

## **Posture During Prayer**

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Very often church members ask about the proper posture in prayer, whether in church we should only pray kneeling down or whether sitting or standing are also correct postures. The question is provoked by the teachings of some well-intended church members who, based on their personal study, have concluded that all prayers in church should be offered on our knees. The debate demonstrates that for many church members prayer is very significant and meaningful and they want to ensure that in its practice they are following God's instructions. We will discuss this issue not to discourage interest in this very important subject of Christian praxis, but to provide information and clarification.

### **Biblical Information**

According to Scripture, prayers are presented to God by His people in different circumstances and physical postures. I will summarize the most important biblical information on the topic.

*1. Kneeling:* There are many examples of people praying to the Lord on their knees, suggesting that this was a very common practice. Daniel prayed on his knees three times a day (Dan 6:10), Stephen fell on his knees and talked to the Lord before he died as a martyr (Acts 7:60), and Peter knelt down before the corpse of Tabitha, prayed for her and she came back to life (Acts 9:40; see also Acts 20:36; Eph 3:14). Sometimes the person placed the head on the knees while praying (1 Kgs 1:13). Kneeling was a ritual expression of the willing surrender of the life of the worshiper to God. By kneeling down the worshipers went voluntarily down to the dust, from which humans were created, surrendering their lives to the Lord in prayer (cf. 2 Kgs 1:13).

*2. Standing:* Standing before the Lord in prayer was also a common practice, perhaps

more common than kneeling. One of the most impressive cases is found in 2 Chronicles 20 where a corporate act of prayer is described. When Judah was about to be invaded by the combined military forces of Moab and Ammon, Jehoshaphat called the people to pray to the Lord. He stood in the assembly in the house of the Lord and prayed for liberation while the people were “standing before the Lord” (2Chr 20:5, 13). Hannah presented to the Lord her petition while standing, and the Lord answered her (1 Sam 1:26). Job also prayed standing (Job 30:20).

The Jews used to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to display their piety. Jesus condemned the pride but not the practice of praying standing (Matt 6:5). In fact, he endorsed it when he said to the disciples, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions” (Mark 11:25). Standing in prayer emphasizes the privilege we have to approach God and address him with our needs and concerns knowing that he can grant us our petitions. Those who were allowed to have an audience with a king usually stood before him and presented to him their petitions (cf. Esther 5:2). Standing in prayer means that we acknowledge God as the king of the universe and consider it a privilege to approach him to request from him guidance, blessings and favors.

*3. Sitting Down:* The practice of praying to the Lord while sitting down is rare in the Bible but not totally absent. A good example is king David, who “went in and sat down before the Lord, and he said . . .” (2 Sam 7:18; NASB). This is the posture assumed by an individual who is seeking instructions from the Lord, through his prophet (e.g. 2 Kings 4:38; Ezek 8:1; 33:31), and who is ready to serve him.

*4. Lying Down:* We also find in the Bible cases in which people prayed during the night from their beds. While lying on the bed they remembered the Lord and meditated on him (Ps 4:4; 63:6). Sometimes the person would bow down (prostrate) on the bed and pray to the Lord (1 Kgs 1:47). Praying while lying down on a bed places the emphasis on prayer as an

opportunity to meditate on the goodness of the Lord and to approach him during the night seeking his help. This is a private act of personal piety.

5. *Prostration*: When prostrating, people lay down horizontally with their faces on the ground and usually with outstretched arms. One of the knees remained bent in order to facilitate rising up from the ground. Rarely is prostration clearly associated with prayer in the Bible. (e.g. 1 Kgs 1:47; Mark 14:35). It is fundamentally an expression of homage and submission before a superior. The person seeking the help of the king prostrated before him in dependence and submission (2 Sam 14:4). It was also practiced to greet a superior (2 Sam 14:22), or as an act of homage (1 Sam 28:14). In religious contexts, this is the posture of worship (cf. 2 Chr 20:18). It intensified the conviction that God was the very source of human life and the one who could preserve it (e.g. Num 16:45; Josh 7:6; 2 Sam 7:16). Sometimes worshipers came before the Lord, prostrated before him as an act of homage and then assumed the posture of kneeling probably to pray to him (Ps 95:6). Prostration before the gods was very common throughout the ancient Near East as an expression of homage, submissiveness, worship, and dependence. Prostration did not become an indispensable aspect of worship in the Christian church probably because God no longer manifested himself or dwelt permanently in a particular place on earth, but was accessible through his Son (cf. John 4:21-24).

This review of postures during prayer in the Bible indicates that there was not one particular posture that was always required from worshipers when addressing the Lord with their requests. Postures are important in the sense that they are the external expression of reverence, inner feelings, and commitments to the Lord, but one of them was not large enough to encompass all of those experiences. Hence, we find in Scripture a diversity of options and possibilities. Any attempt to select one as superior and indispensable over the others lacks biblical support.

## **The Writings of E. G. White**

Ellen G. White emphasizes praying on our knees and encourages us to do it. She wrote: “Both in public and private worship, it is our privilege to bow on our knees before the Lord when we offer our petitions to Him” (*Gospel Workers*, p. 178). We should never consider kneeling down a burden but a privilege. Again she comments that, “both in public and private worship it is our duty to bow down upon our knees before God when we offer our petitions to Him. This act shows our dependence upon God” (*Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 312).

Statements like those should not be used to teach that the only proper position for prayer in public worship is kneeling. She makes it clear that it is not always necessary to kneel down in prayer (*Ministry of Healing*, pp. 510-511). While participating in public worship, E. G. White herself at times asked the congregation to stand for a prayer of consecration (*Selected Messages*, vol. 3, pp. 268, 269), or to remain seated (*ibid.*, pp. 267-268), or to kneel down (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 148-149). One must conclude that according to her, kneeling down was not the exclusive posture of prayer in church. In her private life she even prayed sitting in bed (*Review & Herald*, December 13, 1906).

## **Concluding remarks**

By way of summary we can conclude that according to the Bible and E. G. White there are different postures for prayer and the importance of one of them does not exclude any of the others. During worship the Adventist church allows for praying sitting down, standing up or kneeling down. Since worship should be characterized by order, it is important that when the community of believers comes together to seek the Lord we all follow the common liturgical elements accepted in our worship services. Those who in church kneel down to pray when the rest of the community is praying standing up may be unintentionally displaying piety in a questionable way.