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## Prayers

### To God

Weekly theme: Giving thanks to God for His Word

*Use the words of Psalm 100 to help you praise God; either say the psalm out loud, or use the way it describes God to inspire your praise.*

### For myself

*In the last few days, what have you found difficult? People? Events? Church? Your health? Bring your concerns and cares before the Lord and seek His wisdom.*

### For others

Lord God Almighty, bless all those whose lives have been changed by the Olympic games, especially the athletes. Some will feel elated because things have changed for the better, and some will be desperately disappointed because they have not achieved as much as they felt possible. May the Good News be told to all, declaring that You can indeed lead people through both triumph and disaster to be victorious in every experience of life. And may more and more people discover the eternal truth that they are loved and blessed by a God of love. AMEN

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## Meditation

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, that quality of love  
Which forgives those who have hurt us,  
Overcomes all anger and bitterness,  
Refocuses us on what is good, not bad,  
And seeks to build bridges over troubled waters.

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, that quality of faith  
Which believes that problems can be solved,  
Shows love towards the most difficult of people  
Trusts that God is in control of everything,  
And seeks to defeat the works of Satan.

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, that quality of hope  
Which sees beyond the troubles of the day,  
Longs for peace to be found between people  
Is passionate about overcoming all odds,  
And seeks the ultimate glory of the Father.

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, these spiritual gifts  
Which help us live according to Your will, each day.

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## Bible Passage

### **Exodus 4:1-9**

<sup>1</sup> Moses responded by saying,

*“Look, they will not accept me or listen to my report, for they will say ‘The LORD has not appeared to you.’”*

<sup>2</sup> So LORD said to him,

***“What is that in your hand?”***

And he said,

*“A staff.”*

<sup>3</sup> Then the LORD said,

***“Throw it on the ground.”***

and when Moses threw it on the ground, it became a serpent, but he ran away from it! <sup>4</sup> The Lord said to Moses,

***“Reach out your hand and catch hold of it by the tail.”***

So he reached out his hand and caught hold of it, and it turned back into a staff, there in his hand! The Lord said,

***<sup>5</sup> “This will help the people believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has indeed appeared to you.”***

<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord said again,

***“Put your hand inside your cloak.”***

So he put his hand there, and when he took it out from inside his cloak, it was covered with a leprous disease, like snow!<sup>7</sup> The LORD said,

***“Now place your hand back inside your cloak.”***

So Moses put his hand back inside His cloak, and when he took it out, it the flesh was restored! Then the Lord said,

***<sup>8</sup> “If they do not accept you or take notice of the first sign, then they may accept the second. <sup>9</sup> And if they will not accept even these two signs, or listen to you, then take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”***

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## Review

This passage of Scripture is not well known, but it is about about trusting God and doing His will. After Moses had received a wonderful revelation of God on the mountain top (3:1f.), He had to learn something very important, which is that God chooses people to do something for Him. He does not simply call people and then leave them to their own devices, He has a job for them. We have already learned that God wanted Moses to lead the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt (3:18-22), but this would not be easy; it would require a great deal of work. The signs and wonders God gave Moses were for the specific purpose of impressing

people that God was with Moses, and his message from God was true. God was more powerful than any other god, indeed, more powerful than Egypt and her Pharaoh.

This was no small matter. God's declared plan since the beginning of time was to establish a Covenant relationship with His people, so they would then 'bless' all peoples throughout the world (Gen. 12:2,3). Ultimately, it was His purpose to offer salvation to all through a relationship with His Son Jesus, but the Covenant was established with the great forefathers (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) to demonstrate the relationship He wanted to have with people. Now while Israel were in slavery, the Covenant was ineffective and virtually at a standstill, so it had now become necessary for God to kick-start His relationship with Israel. Having revealed Himself to Moses, our passage today is not just a story in which God gives Moses some impressive signs and wonders to perform. It is the beginning of one of the most important 'salvation' stories of the Old Testament, from which we can learn a great deal about God's saving purposes.

At the beginning of this passage, Moses highlights the problem facing both God and Himself. Why should the people of Israel accept Moses' report, and why should they believe that God had appeared to Moses? Of course, Moses was speaking to God with the benefit of many years of contemplation of his youthful folly. Why indeed should the people of Israel be willing to trust him? He was the upstart prince who had disgraced himself forty years earlier (2:11-15), and who had fled the land and His people because of his folly and immaturity. But now, if Israel wanted the freedom offered them by their God, they would have to listen to Moses and trust that he was God's agent and representative. God's plan for His people was now at stake, and it was a critical time in the salvation history of the world.

After Moses questioned God about this, the Lord spoke immediately, as if ready with a plan. His words, which make up most of the rest of our passage (4:2-9) are a dramatic and forceful representation not just of signs and wonders themselves, but of God's gift to Moses of the ability to perform these signs and wonders himself. This is the first time in Scripture where God gives supernatural power to people so they can do His will!

Moses was given the right to perform three miracles. The first two were reversible signs, the sign of the staff turned into a snake and back again (4:2-5), and the sign of the hand turned leprous and back again (4:6,7). But while the first reason for both of them was to enable Moses to persuade the people of Israel that God had sent him, but both of these signs meant more than just this.

The first sign used Moses' staff. Moses was a shepherd (3:1), and his staff was his foremost tool. In throwing this on the ground, seeing it turn into a snake, and then picking it up again, Moses had to demonstrate not merely an abstract faith that God would protect him, but also complete trust in God for his personal future. Moses was turning away from being a shepherd of sheep to being a shepherd of people. Moreover, in picking up the snake, Moses showed that he was not afraid to deal with the evils that threatened either himself or the people of Israel. Incidentally, this sign was used by Moses in his first confrontation with Pharaoh (7:9f.)

The second sign was also a demonstration of trust. Leprosy was feared because it most commonly led to agonising death, and the disease was therefore regarded by ancient people as unclean. They did not believe that anyone with leprosy should have a place in society, they were 'taboo'. The sign however was a demonstration of God's power, for people would have been familiar with the quick onset of this terrible disease, but its sudden healing would indeed have been seen as miraculous! Moses probably used this sign when he first spoke to the elders of Israel (4:30), but it does not appear to have been used at any other time.

The last sign has threatening overtones (4:8,9). In Egypt, the water of the Nile was regarded as the source of life and was worshipped by the Egyptians. So the sign of turning this water into blood sounds like a threat to bring death instead of life. Now amongst other things, the

rest of the book of Exodus records the details of plagues called down on Egypt by Moses after he persistently asked Pharaoh for the release of the Israelites and was refused (Exodus 7-11). In the second of these 'plagues', Moses turned the water of the Nile into blood by striking it with his staff (7:15-25). But the plague is not the same as the sign, because in the sign, Moses is told to pour the water himself onto dry land, and he does not do this in the story of the plague. Should we ignore these inconvenient details? I suggest instead that both the sign and the plague are prophetic of the very last 'plague' to hit Egypt, after which Israel left for the desert. On that night, the 'life blood' of Egypt in the form of its 'first-born' was slaughtered by an angel of death (12:29,30), while the Israelites who sheltered under the sign of the blood of a sacrificed lamb were spared (12:1f.). Today, we are not used to thinking about things in such deep riddles, but this was normal for people of ancient times.

The primary purpose of the signs described here was to persuade the people of Israel to accept and respect Moses (4:5,8), and receive the message he brought them about God. If the people of Israel accepted the signs, together with Moses and his message from God, then their own future would be secured as God's people, and they would be able to renew their 'Covenant' relationship with God, with all its benefits and its obligations to bless the nations of the world.

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## Going Deeper

### ***Further Comments***

#### ***Trust in God and His plans for the future***

Each of the signs described in our passage was dramatic and fearsome. They each required faith and complete trust in God, as do the signs, wonders and miracles that God gives His people today. Moreover, unless the work of God has this kind of dramatic power, then people will not be able to see in them something of the divine. By looking at these signs more closely, and how God used them to target the fears and aspirations of His own people, we can learn something about how God works in signs and wonders amongst us today.

It is important to remember that these signs were not given to Moses as indicators of the plagues that were to come later on the Egyptians, but signs which Aaron (acting for Moses) performed for the people of Israel. The critical passage of Scripture which links with this is found in Exodus 4:29-32:

*<sup>29</sup> Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. <sup>30</sup> Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. <sup>31</sup> The people believed ...*

It was after this that the famous confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh took place, and the very first plague bears a resemblance to the 'staff into snake into staff' sign found here in our passage (see Exodus 7:8-13). This may itself be symbolic, but we shall examine this later when looking at this text. We have already noted the potential connection between the last sign of 'water into blood', and the last and most terrible plague of death (Exodus 12:29-32).

Another general point worth bearing in mind is that what we read in this passage is a typical form of dramatic story telling, in which a command is given, and it is then done; however, the writer repeats the same words for both the command and its performance, creating a sense of drama. We see this several times in this passage, for example:

*<sup>3</sup> The LORD said, 'Throw it on the ground;' and when Moses threw it on the ground ...*

<sup>4</sup> ... the Lord said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand and catch hold of it by the tail.' So he reached out his hand and caught hold of it ...

<sup>6</sup> the Lord said to Moses again, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' So he put his hand there, and when he took it out from inside his cloak ...

This method of storytelling is often found in Scripture (see how the story of Peter's dream and his visit to Cornelius is repeated in Acts 10, for example), and to us, it may seem rather repetitious, but it is an important part of the way that emphasis is placed by Scripture on the commands of God. They have to be obeyed exactly!

### ***The Nile; water and blood***

Together with Pharaoh, the Nile was regarded by the Egyptian people as a visible and tangible god in their own midst (at times in Egypt, the sun, or 'aten' was afforded the same status). Each had the power of life and death, the Nile through its watering of the land by annual flooding, and Pharaoh through his authority. A sign which used the water of the Nile was powerful because it claimed God's authority over the Nile and by implication, over the pantheon of gods including Pharaoh who were worshipped in Egypt. There is no mistake, the third sign was not a reversible sign as the other two were, but a 'once only' sign to the people of Israel that their God was greater than the gods of the Egyptians. Unless they were prepared to believe this, then God's plan of salvation for His people would not prevail.

The sign itself took water and turned it into blood; from life to death. Although the Scriptures present blood as meaning life, this is because blood was thought of as essential to something that was living. However, blood that was 'poured out' (as in this sign) was a sign of death. The message was unmistakable; God had the power of life and death over Egypt, something that would become clear in a terrible way, later on in the story of Exodus (as we have seen above)

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Trust and faith***

This small and seemingly minor part of the story of Moses is deceptive; small at least in comparison to the great revelation of the name of God in yesterday's reading. It is really very important because Moses' request for God's help in the first few verses shows that he was developing a partnership with God which would prove to be crucial for future years. In this instance, Moses perceived that trust and faith was required from the people of God if they were to work with him, and if God was going to be able to do His work through them. The signs and wonders that were given by God were not for people who had great faith, but for people who were lacking in it, or those who needed to have their faith ignited. Perhaps we should remember this when asking the Lord for miracles today!

#### ***Miracles today***

Many people today still find it hard to accept the miraculous, particularly as recorded in the Bible, and largely because they cannot equate this with their own experience. If we talk with a wide range of people today, however, we can easily find that many will describe events in their own lives which are totally inexplicable, and in our own context and culture, they can be called the 'miracles' of today. Sometimes, people get better after being anointed and having hands laid on for prayer, and people's lives are miraculously saved in incidents which have no rational explanation. Instead of dismissing 'miracles' out of hand, it is better to see how

God is working through inexplicable events of our own day; things that would have readily been regarded as miracles in times past. When we are open to seeing the breadth of God's majesty and the command He has of His own creation, then we may find our own faith blessed and upheld by perceiving events for which we have no clear explanation. We may even find that they have an important part to play in what our Lord wants us to do for him in ministry to the rest of the world.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- In the course of your day, expect the Lord to do something different, and see whether He does. It sounds simplistic, but we often limit our God through our refusal to accept that the miraculous is possible
- Prayerfully ask the Lord to do miracles in your life, which will show others that God is at work in you. Again, such a prayer sounds presumptive, but unless we are ready for what the Lord can do, then it may be that He cannot.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss in your group whether you feel comfortable discussing miracles, and whether you have doubts about the literal truth of events such as this.
2. In what miraculous ways does God bless His people today?
3. Discuss what this passage says about faith and trust in God, and what this might say to people today

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## **Final Prayer**

Holy Lord, stir within me the fire which warms my soul; feed it with the breeze of Your Spirit and breathe it into life. Make me glow with all the radiance of the faith within me, so that I may give testimony to Your truth, Your majesty, Your life and Your transforming power; and may I burn with love, the eternal fuel of Your magnificent Creation! Thank You, Holy Lord: AMEN

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