



Lesson 32

PRAYER

Reading Psalm 107

To be able to pray to God in heaven is a wonderful thing. It is a privilege that He has given to every one who is humble and who recognises that God has made everything in the world. Prayer may seem to be a difficult matter, because there is such a great gulf between the Creator in heaven and His creation on the earth. Yet God has always made it plain that He is willing to be approached, and for men and women to talk to Him if they have the right spirit and if they are ready to accept His word.

"Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool ... but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:1,2).

So we have the promise that God will respond if we come to him in true humility.

We may think that it is not easy to talk directly to God. Indeed, in Old Testament times people were often very frightened when they thought they were in the presence of the Almighty. For example, when the people of Israel came out of Egypt, the glory of God came down on Mount Sinai and everyone, including Moses, was terrified. When God spoke the people fell back and stood a long way off. (Read Exodus 19:17-20 and 20:18-21.) God was drawing near to His chosen nation, but such was His splendour and power they felt they could not come into His holy presence. Probably we should have felt the same. They were so afraid that they asked Moses to be their mediator (or go-between) with God. And so that became the way that God communicated with Israel - through someone else.

When the Tabernacle was built as a place of worship in the wilderness the glory of God shone over the "ark of the covenant" in the Most Holy Place. No-one could go into this "presence of God" except the High Priest on one day each year, on the Day of Atonement. On that day he confessed before God all the sins of the nation of Israel, and for many generations this was the pattern for the Jewish people. They had to approach God by the way He appointed. (It also pointed forward to the work of Jesus as Mediator for his disciples. When he went to heaven he became a "faithful High Priest" for all those followers, whether Jews or not, who have been baptized "into Christ". We will come back to this later in this lesson.)

Can ordinary people talk to God?

Was there no other way to come to God except through a Jewish priest or by offering sacrifices?

What about

- people who lived before there was a nation of Israel?
- people who were not Jews?
- people who simply wanted to ask God for help?
- the Jews later on when they lived in foreign lands?

Could they not speak to God directly? We know from reading our Bibles in the many, many examples of prayer to God in heaven that God always listens to the prayers of people.

For instance, we read in Genesis 24 about the servant of Abraham, who prayed for success on his journey to find a godly wife for Isaac, Abraham's son. We can observe how he thanked God when his prayers were answered. We can read in Job 42 how Job prayed for his friends after God had healed him from his awful sickness. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, prayed in God because she was childless (1 Samuel 1 and 2), while Daniel, a captive in Babylon, "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" (Daniel 6:10).

Again, we have King Solomon's request that God will hear the prayer of strangers:

"Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name's sake; (for they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm when he shall come and pray toward this house; hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee ..." (1 Kings 8:41-43).

What about all those people who call on God when they are in trouble? Will He hear them, even if sometimes they have forgotten Him? The answer is yes, if they are sincere and humble and repentant.

Look at the examples given in Psalm 107:

- the hungry and thirsty are fed (verse 5-6);
- those who rebel against God, but then repent are forgiven (verse 13);
- God hears those who "draw near to the gates of death" (verse 18);
- God hears those who are in danger of being shipwrecked (verse 28).

The teaching is summarised in verse 6:

"Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of all their distresses."

How shall we talk to God?

In the New Testament, in the ministry of Jesus, the Lord told us about the publican ('publicans' and 'sinners' were despised by many Jews) who bowed his head and smote on his breast and prayed: "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Jesus said that such a man would be heard by God because he humbled himself (unlike the Pharisees, who were very proud of their own efforts at living good lives).

Therefore we can see that God has always provided a way for sincere people, whoever they are and wherever they live, to approach Him in prayer. It is just the same today, and we can learn many lessons from these Bible examples. The man or woman who is seeking God and is studying His Word will certainly feel the need to pray. God is concerned for all His creatures and He will hear every sincere prayer. A person seeking God will wish to offer praise and reverent worship; to give thanks for all the blessings of life and especially for the Word of God, the Bible. When he learns about sin he will want to confess his own sins to God, and God will hear him.

(But there is one thing to note: God will only forgive sins in the Way He has appointed, that is, through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, and this requires the believer to be baptized first.)

The Roman centurion Cornelius gave a good example of acceptable prayer. We read that he was-

"... a devout man and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway" (Acts 10:1).

Cornelius' prayers were heard and God sent the apostle Peter to complete his instruction and then to baptize him in the name of the Lord. (You will read this whole chapter at the end of the lesson.)

Possibly the most important prayer for a man or woman learning about God is found in the book of Psalms:

"Open thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Psalm 119:18).

We should all pray that God will bless our reading and study of His Word.

Will God answer?

Whatever our need, we should bring it to God prayer.

- But will He always answer?
- Does He always care?
- Can He always do what is needed?

These are reasonable questions, and there are clear Bible answers. Prayer is not an opportunity for us to put all our wants to God, so that He can give us everything we would like to have. Prayer is part of our worship, and it gives us the chance to think things through in the presence of a God who loves us and wants what is best for us.

The apostle Paul says:

"Be careful for nothing" (meaning, do not be over-anxious), "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6).

We are to pray in faith, but we should pray in accordance with God's will: "Thy will be done." This means reading the Bible to find out God's will and purpose, and not praying for things we are told we cannot have. Nor must we forget that God often answers prayer by requiring us to wait, sometimes for a long time. Abraham prayed, but had to wait many years for the son God had promised him. At other times God answers by not giving us what we ask; for He knows best, better than we do, what IS good for us.

But He never stops caring and loving. Always, "His ears are open unto their cry" (Psalm 34:15).

Learning to pray

We learn to pray in the same way we learn to talk - by first learning from others, and then by trying to do the same thing ourselves. So we have to go to the Bible for examples. The Bible is full of prayers, like the book of Psalms where there are 150 different ones to learn from, or the prayers of Jesus and his followers.

If we read the Scriptures daily we shall develop a mind which is pleasing to God. It will shape the way we think and therefore the way we talk to God. We can also influence others by our prayerful attitude, such as giving thanks to God before meals with the family, or kneeling at the bedside before we go to sleep.

We can pray at any time, as often as we wish, whether we are at home or travelling or at work. Jesus liked to go out alone, early in the morning, to somewhere quiet. But we can also pray in the middle of an emergency, just as we can thank God for things that are going well and for all our blessings. Many people find it helpful to have regular times for personal prayer, often in the morning or evening. But we should never neglect any opportunity to speak to the Lord.

The prayers of the baptized believer

We mentioned earlier in this lesson that there is something special about the prayers of those who have been baptized into Christ. Just as the High Priest was a mediator for the Israelites, so Jesus Christ is a mediator for his true disciples. This special relationship with God through His Son is something for you to look forward to with joy if, in the mercy of God, you are baptized. It will mean that when you confess your sins to God in the name of Jesus He will forgive your sins - that is, He will blot them out for ever.

Jesus Christ is the Mediator for baptized believers

The sins of the people of Israel were not taken away when they offered animal sacrifices, because the animals did not have a conscience about sin and could not offer their own blood. As it is written in Hebrews 10:4: "It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." But Jesus was the perfect sacrifice because he offered his sinless life (Hebrews 9:12). So those who are baptized into Jesus have "a great high priest, that is

passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God"... who "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:14,15).

Jesus Christ is the High Priest for baptized believers

True Christian baptism has the effect of washing away our sins (Acts 22:16) and once we have been baptized we can then come to God through Jesus Christ, in the sure knowledge that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Then we shall be able to use the prayer which the Lord Jesus taught his disciples:

"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil" (Luke 11:2-4).

That will be a wonderful prayer to offer; for, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1).

Summary

1. We must approach God in the way He has commanded.
2. God will hear the prayers of all who are humble and sincere.
3. We should offer praise and thanks, confess our sins and ask for God's guidance and blessing.
4. We must learn to pray for the right things in the right way.
5. Prayer is a great privilege and blessing; we must pray often.
6. After we are baptized we 'may pray through the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. God will then be our Father as well as our God.

Chapters to read

Acts 10; Psalms 51, 102; Luke 18:1-14

Learn by heart

Philippians 4:6

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