

“A PRAYER-HEARING GOD ” ¹

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Praise is due to You, O God, in Zion; and to You shall vows be performed, O You who answer prayer! To You shall all flesh come (Psalm 65: 1-2).

We are meant to know, by personal and by collective experience, that the God of the Bible is a prayer-hearing God!

The Psalmist was full of joy and confidence ... **Praise is due to You, O God, in Zion.** Why? Because he knows the God who answers his prayers ... **For You answer prayer.**

TITLES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF GOD MEANT TO ENCOURAGE US

Throughout the Bible, there are many wonderful titles and attributes given to the LORD our God. When God reveals to His people a title or an attribute of His character, we are meant to take great encouragement. For example;

When God called Himself, **EI-Shaddai**, He wanted us to know that He is the Almighty One, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and that we may rest secure in His Sovereign power on our behalf.

When God called Himself **Yehovah Rapha**, He was revealing Himself as the Lord who heals and restores His people.

When God called Himself **the LORD who does not change**, He wanted Israel to know that He had done for generations in the past, He wanted to do for them now.

When God is called **The LORD our Righteousness**, He wants us to know that He keeps His promises to us (Jer. 23:6).

When God told Israel of old that He is **the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob**, Israel was meant to take great heart. For by calling Himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the people were to understand that God had bound Himself to be faithful in covenant to them --- for their forefathers sake --- and that He would see to it that His everlasting purposes would not fail to be worked out through their ups and downs.

Each title, each description tells us something precious about who God is, and what God is like --- His character.

When God is called **the God who answers prayer**, surely we are meant to understand that it is in the very nature of God to hear and to delight to answer the prayers of His children. **Praise is due to You, O God in Zion ... for You answer prayer.**

And just in case we are tempted to feel that this is not for us, and that we are left out, observe the Psalmist puts in this beautiful addition ... **and to You shall all mankind come.** He wants to be known as the God who is eager to hear everybodys prayers. For all generations God wants to be known as the God who hears and answers prayer.

Whether it be Israelite or Canaanite, whether it be Jew or Gentile, whether it be man or woman, whether it be saint or sinner, God will hear the prayer of any and all who truly call upon him. The Bible says, **God is a rewarder of them that earnestly seek Him (Heb. 11:6).** The testimony of the Bible is that things have happened that wouldn't have happened, unless somebody prayed to the God who rewards and hears faithful prayer.

GOD ANSWERED PRAYER IN THE OT

Time would fail me, to list all the times God intervened in history, in answer to the prayers of His people;

whether they called on Him from land or sea,

whether from dusty desert or forest,

whether from the ecstasy of mountain top or from the depths of the valley of the shadow of death,

whether from palace or from dungeon, from holy Temple or from the sewer pit as in Jeremiah's case,

¹ This is a sermon I delivered at the Hamilton Church of Christ, Mardon Road, on Sunday 29th April, 2018.

whether from a fiery furnace, from the lions den, or from the belly of a great sea monster, whether in public prayer before a mighty congregation, or from a private inner room where no human looked, whether from Jerusalem or from Babylon, whether from the Promised Land or the land of exile, in the OT God made it clear that He delighted to be the prayer-hearing God. His people knew God as their prayer-hearing God.

GOD ANSWERED PRAYER IN THE NT

And so in the NT.

God heard the prayer of the Canaanite woman and the Italian Centurion as readily as He heard the prayers of Elizabeth the barren Jewess, and Peter the foremost apostle;

God heard the repentant prayer of the dying thief on the cross and the weeping tax collector who beat upon his chest for mercy;

God heard the prayer of the repentant prostitute and the outcast leper, as readily as He heard the prayers of the saints and godly ones. Yes, our God, the God of the Bible, is a prayer-hearing God! I say it again: The Bible says things have happened that wouldn't have happened, unless somebody prayed to the God who rewards and hears faithful prayer.

There is a universal need in all mankind to pray. The atheist may mock it. The agnostic may doubt it. The skeptic may knock it. The secularist may repress it. The materialist may deny it. But this universal cry of the human heart, is proof that God Himself is our Creator and has put that innate desire there because it answers to His great and generous nature.

How eager God is to answer prayer! **Praise is due to You O God, in Zion; and to You shall vows be performed, O You who answer prayer! To You shall all flesh come!**

Yes, it would seem God is almost jealous of His reputation as the One who hears prayer. In **Hebrews 11: 6** we read,

But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for whoever comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that earnestly seek Him.

So, if you do not believe God is ready and eager to hear your heart's prayers, then you will not be disappointed ... He **won't!** But if you believe that **God is, and that He is a rewarder of those that earnestly seek Him** and you pray to Him in expectant faith, then you will know Him as the God who answers *your* prayers. This ought to be the joyful experience of every Christian.

Clearly, when we limit God's willingness to answer our prayers, we are guilty of a horrible sin. We slander the good Name and the righteous character of God.

You might say, Well Greg. I try to believe God. I want to believe God hears my prayers. I am desperate to have God answer my prayers, but I just can't seem to get that confidence. I just can't seem to whip up that kind of faith. What can I do?

Good question. And who amongst us hasn't felt that? The answer is, **tell** your problem to God. **Tell** Him your faith is small and fragile. **Tell** him what that father of the epileptic boy told Jesus when asked, "Do you believe?" And that man pleaded, "**Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.**" At best, we are often a mix of faith and unbelief. Even your little faith, your faltering faith, is no hindrance to God! It is your invitation to His grace!

The question is not how big your faith is, but how big your God is! Jesus said even faith as tiny as a mustard seed if it was placed in the God of the Bible, is able to move big mountains!

So ask God for the faith that will honour and please Him. Lift up your heart to heaven and say, "O God of the Bible. I have heard that You hear prayer. What you have done for others, I want You to do for me that I too might glorify Your Name. I ask You to create in me the faith that pleases You. I am willing to do whatever it takes. I want to know You as the God who hears **my** prayers."

And I promise you in the Name of the Living God that your honest prayer will be heard. Feed yourself daily on His word and promises. Soak up His Spirit. Get rid of those things He convicts your conscience about. **He is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him.** So this is not just a passing whim. It must become the passion of your soul. It must come from a thirsty spirit. You will not give up until He answers. You will ask, and you will seek and you will knock until it is opened for you.

TWO OBJECTIONS

One from outside the Church, the man of the world, and one from inside the Church, the man in the pew.

First, there is a widely held view today amongst a growing number of Western intellectuals, that religion will fade away as people become more educated. And certainly the materialists and the secularists allege that prayer is a vestigial superstition from our pre-scientific past.

One of the first great works of religious anthropology was *The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer. Frazer proposed a three-stage view of human development. He said, magic came first, when people tried to manipulate the world by using magical incantations.

Then, religion grew up because magic did not work, and so people tried to see if prayer was more efficient.

Lastly, once science proved that man can control his environment, then magical incantations and religious prayers alike, were replaced by fertilizers and anaesthetics --- which have the advantage that they actually work.

And it is amazing how many today believe that praying is an obsolete relic from the past. ² What is our answer?

Second, some inside the Church say, "Greg, I am not convinced God works like He did in the past. Perhaps the days when God did the things we read of in the Bible are done? Miracles might have been necessary when prophets and apostles walked the earth, but those days are gone. We have the more perfect word, and if people will not listen to the Scriptures, then God is not about to pander to their unbelief with signs and miracles."

Now, it is true that God works differently in different dispensations.

There was a time once when animals were sacrificed. But **now there remains no more sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:26)** for Christ has fulfilled all that, and by his one offering he has sanctified forever those who are being sanctified.

There was a time once when certain foods were considered ceremonially unclean and unfit for Jewish consumption. But now, **every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (I Tim. 4: 4-5).**

There was a time once when Jewish boys were circumcised in order to be a part of the covenant, but now **neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision (Gal. 5: 6).**

There was a time once when there was a Jewish keeping of the Sabbath, and an observance of the feasts, but now **let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day --- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2: 16-17).**

Yes, there are differences in these arbitrary matters that are non-essential. But in the great fundamentals that are founded in the very character and unchanging nature of God, there are no dispensations. God always saved and blessed those who believed Him, whether before the Law like Abraham who believed God or after the Law.

God always was merciful to anybody who cried out to Him. God always has been the prayer-hearing God who rewarded those who diligently sought Him. And He has not changed.

I learned this as a young teenager. There was a family who attended the Church of Christ. The mother in her 30's was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She had a young daughter around 6 at the time, and a young son a couple of

² See Keith Ward in *Is Religion Irrational?* Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2011 p155

years younger. Bev was often absent from church services, because she was bedridden. But her husband and the 2 kids would be there. The church prayed and prayed for her, but she deteriorated inexorably.

After treatment and battling this condition for a few years, the word came from the specialists that Bev was given only a couple of weeks left on this earth. But in her ebbing last days, she sent to the pastor of the church and to the elders. She wanted them to come to her home and to bring some anointing oil like she had read in the book of James. She asked the pastor and the elders to pray for her to be raised up. Her work was not finished. She had children who needed a God-fearing mother.

Bev told the pastor she had read **James 5, Is anyone among sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him (vs. 14f).**

I remember the pastor pulling out the little bottle of oil and showing me and saying that they had done as requested. Bev and her husband confessed whatever sins they were aware of, the pastor and elders prayed to the Lord to honour this woman's faith and to raise her up.

And you can guess why I am telling you this story. It made a deep impact not only this young believer, but the entire church, and the whole community, for Bev was healed and took her place with the family for many, many years after.

I am prepared to venture that God is not so much interested in our pet doctrines and theology that limit Him. I am prepared to say that when someone's heart is breaking and desperate and cries out to Him, that His great love cannot help but break through. He delights to answer prayer, He wants to show His children how great and how gracious He is on our behalf.

God longs for His people to know Him as the prayer-hearing God. **You who answer prayer ... all men shall come to You.** It is amazing to me that I have never heard any other preacher use this text. But the more I think about it, the more I am convinced it is a beautiful summary of who God is in all His fullness. If anybody asks you, What is God like? You could not do much better than to say, The God of the Bible, my God, is the God Who loves to hear our prayers!

Our text in Psalm 65:1-2 tells us just about everything we need to know about God. If it was the only text you had that revealed Who the God of the Bible is, then you could learn heaps about Him.

EVERY ATTRIBUTE OF GOD IS IMPLIED IN THE FACT THAT HE HEARS OUR PRAYERS.

So, I suggest that everything that makes God God, every attribute that sets God apart from His creation, is summarised and implied in the fact that He loves to hears our prayers. Since God is the One who answers prayer we know ...

He is the Creator. Every time we come to God in prayer we are confessing to Him that He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. This is His universe. He made the laws of science and physics and chemistry. He is eternal, outside the laws of the universe. He is in charge. When we come to God in prayer we are saying: Since there is a God, He must act like God. And normally, yes, He operates within the laws He has put in place. But God is not a prisoner of His created order. He is the Eternal God, and **from Him and through Him and to Him are all things (Rom. 11: 36)!**

He is good! He is merciful and full of lovingkindness. He is your heavenly Father and delights to hear every thought and prayer and wish his children offer to Him. He says, you are to have no anxiety about anything, but in everything to let your requests be made known to Him.

He is the Living God.

Some of the greatest sarcasm and satirical writing comes from the prophets who mocked the false gods of the pagans. For instance, Isaiah mocks the man who goes into the forest, cuts down a tree, then cuts the log in half. With great skill he takes the first half and carves and shapes it into an idol. He whittles the wood into the form of a

man. He sets that idol up --- which is made in his own image --- inside his house. Then he prostrates himself and worships what his own hands have created! He cries out to his idol, "You are my god. Deliver me."

But, says the prophet Isaiah with obvious disdain, that idol has eyes, which cannot see. That idol has ears but cannot hear. Hands that cannot move. This stupid man then gets the other half of his log and splits it up for firewood to cook his dinner on! (Is. 44).

You daft man, says the prophet, for **you fall down before a block of wood (Is. 44: 20)!**

Not so the believer in the God of the Bible. We pray to the Living God. We expect God to hear. When we pray we are declaring, O God, You are the Living God. Your eyes see us. Your ears hear us. Your mouth speaks to us. Your hands are extended to help us. Your feet are swift to meet us. Your heart beats for us. You are the Living God.

WATCHMAN NEE tells the story about the time he planned to take 5 other Christian workers with him to do some preaching and evangelistic work on a little island off the South China coast. At the last moment a very new Christian by the name of Wu wanted to join the group. Wu was only 16 years old, and had been expelled from school, but had lately been 'born again' and there was a marked change in his life. Wu was very eager to go, and after some hesitation Watchman Nee agreed to take him. This made 7 in the evangelistic party in all.

The island had one main village of "six thousand stoves". They were to be on the island for 15 days. Accommodation had been arranged with one of Watchman Nee's old school friends. Nee's party arrived late one night, in the dark, but when he found out Nee was there to preach the Gospel, he refused at the last minute to put them up.

They eventually found a Herbalist who was prepared to put them up in the attic, on some planks with straw. It was not long before the herbalist became their first convert. But though they worked hard and preached earnestly, there was little fruit for their labour. They began to wonder why.

Over a week passed and nothing changed ... until young Wu who was in a different part of the village to the others, suddenly asked publicly, "Why will none of you believe?" Someone in the crowd replied at once: "We have a god --- *one* god --- Ta wang, and he has never failed us. He is an effective god."

"How do you know you can trust him?" asked Wu. "We have held his festival procession every January for 286 years. The chosen day is revealed by divination beforehand, and every year without fail his Day is a perfect one without rain or cloud," was the reply.

When is the procession this year?" "It is fixed for January 11th at 8 in the morning." "Then," said Wu impetuously, "I promise you it will certainly rain on the 11th at 8 in the morning." At once there was an outburst of cries from the crowd: "That is enough! We don't want to hear any more preaching. If there is rain on the 11th, then your God is God!"

As mentioned, Watchman Nee was not present at this moment. But as soon as it was reported to him, he knew this was most serious. The news had spread like wildfire, and before long over 20,000 people knew about it. What were they to do?

They stopped their preaching at once, and gave themselves to prayer. They asked the Lord to forgive them if they had overstepped the mark. They were in deadly earnest. What had they done? Had they made a terrible mistake, or dare they ask God for a miracle?

Nee says, "The more you want an answer to prayer from God, the more you desire to be clear with Him. There must be no doubt about fellowship --- no shadow between. If your faith were in coincidence you could afford to have a controversy with Him, but not otherwise." Nee says they did not mind being thrown out if they had done something wrong. After all, you can't drag God into a thing against His will. But they reflected, this would mean an end to their Gospel preaching on the island, and Ta-Wang would reign supreme forever. What should they do? Leave now?

Up to this point they had feared to pray for rain. Then like a flash, Nee says a word came to him: "Where is the God of Elijah?" It came with such clarity and power that he knew it was from God. So he confidently announced to the brothers: "I have the answer. The Lord will send rain on the 11th."

Together they thanked the Lord, then full of praise, went out --- all 7 of them --- and told everyone. They would accept the Devil's challenge in the name of the Lord, and they broadcast their acceptance.

That evening the herbalist made two very pointed observations. Undoubtedly he said, Ta-wang was an effective god. The devil was with that image. Their faith in him was not groundless. Alternatively, if you preferred a rationalistic explanation, here was a whole village of fishermen. For 2 or 3 months on end the men were at sea, and on the 15th they would be out again. They of all people, would know by long experience when it would not rain for 2 or 3 days ahead.

This disturbed the Gospel party. As they went to their evening prayer, they all began once more to prayer for rain --- *now!* Then Nee felt a strong rebuke from the Lord: "Where is the God of Elijah?" Were they going to rest in faith and the finished victory of Christ?

They confessed their sin. "Lord," they said, "we don't need rain until the 11th." They went to bed, and next morning, the 10th they set off for a neighbouring island for a day's preaching. Three families turned to the Lord Jesus, publicly burning their idols. They returned late, tired, but full of joy.

They slept well, but were awoken by the direct rays of the sun through the single window in the attic. "This isn't rain!" Nee said. It was already past 7 o'clock. He got up, knelt down and prayed, "Lord, please send the rain!"

But once again, ringing in his ears came the word: "Where is the God of Elijah?" Humbled, he walked down stairs in silence. They all sat down to breakfast --- 8 of them, including their host --- all very quiet. There was no cloud in the sky, but they knew they were committed.

As they bowed to say grace before the food, Nee said, "I think the time is up. Rain must come now. We can bring it to the Lord's remembrance." Quietly they did so, and this time the answer came with no hint whatever of rebuke in it.

"*Where is the God of Elijah?*" Even before their Amen they heard a few drops on the tiles. There was a steady shower as they ate their rice and were served a second bowl. "Let us give thanks again," said Nee, and they asked God for heavier rain. As they began on that second bowl of rice the rain was coming down in buckets-full.

By the time they had finished, the street outside was already deep in water and the 3 steps at the door of the house were covered. Soon, they heard what had happened in the village. Already, at the first drop of rain, a few of the younger generation had begun to say openly: "There is a God; there is no more Ta-wang! He is kept in by the rain."

But he wasn't. They carried him out on a sedan chair. Surely he would stop the shower! Then came the downpour. After only some 10 or 12 yards, 3 of the coolies stumbled and fell. Down went the chair and Ta-wang with it, fracturing his jaw and his left arm. Still determined, they carried out emergency repairs and put him back in the chair.

Somehow, slipping and stumbling, they dragged or carried him halfway round the village. Then the floods defeated them. Some of the village elders, old men of 60 to 80 years, bareheaded and without umbrellas as their faith in Ta-wang's weather required, had fallen and were in serious difficulties.

The procession was stopped and the idol taken into a house. Divination was made. "Today is the wrong day," came the answer. "The festival is to be on the 14th with the procession at 6 in the evening."

Immediately we heard this there came the assurance in their hearts: "God will send the rain on the 14th." They went to prayer: "Lord, send rain on the 14th at 6 p.m. and give us 4 good days until then." That afternoon the sky cleared, and now they had a good hearing for the Gospel. The Lord gave them over 30 converts --- real ones --- in the village and in the island during those 3 short days.

The 14th broke, another perfect day, and they had good meetings. As the evening approached, they met again, at the appointed hour, and quietly brought the matter to the Lord's remembrance. Not a minute late, His answer came with torrential rain and floods as before.

The next day their time was up and they had to leave. The power of Satan's idol was broken. Souls had come to the Lord and found salvation, and God had proved Himself as the One who hears and answers the prayers of his own.

Ah, there is nothing like being in the very centre of the will of God, doing His work, knowing that you have Heaven's ear!

PRAYER IS THE REAL POWERFUL ANTIDOTE AGAINST UNBELIEF. We wonder why so many of our youngsters give up on the Christian faith. Could it be that they fail to see in us, the kind of faith that brings definite, incontrovertible answers to our prayers? God is waiting to prove Himself to be the Living and true God.

Since God is the God who hears and answers prayer, let us pray! Let us see God at work in our midst doing only the things that God can do!

Where is the God of Elijah? Locked up in the pages of the Bible? Confined to past history only? God forbid. If Christianity is the true revealed faith, If God has spoken through the prophets and supremely through His Son Jesus, then we must believe God has not changed and still is the prayer answering God.

Jesus Christ is alive. He sits at the right hand of God our Father on high and is our mediator. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to him by His God and Father.

God never commanded us to work without ceasing. God never commanded us to sing without ceasing. The only thing God commanded us to without ceasing was to pray. **Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17)**. He wants us to know Him as the God who hears prayer. That he rewards those who diligently seek Him.

May our testimony be the Psalmists: **Praise is due to you O God, in Zion; to You shall vows be performed, O You Who answer prayer. To You shall all men come!**

Thank you Lord, that You delight to hear and answer prayer!