

## DOES GOD HEAR AND RESPOND TO THE PRAYER OF AN ALIEN SINNER?

Alden Bass, Bert Thompson, Ph.D., and Brad Harrub, Ph.D.

For millennia, men have discussed the issue of whether or not God hears—to respond to—the prayer of an alien sinner. Certainly there is no question that God “hears” all prayers. God is omniscient, and therefore hears and sees everything that transpires on Earth. The Scriptures affirm this repeatedly. The Proverbs writer observed: “For human ways are under the eyes of the Lord, and he examines all their paths” (5:21, NRSV). Jeremiah wrote in the book that bears his name: “‘Can any hide himself in secret places so that I shall not see him?’ saith Jehovah. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’” (23:24). The writer of the book of Hebrews commented: “And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (4:13).

There should be no doubt that God hears every prayer—in the sense that He is aware of the petitioner and his or her prayer. The crucial question then becomes: Does God **respond to** every prayer? Specifically, does God “act” based upon requests made by someone who is not a Christian? While responses to this question often are fueled by a great amount of passion and emotion, we must turn to the Scriptures for answers—for only after opinions and emotions have been laid aside can we open God’s Word and seek out the Truth. It is our hope that the following examination of this topic not only will clear up any confusion over this issue, but also will firmly establish a scriptural answer that may be used for teaching others.

The Old Testament is replete with examples of men who, with confidence and fear, lifted up their eyes toward heaven and approached God’s majestic throne in prayer. From these we learn that prayer is a special form of communication between man and our Almighty Creator. Through prayer, men can offer words of thanks, make petitions, and praise their Creator. As early as Genesis 4:26 we read: “Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord.” Prayers to God become commonplace throughout the remaining books—all the way through the book of Revelation. Today we observe prayers offered around dinner tables, before sporting events, and in the assemblies of religious organizations. However, not all of those prayers are consistent with the will of God. In contemplating God’s response to these prayers, we find that accountable individuals fall into one of three different categories.

First, there is the category composed of alien sinners. What exactly is an “alien sinner”? Who fits in this category? Is it just the tribesman on the other side of the world who never has heard of Jesus? No. Although those who never have heard the Gospel are alien sinners (see Estabrook and Thompson, 2001), they are not the only ones separated from the love of God. The phrase “alien sinners” describes those who are outside the body of Christ and who never have obeyed the will of God. The inspired writers of the New Testament placed great emphasis upon the necessity of being “in Christ.” In the American Standard Version of the Bible, the phrase “in Christ” appears 89 times in 88 verses. The new law that we currently are under makes

it crystal clear that it is only when a person is “in Christ” that he has “forgiveness” (Colossians 1:14), “redemption” (Romans 3:24), “salvation” (2 Timothy 2:10), “every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3), and “eternal life” (Romans 6:23). If a person is not “in Christ,” then he or she is “out of Christ” and thus in a lost state. Anyone who has reached the age of accountability, and who has not responded to God’s grace through faith by being **baptized into Christ** (which is the only way the Bible ever tells us we get into Christ and have our sins forgiven—Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-4; Acts 2:38; 22:16), remains “outside of Christ” and is an alien sinner. In Ephesians 2:11-12, the apostle Paul spoke of people in this particular category when he referred to those who “were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” These were the people who were alien sinners in the truest sense of the phrase. They were disobedient to the system of Patriarchal Law that they could have heeded, but did not; they were not amenable to (and thus could not obey) the Law of Moses (without becoming Jewish proselytes); and at the time in their lives of which Paul spoke, they had not had the Gospel message made available to them. They literally were without “hope and without God in the world.”

Whether a person never has heard of Jesus Christ, or whether he simply has heard of Him (possibly sitting Sunday after Sunday in a church building somewhere) but not obeyed Him, that person still is outside of Christ. According to the apostle Paul, any

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person who fits into either category is in a lost condition and will remain in such until he or she obeys the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). Therefore, when we use the words “alien sinner,” we are referring to one who never has been added to the Lord’s body (i.e., the church—Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18), either because he never has heard of it or because he never has obeyed the message that he has heard.

Second, there are those people who once obeyed the Gospel, but who since have “fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4) and become erring children of God. The writer of Hebrews spoke of such individuals:

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversaries. A man that hath set at nought Moses’ law dieth without compassion on the word of two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, think ye, shall he be judged worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (10:26-29).

These are those to whom the apostle Peter referred when he spoke of individuals who had “escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” yet had become “entangled therein [in the world] and overcome” (2 Peter 2:20).

Third, there is the category composed of those who are faithful children of God—i.e., Christians. They have “purified their souls in obedience to the truth” (1 Peter 1:22-23), have been “born again” (John 3:3), and continue to “walk in the light as He is in the light” (1 John 1:7). This last category consists of the faithful saved—those who are living in a right relationship with their heavenly Father. They have done **exactly** what God commanded them to do to be saved, in **exactly** the way God commanded that it be done (see Thompson, 1999, pp. 259-278), and thus they are “in Christ” (Romans 3:24). As Paul told Timothy: “Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Timothy 2:10, cf. also Romans 6:23 where Paul spoke of “the free gift of God [which] is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”). As a result of their relationship with God and His Son, those in this group have access to

all spiritual blessings—blessings found only “in Christ,” as Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” [NOTE: A fourth group of people would include those who are in a “safe” condition due to their mental inability to knowingly commit sin or hear, believe, and obey the Gospel (e.g., small children—Matthew 19:14). This group, however, is not germane to the current discussion.]

What do these three groups—representing people who find themselves in three different relationships to God—have to do with God responding to someone’s prayer? Or, to put it another way, of those individuals in the three groups mentioned above, to which one(s) has God said that He will respond as they pray?

The fact is, the Scriptures teach that people in two of these three groups not only possess the privilege of approaching the throne of God in prayer, but also have His personal guarantee that He will answer their prayer—if it is offered under the proper conditions and for the proper purpose. As we consider biblical examples of prayer to ascertain whether God will respond to a person’s prayer, it is crucial that we understand exactly what relationship the individuals in each of these groups share with God so that we, recognizing our own present relationship with Him, can know if He will respond to the petitions we bring before Him.

Certainly there can be no question whatever that God hears and answers the prayers of those who, as Christians, are His faithful, righteous children. James observed: “The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working” (5:16). Paul commanded the first-century Christians in Thessalonica: “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus to you-ward” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). It is indeed the “will of God” that the righteous “pray without ceasing.” Obviously, the apostle never would have commanded Christians to pray continuously if God did not hear (to respond to) their prayers.

The same principle—that God does indeed respond to the prayer of the righteous—can be found in the pages of the Old and New Testaments, both of which provide examples of righteous men and women who had their prayers answered (cf. Numbers 11:2; Judges 13:8-9; 1 Samuel 1; 1 Chronicles 4:10; Acts 4:24-31; James 5:17-18; et al.). The writer of Proverbs elucidated the principle

involved when he stated: “Jehovah...heareth the prayer of the righteous” (15:29). The psalmist asserted practically the same thing in Psalm 34:15: “The eyes of Jehovah are toward the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry.”

But what about those in the second group discussed above who, for whatever reason, have “fallen from grace”? Do they lose the privilege of having their prayers answered by God? Before answering this question, we must draw a legitimate distinction between those who have fallen away and diligently are striving once again to become servants of God, and those who have fallen away, gone back into the world, and are making no effort to return to God. Will God respond to a sinner who has fallen away and refuses to be obedient toward Him? No, He will not (cf. Isaiah 59:1-2). But what about those who have fallen away, yet desire to return by calling upon His name? This is where the phrase we used earlier—“under the proper conditions, and for the proper purpose”—becomes so important. In the statement that directly preceded James’ comment about the effect of the prayer of the righteous, he wrote: “Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (5:16). Our gracious God has provided a means by which a person who has fallen away may ask for forgiveness—i.e., the avenue of prayer offered on the part of the penitent.

One notable example in the Mosaic Age was King David, whom the Bible calls a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). David committed the grievous double sin of fornication and murder, but when Nathan the prophet exposed those sins, David fell to his knees in repentance, praying to God for forgiveness (2 Samuel 12:1-15). His beautiful, heart-rending prayer is recorded in Psalm 51. We read of a similar incident in Acts 8, shortly after the beginning of the Christian dispensation. Philip the evangelist had proclaimed the Gospel throughout the region of Samaria. A man named Simon (a sorcerer by trade) heard the good news proclaimed, was pricked in his heart, and was baptized, thereby becoming a Christian. Being a new convert and thus not yet well grounded in the Truth, Simon fell back into his worldly way of thinking. When his avarice (our English word “simony” refers back to his first-century greed) caused him to attempt to purchase the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit from the apostles, Peter rebuked him sternly, saying, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the

thought of thy heart shall be forgiven thee” (Acts 8:22). It thus becomes apparent from this divinely approved New Testament example that repentance/prayer is the prescribed manner by which an erring child of God is to deal with personal sin. God does hear and answer the prayer of a person who has gone astray and who wants to return to Him because the prayer is offered in accordance with His divine will.

Praying **according to God’s will** is a critically important point that bears close examination in this particular context. In 1 John 5:14-15, the inspired apostle wrote: “And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, **if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us:** and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him” (emp. added). There are certain things that God allows us to ask of Him that fall under the purview of His will. In addressing this point, the late Guy N. Woods wrote:

We can be assured that our prayers come within the area of his will when (1) we ask for those things which he has specifically stated he will give us, i.e., food, clothing, shelter, comfort in trial, wisdom to direct our steps, deliverance from the evil one and all the many other rich blessings his inspired word promises. Spiritual blessings he bestows by means of his Word; temporal blessings he gives us through the operation of his natural laws. He expects us to live within the sphere of his will, and we have no right nor reason to suppose that he will circumvent either.... (2) He also gives us the things which he sees are best for us, and we should always make our wills subservient to his in our petitions. Because of our weaknesses, our ignorance, oftentimes our stupidity, we are exceedingly poor judges of what is best for us; frequently, we ask for things which would not be conducive to our well-being to grant; and we should always be willing to acquiesce to his judgment in such matters. We should not desire to ask for things he does not want to grant. Many people, instead of petitioning God, order him to grant specific requests; and, when such requests are not immediately forthcoming, their faith in prayer fails them. Prayer, properly engaged in, is a humble request to God for blessings which we desire him to bestow if such bestowal is in harmony with his will. **We ought not to want him to give something which is not within the sphere of his will; and he will not anyway** (1976, p. 150, emp. in orig.).

Whenever we ask “under the proper conditions and for the proper purpose”—i.e., within the confines of God’s will—we have His pledge that our prayers will indeed be answered. Since He does not lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), we know that He will do what He has promised to do. As often is said (correctly), sometimes the answer is “yes,” sometimes it is “no,” and sometimes it is “wait a while.” But God has promised to hear and respond to the prayer of the righteous (and the wayward Christian, if the prayer is offered according to His will).

Now consider the alien sinner’s prayer. What do the Scriptures teach us about God’s response to the alien sinner? The Scriptures are explicit in their testimony that **God does not hear (to respond to) the prayer of alien sinners.** A litany of passages in the Old Testament confirms the idea that God **does** respond to the prayers of the righteous, but **does not** respond to the prayers of the wicked. Proverbs 15:29 declares: “Jehovah is far from the wicked; but he heareth the prayer of the righteous.” Psalm 66:18 further explains: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” The Proverbs writer also taught: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to Jehovah; but the prayer of the upright is his delight. The way of the wicked is an abomination to Jehovah; but he loveth him that followeth after righteousness” (15:8-9). David wrote: “The eyes of Jehovah are toward the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry. The face of Jehovah is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth” (Psalm 34:15-16). And Isaiah concluded: “Behold, Jehovah’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, so that he will not hear” (59:1-2).

Consider in this context the story found in John 9. During His travels, Jesus encountered a man who had been blind since birth. Having compassion on the poor fellow, Jesus healed him. After the former blind man left the presence of Jesus and His followers, he was brought before the Pharisees and interrogated. They reasoned that because Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath, He must have been a sinner. The blind man came to Jesus’ defense, however, and before this brood of vipers he presented a remarkable defense of the deity of Christ when he stated emphatically: “**We know that God heareth not sinners:** but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he hear-

eth” (John 9:31, emp. added). Simply put, his argument was as follows: (1) Only God could have worked such a remarkable miracle as giving sight to the blind; (2) God does not hear the petitions of sinners; (3) therefore, Jesus could not be a sinner, because He restored the man’s sight by the power of God. He thus concluded (correctly): “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (John 9:33).

This is a vitally important passage in the matter of whether God hears the prayers of alien sinners. There have been those, however, who, in an attempt to teach that the passage need not be taken at face value, have suggested that because the blind man was un-inspired, this passage cannot be used to establish that God will not hear the prayer of an alien sinner. In an effort to negate the obvious thrust of the verse’s instruction, they point out that quite frequently throughout the pages of Holy Writ the statements of un-inspired men are recorded, but are untrue (e.g., Satan’s lie to Eve in Genesis 3:4—“Ye shall not surely die”—as he tempted her to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). Jack P. Lewis once wrote in defense of this position:

“We know that God does not listen to sinners” (John 9:31), are the words of an un-inspired man. Though in a sense true, as we shall see, they should not be elevated into an infallible and universal principle in which a special definition is given to “sinner” solely to mean “one out of Christ” (1992, 134 [4]:54).

It is true, of course, that the Bible occasionally contains statements—even grossly erroneous statements—that are **recorded** by inspiration but not **spoken** by inspiration. Job’s rebellious complaint against God (23:2) and his preoccupation with what he viewed as the apparent injustice of God’s providential workings, both in his life (chapter 23) and in man’s world in general (chapter 24) are good examples. While recorded by inspiration, they were not spoken by inspiration.

But this argument does not apply to the statements made by the blind man. As one writer noted: “Though the blind man who uttered the statement of John 9:31 was not an inspired person, and thus, his affirmation **alone** would establish nothing about the matter, nonetheless, he did express a truth that is repeatedly taught elsewhere in the Bible” (Jackson, 1981, 17:31, emp. in orig.). Indeed, the blind man **did**, in fact, express a truth “repeatedly taught elsewhere in the Bible.” Notice specifically how he prefaced his words

by saying, “**We know...**” Of interest is the fact that there was not a one among all those religious leaders who attempted to correct, or who contradicted, his statement. Why is this the case? The simple fact is that to the Pharisees, who were well trained in the Law, the blind man’s affirmation was a well-established fact. The Old Testament passages mentioned earlier (e.g., Psalm 34:15; Proverbs 15: 29, et al.) confirmed the truthfulness of his declaration. Plus, the Pharisees were not unfamiliar with statements such as those found in Job 27:7-10: “Let mine enemy be as the wicked, and let him that riseth up against me be as the unrighteous. For what is the hope of the godless, though he get him gain, when God taketh away his soul? Will God hear his cry, when trouble cometh upon him?” The fact of the

*Jesus said: “I  
am the way,  
the truth, and  
the life; no one  
cometh to the  
Father but by me”  
(John 14:6).*

matter is that the blind man, although admittedly un-inspired, echoed a spiritual truth that the Pharisees were unable to refute—an eternal truth that he ultimately used in his able defense of Christ’s deity (much to the chagrin of the Pharisees, who could not deter the man from his course or successfully counter his sound argumentation).

It is clear that God will not respond to the requests of the wicked. But does the same principle still apply today? Yes, it does, as Peter confirmed when he wrote: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:12, NRSV). Will God respond to the prayers of alien sinners for forgiveness of sins or other spiritual blessings? Guy N. Woods asked and answered a similar question.

Will God hear and answer an alien sinner’s prayer for what? Forgiveness? Sonship? Eternal life? No. These blessings, and all others needed by an alien sinner (one who has never obeyed the gospel), are promised on conditions other than prayer (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:3-4; 10:9-10). Forgiveness is available only in Christ (Eph. 1:7; II Tim. 2:10; II Cor. 5:17; Gal. 3:26-27). To be “in Christ,” one must have believed the gospel, have repented, have confessed faith in Christ, and have been baptized. Prayer does not put one into Christ. One becomes a member of the family of God by being “born again” (John 3:3-5). The “new birth” is the equivalent of being saved; and is obtained by being born of water and the Spirit. Since things equal to the same thing are equal to each other, it follows that to be born of water and the Spirit is to obey the gospel (James 4:3; Prov. 28:9). Every blessing needed by an alien sinner is obtained on specified conditions, not including prayer. In no instance, in the Scriptures, is an alien sinner promised salvation on the condition of prayer (1976, p. 312).

Jackson continued this line of thought when he wrote: “Nowhere in the NT is the alien sinner authorized to pray for forgiveness of his sins; nowhere is he promised that God will answer his petition requesting the remission of his sins” (1981, 17:31).

Again, we ask, for what should an alien sinner pray?

1. That God would give him faith? No, faith comes via hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17).
2. For enlightenment? No, God does that through His Word (Psalm 119:130).
3. For wisdom? No, it is the Scriptures that make us wise (2 Timothy 3:14ff.).
4. To ask God to beget him life? No, life comes from the Word of God (1 Peter 1:23).
5. To be converted? No, the law of Jehovah accomplishes this (Psalm 19:7).
6. To be sanctified? No, the Truth does that through the Word of God (John 17:17).
7. That his eyes be opened? No, the commands of the Lord perform that task (Psalm 19:8).
8. For understanding? No, understanding comes from the Word of God (Psalm 119:130).
9. For salvation? No, the Word offers knowledge of what one must do to be saved (James 1:21).

10. For purification? No, the Word purifies (1 Peter 1:22).
11. For cleansing? No, the words of Christ accomplish that (John 15:3).

For what, then, should the alien sinner pray? Unfortunately, today those who never have obeyed the Gospel often are taught simply to “pray and ask Jesus to come into their hearts” so they might be saved from their sins. This teaching, although quite widespread, is completely at odds with the Bible’s specific instructions regarding what one must do to be saved (see Thompson, 1999, pp. 33-51). In fact, in numerous sermons, books, and tracts within the religious world at large, it is not uncommon to hear or read what commonly is referred to as the “sinner’s prayer.” Those who believe in it frequently suggest something like this.

Accept Christ into your heart through prayer and he’ll receive you. It doesn’t matter what church you belong to or if you ever do good works. You’ll be born again at the moment you receive Christ. He’s at the door knocking.... Just trust Christ as Savior. God loves you and forgives you unconditionally. Anyone out there can be saved if they accept Christ, now! Let’s pray for Christ to now come into your heart (see Staton, 2001).

And the prayer the alien sinner is urged to pray frequently goes something like this:

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for

forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be (see McDowell, 1999, p. 759).

Where, exactly, in the Scriptures does it teach that, in order to be saved, one should “pray to ask Jesus to come into his heart”? Through the years, we have asked many within various religious groups this important question. But we have yet to find anyone who could provide a single biblical reference to substantiate such a claim. The salvation that Jesus freely gives is not conditioned on prayer; rather, it is conditioned on the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Truth be told, the alien sinner can pray for salvation as long and hard as he wants, but that prayer will not result in such. God has stated—in plain, easy-to-understand language—exactly what the alien sinner must do to be forgiven. And that cannot be accomplished through prayer. It is fruitless for the alien sinner to pray to God to “send Jesus into his heart.” God will not respond to such a request, and, additionally, salvation is not accomplished via prayer.

Some in the religious world today appeal (erroneously) to Luke 18:9-14—commonly known as the parable of the Pharisee and the publican—to support their idea that God hears the prayer of the alien sinner. In this situation, the Lord contrasted the attitudes of two men—one a self-righteous religious leader (a Pharisee), and the other a humble tax collector (a publican). The Pharisee stood up in a prominent area of the temple sanctuary and loudly thanked God that he was

not like other men, announcing his “righteous” deeds and attributes. Conversely, the publican, standing afar off, humbly asked God to be merciful to him, a sinner. As Christ finished the parable, He explained to the disciples that it was the lowly publican who went away justified, not the Pharisee. Those who advocate the “sinner’s prayer” or the “mourner’s bench” as the way to heaven sometimes use this text to suggest that God will hear and forgive an alien sinner. But when they do so, they overlook the publican’s relationship to God. Obviously this man was a Jew—one of God’s chosen people (the story takes place in an area, the temple sanctuary, where Gentiles were not allowed). As a Jewish man under the Old Covenant, this man was considered a child of God. He was a child in sin, but one of God’s own nonetheless. Additionally, this humble publican did not pray to God for salvation; rather, he, like King David before him, prayed for forgiveness—something that, as a Jew, he had every right to do, just as David had done many years earlier (and just as those today who have fallen away but seek to return have the right to do). This parable cannot be used to justify the so-called “sinner’s prayer.”

Others attempt to defend the position that forgiveness can be given through prayer by turning to the conversion stories in the Bible such as Cornelius in Acts 10 or Saul in Acts 9. Are these stories proof that God does, in fact, respond to the prayer of an alien sinner? As we look closely at these examples, we will see that not only are they not proof of such a position, but actually establish just the opposite.

Let us begin this investigation with a look at the conversion of Cornelius. And as we do, let us state plainly that God **did** hear Cornelius’ prayer. As the angel said to him on the Lord’s behalf: “Thy prayers and thine alms are gone up for a memorial before God” (Acts 10:3-4). Did God hear the centurion’s prayer? Yes, he did. But was Cornelius an alien sinner when God heard his prayer? No, he was not. Consider the following.

First, note specifically the words Luke used to describe Cornelius. “Now there was a certain man in Caesarea, Cornelius by name, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, a **devout** man, and one that feared God with all his house” (Acts 10:1-2, emp. added). How could Cornelius be described as devout if he were an alien sinner? Note further that when the three servants Cornelius had sent to Peter arrived,



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Peter went down to the men, and said, "Behold, I am he whom ye seek: what is the cause wherefore ye are come?" And they said, "Cornelius a centurion, a **righteous** man and one that feareth God, and well reported of by all the nation of the Jews, was warned of God by a holy angel to send for thee into his house, and to hear words from thee" (Acts 10:21-22, emp. added).

This is the picture of a sincere, godly, devout, righteous man. The Scriptures **never** refer to an alien sinner as "devout" or "righteous." And therein lies the solution to the problem of Cornelius' answered prayers. Woods explained the solution to this seeming conundrum when he wrote:

It is interesting and important, in this connection, to inquire as to the nature and identification of the law under which Cornelius, the Centurion, was worshipping God. (1) It was not Christianity; for, he had not thus far obeyed the gospel. (2) It was not Judaism, because he was neither a Jew nor a proselyte to the Jewish religion, being an uncircumcised Gentile. There has been but one other law, through the ages, under which God accepted worship: Patriarchy. (3) It follows, therefore, that Cornelius was worshipping God under a system which had continued since Eden—the patriarchal arrangement. We should recall that the Law of Moses was given only to the descendants of Jacob—Israel—and to those Gentiles who suffered themselves to be proselyted—by circumcision—to it (Deut. 5:2; Acts 2:10; 13:43). Inasmuch as Cornelius was neither a Jew nor a proselyte, it follows that he was worshipping God under the patriarchal system obtaining from the beginning. It had, indeed, been in the divine purpose to make of the two—Jew and Gentile—"one new man" (Eph. 2:14-18), but the attitude of Jews toward Gentiles had thwarted that plan, until the events of Acts 10 (1976, p. 63).

Michael Hatcher added:

The application of what Jesus did was not seen for the Gentile until Cornelius (Acts 10). During that time (between Christ's death and Cornelius), if a person was faithful to the Law of God given through the fathers (Patriarchal Law), then he would have been in a right relation with God and thus have the right to pray. This is the condition [in which] we find Cornelius. He was in a right relation with God, having the right to pray, because he remained faithful to the Patriarchal Law. Now the Law of Christ was coming into effect for the

Gentile, and he needed to hear the Word of Christ and obey it to be saved.... [Cornelius] was not a Christian, but he was in a right relation to God (a child of God) by being faithful to the law to which he was subject: the Patriarchal Law, until the Law of Christ became applicable to him. He then had to obey the gospel and become a Christian (2000, pp. 317,318, parenthetical items in orig.).

Second, note that in this situation we see a man who **had been living** [notice the past tense] in a right relationship with God and who was seeking to do His will in everything. Yet during Cornelius' lifetime came the dawn of a new era—a time when men would have to call on the Lord Jesus (Acts 22:16) in obedience to be saved. Cornelius' prayer, therefore,

*The Scriptures are  
explicit in their  
testimony that  
God does not hear  
(to respond to)  
the prayer of an  
alien sinner.*

was not the prayer of an alien sinner, but of one living righteously under Patriarchal Law. If Cornelius had not been worshipping under patriarchy, then one of the following conditions must apply: (1) Gentiles were members of and could participate in the Jewish covenant; or (2) there was no salvation of any kind for the untold multitudes of people who died outside of Judaism and before the events of Acts 10—regardless of how much of God's moral law was written on their hearts and exhibited in their lives. We know from both sacred and profane history that non-proselytized Gentiles were unable to participate in the Jewish covenant. We also know that God would not (and did not!) abandon millions of people to a life without hope of salvation just because they were outside the Law of Moses, since that would make Him a respecter of persons—something Peter stated very plainly He is not (Acts 10:34).

When Paul spoke in Ephesians 2:12 of certain Gentiles who in the past had no hope and were "without God in the world," he did not imply that they were in that position simply because they were Gentiles, but because they were Gentiles who had not been obedient to the particular law they had been given. We know that Gentiles were, in fact, amenable to a law system that was not the Law of Moses, as Paul made clear in Romans 2:12-16 when he wrote:

For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without the law: and as many as have sinned under the law shall be judged by the law; for not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified: (for when Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these, not having the law, are the law unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them).

Cornelius was not an alien sinner but a "devout" and "righteous" follower of God who had been worshipping God acceptably under the only law system available to him at the time—Patriarchal Law. The case of Cornelius cannot be used to establish that God hears the prayer of an alien sinner. [Note carefully in this context that no one today falls into the category in which Cornelius found himself, since everyone now is amenable to the Gospel—Acts 17:30.]

Still others believe that events surrounding the conversion of Saul prove that God hears and answers the prayers of alien sinners. Saul saw a light from heaven while traveling on the road to Damascus. The resurrected Lord, Whom he had been persecuting, spoke to him and told him to go into the city where he would find assistance. Struck with blindness, Saul waited in darkness for three days until Ananias came to teach him "the Way" more perfectly. During that waiting period, Saul prayed (Acts 9:11). It was perfectly natural for Saul—a Jew both by nationality and by faith—to pray in times of distress. The old ways of Judaism were over, of course (having been nailed to the Cross—Colossians 2:14), and the Gospel age had arrived. But Saul—at that point in his life—was still worshipping as a Jew. Thus, he prayed—which he had every right to do as a child of God living under the Law of Moses. Did God hear Saul's prayer and know he was praying? Yes! Did He respond to it? There is no proof that He did. In fact, as we pointed out earlier, when Ananias, a Gospel preacher, contacted Saul, he immediately instructed him regarding

what he should do: "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). The case of Saul certainly does not prove that God hears an alien sinner's prayer.

The Gentiles had Patriarchal Law, through which they could send prayers before their heavenly Father. And the Jews had the Law of Moses, by which they could offer up prayers to the throne of Heaven. But with the advent of the new law that came through Christ, both laws were abolished and the new mandate for prayer was that it come through Christ. This makes perfect sense, in light of other considerations involved in this study. Christ taught quite explicitly: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one cometh to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). As Woods noted:

Our Lord does not intercede with the Father at the throne of God for alien sinners. "Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). To draw near to God is to come to him in humble and unquestioning obedience to his commands (1976, p. 312).

Christ is the only way to the Father. The alien sinner is restricted from approaching God on his own, and, as an alien sinner, has no advocate to do so on his behalf. Yet if God responded to the prayers of alien sinners for forgiveness of their sins, then Christ would be placed in the position of making intercession for them as well. When He stated that "no man cometh to the Father but by me," He eliminated any possibility of an alien sinner having his prayer for remission of sins answered by God.

That privilege of approaching the throne of Almighty God is one of the greatest benefits afforded the faithful Christian (or the wayward Christian who is desirous of returning to his first love), for it is through prayer that we gain access to God. Without a mediator, our prayers will go unanswered. Matthew 7:11 informs us that God is indeed the hearer and answerer of prayer; however, we still are in need of someone to present our petitions to Him on our behalf. Paul, in writing to Timothy, left no doubt as to Who that Mediator is when he wrote: "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:3-5). Jesus, while He walked this Earth, instructed men: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, if ye shall ask anything of the Father, he will give it you in my name. Hitherto have ye asked

nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be made full" (John 16:23-24). Therefore, it is **only through the name of Jesus** that we make our requests known. In whose name would alien sinners offer up their petitions since they are not "in Christ?"

Does this then mean that someone who is searching diligently for God and calls on His name will not find Him? Can the alien sinner find and obey the Truth, independently of prayer? Yes, he certainly can. In addressing this point, Wayne Jackson wrote:

[I]f an alien sinner was sincerely seeking to know and to do the will of God, and was praying that somehow he might come in contact with the truth so that he could ascertain the Lord's will relative to being saved, it is surely possible that God, consistent with His **providential means**, could work matters out where that individual would be exposed to the preaching of the gospel (1981, 17:31-32, emp. in orig.).

God, through His divine providence, has provided a means for the alien sinner to be assured of understanding what that will is. God's pledge throughout all time has been, and remains: "I love them that love me; and those that seek me diligently shall find me" (Proverbs 8:17). God, through His marvelous providence, can (and does) lead the open and searching heart to someone who is able to teach them the Gospel (cf. Acts 8:26-40 and 16:6-10). Jesus Himself stated: "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). But this does not imply that He hears (to respond to) the prayer of the one lost in sin. He already has set in motion—through that providence—the means by which a diligent, probing soul can find the Truth. Those who are earnest in their desire to do God's bidding **will** be successful in their endeavor to locate God and to learn what His will and way is for their lives. That was/is Heaven's promise. But it is important to recognize that nowhere in Scripture is the alien sinner's success in finding/obeying God predicated on prayer. Therefore we should strive diligently to establish a correct relationship with God by being obedient to His will so that our prayers not only will be heard, but also will be answered.

As the old song says, "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!" With such a marvelous opportunity at our disposal, we should seek to do everything in our power to remain in a proper relationship with God so that we can sustain our communion with the heavenly Father and "pray without ceasing."

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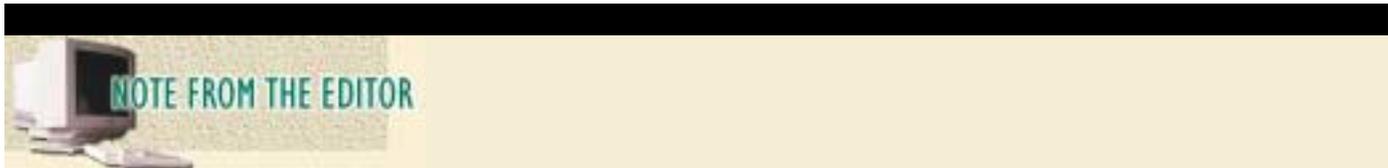
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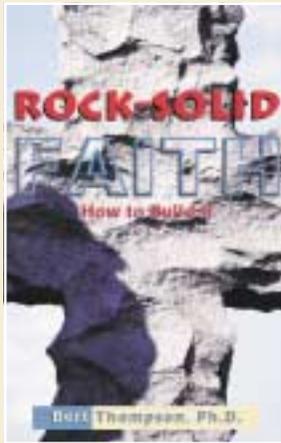


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Many of our readers have a more-than-average interest in products that can be used to build and defend faith in God, His Word, and His Son. From time to time, therefore, I like to mention in my “Note from the Editor” publications from Apologetics Press that are tools meant specifically for building and defending faith.

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