

Spiritual Exercises for Adventists

**“BLESSED ARE THEY THAT KEEP HIS TESTI-
MONIES, AND THAT SEEK HIM WITH THE
WHOLE HEART.”**

Psalm 119:2

Chapter 6

PRAYERS OF PETITION

“Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name.” Psalm 86:11

AS A child I spent most of my time in this segment of prayer. I always had a list of items I wanted God to deal with. For some reason I remember my brother praying aloud in family worship when I was preschool age and he was in the 3rd grade. I remember him praying for the missionaries in Macedonia. I had no idea where that place was, or why he chose to include it in his prayer. But I still recount his concern for the missionaries in Macedonia as he asked God to bless them and keep them safe.

Throughout my youth I experimented with petitions to God. I lost a jack knife once and never did find it. God seemed to think that I shouldn't recover it. My sister lost a quarter that wasn't found, in spite of fervent prayer.

I admit that I have never been a prayer warrior. I don't keep a record of what I've prayed for and when. I don't try to remember the outcomes as a percentage of the whole. For me, it's a dynamic process, and I was taught as a child to always, always remind God in my prayer that He should do what I ask, only if He thinks it's the right thing to do. We should emulate the

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words of Jesus on the Mount of Olives when He said, “let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will; but as thou wilt.”

We should realize that we don't know what's in other people's hearts, and when we pray for someone else to be healed, we can't know all of the reasons why or why they shouldn't be healed. Perhaps if some Christian dies in peace and dignity, another person will be touched and make a decision for Christ. Perhaps a person is weak and would suffer if life were to be prolonged. We can't know, and we must always be accepting, and not pray with a demanding attitude.

Isaiah 57:1 says, “devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.”

Maybe we place too high a value on this life and sometimes forget that there is eternal life to follow for the saints.

There are people on my list who have not given their hearts to God, and I'm sometimes unsure of what to pray for. If I ask for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on them, will it just harden their heart? If I ask for Jesus to confront them like he did the apostle Paul, would they accept Him with love? Or would they be super-legalists? Some of these people have been there a very long time, and these are not loving people. They are very self-centered and have done very little to help others. The fruit of their life has revealed very little love for others. This leaves me with concern about what to pray for; I mean, what can God do? When a person has rejected all pleadings of the Holy Spirit for years, then what more can God do? It reminds me of Romans, chapter 1, where St. Paul describes how God has to “let them go” to their own conclusion. God is forced to let us go when

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we refuse all pleadings of the Holy Spirit.

When I hear people pray for “world peace” I wonder what it is they want God to do. We live in a broken world, and the four angels are already holding back the winds of strife, and yet, look how bad things are. I think God is doing all He can while waiting for His church to finish the Gospel Commission, and if we don’t get the job done in time, angels will be sent to do it for us.

That sounds convenient, except that we are told it will at that time be the most difficult of all circumstances. That is to say, Lucifer’s deceptions will be so great that the Second Coming will occur just before the world self-destructs, or comes close to it. Remember, God in His mercy, has already delayed the 2nd Coming in order to save more of the people who can be saved. I’m referring to people who can be convinced to respond to the Holy Spirit. We know there are sheep not of this fold, and we know that the “Gentiles are a law unto themselves” meaning that some people might not be keeping the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus, but they are following what they know, and the fruits of their life reveal love.

But there’s another group of people that will respond to our love as we sacrifice materially to demonstrate a better way—a loving God in our hearts. Sometimes we think that God will change our characters at the 2nd Coming, but that’s not the case. Only people who were already growing in Christ or by the pleadings of the Holy Spirit will be fit for a position in the culture of heaven. So we pray for guidance to know who and how to minister to others.

There seems to be a relationship between our prayer and His intervention in the events of the world. It does appear that as

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we pray together, He is able to interfere with Lucifer's plans. Maybe that's the way it's always been. Lucifer has dominion over earth for a short time, and God doesn't intervene in certain ways unless asked.

Having said that, there are also requirements for us and they are described in part in Isaiah 58: "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high."

Here is evidence that there are conditions that prevent God from answering our prayers. We need to be right with God.

Ellen White tells of a time when they visited a church and were asked to pray for a member who had a disease of the lungs. "He was pale and emaciated. He requested the prayers of the people of God. He said that his family were sick and that he had lost a child. He spoke with feeling of his bereavement. He said that he had been waiting for some time to see Brother and Sister White. He had believed that if they would pray for him he would be healed. After the meeting closed, the brethren called our attention to the case. They said that the church was assisting them; that his wife was sick, and his child had died. The

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brethren had met at his house, and united in praying for the afflicted family. We were much worn, and had the burden of labor upon us during the meeting, and wished to be excused.”

She continues, “I had resolved not to engage in prayer for anyone unless the Spirit of the Lord should dictate in the matter. I had been shown that there was so much iniquity abounding, even among professed Sabbath-keepers, that I did not wish to unite in prayer for those of whose history I had no knowledge. I stated my reason. I was assured by the brethren that, as far as they knew, he was a worthy brother. I conversed a few words with the one who had solicited our prayers that he might be healed, but I could not feel free. He wept, and said that he had waited for us to come, and he felt assured that if we would pray for him he would be restored to health. We told him that we were unacquainted with his life, that we would rather those who knew him would pray for him. He importuned us so earnestly that we decided to consider his case and present it before the Lord that night; and if the way seemed clear, we would comply with his request.”

That night she and her husband did pray for counsel from the Lord, and asked to know His will concerning the man. Their desire was that the Lord be glorified. Should they pray for this man? They went to bed that night leaving the question open and unanswered. But, during the night the Lord revealed to Mrs. White some things about this man, who had a cherished iniquity in his heart. The Lord could do nothing for the man who was in this condition. The next morning the man approached the Whites, and they had a private conversation with him and shared with him what the Lord had revealed, and he then confessed that it was true.

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This case found in the *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, pages 349-350, presents two very important things. It helps us realize that we need to approach prayers of petition very seriously. I know that I have, in the past, been only too eager to add my prayers to the prayers of others regarding a request. I have spent little time vetting the issue and the person for whom I'm about to pray. Ellen White refused to pray for this person unless she knew the pertinent facts, and then only after she had prayed for guidance. You and I might not receive a special message from God in a dream or vision, but the Holy Spirit will give us a distinct impression when we are to say no. He will also give us clearance when the light is green, and we can proceed with a prayer of petition.

This case also highlights the importance of praying for permission to pray, which I've briefly touched on. I'm guessing that you have probably never asked the permission of God to pray for someone.

The emphasis on vetting works both on the intended beneficiary and the one who is praying. Remember Isaiah 58? We need to place our own house in order. Does that mean that I must be perfect? No, but it does mean that I must put away cherished sin. If I have a problem with my temper, and I kick the dog on an impulse, is not the same thing as my continued viewing of pornography. We can easily have things in our lives that we know are wrong, yet we continue to hold them dear. You and I must be determined in our hearts to rid ourselves of these things, and yes, we might fail, but the resolve in our hearts makes the difference. If I resolve in my heart, then it is no longer "cherished." At that point I am free to participate fully in prayers of petition.

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Sometimes, when a person learns that a friend is praying for them, it makes a difference. It becomes an emotional moment when decisions can be made on a different level. I can't explain it, but the emotional response to love helps people respond to the Holy Spirit. It clicks in the person's mind and a life is changed. I've heard several stories of men who said they were so impressed when they heard their mother pray for them by name. They were touched by a mother's prayer, and knew they were drifting away from God, and this prompted a decision at that moment to change course and return to the fold of safety.

We are cautioned, however, to observe certain restrictions when making this type of prayer: "Some, I saw, had erred in praying for the sick to be healed before unbelievers. If any among us are sick and call for the elders of the church to pray over them, according to James 5:14-15, we should follow the example of Jesus. He put unbelievers out of the room, then healed the sick; so we should seek to be separated from the unbelief of those who have not faith when we pray for the sick among us." ⁽¹⁾

We Christians don't hesitate to ask for prayers for issues in our lives, and we are eager to tell a friend that we are praying for them. I received a phone call a few weeks previously from a friend. It was in the evening and I was relaxing.

When I answered and we greeted each other, I noticed that his voice was not full of energy; it seemed to be quiet. There was no noise in the background, so I presumed he was traveling and was in a hotel room. There was emotion in his voice when he surprised me by quietly asking, "Are you praying for me?" This man is a leader in his church, and a few months ago I sensed something wasn't right and asked him, "How's your

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courage?” He wasn’t prepared for my question, and without hesitation he looked me in the eye and said, “Not good.” Whereupon I assured him that I would pray for him. We hadn’t talked about that conversation again until the phone call that night, and I was able to assure him that I remembered my promise and that I was still praying on his behalf. I have no idea what issues are involved; if it is marriage related, or if it is work related or just a faith issue. But I know him well enough to feel free to pray for him daily, and I’m sure he appreciates the fact that I’m praying on his behalf.

Asking people that question about courage has worked for me in opening the door of the conversation to spiritual issues. It is a question that is well received and isn’t too intrusive. When a person replies with “good” then the conversation moves on, but sometimes it opens the door to a life story. Sometimes people want to tell their story and admit their faults, and how they have rejected the pleadings of the Holy Spirit. It’s a question that fosters opportunities to encourage fellow believers.

When praying for others, it is critically important that we exercise the greatest amount of humility. There can be no place for pride in our lives. When people know we are praying for them, the devil looks for reasons to place doubt in their minds. They look for reasons to reject the prayers and the person who is praying. It is imperative that we pray for ourselves to remain humble and become more like Christ under these conditions.

John was worried. He had been walking around the horse race track for hours pleading and pleading with God for help. It was Friday evening, and he was scheduled to work the next day—a day he was determined to keep holy. Yes, he was a medic in the United States army, but he knew in his small clinic only

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a portion of his duties would be health related. There were other duties involving stocking supplies, mopping floors, and other non-medical related issues. It was World War II and he was somewhere in the middle of Australia, stationed on an old horse racetrack, but more importantly he was alone, and now it was late, very late in the evening and he needed rest. He was done. No more prayers for tonight. It was now in God's hands.

He headed back to his tent but in the darkness took a wrong turn and didn't realize his mistake until he saw the outline of the bleachers against the dim sky and lights in the distance. He turned around to head in the right direction, but was stopped by an angry and gruff voice that he recognized. The Sergeant who liked nobody, and who nobody liked.

"Where are you going Peterson?" demanded the voice.

"To bed." John answered.

"Come here."

"Okay."

"Why did you go and see the Colonel today?"

"I needed to get excused for work on Saturday." He then explained to the Sergeant about the Sabbath and his need for the day off. He told how the Colonel had denied his request, but he didn't mention how he had tried to enlist the assistance of an Adventist pastor in the village.

"Do you have any cigarette coupons?"

"Yes."

"Give them here."

John knew they were in his wallet. He had tried to dispose of

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them a few days before. They were issued to every G.I. and John refused to sell his or give them away, so he went to the trash can one evening and threw them in. But, when he withdrew his hand, the coupons were still there. He tried again and placed his hand over the can and shook it. But the coupons were stuck to his hand. He examined them and they weren't sticky; they just refused to leave his hand so he thought that there must be a reason and he placed them back into his wallet. And now the Sergeant was asking for them.

He handed them to the Sergeant who then said, "You should have come to me to ask for Saturday off. I'm the one who makes the schedule, and I'll take care of it. You go to church tomorrow and you shouldn't be out this late. Now get to bed."

"Yes, Sergeant."

For the rest of his enlistment, the Sergeant was faithful to his word, and John was never required to work on Sabbath, and the Sergeant never asked for more coupons.

John's story is an example of a prayer of petition for himself. God intervened on his behalf and it's a wonderful story. He told me that story over 60 years after it happened, and it had been untold up to that time. He agreed with me that it deserved to be shared in order to encourage others with similar challenges. He prayed, and the Lord intervened.

Sometimes we later regret what we prayed for. I remember when I was a preteen, and one of my mother's sisters came to live with us. She had polio when she was young and her spine was severely deformed, causing her to breath and walk with much difficulty. She had worked her way through Atlantic Union College and became a church school teacher in the New

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York Conference. She never rented an apartment, but rented a room with various church members where she didn't have to worry about house cleaning and food preparation. She focused all of her limited energy on her teaching responsibilities.

After she died I learned how she had donated a significant portion of her salary to provide financial assistance for various students to attend Union Springs Academy and college. The obituary stated that several leaders in our denomination were beneficiaries of her generosity when they were students. At any rate, when she was in her early 50's her hip fractured, and she came to our house to convalesce. I had learned in church school how at the time of the end certain weak people would be laid to rest, and so I remember telling God that I would be "good" after my aunt died. I figured that was a pretty accurate assessment of the situation, and that it would be a good bell weather for my future salvation. I hadn't anticipated her heart attack a few months later that took her life. I never considered how my prayer might have affected her longevity—that is, maybe it forced the Lord into action in order to keep me from going too far. (see Isaiah 57:1) I admit that as a preteen, my behavior wasn't that bad, but it was the attitude that needed adjusting, and her death did indeed make a difference. I kept my deal with God.

If you aren't a prayer warrior and are reluctant to pray in public, then this following counsel will be very helpful.

"Learn to pray short and right to the point, asking for just what you need. Learn to pray aloud where only God can hear you. Do not offer make-believe prayers, but earnest, feeling petitions, expressing the hunger of the soul for the Bread of Life. If we prayed more in secret, we should be able to pray more intelligently in public. These doubtful, hesitating prayers would cease.

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And when we engage with our brethren in public worship, we could add to the interest of the meeting; for we should bring with us some of the atmosphere of Heaven, and our worship would be a reality, and not a mere form. Those about us can soon tell whether we are in the habit of praying or not. If the soul is not drawn out in prayer in the closet and while engaged in the business of the day, it will be manifest in the prayer-meeting. The public prayers will be dry and formal, consisting of repetitions and customary phrases, and they will bring darkness rather than light into the meeting.”⁽²⁾

As we consider prayers of petition we must remember that it's the Lord's will that His people participate and partake of His divine nature, and become a member of the royal priesthood. It is His desire that we partner with the Trinity to be united and one with Them as They are with each other. Oh, what a blessing can be ours as we draw close to God.

REFERENCES

- 1 *The Present Truth*, Vol. 1, No. 11, November, 1850.
- 2 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 22, 1884.