

What is it We Expect When We Pray?

"In the ancient world," said the teacher, "there was born a Jewish child to an affluent family. His parents gave him two names. The one name could be translated as 'small' but comes from a root word meaning to pause, to desist, or to stop. His other name came from a root word that meant to ask, to seek, or to inquire. As the child grew, he rarely paused or desisted from anything. Nor was he one to question his course. He was headstrong. But one day all that would change. He finally paused before a blinding light that caused him to fall to the ground."

-- Johathan Cahn, *Book of Mysteries*, Day 105

"[My fellow Jews] have known about [me] from the start, if they are willing to testify, that I have lived my life as a pharisee, the strictest party of our religion. But now I am standing trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors."

-- Saint Paul, Acts of the Apostles 26:5-6

I am sure that all Christians who have at least a minimal understanding of the Bible know how Saul, a zealous murderer of the first Christians, was converted after having been blinded by a light on the road to Damascus and spoke to Jesus while this happened. He not only converted, but became the most successful evangelist in Christian history. This story is told several times in the Acts of the Apostles, including the rest of chapter 26, from which my opening scripture was taken. And the impact of his conversion cannot be overstated. Thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament were written by him. Of the remaining fourteen, the letter to the Hebrews was written by his disciples, who were clearly faithful to the teachings he gave them. Furthermore, his disciple Luke accounted for one of the four gospels, as well as the Acts of the Apostles (half of which is about Saint Paul). It is therefore believed that the gospel Paul preached is faithfully contained therein. So Saint Paul's message is found in sixteen of the twenty-seven New Testament books! The Bible without Saint Paul is not the Bible, it is the Torah come to fruition.

Virtually all Christian churches, regardless if they are in communion with the Pope or not, look to Saint Paul on how to organize and run a church. So influential is Saint Paul that I often get the impression that many Christians are more interested in what Saint Paul has to say than in what Jesus says! And this is not just my observation, as this disturbing tendency was apparently taking place in Saint Paul's time as well -- "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13) Even the greatest critics of Saint Paul (which include Thomas Jefferson, Leo Tolstoy, and Muslims) recognize his influence, claiming Christianity was great before Saint Paul corrupted it. But despite the influence Saint Paul has on the Christian faith, I wonder how many people have taken the time to notice the irony of Saint Paul's conversion? I often read and hear explanations that suggest the necessity of it. A common example is that if Saul, the worst of sinners ("Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of these, I am the foremost" 1 Timothy 1:15) could be saved, then we all have hope for salvation. I agree that this is an important aspect of his story, although it is technically opposed to his own teachings. Saint Paul never took his own salvation for granted ("No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." 1 Corinthians 9:27). But if Jesus really did sacrifice Himself for us, then truly even the worst of us can have hope. But how often do people consider the question of *why* Saul was so horrible? Is it because his story reminds us of ourselves? Do his actions "hit a little too close to home," as they say? True,

few, if any of us, go around and imprison or kill as many skeptics as we can get away with, but that's only a minor detail (we don't want to be arrested for committing murder). Saul was not persecuting Christians because he *hated* God, he was persecuting them because he *loved* God.

Saul believed the early church was a blasphemy to Yahweh, and by the law God commanded (Leviticus 24:16), blasphemers were to be put to death. Of course, I don't know the thoughts of Saul other than what he revealed as Saint Paul, but there is simply no question that he was being obedient to God. Yet, at the same time, something was wrong, horribly wrong.

We learn from his own testimony (Acts 22:3) that he studied under Gamaliel. This is important, because Gamaliel was the premier teacher of his time. Saul was most likely one of the most outstanding young men of the time. As a naturalized Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28), coupled with the common Jewish belief that God rewarded the faithful with wealth and power, it would be foolish to suggest that he and his allies would not have had political aspirations. He could have been a candidate that would have been pleasing to both the Jews and the Romans. This gives credence to a theory that his hunting of Christians was politically motivated, as he could then claim to be a contemporary version of the great defender of the Jewish faith, Judas Maccabee. Sadly, protestants took the Books of Maccabees out of their Bibles, but for those curious, I suggest getting a Catholic Bible and reading these two books to see how closely Saul's story would have paralleled Judas and his children. But all this speculation on Saul's motivations still doesn't tell us what went wrong. There is nothing wrong with dreams of greatness, especially with the Jewish understanding of Earthly rewards for faithfulness. Furthermore, there is nothing wrong with defending one's faith from blasphemers, nor in obeying God's command on how to deal with blasphemers.

No, what went wrong is so simple and obvious that it is easily overlooked. Saul was faithful to the *idea* of Judaism, not to Judaism itself. While not worded that way, he freely admits this himself in his defense in Acts 26:9 -- "I myself thought that I had to do many things against the name of Jesus the Nazarean." Judaism came from the one true God. Judaism was what Saul studied throughout his whole life, and under the best teachers. Judaism was that for which no sacrifice was too great for Saul to make. And *that* is what went wrong. Judaism became Saul's god, not Yahweh. And when Judaism became his god, then Judaism, like all false gods, ceased to be a living thing. Judaism said to expect a messiah, but since Judaism was no longer a dynamic, living thing, then Judaism would *always* expect a messiah. By forever expecting a messiah, and not allowing for this expectation to be met, any claim to messiah-ship must always be a blasphemy. And as blasphemy meant death, then death was to be dealt out. When Judaism became a god instead of a relationship with God, then logically what followed was predictable and inescapable.

Of course, the gospels and Acts of the Apostles have multitudes of other Pharisees doing exactly this, yet only Saul is shown to turn away. Nicodemus apparently rode the fence, and his final conversion is only shown at the burial of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea was a convert, and the same Gamaliel who taught Saul played the agnostic over the matter (Acts 5:34-39). What made Saul different, other than his unparalleled success among the other Jews that also converted? I think the answer is so clear that we overlook it. And it's the answer Saint Paul himself gives us. Saul finally realized that everything he believed in, hoped for, and sacrificed for, was finally realized. This is what really made him Saint Paul. Of all those who persecuted the early Church, Saul finally accepted the idea that God actually does answer prayers and keeps His promises (at which point he becomes Saint Paul). Saul was fortunate enough to see the prayer of all prayers answered, and the promise of all promises kept, but it was Saint Paul that accepted these obvious truths.

How much are we like the Pharisees of the time of Jesus and the early Church? This is not as flippant as it sounds, nor is it all bad. As Christians, we are part of the body of Christ. Therefore, we share in the priestly aspect of Jesus. As Jesus was Jewish, we are also all Jewish, by adoption if not by blood. This also gives us a claim to the priesthood ("You shall be to me a kingdom of priests." Exodus 19:6). And between the Pharisees and the Sadducees (the two most important priestly orders of Jesus' time), it was the Pharisees who were more spiritual. Much of what they believed in is found in Christianity -- angels, demons, Heaven, Hell, resurrection and prayer were beliefs the Pharisees supported, not the Sadducees. Pharisees were also missionary, leaving the temple and going to where the people were, preaching and providing spiritual guidance in local synagogues. It was the Sadducees who remained in the Temple, and demanded the people come to them. Christian priests, ministers and missionaries all follow the pharisee model rather closely. But all similarities aside, I'm sure many Christians still resent being called a Pharisee, mainly because they do not want to be associated with those called "hypocrites" by Jesus, nor with those who caused the persecution and execution of Jesus and His followers.

While it is true that most Christians would not resort to an obvious and blatant denial of Jesus, do we not act like the Pharisees in more subtle ways? Do we not reject Jesus and his teachings, or at least pervert them to suit our lifestyles? This is a big question, so for this paper I will limit it to prayer only. For an analogy, I would like to present an image of a farmer in a big field. He is leaning up against a shovel and saying a prayer for a hole to be dug. We know *what* he is praying for: a hole. But what is his *expectation* of the prayer? Does he expect the soil to suddenly disappear (much like when God killed Dathan and Abiram in Numbers 16:25-35), or does he expect God to give him the strength and endurance to dig the hole himself? When Saul and the other Pharisees prayed for a savior, they apparently thought God would do all the work concerning the Romans; all they had to do was make the Jewish people worthy of such help. This included, in part, executing blasphemers. Saint Paul came to realize that *he* had to challenge the Romans, using the gifts God gave him to do so. While I can't say that God will never make the hole simply happen for the farmer, I would suggest that most farmers, no matter how worthy, will have to either dig the hole using the gifts God gave them, or do without.

Most Christians pray a lot! We need to occasionally ask ourselves what a given prayer is for, and how do we expect the prayer to be answered. Do we pray for the school board to do a better job in teaching our children, yet keep voting poorly performing members back into their positions? Are we expecting that God will change the incumbent's attitude, or are we expecting wisdom to be granted to us so we can make a good choice at the next election? Perhaps we are expecting fortitude enough to encourage our friends to vote against the popular candidate. Of course, this example can be extended to any elected official, and for any social concern we have.

Do we pray for our children to grow up with solid Christian values? What are we expecting? That God will show them the way, perhaps through dreams? Or are we expecting God's help to be a good role model for them? Are we expecting an hour or so each week for religious education classes, or are we expecting wisdom when having serious conversations with them on what it means to be a Christian?

Do we pray for our children to be self-sufficient? What are we expecting from this prayer? That God will let them have good grades in school and to make a good impression with a possible employer? Or are we expecting us to have the fortitude to discipline them when they misbehave, and to watch them suffer so they can learn the consequences of making bad decisions over small matters?

Do we pray our children will be respectful, law-abiding citizens? What are we expecting from

this prayer? That God will "not subject [them] to the final test?" (Matthew 6:13 and Luke 11:4) Or are we expecting to gain obedience on our part, to vote regardless how bad the weather is that day, to serve jury duty when called, and to turn off professional sports when athletes refuse to respect the national anthem?

Do we pray for a safe neighborhood? What are we expecting from this prayer? That God will lead troublemakers to another neighborhood? Or are we expecting courage to publicly defend the police against the growing animosity towards them in this country?

I could obviously continue on and on, but I hope my point has been made. And it is *not* my intent to suggest we should never pray for God to personally change a circumstance. There are many examples where one is truly helpless, and prayer is the only recourse available. Most obviously, the fate of a beloved's soul is in God's hands alone, but there are many Earthly examples as well. Anyone can have cancer, and the common person has little chance to help in the matter outside of prayer. But while such cases are commonplace, more so are situations where we can do more than merely pray. It really comes down to whether we simply believe prayer alone is the answer, or if we are prepared to be part of God's answer to the prayer. Saul and the rest of the Pharisees were very prayerful in their lives, but it was Saint Paul who allowed himself to be part of the answer to the prayers. All too often, we want God to do all the work while we sit back and enjoy the show. But while God can do that, He rarely works that way. The farmer can pray all he likes, but in almost all cases he will have to allow himself to be part of the answer to the prayer. More often than we like to admit, we are faced with the choice to either be like Saul and expect God to answer the prayer, or to be like Saint Paul and to let ourselves be part of the answer.

"And what happened," asked the teacher, "right after he paused? God said to him, 'Saul! Saul!' In Hebrew, that's like saying 'Ask! Ask!' And what did Paul do? He finally asked the question: 'Who are You, Lord?' ... For the first time in his life, he realized that he didn't even know who God was. ... And his question was answered with the words, 'I am Yeshua, Jesus.' ... He would [finally] become what he was born to become."
--Jonathan Cahn, *Book of Mysteries*, Day 105

Pray as if everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.
--Saint Augustine

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