

“And this Gospel,” shall be preached... Matthew 24:14

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

‘Close Encounter’ Through Prayer

A currently popular movie is entitled *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. And several other movies and scripts are being written about close encounters between human beings and extraterrestrial beings.

I have found a very interesting, very exciting story that deals with these subjects. It has space wars in it, interstellar spacecraft, transmutation of matter into pure energy, numerous encounters between earthlings and extraterrestrial beings, even an invasion of the earth and a great war. With an awesome plot and all kinds of interesting characters, it's the all-time No. 1 best-seller, and its title is the Bible.

Because the Bible has more to do with meetings and encounters between human beings and extraterrestrial beings than any other book you'll ever read, let's contrast it with today's sci-fi craze.

But how do science fiction and human problems relate? The answer is we all need and are destined to have an encounter with an extraterrestrial being — God. We all need to have a personal relationship with God — something more than an encounter of the first or second kind.

According to the advertising for the movie the encounter of the first kind is sighting an unidentified object, comparable, let's say, to a person's first hint that a God exists. The second kind is some kind of physical evidence of a UFO [unidentified flying object] that remains when the UFO has departed. Compare some past intervention by God in man's history that has left us with permanent results. Three, in both cases, is actual give-and-take contact. This third kind is where man meets his God.

A relationship built by prayer

There's really one fundamental way in which human beings can get involved in bringing about the necessary encounter and build a relationship, while easing the stress of trial and test. I think it's also the answer to our lack of faith and to all of our human problems in the world today. And that is prayer.

That relationship you build with God is based primarily, fundamentally upon your prayer life. That's how you can have, right now, an encounter with God. Do you realize that your salvation depends upon your prayer life? Your most important Christian responsibility is your prayer life, your time of contact with God Almighty. There are so many facets of our lives that are in some way dependent upon prayer.

Spiritual growth, how you progress in God's Church, how you are able to take the trials of life, your Bible knowledge, your understanding of God's Work, the marital relationship you have with your husband or your wife, how you train and rear your children and your relationship with them, how you treat your workers or your boss, how you live with your neighbors, how you get along with fellow workers are all partially dependent upon your prayer life. Prayer is really the essence of your whole spiritual life.

Prayer is one thing God expects of us — that we set aside time to visit with Him, to talk to Him. Your schedule should really be built around your prayer life if you really want to prepare for God's Kingdom.

I want to share with you four basic ingredients for successful prayer. And I hope by understanding and practicing them your life will pick up, you will be happier, you will be a more understanding person, you'll be a more patient person and, above all, you will have more faith in God and faith in God's Church.

Simple obedience

Point 1 is obedience to God's law, obedience to the Ten Commandments (not just in the letter but in the spirit as well). If you don't think your prayers are going

above the ceiling, maybe it's because you've got some sin you haven't repented of. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2).

If you don't know if you have any sins, just get on your knees to God and ask Him to show you your sins. But the result may be pretty tough to take because God doesn't pull any punches. If you ask for something, if you seek, you will find. So if you say, "God, show me my sins," be prepared, because He might open your eyes up wide so you can begin to see what kind of a human being you really are. Of course, being a human being, you are subject to faults and mistakes and lusts and sins.

... But," says the Lord, "to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

Have we gotten away from this concept of getting on our knees and praying to God with our Bibles in front of us occasionally and asking God to show us an understanding of His word?

Unwavering faith

The second point to a good prayer life is faith, belief that God will hear. Normally it will do little good to go before God and say: "Well, God, I'm not quite sure you're going to hear this, and I think I'm wasting my breath, but here goes anyhow."

Hebrews 11:6: "But without faith it is impossible to please him [God]; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

What you have to do is go before God in faith, believing He does hear. James 1:6: "... let him ask in faith, nothing wavering..."

I'm reminded of the story of Peter coming on the water to Christ. When Christ bade him to "come," Peter walked out on that water because at first he didn't doubt. And then he looked around and he saw all the elements — the wind blowing and making all this noise and the waves lapping at his shoes — and he began to doubt. He took his eyes off Christ, and he began to sink. He was wavering like the waves themselves.

"... For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think he shall receive any thing of the Lord" (verses 6 and 7).

When you go before God's throne, you come boldly before that throne as He tells us to in Hebrews 4:16. You approach that throne knowing you are a human being, subject to mistakes, but you approach that throne with the attitude, I want to talk to God; I know He will hear me. He's never too busy, even though He might be controlling all the forces of this universe. He's never too busy to take time to listen to your prayers.

The Holy Spirit will help you have faith. In fact, the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us (Romans 8:27) because sometimes we don't even know how to talk to God. God reads our attitude, our spirit and on that basis answers our prayers.

He already knows what we need, but He says, "I still want you to ask."

Romans 4:21 is really a definition of the faith we should have when we ask: "... being fully persuaded

This sermon was delivered by Benjamin R. Chapman, pastor of the Pasadena Auditorium A.M. church. Mr. Chapman also serves as a theology instructor at Ambassador College School of Ministerial and Biblical Studies.

that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform."

Notice this, that it's a knowledge of God's will and what He has promised that is required to believe He will perform it. But a lot of people make the same mistake with this that they do with Acts 16:31:

"And they [Paul and Silas] said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house." A lot of people just stop right there and simply say, "Well, all you have to do is believe in Christ, you pronounce the name Jesus Christ and you give your heart to Him and you are saved." They don't really understand what Luke was writing. It means believing in the way that Man lived. It means conducting your life the way He conducted His life. It means doing the same kind of work He did. It means giving to the poor as He did. It means, if it is God's will, to step out on faith and raise the sick, to cast out demons, whatever Christ inspires you to do. It means to pattern your life after His life. Sin not with your lips, sin not in deed, but to live a righteous life. It means to be willing to give your life as Christ gave His life — to be a living sacrifice as Romans 11 tells us. Belief in Christ is much more than simple belief in a name. It's a willingness to live the same kind of life.

Which brings us to the third point for effective prayer.

According to God's will

So many times when we pray we have what I call the gimmies. "Lord, gimme this, and Lord, gimme that. Now Lord, provide me with this. And Lord, make sure I am blessed that way."

I have told people the simplest, quickest way to solve one of your personal problems is to find somebody else — one of your brothers or sisters — who has a very similar problem and begin to pray for that individual, about his problem, his calamity or his difficulty. You must ask according to God's will. If you ask for something just to be able to consume it on your own lusts, James 4:1-3 says you are not going to receive it.

Pray about others. Pray about the needs of the Work. Pray about the bad health some of us are experiencing. Pray for God's will in all things.

The effective prayer

James 5:16: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

The kind of prayers God hears are the ones in which He knows you are in deadly earnest. If you really want a personal relationship with God, of course you will be in earnest. The only way you are going to be in God's family is in a personal relationship that's that close to God.

Why don't you — you ought to — read the example of Elias' life sometime and find out what things he did and how his prayers were answered? They were answered because he was fervent in his prayers. He really meant them when he prayed.

"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession" (Hebrews 4:14). An integral part of our profession is prayer, though God calls you for other things as well: to give your time and your energies to His Work, to study His Word, your Bible, etc. Verses 15 and 16: "For we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly before the throne of grace" — How do you do that? You do that

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An Overlooked Key to Prayer

Requests for prayer run the gamut of human needs. Is prayer the only cure?

This article was contributed by Val Aspens, a senior correspondent in the Work's Personal Correspondence Department. The department handles mail addressed to Herbert W. Armstrong and provides personal answers to questions or topics not covered in other literature published by the Church.

Every day Herbert W. Armstrong receives dozens of letters from people requesting prayer. These requests run the gamut of human needs, such as healing a child dying from some dreaded disease, personal problems, employment needs, financial problems, marital troubles — even a few humorous ones such as prayer for Aunt Gertie's sick canary! Because Mr. Armstrong is obviously not able to personally read each letter and pray for each specific request, he is assisted in these very important duties by the Personal Correspondence Department.

We have the privilege of helping pray for, encourage and assist these people who need help. Along with joining them in prayer, we try to send appropriate information giving deeper insight on how God deals with us, why He allows various trials in our lives and inspiring hope for ultimate victory and deliverance.

Why problems not resolved

Very often we receive responses to our letters that are most gratifying, showing God does indeed answer prayer — with resounding power. There are also those who tell us the problem or need they were praying about has not been resolved. And they wonder why.

It is often difficult to know why a specific prayer has not been answered as yet. But there are general principles or keys all of us who pray or ask others to pray should consider. Mr. Armstrong has often mentioned that while we should commit our lives totally to God, we should also continue to work as though everything depends on us. This principle can apply to prayer as well.

We've noticed that too often people will pray and then sit back and do nothing to improve the situation themselves. In many cases we not only need to pray for God's deliverance, but also to ask Him to open our minds to how we can solve the problem. We've all heard of the principle of cause and effect. The problems, the trials, the financial predicaments are the

effects. When we pray we look to God to extricate us from these unwanted effects, but God in His wisdom may have something else in mind. He may want us to look at the causes and learn a few lessons in the process.

It's true that occasionally we may hit an impenetrable impasse, a virtual Red Sea, where there is absolutely nothing we can or should do except pray and expect God's deliverance in faith. But most of the time there are things we can and should do ourselves — learn why we have had troubles, repeat of mistakes and take action to overcome.

When we fall seriously ill, prayer and anointing are of course called for. But this should not be thought of as a spiritual aspirin — just getting rid of the effects. We should also try to find what caused our ailments so we can do whatever possible to prevent a recurrence. Whatever the cause, in most cases God sees in His infinite wisdom that there is something we can do to personally change or remove the cause so we needn't continue to suffer the effect.

If we have problems with the proverbial mother-in-law or our mate or the children have become uncontrollable teenage ruffians, prayer is likely not enough. We may need to seek counsel from God's ministers or competent professionals or read books pertaining to

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the specific problem. Or maybe it's a matter of trying to bridge the gap with honest, loving, caring communication.

Seek the solution

Many write heartrending letters telling us they're alone and lonely. Is prayer the cure? It helps but in many cases people should help themselves by becoming involved in helping and encouraging others. We've all heard the admonition to "visit the fatherless and

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widows in their affliction. . . . This applies to the lonely too. As people help others they literally help themselves. Helpful people are generally happy people.

Once again, God wants us to be actively involved in seeking the solution. He wants us to pray and, in addition, many times He expects us to do our share in working the problem out.

God wants us to use the trials and tribulations of this life not only to develop deep, abiding faith but also to develop resourcefulness, ingenuity and ability to solve problems. It is our destiny to be born into His Family

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where we will assist in judging angels and help solve problems of multiple thousands, whom God will put under our care. We should be training for that by working with God's blessing and help to solve and overcome some of our own problems today.

'Close Encounter'

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in prayer — "that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

None of us have had to face the kind of trial Jesus had to face. And maybe that's why His prayers were so fervent He literally sweated blood, out of His skin, out of His pores (Luke 22:44).

But that's the model we have and the example we need to follow.

Prepare for an encounter

There's going to be an encounter — perhaps of a fourth or a fifth kind — in the resurrection. And even if you are falling short, now is the time to be having a really personal relationship with God in preparation.

We are God's children. "And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:17).

That's all our goal. Beyond salvation, it means glorification with God. That's what we're fighting for. That's why we suffer — not necessarily because of sin, but because God puts suffering on us to teach us lessons, to help us see how much we need Him, and each other. How much we all need to be a team.

Therefore, said Paul, . . . I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). And across the page in verse 28: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose."