



# Whose Prayers Does God Hear?

While Americans mourned and prayed for God's comfort and strength, passionate religious extremists offered prayers of thanks for what they saw as a great victory. Whose prayers does God hear?

by Roger Foster

**A**merica's wake-up call—that's how many news commentators and government officials characterized the Sept. 11, 2001, airborne terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States. Almost with one voice they called on Americans to pray for the comfort and support of the nation and for all who had suffered loss.

The response to this call for prayer, including the special service on the day of prayer and remembrance emanating from the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., was heartfelt and massive. The international response also was encouraging.

Yet, equally passionate religious people—primarily from militant extremist groups and their supporters—celebrated and offered up prayers of thanksgiving. Some of them, caught on videotape, openly and gleefully celebrated the grievous wound that was inflicted on the United States. No doubt they also were confident that God had heard and answered their prayers.

Terrorism, a horrible and heartless form of evil, is routinely motivated by religion as well as politics. Many who die as suicidal terrorists sincerely see themselves as martyrs in a just and holy war against an infidel society.

## Whose cause is just?

Those who despise America would argue that their cause is just and their prayers for retribution are pleasing to God. Most Americans are equally convinced that they are right and that God is obviously on their side. This tragic dichotomy can be found in almost all of the world's sordid conflicts.

Whose prayers will God answer? Could the real wake-up call be that all of humanity

needs much clearer understanding of how God determines whose prayers He will hear and heed?

Christianity, Islam and Judaism—the world's three great monotheistic religions—each views itself as the primary religion of the one God worshiped by the ancient patriarch Abraham.

Significantly, it is in the Holy Scriptures, preserved by Abraham's descendants, that we find the world's first written revelation of the one God. These Scriptures tell us that He is "God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18).

These Scriptures also tell us when and why that same Creator God will not respond to people's prayers: "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But *your iniquities* have separated you from your God; and *your sins* have hidden His face from you, *so that He will not hear*" (Isaiah 59:1-2, emphasis added throughout).

If ever a wake-up call is desperately needed, the entire world needs it today. The world abounds with religion—but religion that is woefully ineffective in persuading its adherents to live godly lives.

## Conditions for answered prayer

When we face a crisis, nothing is more important than knowing the criteria God uses for responding to our prayers. The only way we can know is to carefully look at what the Holy Scriptures reveal about God's criteria for answering—or refusing to answer—

the petitions we make to Him.

Let's be bold and ask the key question: Who has God's ear?

God Himself gives us a clear answer: "This is what the LORD says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?' declares the LORD. *'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word'*" (Isaiah 66:1-2, New International Version).

Those who think God is more inclined to respond to their prayers simply because they are uttered in a religious building—a church, temple, synagogue or mosque—usually do not have a clear perspective of His true priorities. God's first criterion is to examine each person's attitude.

It is those who humble themselves that will sincerely hear and *heed* His instructions. They have God's ear. Without that commitment, no building of any kind will make the prayers of those who refuse to live righteously acceptable to Him.

God warns those who continually ignore His commandments: "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; *even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen . . .* Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

"'Come now, let us reason together,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the*

best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.' For the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 1:15-20, NIV).

Everyone should take that warning seriously, especially those who profess to worship the one and only God. "For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil" (1 Peter 3:12).

President George W. Bush, in his Sept. 20 address to Congress, expressed this same principle when he said, "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them." Proverbs 28:9 tells us, "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination."

### God is never fickle

A primary characteristic of God is His consistency. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, *with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning*" (James 1:17). Because He is consistent, we can learn much from the way He has responded to prayers recorded in the Scriptures. These examples reveal much about what He expects before He will hear and answer us.

One thing is clear. God always hates evil, wherever it exists. He wants us to do the same—but according to *His*, not *our*, definition of what is evil.

The Scriptures plainly tell us: "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 those people willing to respond in this manner (Amos 5:14-15, NIV).

As the apostle Peter explained, "I now

realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35, NIV).

God wants to bless us—every one of us. But He demands more than lip service. He has established and revealed specific, real conditions that we must meet if we are to receive those blessings. To God, both a *right heart* and *sincere obedience* are prerequisites for His sustained care over us.

### How can a nation turn to God?

So how should a nation examine itself if it wants to secure divine assistance in addressing a national crisis? How can it be certain that God will hear and answer the prayers of its people? Is a national day of prayer sufficient to hold God's attention? Or does He expect much deeper and enduring commitment, dedication and contrition?

God explained to the prophet Ezekiel that any superficial worship—even in the presence of one of His prophets—does not impress Him. "So they come to you in crowds as if they were really ready to listen. They sit in front of you as if they were my people and hear your words, *but they will not obey them*."

"With their mouths they tell me they love me, but their hearts desire their selfish profits. To your people you are nothing more than a singer who sings love songs and has a beautiful voice and plays a musical instrument well. They hear your words, *but they will not obey them*" (Ezekiel 33:31-32, New Century Version).

In times of national crisis it's normal for people to think their appeals to God are more likely to be heard when they band together in prayer. Indeed, God does promise to answer prayers of genuinely humble people who are willing to examine themselves and forsake their disobedient ways. But prayers on a

nationwide scale that are not accompanied by sincere obedience to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures are not acceptable to God. He makes this clear in His Word.

### Lessons from the past

God established a special relationship with ancient Israel. He promised to always bless and protect the Israelites if only they would live up to their agreement to obey His commands. He had Moses tell them: "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, NIV).

God proposed to make ancient Israel an example that all other nations would want to follow (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). But from the beginning He gave the Israelites this warning: ". . . If you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these *curses* will come upon you and overtake you . . ." (Deuteronomy 28:15, NIV). He then gave a long list of potential catastrophes.

Over a period of several centuries God worked with these people. The more they sinned, the more He would withdraw His protection and blessings. At times He permitted many of them to die in national calamities such as droughts, wars and famines—even from occasional invasions by foreign armies. But they never really grasped God's warnings about how lacking in true righteousness their national habits were. Even so, for decade after decade God was merciful toward them.

As Psalm 78:34-41 explains: "Whenever God slew them [by withholding His protection from national calamities], they would seek him . . . But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their

## Pray for and Respect Governing Officials

The apostle Paul wrote to the young evangelist Timothy, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Political leaders, especially during times of national and global crises, often make decisions that will affect the lives of God's servants. Whether those serving God will be able to live "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" often depends on the soundness and wisdom of those decisions.

Therefore it is good and appropriate that we pray for God to aid and influence, according to His will and wisdom, those making critical governmental decisions. This is especially true when such decisions would dramatically impact the lives of those who genuinely want to please God and do His will. Also, we should consider that praying for government leaders demonstrates love to *all* our fellowman, because everyone is affected by the decisions of their rulers.

Praying for "all who are in authority"—regardless of whether they personally

believe in and serve the living God—is an appropriate way we can show godly appreciation, respect and concern for their service to us. The Scriptures also admonish us to submit willingly to their leadership, insofar as it does not require us to disobey God (Acts 5:29). In the case of corrupt or despotic rulers, it certainly would not be wrong to pray to God that such a person change or be removed from office.

"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers [as a general class of public servants] are not a terror to good works, but to evil.

"Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake" (Romans 13:1-5).

## How to Seek God's Will

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was a horrible act of violence by religious extremists. Their acts are unconscionable. Nevertheless leaders from all nations are warning that more violent acts of terrorism may come. They caution us that, though now few in number, these furtive enemies of Western civilization are intelligent, cunning and capable. We should never underestimate the havoc they can inflict.

Many leaders are also imploring us to pray for God's help. Indeed we should. But let's be realistic enough to realize that God will hear us only if we are willing to hear Him.

It is time we took the blinders off our eyes. Our entire Western culture is caught up in an evolutionist philosophy that believes God doesn't exist or the surreal notion that we can do whatever we please and God's attitude toward us is one of ignoring our sins—that He simply needs and desires our adulation and attention. But that is not how the Holy Scriptures describe His view of humanity. The message they thunder from Genesis to Revelation is a call for repentance and obedience to God's laws and His way of life.

In times of trouble God offers this encouragement: "If My people . . . will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

tongues; their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return. How often they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland! Again and again they put God to the test . . ." (NIV).

Over and over, throughout the course of their history, God warned the Israelites that they were headed toward national disaster. But they refused to heed His warnings. In the end they forfeited the ultimate greatness they could have achieved. Their enemies conquered them and took them into captivity. Yet even then they were not totally destroyed because God kept His promise that He would never completely forsake them as His people.

Later, after a few had returned to their homeland from captivity, God summarized His past relationship with them with an appeal for them to learn from their tragic experience: "For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. "But you said, 'In what way shall we return?'" (Malachi 3:6-7).

### Realistic self-examination

We should be asking ourselves the same thing. Americans in particular should ask themselves: How should we return to the living God who has so richly and abundantly blessed us as a people?

In other words, should we examine ourselves for personal, social and national sins? Should we ask ourselves if the calamities that have befallen us in recent years—such as devastating hurricanes, floods, droughts and other natural disasters—could be indicators that God is withholding His blessing from us because our way of life is not pleasing to Him?

Could the recent murderous terrorist attacks serve as a shocking indicator that He wants

our attention? Could He be letting us learn—the hard way—that we are not sufficiently looking to Him to guide us and solve our problems? Has our confidence in our own perceived greatness deluded us into relying on ourselves instead of God to provide our physical blessings and national security?

God's relationship with ancient Israel can be instructive for us—providing we are willing to listen and learn from the Israelites' experiences. Speaking of events in that nation, the apostle Paul explained that "all these things happened to them as examples, and they were *written for our admonition*, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

At the beginning of their national existence God told the people of ancient Israel: "You should know in your heart that *as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you*. Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

"For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

"When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:5-10).

Today, the entire Western world has been similarly blessed, especially the United States of America. But far too many have also become smugly materialistic and spiritually independent of God. Their outlook toward life has been that of undisguised self-sufficiency.

This is exactly what happened to ancient Israel. The Israelites paid a terrible penalty for not acknowledging their attitudes in real national repentance—by forsaking their evil ways.

Yet, from the beginning, God had warned them: "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God *by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes* which

I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silve and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and *you forget the LORD your God* . . .

"Then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' And you shall remember the LORD your God, *for it is He who gives you power to get wealth*, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers as it is this day.

"Then it shall be, if you by any means *forget the LORD your God*, and follow other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroys before you, so you shall perish, *because you would not be obedient* to the voice of the LORD your God" (verses 11-14, 17-20).

### A wake-up call for today?

Are these types of warnings only for the people of ancient Israel? Or are they applicable to all nations for all time? God, through the prophet Jeremiah, tells us: "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it" (Jeremiah 18:7-10, NIV).

(For a clear explanation of how God announced, centuries ago, the present role of America and Britain in world affairs, be sure to request your copy of *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. It's free from any of our offices listed on page 2 or from our Web site at [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org).)

As we saw earlier, God is consistent. The long-term welfare of any nation depends on whether its people have an obedient relationship with Him.

Notice God pleading with His people Israel to repent so that He will hear them: "Now,

therefore,' says the LORD, 'turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.' So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him . . ." (Joel 2:12-14).

Speaking to other nations, God warns: "But if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it" (Jeremiah 12:17, New Revised Standard Version).

God's message to a nation's individual citizens is similar: ". . . If I say to the wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right—if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live.

"Yet your countrymen [may] say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just. If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it. And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so" (Ezekiel 33:14-19, NIV).

### Seeking God's will

The Bible calls this turning from wickedness *repentance*. It involves much more than acquiring a superficial knowledge of God's Word or paying lip service to Him.

How do we begin reexamining our own lives? Where should we start in comparing our ways and thinking to the teaching of

God's Word, the Holy Bible?

First, we should find a private place where we can humble ourselves before God. The normal biblical example is to pray while kneeling respectfully before Him (unless we are physically incapable of doing so for reasons beyond our control).

We should avoid approaching God in the manner of the Pharisee who could not see in himself any need for repentance yet contemptuously viewed others as sinners (Luke 18:9-14). We should pray that God will give us a heart that is willing to face our shortcomings, willing to see what we need to change (Psalm 139:23-24). It is also important that we avoid superficiality but take our time to talk to God from the heart.

Once we genuinely want to both know and *do* what God tells us to do, we need to quickly acquire a proper understanding of His teachings. Paul wrote: ". . . Before people can ask the Lord for help, they must believe in him; and before they can believe in him, they must hear about him; and for them to hear about the Lord, someone must tell them" (Romans 10:14, New Century Version).

To receive a clear explanation of repentance and the way of life God expects of those who serve Him, be sure to request your free copies of the booklets *The Road to Eternal Life, Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *The Ten Commandments*. Read them thoroughly and carefully.

Also be sure to request *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* and *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* for an enlightening perspective of the troubled times the whole world will have to endure before Christ returns—and the wonderful world we can look forward to after He returns.

### When God will hear humanity's prayers

Of that exciting time we read: "Thus says the LORD: 'Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who lays hold on it; who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.'

"Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD speak, saying, 'The LORD has utterly separated me from His people'; nor let the eunuch say, 'Here I am, a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD: 'To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

"Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants; everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant; even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer . . . for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:1-7).

God greatly desires to hear and answer humanity's prayers. After Christ returns—and after all mankind learns God's truth and most repent—that desire will become a reality.

In the meantime only those who are willing to hear His Word and turn away from their sins have His ear. If you want God to hear you and consistently answer your prayers, make sure you are hearing and responding to His teachings in the Holy Scriptures.

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