



# We Talk to God...

**I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,  
from whence cometh my help.  
My help cometh from the LORD,  
which made heaven and earth.**

Psalm 121: 1,2

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# ... in Prayer

*Dear Reader,*

*In Galatians 4:6 we read, “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” From this verse we learn that God the Holy Spirit prays to God the Father through His children. God prays to God through His children! What an amazing idea! That is what prayer is: God giving His children His own desire to pray, His own power to pray and His own words to pray. God causes His children to see why they ought to pray, gives His children the spiritual strength to pray and causes them to understand the spiritual issues which shape their prayers. God has created and saved them for many reasons, and one is to pray.*

*From this verse we also learn that the Holy Spirit cries “Abba Father” through His children. That is what prayer also is: God causing His children to call upon Himself as their Father, to whom they desire to draw near and to whom they desire to pour out the secrets of their hearts. Almighty Creator God wants sinners to gather around Him as dear and welcomed children. God causes His children to see their need and flee to Him because they trust that He is wise and powerful enough to be able to help and because they trust that He is tender and kind enough to want to help. God also causes His children to seek Him simply because they love Him and want to be with Him in response to all the love He has showered upon them.*

*Prayers are what God wants from His children. Prayers please Him and make Him happy. He adopted people as His children so that they would pray to Him. If you love God as one of His children, shouldn't you want to give Him what He wants the most? If you are His child, you should pray. You should be compelled to pray. You should delight to pray. To that end, the thoughts in this booklet have been presented to motivate and encourage you to pray with understanding, with boldness and with joy.*

*Sincerely,*

*Family Radio School of the Bible*



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## 1. PRAYER IS HALF OF A CONVERSATION WITH GOD

God talks to His people through the Bible. God's people talk to Him through prayer. Therefore, prayer is one half of a heavenly conversation between God and His people. This fact is the basis for understanding prayer.

Although prayer is talking to God, it is a different than the normal conversation between two people. Our prayers are not just casual and polite conversation. We are not just passing the time of day with idle chitchat or small talk until we find something better to do. For one thing, the conversation is not between equals. Prayer is what a creature says to his Creator. For another thing, the conversation is between a sinner and a holy God. Even people who are saved have bodies that lust after sin with which they struggle all their lives, including the times they go to God in prayer.

And yet, these realities do not discourage God's people. Instead, believers are motivated to talk to God for many reasons. They believe that He is listening (Psalm 66:19). They believe that He understands them (Heb. 2:11-14, 4:15,16). They believe that He really can do something about their concerns if He wants to (Psalm 115:3, 135:6, Matt. 8:2). They believe that He cares about every detail of their lives (Matt. 10:30,31) and is always willing to do the best for His children (Luke 12:29-32, Eph. 1:5).

## 2. SOME WRONG IDEAS ABOUT PRAYER

Unfortunately, many people have wrong notions about prayer. When people ignore or misunderstand what the Bible says about prayer, when people base their thinking upon superstition, mysticism or some other human philosophy, they will either stop praying altogether or not pray as God desires. Therefore, it is important that we consider and set aside some wrong ideas of prayer.

Prayer itself does not have supernatural power. All power is in God. He is the supreme Sovereign. He has the wisdom and power to do always what He pleases, no matter what anyone says in prayer. Therefore, we must not think that prayers have the ability in themselves to change circumstances. Prayers themselves do not change anything. God alone does.

Prayer is not some mysterious ritual by which the person who prays gains entrance into a holier state. We must not think that prayer is equal to a magic incantation or an entrancing mantra by which the person who prays elevates himself to a higher consciousness. Prayers themselves do not make the people who pray righteous. Prayers themselves do not change the hearts and souls of the people who pray. God alone does.

Prayer is not a religious activity which especially impresses God. For one thing, when people pray, they must not think that they are doing God a favor. God does not need their prayers. They need to pray. For another thing, when people pray, they must not be full of self-congratulation for the effort, as if their prayers gain for them some credit or merit. When people seek the praise of men for their prayer, that is all they will receive (Matt 6:5). And even more perilous, when people seek the favor of God for their prayer, they are practicing a gospel of works.

We should also mention that many people hold to the view that prayer has little real value. For them, prayer seems like a weak thing to do, sort of a last resort to be tried when nothing else works. That distortion springs out of hearts that are self-confident and earthly centered rather than God-confident and heavenly centered.

Remember, prayer is talking to God Almighty. We should not expect a man's words to have any special power or value. And they do not. Also, we should expect God alone to have all the wisdom and power needed to meet the needs of those who pray. And He does.

Because people are sinners, ego, self-centeredness, worldly desire and a trust in self are closely bound to their minds and hearts and distort their view of prayer. Therefore, we must put aside any man-centered or earthly ideas of prayer in our attempt to think about prayer as accurately and clearly as possible.

### 3. THE RIGHT HEART ATTITUDE IN PRAYER

When we pray, what we think in the deepest part of our hearts, about God, about ourselves and about other people, is more important than what we say to God and is more important than how we say it. As in all that we do in our lives, including as we seek to pray, a check of our motives ought to come before a check of our actions. The reason is that why we do something is more important than what we do. If we pray with the right heart attitude, then we can be sure that we are praying as God wants and

that He will hear us (Jer. 29:12,13). With this in mind, we shall briefly look at the heart attitudes of love, humbleness and faith.

## Love

Prayer is rooted in love, God's love for His people and their love in response to Him (Psalm 116:1,2, Eph. 2:4,5,18, I John 4:19). Before someone is saved, he is God's enemy. He is headed for destruction and deserves the wrath that is certain to descend upon all unbelievers at the end of time. Fear and hatred grip the hearts of all people who are faced with the reality of such a destiny. But the hearts of God's people beat with a different emotion. They have a love that was given to them when they were saved, a love for Him who would not even spare His own Son in order to rescue them from death (Rom. 6:23). Above all else, prayer is sustained by a heart that loves God, for all that He is and all that He has done to and for sinners (John 3:16, Rom. 5:8, 8:32).

The bond of love between God and His people explains a lot about the nature of prayer. Let us see how this is so by asking the following questions, "How would you feel if someone you thought was your friend never showed any interest in talking to you nor cared much to hear what you had to say? What kind of a relationship would that be? In fact, would that person really be behaving as your friend at all?" That kind of friendship certainly would not be a relationship based upon love. Two-way conversation is expected between people who claim to care for each other. Similarly, conversation is expected between God and someone who claims to be His friend (John 15:13-15, James 2:23). This dialogue is expected. In fact, it is necessary for maintaining a strong and growing bond of loving friendship.

If we see prayer from the rather simple point of view that it is part of a conversation between friends, then we can be more comfortable as we approach God. When we wonder about prayer, we must understand that we are not called to seek the secret to some mysterious rite. Rather we believers are called to speak to God as we would to someone who loves to hear what we have to say because He loves us. Whatever we want to say, whenever we want to say it, God delights to hear. Amazing!

## Humbleness

People are creatures, totally dependent creatures, who exist and continue to live only because God made and sustains them. It is amazing that the dust of the earth can have a conversation with God who is Almighty

God (Genesis 2:7, Job 10:9, 21:15). Therefore, a person who prays must pray humbly before such an Almighty Creator (Rev. 4:11, 5:12), always recognizing who he is and who God is.

Not only are people creatures, but also they are wicked, rebellious creatures. The fact that God wants sinners to speak to Him is grace. Their prayers should fall back upon them as dead leaves which blow in the wind. Joyfully, that is not what happens. The wonder of God is that He hears the cry of a penitent sinner (Luke 18:13,14). Therefore, a man who prays must be humbly honest about himself (I John 1:8,9).

People must pray to God with an appropriate humbleness based upon a recognition that they are creatures. They are dependent upon the wisdom and power of God to whom they talk. People must pray with an appropriate contriteness based upon a recognition that they are sinful creatures. Before they are saved they deserve condemnation. After they are saved they continue to struggle with the sinful desires of their bodies. They are limited both in body and mind. They are physically and spiritually weak. They are dependent upon the mercy and grace of God to whom they pray (Isaiah 57:15). Therefore, humbleness is a necessary companion to prayer.

Believers know that God is their Heavenly Father, that they are His dear children. Therefore, they go to Him expecting a loving, sympathetic and helpful response. But they must never forget from where they came and who they are in themselves outside of their Savior Jesus Christ. Believers must never forget that the Bible pictures them before they were saved as beggars who sit along side of a road in the dust with an empty cup (Luke 16:20, 18:35-42). The spiritual situation of unsaved sinners is no different than that of a beggar who must cry out for help and who has no right to be heard or receive anything from Him to whom he cries. Believers must never have the presumption that before they were saved, their prayers obligated God to hear and bless them. Believers must keep in mind the principle that if God wills, He can answer a sinner's prayer, but only if He wills. The only obligation God has is one in which He obligates Himself. If He condescends to answer someone who calls upon Him, it is because He has decided to do that according to His own counsel. Believers must remember that they were once unsaved sinners who, as beggars with empty hands, cried out to God for whatever mercy He cared to extend. This is a heritage that should remind all believers, as they go to God in prayer, of their inadequacy to fill their needs and their great abiding dependancy upon God's sustaining grace. This is also a heritage that should remind all believers who pray that, in themselves, they are

unworthy of God's attention and are heard only for the sake of their Savior Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, a person's honest awareness of his inadequacy must not demotivate him from coming to God in prayer. People who stay away from God, because they say they feel unworthy, are demonstrating rebellion based upon enormous pride. Such people wish that they were more worthy than they have shown themselves to be and are embarrassed and chagrined that they do not measure up to a standard they have set for themselves. Rather than come to God with broken and humble hearts, they lament that they have not attained in their own power the level of holiness to which they aspire. On the other hand, a person who is truly humble will submit to God's call to come in the name of Jesus Christ. He will recognize that he is not worthy in himself but that Jesus is, and that Jesus has cleared the way to the heavenly Father by His own sacrifice (Heb. 4:15,16). A believer rejoices in the amazing facts that God wills to hear his prayers and that He delights to bestow the riches of the gospel upon all who come to Him with a broken heart (John 6:37).

We ought to mention that although the Bible describes prayer as a sacrifice (Psalm 141:1,2, Hebrews 13:15), that does not mean people can congratulate themselves after they pray, as if they accomplished a great deed. Nor should they feel sorry for themselves, as if they practiced great self-denial, expending time and energy which they could have spent in their own pursuits. There is no room for pride or self-pity in prayer (James 4:6, I Peter 5:6,7). In fact, those are sinful attitudes that will break the conversation between a man and God (Psalm 66:18). The proper understanding of the idea of sacrifice is that prayer is part of the reasonable service all believers are expected to give to God (Rom. 12:1,2).

## Faith

Luke 18:1-8 is an interesting and helpful passage as we think about prayer. We will not analyze this parable but the conclusion, phrased in the form of a question, helps us understand God's command to pray. Jesus began to teach about prayer with a parable and ended with a question on faith. The conclusion is that faith is the basis for prayer. The reason is that there is no sense in praying to someone for help if we do not expect them to help. After all, why pray if we think they do not care or because we do not believe that they can do anything, even if they wanted to? We must be like the woman in Jesus' parable. That is, we must trust God to be our defender. We must trust Him to be willing and able to help us in time of need.

The principle that faith is the foundation of prayer is illustrated in the letter to the Thessalonians. The believers in the Thessalonian church were people who had “received the word in much affliction” (I Thess. 1:6). We also read in I Thessalonians 5:17 that the Thessalonians were commanded to “Pray without ceasing.” The idea of this verse is that the Thessalonians were expected to persist in seeking God as they endured affliction. However, they prayed amid affliction not because it was a good psychological ploy which helped them cope with the hurts inflicted by wicked men, but because they believed God wanted to and actually was able to help them in their distress, no matter what the situation might look like for a time. They believed in what is true about what God had done for them in the past, was doing in the present and would do on that glorious day when He returns to gather them to Himself. Therefore, they fled to God and poured out their concerns to Him who worked in them and controlled the events in the world to do His good will.

At this point we should add a few words about patience, which is a companion to an attitude of trust. God answers His people in His great way. God also answers His people in His wise time. A person who prays could ask, “When will the person for whom I have prayed so long become saved? How long will I have to struggle with this problem?” God does not reveal His timing as He works out the perfect answer to His peoples’ prayers. So they must pray and wait, believing that God has heard them as He has promised and will work things out for the best. Waiting does not mean that they are idle. They must continue to pray and serve God as He reveals His will in the Bible (John 15:7,8). However, they do not continue to pray or serve God as if they have to get His attention or impress Him so that He will be moved to act on their behalf. Rather, they pray because they speak to God whom they love and trust, expecting that all things will work out for good (Rom. 8:28).

Prayer begins with a heart that believes the Bible, which states that Jesus has cleared the way to the Father and that in Jesus’ name sinners can go boldly to the throne of grace (Rom. 5:10, John 14:13,14; 15:16). Prayer continues with a heart that is confident in the Bible, which states that saved sinners are welcomed by God into His presence and that He does all things well for their benefit, in His great way and time (Heb. 4:16, 11:6).

## An important note about the origin of prayer

Our focus upon love, humbleness and trust leads us to think about the origin of prayer. Galatians 5:22-23 states that love, humbleness and faith are fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are three fruits, which among

others, are given to us when we are saved. They are heart attitudes which result from God's work of salvation and are found in those people who are in Jesus.

We must keep in mind that prayer is not our idea nor is it even our own natural desire. Instead, prayer is a creation of God (Isaiah 57:19).

It is true that the call to prayer, found many times in the Bible, is a command of God. A life of prayer can reveal the work which God has done within a person's heart, much like all the other acts of obedience true believers perform (Heb. 10:22).

Having said that, we can go back one step further and say that prayer is also part of the process by which God applies the blessing of Jesus' atonement to the lives of His people. Not only do people pray because they are saved, but also God inclined their hearts to pray for salvation in the first place. Unserved sinners are spiritually dead people and usually have no desire to cry out to God for mercy. And yet some do. The reason is that as God draws a stubborn and rebellious sinner to Himself, He inclines him to call out to God for mercy. We cannot dissect the process of salvation and examine all of its parts. Nothing we can observe, including prayer, will tell us the instant a person has become saved (John 3:8). How and when God gives a person new life is a spiritual work which He alone understands.

The fact that prayer is a gift of God, helps us in one important way. If we struggle with a neglect of prayer, if we struggle with a lack of desire to pray, the answer is "pray." What we mean by that strange counsel is since God can give us the gift of prayer and since God can incline our hearts to want to talk to Him, we must ask Him for that ability and desire. If we do not know even how to begin to pray, then we must cry out to God for the grace to pray, for the origin of prayer is in His hand.

Now let us briefly consider the prayers of unbelievers. Does God hear and answer unsaved peoples' cry for help, as misguided and poorly motivated as their prayers may be? From one point of view the answer to that question is "yes." God creates a desire in the hearts of unsaved people to call upon Him for mercy and saves those who He has chosen for salvation. From another point of view the answer to that question is, "no." God is not obligated to hear and answer the prayers of wicked, stubborn, selfish unbelievers and most times He does not. According to Psalm 66:18, Proverbs 28:9, Isaiah 1:15, Jeremiah 14:12, James 4:3, to name just a few verses, God will not hear and answer the prayers of people who trust in their own abilities and performance and who desire to live in defiance of God's will. That includes people who say they are saved and pray

according to all the proper forms, but do not really come to God with a broken and contrite heart.

And yet there is grace. There must be grace if anyone is to be heard. What a wonder that, in the midst of all people's hateful rebellion against God, He arrests some and turns their minds and hearts so that they begin lives of humble conversation with Him (Acts 9:3-9).

#### 4. THE PERSONAL VALUE OF PRAYER

Colossians 3:1,2 commands God's people to set their affections, or thoughts, on "things which are above," where Christ is, and "not on things on the earth." To that end, one of the supreme values of prayer is that it focuses a person's mind and heart upon God. In honest prayer, a believer is thinking of the Person to whom he is speaking. When the images of both the attractions and threats of the world fade from his mind as he is talking to God, he has found the blessing of prayer. When talking to God reminds him of the vanity of his self-confidence and reminds him of his dependence upon God for all things, he has found the blessing of prayer. When earnestly talking to God crowds out the suggestions of sin which so easily beset his mind with the result that he lives a more holy and faithful life, he has found the blessing of prayer. When talking to God draws his heart closer to his loving Savior and Lord, he has found the blessing of prayer (Isaiah 26:2, Phil. 4:8,9).

However, prayer is not a psychological trick designed to make people think better thoughts and so feel better about themselves and the world. We must remember that all wisdom and power are in God, so that a mind fixed upon God is hopeful and expectant of the blessings that can come from His hand. People who pray are thinking of something true about God to whom they talk. They know God is wise and able to do all things well. They know that it is His good pleasure to do all things for good for them who are His children. Instead of focusing upon their problems to the extent that the problems dominate their minds and smother their hope, believers thoughts include the truths that God is on the throne, hears their prayers and does all things well, in His great time and way (Matt. 6:24-34). One great value of prayer is the peace and comfort that comes to people who abandon their own wisdom and strength and pray that God would take complete control of their minds and hearts as they struggle with trials and personal sins.

Prayer also has real value in helping true believers grow in grace. Many things that God does within His people, to strengthen their

characters and help them conform to His word, are done in His own secret way, unknown to anyone but Him. Nevertheless, we do know that, over time, through the specific and concrete actions of Bible study and prayer, God's people begin to show the fruits of His wise and wonderful work within them. God uses His peoples' prayers to mold their lives to conform to and display His will. That change is another value of prayer.

## 5. PRAYER IS A TOOL IN GOD'S HAND

God does not need the prayers of His people to do His will. In fact, He has done and still does many things without the accompanying prayers of any of His people. For example, He created the universe without the prayers of anyone. Also, no one can intelligently pray for all that is needed to sustain it in all of its amazing detail. And yet, in God's wisdom, He has decided to use the conversation He has with His people to accomplish His will, especially His will of salvation. Like a father who delights to work with his child, weak and bumbling as that child is, God has chosen to create a desire to pray for His will in the hearts of His people and then answers their prayers.

Perhaps we can better understand this dimension of prayer when we compare it to God's method of spreading His Word. As in all things, God's salvation plan is totally in His hands. He does not need the participation of His people to send His gospel into the world. But as an expression of the love He has for His people, He has included them in the joy of spreading His Word. As an expression of the love He has for His people, He works with them in the fields as they plant and water and as He brings the increase. God is wise and powerful enough to do His will without the prayers and efforts of His people. But He is loving enough to patiently use the tools of both His peoples' prayers and their distribution of His word to build His kingdom and prepare the world for His return.

However, we must not think that God is compelled to bring revival in response to a campaign in which many people pray earnestly for a mighty work of God. It is true that God's children ought to pray because God does respond to and answer the prayers which express the desires of their hearts, as we read in Psalm 37:4. However, the full understanding of that verse is that God gives His children the heart to desire His will and then He fulfills that desire. That is, God always answers prayers in agreement with His own will. Fervent zeal, even for an apparently good purpose, is not a substitute for a knowledge of God's will. Therefore, rather than insist that, because they have a holy desire, they can expect God to work as they

request in their prayers, people who pray must always be concerned about God's will. "Thy will be done" is more than a pious appendage to prayer. It is an accurate and honest recognition that God knows best, and some of the things He may do will surprise His people. As always, God's will is done and that is the real desire of God's people.

## 6. THE SHAPE OF PRAYER

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

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

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

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

Does that mean that our prayers are only quotations from the Bible? What about our own words? Where do they fit in? Our own words will dominate our prayers. That is expected and is as it should be. The reason is that we talk to God as a friend, expressing all our own thoughts and feelings about the immediate and detailed issues of life as we encounter them each day. Our prayers should flow spontaneously out of

our hearts. They should express things that maybe we have not even thought out carefully previous to our time with God in prayer.

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

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

As God's people grow in grace, their prayers are more and more shaped by God's word. But this does not mean they parrot some biblical formula. The Bible warns against prayers of vain repetition (Matt. 6:7). For example, some people encourage those people to whom they witness to pray the "sinner's prayer," as if once certain words are spoken, their salvation is assured. In another example, some people use the "Lord's prayer" as their chief expression of prayer, as if the prayer is especially holy and will assure that they are heard by God. In one more example, some people use some convenient phrase at the dinner table day after day, without any change, as if in the exercise of saying "grace" they have paid their dues and are assured of God's blessing, at least during the meal they are about to eat. These are all wrong ways to use the gift and privilege of prayer. We must keep in mind that prayer is talking to God. No one talks to his friends in some artificial formula. God has not given His people the Bible to be used as a ritualistic prayer book or mindless mantra. Instead, He intended it to help them express what is upon their own hearts.

Let us now consider and set aside a commonly held but wrong notion about prayer and its relationship to the decisions people make.

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

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

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

show that they truly trust Him. Only by their obedience, do they show that they believe God designed and understands the assigned job better than they do. Only by their actions, do they show that they believe God will go with them and help them fulfill that job.

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

## When and where do we pray?

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

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

Prayer should be our constant companion, for we should be inclined to pray any time and any place. We should pray for wisdom and faithfulness as we face any problem or challenge in life. We should pray for courage and strength as we are in the middle of a problem or challenge. We should pray for forgiveness and thankfulness as we complete a problem or challenge.

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

## 7. PRAYERS OF PETITION

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

### Setting aside some wrong ideas

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

In the second place, the purpose of believers' prayers of petition are not to educate God about some need His people have. God's people are not

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

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

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

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

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

One reason many people have a wrong idea about prayers of petition is that they think they can make a one-to-one correlation between a specific prayer and what happens around them in the world. They look for specific physical evidence in this world that God has answered a particular prayer. For example, when they are sick, have a need for a job, or grieve because someone they love is living as an unbeliever, they pray for help and expect to see evidence that God has heard their prayer. However, just as it is true that salvation is a totally invisible spiritual work of God, so is it true that God provides no physical reinforcements for a Christians's life of faith (II Cor 4:18, 5:7). Not only that, a believer does not know enough to be able to ever make a definitive correlation between a specific request and a specific event in this world.

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

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

## Praying with Thanksgiving:

Philippians 4:6,7 gives us some help as we try to understand prayers of petition properly (or as the verse calls them, prayers of "supplication"). The words in Philippians 4:6, "Be careful for nothing," do not mean that a believer ought to be casual in what he does, not really caring if things turn out badly. Rather, they mean that a believer must not be full of care, or anxious. To sustain that attitude, God's counsel is "in everything ... let your requests be made known unto God." The words are

not “for everything” but “in” everything. That is, the counsel is, “no matter in what situation you find yourself, even difficult ones, speak to God.”

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

Two important words which help us understand God’s counsel in Philippians 4:6,7 concerning prayers of petition are “with thanksgiving.” These words mean not only that we thank God for the help He has provided in the past, but also as we read here, we thank God at the same time we offer our petitions. That is, we are thankful before we have finished our request. The idea is that a believer knows something about the Person to whom he prays and so is able to give thanks without seeing the future events take place which might be understood as an answer to his prayer. In fact, a believer might move from a geographical area or even die before he knows the full story of how God works His will in the problems for which he had besought the Lord. A Christian does not pray with the expectation that he will necessarily witness and understand the events that are answers to his prayers. Rather, a Christian prays with the confidence that God is in control and guides all things wisely.

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

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

In addition, a mature believer knows that it is his business to obey those specific principles which God has revealed in His word. Rather than

try to make a rigorous connection between his prayers and the events in this physical world, a mature believer knows that God has given him a specific job to do and that he should be busy with his assignment..

Perhaps someone might say, “Well then, are you saying that, for example, if we pray when we suffer we should take the abuse stoically and just say, ‘As God wills’ instead of expect God to send some relief?” Not at all. Believers are burdened by their own sufferings and also have a concern for the problems of others. They must take everything to the Lord in prayer. But they also know that the best solution is in the mind of God. Believers want God’s will because it is the best for themselves and others; and as they pray, they learn to trust in Him who has done a good work in them so far and will complete it according to His perfect plan.

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

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

## 8. IN CONCLUSION

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

*I love the LORD, because he hath heard  
my voice and my supplications,  
Because he hath inclined his ear unto me,  
therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.*

Psalm 116:1,2

## 9. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PRAYER: UNDERSTANDING ROMANS 8:26-28

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

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

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

The idea of the words “we know not what we should pray for as we ought” is not that we are not smart enough or that the troubles of our lives

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

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

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

that God's will is done, but we do not always know what it is and so cannot pray as we ought. It is the testimony of Romans 8 that the Spirit, who does know the mind of God, prays for us that God's will be done.

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

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

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

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

It is important to understand this verse as it fits into the logic that flows from the verses just before it to the verses that follow it. By comparing verse 28 with verse 26 we notice that although “we know (oida: understand with our mind) not what we should pray for as we ought,” nevertheless “we know (oida) that all things work together for good to them that love God.” Our assurance “that all things work together for good” today and our hope “that all things (will) work together for good” tomorrow is based upon the fact that, although we groan under the burden of our flesh (Rom. 8:23) and we live in a broken world that groans under the curse of sin (Rom. 8:22), we nevertheless have the comfort that the Spirit also groans as He calls upon God to fulfill His eternal will for His people. And the Spirit knows that will perfectly because, as God, He

carefully designed it before the foundation of the world. Therefore, Paul can write in verse 28, “we know” that our present struggles will end in a future total victory because, according to Romans 8:29 and 30, the eternal plan of God, of which the Spirit groans in prayer to God, will be fulfilled for His saints (Rom. 8:39).

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

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

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

## 10. PRAYER IN TIME OF SICKNESS: UNDERSTANDING JAMES 5:13-16.

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

In the phrase, “Is any sick,” the word “sick” can mean physically sick as in Mark 6:56 or John 11:1. Other times it can mean spiritually weak as in Romans 4:19 (“being ... weak” in the faith) or Romans 14:1 (“that is weak” in the faith). As we shall see, we do not have to choose one meaning over another because both meanings will fit into the logic of the

verses for at least two reasons. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that even if a man suffers from physical illness, he always has a spiritual need that must be met. Maybe his physical illness was induced by a spiritual problem. Or it could have been that the spiritual need existed before and the physical illness exacerbated it. In any case, spiritual encouragement is always needed to help a man sustain his Christian witness amid physical illness. Secondly, during the church age which is now past, we recognized that no matter what the physical situation may be, the job of the church was to provide what no other organization in the world could or desires to provide, the spiritual balm that soothes the sin-sick and discouraged soul.

God's council to call for the elders in James 5:14 is no longer applicable because God commands the believers to leave the local congregation. However, the spiritual principles concerning ministering the Gospel still apply to individual believers as they bring the Gospel. The counsel of James 5:14 was to "call for the elders of the church." Why? What could they do? A better question was, "What should they do?" That is, "What did God expect them to do?" One thing that they must do was "pray over him," for they knew that in all situations, including physical ones, the most important concern was the establishment and strengthening of a man's walk with God. The expectation was that the elders have the wisdom that only God can give, that as men who are saved they sought the Lord's will in all things. Although the elders did not know the outcome of the sickness, they trusted God in this situation and prayed that the man who was sick will learn to humbly trust in God's will, a trust expressed in James 4:15 by the words "if the Lord will." Incidentally, with this in mind we can look ahead and understand the opening lines of James 5:15 as, "if the Lord will, the prayer of faith shall save the sick (man)."

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

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

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

Verses 14 and 15 can be understood together to mean that whatever may be troubling a man, the elders should be called to deal with the spiritual issues of his life. Forgiveness is the best possible news for anyone who is sick, physically or spiritually. That is the cure that all men ought to seek. That kind of remedy is eternally lasting.

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

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

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

A saved man desires in his heart that God’s will be done. While he resides in his flesh on earth he prays imperfectly to that end. But in his heart and soul a saved man prays earnestly that God’s will be done. The fact is that God’s will is always done. Therefore, verse 16 is saying that a believer, any believer, has the same spiritual interest in others as God does, and his spiritually centered prayers will be effectively answered in God’s time and way, as God fulfills His spiritual plan for all men.

