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BIBLICAL WAY OF PRAYER

Centuries ago Paul, a great man of God, wrote thus about prayer: "... we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). Yes, man left to himself is incapable of praying properly. But if he is assisted by God's Spirit, he can look up to God and call him "Abba!", "Father!", and thus engage himself in authentic prayer.¹ The Bible being a sacred book inspired by the Spirit of God, offers many ways of prayer and thus teaches us how to pray. In this context, a study of these biblical ways of prayer is of great importance, and hence the scope of this article. Since the limited space of this article does not permit us to examine elaborately all the instances of prayer found in the Bible, which would indeed be too vast, in this short essay we confine ourselves to certain areas of the Bible, the analysis of which would give invaluable knowledge about the biblical way of prayer.

The Way Abraham the Patriarch Prayed

In the Pentateuch, prayer is viewed as man's encounter with God. In this encounter man's involvement lies in listening to God rather than in speaking to him. This listening, in fact, leads him to act as God directs him. Such a praying man can be discovered in the figure of Abraham as portrayed by the book of Genesis. The story of Abraham begins with the statement: "Yahweh said to Abraham, 'Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who slight you. All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you'" (Gen 12:1-3). Here we find that Abraham just listens to God and obediently acts according to the demands of the word of God.²

1. Cf. Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6

2. Cf. Gen 12:4-5

For Abraham prayer was an act of invoking God's name and thus encountering Him in worship. This is evident from the account that Abraham built altars to Yahweh at several places and invoked His name. When God appeared to Abraham and said: "It is to your descendants that I will give this land", Abraham built there an altar to God; he built yet another altar when he moved to the mountainous district east of Bethel and invoked the name of Yahweh.³ After Lot had parted company with him, Abraham again experienced a divine encounter in which God did the speaking and he just listened and at the end responded to Him by building an altar to Him.⁴

Vision of a Consoling God in Prayer

Abraham later had another prayer-encounter with God, and this was in a vision.⁵ In this prayer, Abraham was both listening to and speaking to God. The subject-matter of this conversation was related to the personal affairs of Abraham. When God spoke to Abraham saying: "Have no fear, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward will be great" (Gen 15:1), Abraham listened to God's word, and after a moment of reflection he replied to God pouring out before Him all his distresses. He said: "My Lord Yahweh, what do you intend to give me? I go childless. See, you have given me no descendants; some man of my household will be my heir" (Gen 15:2-3). Then God assured Abraham "He shall not be your heir; your heir shall be your own flesh and blood" (Gen 15:4). Here Abraham encountered a God of compassion who came down to console him just as a father consoles his weeping child. So God took him outside and said: "Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants" (Gen 15:5). Abraham thus realized in prayer the tender love of his God. This experience led him to surrender himself to God and put his trust in Him, believing in the unbelievable that he will have a son in his old age when his wife Sarah was already ninety years old. God then confirmed his promise by making a covenant with Abraham.⁶ As this episode shows, prayer is a personal encounter with God in which man comes to experience the tender love of God, and this experience helps

3. Cf. Gen 12:7-9

4. Cf. Gen 2:14-18

5. Cf. Gen 15:1ff.

6. Cf. Gen 15:7-21

man to rise from the natural level of distress and darkness into the supernatural realm of hope.

Prayer Leading to See God in Men

The growth of Abraham's prayer-life is very well delineated in the book of Genesis ch.18. If Abraham so far was encountering God only in visions, he now begins to meet God in the form of men. As he was sitting by the entrance of his tent at the oak of Mamre during the hottest part of the day, "He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him" (Gen 18:1-2). At first Abraham saw them only as three men. Their superhuman character is only gradually revealed.⁷ However, as soon as he saw them, Abraham offered them his generous hospitality.⁸ This led him to receive the wonderful divine blessing and promise of a son in his old age.⁹ This passage in the Bible shows that whatever good one does to men is in fact done to God, and that God will reward him without measure. As one grows up in prayer life, he should be able to meet God in his encounter with his ordinary fellow-human beings in his day-to-day life.

Altruistic Love: the Effect of Prayer

One of the effects of a true prayer-life is that the praying man becomes more and more altruistic in his thinking and actions. That is why when Abraham saw three men on a journey, he thought of their need of rest and food. Thus the praying man will slowly grow out of his self-centredness and develop an altruistic approach to life. This is nothing but a sharing in the very nature of God, which is goodness that diffuses itself to others.

Prayer of Intercession

In the subsequent episode of Abraham's intercessory prayer we can clearly see Abraham's growth in sharing the very nature of God.¹⁰

7. Cf. Gen 18:9, 13,14

8. Cf. Gen 18:2-8

9. Cf. Gen 18:9-15

10. Cf. Gen 18:16-33

After receiving Abraham's hospitality the three divine persons set out towards Sodom and Gomorrah. Now, Yahweh does not want to conceal from Abraham the purpose of His proceeding in that direction. This shows how God has become a friend of Abraham. When a man advances in prayer-life and thereby in friendship with God, there will be nothing between them which is not shared. So God revealed to Abraham that He was going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sins.¹¹ Here begins Abraham's intercessory prayer. The setting of this prayer is briefly presented in this way: "The men left there and went to Sodom while Abraham remained standing before Yahweh" (Gen 18:22). Here "the men" means the two "men" who in fact were two angels who were accompanying Yahweh.¹² The posture of Abraham of 'standing before God' indicates the usual prayer-posture of the Orientals. 'Standing before God' is, in fact, the first step in prayer. This, as well as the following clause "approaching Him he said" confirm the biblical concept of prayer that it is an encounter with God.

In this prayer-encounter Abraham is not praying for himself, but he is pleading for others. He argued that if God is just, he should not kill the just along with the unjust. He said: "Perhaps there are fifty just men in the town, will you really overwhelm them, will you not spare the place for the fifty just men in it?" (Gen 18:24). God replied that He would not destroy Sodom if there are fifty just men. Then exercising a full measure of freedom, Abraham began to bargain with God lessening the number of the possible just men in the town from fifty to fortyfive, then to forty, thirty, twenty and, finally, to ten.¹³ This prayer reveals that biblical prayer is a dialogue between God and man, in which the praying man, being a friend of God, enjoys a great deal of freedom, maintaining at the same time the sense of respect towards God. The praying man forgets himself and pleads for others. This aspect is clearer in the intercessory prayer of Moses. When the Israelites made a golden calf and worshipped it, Yahweh revealed his wrath against them and said to Moses that he was going to destroy them. Now Moses, as the leader of the people, identified himself so completely with them that he pleaded for them saying: "If it pleased you

11. Cf. Gen 18:16-21

12. Cf. Gen 19:1

13. Cf. Gen 18:27-32

to forgive this sin of theirs . . .! But if not, then blot me out from the book that you have written" (Ex 32:32; cf. 32:11-14, 30-34) Thus growth in prayer-life is indicated by the growth in the level of self-effacing love.

Prayer as Invocation of God's Name

There are instances in the Bible where prayer is understood as mere invocation of the name of God. After Abraham had made a covenant with Abimelech and settled the dispute over a well at Beersheba, "Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beersheba and there he invoked Yahweh, the everlasting God" (Gen 21:33). Patriarch Isaac also has done the same.¹⁴ This mode of biblical prayer is very much like the Indian way of prayer which is called Nam-japa, the repeated pronouncement or chanting of God's name.

True Prayer Leads to Self-Sacrifice

The Bible reveals that as a man advances in prayer-life, God demands of him great sacrifices. This was the experience of Abraham who was asked to sacrifice his dearest son Isaac as burnt-offering to God.¹⁵ To use an expression of the Spanish Mystics, it was the 'Dark Night of the Soul' for Abraham. But Abraham, though filled with great pain, was ready to make that sacrifice as a gesture of his supreme worship. He "bound his son Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son" (Gen 22:10). It was then that Abraham stood before God as the perfect devotee who reached the zenith of his prayer-life.

Prayer of Abraham's Steward

Prayer is an act of faith. In the Bible we have examples of men of prayer who grew up in prayer to the extent of forcing God to act according to a sign they set up. Such a prayer spontaneously issued from the mouth of the steward of Abraham who went in search of a suitable bride for Isaac. When he reached the town of Nahor in Upper Mesopotamia, he made the camels kneel outside the town near the

14. Cf. Gen 26:23-25

15. Cf. Gen ch. 22

well, and he prayed thus: "Yahweh, God of my master Abraham, be with me today, and show your kindness to my master Abraham. Here I stand by the spring as the young women from the town come out to draw water. To one of the girls I will say, 'Please tilt your pitcher and let me drink'. If she answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels too', may she be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac; by this I shall know you have shown your kindness to my master" (Gen 24:12-14). The faith of this praying man was great, and the subsequent narrative shows that God did act in the manner the steward of Abraham had prayed.¹⁶

Prayer as Consultation

A special mode of prayer can be seen in the prayer of Rebekah, the wife of Isaac. When she conceived twins and felt them struggling with one another inside her womb, she said, "'If this is the way of it why go on living?' So she went to consult Yahweh" (Gen 25:22-23). In the life of Israel this consultation with Yahweh had great importance. During their sojourn in the desert, they used to consult Yahweh to solve—all their problems. This was done by asking for an oracle through the agency of Moses, who alone could enter the Tent of Meeting and converse with Yahweh.¹⁷ Later this consultation was done through a man of God or a prophet.¹⁸ This consultation was done also by using the sacred lots called *urim* and *thummim*.¹⁹ But in the case of Rebekah this seems to have been much simpler. Her consultation meant only her visit to a holy place where Yahweh manifests His presence. However this kind of prayer indicates the deep faith of the praying person.

Prayer by Singing

An important form of biblical prayer is singing a song of praise in honour of God. When the Israelites under the leadership of Moses miraculously crossed the Red Sea, and the Egyptian army was swallowed up by the sea, then Moses and all the Israelites with him sang a song

16. Cf. Gen 24:15-21

17. Cf. Ex 33:7-11

18. Cf. I K 14:5; 22:5, 8; II K 3:11; 8:8

19. Cf. I Sm 14:41f.

in honour of Yahweh, while Miriam the sister of Aaron and all the women with timbrels began to dance singing the refrain of that song.²⁰ Ancient Israel, therefore, conceived of prayer not as a formal ritualistic act, but as a spontaneous reaction of a human being when he encounters a God who intervenes in his history. In such a prayer there is no room for any sort of inhibition; all the feelings and sentiments of the human person find expression in it; the whole body and soul of man are fully involved in it. This is the prayer of sincerity and simplicity.

Prayer Makes Man Divine

The chosen people in the Old Testament believed in the tremendous impact of a prayer—experience on human beings. They thought that an intensive prayer—encounter with God could produce a change even in the body of the praying man. Thus the author of the book of Exodus says: “When Moses came down from the mountain of Sinai . . . he did not know that the skin of his face was radiant after speaking with Yahweh” (Ex 34:29). Yes, the face of a man of prayer will exhibit a special grace and glow with a heavenly radiance. The New Testament also shares this view of prayer. Concerning St. Stephen, the first martyr, it is said: “The members of the sanhedrin all looked intently at Stephen, and his face appeared to them like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). Thus the Bible seems to hold that a truly praying man will have a face full of grace reflecting God’s own nature.

Prayer of Gideon

According to the Bible, prayer does not always require a particular place or time. Even when a person is working, he can have his prayer-encounter with God. It was when Gideon was threshing wheat inside the winepress that he encountered God and poured out his heart in prayer before God, saying: “Forgive me, my Lord, but if Yahweh is with us, then why is it that all this is happening to us now? And where are all the wonders our ancestors tell us of when they say, ‘Did not Yahweh bring us out of Egypt?’ But now Yahweh has deserted us; he has abandoned us to Midian” (Jdg 6:13). It is then that God strengthened him and appointed him leader and protector

20. Cf. Ex 15:1-21

of his people.²¹ Thus, according to the Bible, prayer should be quite natural to man, and man should have always a prayerful tendency towards God even when he is engaged in his daily work to earn his livelihood.

Prayer of Elijah

The Bible reveals that for a fruitful encounter with God in prayer man needs first of all a good heart and a peaceful mind. This is brought out in the story of prophet Elijah. Elijah was a man burning with zeal for Yahweh. In his zeal he challenged the priests of Baal, and put them all to death.²² But then King Ahab and the Queen Jezebel who supported those priests sought to kill Elijah. Elijah fled for his life. During that flight, once when he was in a cave in the wilderness, God's word came to him saying: "Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh" (I K 19:11). Thus Elijah posed himself to encounter God. For Elijah it was like a meditation observing the cosmological phenomena. As he was thus observing, "There came a mighty wind so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice came to him, which said, 'What are you doing here Elijah?'" (I Kgs 19:11-13).

This passage should be understood not literally, but in its symbolic meaning. This text does not mean that God's presence is absolutely lacking in the power of cosmological phenomena like the wind, earthquake and fire. In fact, the storm, earthquake and lightning in Ex 19 manifested God's presence. But in our text they are considered only as heralds of God's coming. Here the tenor of the text is that even though God is present in all the universal phenomena, as far as man's accessibility to the understanding of that presence is concerned, it is in a peaceful atmosphere like that of the gentle breeze that God's presence is experienced by man. Through this particular form of theo-

21. Cf. Jdg 6:14-24

22. Cf. I K 18:17-40

phany God seems to criticize the mentality of the, prophet which was violent like a storm, earthquake and fire, and which led him to murder four hundred prophets of Baal.²³

Prayer Needs Serenity

A praying man needs a calm and peaceful mind. This is what Indian spiritual tradition too advocates: "Karma is said to be the means of the Muni who seeks to attain to yoga; serenity is said to be the means when he has attained to yoga" (Gita 6:3). "He stands supreme who has equal regard for friends, companions, enemies, neutrals, arbiters, the hateful, the relatives, saints and sinners" (6:9). The God of the Bible demands such a peaceful, serene and calm disposition devoid of all hatred and enmity towards others from a man who truly wants to pray. Jesus had this internal peace and serenity when he prayed. It was when the disciples saw Jesus absorbed in prayer that they came to him and asked: "Lord teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). Jesus then taught them to pray addressing God as "Our Father". In this prayer he insisted that a praying man should stand before God to pray only after having forgiven those who have offended him. That is why he has taught us to pray thus: "And forgive us our debts, as we also *have forgiven* (the Greek: *aphēkamen*.) our debtors" (Mt 6:12). According to Jesus, true prayer and worship is possible only if one has the internal peaceful disposition of being reconciled with his brethren. For he said: "So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering" (Mt 5:23-25). Hence, it is with a peaceful mind that one has to come to encounter God in prayer.

Prayer of the Psalmist

In the Psalms we see in miniature all the prayers of the Old Testament man. There we observe the vivid vibrations of the heart and mind of a truly praying man who pours out his heart before his living God. Just as in the Indian way of prayer the moods (*bhavas*) of a *bhakta* keep changing when he stands before his *Ishtadevatha*, so too

23. Cf. *ibid*.

in the Psalms the attitude of the praying man goes on changing from praise to thanksgiving, from joy to sorrow, from desperation to trust, from fear to courage, from anxiety to self-surrender etc.

Prayer of Praise

The Psalmist sometimes sings songs of praise. That is his spontaneous reaction when he realizes how the almighty and loving God has intervened in his own history and in the history of his community as well as in the history of the whole of mankind. He feels that his whole life is set apart to praise God. He would say to himself: "Praise, Yahweh, my soul! I mean to praise Yahweh all my life, I mean to sing to my God as long as I live" (Ps 146:1-2). Joy is the characteristic *bhava* of this kind of prayer-songs. The Psalmist in his joy wants the whole world to join with him in praising God. So such prayer-songs begin with an invitation extended to all as in Ps 148: "Let heaven praise Yahweh . . . Praise him sun and moon . . . Let earth praise Yahweh . . . all kings on earth and nations, princes, all rulers in the world, young men and girls, old people and children too!" (148:1ff.). The last Psalm ends with the injunction: "Let everything that breathes praise Yahweh! Alleluia!" (150:6). This praising was often accompanied by hand-clapping,²⁴ or instrumental music and dance.²⁵ In this form of prayer the selfish man automatically forgets himself while his attention is captured by the thought of God's grandeur and goodness manifested in creation and salvation. This way of prayer has, therefore, a healing effect on the naturally selfish man, and it slowly transforms and sanctifies the praying man.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Another prayer-*bhava* of the Psalmist is that of thanksgiving. When he stands before God, recalling to mind all the favours God has done to him as well as to others, he is filled with gratitude and begins to proclaim those miraculous interventions of God, and offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving followed by an *agapē* meal, a banquet of thanksgiving, in which he, his relatives, friends, well-wishers and all poor people take part.²⁶ With deep sentiments of love and gratitude the

24. Cf. Ps 47:1

25. Cf. Ps 150

26. Cf. Ps 22:25-26; 26:6-7; 23:5

Psalmist would say: "Bless Yahweh, my soul bless, his holy name, all that is in me! Bless Yahweh, my soul, and remember all his kindness: in forgiving all your offences, in curing all your diseases, in redeeming your life from the Pit (of Sheol), in crowning you with love and tenderness, in filling your years with prosperity, in renewing your youth like an eagle's . . . As tenderly as a father treats his children, so Yahweh treats those who fear him; he knows what we are made of, he remembers we are dust . . . yet Yahweh's love for those who fear him lasts from all eternity and for ever" (Ps 103:1-5,13-14, 17). The goodness and covenantal love of God captivates the mind of the Psalmist when he stands before God for prayer. So spontaneously he sings: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (Ps 136:1).

Prayer of Lamentation

One of the predominant '*bhavas*' of the praying man of the Bible is that of sorrow and lamentation. When man is faced with the threats of death or illness or calamities or enemies, he laments before his God and cries for help. Such prayers of lamentation start with invoking the Name of God. The biblical man believed that God's Name has a great power. By the very utterance of the divine Name, the very person of God will become present there making his devotee feel His power and grace. For the Psalmist it was enough to utter once the Name of God to put him in contact with the Divine. Once this contact is established, the Psalmist then moves to the second step of his prayer-process, i.e. to pour out his heart before God. As a child talks to its father likewise he would now share with God all his feelings and thoughts without any inhibition or reservation. In order to attract the attention of God and to make him take pity on him, in his lament he would depict his difficult situation in the blackest colours. For example, he would say: "Save me, O God! the water is already upto my neck! I am sinking in the deepest swamp, there is no foothold; I have stepped into deep water and the waves are washing over me. Worn out with calling, my throat is hoarse, my eyes are strained, looking for my God" (Ps 69:1-3). By this very lamentation before God the biblical man experienced a psychological consolation. He says: "To Yahweh, my cry! I plead. To Yahweh, my cry! I entreat. I pour out my supplications, I unfold all my troubles" (Ps 142:1-2). To the modern man as well this way of prayer is salutary. He will

experience an internal healing and peace if he pours out his heart in prayer even before he goes to a psychiatrist.

Prayer of Petition

After the lamentation, as a third step of his prayer, the Psalmist would ask whatever help he needs from God. In these passionate entreaties he talks to God in an anthropomorphic way, conceiving God as a man, an intimate friend standing in front of him. Thus he would say: "Quick, Yahweh, answer me before my spirit fails; if you hide your face much longer I shall go down to the Pit like the rest" (Ps 143:7). In this way of prayer the deep faith of the praying man in the nearness and power of God is quite evident. It is about this kind of prayer that Jesus said: "And if you have faith, everything you ask for in prayer you will receive" (Mt 21:22). Jesus taught his disciples to call God "Our Father" and ask him whatever they need in the same manner as the children usually ask their father: "Give us this day our daily bread . . ." (Mt 6:9-13). He insisted that "They ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1).

Prayer of Self-Examination

As a fourth step of his prayer, the Psalmist would reflect upon his own worthiness to be heard and consoled by Yahweh. In this regard, the first series of reasons, according to the Psalmist, are God's own qualities such as His goodness, compassion, righteousness, omniscience etc. Secondly, the Psalmist would point out to his own trust in God in virtue of God's election of and covenant with his people. Thirdly, he would show his own repentance, acts of penance and fasting. Fourthly, he would speak of man's inborn weakness and shortness of life. And, finally, he would point to his own innocence at the time of prayer. Thus the prayer of the biblical man ends with self-evaluation. This prayer, therefore, does not confine itself to an abstract and artificial realm, but it comes down to the most concrete and personal levels of the life of the praying man. In the parable of the two persons who went up to pray (Lk 18:9-14) Jesus showed that only one person who examined himself and accepted himself as he was before God has, in fact, truly prayed.

Prayer of Self-Surrender

At the end of his prayer the biblical man will surrender himself to God, saying: "Into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Ps 31:5). In Gethsemane Jesus had, as any other human being would naturally experience, tremendous internal struggle and agony in the presence of his impending suffering and death. But he prayed to his heavenly Father: "If thou art willing, remove this cup from me". Even in that moment of agony Jesus ended his prayer adding: "Nevertheless not my will, but thine be done" (Lk 22:42). As he ended all his prayers with this attitude of self-surrender, he could end his life too on the cross with the same bent of mind reciting Ps 31:5 in his own way: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Thus, according to the Bible, total self-surrender to God is the zenith of prayer.

Conclusions

Our foregoing reflections on selected biblical passages on prayer reveal that the biblical way of prayer has several important elements which could be adopted by the modern man for God-experience that will definitely bring him internal peace and lasting happiness. Among the many perspectives of prayer that came out in our discussion, the following are to be recalled to our mind with special attention :

(i) Prayer in the Bible is not a psychological technique or exercise lasting only for half an hour or one hour that one spends in the church or temple, but it is a constant tending of the whole being of the praying man towards God that lasts all throughout his life. Hence, one's prayer-encounter with God in the prayer-room is closely interrelated to his life outside that room. If one disregards God's will and seeks his own selfish gains in his everyday life, he will not be able to encounter God in prayer in the temple or the church. Such hypocritical worshippers have been severely criticized in the Old Testament by the prophets and in the New Testament by Jesus.²⁷ (ii) Prayer is a sincere conversation with God. It involves not only talking to God but also listening to what God speaks to us to our hearts. In this regard, prayer is also a consultation with God. (iii) Prayer can be either a silent meditation, as was often practised by Jesus who went up to the solitude of the mountains to commune with God, or a prayer aloud in which a com-

27. Cf. My book: *Destroy This Temple*, Bangalore, 1978, pp. 14-23.

munity also can take part. (iv) Prayer is an activity of true faith, which will transform man, making him come out of his self-made prison of egoism to the altruistic love towards God and men which would often demand self-sacrifice. (v) Prayer is an encounter with God which affects the deepest core of the human being to the extent of making him burst into tears sometimes, sometimes shouts of joyous praise thanksgiving etc. It is in prayer that man discovers himself and becomes what he ought to be, as he stands before his Creator and Saviour just as a *bhakta* (devotee) would stand before his *Ishtadevata* (one's supreme personal God) in adoration, in praise, in thanksgiving, in repentance, in trust, in joy and in hope. Such a prayer will make man God-oriented and will keep him intimately united with God. Such an effect of prayer can be easily recognized in the vibrations of the spirit of the biblical man as he prays: "On my bed I think of you, I meditate on you all night long, for you have always helped me. I sing for joy on the shadow of your wings; my soul clings close to you, your righthand supports me" (Ps 63:6-8).