

# A FEW THOUGHTS ON PRAYER IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**Suggested introductory reading: 1 Kings 8:22-55.**

## Foreword

This talk was given to a midweek Bible Class, but Prayer is a very big subject which covers man's approach to God in so many different ways, for so many different reasons and on so many varied occasions. It is a subject of the heart and is intimate to each person and there is no way in which one could adequately deal with the subject in only one evening's talk. May this therefore be a suitable introduction to your future studies.

Russell Gregory



The word 'pray' means 'to ask' or say "please" and though not used any more in this sense in our modern language we are all familiar with this meaning in the scriptures. But prayer has come to mean much more than just asking and so in the sense we shall use it here it will be our approach to our Creator in our worship of Him, our reverence for Him, our thanking Him as well as our asking of Him. So tonight let's see some of the ways in which a few people in the Old Testament times approached God. Adam and Abraham and others talked directly with God, or with an angel as God's representative but there were other occasions when it was necessary to approach God through the priest or High Priest who would intercede for them. Then there were the sacrifices, the casting of lots, Urim and Thummim, vows, oaths and fastings all

involving prayer. In fact, no part of worship can be left out of our consideration.

There are very many prayers recorded in the Old Testament for nearly all the Psalms are prayers, and besides these there are about 90 others recorded. One of the most marvellous things about these prayers is that they are all expressed by men and women of great faith. They contain no errors, no false nor even doubtful or questionable ideas and in all these prayers we find nothing but truth. We find God-fearing men and women pouring out their hearts, expressing the very highest thoughts of which the human mind is capable. We see them reflecting the character of their great Creator, accepting His covenants, acknowledging His righteousness, proclaiming His love and mercy and grace, while, at the same time, realising their own unworthiness, understanding their obligations and, in humility, appreciating their great privileges. As a man thinketh, so is he and in considering prayer we are treading sacred ground where thoughts of the heart meet with God and it is a great honour to come so close to holy men and women of old as to share such intimacies, fears, hopes and joys.

The prayer that was read by way of introduction is the climax of the Old Testament. God had chosen the site on which the temple was to be built. The threshing floor of Ornan (1 Chronicles 21:18) “Then the angel of the Lord commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up and set up an alter unto the Lord in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.” And in chapter 22 v. 1 “Then David said. This is the house of the Lord God and this is the alter of burnt-offering for Israel.” Then in verse 19 David charges Solomon, his son, to build the house of God “Now set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God: arise therefore and build ye the sanctuary of the Lord God, to bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and the holy vessels of God, into the house that is to be built to the name of the Lord.” And in 1 Kings 8 is the prayer of dedication of that temple - the sanctuary of the Lord God. It is the supreme prayer of the Old Testament, even as the

17th chapter of John's Gospel is the supreme prayer of the New, and it is that on which the Law of Moses centres, and indeed the whole of the Old Testament before being replaced by the New.

It is a prayer which contains all the elements of worship. Praise, thanksgiving, reverence and supplication, covenants and vows. What may seem remarkable is the submissiveness of Solomon; his dependence and humility, for the kings of his time were despots who ruled with great authority and severity and while Solomon was fast becoming the greatest king of the greatest nation in the world his heart showed a right understanding of his relationship with his Maker.

If we are to fully appreciate these prayers it is necessary that we too, have a right understanding of our relationship with God, for only then can we know the depths and the riches of His love, and this, in turn, greatly affects our own attitude in prayer as well as enriching our estimation of the prayers we are considering.

God, over the years, made several covenants with man and in each it is God who formulates the covenant and man has no part in this but to accept whatever God decrees. These covenants show His righteousness, love and mercy and man has to acknowledge his proper standing in the eyes of his Creator.

The first prayer we will look at is in Genesis 24. Abraham's eldest servant ruled over all his house and in an earlier chapter we are told that Abraham's chief steward was Eliezer. It would seem likely that they were one and the same, so let's call him Eliezer here in chapter 24. Now this servant was the eldest of many. We would call him a slave today for he was owned by Abraham and he accepted this as his position. His duty was to do his master's bidding. Eliezer was also a God-fearing man.

Well, Abraham was old and he sent Eliezer on a long journey - perhaps some 600 or 700 miles - to find a bride for his son Isaac.

A journey lasting about 2 weeks or so. At the end of his journey, Eliezer seeks guidance in prayer, verse 12, “And he said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and show kindness unto my master Abraham.” Notice how Eliezer asks for nothing on his own account, nor does he presume to address God as his God, but Abraham’s. He makes himself of no account. Verse 14, “And let it come to pass that the damsel to whom I shall say. Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink, and she shall say, Drink; and I will give thy camels drink, also, let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac, and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master.”

Here we see Eliezer’s attitude as an example to us all as a right attitude for all God’s servants and is the one shown in all the Old Testament prayers. And how quickly God answered Eliezer’s prayer! Before he had done speaking in his heart there was Rebekah before him! He stood in wonderment for a few moments while the realisation of the events that had happened came to him. When he had finished telling Rebekah his mission, and learning that there was room to lodge in, he again bowed his head in thanksgiving and worshipped God. Verse 27, “And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth; I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my masters brethren.” That was enough for Eliezer, for he wished for nothing more than to complete his mission. But let’s just complete the next part of this delightful story - not that I wish to say much more about it but just for its own sake. Rebekah goes into the house to tell her family this remarkable news while Eliezer remains waiting outside. But not for long and the next words he hears have a familiar ring to them - “Come in, thou blessed of the Lord, wherefore standest thou without? For I have prepared the house.”

This surely, was not the usual form of addressing a slave and we can only suppose that there was something about this man Eliezer which made it appropriate.

Next we will turn to Genesis 3. Adam and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit. They knew they were naked and they hid from God. Now, prayer is our approach to God, but that's not what Adam and Eve wanted to do just now for they were fearful of Him and wanted nothing more than to get away from Him for they knew that their lives were in danger. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" and that's what they had done. It was necessary for God to show the initiative to bring them back to Him. So He called them until they realised it was no use hiding away any more. They had to finally approach Him and talk with Him. They were humble, full of remorse and ashamed. They wanted to put things right but there was no prayer they could offer that would put things right and then, they were told that God would put things right - in His way and in His good time. The coverings they had made for themselves would not do and they watched while a lamb was slain and the skin made into aprons for each to wear. We don't know how they felt in seeing the animal slain, but for most people it is unpleasant and to some a distressing experience, especially the first time. And to feel responsible for the slaying would only add to their sadness. But even more than just this, for they had to wear those skins day by day, always reminding them of their guilt, it had been all their fault. It was explained to them that one day God would provide a lamb which would take away all sin but until then, regular sacrifices had to be made.

Adam and Eve had no alternative but to accept a new relationship with their Creator, and God formulated a new covenant for them to live by. There was no going back to the way things were for the Cherubim, each with a flaming sword would have destroyed them, as indeed it does all that is not acceptable to

God. We may be quite sure Adam and Eve offered up a prayer of thanksgiving that their lives were spared.

Adam and Eve were now sinners and had sold themselves and were slaves to sin. All future generations would now be born into that slavery, and even as slaves have no rights so man has no rights, but he must serve a master. However, slaves can be bought and sold, and God so loved the world that he set about buying. It was not the will of God that man should remain slaves to sin and death. So now the covering of skins gave provisional reinstatement of Devine favour, and in the 4,000 years from Adam to Christ sacrifices reminded the God-fearing of their position of helplessness and hopelessness apart from the love, mercy and grace of God, and like Eliezer, they sought to do only the will of Him who sent them on life's journey.

Prayer is for our benefit. It is because of God's love for His children that He asks use to pray to Him, and indeed He demands it and puts us in situations which leave us no alternative. He knows our needs and He tries our hearts - time and again in order to build our trust in Him and develop our characters.

Now let's turn to Exodus 14. Israel, after leaving Egypt, was now three days journey into the wilderness. The Egyptian army came marching after them in order to recapture them and take them back again to slavery. The children of Israel had travelled down a valley to the sea shore. There were mountains on either side and they were in trouble. They had a big problem. Mountains to the right, mountains to the left, the enemy behind and the sea in front! What were they to do? They couldn't fight, for they had no weapons, and they couldn't flee, for there was nowhere to go. But their problem was their opportunity - their opportunity to show their trust in God, and they cried unto the Lord. Sadly, it was not a cry for help but a cry of complaint for they failed to show any faith in God and in verse 11, "They said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the

wilderness? Wherefore hast thou dealt with us, to carry us out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in this wilderness.”

Moses, ever patient, pleads with them to put their trust in God. “The Lord will fight for you.” But the lesson of appealing to God had yet to be learnt. Time and again the children of Israel failed to approach God in the right way and in the right frame of mind. Though they had been slaves in Egypt and had been severely treated and any complaint brought only harsher treatment and greater burdens, they would, it seemed, rather live for the moment in Egypt than put their trust in God. Where was their thankfulness and their appreciation of all that the Lord had done and was now doing for them? How many had hearts acceptable to God? Sadly, very few.

For a contrast we will turn next to 11 Chronicles 20. “It came to pass after this also, that the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, and with them other beside the Ammonites, came against Jehoshaphat to battle. Then there came some that told Jehoshaphat, saying, There cometh a great multitude against thee from beyond the sea on this side Syria; and, behold, they be in Hazazon-tamar, which is Engedi. And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask help of the Lord: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord. And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, and said, O Lord God of our fathers, art thou not God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee? Art not thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham thy friend for ever? And they dwelt therein, and have built thee a sanctuary therein for thy name, saying, If, when evil cometh upon

us, as the sword, judgement, or pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in thy presence, (for thy name is in this house), and cry unto thee in our affliction, then thou wilt hear and help. And now, behold, the children of Ammon and Moab and mount Seir, whom thou wouldest not let Israel invade, when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them, and destroyed them not; behold, I say, how they reward us, to come to cast us out of thy possession, which thou hast given us to inherit. O our God, wilt thou not judge them? for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee. And all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives and their children.”

How similar was their situation to that of Israel in the wilderness when they had mountains to the right, mountains to the left, the enemy behind and the sea in front! Here again, the people were in dire straits. And again, their problem was their opportunity to show faith. And they did. Jehoshaphat feared and set himself to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast, and Judah gathered themselves together to ask help of the Lord. They put their hearts right with God. This is what it is all about. All things work for the good of those who love God. Jehoshaphat, in his prayer recalls Solomon’s prayer of dedication and they link themselves with the great purpose of God. They cried unto the Lord God in their affliction but this time to seek help. Verse 12 “for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee; and all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives and their children.” It was no use looking around to see what they could do for themselves. They had to look up, and in order to look up one has to stand still. Verse 15 “And he (Jahaziel, a Levite in the congregation) said, Hearken ye, all Judah and all ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God’s...”



verse 17 “Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you. O Judah and Jerusalem; fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go ye out against them, for the Lord will be with you.” Notice verse 18...

“And Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, worshipping the Lord and the Levites stood up to praise the Lord” and all this is before the battle had begun! Next morning they rose early and went into the wilderness of Tekoa where their enemies were encamped, and Jehoshaphat stood encouraging the people saying “Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.”

Verse 21 “And when he had consulted the people, he appointed singers unto the Lord and that they should praise the beauty of holiness as they went out before the army and say, Praise the Lord; for His mercy endureth for ever. The singers went out first - before the army! And all the people praised God, even though the enemy they were going out to meet were preparing for battle. What faith! What trust in God! Verse 22 “And as they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir ...and they were smitten ...and none escaped.” O what joy and thankfulness those God-fearing people experienced that day. Their salvation was reward enough, but on top of all this they had the spoil of their enemies which took them three days to collect, it was so much. And finally, they came back to Jerusalem. Verses 27 & 28 “Then they returned every man of Judah and Jerusalem and Jehoshaphat in the forefront of them to go again to Jerusalem with joy, for the Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies. And they came to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets unto the house of the Lord.” No doubt to offer thanksgiving in the house of God before returning to their homes.

We have looked at right and wrong attitudes of the heart in prayer, now let's turn to the subject of casting of lots and the Urim and Thummim. This casting of lots was used very extensively in the Old Testament and provision was made for it in the Law of Moses. It was a very deliberate way of seeking a decision from God. It was used on the Day of Atonement for deciding which of the two goats should be slain and which set free. It was used in the allocation of territory when the children of Israel entered the Promised Land. It was used to determine guilty people, and it was used in the allocation of Temple duties. The Urim and the Thummim would also appear to be a method of casting of lots and used on occasions, not only to determine guilty persons or the allocation of duties but also elsewhere used to seek council of the Lord.

In all cases it would appear to be the prerogative of the priests to cast lots. The first occurrence is in Leviticus 16:8. This is on the Day of Atonement and Aaron had to cast lots over the two goats "one lot for the Lord and the other lot for the scape-goat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to make an atonement with him and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness."

It may seem a very simple matter but the choice of which goat should live and which should die was made by God and not by man, and there can be little doubt that before the lots were cast a prayer was offered to God, a prayer for guidance, of confession and of thankfulness, though no form of words is recorded.

Turning next to Joshua 7. Jericho had fallen to the Israelites. The first city to fall to them as they entered the Promised Land under Joshua. Ai was next, but something went wrong. They were defeated and Joshua was perplexed. Verse 6, "And Joshua rent his clothes and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of

the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads.” On to verse 10 - “And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou upon thy face? Israel hath sinned and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them; for they have taken of the accursed thing and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and have put it among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies because they were accursed. Neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you.” It may be noted that God could so easily have told Joshua that it was Achan who had stolen the clothing and the silver and the gold from Jericho and hidden it in his tent, but God, in His wisdom uses the casting of lots before all the people and this way all the people of Israel were involved. Indeed, God said that Israel had sinned - not just one man or one family. It was necessary for the people to consider themselves as one, so that whatever one person does affects others also. God declared that He would not stay in their midst if there were any amongst them who would not obey His commands. Verse 14 “In the morning therefore ye shall be brought according to your tribes, and it shall be that the tribe which the Lord taketh shall come according to the families thereof. And the family which the Lord shall take shall come by households. And the household which the Lord shall take shall come man by man.” And so it was. The lots were cast before the Lord and in due course Achan was taken and he and all that he had was destroyed. As prayer is man’s approach to God and all the nation were in prayer at this time, anxious to know why they had been defeated at Ai, who had sinned and what had been done to offend God that He should forsake them. And God was all the while drawing the people closer to Him, so that He should be involved in all they did.

When Joshua allocated the territory to each of the tribes of Israel it is recorded in Joshua chapter 18 that he “cast lots in Shiloh before the Lord.” We do not know just what form the casting of lots took and we get no further help in this direction from 1

Chronicles where we read of the allocation of the Temple duties. It seems possible that the Urim and Thummim were used for the casting of lots but there can be no certainty upon this for there is a considerable amount of conjecture surrounding their use, so I feel a few minutes spent looking at this subject may be well spent here. Let's see first of all what we know for certain about them and for this we will turn to Exodus 28 where we find that they consisted of two plates carried in the Breast Plate of the high priest. Verse 30 "And thou shall put in the breast plate of judgement the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be upon Aaron's heart when he goeth in before the Lord. And Aaron shall bear the judgement of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually." So we see that these two plates, carried in the breast plate were in some way connected with the judgement of the people. In the margin of your bible you may see that the meaning of Urim and Thummim is 'lights and perfections' but this is by no means the only interpretation, for others are 'doctrine and judgement,' 'declaration and truth', etc., none of which make much difference to our understanding of the matter.

In Numbers 27 we see God directing Joshua and the high priest Eleazer in the use of the Urim and Thummim, although only the Urim is mentioned. Verse 18, "And the Lord said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hands upon him, and set him before Eleazer the priest, and before all the congregation, and give him a charge in his sight. And thou shalt put some of thine honour upon him that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient. And he shall stand before Eleazer the priest (verse 21) who shall ask counsel for him after the judgement of Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out, and at his word shall they come in, both he and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation." As this was at the end of Moses life and the people were preparing to go into the promised land, it would seem that this going out and coming in would refer to battle. They had the land to conquer and now provision was being made for Joshua to

enquire of the Lord, through the priest, as to when he should lead the people out to battle and when he should bring them in again.

King Saul used Urim and Thummim as we read in 1 Samuel 14:38 “And Saul said, Draw ye near hither, all the chief of the people, and know and see wherein this sin hath been this day, for as the Lord liveth which saveth Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die. But there was not a man among all the people that answered him. Then said he unto Israel, Be ye on one side and I and Jonathan on the other side. And the people said unto Saul, Do what seemeth good unto thee...” verse 41, “Therefore Saul said unto the Lord God of Israel, give a perfect lot. And Saul and Jonathan were taken. And Saul said, Cast lots between me and Jonathan my son. And Jonathan was taken.” In the Authorised Version of the bible there is no mention of Urim and Thummim, but the Revised Standard Version reads at verse 41, Therefore Saul said, O Lord God of Israel, why hast thou not answered thy servant this day? If this guilt be in me or in Jonathan my son, O Lord God of Israel, give Urim; But if this guilt is in thy people Israel, give Thummim, And Jonathan and Saul were taken... verse 42, then Saul said Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan, and Jonathan was taken.” It would seem from this that the use of Urim and Thummim was the usual form for casting of lots.

One more thing to mention here and it is that God sometimes did not answer, as in 1 Samuel 28. By this time Saul had lost his faith and had been rejected by God.

This is now close to the end of Saul’s life. The Philistines had gathered a particularly large army and Saul was afraid. Verse 5, “And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines he was afraid and his heart greatly trembled. And when Saul enquired of the Lord the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.” So how could this casting of lots work if it could give a “no answer”? Well, the Bible doesn’t tell us any more than

we have considered so far, so now we must go outside of the scriptures to other sources to see if we can find out anything more, and here we learn that the priest, after making the appropriate request in prayer, would take out the two plates from his breast plate and throw them to the floor. If this is the case then the casting of lots was not unlike the tossing of a coin as we would use today to see if it would show heads or tails. However, the difference is that there were two plates thrown down, not one. Let's suppose that each of these two plates had the word 'Urim' written on one side and the word 'Thummim' written on the other side, then, when thrown to the floor they could each show 'Urim', or they could each show 'Thummim' or they could show differently, the one showing 'Urim' and the other 'Thummim' and this last case could be the 'no answer.' Such a response is not possible with one coin.

However this may be we have come to the end of our time here tonight and to sum up we have seen how important prayer is. What a wonderful privileged it is to be able to come so close to our Creator in prayer and even more, He has asked us to reason with Him. In Isaiah 1:18 we read, "Come now, let us reason together saith the Lord."

May we always do so.

Russell Gregory. (Talk given at a Bible Class. 1984.)



