

## **“The Sinner’s Prayer”**

Prayer is one of the greatest blessings in the world. It’s hard to fathom the fact that the God of heaven hears us when we pray. Though our prayer is but a whisper beneath the noisy din of life, or even a thought unexpressed with our lips, God hears every word when His child speaks to Him in the name of Jesus. But can anyone pray to God? What about the sinner? That is, can a person outside of Jesus Christ pray to Father God in heaven?

**Acts 9:10-11 “And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.”**

Now, here we have the case of a sinner, named Saul, praying to God. This is the same Saul who became known as the apostle Paul later on. But at this time, Saul is lost in his sins, and he is praying to God. A lot of sinners pray from time to time, but what are they praying for, and is God listening? What can a sinner pray for? Does the Bible teach the idea of a sinner’s prayer that we hear so much about today? Let’s see what the word of God says about that.

We should begin by defining what we mean by the word ‘sinner.’ Aren’t we ALL sinners in the sight of God? In one particular sense, yes, we certainly are.

**Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”**

**Romans 3:10 “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one...”**

That is, until we come and obey the gospel and become righteous through Jesus Christ and what HE has done upon the cross in the forgiveness of our sins. No man can stand of his own accord or his own morality, strength or goodness, and be righteous in God’s sight. Even as Christians, we all fall short of God’s expectations. We break His commandments and His laws from time to time. So, in the generic sense, every man sins and has nothing to merit his coming into the presence of God.

But the kind of sinner we’re talking about in this study is an unforgiven sinner, alien to the kingdom, a person outside of Christ Jesus who has never become a Christian through obedience to the gospel. He may be trying to come to Jesus but he’s not yet *in* Jesus Christ. You see, when a man obeys the gospel of Jesus Christ and becomes a child of God, he is no longer a sinner in the sense that sin no longer has control of him. It no longer dwells in his heart.

**Romans 6:17-18 “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.”**

Does that mean that a Christian never sins? No, but I no longer live in and serve sin. It no longer dwells in me. My relationships to God AND to sin change respectively when I become a Christian. So, when I use the word 'sinner' in this study, I am talking about a person who has never been baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins (**Galatians 3:27, Acts 2:38**). Can such a sinner pray? Does the Bible ever command such a sinner to pray, to come to Christ or for any other reason? If so, what should a sinner pray for?

Sinners are often encouraged to pray today. I hear speakers on other religious television and radio programs frequently telling listeners at home who wish to come to Jesus to bow their heads along with him. I've been to services where sinners were asked to come down to the front and kneel down at what they call an altar, pray for salvation and invite Jesus into their hearts, to ask for forgiveness of their sins and to become a Christian and pray for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and so on and so forth...Perhaps that is the practice of the church where you attend. In fact, if you were to think back, you might tell me that that was your conversion experience as you would recount it. Perhaps someone encouraged you just to open your heart and say a simple prayer, inviting Jesus in to forgive you of your sins and make you a Christian, a child of God. But have you ever stopped to really wonder if that's biblical? Does the Bible ever command a sinner outside of Christ to pray to come into Christ? Does the Bible ever tell a sinner to pray at all?

Let's begin by noting a few of the things that sinners are often encouraged to pray for by people today. There are those who are told they should pray for a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit, to pray for supernatural light from heaven or for knowledge of the truth. But does the Bible teach that a sinner should pray for a revelation of God's will? Is that how faith in God is created within a person's heart, through some kind of a supernatural better-felt-than-told revelation or experience? The apostle Paul answers that question powerfully and concisely.

**Romans 10:17 "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."**

Underscore that. Write that in the margin of your Bible or file it away in your mind. Faith is created by hearing the word of God. The Holy Spirit doesn't zoom down from heaven and zap a person with faith. That's not how it happens. You see, a person doesn't fall down on his knees *without* faith, and get up *with* faith after some sort of feeling or experience. No, rather, *faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* In fact, the context surrounding that verse shows the necessity of the sinner hearing the preaching of the gospel before he can be saved. Notice what Paul said in the verses prior:

**Romans 10:13-17 "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."**

We'll talk more about "*calling on the name of the Lord*" in a few minutes. Paul says that a sinner cannot be saved without hearing the gospel. If that's the case, what good would it do for a sinner to ask God for some supernatural revelation of knowledge or light? God's plan necessitates that a sinner reads or hears the gospel preached in order to obey it and be saved. That's where the point of contact is. That's where faith is generated.

Now, there's a difference between the time that Paul is talking about in this passage and the time that we're living in today and that is this: in Paul's day, the gospel had not been recorded. It had not been written down, rather it was *within* inspired men. They didn't have the New Testament record as we do, to read and study. So, by necessity, the sinner had to make contact with a person who was inspired by the Holy Spirit in order to learn how to be saved. That's what happened before the Ethiopian nobleman could be saved (**Acts 8**). I want you to follow this carefully. This nobleman had been to Jerusalem to worship God according to the law of Moses, and was returning home by way of chariot. He had a scroll of the prophesy of Isaiah with him. Perhaps he had obtained it while in Jerusalem. He was reading the famous words of Isaiah that comprise what we know as **Isaiah 53**. That passage foretells of Jesus' crucifixion and how He would be the sacrifice needed to take away our sins. The problem was that this man didn't have the slightest idea who Isaiah was talking about. He was blindly groping through the Old Testament scriptures wanting to learn what they were saying. Now think about this: if faith comes through a sinner praying, couldn't he have just asked God for it while he was riding along in his chariot? And wouldn't God have just sent some direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon his heart to cause him to understand what he was reading? The Bible doesn't tell us that he prayed for knowledge or understanding. Maybe he did. Let's just assume for the sake of argument that he did ask the Lord for knowledge, for light, because he was in darkness. Well, if that was the case, do you know how the Lord answered his prayer? The text makes it obvious: by sending Philip, the inspired man, to teach him the gospel.

But, you see, some people think it happens the other way: that faith somehow comes supernaturally after we ask God for it. The Bible says that God sent Philip the evangelist over there to the Gaza road where this man was travelling, and this is what happened:

**Acts 8:30-31 "And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me?"**

Now, you see, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy had not yet been written down in the New Testament. It was being preached by word of mouth while the apostles were being led by the Holy Spirit to preach and write the New Testament. Thus, Paul's rhetorical question, "*How shall they hear without a preacher?*" (**Romans 10:14**).

Today, I can read the gospel for myself and I can learn what I must do to be saved. I don't have a revelation or message from heaven for you. I am simply preaching THE message that has already been recorded. I'm pointing you to the book and what the book says because that's where the authority is, not in men today. But a man who has never heard of Christ can pick up a copy of the scriptures and,

with a sincere heart, he can learn all by himself what God wants him to know and what he must do to become a Christian and go to heaven. That wasn't the case during the infant stage of the church, when the gospel had not been written down. But what has NOT changed is that faith comes from hearing the word of God—whether that word is preached by someone, or one reads it for himself.

**Psalm 119:130 “The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.”**

But, should a sinner pray for salvation? Perhaps you've heard of what is commonly called 'the sinner's prayer.' That's the prayer that people are urged to pray in order to receive Christ into their hearts and to become Christians. But does the Bible ever instruct any sinner to pray such a prayer? I want you to seriously think about that. Where in the New Testament was any sinner instructed to pray to God for salvation? Was it on the Day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:38**)? You know, those people heard the gospel and were convicted of their sins. They wanted to be saved. You won't find a plainer example in all of the New Testament of people who wanted to be saved, asked how to be saved, were told what to do to be saved and did whatever they were told to do to be saved. They asked Peter that day, "What shall we do?" Peter could've said, 'Repent and come up here to the front and kneel down where you are and invite Jesus into your heart.' But that's NOT what he said.

**Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”**

Every single one of them were commanded to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins, and not one word was said about them saying any kind of prayer in order to be saved.

Do you suppose we might find it in the conversion of the nobleman in **Acts 8**? He was a man who wanted to learn the truth and Philip was the man who taught it to him.

**Acts 8:35 “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.”**

They could've pulled over by the side of the road and both of them gotten down beside the chariot and prayed for the Lord to forgive this man of his sins. But that's not what the record says happened. How did the nobleman respond when Philip preached to him of Jesus?

**Acts 8:36 “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?”**

So, no sinner's prayer there either. Where do you suppose that idea comes from? Continue reading through the book of Acts, and time and time again, you'll read of men and women coming to faith in Christ upon hearing His word preached. If you find one example of any of them being told to say the sinner's prayer, please write me and let me know because I've not found that in the book of Acts. Now someone may say, wasn't Saul commanded to call on the name of the Lord? There's your sinner's prayer. Didn't Paul later tell people to call on the name of the Lord to be saved in **Romans 10**? Yes, he did. In fact, let's look at that. It brings us back to where we began our study in **Acts 9**.

Saul was a zealous Jew, who was busy trying to destroy the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was persecuting Christians everywhere he could find them, but the Lord changed all of that in an unforgettable experience along the Damascus road. Jesus appeared to him and confronted him about the way Saul had been treating His church and Saul came to understand that this Jesus, whose name he had despised, was indeed the Son of God, alive and reigning and well.

**Acts 9:6 “And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”**

Here’s a man who wanted to be saved as badly as anyone ever wanted to be saved. And he has the opportunity to ask-not just a preacher-but the Lord Himself what to do about his condition!

**Acts 9:6 “...And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.”**

Now, if all it takes is (as the old song says) “Just a Little Talk with Jesus” to make it right, then here you have it. Saul had a little talk with Jesus along the Damascus road, but he’s not yet right. Jesus said someone would come and tell him what he must do to be saved once he got to the city. Well, a few days later, Ananias the preacher was dispatched by the Lord to deal with Saul.

**Acts 9:10-11 “And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold he prayeth...”**

Well, there it is. The Bible gives us an example of a praying sinner. Wait a minute, what was he praying for? The Bible actually doesn’t tell us. But I can tell you that if it was for the forgiveness of his sins, the Lord didn’t hear and answer his prayer. Why do I say that? Saul was a religious man, and it is not surprising that his reaction to the events on the Damascus road would cause him to want to pray. After all, Saul is kind of bewildered. He has a lot of questions about all of this, and here he is struck blind, waiting for three days for someone to come and explain all of this to him. I suppose I’d be praying too. Wouldn’t you? But Saul didn’t ‘pray through.’ And he didn’t pray himself into salvation. He didn’t pray his sins away. The Bible says that Ananias came to him and restored his sight and told Saul to get up and be baptized. Now, Ananias could’ve knelt down with him at the side of the bed or in the room where Saul was staying and prayed with him to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and let Jesus come into his heart. That’s what would happen in many, if not most, denominational churches today. But friend, that is NOT what happened in Damascus that day. Ananias told Saul the following:

**Acts 22:16 “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”**

Do you see that? Saul was told to call upon the name of the Lord to be saved! How was he to do it? By being baptized in order to wash away his sins. You see, baptism puts one into a new relationship with Christ Jesus.

**Galatians 3:27 “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”**

Being in Christ causes one to obtain a number of spiritual blessings that he didn't enjoy before. One of those blessings is the ability to pray- through Jesus Christ as his mediator- unto God. Now, I don't have that right before I am a child of God. I must call upon the Lord's name-or avail myself of the authority in that name- by being baptized for the forgiveness of my sins. When that happens, I am then in a new relationship with Christ that includes the right of access to the throne of God in prayer. From that day forward, when I sin as a Christian, I may go in contrition and repentance and confession to the Lord's throne in prayer and ask for pardon from that sin. But that's not the privilege of the alien sinner. He must first exercise faith and become a child of God by reason of the new birth. And that takes place when one is baptized into Christ for the remission of his sins, and not until then.

Friend, the concept of the sinner's prayer is not taught in the Bible, despite its popularity in the world today. It is instead a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, spread by evangelists and revivalists such as Billy Sunday and Billy Graham, who call hundreds at a time to the edge of a platform to recite a prayer for salvation. But you don't read one word of that in one single account of conversion recorded in the book of Acts. We need to be telling sinners what Jesus said they must do to be saved.

**Mark 16:16 "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved;"**

Then, they can enjoy the wonderful privilege of prayer.