

# SENSE AND NONSENSE ABOUT PRAYER

LEHMAN STRAUSS



*Developed as a study course by Emmaus Correspondence School, founded in 1942.*

*Sense and Nonsense About Prayer*

Lehman Strauss (1911-1997)

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# STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

Have you ever listened to yourself pray? Did it ever occur to you to think through and analyze your prayers, to examine precisely what you are saying? This provocative course is designed to help us in the way we pray. We will come to see that prayer is a discipline of the Christian life that needs to be exercised according to biblical principles if it is to result in blessing.

As you study the following chapters, **think** about the subjects and **examine** the way you pray.

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## **Course Components**

This course has two parts: this study course and the exam booklet.

## **How To Study**

This study has twelve chapters, and each chapter has its own exam. Begin by asking God to help you understand the material. Read the chapter through at least twice, once to get a general idea of its contents and then again, slowly, looking up any Bible references given.

Begin studying immediately, or if you are in a group, as soon as the group begins. We suggest that you keep a regular schedule by trying to complete at least one chapter per week.

## **Exams**

In the exam booklet there is one exam for each chapter (exam 1 covers chapter 1 of the course). Do not answer the questions by what you think or have always believed. The questions are designed to find out if you understand the material given in the course.

After you have completed each chapter, review the related exam and see how well you know the answers. If you find that you are having difficulty answering the questions, review the material until you think you can answer the questions.

## **How Your Exams Are Graded**

Your instructor will mark any incorrectly answered questions. You will be referred back to the place in the course where the correct answer is to be found. After finishing this course with a passing average, you will be awarded a certificate.

If you enrolled in a class, submit your exam papers to the leader or secretary of the class who will send them for the entire group to the Correspondence School.

See the back of the exam booklet for more information on returning the exams for grading.

# 1

## SENSE OR NONSENSE?

Have you ever listened to yourself pray? Did it ever occur to you to think through and analyze your prayers, to examine precisely what you are saying? Do it sometime. Listen carefully the next time you or someone else is asked to pray. Then make notes. You might be convinced that those prayers did not make much of an impression on God.

Since 1963 I have been giving full time to an itinerant Bible conference ministry in churches, colleges, seminaries, and camps. I enjoy my work thoroughly, sometimes coming away spiritually refreshed in my own soul. But I returned from one conference that left me mighty low. It was attended by more than two thousand people at every service. All of the sessions were recorded on cassette tapes. I purchased the complete set of tapes, and frankly I find it hard to believe all that I am hearing.

For one thing, some of the prayers both amaze and amuse me. If some of the Christians who prayed were really talking to God, I cannot see how our heavenly Father could have been favorably impressed with their ability to hold an intelligent conversation. If one brother preaches the way he prayed, God pity his congregation. His words were dull, lifeless, at times theological and academic, but mostly incoherent. I thought to myself, *It must be a frustrating experience for God to listen to millions of prayers that say nothing, ask for nothing, and expect nothing.*

Right here, I am reminded of a story about an author who needed money and wired his publisher, “How much advance will you pay for my latest novel of fifty thousand words?”

The publisher wired back, “How important are the words?”

I like that! Some of the words that make up our prayers are not very important.

I must tell you about a good doctor who attended that conference to which I just referred. I met him for the first time over a cup of coffee between sessions. He seemed like a regular and normal kind of fellow. We returned to the auditorium for the next session, and as we entered the main hall, the chairman approached him, asking him to lead in prayer.

Well, he led all right, but to where, I will never be able to tell you. He had not uttered a dozen words before I was convinced that the man who had spoken to me at that coffee break was not the man who was praying. It was the sound of his voice that threw me off. He sounded as if he had developed a steeple in his throat, or as if he were talking through a stained-glass window. Now, I have never heard the voice of an angel, but he left me with the idea that he was trying to come through in angelic tones. It all sounded so unreal, so unlike the man himself.

Later that day, some of the men gathered around to talk about the session. I stood on the fringe of the group and listened to a bit of—shall I say—*gossip*. The discussion was about the brother's prayer. One of the men said he felt it was wrong to criticize another's "public prayer voice." I called a moratorium on that one and quietly slipped out of the room.

During a series of Bible studies in a southern city, a college professor was called upon to lead in prayer. The professor stood before the microphone, and what he said is here recorded, in part, word for word:

“God, You created the heaven and the earth. You created man, and You didn't do it by some evolutionary process. [*That bit of news must have been an eye-opener to God.*] And now, God, we thank You for sending the speaker. Bless the message of Dr. Strauss because we pray in his name. Amen.”

Ah, that one touched my heart.

A tragic plane crash resulted in the death of all persons aboard. I was at a conference in northern Pennsylvania at the time. The conference director called on a man to pray. He apparently wanted to pray for the families who

————— ❧ —————  
**Some of the  
words that make  
up our prayers  
are not very  
important.**  
————— ❧ —————

survived those who had died in the crash. Unable to recall the location of the crash, he said:

“Lord, bless that plane crash out there in—out there in—out there in—Well Lord, You know where it is; You must have read it in the morning newspaper.”

Sense or nonsense?

One of my favorite authors has written several books on prayer. In one of them, he has a chapter entitled, “Prayer Can Do Anything that God Can Do.” Now that might sound good, but does it really make sense? Apart from our Lord Jesus Christ, there never has been a praying man, nor is there a praying man alive today who, through prayer, can do anything that God can do. There are things God has done, and can repeat, but He has not repeated them and possibly never will. Moreover, there are things God can do but which He will not do, notwithstanding our much praying. Still, there are Christians who have adopted as their favorite saying, “Prayer can do anything that God can do.”

When I was in Pennsylvania, I was called to the bedside of a dying man eighty-nine years old. His body was full of cancer. It was a family dream that he might live to be a hundred years of age. A daughter asked me if I would pray and ask God to raise up her father and spare him for eleven years more. I told her that I had no leading to make such a request.

Some bitter resentment showed as she snapped back, “Sir, prayer can do anything God can do.” In her expressed opinion, I was not a man of prayer. Yet, neither she nor the other members of that family could produce through prayer the result she expected of me.

In my opinion, she was misled by someone’s nonsensical statement about prayer. Of course I believed that God was able to heal that old gentleman and keep him alive until he reached a hundred, but He did not do it. Nor did I have a sound reason to ask Him to do it.

Let Paul tell us why many of our prayers contain so little sense. He wrote, “The Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought” (Rom. 8:26).

Do you believe that statement? Will you admit that it is true in your own experience?

The text says *weaknesses*, but the word is in the singular in the original, and should read *weakness*.

In the midst of the turmoil, trials, and sufferings in this life, we are placed in a position of disadvantage which sometimes renders us ignorant when it comes time to pray. Under just such circumstances, Paul himself prayed ignorantly, three times, for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. But God had to say to him, “Paul, you are not praying right. You have asked me to do something I am not going to do.”

Concerning this experience, Paul wrote:

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Romans 8:26 tells us that we all have a weakness when it comes to the matter of praying. Whether this weakness is in the thing we request, in the phrasing of the request, or in the motive, makes no difference. “We do not know what we should pray for as we ought.”

The heathen philosopher Diogenes gave this as a reason why men ought *not* to pray. But he was wrong! Instead of our ignorance silencing

————— ❧ —————  
**We do not know  
how to pray,  
but the Holy Spirit  
wants to teach us.**  
————— ❧ —————

our prayers and leaving us in despair, we have the help we need in the person of the Holy Spirit, who serves in the role of advocate on our behalf (Rom. 8:26-27). We do not know how to pray, but the Holy Spirit wants to teach us. Without Him, we Christians are powerless in our praying.

In the pages which follow, we will examine some Scriptures on the subject of prayer. I am eager to cover only those things which will instruct and edify God’s children. If it is true that many mighty successes come to God’s cause through prayer, then we should be willing to learn all we can about this important subject.

*Lord, teach us to pray.*



# SENSE AND NONSENSE ABOUT PRAYER

## EXAM BOOKLET AK '10 (2 UNITS)

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STUDENT NAME (PLEASE PRINT)

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ADDRESS

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CITY, STATE, ZIP

COURSE GRADE: \_\_\_\_\_

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INSTRUCTOR



*Exam developed by Emmaus Correspondence School, founded in 1942.*

## A NOTE ON THE EXAMS

The exams are designed to check your knowledge of the course material and the Scriptures. After you have studied a chapter, review the exam questions for that lesson. If you have difficulty in answering the questions, re-read the material. If questions contain a Scripture reference, you may use your Bible to help you answer them. If your instructor has provided a single page Answer Sheet, record your answer on that sheet. This exam contains the following types of questions:

### **MULTIPLE CHOICE**

You will be asked to write in the letter of the correct answer at the space on the right. Here is an example:

The color of grass is

- A. blue                      C. yellow  
B. green                     D. orange

     **B**     

### **WHAT DO YOU SAY?**

Questions headed this way are designed to help you express your ideas and feelings. They will help you to apply the principles and concepts in this course. You may freely state your own opinions in answer to such questions.

### **RETURNING THE EXAM**

See the back of this exam booklet for instructions on returning your exam for grading.

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## CHAPTER 1 EXAM

### SENSE OR NONSENSE?

                      
EXAM GRADE

***Before starting this exam, write your name and address on the front of this Exam Booklet.***

*Directions: Read each question carefully and write the letter of the correct answer in the blank space on the right. Use the separate answer sheet if provided.*

1. It is profitable to \_\_\_\_\_ when we pray.
  - A. immediately forget what we say
  - B. analyze what we say
  - C. say whatever comes to our mind
  - D. recite a lot of religious phrases

\_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Sometimes our prayers
  - A. say nothing
  - B. ask for nothing
  - C. expect nothing
  - D. all of the above

\_\_\_\_\_
  
3. When we pray in public we should
  - A. put on a special voice for God
  - B. speak loudly so God can hear
  - C. speak in a normal voice
  - D. speak in an angelic voice

\_\_\_\_\_
  
4. The statement, "Prayer can do anything that God can do,"
  - A. is a false statement
  - B. is a true statement
  - C. makes a lot of sense
  - D. obligates God to do what we ask

\_\_\_\_\_
  
5. From Romans 8:26, we can infer that
  - A. correct praying comes automatically after we are saved
  - B. we do not need anyone's help in praying
  - C. a godly person will always know what to pray for
  - D. sometimes we don't know what or how to pray

\_\_\_\_\_

- 6. Paul prayed ignorantly three times for
  - A. the expansion of his missionary work
  - B. freedom from prison
  - C. the removal of his thorn in the flesh
  - D. a helper in his work\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 7. The Lord answered Paul's ignorant prayer by saying,
  - A. "Stop bothering me about this."
  - B. "My grace is sufficient for you."
  - C. "Because you want it so much, I'll do it."
  - D. "No! You are strong enough to handle this problem."\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 8. Because we have a weakness when it comes to praying, we should
  - A. let the Holy Spirit teach us
  - B. stop praying
  - C. just do the best we can
  - D. assume we can't pray\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 9. According to Romans 8:26-27, the Holy Spirit
  - A. speaks to God on our behalf
  - B. intercedes for us according to God's will
  - C. plays no role in our prayers
  - D. both A and B\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 10. It is most important that we
  - A. memorize all the Bible's prayers
  - B. be teachable about prayer
  - C. say exactly the right words when we pray
  - D. kneel when we pray\_\_\_\_\_

**WHAT DO YOU SAY?**

As you think about your own prayers, in what areas do you know you need to improve?

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