

# Praying

251 prayers

by  
Leen La Rivière

## **Praying - 251 prayers by Leen La Rivière**

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## PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

Over the years, prayer has been the subject of a large number of books and speeches. The books on offer even include all sorts of methods, giving detailed instructions as to HOW you are to pray and WHAT you are supposed to say. The better you do it, the more prayers will be answered. You may smile about this, but there are thousands of Christians who believe such theories. And if their prayers are then not answered, quite a few people end up with a crisis of faith. Others regard God as a kind of Santa Claus, with matching expectations and shopping list prayers. Unfortunately, this will prove a disappointment too. Many discussions have shown that the image of God that people have in mind (which often depends on the denomination in which someone is brought up) has a strong influence on prayer and the inherent expectations of receiving an answer to prayer.

Is there anything left to contribute to the discussion about prayer?

As within our organisation a large number of young believers present themselves every year to be trained as a 'Continental', musically, culturally and also spiritually, many questions about prayer present themselves as well. Leaders for instance are faced with questions such as 'How come that prayers are sometimes answered and sometimes not?'; 'If my prayer is not answered, does this mean that God doesn't love me as much?'; 'Do I actually believe correctly, for I never hear anything back when I pray?'; 'Do I actually pray properly?'.

Many answers can be given if you first take some time to look at all the examples of prayer in the Bible. First of all, it appears that there many more forms of prayer than the well-known 'praying'.

Secondly, the situations in which prayer occurs appear to be very diverse.

Thirdly, the contents of prayer differ, from a short cry to a long story.

May this book encourage many to make contact with God.

*Leen La Rivière*

## CHAPTER 1 ATTITUDE FOR PRAYER

Entire volumes have been written about the correct attitude for prayer. It has been the subject of a number of theological conflicts. Some groups are adamant about it: this is 'the' way to pray.

### A. KNEELING

- Moses kneeled for God (e.g. Ex. 34,8).
- The people of Israel kneeled (Ex. 12,27).
- The entire congregation kneeled (1 Chron. 29,20).
- Solomon kneeled (2 Chron. 6,13).
- The Israelites kneeled in the temple (2 Chron. 7,3; Nehemia 8,7).
- Ezra kneeled, his clothes torn (Ezra 9,5).
- Call to all people to throw themselves down, bow down and kneel before God (Psalm 95,5).
- The apostle Paul once prayed kneeling in front of the people present (Acts 20,36).
- A day will come when everyone will kneel before God (Is. 45,23; Rom. 14,11; Philip. 2,10).
- Paul indicates that when he kneels he fully submits to the authority and majesty of God (Eph. 3,14).

### B. FALLING OR LYING PROSTRATE BEFORE THE LORD, OR THROWING ONESELF DOWN BEFORE GOD

- Moses and Aaron prayed like this (Ex. 20,6).
- At times Moses prayed like this for a very long time (Deut. 9,18 and 25).
- Ezra threw himself weeping down before the house of God (Ezra 10,1).
- Everyone is called to bow down in worship (Psalm 95,6).
- The man born blind worshipped Jesus this way (Joh. 9,38).
- In the Book of Revelations people fall down before God (Rev. 4,10; 5,8 and 14).

### C. STANDING UP

- Samuel's mother prayed like this (1 Sam. 1,26).
- It is mentioned in the Psalms (including Psalm 134,1).
- People often pray standing whilst reaching out or lifting up their hands (indicating a blessing or worship); see for instance Ps. 134,2, 1 Kings 8,54 and 1 Tim. 2,8.

### CIRCUMSTANCES FOR PRAYER

- Alone. People sometimes went to pray on their own, for instance Samuel's mother in the temple. Jesus, too, occasionally went to pray alone in silence.
- In a large group of people. The other extreme is a massive number of people, for instance at the consecration of the temple; or consider the multitude of people no-one can count, in the Book of Revelations.
- If you look at locations, everywhere was a place to pray: in town, on the land, at the river, on the beach, at sea, on a mountain etc. The most peculiar location for prayer is no doubt that of Jonah in the belly of the fish.

We may conclude that there are many forms of prayer and many circumstances for prayer.

In the following chapters I will discuss a number of different prayers and explain what strikes me in them.

## CHAPTER 2 SHEMA ISRAEL

The most crucial prayer from the Old Testament can be found in Deut. 6,4,5. *"Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."*

Dit gebed is het belangrijkste gebed dat in alle Joodse bijeenkomsten en synagogen vanaf de uittocht tot heden gebeden wordt.

'Sjema Israël, hoor Israël.'

This prayer is the most important prayer that has been prayed in all Jewish meetings and synagogues from the exodus until this very day. 'Shema Israel, hear Israel.'

Jesus refers to it too (Matth. 22,34-39). When a teacher of the law asks Jesus for the greatest of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20,1-17), He answers by referring to the most important prayer. By praying this prayer and acting accordingly, God's commandment is fulfilled. How is this done? By loving your neighbour as yourself. Jesus concludes by saying that the entire law and prophets are based on these two commandments (so a prayer and act accordingly); so everything that constitutes religion is comprised in these two commandments. An interesting thought to think and pray about.

Let us go back for a moment to the opening phrase. Hear Israel, hear Jan, hear Ria, hear Leen, there is but one God, a wonderful God, who is so worth loving with all that is in you, so that you can love your neighbour and yourself as well.

*"O God, I want to listen to you, I want to love you; You are the only God. Help me to love my neighbour and myself."*

## CHAPTER 3 THE LORD'S PRAYER

At some point Jesus makes some very useful remarks about the position to adopt during prayer, the motivation to pray, the right place for prayer, formulation of prayers etc. Go and pray a real prayer and don't do it to impress people with your prayers.

Matth. 6,5-8: *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."*

Jesus continues by teaching his disciples a prayer, the Lord's Prayer, that has become the most central prayer from the New Testament to billions of Christians from the days of Jesus until today. Matth. 6,9b-13 *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one: for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen."*

This prayer was not meant to be and remain THE prayer. It is a model meant to help us. It contains praise, it is practical, it is about contacts and relationships, it is about forgiveness and reconciliation, it contains a proclamation, it speaks of needs and care etc. If you pray it out loud with a group of people, it is very impressive and you know God to be close to you. And you know you are united with all those who believe, of all races, classes and ages.



## CHAPTER 4 AFRAID

Gen. 3,9-10

*"But the Lord God called to the man (Adam, in the Garden of Eden), "Where are you?" He (Adam) answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

Adam and Eve have just trespassed one of God's commandments and eaten the 'forbidden fruit'. This causes them to 'see'. Their innocence is gone. Their trust is gone. Fear has taken over. How can they see God face to face? So when God pays a visit in the evening, Adam and Eve hide.

These few sentences from Adam reflect the deepest fear many people have about prayer. You are naked before God. He knows about you and He knows you through and through. Secrets or hidden agendas are impossible. What do you say then? The obvious answer is an open and honest talk. Many centuries later people even thought that if God spoke to you, it would be your death. It shows how afraid people were of contact with God (see for instance the calling of the prophet Isaiah, Is. 6,5). Of course nobody needs to be afraid to say the first sentences to God. He actually really wants us to pray.

Another significant aspect to this situation of Adam, Eve and God is that they simply talked to each other and understood each other. Unfortunately, this is at times a bit more complicated these days. Hearing God's very words in fact no longer happens. Nevertheless, we may know what He means and this begins with the certainty that we do not have to be afraid to start talking to God.

## CHAPTER 5 CALLING ON GOD

Gen. 4, 26 *"At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord."*

Adam and Eve were thrown out of paradise. Cain (son of Adam and Eve) has killed his brother Abel and has to leave. Then Adam and Eve get another son, Seth. On a certain day Seth gets a son too, called Enosh. At that time people began to call on the Lord.

Calling on God is therefore a form of prayer. What can you call for? Well, for help, a solution, salvation, or it can just be a cry.

This may encourage us to call on God too, when necessary. Calling on God is a form of prayer.

There are other places in the Bible which tell about God being called on:

- Gen. 13,4, Abraham built an altar in Canaan and called on the name of the Lord there.
- Gen. 21,33, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called on the name of the Lord, the eternal God.
- Gen. 26,25, Isaac built an altar and called on the name of the Lord.

In addition to this obvious conclusion, it is good to realise that the first generations simply talked to God. This auditive contact must have disappeared one way or another. Did the fall of man increasingly become an obstacle for direct contact with God? Or did God withdraw as humanity now had to carry their own, self-chosen responsibility?

Whatever may be the reason, direct contact had changed, people started calling on the Lord.

## CHAPTER 6 WALKING WITH GOD

Gen. 5,22-24 *"Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away."*

This is truly amazing: one moment you are walking with God and the next you simply walk into eternity. How are you supposed to view this? For it seems really odd.

Hebrews 11,5 tells us more about Enoch.

*"By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."*

Enoch started living as closely to God as possible. He got more and more intertwined with God. God's thinking became his thinking. God's acting became his acting. God's character became his character. What a remarkable way of prayer, walking with God. Finally Enoch had become one with God to such an extent and he so pleased God, that he walked with God straight into eternity, without dying.

This fragment from Hebrews mentions yet another vital basis for prayer: faith in God. But also, that God rewards you if you earnestly seek him. This means that he may not always be easy to find. Sometimes you have to make an effort. At times he may seem far away, sometimes he seems silent. But if you set out on the way with God, he will reward your seeking and will allow himself to be found. He does not reward you with Christmas presents. He rewards you with His unfathomable and mighty presence. It is a challenge to walk with God like Enoch did. There are people who turn this into real prayer walks, and why not. But first and foremost our whole life should be 'walking with God'.

## CHAPTER 7 ACTION BY MEANS OF PRAYER

Gen. 8,20-22 *"Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.'"*

It's just after the flood. Noah, his family and all animals have been saved by the arc.

Now that there is land again, Noah thanks God with an offering on an altar. Noah makes a gesture, and this gesture is a pleasing aroma to God.

Sometimes our prayer is similar to building an altar of remembrance, an altar to mark something in our life. Such action can be a pleasing aroma to God. It is good to remember your life with God. It is good to count your blessings.

And God appeared to be very glad with it. Gen. 9,8-17 tells us that God made a special covenant with Noah, a covenant that has existed with all living beings ever since. If we, just like Noah, mark the moments we have been saved, we take our place in the history that started with Noah thousands of years ago. And God considers such an action a beautiful prayer.

## CHAPTER 8 CALLING GOD BY NAME

Those who have faithfully attended Sunday School will still know the story of Abram. God had promised Abram that he would get a child. But he got older and older, and so did his wife Sarah. Finally Sarah is too old to have children. Then she gives her Egyptian slave Hagar to Abram, so that he can at least father a child with her. And so Hagar becomes pregnant. Then Hagar feels that she is superior to her mistress Sarah. Sarah takes it very badly. She so humiliates Hagar that Hagar finally flies into the desert. A special angel finds her at a well by the roadside. The angel encourages her, asks her to go back and gives this refugee another special promise for the child that was to be born (who would become the boy Ismael). You will find the whole story in Genesis 16.

But did she pray at all? The angel says in verse 11 that the Lord had heard her misery. Verse 13 says that *she called the name of the Lord*, and this name meant to her something like 'He who looks after me'. Quite a beautiful name for God. Not that all misery was suddenly solved. Hagar's life remained a hell for years. But she knew that God looked after her and that gave her strength. Certain is, that God hears our cry of misery, even if we sometimes only call his name.

## CHAPTER 9 CRYING

The story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar continues. The next episode can be found in Genesis 21,8-21. Sarah finally did have a child, Isaac. When Isaac grows up, he doesn't like his half-brother Ismael. This leads to big trouble in the family. Finally, Sarah demands that Hagar and her child Ismael are sent away. This happens. They are given water for their journey, but it runs out. Finally, in despair Hagar puts Ismael under a bush to die. A little further down the road she sits down and cries, for she can no longer bear to see her child die.

Then we read in verse 17, "*God heard the boy crying.*" An angel offers a solution yet again (a well of water) and so Hagar and Ismael can continue their journey.

This boy did not pray in any classical way at all: no joined hands, no kneeling, no proper prayer. No 'hands together softly so, little eyes shut tight', etc. This little boy was dying of thirst and will at most have cried and whimpered. God listens to these cries. Today as much as then.

## CHAPTER 10 NEGOTIATING

One of the most remarkable prayers is the conversation between Abraham and God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. You can find it in Genesis 18,16-33.

The sins of these cities (in particular their unrighteousness and egotism) had run so out of hand that God had decided to purge this pest from the navel of the world. But he decided to tell his friend Abraham first.

After all, Abraham didn't live that far away from these cities. When Abraham hears what God is intending to do, he says, *"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"* and God answers that if 50 righteous people can be found, the city will not be destroyed. But then Abraham goes on: say there are 5 people less. What about 45 righteous people? And so the negotiations continue, down to 10 righteous. God says that if 10 righteous people can be found in the city, it will not be destroyed.

The end is well known: only Lot, Abraham's cousin, and Lot's daughters get out of the city safely and survive...

They were the only righteous people (Gen. 19,29).

Abraham knew enough about the situation in Sodom to know that he had little chance of success. It is an encouragement to keep praying, even if the situation seems desperate. Even more remarkable is the 'negotiating' with God. Of course not out of self-interest, but in the interest of many. How often do we pray, negotiate, plead for God's grace and mercy in the face of God's judgement or someone's downfall?

Abraham was daring enough to get his hands dirty. He kept praying for an almost 'lost cause'. Aren't we all too quick in leaving the "Sodoms and Gomorrah's" to their own devices?

## CHAPTER 11 ENTREATING

Gen. 25,21 *"Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant."*

In old translations the word 'entreating' is used for Isaac's prayer. 'Entreating' brings to mind associations of relenting, changing opinion, changing the course of things, changing direction, negotiating about something etc.

It sounds so human, so intimate. As if you are really at the negotiating table with God, trying to make a deal. Although you can't manipulate God, this is a very encouraging incident. When something weighs heavily on your mind and you go and talk it over with God... and who knows with what result. 'Entreating' is a form of prayer too.

## CHAPTER 12 ENQUIRING

Gen. 25,22

*"The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to enquire of the Lord..."*

It sounds so wonderfully uncomplicated. Something is the matter, you don't understand it and you do the most obvious, 'you just go and enquire of God...'

A wonderful and honest encouragement to be as uncomplicated as Rebecca. For how often do we have to be up to our neck in trouble before we even begin to think of enquiring of God. This example from the bible is a great encouragement simply to enquire things of God. 'Lord, why is it that...?' This is a pleasant, uncomplicated way to pray.

## CHAPTER 13 A VOW

Gen. 28,18-22

*"Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."*

It all depends on where you start reading this example. There are people who completely lose themselves in the last part. I must tithe at all cost, for then God will bless me, use me, anoint me etc... and then after some time they are disappointed, for that is not the way to deal with God. The heart of the story is, that you may occasionally find yourself so moved by an event (Jacob had had a special dream to encourage him) that you make a vow to God. You then also have to keep this vow. A vow is therefore a certain kind of prayer, but only to be prayed in very special circumstances.

Jacob goes to live abroad for many years and acquires wealth and a large family. Then God reminds him of his vow (Gen. 31,13) and Jacob returns to his own country.

In Psalm 50,14 we sing, *"Sacrifice thank-offerings to God, fulfil your vows to the Most High"*. And Ecclesiastes (5,4) says, *"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it"*.

God, too, makes a special vow to us, *"And this is what he promised us - even eternal life"*. (1 Joh. 2,25)

It is at times wiser to remind God of His promises and vows than to promise God all sorts of things light-heartedly.

## CHAPTER 14 PRAYER IN FEAR

*"In great fear and distress Jacob..."* (Gen. 32,7a)

*"Then Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac... Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children...' "* (Gen. 32,9-12)

This wasn't just a bit of fear, it was absolute fear for Jacob's life and that of his family. In his anxiety Jacob calls to God. Sometimes this fear is unfounded. In this case Jacob had some reason to be afraid, he had played quite a trick on Esau in his youth. But would Esau still be that angry? The story that follows shows that Esau was glad to see his brother again. So Jacob has to combat the enemy within. In his fear he calls to God. A prayer out of fear is also a prayer, even though there is often no reason to be really afraid. Yet this is often easier said than done. God meets Jacob part of the way. And likewise, God meets us part of the way.

## CHAPTER 15 WRESTLING

In the night that Jacob is so afraid, he first brings his family to safety and then stays behind on his own (this story can be found in Gen. 32,22-33,3). Then a mysterious opponent wrestles with Jacob. None of the two gives up. At the break of day the fight ends. The opponent appears to be someone sent by God. He blesses Jacob and gives him a new name, 'Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men'. Jacob had overcome himself and his fears and then dared to come face to face with his brother. That morning Jacob (Israel) sets out ahead of his family.

Sometimes our prayer is a struggle. A struggle with yourself, your motives, the truth, with God. This may eventually bring about honesty and courage in us.

## CHAPTER 16 OFFERING SACRIFICES AND DREAMING

Gen. 46,1-5 *"So Israel (=Jacob) set out with all that was his, and when he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, "Jacob! Jacob!" "Here I am," he replied. "I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." Then Jacob left Beersheba."*

Jacob is anxious to go to his son Joseph in Egypt, but he is also afraid to leave the country. This land was after all God's promise. So he travels to the southernmost inhabited part, Beersheba. He doesn't know what to do now. Therefore he offers sacrifices by means of prayer, as he does not know how to express himself in words. And God listens and comes to encourage this old man in his dreams. How kind God is to this old man. In this prayer God takes the initiative. Offering sacrifices by means of prayer and communication with God is a dream, and that, too, is a prayer.

## CHAPTER 17 CRY FOR HELP

Ex. 2,23-25 *"During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them."*

Crying out, a cry for help, all of this is prayer too. This form of prayer has little to do with the ritual prayers in for instance a church service. In the above example some gross injustice affects a whole nation, and God eventually listens to this cry.

Sometimes a situation arises when a large group of people desperately cry out for justice and a humane life. Did they call out to God? What follows (Moses' activities to deliver the people) shows that the people hardly had any idea that God existed. Their cry was probably just a cry of misery to nobody in particular. Or they clenched their fists or swore inside their hut. And don't be mistaken about this, the moment comes when God listens.

## CHAPTER 18 THE BURNING BUSH

Ex. 3,1 - 4,16 In this passage from the Bible we are told how Moses was called. He sees a burning bush that is not consumed by the fire.

*"So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight - why the bush does not burn up.'"* Moses goes over to have a look and then God begins to speak.

A meeting like this at the burning bush really is an extraordinary event to talk with God, and a unique prayer. Few will experience anything like it. Nevertheless it does occur that God has something to tell us and that He uses certain situations or incidents to do so. Then the important thing is for us to listen. Certain is, that there are moments in each person's life when God opens the talks himself. But do we understand Him?

## CHAPTER 19 INTERCESSIONS

Ex. 10,16-17 *"Pharaoh quickly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you. Now forgive my sin once more and pray to the Lord your God to take this deadly plague away from me.'"*

Because of Pharaoh's reluctance to let the people of Israel go, ten plagues rage over Egypt. Finally the people may leave.

Pharaoh requests the intercession mentioned above at the time of the ninth plague. He seems so repentant. But this is only to make the plague stop. Once Moses has prayed and the plague has stopped, Pharaoh's true nature emerges...

We learn from this incident that intercessions for someone or something are very important and do have influence.

We also learn that the request for intercessions may at times be prompted by other motives. Knowing this, Moses prayed anyway, for he knew that the situation would be part of God's plan anyway. Similarly, it is not for us to judge these things if someone asks for intercessions. We just put the person or situation in God's hand.



## CHAPTER 20 GRUMBLING

Ex. 15,24 *"So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink?'"*

Ex. 16,2-3 *"In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'"*

Ex. 16,6-7 *"So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?'"*

Grumbling is a very negative way of praying. God hears it too. Only, grumbling doesn't lead anywhere, it stifles everything, and everything grinds to a halt. In the above situation something else could have happened as well. The people could have called on God, but by contrast they started a revolt against Moses and Aaron. When the people of Israel were still in Egypt and oppressed as slaves, they could call onto God and God listened to their cry for help. And just as God was able to miraculously lead them out of Egypt (think for a moment about the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea), God can provide now as well. But this is not the issue. The people of God are spoilt; trekking through the desert is tiring; in their mind's eye it all looked so different... Instead of seeking God, they look for a scapegoat. So all their frustrations are projected onto their leaders. In fact they resent God's rescuing them from Egypt. How ungrateful, how unreal and how unreasonable. This grumbling had a very negative effect. Eventually these people would not see the promised land.

What is grumbling? It is, among other things, unreasonable and unjustified criticism; it is slander, lying, gossip and manipulation. Be aware that God hears this way of 'praying' too.

## CHAPTER 21 PRAYER OF THE OPPRESSED

People who are abused and people who are oppressed sometimes start calling to God for the injustice they suffer. And mind you, God hears this. Exodus 22,21-27 prescribes rules regarding those who are needy. Who should be cared for? Among them are foreigners, widows, orphans, the poor etc. You may not ill-treat or take advantage of these socially vulnerable groups.

*"If you do (take advantage of them) and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry." "When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate."*

If God listens to their call for social justice like this, it is wise to support these socially weak people.

## CHAPTER 22 INTERCESSIONS FOR A PEOPLE

It's not easy to lead the people of Israel. It certainly was a tall order to the great leader Moses. At some point in time Moses was on the mountain and was given the 'stone tables' containing the 10 commandments. The point was, that Moses stayed away for a long time, 40 days. In the meantime things start going wrong. The people make a gold calf as a god and it all goes downhill and turns into an unbridled orgy. This must be stopped. God wants to put all the people to death.

Then Moses prays for the people, *"But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. 'O Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out?' Turn from your fierce anger..."* Ex. 32,11-14.

It is hard to believe that God listens to Moses. The impending doom does not materialise, but it is then Moses' task to punish the guilty.

We then read in verse 31 that Moses embarks on another plea for the people of Israel. *"Please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."*

Finally, Moses does something else, something very special: he pitches a tent outside the camp. Anyone who wants can come and pray there. *"Anyone enquiring of the Lord would go to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp."* Ex. 33,7-b. This way Moses encourages the people to start talking to God personally.

But the people remain difficult, unruly and undisciplined. Moses has to get down on his knees to pray for the people regularly, to prevent God from destroying them for lack of obedience or sin. Numbers 11,4-9 is another example of this. The people consider even the manna from heaven unsatisfactory. Why did Moses lead them out of Egypt? They were better off there! The people are punished by snakes; their bites kill people. Then the people gather in a crowd before Moses and ask him to pray for them. *"So Moses prayed for the people."* Moses then has to make a bronze snake and everyone who looks at it is healed.

## CHAPTER 23 RADIANT PRAYER

There are people who are so close to God that their eyes become almost radiant when you look at them. I've seen people literally 'radiate' for joy when they were telling about their lives with God, or about great or profound spiritual events. The champion in radiation is Moses. On many occasions he has enjoyed the privilege of literally speaking with God. These meetings eventually made him literally radiant.

*"When he came down from Mount Sinai he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord."* Ex. 34,29. This became so frightening to see for the people, that when Moses was among them, he put a veil over his face (vs. 33-35).

I long for this kind of talks, this kind of meetings, this kind of prayers, that make your face radiant. How rich, beautiful, profound and special these meetings are.

## CHAPTER 24 THIS IS WHAT YOU MUST NOT PRAY

*"Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast metal for yourselves. I am the LORD your God."* Lev. 19,4

At times it is clear what those idols are. In Moses' days, they were statues of idols before which people bowed down and which they worshipped. But there is a lot more to say about this. It is remarkable that God always says something about 'striving for holiness in life' in this context. For He, too, is holy. In Moses' time virtually all idol worship involved sex: prostitution (with the same sex or the other sex), with children, even with animals. Or rape was part of those rites. Or even sacrificing children. It is all an atrocity. All those rites pose a danger to public health, and, moreover, they resulted in a certain addiction and stupor; also, all values and standards were hollowed out by this kind of practices. The result is clear: destruction of what is human. You can't build a society on this kind of practices.

What then is religious practice? And how does true religion give direction to life in a society? These questions are answered very pointedly in the verses following this passage (vs. 11-17) by repeating the 10 Commandments. Keeping these wise rules is true prayer.

Idols can have many faces: materialism is an idol. Egotism is an idol. Envy is an idol. Work may be your idol. Greed (including money and possessions) can be an idol. Hedonism and narcissism (this includes seeking enjoyment at any cost) can be an idol. The desire to manifest yourself at all times, so also at the cost of others, can be an idol. Idols are cruel masters; your worship will never be enough. Eventually it will be your downfall.

## CHAPTER 25 WHICH SPIRIT DO YOU WORSHIP?

Lev. 20,6 *"I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them, and I will cut him off from his people."*

People sometimes say that all this bother about the occult is just nonsense. The Bible certainly doesn't say so. The occult exists and is a gigantic danger. It is life-threatening. Once someone turns to (so in fact starts worshipping) the spirits of the dead (spiritism) or gets involved in fortune telling (this includes explaining signs, tarot cards, handreading, believing in horoscopes/signs of the zodiac etc.), these negative powers slowly but surely start to reign over you. This may result in feelings of depression, suicidal tendencies, pessimism, anxiety and fear, your downfall.

God's Spirit is totally different. Where God's Spirit is, is freedom (2 Cor. 3,17). That is quite a different kettle of fish. And the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... (Gal. 5,22). So those effects are very different. God's Spirit builds up. The occult destroys.

*"O, God, I pray, fill me with Your holy Spirit."*

## CHAPTER 26 A PRAYER OF BLESSING

Numbers 6, 22-27 *"The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.'*

*"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."*

This blessing is often spoken at the end of a church service. It is part of an impressive tradition, but there is a lot more to it. What is prayed here is that God's blessing, his Shalom, his presence, will manifest itself. It sets the wheels of the Kingdom of God in motion.

Such a blessing has far-reaching consequences. An example is the calling of Abram (Gen. 12,2-3), *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* Blessings appear to have far reaching consequences and have an impact on individuals, matters, generations and nations.

Jesus says somewhere that we should even bless our enemies. The first time you bless someone and say it like that, it will seem very odd. But if you repeat it every day, you will be surprised about the effect. A blessing is a very strong prayer.

## CHAPTER 27 A MUSICAL PRAYER

Numbers 10,9-10 *"When you go into battle in your own land against an enemy who is oppressing you, sound a blast on the trumpets. Then you will be remembered by the Lord your God and rescued from your enemies. Also at your times of rejoicing - your appointed feasts and New Moon festivals - you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and they will be a memorial for you before your God."*

These trumpets were special trumpets (Numbers 10,1), specifically used for God's service. In normal circumstances, they were sounded to announce something to the people, for instance meetings in the Tent of Meeting.

But these trumpets also drew God's attention. In case of war or feasts and festivals the sound made God remember his people of Israel. In a way, these trumpets prayed.

Apparently, music can play a significant role in making contact with God. Music can be a prayer as well.

## CHAPTER 28 A MATTER OF LAW

*"Some day the five daughters of a man approached Moses with the question: 'Our father died and left no sons, only us as daughters. Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father's relatives.' So Moses brought their case before the Lord." (Numbers 27,5)*

And the girls are proved right, they get the full inheritance of their father.

The situation indicates that you can also pray to God about very complicated matters: legal, business, economic, social, political and other problems. Unfortunately, this still seems to be done too rarely.

This prayer is conducted in a very businesslike manner: Moses brought the case before the Lord. He explained it to God as he would do to a business partner.

## CHAPTER 29 PLEADING IS PRAYING

The book of Deuteronomy begins with Moses looking back. What has he been allowed to do in God's service? What has happened in the 40 years after he left Egypt?

Somewhere halfway this list, you read: *"At that time I pleaded with the Lord."* (Deut. 3,23) Moses very much wanted to cross the Jordan to the promised land, but the Lord said, *"Do not speak to me any more about this matter."* (Deut. 3,26)

Pleading, too, is a form of prayer. In Moses' case it was to no effect, but there are many occasions when the Lord did answer other people's pleas.

## CHAPTER 30 GOD IS NEAR

Deut. 4,6-8 *"Observe the decrees and laws of God carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"*

God is near. He is near to us in His rules. The laws mentioned are the 10 Commandments, which constitute the core of the law. And God is near us when we call out to Him.

You're not always aware of God's presence. This actually happens very rarely. Yet it is definitely so that if you follow His rules for the game (and that means listening to Him) that He is near you. He is always with us, around us, within us, even though you may not notice. But His love is sure. God loves us if we do his will. Not the listeners of God's word, but those who act upon His word are pleasing to God (compare Matth. 7,21). He is near them.

## CHAPTER 31 FOOD FOR YOUR SOUL

Prayer is often about needs, worries, your own problems or those of others that move you. You can also bring social and political worries about society to God. God wants to be prayed to.

But prayer has another function as well. This is to do with God's response to you personally. Of course God may occasionally give certain clear answers, but that is not what I mean.

Prayer brings about a kind of 'carrier gulf' through which God gives the person who prays food for his or her soul. Contact with God feeds our spiritual life, it gives energy to those who feel down, it gives courage to those who are broken...

*"He taught you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* (Deut. 8,3b)

Jesus used this word from the Bible to make it through *doorstaan* one of the temptations in the desert (Matth. 4,4).

Our bodies need food, but our mind and soul do so too. We get this spiritual food by reading God's word and praying.

## CHAPTER 32 PERSEVERING PRAYER

Deut. 9,25+26 *"I lay prostrate before the Lord those forty days and forty nights because the Lord had said he would destroy you. I prayed to the Lord and said, "O Sovereign Lord, do not destroy your people..."*

Moses tells something here about how at a certain instance he made intercessions for the people who had been disobedient. What incredible perseverance. Just imagine praying for 40 days and nights in order to avert the catastrophe. As a result destruction did not strike.

This attitude of Moses may serve as an example to us in times of impending doom and danger, and it tells us not to stop praying too soon.

## CHAPTER 33 FIRST FRUIT PRAYER

The people are given a special order in Deut. 26,1-11. Once they have entered the promised land, they are to bring the first fruits collected and the first yield of the land to the priests as a sacrifice of praise to God. A prayer is part of this offering. *"And now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me."*

The ceremony continues, *"Place the basket before the Lord your God and bow down before him. And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household."*

Not a bad thought, also for today: to bring the first yield, the firstfruit, to God if you start something new, a company, an activity. By doing so, you allow others to share in the blessings you have received. How liberating is this giving, how redeeming is this prayer of thanksgiving. What a difference this will make to the economy and to care for one's neighbour.

## CHAPTER 34 A USELESS PRAYER

Joshua 7,6-7, 10-12a *"Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell face down to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, 'Ah, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?' "The Lord said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction".*

Joshua is the new leader after Moses. At the beginning, conquering the promised land is incredibly successful. Jericho falls. But with the very next town (Ai) everything goes wrong. Panic ensues. How is this possible? Joshua sincerely confesses guilt and humbles himself before God, and the other leaders join in. How could this happen? Then God interrupts their prayer and questioning. 'What are you doing down on your face? There is sin. Someone has violated the rules. That's why no conquest/breakthrough was forced.' There is a lesson to be learned from this. Sometimes there is no breakthrough, because something is very wrong. Should this occur, we should not start investigating each other with a magnifying glass to see whether there is someone among us who may serve as a scapegoat. Or, as a voorganger once said when things just didn't improve for a woman, 'there probably is some sin in your life, otherwise things would be different for you'. He left the woman, totally gobsmacked, to her fate. Should anything be really fundamentally wrong, such as here in the story of Joshua, the people of Israel and Ai, God will no doubt bring it to light. Another lesson is, that after the first victory at Jericho people became a bit careless. The rest would be an easy ride. But that is never the case. We need to stay alert until the end.

## CHAPTER 35 AND THIS WAS VERY STUPID...

Joshua manages to frighten other kings and peoples by his conquests in the promised land. One of the towns in the area plays it clever. The inhabitants think, 'if we manage to make a treaty with this Joshua, he will not destroy us'. So they act as if they come from a town very far away. It is an entertaining story, a prime example of spin doctoring and misleading propaganda. Joshua is incredibly flattered when this delegation from far away visits him. Of course he wants to make a peace treaty. His fame has gone before him. And then they make a big tactical mistake: *"But they did not enquire of the Lord. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live."* (Joshua 9,14)

This obviously comes out later, but Joshua keeps to the treaty and does not kill them.

They should have gone into prayer, they should have enquired of the Lord. Then they had been prevented from making a stupid mistake... The importance of prayer about all kinds of business agreements, contracts, political coordination etc. springs to mind. Why not ask first in prayer if this 'treaty' is actually a good idea? What is the hidden agenda? This may help us all on God's way.



## CHAPTER 36 HEARTS YIELD TO GOD

At the end of Joshua's life this 'general' gathers the people together to renew the covenant with God at Shechem. You can read all about it in Joshua 23 and 24.

Then Joshua says something very special at the end of his speech.

*"Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him."* (Joshua 24,23-24)

Yield hearts, to yield your heart to God. In modern English this means that you actively orient yourself to God, and open your heart to God.

It says something about your attitude; this orientation is a kind of prayer attitude.

And that is something we may ask ourselves now: does my life reflect a kind of permanent orientation to God? Does my heart 'yield' to God? Is this prayer attitude my attitude?

## CHAPTER 37 IN ANXIETY

The book of Judges tells us the story of the people of Israel in the period from the conquest of the promised land until the time of the kings. Each of the twelve tribes lived in their own area. There was no central leadership. So, it soon became 'every man for himself' (see for instance Judges 21,24-25). Another result was spiritual decay, even including idol worship. Then God would send enemies, the people would be oppressed and in their need and anxiety they would again start crying out to God for help, salvation, a solution.

*"But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer who saved them."* (Judges 3,9+15; 4,3; 6,6; 10,16)

The people were saved and then everything would be all right for a while. They would remember God and his commandments, but after a while the experience of God would wear off and the whole cycle would start again. There is a lot to be learned from this.

- We cannot rely on previous experiences of God.
- We have to turn to God time and time again and be aware that we have to do this.
- And if we are in great anxiety, we can cry out to God faithfully. That is, let's not do so by means of an easy escape; it does have consequences for our daily life with God.

## CHAPTER 38 GIDEON'S PRAYER

Things had gone wrong with the people of Israel again. The people were oppressed and God sent an angel to Gideon to call him to save the people. But Gideon thinks he can't. You can read the amusing discussion in Judges 6,11-23. Then Gideon dares to take action by destroying the local idol. In the meantime the enemy is gathering massively. Then Gideon gets afraid. Would he really be able to do this? Gideon begins to pray. *"Gideon said to God, 'If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised - look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing-floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.' And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew - a bowlful of water. The Gideon said to God, 'Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.' That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew."* (Judges 6,36-40)

This gives Gideon courage and he eventually manages to defeat a great enemy with a small group of people.

Of course you should not turn this into a game. You can't constantly ask God to give a special sign and make clear what you should do. In an exceptional situation in your life, which will have an enormous impact on you and a large group of people, this may be prayed in order to encourage you. But God had already made clear to Gideon what he had to do. In fact, you already know in your heart what you have to do.

Why can't you constantly pray for signs to indicate what you have to do? First of all, this easily amounts to fortune telling and explaining omens and so it is tending towards astrology and the occult. Secondly, God wanted us to become mature believers, which means that you take personal responsibility for your life and take your own decisions as to what you are going to do with it.

Some years ago I heard the story of a couple who weren't certain whether they should get married. They prayed for a sign from God and the next day they saw two birds which landed on a trunk in the woods together. Lo and behold: God has given a sign. So they married. They became deeply unhappy. With so much doubt they could have known that this would come to nothing. Their request for a sign was to no avail. Something so clear is your own responsibility.

## CHAPTER 39 BOWING DOWN IN PRAYER

There is another interesting passage in Gideon's story. He steals up to the enemy camp. There he hears a soldier telling a dream to his mate. To Gideon this dream is an enormous extra encouragement. You can read about the whole incident in Judges 7. How does Gideon react? Full of arrogance?

*"When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, 'Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands.'* (Judges 7,15)

Gideon reacts by worshipping and giving thanks. After this the situation incites him to take immediate action. Now is the time. And so it happened. Bowing down to God in worship and humility is a form of prayer. Another important thing to remember are the circumstances and inner attitude.

## CHAPTER 40 MAKING A VOW

*"And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.'*" (Judges 11,30-31)

Making a vow is a form of prayer, a prayer in which you fully commit yourself to something and that you will therefore have to do or carry out. The story of Jephthah teaches us that you should not do such a thing easily. Jephthah had thought of an animal, for this was sacrificed in Israel. But unfortunately, what came out of the door to meet Jephthah after winning the battle was his daughter, and this posed a problem. How do you sacrifice your daughter to God. Obviously, she was not offered as a human sacrifice, God clearly prohibits this. She was dedicated to God, remained single and childless. And that was quite something in those days. The lesson is, that you will have to be very careful with what you are going to promise to God. It is therefore clearly better just to live your life every day with God and to beware of overconfidence and 'macho behaviour'.

## CHAPTER 41 SAMSON'S FATHER'S PRAYER

A woman goes to her husband in near-panic and tells him that an angel told her she will get a son. She is not allowed to drink any alcohol, nor eat anything unclean. The boy who will be born will be a Nazirite of God, i.e. a person set apart to God who is to be an example as a judge. Hubby at once thinks 'What now?' His reaction is remarkable: he decides to pray to God for wisdom.

*"Then Manoah (that's what Samson's father was called) prayed to the Lord: "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." God heard Manoah." (Judges 13,8)*

The advice asked is therefore about how to bring the boy up. The rest of the story shows that there was rather a need for this, for the boy who is born appears to be quite a strapper. A lot is told about this Samson, as chapters 14,15,16 from Judges show.

If you are suddenly faced with great responsibility, you can pray, just like Samson's father 'Lord, help.'

## CHAPTER 42 SAMSON'S PRAYER

Samson was a plague to the occupying force, the Philistines. But they finally trick him and get him in their clutches, for he can be robbed of his exceptional strength. So the muscleman of the Old Testament is thrown into prison and his eyes are gouged out. Yet although he is blind, his hair starts growing again and Samson knows that his moment is near. Then a magnificent feast is organised in the temple of Dagon. This god is greater than the God of Israel, for they have been able to take Samson prisoner, haven't they? Samson is brought as a trophy and displayed to the people. Thousands are in and on the building in order not to miss this spectacle. But then Samson starts praying: *"Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." (Judges 16,28)*

Samson pushes the pillars on which the roof rests apart and the building collapses. Everyone is crushed, including Samson.

Samson could not cope with God's humiliation. His personal humiliation also meant God's humiliation. This was the moment to make this manifest. He sacrificed his own life.

These days nobody is asked to give their lives like this for God's sake. Yet we are asked to commit to God's Kingdom and to be a witness.

When we are faced with situations in which God's honour is at stake, we may pray about the attitude we should adopt. Since Jesus has come we know that nobody is allowed to bash away at people or take up arms 'in God's name' any longer. Rest assured, God can look after himself.

## CHAPTER 43 SITTING BEFORE GOD

*"The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. "O Lord, the God of Israel," they cried, "why has this happened to Israel?" (Judges 21,2-3)*

The tribe of Benjamin had made an incredibly stupid mistake, which resulted in virtually the entire tribe being destroyed. The other tribes gathered in Bethel, where the Tent of Meeting was, and, totally devastated, sought the Lord.

If something traumatic happens in your life, it may be very good to take time. Time to sit before God, time to weep, time to cry, time to express your despair. Take your time to sit before God in those circumstances.

## CHAPTER 44 SAMUEL'S MOTHER'S PRAYER

Once upon a time there was a man called Elkanah. He had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. The latter had children, but Hannah didn't. In those days such a thing was a big disgrace in Israel. People thought it was God's punishment for a hidden sin. Typically, the whole village would gossip about you, and at times Peninnah bullied Hanna terribly. Once every year Elkanah would go to Shiloh, where the holy Ark of the Covenant was placed.

But then one day Hannah can't take it any more. She prays to God.

*"In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord."*

1 Sam. 1,9b+12

*"As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk..."*

This priest then tells her off, but when it becomes clear that Hannah only poured out her soul, the priest tells her to go in peace. God will answer her prayers. And indeed, a year later a son is born, Samuel, who would later become the greatest judge of Israel.

A quiet prayer is a prayer as well, and what a special prayer this was. Sometimes you can be so full of emotion, pain, sorrow and sadness that you can only pray to God in your heart. God hears that prayer too.

## CHAPTER 45 HANNAH'S SONG OF PRAISE IS A PRAYER

Hannah, Samuel's mother, had promised that if it came true that she would have a child, the child would be consecrated to God. Once the child was able to fend for itself, she brought the little boy Samuel to the Tent of Meeting to minister and serve there. After bringing the boy, when she is offering sacrifices, she bows down before the Lord and prays a beautiful prayer; it is a song of praise. She probably really 'sang' it. Just read it slowly and let it sink in. It comes from the very depths of her heart.

1 Sam. 2:1-10

*"Then Hannah prayed and said;*

*My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high.  
My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.  
There is no-one holy like the Lord; there is no-one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God. Do not keep talking so proudly or let  
your mouth speak such arrogance, For the Lord is a God who knows,  
and by him deeds are weighed. The bows of the warriors are broken,  
but those who stumbled are armed with strength. Those who were  
full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger  
no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, But she who  
has had many sons pines away. The Lord brings death and makes  
alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends  
poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor  
from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; He seats them  
with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour. For the foundations  
of the earth are the Lord's; upon them he has set the world.  
He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced  
in darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose  
the Lord will be shattered. He will thunder against them from  
heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.  
He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed."*

May this prayer give you comfort.

## CHAPTER 46 RISING ABOVE YOURSELF

*"Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name the Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right."*

Said the prophet-judge Samuel in 1 Sam. 12,20-23.

What had happened? The people of Israel wanted a king, like all the other peoples around them. They no longer wanted an invisible God as a king, with a judge as his representative. This was of course a particularly painful situation for the judge at the time, Samuel.

Then Saul is made king and Samuel, being on the sidelines, tries to steer things in the right direction a little. Saul's government ends in a failure, because he does not observe God's laws.

So Samuel had to step down when Saul was crowned. It's not an easy thing to do. Yet this is the moment that his true greatness comes to light. He manages to set aside his frustration and says, 'I keep praying for you and I will teach you the way that is good and right.'

What a great attitude and what an example.

## CHAPTER 47 JABEZ' PRAYER

1 Chron. 4, 9+10

*"Jabez was more honourable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, 'I gave birth to him in pain.' Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.' And God granted his request."*

In the United States and some other countries, Jabez-groups have already formed. The first books on this man and his prayer have been published. When you read them you notice that it is all very much focused on 'enlarging territory'; people want more, more health, wealth and happiness. But is this what the story is about? There are a few aspects that should make us think. The story starts with the word honourable, with integrity. So this is an honourable person, full of righteousness. It implies that he had more integrity than the rest of his family. In the line of descent only his mother's name is listed. His father's name remains out of sight. This is very un-Jewish, so there's something wrong here. Also, the boy was given a very unpleasant name when he was born, 'borne in pain'. Just imagine that you're playing outside and your mother calls you in from the village green for dinner, 'borne in pain, tea's ready...' How would you feel? When he has grown up and has come to terms with everything he asks God to bless him abundantly. In those days this became apparent by the size of your territory. They were still winning ground from the enemies of God in those days, so that's why. But then Jabez continued by asking that God's hand be with him and he would be kept from harm, so that he would be free from pain. What pain was he referring to? In those days it could be childlessness, children who do not follow God, war and destruction, terrible diseases striking your family, animals or plants. Now the picture becomes a lot clearer. Don't focus on an increase in possessions, so don't ask God for this shiny Mercedes. Ask God for a steadfast character, integrity, peace in your heart and peace in your family, peace, but most of all His blessing. These are all things we may express in our prayers, just like Jabez.

## CHAPTER 48

### PRAYING VIA THE EPHOD IS NO LONGER POSSIBLE

In Exodus 28,1-34 and Exodus 39,1-26 you can read how the ephod was made for the high priest. This garment with all its accessories was a unique work of art. The breastplate for making decisions was important. It contained the Urim and Thummim (Ex. 28,30).

These could be consulted as a kind of oracle, guided by God, so that people would know God's will in an important situation.

David is an example of this. David had to flee from Saul and wanders around the country with a group of followers/warriors. He uses the ephod to find out whether he should attack enemies or not, and whether he should pursue something or not (see for instance 1 Sam. 23,1-13; 1 Sam. 30,7+8; 2 Sam. 2,1).

Via the ephod David consults the Lord. Many wish that something similar to the Urim and Thummim would still exist today. By throwing these 'holy dices' you get an instant answer to your prayer... convenient, but is it also wise?

In the New Testament this possibility no longer presents itself. God wants us to grow to maturity in the faith and take our own responsibilities. There isn't a place for explaining this kind of signs any more. And should people have difficulty taking a decision anyway, then there is the gift of wisdom, which we may pray to receive. And we can always talk to wise people with great faith. But the person who decides is you.

Nevertheless, people still make ephods today. This happens when one proclaims the other to be God's mouthpiece. Be careful with this. It can open the door to manipulation. Even if people think they speak words of the Holy Spirit, what they say must still be judged, discussed and criticised carefully. If you don't, an 'ephod' easily turns into an idol. Nobody can take the place of God. Nobody can take the place of your prayer and your contact with the eternal God.

## CHAPTER 49 DAVID'S PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Once David firmly holds the reins over the twelve tribes of Israel; and once all enemies have been defeated; and once Jerusalem has become the new capital and David built himself a palace there; then he asks the prophet Nathan whether he should build a temple for God. Nathan is given a special revelation from God that David is not the one allowed to do this, but his son is. In the meantime God will bless David in a special way. (You can find this in 2 Sam. 7,1-17 = 1 Chron. 17,1-15.)

David is very moved by this and answers God by an honest and profound prayer. This prayer gives a lot of insight into what motivates David and into his character. You can find it in 2 Sam. 7,18-29 (= 1 Chron. 17,16-27).

*"Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and he said:*

*"Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, o Sovereign Lord, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant. Is this your usual way of dealing with man, o Sovereign Lord?*

*"What more can David say to you? For you know your servant, o Sovereign Lord. For the sake of your word and according to your will, you have done this great thing and made it known to your servant.*

*"How great you are, o Sovereign Lord! There is no-one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. And who is like your people Israel - the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You have established your people Israel as your very own for ever, and you, o Lord, have become their God.*

*"And now, Lord God, keep for ever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house. Do as you promised, so that your name will be great for ever. The men will say, 'The Lord Almighty is God over Israel!' And the house of your servant David will be established before you.*

*"O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant, saying, 'I will build a house for you.' So your servant has found courage to offer you this prayer. O Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your words are trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant. Now be pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue for ever in your sight; for you, o Sovereign Lord, have spoken and with your blessing the house of your servant will be blessed for ever."*

Just pray this prayer aloud and with feeling, in total silence; it will move you.



## CHAPTER 50 SOMETIMES PRAYER DOESN'T HELP

David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. To all intents and purposes he had had her husband killed. God was very angry with David, for the king should have set a moral example. The prophet Nathan is given orders to predict a number of punishments to David (2 Sam. 12). A boy will be born from this adulterous affair, and he will become ill and die...

David then begins to pray and fast and cry before God. But the little baby dies after a few days (2 Sam. 12,15-23).

God was very much hurt by this great stupidity of David. David was very much hurt by the consequences of his sins. The only thing that helps in such a situation is humbling yourself in deep remorse. Forgiveness can only come from such honesty.

## CHAPTER 51 RECTIFYING INJUSTICE

*'During the reign of David, there was a famine for three successive years; so David sought the face of the Lord. The Lord said, "It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death." '..... they did everything the king commanded. After that, God answered prayer on behalf of the land.'*

(2 Sam 21: 1, 14b)

After continued trouble, David went to enquire of the Lord as to the reason for the unusually lengthy time of difficulty. He gets an answer and goes to restore the wrong someone else has committed.

This is a prayer, too. Sometimes it turns out that it was not you, but someone else, who has done a great injustice. Great discernment is required to right such a wrong. And God blesses such discernment.

## CHAPTER 52 BEING AFRAID

When David finally won all the battles and rested, he wrote a song of thanks. It can be found in 2 Sam 22. This song of gratitude is both praise and prayer.

Verse 7 shows the following: *"In my distress I called to the Lord; I called out to my God. From his temple he heard my voice...."*

David seems to be a real he-man. But, on occasion, he was also quite worried and even frightened. And when we are afraid, we begin to pray and call upon the Lord.

God gave him the courage to continue: *"For you are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall"* (verses 29 and 30). Such prayer is uplifting. It does not change the situation, but it does alter our perspective on it.

## CHAPTER 53 REMORSE

*"David was conscious-stricken after he had counted the fighting men ..... and David said to God, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'"* (2 Sam 24:10 [= 1 Chron 21:8])

Once we start counting the people, we no longer trust in God, but rather in our own strength or the strength/number of the people. David makes quite an arrogant mistake. The prophet Gad comes to tell David what the punishment for his sin will be. He has to choose between three bad choices which results in a three day pestilence on the land. A dreadful punishment. And David eventually says to God, *"I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? O Lord my God, let your hand fall upon me and my family...."* (2 Sam 24:17)

The plague stops. *"Then the Lord answered prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped."* (2 Sam 24:25).

God appreciates our own prayer, our own confession, taking responsibility for our own actions, acknowledging our own mistakes and guilt (even if that sounds a bit strange). David was called a man after God's heart. Not because he was perfect, but because of his attitude in acknowledging the truth of the matter.

## CHAPTER 54 NOT ON AUTOMATIC PILOT

The following scenario is easy to understand: we have a problem, we pray, God shows the solution, we do what he says and, hallelujah: a breakthrough. Shortly afterwards: the same problem presents itself. So what do we think? Such and such is what we need to do to see a breakthrough. Wrong, quite wrong. That was the automatic pilot.

This next story teaches us that: The Philistines attacked again. David consults God as to what he should do. The answer: Go straight towards them. And the enemy gets defeated. Shortly afterwards, the Philistines attack again. Fortunately, David consults God again and He says: 'Don't go directly towards them, but go around them and attack from the other side.' And that time David defeated the enemy, too. This interesting situation is told in 1 Chron 14:8-17 (=2 Sam 5:17-25).

What we can learn from this is that we need to keep going back to enquire of God. We need to watch out for the automatic pilot in our belief system and prayer life. Our contact with God needs to be continually renewed and refreshed. We need to be open to new ideas and solutions. And that makes prayer a continuous adventure.

## CHAPTER 55 DAVID'S LAST PRAYER

At the end of his life David again gives instructions for the building of the temple. He saved up for the construction all his life, and the people, the leaders, et al, contribute all they can (1 Chron 29). David then hands over the reign to Solomon. In that setting we find, in 1 Chron 29:10-19, David's last song of praise, his last prayer. It is a remarkable prayer for, even though he was the greatest king in the history of Israel, he gives all the glory to God.

*"David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, Praise be to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from you. We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. O Lord our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. O Lord, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people for ever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided."*

And the lesson? Even if your life was entirely successful, even if you have abundance, even if you have the support from the whole population: all the glory goes to God, He is the giver, He is the motivator, all glory to God.

## CHAPTER 56 SOLOMON'S PRAYER

The start of Solomon's reign is good. Solomon prays. He knows himself to be completely dependent on God.

But his prayer has an interesting result. God appears to Solomon in a dream (1 Chron 3:5 [=2 Chron 1:7]). In that dream God asks Solomon what he wants, and Solomon asks for wisdom and knowledge. His request is granted and Solomon becomes the wisest king in history. His songs, proverbs and sayings are quoted to this day.

Sometimes dreams do come true and God uses dreams to speak to us. Compare Joel 2:28 *'your old men shall dream dreams'*.

## CHAPTER 57 THE PRAYER FOR THE DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE

Solomon builds the temple. When it is finished, there is a large scale dedication. Solomon prays a prayer. It can be found in 1 Kings 8:14-54 (=2 Chron 6:14-7:3). The prayer recounts once more the whole history and the importance of serving God as a people and to live according to his laws. Solomon's prayer ends like this:

*"When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the Lord, he rose from before the altar of the Lord, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out towards heaven. He stood and blessed the whole assembly of Israel in a loud voice." (verses 54, 55).*

Chronicles (7:1) report also that fire came from heaven to burn the burnt offerings and the glory of God filled the temple..... What a fantastic prayer, what an example. What a challenge to dedicate land, reign, life, economy, present and future to God like that.

## CHAPTER 58

### GOD'S SECOND APPEARANCE TO SOLOMON

Once the temple is built and there is a smooth-running praise service, God appears at night again. The fact that this was not just any old dream is clear from the way the event is so exactly recorded (2 Chron 7:11-22 [=1 Kings 9:1-9]). It must have made an enormous impression.

God says that he has heard Solomon's prayer, but that the future history will depend on whether the future kings and generations serve God or not. If not, the prosperity will come to an end and oppression will result.

*"But if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."* (2 Chron 7:14).

That promise still holds.

## CHAPTER 59 INTERCEDING WITH GOD

Israel had divided. The kingdom in the north had Jeroboam as king, who sinned by installing a shrine and an altar in his own honour. (1 Kings 12:25-32). When the king stands on the altar to light a burnt offering, a prophet stops by who prophesies against this altar. This makes the king angry and he stretches out his arm and shouts: "Get him!" But then he cannot draw back his arm: it has become stiff. So this king asks of the prophet: *"Intercede with the Lord your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored"* So the man of God interceded with the Lord, and king's hand was restored and became as it were before. (1 Kings 13:6).

Interceding with God is a form of prayer. It is interesting to note that it is done here for a king who had deserted God. We can intercede with God for non-believers and sinners, too.

## CHAPTER 60 ASA'S PRAYER

Asa became king of Judah, and this king *"..... did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He removed the foreign altars and the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to obey his laws and commands."* (2 Chron 14:2-4).

The enemy approaches, and Asa prays to God, *"Lord, there is no-one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, oh Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. Oh Lord, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you."* (2 Chron 14:11). The enemy is defeated.

After the battle a prophet comes to meet Asa and says, *"The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.... But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded."* (2 Chron 15: 2, 7). Under the leadership of this king the whole population turned back to God (verse 14).

Such honest prayer, such trust in God, such example of leadership, and what blessed consequences for the nation.

Postscript: Sadly, at the end of his reign, Asa makes a pact with Aram against the northern kingdom Israel. A prophet subsequently approaches King Asa and tells him that, with regard to his conflict with Israel, he should have put his trust in God rather than in Aram. Had his earlier enemies not been far more numerous? They were beaten because Asa had put his trust in God. *"For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."* (2 Chron 16:9).

This angers Asa and he throws the prophet into prison. In the end Asa gets ill, but even then he will not turn to God. That opportunity passes, too, and eventually Asa dies.

## CHAPTER 61 JEHOSHAPHAT SOUGHT GOD

After Asa, his son Jehoshaphat becomes king of Judah. *"The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because in his early years he walked in the ways that his father David had followed. He did not consult the Baals but sought the God of his father and followed his commands rather than the practices of Israel.....His heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord."* (2 Chron 17: 3, 6).

This brought prosperity, peace and rest to the land. The culture blossomed. May the prayers and actions of our leaders follow the lead of Jehoshaphat.

## CHAPTER 62 JEHOSHAPHAT'S PRAYER

Then one day the enemies do threaten Jehoshaphat and Judah in great numbers. *"Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to enquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord."* (2 Chron 20:3-4)

King Jehoshaphat stands in the midst of his people who gathered in front of the forecourt and prays out loud: *"Oh Lord God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no-one can withstand you. Oh our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it for ever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, 'If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us. But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt, so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. See how they are re-paying us as an inheritance. Oh our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.' All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord."* (2 Chron:6-13).

Then the Spirit of the Lord spoke through a Levite: *"This is what the Lord says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's'."* (2 Chron 20:15-17). Jehoshaphat and the people bowed down before God and the Levites praised God with a loud voice.

The next day brings the confrontation. The Levites went out ahead of the army, singing praise to God for the splendour of his holiness. The enemies rose up against each other and when Judah's army reaches the battlefield, there is nothing left for them to do. (vs 21-28). Afterwards they assembled to praise the Lord, and then they returned joyfully to Jerusalem to give praise and thanks to God.

In difficult and fearful times we don't want to follow marching music, but rather follow prayers and songs of praise to God.

## CHAPTER 63 UZZIAH SEEKS GOD

Uzziah was young when he became king of Judah. *"He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the Lord, God gave him success."* (2 chron 26:4-5).

At the height of his power, after the death of his teacher Zechariah, he involves himself in unwholesomeness. He wants to burn incense in the temple himself, rather than let the consecrated priests do it. He is punished with leprosy.

Here is an inspiring and remarkable example of how good instruction, following God, and prayer all reinforce each other.

## CHAPTER 64 ELIJAH CALLS ON GOD

Elijah was a prophet who made himself all but invisible at the time of the ungodly king Ahab of the Northern Kingdom. At one stage he had to flee the country in order to escape death, and went to live in the house of widow in the town of Zarephath, which was in the state of Sidon. Then the widow's son got ill and dies.

*"She said to Elijah, 'What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?' 'Give me your son', Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?' Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!' The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, 'Look, your son is alive!' Then the woman said to Elijah, 'now I know that you are a man of God and that the work of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.'" (1 Kings 17:18-24)*

Elijah calls on God to do a miracle. The woman receives her son back from the dead. This shows the woman that Elijah really is a 'man of God' and that God's word is true. It turns into a story of salvation.

Can we still call on the Lord, pray to God for a miracle? No man can perform miracles. No other human being had a calling and ministry like Elijah. Those were exceptional circumstances, which resulted in an exceptional outcome. Still, even today, small miracles happen if we take the trouble to look; for example: a child's smile, a baby's laughter, your partner's hand, your grandchild's kiss.... all are a reason to call on God that we may continue to enjoy such blessings. Sometimes we are allowed to see God perform big miracles, and all we can do is be grateful for the unexpected blessing.



## CHAPTER 65 A NATIONAL TRIAL

King Ahab of the northern kingdom had led the people astray with the new state religion of Baal worship. This leads to a power struggle with God's prophet: who is the real God? The people gather on Mount Carmel. Two altars with burnt offerings are built. On the one side we have 450 prophets of Baal and on the other side we have Elijah, by himself. The people are watching and waiting. The God who answers by fire will be the real God. That is the God whom the people will serve.

*" 'Then you call upon the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire – he is God', "*says Elijah. *"Then all the people said, 'What you say is good'."* This exciting story can be found in 1 Kings 18:16-45.

The priests of Baal make a lot of noise, but nothing happens. Eventually it is Elijah's turn. He prays: *'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, o Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you are turning their hearts back again.'* (verses 36-37).

God does answer by fire, and the case against Elijah is decided: God is real and He is the true God. The priests of Baal, who led the people astray and brought them into misery, are sentenced. The people want to follow God.

All that through prayer!

## CHAPTER 66 ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

King Ahab tells his wife Jezebel all that happened on Mount Carmel. Jezebel headed up the Baal cult. She had many servants of God killed during the preceding few years (religious persecution is obviously nothing new). Now that her own servants have been killed, she sends a message to Elijah the prophet, that this will cost him his life. Elijah immediately departs for the northern kingdom in order to save his life. He flees through the whole of the southern kingdom and crosses the border at Beersheba. He continues on for a further day into the desert, then sits down under a broom tree and desires to die. Elijah prays: *"I have had enough, Lord. Take my life, I am no better than my ancestors."* (1 Kings 19:4).

After his huge victory at Mount Carmel, Elijah slides into some sort of depression. Many people know that the 'downer' comes after they have achieved something really great. So arm yourself against this. Elijah could have armed himself. There was an obvious solution for his situation. The Lord, who had done such a miracle on Mount Carmel, would have helped him against attempts on his life by Jezebel.

Elijah receives special sustaining food, and needs to walk 40 days to Mount Horeb (while walking, acquiring new discipline for body and mind). On Mount Horeb he receives new instructions from God.

We, too, have moments when we pray: 'I've had enough.' Let's ask ourselves why. Is it frustration? Is it a 'downer' after a great achievement? What exactly is the cause? We have to take those reasons to God first, before we take any action, because, if that action is based on emotions, there will not be the right reaction. We need to pray first, re-find our balance first, let the Lord cleanse our emotions first. And then, after a short while, we will see the right course of action in the light of God.

## CHAPTER 67 ELIJAH'S DIALOGUE ON MOUNT HOREB

After his flight from evil Queen Jezebel, Elijah's journey ends in a cave on Mount Horeb. He spends the night there. And God says to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah tells of all that has happened to him. God says: 'Go outside to meet me.' Then a great and powerful wind begins to blow, followed by an earth quake, followed by a fire, followed by a gentle whisper. And God is in the whisper and asks again: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

Elijah gets commissioned to fulfil a couple of exceptional demands, and feels encouraged to continue.

Sometimes we find similar situations in our own lives. We would like God to come with force, signs, fire, power. .... But He does not work like that. He nearly always works like he did with Elijah, in dialogue: He speaks from a place of rest. This story is an exhortation to find a place of rest before praying, so that we do not just pray any old thing, but instead find a place of inner rest so that we can hear God's answer. (The whole story can be found in 1 Kings 19:9-18.)

## CHAPTER 68 RECOGNISE THE RIGHT ANSWER

The king of Israel and the king of Judah were scheduled to join forces and fight against the town of Ramoth Gilead. In order to find out if this was a good plan, the king of Israel called for his prophets (around 400 in number) and they, obviously, prophesied a successful undertaking. The king of Judah asks if, besides these court prophets, there is a prophet of God. There is one left: Micah. Micah speaks the truth and foretells that the army will be destroyed. As a result, Micah is put in prison. The armies do battle and the king of Israel gets killed, after which the army retreats. (1 Kings 22:1-40).

If we ask God for a word, we need to be aware from whom we are asking. The court prophets only prophesied what the king wanted to hear, and the person who really did speak the word of God was ignored. A second lesson: be prepared to receive God's word, even if it isn't what we had hoped for.

## CHAPTER 69 MUSIC

The king of Israel, the king of Judah and the king of Edom joined forces to fight against the king of Moab. After a roundabout march of 7 days, they ran out of water for the army and the pack animals. What to do now? The king of Israel panics, but the king of Judah says: 'Is there a prophet of God we could ask to enquire of the Lord?' It turns out that the prophet Elisha is there. But Elisha initially refuses. Then he says: ' *"But now bring me a harpist". While the harpist was playing, the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha.*' (2 Kings 3:15)

We can experience difficulties in our contact with God. At such times, it can be helpful to play a CD with suitable spiritual music, or to sing songs of praise and worship, in order to bring our spirit in tune with God.

## CHAPTER 70 JEHOAHAZ'S PRAYER

Jehoahaz became king of Israel. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, which resulted in Israel falling into the hands of Aram. Then Jehoahaz came to a turning point: *'Then Jehoahaz sought the Lord, and the Lord listened to him, for he saw how severely the king of Aram was oppressing Israel. The Lord provided a deliverer for Israel, and they escaped from the power of Aram.'* (2 Kings 13:4-5, also verse 23).

Seeking God's favour is prayer, too. Here it concerns repentance brought about by the influence of all kinds of political and military situations. When the escape is provided, sadly that repentance is not carried through into public life and Israel continues to worship idols. There was an opportunity for a complete change, and yet the power of prayer is not fully utilised.

When we pray and God answers, let's continue to work things through to completion.

## CHAPTER 71 ISAAH'S PRAYER (1)

Jerusalem is surrounded by the Assyrian army. The army's field commander makes it clear that no-one will save them, not even their God (2 Kings 18:29-31). If the people surrender, their life will be spared and they will be taken to another country, which will also have oil, bread, new wine and honey. The people will find an alternative 'promised land'.

When King Hezekiah hears this, he tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and goes into the temple of the Lord (2 Kings 19:1). What should he do? The king sends servants to the prophet Isaiah: *'This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace...It may be that the Lord your God will hear all the words of the field commander which ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for his words. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives.'* (2 Kings 19:2-5). Isaiah starts praying and God provides an answer and an escape.

In this whole story, the interesting thing is that prayer is asked for through others. It is important that a leadership sets an example in repentance and humility in such a precarious situation.

## CHAPTER 72 ANOTHER PRAYER BY HEZEKIAH

Under King Hezekiah the people turn back to God. The Passover is celebrated again, and many people come to Jerusalem to take part. So many people come, that not everyone managed to be purified, which is contrary to what was written by Moses, and which was a sin. But Hezekiah prays for them: *'May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God – the Lord, the God of his fathers – even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.'* And Lord heard Hezekiah.' (2 Chronicles 30:18-20).

For seven days the Passover is celebrated with great joy, singing and music in honour of God. They then agree to celebrate the festival for another seven days (vs 21-27), which had not happened since the days of David. In conclusion, the priests bless the people and God hears their prayer (verse 27). The people go home, destroying images of idols on their way, thus cleansing the land.

Prayer works – the above scenario clearly shows that.

## CHAPTER 73 THE LETTER

2 Kings 19:14-19: *'Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord.....'*

Jerusalem was surrounded by Sennacherib and the Assyrian army. Sennacherib sends a letter to King Hezekiah demanding surrender. This letter (verses 8-13) is insulting and offensive to God. Hezekiah brings the letter before God in the temple. Hezekiah pours his heart out to God (verses 15-19) and concludes his prayer with: *"Now, oh Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, oh Lord, are God."* 'The answer comes through the prophet Isaiah (verses 20-34) and during that night (verses 35-37) an angel slays a huge number of soldiers, and Sennacherib has to leave.

Sometimes we receive a dreadful and painful imputation by letter, email or fax. We should bring such writings before the Lord. Or we might receive a phone call: let's write down our distress and bring the letter before the Lord. Some people even have a private wailing wall. Let's post such absurd letters into our wailing wall and bring the contents to God.

Let's not immediately respond publicly, which would be done out of our own reaction. We can see from the newspapers how conflicts are being fought using the media. It does not need to be like that.

In Hezekiah's situation God intervened, as His honour was in dispute.

## CHAPTER 74 DON'T FORGET TO BE GRATEFUL

God miraculously delivered Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrian king. Some time later King Hezekiah became ill to the point of death.

*'He prayed to the Lord, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the Lord's wrath was on him, and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the Lord's wrath did not come upon them during the days of Hezekiah.'* (2 Chronicles 32:24-26).

Do respond to God's answer to your prayer, clearly give him the honour and express your thankfulness. We should never forget to be grateful and we should remain humble.

## CHAPTER 75 MANASSEH'S PRAYER

Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, becomes king. He did evil in God's eyes and involved himself in detestable practices. The Lord spoke to Manasseh and the people, but they would not listen. Then Judah was conquered by Assyria and Manasseh was taken away captive to Babylon. *'In his distress he sought the favour of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea, so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God.'* (2 Chronicles 33: 12-13).

Things quickly go downhill under his reign. He ends up taken away a prisoner. But then he repents, and his honest prayer and remorse result in God restoring him.

After his return Manasseh continues to walk in God's way.

*'Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship and thank-offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.'* (verse 16).

His actions showed that his prayer had been honest and true.

## CHAPTER 76 A COVENANT IS ALSO A PRAYER

Josiah was the last king of Judah who served God faithfully. He reinstated the service and laws of God. Because this king humbled himself, God's judgement did not come upon the city and the land during his lifetime. The kings called priests, leaders and the people together and by the temple read out the words of the book of the covenant. *'The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book.'* (2 Chronicles 34:31).

Making this covenant was an act of prayer by an upright man, who wanted to follow God in deed.

## CHAPTER 77 RAISING ONE'S VOICE

After the exile, a remainder of the people returns. The rebuilding of the temple as spiritual nucleus for the people follows. As the foundations are laid, the priests and Levites and the people gather. They sing God's praise: 'for He is good, His love to Israel endures forever'. *'And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord...'* (Ezra 3:12b), but others wept loudly. Sounds of joy and sounds of weeping were heard at the same time. Sorrow and joy mingled together.

Raising one's voice is praying, too.

## CHAPTER 78 TO HUMBLE ONESELF IS TO PRAY

Ezra is commanded by King Darius to re-build the temple. And the people may return. *'“There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, “The good hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.” So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayers.’* (Ezra 8:21-23).

Ezra has an interesting way of preparing for an important journey, which can teach us a lot. When we embark on 'something big', it is a good place to start with humbling ourselves, fasting and petitioning.

That is prayer, too.

## CHAPTER 79 EZRA'S PRAYER

Once he arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra heard that the first group of returned exiles had intermingled with the inhabitants, resulting in uncleanness regarding the detestable practices of idols. Ezra was very upset.

*'When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered round me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice. Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my god and prayed, "Oh, my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you...."'* (Ezra 9:3-6).

He prays a very interesting prayer, which continues into Ezra chapter 10.

Here we have an excellent example of someone humbling himself on behalf of someone else. Such humility, such repentance is effective, for the people join Ezra (Ezra 10:1-6). We see a gathering of all the people, at which Ezra explains the law (Neh 8:6). It starts with an exceptional prayer of praise, followed by a day of repentance and prayer (Neh 9). It continues with the Levites praying a prayer of repentance (Neh 9:6-37), and concludes with a covenant (Neh 9:38).

How remarkable that a prayerful attitude results in the reformation of public life and leadership.

*(See also the next chapter).*

## CHAPTER 80 NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

Nehemiah is much affected by reports on the dilapidated state of Jerusalem, the destruction, and the miserable circumstances of the remaining Jews in the land of Israel. Nehemiah begins to repent and pray for the temple, Jerusalem and the people. This honest prayer is found in Nehemiah 1. After his prayer he dares to approach the king and expresses his concern. When asked by the king why he looks so sad, Nehemiah prays a quick prayer (Neh 2:4) and shares his sorrow. He is allowed to go to Jerusalem to re-build the city. But Nehemiah takes it to God, too: *"Hear us, oh our God, for we are despised."* (Neh 4:4).

Nehemiah and his people are threatened. *"But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat."* (Neh 4:9). Nehemiah does nothing for his own benefit and takes nothing from the taxes. *"Remember me with favour, oh my God, for all I have done for these people."* He also brings all the lies and accusations by the opponents to God: *'Remember, my God, everyone who has been trying to intimidate me.'* (Neh 6:14). Nehemiah continues praying in order to give the land and the temple good leadership: *"Remember me for this, oh my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services."* (Neh 13:14).

Some of the returned priests and Levites turned out to be traitors. There, too, Nehemiah makes a fresh start: *"Remember them, Oh my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites."* (Neh 13:29). And the book of Nehemiah finishes with: *"Remember me with favour, oh my God."*

Nehemiah led the people into a new start after their exile. He did so 'by the grace of God' and without any personal benefit. He is an example for everyone in leadership: in society, the economy, politics. ... Let us hope, that they, too, can look back and pray: "Remember me, oh Lord, I sought no gain for myself, just like Nehemiah".



## CHAPTER 81 ESTHER'S PRAYER

The book of Esther tells of how a woman, with the help of her stepfather Mordecai, manages to save the Jewish people from extermination. She needs to go before the king to bring things to his attention, but coming before the king without first being summoned might result in her death. Mordecai tells Esther: ‘*Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?*’ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai, ‘*Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.*’ (Esther 4:13-17).

Much prayer will have taken place during those three days. It was a matter of life or death for Esther, but also for the people. Prayer and fasting gave Esther the courage to act. Someone like Esther can shape history. The story challenges us to be brave enough to act like Esther.

## CHAPTER 82 JOB'S PRAYERS

The book of Job is impressive in its dealing with the issue of suffering. In the first part Job's character and actions are depicted. He is exemplary in how he sanctifies, blesses and prays for his children. (Job 1:4-5). Then Satan is allowed to remove all his wealth and Job loses his possessions and his children. The effect on Job: mourning and prayer. ‘*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised.*’ (Job 1:20-21).

Satan makes him ill, his wife reproaches him that his piety is a big lie and that he had better die. His friends come and bemoan his fate: no-one suffers without cause, so it must be his own fault; it must be a just punishment from God; Job is talking nonsense, he had better humble himself before God; maybe it is a punishment from God because he has turned his back on God; if misfortune befalls a person, that is punishment from God, so Job must have done something wrong; death comes to a godless person, so Job must be in the wrong; Job needs to repent, Job is a sinner..... Job insists that he is righteous. His friends haven't given him any real reason, they have just declared him guilty. Eventually God speaks. In response Job says: ‘*I am unworthy – how can I reply to you?*’ (Job 40:4). Job will not blame God, and wants to keep quiet. God speaks again, to which Job responds with a prayer (Job 42:2-6). ‘*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*’ (Job 42: 5-6).

Job had a profound meeting with God. God put the friends in the wrong, and they need to repent of their faulty vision of God. Job prays for them, that nothing bad will happen to them. And God hears that prayer (Job 42:7-9). God then turns things around for Job and he is much blessed again with wealth.

What we can learn from this story is to have a prayerful attitude, in spite of circumstances. Another thing we can learn is not to be so quick to offer explanations. Such explanations can cause much hurt.

## CHAPTER 83 A PSALM AS PRAYER

There are many different kinds of prayer. We can speak out loud, we can shout, we can write, we can yell, write poetry, paint. . . . But we can also refer to a source of many prayers, which dates from around 3000 years ago: the Psalms. Psalms are sung prayers full of emotions, anger, thankfulness, or joy. One can always find a Psalm to suit every situation. Millions have found faith, hope and strength in these psalms.

One of the most precious jewels is Psalm 23, a beautiful song, a touching prayer: *'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing. He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.'*

## CHAPTER 84 PRAYER FOR WISDOM

The book of Proverbs is full of practical wisdom. But besides the help we can find in those verses, we can find something bigger and more profound: we can pray for insight and wisdom.

*'My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways. ....'*

(Prov 2:1-13).

The New Testament also encourages us to pray for wisdom and God will give it to us (James 1:5): *'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.'* We need God's wisdom for every day life. And it can only benefit us to have a good read through the book of Proverbs once a year.

## CHAPTER 85 WHEN YOU PRAY: BE AWARE OF WHAT YOU ARE SAYING

*'Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfil it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake". Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.'* (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

## CHAPTER 86 ISAIAH'S PRAYER (2)

Isaiah is one of the major prophets in the Old Testament. His remarkable calling started with a vision of God, surrounded by seraphs calling to each other that God is holy. Isaiah's reaction: ' "Woe is me", I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I, send me." ' (Isaiah: 6:5-8).

Isaiah's honesty is significant. If we show the same honesty, God will cleanse us in the same manner. Isaiah's prayer is very direct: he offers himself to be used. Easy? Speaking the truth and exposing lies, deceit and injustice is not a simple matter. Such a person is not loved, which was also the case with Isaiah. But he had the courage to continue. All as a result of his prayer and being touched by the seraph. May we be sent in the same manner: 'Lord, send me to be an Isaiah in my own situation.'

## CHAPTER 87 PROPHETIC PRAYERS

Isaiah prophesied in chapter after chapter what would happen to the people of Judah, to Jerusalem, the kings, the nations, politics, land and cities. About the coming restoration, and about the distant future when God's kingdom will fill the whole earth. Sprinkled in between are prophetic prayers. These are for our encouragement.

*'In that day you will say, "I will praise you, oh Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. In that day you will say, "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you." '* (Isaiah 12).

*' "Oh Lord, you are my God, I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvellous things.....You have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress " '* (Isaiah 25: 1, 4).

These prophetic prayers stem from what God revealed to Isaiah, and that was not all a bed of roses. In spite of those judgements, a praise offering and a prophetic prayer can illuminate God's greatness. And that comforted Isaiah.

## CHAPTER 88 FASTING AS PRAYER

It is a very old custom to fast in order to focus on God. But for some people fasting had become an outward show: 'Look what a godly person I am: I am fasting.' Some people made a point of conducting their business on a day of fasting, abused workers, and it became a day of arrogance! It needs to be the opposite! Isaiah says it very clearly (Is 58).

And what about fasting? Fasting is drawing closer to God. If people want to fast, this should not lead to argument and strife. Fasting should result in ending injustice, ending godlessness, releasing the oppressed, breaking yokes, feeding the hungry, looking after strangers, clothing the naked, caring for families, abstaining from gossip and threats.

*'Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say, "here am I".'* (Is 58:9a).

*'Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, not his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.'* (Is 59:1-2).

The subsequent verse show what all those iniquities are.

Do read on to verse 16.

But if we do what is right, we have the promise: *'Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.'* (Is 65:24).

## CHAPTER 89 JEREMIAH'S PRAYER

Jeremiah was a prophet up till the time of the exile. People were hoping to be saved. He told the people that they would go into exile and that there was no point in resisting. A person would have to be very certain of his calling to be able to do such a job. God gave him this role and the strength from birth.

*'The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Ah, sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child'. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." ' (Jer 1:4-10).*

Jeremiah keeps telling the people, the cities, priests and leaders what God commands him, with the result that everyone hates him. This causes the occasional deep struggle (Jer 20:7-18). He came close to being killed because of what he prophesied (Jer 29). And he ends up in prison for a long time (Jer 32:2, 37:16). He almost dies in a cistern (Jer 38:1-13). Jeremiah survives all these situations. And all his prophecies come true. Jeremiah was a great prophet, he trusted God, was honest in his prayers; but he did not have an easy life.

## CHAPTER 90 EZEKIEL'S PRAYERS

Ezekiel was a priest-prophet in the days of the exile of Israel and Judah in Mesopotamia. On one occasion, the heavens opened and he saw visions (Ez 1:1-3). God's hand is upon him and they have a special and rare prayer relationship. But such a situation is not easy. Ezekiel needs to mention painful matters. When it all becomes too difficult, he cries: Ah Lord, Lord! (See a.o. Ez 4:14, 9:8, 11:13, 20:49). But Ezekiel has to carry out God's commands. (eg Ez 2). His moments of difficulty run parallel with ours. For don't we sometimes cry: 'Oh Lord, help!'

In balance with all the difficult visions he saw and had to mention, there is also something very special. In chapter 37 we find the vision of the valley of the dry bones. Ezekiel is required to do the impossible: he prophesies in his prayer for these bones to come back together and for the dead to come back to life again, reflecting the future of the scattered nation of Israel: it will become one people again, one nation, and live back in its own land. It is not given to many to do the impossible in God's name. But all things are possible through the Spirit of God.

The final outcome for the people will be: *'I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the sovereign Lord.'* (Ez 39:29).

God will no longer hide his face... there will finally be direct contact... monologues will finally become dialogue, which will give a special dimension to prayer.

## CHAPTER 91 DANIEL'S PRAYERS

Daniel is taken captive as a young man and taken to Babylon. From a noble background, he is required to serve at Nebuchadnezzar's court. Daniel has real faith and a real relationship with God. Then Nebuchadnezzar has a dream (Daniel 2). If wise and learned men cannot interpret the dream, they will be killed, including Daniel and his three friends. Daniel asks his three friends to join him in prayer (Daniel 2:17-19). Then, in a vision at night, Daniel sees the dream and the interpretation. He thanks, worships and praises God (Daniel 2:20-23). When all is told to Nebuchadnezzar, no-one gets killed and it becomes a testimony to the one true God.

Daniel's exceptional wisdom and insight elevate him to a minister's post. Many envy him (Daniel 6:4-6) and try to bring him down. Under King Darius a law is pushed through that people may only address a petition to Darius and not to any god. In spite of this law, Daniel continues to go home and pray to God three times daily (Daniel 6:11). His enemies catch him out and Daniel ends up in the lions' den, where God supernaturally protects him...

Daniel had a disciplined prayer life. We find a very moving prayer in Daniel 9:3-19, where Daniel sees that the 70 years of exile – as prophesied by Jeremiah – are nearly at an end. He starts to pray, plea, fast in sackcloth and ashes; he confesses all the sins of the people, he repents on their behalf. He concludes with (verse 18-19): *'Give ear, oh God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. Oh Lord, listen! Oh Lord, forgive! Oh my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your name.'*

Daniel's attitude, the content and tone of his prayer are an example of how we may pray on behalf of other people and situations.

## CHAPTER 92 HOSEA'S LONGING

Hosea lived in the latter days of the northern kingdom Israel and southern kingdom Judah. God used Hosea's life to show the bad state of these two kingdoms: moral decline, social injustice, idol worship, while hypocritically pretending to follow God... Hosea was even required to marry a harlot to show that Israel and Judah were behaving like harlots. Judgements are made and in the midst of God's anger we find a wonderful passage that Israel and Judah can only be healed through repentance. Greatly pressured by war and destruction: *'In their misery they will earnestly seek me. Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us. He has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.... Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.'* (Hosea 5:15b-6:3)

Hosea longed for an honest upright wife, but the wife he had was unfaithful. In the same way God longed for his people, but the people were unfaithful. But the day will come that the people (what is left of them) will have a new desire: really to serve God with their whole heart.

May that desire be at work in us, too - that's where prayer begins.

## CHAPTER 93 PAST THE POINT OF PRAYING

The book of Hosea clearly shows the duplicity and hypocrisy of the society of that time. For the sake of outward appearances there was an official temple service, but at the same time priests, leaders, noblemen, kings and ordinary people were practising deceit, oppression, robbery, bribery and corruption, bending the rules. This arrogance and pride caused the fall of the nation. Religious ceremonies continued, without any meaning, as it was all outward show.

Judgement: *'...because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law. They cry out to me, "oh our God, we acknowledge you!" But Israel has rejected what is good...Israel has forgotten his maker...' (Hosea 8:1-3, 14).* While behaving so unethically, there is no point in praying and calling upon God.

But there is always room for true repentance, for a change of heart, thought and action. At the end of the book of Hosea we find this wonderful promise: *"Return, oh Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say "our gods" to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.' 'Who is wise? He will realise these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.'* (Hosea 14: 1-3, 9).

If we change our lives, we can call on God and there is real meaning in our prayer. God does not desire lip service, but a life that is in line with our confession. As part of that, He would want us pray.

## CHAPTER 94 JOEL'S PRAYERS

The prophet Joel's message fills but three chapters. But he warns very piercingly about the destruction that God will send because of the injustice. *"What a dreadful day! For the day of the Lord is near, it will come like destruction from the Almighty."* (Joel 1:15)

Joel calls the people to wake up and pray honestly. *"Surely the joy of mankind is withered away. Put on sackcloth, o priests, and mourn, wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. Declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God and cry out to the Lord."* (Hosea 1:12b-14)

*"To you, oh Lord, I call, for fire has devoured the open pastures and flames have burned up all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals pant for you..."* (Hosea 1: 19-20a).

At such a time, how should we act in order to reach God? *"Even now," declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing – grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. ....Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, 'Spare your people, oh Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples 'Where is their God?' "* (Joel 2:12-17)

And what is the result of this true repentance and prayerful attitude? *"Then the Lord will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the Lord your God. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* (Joel 2: 18,26, 32a).

Let's be encouraged by these examples from Joel to call upon God.

## CHAPTER 95 AMOS'S PRAYERS

Amos was a sheep breeder, but God used him as prophet to alert Israel and Judah to the approaching judgement of God on the iniquities, decline and injustice in Israel and Judah. Yet even at that point in time there was still an opportunity to escape the judgement.

*"This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: 'Seek me and live'" (Amos 5:4) "Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph."* (Amos 5: 14-15).

Sadly the people would not listen to what the prophet said.

At some point in time, God shows Amos that he will send a plague of locusts to bring the people to repentance. Amos's reaction: *" 'Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!' So the Lord relented. 'This will not happen, the Lord said."* (Amos 7:2)

Then God wants to send a consuming fire to bring the people to repentance. Amos's reaction: *" 'Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!' So the Lord relented. 'This will not happen either,' the sovereign Lord said."* (Amos 7:5-6)

Amos's prayers made sure that these judgements did not come upon the land. The people were eventually deported, however.

Still, at the end of the book of Amos we find the promise that God will eventually restore Israel.

## CHAPTER 96 JONAH'S PRAYER

Jonah was called by God to confront the city of Nineveh with its evildoing. Jonah is scared and boards a ship in the opposite direction. God sends a storm, the ship is endangered and the crew throw Jonah overboard. A big fish swallows him up. Then Jonah repents and begins to pray. That must be one of the strangest places to pray in the whole Bible.

*"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said, 'In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me, all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.' The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you brought my life up from the pit, oh Lord my God. 'When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.' And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."* (Jonah 2)

This prayer is very poetic and colourful, but straight from the heart.

God hears and Jonah gets a second chance.

Jonah tells Nineveh of God's judgement. The city repents. The people clothe themselves in sackcloth, call on God, repent of their evil ways and the injustice (Jonah 3:8). And the Lord does not destroy the city.

This made Jonah angry as he felt foolish. He had foreseen that this would happen, that's why he wanted to run away: because God is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and full of love (Jonah 4:2). Jonah says all this to God. In the end he prays: 'You'd better take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live' (Jonah 4:3). God answers Jonah: 'Have you the right to be angry?' (Jonah 4:4). God miraculously causes a vine to grow



overnight, to provide Jonah with shade. The next day the vine withers and Jonah is overwhelmed by the heat. God asks Jonah if he has the right to be angry about the vine and says, how can you be angry over this vine which you would have wanted to keep alive, to which you contributed nothing. Is there not much more reason to spare tens of thousands of people and animals in the city of Niniveh? So why are you not grateful that they are still alive?

That last part brings an interesting lesson. Let's be grateful when people take a warning to heart and make changes for the better. After all, we do pray that God blesses others. We are even required to bless our enemies. God does. Let's aim to be grateful.

## CHAPTER 97 MICAH'S PRAYER

Micah was one of the prophets in the latter period of the northern and southern kingdoms, before the exile.

He, too, foresees approaching judgements, the downfall of the cities of Samaria and Jerusalem. But in the very far distance he also sees the kingdom of peace that will be brought about by the Messiah. And Micah, too, says that, if your life is not righteous before God, you can pray all you like without getting an answer. (Micah 3:4). Micah rebukes the leaders, prophets and priests extra severely for leading the people of God astray. And then, in the middle of all his accusations, we find the following wonderful invitation:

*"With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down (= pray) before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, oh man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* (Micah 6:6-8).

What a wonderful prayer, such a profound and honest call. We can only agree and carry it out.

## CHAPTER 98 HABAKKUK'S PRAYER

*"How long, oh Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Destruction and violence are before me, there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."* (Habakkuk 1:2-4). The prophet Habakkuk is tormented by the violence and injustice in society.

*"Then the Lord replied, 'Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets, so that a herald may run with it.'*" (Habakkuk 2:2).

These judgements and idolatries bring Habakkuk to specific prayer – the whole of chapter 3 – in which he expresses all his expectations that God will save His people. Which is nothing to do with health, success and wealth. Note especially the closing verses of the prayer

(Habakkuk 3:17-19): *"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to do on the heights."*

Habakkuk takes a huge leap and rises above all the circumstances. That is how prayer can help us to discern the essence of a situation – the 'bigger picture' – which is often different from what the eye can see.

## CHAPTER 99 ZEPHANIAH'S PRAYER

Zephaniah was a prophet under king Josiah of Judah, in the last days of the kingdom. The people's sins and evildoings invoke God's judgement.

Zephaniah calls the people to repentance and prayer.

*"Gather together, gather together, o shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's wrath comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger."*

(Zephaniah 2:1-3). But Jerusalem and the people reject the call for repentance, they will not call upon the Lord. *"Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no-one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God."* (Zephaniah 3:1-2).

However, after the judgement a change does come, and the people begin to serve and call upon God. *"Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord."* (Zephaniah 3:9). Zephaniah's prayer is answered and a new prayer results. And many will take part in this new prayer.

## CHAPTER 100 ZECHARIAH'S PRAYER

Zechariah lived in the latter days of the exile. He sees vision after vision about judgement, but also about restoration. Which is related to repentance. What use is prayer and fasting in the face of injustice? There were those who, during the past 70 years, had regularly fasted and prayed (Zech 7), but was there any point? God gives his answer:

*"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.' (Zechariah 7:9).*

God wants to bring about repentance and says: *"I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do. Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgement in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbour, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," says the Lord.*" (Zechariah 8:15-17). God makes it known that he will answer prayer in an amazing manner. Note the concept 'showers of rain', which has a deeper meaning of God's blessing, resulting in a spiritual awakening, a revival; also the 'plants' mean many people following God. *"Ask the Lord for rain in the springtime; it is the Lord who makes the storm clouds. He gives showers of rain to men, and plants of the field to everyone."* (Zechariah 10:1).

Zechariah is full of hope (12:10): *"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication." And this will bring refining: "I will bring them into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer."* (Zechariah 13:9).

## CHAPTER 101 MALACHI'S PRAYER

This prophet exposes the sins and evil doings of the spiritual leaders. So don't be surprised that God does not listen. *"You have wearied the Lord with your words. 'How have we wearied him?' you ask. By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?'"* (Malachi 2:17). But woe to those who think and speak like that, who justify wrongdoing. Note the well-known erroneous way of thinking: 'If there is a God, why....' The people commit the sins themselves and need to be accountable for their behaviour. God does not interfere.

*"You have said harsh things against me," says the Lord. Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?' You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.'"* (Malachi 3:13-15).

But the day of God's judgement is coming. *"And you will see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."* (Malachi 3:18).

*"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings."* (Malachi 4:2a). Justice will finally come, 'free at last' as Martin Luther King would have shouted.

We can bring our questions to God, along with the enigma of the success of the ungodly, but watch for the end. People may be very rich in the here and now, but what have they got in eternity? Is it really a joy to lie, and to cheat people? Nothing can compare with honesty, faithfulness, true relationships, love, friendship, rest, peace and, above all, an honest contact with God.