

Praying
Successfully

Praying Successfully

“Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.”

—John 16:24



Charles Spurgeon



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Publisher's note:

The author's selection of Bible versions has been retained whenever possible, including the Revised Version when it was originally cited. The text of this book, however, has been edited for the modern reader. Words, expressions, and sentence structure have been updated for clarity and readability.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version (KJV) of the Holy Bible.

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❧ CHAPTER 1 ❧

David's Prayer in the Cave

A prayer when he was in the cave.

— Psalm 142:1

I like the title given to Psalm 142: “*A prayer when he was in the cave.*” David did pray when he was in the cave. If he had prayed half as much when he was in the palace as he did when he was in the cave, things would have been better for him. But, alas, when he was king, we find him rising from his bed in the evening, looking from the roof of his house, and falling into temptation. If he had been looking up to heaven, if his heart had been in communion with God, he might never have committed that great crime that has so deeply stained his whole character.

“*A prayer when he was in the cave.*” God will hear prayer on the land, on the sea, and even

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under the sea. I remember someone at a prayer meeting saying so. Somebody else at the prayer meeting was rather astonished and asked, "How would God hear prayer under the sea?" The man said that he was a diver, and he often went down to the bottom of the sea after shipwrecks. He said that he had held communion with God while he had been at work in the depths of the ocean.

Our God is not only the God of the hills, but also of the valleys. He is the God of both land and

<p>There is no time of day or night that God's throne is inaccessible.</p>	sea. He heard Jonah when the disobedient prophet was at the roots of the mountains and when " <i>the earth with her bars</i> " (Jonah 2:6) seemed to be around him forever. Wherever you work, you can pray. Wherever you
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lie sick, you can pray. There is no place to which you can be banished that God is not near, and there is no time of day or night that His throne is inaccessible.

"*A prayer when he was in the cave.*" The caves have heard the best prayers. Some birds sing best in cages. Likewise, some of God's people shine brightest in the dark. Many an heir of heaven never prays so well as when he is driven by necessity to

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pray. Some will sing aloud upon their beds of sickness who hardly ever sang when they were well. Some will sing God's high praises in the fire who did not praise Him as they should have before the trial came. In the furnace of affliction the saints are often seen at their best. If you are in a dark and gloomy situation, if your soul is bowed down, may this become a special time of powerful communion and intercession. May the prayer of the cave be the very best of your prayers!

In this chapter, I will use David's prayer in the cave as a picture of a soul under a deep sense of sin. Second, I will use it to represent the condition of a persecuted believer. Third, I will write about how it reveals the condition of a believer who is being prepared for greater honor and wider service.

The Person Convicted of Sin

First, let me try to use this psalm as a picture of the condition of a soul under a deep sense of sin.

A little while ago, perhaps, you were out in the open field of the world, sinning nonchalantly, plucking the flowers that grow in those poisoned valleys and enjoying their deadly perfume. You were as happy as your sinful heart could be, for

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you were giddy and careless and thoughtless. However, it has pleased God to capture you. You have been arrested by Christ and have been put in prison. You are behind bars. You feel like one who has come out of the bright sunshine and balmy air into a dark, musty cavern, where you can see very little, where there is no comfort, and where there appears to be no hope of escape.

Cry to God

Well now, according to the psalm before us, which is meant for you as well as for David, your first business is to make an appeal to God. I know the doubts you may have. I know the fears you may have of God. I know how frightened you may be at the very mention of His name. But if you want to come out of your present gloom, I charge you to go to God at once. See, the psalm begins, “*I cried unto the LORD with my voice; with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication*” (Psalm 142:1). Cry to God with your voice. If you have no place where you can use your voice, cry to God in silence, but do cry to Him. Look Godward. If you look in any other direction, all is darkness. Look Godward. There, and only there, is hope.

“I have sinned against God,” you say. Be assured that God is ready to pardon. He has

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provided the great Atonement through which He can justly forgive the greatest offenses. Look Godward, and begin to pray. I have known people to do this who hardly believed in God. Having a faint desire to pray, they cried to God. Even though it was a poor prayer, God heard it. I have known some to cry to God in utter despair. When they hardly believed that there could be any use in praying, still it was that or nothing. They knew that it could not hurt them to pray, and so they got down on their knees and cried. It is wonderful to see what poor prayers God will hear and answer—prayers that have no legs to run with, no hands to grasp with, and very little heart. Still, God has heard them and has accepted them.

Get on your knees, you who feel guilty. Get on your knees if your heart is sighing on account of sin. If the dark gloom of your iniquities is gathering around you, cry to God. He will hear you.

Make a Full Confession

The next thing to do is to pour out your heart. David said, *"I poured out my complaint before him; I showed before him my trouble"* (Psalm 142:2). The human heart longs to express itself. An unuttered grief will lie and smolder in the soul until its black smoke blinds the very eyes of the spirit.

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Sometimes it is not a bad thing to speak to a Christian friend about the anguish of your heart. I would not encourage you to make it a priority—far from it—though it may be helpful to some. But I do encourage you to make a full confession unto the Lord. Tell Him how you have sinned. Tell Him how you have tried to save yourself and have failed. Tell Him what a wretch you are, how fickle, how proud, how unruly. Tell Him how your ambition carries you away like an unbridled horse. Tell

**Do not
attempt to
hide anything
from God, for
He knows all.**

Him all your faults, as far as you can remember them. Do not attempt to hide anything from God. You cannot do so, for He knows all. Therefore, do not hesitate to tell Him everything—the darkest secret, the sin you would not even wish to whisper to the evening's breeze. Tell it all. Confession to God is good for the soul. "*Whoso confesseth and forsaketh [his sins] shall have mercy*" (Proverbs 28:13).

I urge you who are now in a gloomy cave to seek a secret and quiet place and, alone with God, to pour out your heart before Him. David said, "*I showed before him my trouble*" (Psalm 142:2). Do not think that the use of pious words can be

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of any help. It is not merely words that you have to utter; you have to lay all your trouble before God. As a child tells his mother his griefs, tell the Lord all your griefs, your complaints, your miseries, your fears. Get them all out, and great relief will come to your spirit.

Acknowledge That God Is Your Only Hope

So, first, appeal to God. Second, make confession to Him. Third, acknowledge to God that there is no hope for you but in His mercy. Put it as David did: "*I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me*" (v. 4). There is only one hope for you; acknowledge that. Perhaps you have been trying to be saved by your good works. They are altogether worthless, even if you heap them together. Possibly you expect to be saved by your religiousness. But half of it is hypocrisy, and how can a person hope to be saved by his hypocrisy? Do you hope to be saved by your feelings? What are your feelings? They are as changeable as the weather. A puff of wind will change all your fine feelings into murmuring and rebellion against God.

Friend, you cannot keep the law of God! Keeping it perfectly is the only other way to heaven besides Christ. The perfect keeping of

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God's commandments would save you if you had never committed a sin. But, since you have sinned, even that will not save you now, for future obedience will not wipe out past disobedience.

Here, in Christ Jesus, who is the atoning sacrifice for sin, is the only hope for you. Lay hold of it. In the cave of your doubts and fears, where you are chilled and numbed by the clinging dampness of your despair around you and by the dread of the wrath to come, make God in Christ your sole confidence, and you will yet have perfect peace.

Plead with God

Furthermore, if you are still in the cave of doubt and sin, plead with God to set you free. You cannot present a better prayer than the prayer of David in the cave: "*Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name*" (Psalm 142:7).

If you are in prison, you cannot get out by yourself. You may grab the bars and try to shake them, but they are unmovable. You cannot break them with your hands. You may meditate, think, invent, and devise, but you cannot get through those bars. However, there is a hand that can cut bars of iron. Oh, prisoner in the iron cage, there is a hand that can open your cage and set you free! You do not have to be a prisoner. You do

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not have to be confined. You may walk in freedom through Jesus Christ, the Savior. Only trust Him, and believingly pray David's prayer right now: "*Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name*" (v. 7). He will set you free!

How sinners do praise God's name when they get out of the prison of sin! I remember how, when I was set free, I felt like singing all the time. I understood very well the words of Charles Wesley:

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise!

I recall a story that my old friend, Dr. Alexander Fletcher, told some children one time. He said that he was going down the street one day and saw a boy standing on his head, turning cartwheels, and jumping up and down. He said to him, "What are you doing? You seem to be tremendously happy." The boy replied, "Oh, mister, if you had been locked up for six months and had just gotten out, you would be happy too!"

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by yourself.

I have no doubt that this is very true. When a person gets out of the prison of sin—a far worse

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prison than any earthly prison—he must praise God’s free grace and dying love. He must sing and make his whole life musical with the praise of the emancipating Christ.

Now, that is my advice to you who are in a cave because of conviction of sin. May God make that cave a blessing to you! If you are under a sense of sin, heed what I have already said; you do not need to notice anything else that I am going to write in this chapter. If you are not in the cave of conviction, the rest of this chapter belongs to you.

The Persecuted Believer

I will go on to my second subject. This psalm sets forth the condition of a persecuted believer.

A persecuted believer! Are there any in our country? Yes, dear friends, there are many! When a person becomes a Christian, he immediately becomes different from the people around him.

I was standing at my window one day, meditating on possible subjects for my next sermon. I could not decide on a text, when, all of a sudden, I saw a flock of birds. A canary had escaped from its cage and was flying over the roofs of the houses opposite mine. It was being chased by

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about twenty sparrows, along with other rough birds. Then I thought of that text, “*Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her*” (Jeremiah 12:9). Why, the birds in pursuit seemed to say to one another, “Here is a yellow fellow. We have not seen a bird like him in our city. He has no business here. Let us pull off his bright coat. Let us kill him, or let us make him as dark and dull as we are.”

That is just what people of the world try to do to Christians. Here is a godly man who works in a factory, or a Christian woman who is employed in an office building. Such Christians will have a sad tale to tell of how they have been hunted down, ridiculed, and scoffed at by ungodly coworkers.

You Do Not Know What to Do

It may be that you are in the condition just described. You hardly know what to do. You are as David described himself in Psalm 142, for he said, “*My spirit was overwhelmed within me*” (v. 3). Perhaps you are a new believer, and your coworkers have turned against you and become your persecutors. It is a new thing to you as a young believer. You are quite perplexed and completely unsure of what you should do. They are severe, ferocious, and incessant. They find out

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your tender spots and know just how to touch you on those raw places. You are like a lamb in the midst of wolves; you do not know which way to turn.

Well then, say to the Lord what David said: "*When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knewest my path*" (v. 3). God knows exactly where you are and what you have to bear. Have confidence that, when you do not know what to do, He can and will direct your way if you trust Him.

You Are Tempted

In addition, it may be that you are greatly tempted. David said, "*They privily laid a snare for me*" (v. 3). This is often the case with a young man. His coworkers find out that he has become a Christian, and they try to trip him up. If they can, they will devise a scheme by which they can make him appear to be guilty, even if he is not. Ah, if you are in this situation, you will need much wisdom! I pray that you may never yield to temptation but may hold your ground by divine grace. Young Christian soldiers often have a very rough time of it in the barracks. But I hope that you will prove yourself a true soldier and not yield an inch to those who would lead you astray.

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It will be very painful if, in addition to that, your family turns against you. David said, "*There was no man that would know me*" (Psalm 142:4).

Is it the same with you?

Are your father and mother against you? Is your wife or your husband against you?

Do your brothers and sisters call you a hypocrite?

Do they point the finger of scorn at you when you get home? And often, when you

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go home after church, where you have been so happy, do you have to hear profanity the moment you enter the house?

Christians should pray for young people who are newly converted, for their worst enemies are often those in their own household. "I would not mind so much," a new believer said, "if I had a Christian friend to go to. I spoke to a Christian the other day, and he did not seem to care about my situation at all."

Such a nonchalant attitude really hurts a young convert. Take John as an example. He has truly, lovingly, given his heart to Christ. The manager where he works is a Christian man. John is ridiculed by his coworkers, and he tries

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to talk to this Christian man about it. John's boss squelches him in a moment and has no sympathy for him. Well, there is another Christian working near John's desk. As the young convert begins to tell him a little about his trouble, this man too is very grumpy and cross.

I have noticed that some Christians appear to keep to themselves, and they do not seem to notice the troubles of beginners in the Christian life. Do not let this be the case with you. My dear brothers and sisters, cultivate great love to those who, having come into the army of Christ, are harassed by adversaries. Like David, they are in the cave. Do not disown them. They are trying to do their best. Stand side by side with them. Say to the persecutors of your young Christian friend, "I, too, am a Christian. If you are honoring that young man with your ridicule, let me have my portion of it. If you are pouring contempt on him, give me a share of it, for I also believe as he believes."

Will you do that? Some of my readers will, I am sure. Will you stand by the man of God who upholds the Lord's revealed truth? Some of you will. But there are plenty of people who want to save their skin. If they can sneak away from a fight, they are glad to get home, go to bed, and slumber until the battle is over. May God help us

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to have more of the lion in us, and not so much of the chicken! May God grant us grace to stand by those who are out-and-out for God and for His Christ, so that we may be remembered with them in the day of His appearing!

You Are Weak

It may be that your worst point is that you feel very feeble. You say, "I would not mind the persecution if I felt strong, but I am so weak." Well now, always distinguish between feeling strong and being strong. The person who feels strong is weak; the person who feels weak is strong. Paul said, "*When I am weak, then am I strong*" (2 Corinthians 12:10). David prayed, "*Deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I*" (Psalm 142:6).

Just hide yourself away in the strength of God. Pray much. Take God for your refuge and your portion. Have faith in Him. Then you will be stronger than your adversaries. They may seem to pull you down, but you will soon be up again. They may set before you puzzles that you cannot solve. They may come up with their scientific knowledge, and you may be at a disadvantage. But never mind that. The God who has led you into the cave will turn the tables for you one of

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these days. Only hold on, and hold out, even to the end.

I am glad that there is some trouble in being a Christian, for it has become a very common thing

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to profess to be one. If I am right, it is going to become a much less common thing for a person to say, "I am a Christian." There will come times when sharp lines will be drawn. Some of us will help to draw them if we can. The problem is that people bear the Christian name

but act like worldlings and love the amusements and the follies of the world. It is time for a division in the house of the Lord in which those for Christ go into one camp and those against Christ go into the other camp. We have been mixed together too long.

I, for one, say, "May the day soon come when every Christian will have to run the gauntlet!" It will be a good thing for genuine believers. It will just blow some of the chaff away from the wheat. We will have all the purer gold when the fire gets hot and the crucible is put into it, for then the dross will be separated from the precious metal.

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Be courageous, my fellow believer. If you are now in the cave, the Lord will bring you out of it in His own good time.

The Believer in Training

Now, to close this chapter, I want to write a little about the condition of a believer who is being prepared for greater honor and wider service.

Is it not a curious thing that whenever God means to make a man great, He always breaks him in pieces first? There was a man whom the Lord meant to make into a prince. How did He do it? Why, He met him one night and wrestled with him! We always hear about Jacob's wrestling. Well, I dare say Jacob did wrestle, but it was not Jacob who was the principal wrestler: "*There wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day*" (Genesis 32:24). God wrestled with him. He touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh and put it out of joint before He called him Israel, which means "a prince of God." The purpose of the wrestling was to take all of Jacob's strength out of him. When his strength was gone, then God called him a prince.

Now, David was to be king over all of Israel. What was the way to Jerusalem for David? What

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was the way to the throne? Well, he went by way of the cave of Adullam. He had to go there first and be an outcast, for that was the way by which he would be made king.

Have you ever noticed that whenever God is about to give you a promotion, elevating you to a larger sphere of service or a higher platform of spiritual life, you always get thrown down? That is His usual method of working. He makes you hungry before He feeds you. He strips you before He clothes you. He makes you nothing before He makes you something. This was the case with David. He was to be king in Jerusalem, but he had to go to the throne by way of the cave.

Now, are you about to go to heaven or to a more heavenly state of sanctification or to a greater sphere of usefulness? Do not be surprised if you go by way of the cave. Why is this? God wants to teach you several things.

Pray

First, in order for God to make you greatly useful, He must teach you how to pray. The man who is a great preacher and yet cannot pray will come to a bad end. A woman who is noted for her Bible teaching and yet cannot pray will also come to a bad end. If you can be great without prayer,

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your greatness will be your ruin. If God means to bless you greatly, He will make you pray greatly, as He did with David, who said while in the cave, *"I cried unto the LORD with my voice; with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication"* (Psalm 142:1).

Always Believe in God

The person whom God will greatly honor must always believe in God, even when he is at his wit's end. *"When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knewest my path"* (v. 3). Are you never at your wit's end? Then God has not sent you to do business in great waters. If He has, before long you will be in a great storm, staggering to and fro and at your wit's end. Oh, it is easy to trust when you can trust yourself. But when you cannot trust yourself, when your spirit sinks below zero in the chill of utter despair, then it is time to trust in God. If that is your case, you have the marks of a believer who can lead God's people and be a comforter to others.

Stand Alone

Next, on the way to greater usefulness, many a man or woman of God must be taught to stand alone. *"I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but*

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there was no man that would know me" (Psalm 142:4). If you want others to help you, you will make a decent follower. But if you look to no man and can stand alone, God being your Helper, you will make a good leader.

It was an impressive thing when Martin Luther stepped out of the ranks of Rome. There were many good men around him who said, "Be

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quiet, Martin. You will be burned at the stake if you do not hold your tongue. Let us stay where we are, in the Church of Rome, even if we have to hear false teaching. We can believe the Gospel and still remain where we are." But Luther knew that

he had to defy antichrists and declare the pure Gospel of the blessed God. He knew he had to stand alone for the truth, even if there were as many devils against him as there were tiles on the housetops in his hometown of Worms, Germany.

That is the kind of man whom God blesses. I fervently desire that many young people reading this book will have the courage to say, "I can stand alone if need be. I would be glad to have my

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coworkers and friends and family stand with me, but if nobody will go to heaven with me, I will say good-bye to them and go to heaven alone through the grace of God's dear Son."

Delight in God

The person whom God will bless will be the person who delights in God alone. David said, "*I cried unto thee, O LORD: I said, Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living*" (Psalm 142:5).

Oh, to have God as our refuge and to make God our portion! You may lose your job. You may lose your income. You may lose the approval of others. "But," says the believer, "I will not lose my portion, for God is my portion. He is my job, my income, my everything. I will hold onto Him, come what may."

If you have learned to "*delight thyself also in the LORD,*" then "*he shall give thee the desires of thine heart*" (Psalm 37:4). Then you are in a state in which God can use you and make much of you. But until you make much of God, He will never make much of you. May God deliver us from having our portion in this life, for if we do, we are not among His people at all!

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Sympathize

The person whom God will use must be taught to sympathize with hurting Christians. David said, *"I am brought very low"* (Psalm 142:6).

If the Lord means to bless you, believer, and to make you useful in His church, you can be sure that He will try you. Half, perhaps up to ninety percent, of a minister's trials are not sent to him for his own welfare; they are sent for the good of other people. Many children of God who go very smoothly to heaven do very little for others. But others of the Lord's children, who have experienced all the ups and downs and changes of mature believers' lives, have done so only so that they may be better equipped to help others. They are able to weep with those who weep or rejoice with those who rejoice.

Therefore, you, my brother who has entered the cave, and you, my sister who has deep spiritual challenges, I want to comfort you by showing you that this is God's way of making something out of you. He is digging you out. You are like an old ditch that cannot hold any more, and God is digging you out to make room for more grace. His shovel will cut sharply as it digs up clump after clump and throws them aside. The very thing you

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would like to keep will be thrown away, and you will be hollowed out and dug out so that the word of Elisha may be fulfilled: *"Make this valley full of ditches. For thus saith the LORD, Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water"* (2 Kings 3:16–17). You are to be tried, my friend, so that God may be glorified in you.

Praise

Last, if God means to use you, you must be full of praise. Listen to what David said: *"Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me"* (Psalm 142:7).

If God is trying you in order to benefit you and afflicting you in order to promote you, may He give you grace to begin to praise Him! The singers are the ones who go before the others; those who can praise the best will be fit to lead others in the work. Do not ask me to follow a gloomy leader. Do not ask me to march to a sad tune. No, no, give me a joyous song. Sing unto the Lord who has triumphed

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gloriously (Exodus 15:1). Praise His great name again and again.

If you have a cheerful spirit, if you are glad in the Lord and joyful after all your trials and afflic-

<hr/> <hr/> If you know anyone who is in a cave, stop and comfort him. <hr/> <hr/>	tions, and if you rejoice all the more because you have been brought low, then God is making something out of you. He will yet use you to lead His people to greater works of grace.
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Encouragement

What I have written in this chapter I have written to three kinds of people: those convicted of sin, persecuted believers, and disciples in training. May God grant to each of you the grace to know which you are and to take what belongs to you!

If you know anyone who is in a cave, stop and comfort him. Even if you feel that you are too busy, put yourself second. Just paddle your own canoe alongside someone else's little ship, and see whether you cannot communicate with the poor troubled one on board. Say a word to cheer a sad heart. Always do this. If you are in prison

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yourself, the way out of it is to help another out. God restored the riches of Job when he prayed for his friends. When we begin to look after others and seek to help others, God will bless us. May it be so, for His name's sake!