

I have prayed for you!
(Luke 22:31.32)

1) The surrounding situation

The time when Jesus said these words to Peter, was the evening before Jesus had to lay down His life for the sins of the world. Jesus celebrated the Passover feast with His disciples. The day had come when the sacrificial lamb was to be killed, and He sent Peter and John to make preparations for Him to celebrate the Passover, together. The surrounding situation, here, was the Passover festival. The disciples did as Jesus instructed them and prepared the Passover meal. When everything was prepared and they were seated around according to the traditional way of eating of that day, Jesus knew that in a few hours, he would suffer and die. And He told the disciples: “I have earnestly and intensely desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I say to you, I shall eat it no more until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God” (Verse 15.16). As they were eating, Jesus took the cup into His hands and said: “This cup is the New Testament in my blood which is shared for you”. Then, He took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the disciples, saying: “This is my body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me” (Verse 17-20). What an awesome moment! And what a tragic moment, too! It was that they celebrated this important Passover meal in which a few hours, later, Jesus would become the spotless sacrificial lamb Who was slain to take away the sins of the world. God established the Passover feast to be celebrated, forever, throughout all generations. It began with Moses and the children of Israel, when God told Moses: “These are the feasts of the Lord, even holy convocations, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons. In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the Lord’s Passover” (Leviticus 23:4.5). God told them: “And this day shall be unto you for a memorial, and you shall keep it a feast by an ordinance, forever” (Exodus 12:14). God emphasized that these were His feasts, and Jesus referred to the Passover as the “Lord’s supper”. The Passover is one of the first three great festivals of the Hebrews. The name “Passover” recalls the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-13:16). God sent His angel to kill the firstborn sons of all the Egyptians in order to persuade Pharaoh to let God’s people go. The Israelite families were instructed to sacrifice a lamb and smear its blood on the door post of their houses as a signal to God that His angel should pass over them during the judgement. So the celebration begins in the evening as a sign that Israel left Egypt in haste. The unleavened bread was used in the celebration as a reminder that the people had no time to leaven their bread before they ate their final meal as slaves in Egypt. In the New Testament time, Passover became a pilgrim festival. Larger numbers of people gathered in Jerusalem to observe the annual celebration. And in the middle of these historical events, Jesus saw something beyond the natural. He saw Judas’ agreement in the spiritual realm to become the representative of Satan to betray Him (Luke 22:3). It is almost unbelievable that someone who had had an intimate relationship with Jesus would now become His betrayer. All the Gospel writers tell us this story, probably to serve as a warning for all of us who are following Jesus. In this life, there is always the possibility that we might grow cold towards Christ, allowing Satan little by little to lead us into self-centred compromises with this world, and then, at the end, we betray the Lord Whom once we served as a Saviour. May God have mercy on our part as He has become our heavenly intercessor Who is praying for us, every day!

2) God’s purpose of celebrating

The purpose why God allowed this feast, probably, was to remind the children of Israel and the generations after them of His supernatural deliverance of Israel out of Egypt and also the sacrificial lamb that protected them from the destroying angel. This feast was supposed to be a time of rejoicing. The people celebrated by each household feasting on the sacrificial lamb.

The head of each household, according to studies, would kill the lamb and present it to the priest. The priest, then, would sprinkle the blood upon the altar with a bunch of hyssop. The blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the upper door post and the two side door posts of the people's houses. That evening, the entire household joined together in eating the Passover lamb. It was roasted, and they ate it together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Before and after the meal, they sang songs. They began the meal singing the Psalms 103 and 104, and they ended it by singing Psalm 105 and 108. It was this sacrificial celebration when Jesus blessed the bread and the vine and gave it to His disciples. He was identifying Himself as the sacrificial lamb, the One Whom John the Baptist saw and about Whom he said: "Here come the lamb of God Who will take away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus was the lamb Who was slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). Long before the earth was formed, God saw in His Spirit that mankind would fall away from His will, and Jesus devoted Himself to become the mediator Who would bring mankind back to God. So Jesus had been waiting and longing from this early time on that this day would come when He would lay down His life and become the spiritual solution of mankind which is working from inside to outside. Therefore, through His death, Jesus fulfilled the Passover feast. As the sacrificial lamb of God was slain, and His blood was shared for the remission of our sins: "He was oppressed, and He was afflicted. Yet, He opened not His mouth. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). Just as the blood of the lamb kept the children of Israel safe in Egypt, the blood of Jesus which was shared on Calvary, is able to protect our spirit, soul and body and bring the presence of God into our lives, homes, and churches. There is still a fountain full of blood which has already flown from Immanuel's vein. There is power in the blood of Jesus for protection, cleansing and healing. The believers of old spent time to plead the blood of Jesus upon their lives, churches and cities. His blood is what has made it possible for the bondage of Satan to be broken. The New Testament is covenant of His blood (Luke 22:20).

3) The question of greatness

As they were eating together and celebrating the great events of the supernatural power of God's deliverance, Jesus said: "But the hand of him who is going to betray me, is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays Him!" (Luke 22:21,22). The disciples began to question one another who would be going to betray the Master. But according to Luke's account, it looks like it was just a bye-question, not interesting, for it did not look like someone of them could betray Jesus. Their interest was rather, who was going to become great among them. Often, we forget that it is the spiritual world that rules the natural world. But because their natural senses were stronger than their spiritual life, the disciples' interests were centred on natural things. Therefore, in the midst of Jesus' spiritual battling for the cause of which He came to earth, He still had to take care of them concerning the future of the ministry which He had come to establish. Jesus used the worldly greatness and compared it to the spiritual greatness of His Kingdom that true greatness is a matter of inward spirit and heart. It is seen in the person who expresses his or her love for Christ in sincere humility. This was Jesus answer to His disciples when they had asked Him who among them would be considered to be the greatest. In our world, today, it happens all the time that the spirit of comparison is taking over in our family lives, societies and even, in our churches. Jesus said: "Kings like to throw their weight around, and people in authority like to give themselves fancy titles. It is not going to be this way with you. Let the senior among you become like the junior, and let the leader act the part of a servant" (Verse 26,27). May God grant us the understanding that greatness is not positions, offices, leadership, power or influence, academic degrees, fame, abilities, or great accomplishments of success. It is not so much what we do for God as what we are in the Spirit before Him. There are three kinds of knowing ourselves. The first one is how we know ourselves as individuals. The

second kind is how others think that we are. And the third one is what God, the Creator of all mankind, says that we are. Therefore, to be great requires that we become great in the right place and area where God has placed us. We need to learn to be great in faith, humility, godly character, wisdom, self-control, patience and love. It is to have the greatness of Christ Who loved righteousness and hated wickedness. In other words, Jesus doesn't want us to be worldly and handle things in the way that the worldly people handle them. He said: "If you want to be great in God's Kingdom, learn to be the servant of all!" (Matthew 20:26). Jesus wanted His disciples to be consecrated and faithful wherever God choose to place them. And we should have that same kind of love and commitment for Christ Whom we say we love. So in God's sight, the greatest in His Kingdom are those with great love for Him, commitment to His revealed Word and willingness to serve others.

4) Appreciation of Jesus

Jesus, the King of love and Master of insight, Who knows the end from the beginning, acknowledged that He was grateful for His disciples' faithfulness to Him during His life and the trying circumstances that surrounded it. And if we, also, want to be great, our greatest concern should be, too, to stand by Him in the local church and in the circumstances that surround it. And in appreciation of one another, the local church will increase value, and the potentials which God has placed into individuals, will function to meet all the needs of the church. Jesus has provided us a Kingdom, and all His faithful followers from every race who bear His name, belong to this Kingdom. Therefore, the disciples of Jesus must be careful not to accept earthly glory or worldly power in this age. It is only love and appreciation that will enable the world to know that Jesus has called us and sent us. He said: "A new commandment I give unto you: Love one another as I have loved you. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples when they see the love you have for each other" (John 13:34). Jesus' appreciation of His disciples can teach us that we cannot build relationship with people whom we don't love and appreciate. It is only in love and appreciation that relationships are built. God started with relationships. There was the relationship between the trinity extended to Adam and Eve who were asked to multiply the earth. If it had not been because of the fall, the earth would be full of people who would love God and one another in appreciation. This was God's first plan with His creation. His second plan began with Genesis 4 until Jesus came to restore that relationship, again. He did this for us to have a right stand before God without any inferiority through the blood which He shared on the cross. Five times, Jesus prayed for His followers in John 17 that they might be one. This is possible in love and appreciation. Appreciation will minister love to our broken world and heal the broken hearted. This ministry of salvation will reach the ends of the earth. The disciples of Jesus had a lot of mistakes hanging around them, but Jesus knew that one cannot build relationships by just always looking down on the mistakes of others. It is appreciation that increases value. It is a relationship that God wants to build between the rich and the poor, between the cultures, between strong people and weak people, and Jesus spent His time with the "nobodies" in the society of His days. Others said: "Isn't He the son of a carpenter?" Others said: "Isn't He the illegitimate son of Joseph?" Some people said: "This man eats with sinners! He's a friend of tax collectors and He is possessed by demons!" But in all, Jesus trusted these men who valued and loved the relationship which they had with Him, therefore He told them: "You are those who have stood by me in my trials. Now, I confer on you the royal authority my Father conferred on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom and be strengthened as you take up responsibilities among the congregations of God's people" (Verse 28.29).

5) As the Lord beheld Simon Peter

The conversation changed at once in verse 31 and 32: "Simon, Simon, Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me like chaff from wheat, but I have prayed for you in particular

that you not give in or give out. When you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start” (from “The Message” version). Jesus’ statement concerning Peter and the other disciples causes us to ask questions like: Does God allow Satan to attempt us? And if Satan tempts us, is it only within a certain limits by God’s permission? Or, is the devil free to do what he wants with God’s people? It does assure us that Jesus is praying for us that the faith of His people may not fail. He is our heavenly intercessor, and He prays for all who come to God through Him. He does ever live to make this intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). God is faithful in all our temptations to provide a way to escape (1st Corinthians 10:13). However, the fulfilment of Jesus’ prayers is conditional. If we reject the grace of God, Christ’s intercession is, then, of no effect on our behalf. The lesson, here, is: Jesus looked beyond the situation of difficulties, unrest and turmoil in the life of His beloved disciples. Jesus was looking into the realm of the spiritual and saw that the root cause of the conflict was the purposeful, planned attacks of the enemy to destroy Simon Peter who was the ring leader of the disciples. And if destruction came to him, the other disciples would not have any strength to keep on with their faith. The attacks of the enemy against the church and the individual Christians are just as real, today, as it has ever been. In fact, the true church and the true individual Christians have a greater challenge, today, than any other time in history. There are scientific attacks against the church, co-workers attacks against individual Christians, or people doing their best to sell the houses which once stood as houses of God, making supermarkets and dancing halls out of them. In this city Berlin, every three months one church or more is being closed down. Either, it gets renovated as old people’s home, or they destroy it and build something else. But Jesus is praying for us. In God’s dealing with Israel and in the history of the church, studies show that in times of great crisis, often, the greatest manifestations of God’s power were being brought forth. Therefore, in situations when Satan is attacking us, it could be that he is just building a platform for God to demonstrate His power. Like Romans 9:17 says: “For the Scripture says unto Pharaoh: Even for this same purpose have I raised you up that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout the earth.” There is hope for those who trust in Jesus, there is hope for our churches, and there is hope for our cities. But we have to seek God for His power to manifest in our midst. It does not come automatically. Peter and all the disciples insisted enthusiastically: “‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you’. And all the others said the same” (Mark 14:31). None of us stands except by the grace of God. Neither can one do something for God except what he or she has received from above (John 3:28-30). This was John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus.

6) The tempter can make us blind to reality

God’s answers are not always easy to accept. Sometimes, they demand tremendous dedications of our lives. One of the greatest secrets we can learn from this verse which is also the yearly verse for the church in Germany is that through times of great trials and difficult decisions we can learn to trust Christ and ask Him what He wants to do with our lives. What may at the moment appear difficult to accept, can be the very doorway into the most beautiful experiences and blessings of individual lives, congregations and cities. Therefore, let us not be afraid to allow God to have His way while Satan is there to sift us as wheat. Jesus is there at the throne of God, interceding on our behalf. We are not alone in the midst of our trials, just as the disciples were not alone. Victory and power in every area of our individual family lives and in the congregation are not far from us if we trust Jesus. A mathematic and scientific man called Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), who fell in love with God and wanted his friends to come to Christ and developed apologetics for this reason, said: “We cannot imagine what God can create out of the fragments of our lives if we give our totality unto Him”. Jesus is praying for us to give our totality to His call for our lives as individuals and as a spotlight to society. And this is impossible if our faith fails. May God help us in our feelings and also in our spiritual-

ity, just as He helped Graf von Zinzendorf (1700-1760)! This man opened his eyes for the refugees who had fled from troubles. Many of them were followers of John Hus who had been put to death because of his beliefs. Graf von Zinzendorf let the refugees come to his own land where he took care of them. Out of this relationship, the Moravian Brethren movement was born. What are the things that God wants us to do in our world, today? Or what do we think when we see people on the streets? When Jesus saw the people, He had compassion and asked His disciples to pray for workers in the harvest (Matthew 9:36-37). The people in Jesus' days were blind to the reality because of false security. This made Jesus even weep over the holy city Jerusalem and its temple. Jesus knew that the people and their leaders would accept a political Messiah and that they would ultimately reject Him as God's Messiah. Therefore, He wept in pity for these people who would, soon, suffer a terrible judgement. It was not only sharing tears, but it was rather a lamentation of a soul in agony. Jesus as God revealed not only His own feelings, but also God's broken heart over the blindness of the human race and their refusal to repent and receive salvation from Him. He said: "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you; how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicken under her wings. But you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37). The people who were living in Jerusalem at Jesus' time had a reason to believe His predictions that the city would eventually be destroyed. For Jesus, Jerusalem was a city of people who were spiritually blind. He said: "If you, even you had only known on this day what will bring you peace- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side" (Luke 19:41-43). What about the Galilee of the nations? Probably, it was a city with unfulfilled potentials because of their blindness to reality. Jesus said to these cities where most of His miracles had been performed: "Woe to you, Korazin, woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, and you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you would have been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day" (Matthew 11:21-23). Unfortunately, all these cities unto which Jesus proclaimed His woes are no more. But Nazareth has survived up to this day.

7) Nazareth, the rough place

Nazareth was known as a place where nothing good could come from (John 1:46). It was a community which was located less than five miles from Sepphoris, the splendid capital city of Galilee. It knew quite well the impact of Greek culture and Roman wealth and power on Palestine. Yet, Nazareth shared in none of these benefits. Its situation on a steep headland assured that its citizens would remain outsiders in the city below. Primitive thinking says that God made the garden, and the evil man made the city. But the devil made the small towns. Little towns can be vicious with rumours, gossip and memories that refuse to die. They can also prove remarkable resistance to changes. Nazareth in Jesus' days was possibly this kind of town. Nevertheless, God chose Nazareth as the place where Jesus grew up and invested most of His life. This fact demonstrates that while God cares deeply about cities, He also invests in small communities and various kinds of neighbourhoods. Nazareth is a gift to anyone who comes from unfashionable places such as a dying inner city or declining, rural town. Nazareth says that such a person, too, can receive God's love and do something for the suffering of humanity. Unfortunately, Nazareth rejected its home-grown leader in dramatic ways (Luke 4:16-30 Mark 6:1-6). Jesus left, and as far as we know, He did never go back. However, His mother, brothers and sisters remained. They had to endure the prejudice and scorn of their neighbours who may have circulated rumours about Jesus' birth and His mental condition. The family might have suspected that Jesus' career would end in a martyr's death. For a while, even His brothers doubted His claims (John 7:5). This is the man Who said to Peter: "I have

prayed for you that your faith may not fail". He's praying for us, as well, and for the cities that have characteristics like Nazareth. Therefore, the question if any good thing can come out of Nazareth can be seen as answered in Jesus' life and ministry. Nazareth is there, today. It is an almost Arab village of about seventy thousand residents.

If the destructions of all the other cities came about just as Jesus said, what other prophecies did He make that might have to do with us and that we have to take literally and seriously? The truth is, God is interested in people. The churches and cities are there because of people. And if we don't value people, it could be that even the prayer of Jesus will be in vain. He's praying for us to increase in love and in fellowship for the cities to sense His love among us and desire to become like us.

May He to Whom our hearts are opening and all desires are known, the One of Whom stands our eternal redemption, grant unto us the power of love and the ability of opening our spiritual eyes not to become like the cities which grieved Jesus and ended up in destructions. Safety is only found in Him when we give our totality to Him. And if you have not known Him as your Lord and personal Saviour, I invite you to receive him, now.

Yours in His service, F.P. Arthur (a missionary from Ghana)
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