity. It is the best way to show gratitude for God's faithfulness and positions us to receive many mighty miracles to glory of Jesus Christ, who is the Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11).

John's prayer for the church

3John 1:2 Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.

The church must always proceed carefully when talking about prosperity because the term has been abused by some denominations who have corrupted its biblical meaning. Paul says about such people, “Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself” (I Timothy 6:5). However, as the saying goes, we cannot throw out the baby with the bathwater – all scripture is still scripture:

2Timothy 3:16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

Returning to our text, John wished or prayed in regard to three important matters for the church: prosperity, health and spiritual wellbeing. Let us begin with the first. The Greek word for prosperity is *euodoō* and was used to wish someone a good journey or success in business. Let us think about this for a moment. Most of our waking hours are spent either preparing for making a living (schooling) or making a living (work). Do you not think that God has some advice about this? Of course he has!

1Thess 4:11 And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you.

When Christians work, they must take comfort from the fact that they are following an apostolic commandment. Even better, the apostle John prays for their prosperity – he has prayed that our journey in business will be successful. Amen! There are too many countries, societies and employers who exploit their employees despite the important work they do; God does not approve of exploitation! May God bless your labor as he blessed Jacob, although he was exploited by his own uncle, Laban!

Gen 31:41 *Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times.*

Gen 31:42 *Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hath seen mine affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked thee yesternight.*

Next, John prayed for the church to be in health (3 John 1:2). The Greek word *hygiainō* means “to be sound, to be well, and to be in good health”. Who would not want to say Amen to that? Praise Jesus! Contrary to what anyone else may say, the apostle tells us that God wants us to enjoy good health. It is as simple as that! We have evidence of this if we go back to the beginning. The first humans enjoyed the best health for the longest period of time – people like Adam, Eve, Methuselah, etc. God did not create doctors or physicians just in case they got sick. God was their physician!

Gen 5:25 *And Methuselah lived an hundred eighty and seven years, and begat Lamech.*

Gen 5:26 *And Methuselah lived after he begat Lamech seven hundred eighty and two years, and begat sons and daughter* 43

Imagine having children at the age of 187 years and then again at the age of 782 years! Scientists and nutritionist would have had a field day subjecting Methuselah to every test imaginable to determine the source of his super health. Does this not prove that God granted humans perfect health in the beginning – even after the Fall, at least for several hundred years? I challenge the church to return to the Lord Jesus as the guarantor and custodian of our health – as the apostle John himself prayed. We live in a day and age where we are assaulted daily by so-called health experts who tell us that, for example, eating eggs is bad for cholesterol the one day, and then “new research” says eggs are good the next – this is perhaps our punishment for not trusting in the Lord. Let us not make the mistake of Asa!

***2Chron 16:12** And Asa in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians.*

Finally, the apostle John prayed that the souls of the church members would prosper. Remember that the word prosper means to wish someone a safe journey and be successful. The essence of humans is the soul – we are spiritual creatures at our core. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen 2:7). What this implies is that we must first have our relations with God in order. The soul must acknowledge its source – its Creator, and find fulfilment in knowing and doing his will. So what is the will of God that our souls may prosper on the journey to heaven? The Father wants us to know

that he is in the Son – Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:19); The Father has been manifested in the flesh and his name is Jesus (Isaiah 9:6; John 14:9). He died on the Cross for our sins and we are to acknowledge this through baptism in Jesus name – using his name in baptism is proof that you acknowledge only Jesus took away your sins (Acts 2:38; Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27) . Next, we are to pray to receive the Holy Spirit, which is not another Spirit, but the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the one true God (Matt 18:20; John 14:18; Gal 4:6). Finally, we are to seek out the assembly of the church, live a life of prayer and holiness and expect the return of the Lord with joy. This is what John prayed for – that our souls may prosper!

Peter prayerfully walking on the sea

Matthew 14:24 But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.

Matthew 14:25 And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

The Romans had divided time into four watches – the fourth watch was between 3 a.m. to 6.a.m. in the morning. The disciples had been battling the storm for many hours now and must have begun to despair of hope. However, the Lord Jesus was watching them all the while. Overwhelmed by the battles we fight, Christians often forget the Lord is watching them: he can see us when we do not see him. It was during the fourth watch that the invisible hand of God began to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians and deliver Israel. The enemy fights us bitterly in the fourth watch before our final deliverance. All of a sudden, the God who was nowhere to be found, came walking on the water towards the boat. Are you in a similar situation? Just hold on for a little while longer! Jesus is coming towards your boat; you cannot see him but he sees you.

Matthew 14:27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

Matthew 14:28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

So traumatized were the disciples by their experience that they became paranoid – they could not distinguish between friend and foe. Thankfully, his sheep recognize his voice. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). In the midst of

storms, we must try to discern the voice of Jesus from all the other confusing voices. One man, Peter, not only quickly discerned the voice of Jesus, but, amazingly, prayed to walk on the water and come to Jesus. What an amazing prayer – let us dissect and analyze his intentions! Individuals who experience some trauma know that visiting or remembering that place will trigger the feelings of stress and despair.

Could it be that Peter determined to remember this experience, not as a trauma, but a mighty victory – one in which he walked on the sea that tried to drown him? The Sea of Galilee was a childhood friend of Peter's. As a child, he learned to swim and fish with his father and friends in the sea. As an adult, he earned his livelihood from the sea and, best of all, this is where he met the Lord Jesus and received the call to follow him. Peter was a fighter! He was not going to let whatever forces threatened to drown him get away with the bruising and battering he received for many hours. We can only imagine how exhausted he was. Yet, the moment he heard the voice of Jesus, he remembered it was the same voice that he heard some years ago, when he was tired and ready to give up, commanding him to let down the net again.

***Luke 5:5** And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.*

Peter did not forget that meeting. He immediately prayed to the Lord for permission to walk on the sea – to take revenge and reclaim his relationship with the sea of his fond childhood experiences and encounter with Jesus. The Lord Jesus knew very well what was going on his beloved apostle's mind. Earlier, Peter would wait for ~~the~~

command of Jesus, but now he took the initiative and asked Jesus to command him. This is maturity in prayer - to learn from our experiences with the Lord Jesus. He was pleased to issue the command.

***Matthew 14:28** And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.*

Another school of analysis may be tempted to conclude that Peter was testing to see if this really was Jesus – “...If it be thou...” I am not convinced about this argument. Had Peter wanted to ascertain the identity of Jesus, that this was Jesus and not some spirit, he would ask for another miracle – for example, to miraculously take the boat to the shore. Why would he test Jesus by walking on the water himself? It is more likely that Peter had a personal agenda. He wanted to conquer the sea that so traumatized him. Peter prayed for this miracle to walk on the sea perhaps because he heard and remembered what the Lord said about walking on serpents and snakes.

***Luke 10:19** Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.*

Prayer, then, is about tapping into the power of the Lord Jesus Christ to tread upon and subdue the power of the enemy. When Peter had walked a few steps, he was elated and the other disciples must have slowly calmed down and focused on this new miracle. “But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me” (Matthew 14:30). What happened was that the same forces that first traumatized him returned once again. Is this not the experience of Christians – that problems we have struggled with

and think we have overcome seem to keep returning? What do you in such circumstances? Do as Peter did! Pray the second time! “Save me!” The Bible records, “And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matthew 14:31).

It is easy to criticize Peter. But how many can say they have walked on water – anywhere? Even Moses and Israel walked on the floor of the Red Sea, not on its surface. Joshua and Israel walked on the river bed of the Jordan, not its surface. Only one man in biblical history, Peter, walked on the surface of a stormy sea. Before he was baptized in water in the name of Jesus, Peter walked on the water in the name of Jesus – the only man to do so. This is the power of prayer! Bold prayers full of faith in Jesus name will make your history unique. We should not wish to do what has been done before! We should by faith desire to show the world new ways of glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ. To walk on the Sea of Galilee was Peter’s idea – not that of anyone else! How will you glorify the Lord Jesus in your life? Start by praying that incredible prayer that no one else has dared to pray yet. God will match your faith for his glory! He will honor your faith in prayer!

Call unto me and I will answer thee

Jeremiah 33:3 Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.

The prophet Jeremiah lived in one of the most ungodly and confusing times in Israel's history. He was obedient to God and prophesied that the King and people of Judah should submit to the King of Babylon, accept exile for 70 years and seek the welfare of Babylon. At the end of 70 years, God would bring them back to Israel. In fact, in the previous chapter, Jeremiah acted on the word of God and publicly bought land from his nephew, Hanameel, as token evidence that the people will return to Israel in the future.

Jeremiah was treated very poorly for his efforts. King Zedekiah was incensed and threw Jeremiah in prison for weakening the resolve of the people against the enemy. We can all pity Jeremiah – the man who was aptly called the “weeping prophet”. “Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people” (Jeremiah 9:1). His was a thankless task. Bible students are familiar with his famous words born out of a deep sense of frustration.

Jeremiah 20:9 Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.

It was in these terrible circumstances sketched above, when Jeremiah was on the verge of giving up, that God said, “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not” (Jeremiah 33:3). There is always hope for the person who knows to pray when all hope seems lost. Such a person refuses to accept seeming defeat, closes his or her eyes and looks up beyond the prison of misery to the throne of God. What was the great and mighty thing that God revealed to Jeremiah?

***Jeremiah 33:14** Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.*

***Jeremiah 33:15** In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land.*

Jeremiah was the only person in the entire land to be told that Jesus Christ, the “Branch of righteousness” would be coming. This is what prayer does – it reveals the hidden matters and gives immense hope. Prayer brings comforting news from the throne of God; news that cannot be revealed in any other way. Jeremiah would weep profusely because he was concerned for the spiritual welfare of his people, Israel. This was the only country in the world founded and sustained directly by God. As such, Jeremiah knew that destruction was coming because his people rejected the God of Israel. This was the cause of so much stress and anxiety for this young, holy prophet. But thanks be to God who does not leave the lovers of truth inconsolable.

What are you troubled about today, saint of God? Are you tired of witnessing for the Lord Jesus and weeping for the sins around you? Does it seem like no one cares to hear what you have to say about the Lord and, worse, think you are mad; a religious bigot? Take heart from the story of Jeremiah. Did you know that meditating on the promise of the return of Jesus is a source of tremendous hope? Close your eyes for a moment and see the return of the Lord Jesus Christ; see him reign for a 1000 years in peace and righteousness; see the world travelling to Jerusalem to worship him often; see the Devil cast into the bottomless pit and no more individuals demon-possessed anymore; see the lion lying down with the lamb and the snake; see yourself entering the gates of the New Jerusalem and worshipping the one God, Jesus, on the throne together with 24 elders and billions of saints and angels. Call unto me and I will answer thee and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not. I wrote earlier that God does not forget those who wrestle with tears and sighs for the sins around them.

***Ezekiel 9:4** And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.*

***Ezekiel 9:5** And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity:*

***Ezekiel 9:6** Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house.*

There is a promise of deliverance from the anger of God for those who pray and sigh for the sins of the people around, as did Jeremiah and the people in Jerusalem in the days of the prophet Ezekiel. Did you know that Nebuchadnezzar had heard about Jeremiah and gave a command for his safety? “Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave charge concerning Jeremiah to Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, saying, Take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee” (Jeremiah 39:11, 12).

What an amazing deliverance for Jeremiah! In conclusion, when life is at its darkest, that is the time to call upon the name of the Lord and he will reveal the secrets of his plan exclusively to you. The revelation will be of such a nature that it will comfort you even if you are in a dungeon as Jeremiah was. God revealed the coming of God in flesh, Jesus Christ, to Jeremiah. God disclosed that when his people would return from captivity in Babylon, the Messiah would be revealed and bring salvation. This news more than compensated for all the troubles Jeremiah faced. What is greater than the coming of Jesus? What is greater today for us than the knowledge that the return of Jesus is at the door? Look to the clouds, saints of God! One of these days, something that never occurred before will transpire – the Lord Jesus for whom we’ve waited will lead an army from heaven to reign as king forever more. Let us never stop calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Maranatha! Praying for the return of Jesus

1 Corinthians 16:22 If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha.

The New King James Version has this translation: “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come.” Maranatha is an Aramaic word meaning, “our Lord cometh or will come”. The Greek scholar, James Strong, adds that it is “an exclamation of the approaching divine judgment”. In other words, “Maranatha” was a prayer that gave expression to the deepest longing in the hearts of those who love the Lord Jesus Christ – a prayer for his return. This prayer for the return of Jesus was often uttered in times of great spiritual darkness when the believer could only look up to heaven as the last hope for a dying world and cry “Maranatha, Jesus!” There is a special blessing reserved for those who utter this prayer. One such man in the Bible is Enoch.

Jude 1:14 And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints,

Jude 1:15 To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

Enoch was the seventh from Adam. This echoes back to the seventh day of creation when God rested from his works. Some Bible scholars believe that we are living in the seventh day since creation if

we accept that over 6000 years have passed since Adam, and one thousand years is as one day in the sight of God (2 Peter 3:8). Hence, the generation of the seventh day ought to pray “Maranatha” diligently as we see the day of the Lord approaching. As previously stated, this would demonstrate our belief in the imminent return of the Lord and our heartfelt desire to see divine judgment exercised in the earth. Enoch embodied this prayer. He lived in a very wicked age. Enoch was a contemporary of the murderer and polygamist, Lamech. Not only did Lamech boast to his wives about committing a murder, he actually held up the wicked Cain as his role model.

Genesis 4:23 *And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt.*

Genesis 4:24 *If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.*

Enoch clearly was vexed everyday by the universal wickedness that had infested humans. Furthermore, Enoch died about 69 years before Noah was born; he, therefore, no doubt witnessed much of the moral depravity that gripped the pre-diluvian (before Noah’s flood) world. What were the results of Enoch’s prophetic prayers for the return of God and his angels?

Genesis 5:24 *And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him.*

Hebrews 11:5 *By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.*

It pleases God if we shout “Maranatha”. When the church shouts “Maranatha”, Jesus is eager to mount his horse and charge into this world, so to speak. Let us pray together, “Maranatha, Jesus!” When there is nothing to celebrate around us, look up to heaven and pray “Maranatha!” to the God who promised, “And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:7).

Enoch had no Bible, church or Holy Spirit infilling as we do today. Only one message and one prayer fired up his soul for 365 years: “Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints.” One may not have anything else to sustain one’s faith, but all we need is prayer. The old heroes of the faith were sustained by prayer no matter the political, economic or social conditions of their days. Consider the unlikely character of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well.

John 4:25 *The woman saith unto him, I know that Messias cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things.*

This woman had a bad reputation, and, yet, she somehow never stopped praying “Maranatha!” This became her salvation – God in flesh knew who was expecting his return and he visited her in Samaria. Perhaps when no one understood her, and her reputation was sealed as a grievous sinner, she looked up and prayed “Maranatha!” to the one who alone judges, not as humans do, but with righteousness. We read in the beginning of this chapter, “And he must needs go through Samaria (John 4: 4)”. Why? Clearly because God always visits and

blesses those who cry “Maranatha!” All who did so in the Bible received incredible blessings. The apostle Paul exhorts us:

2Timothy 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

A crown is for those who overcome. Enoch’s faith in the return of the Lord overcame his wicked world. Paul was fired up by the knowledge that Jesus will return one day. So he evangelized the world at a frantic pace. What about you and me, saints of God? What are we doing while we pray “Maranatha!”? The Samaritan woman told her people that Jesus was the Messiah. “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?” (John 4:29). Let us pray “Maranatha!” and also tell others about his identity.

Maranatha, Lord Jesus!
