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Unlike the idols, our God is a living God. GRAHAM COLE looks at how this should drive our prayer.

Social scientists tell us that most Australians believe in a god, a god who is behind it all. But unfortunately, this god doesn't seem able to do anything in the twentieth century. He or 'it' may have got the show started and He may even be there at the final curtain to see if people have paid for their seats. But during the performance He remains hidden in the wings, and strangely silent.

From the Bible's perspective, this is a poverty stricken view of God. Indeed, it is practical atheism. A number of reasons have been given for this loss of a concept of an active God in the modern Western world. Some have suggested that the problem starts with life in the big city. Here, men and women are surrounded by what they have made in concrete and steel, plastic and glass; we are cut off from nature's rhythms. We easily lose our sense of dependence upon nature. We may lose the sense of our creaturehood.

Another suggestion is that we moderns approach birth, death and disease in ways that insulate us from the wonder or harshness of it all. There was a time when most of us were born at home, suffered at home and died at home. But now these events happen elsewhere, behind antiseptic walls. We may lose our sense of the fragility of life as a result. And even if we busy people had the time to think on these things, there are now a thousand and one electronic diversions to lobotomize the mind.

When we turn to the Scriptures, however, we are in another world. Our Bible doesn't tell us about a vague force behind it all. Instead, we meet the living God. Recall how the psalmist expresses his deepest longing: "My soul thirsts for the living God" (Psalm 42:2). In his extreme situation only the living God is big enough. The question is whether the psalmist's longing is one that we modern Christians have lost.

To be sure there is tremendous Christian busyness everywhere: the church going, the tape listening, the Christian book reading, the convention going and the small group meeting. But where is the expectancy? Do we still believe in the God who acts? At creation, of course. In Israel's history, of course. In the career of Jesus, most certainly. In the adventures of the apostles, indeed yes. But now? The psalmist longed for the living God. Do we?

Come with me in your mind's eye to the strange sight of a bush burning on a mountain slope. It burns and burns, but the bush doesn't burn away. For this is the living God making His name known to Moses (Exodus 3). The meaning of the name, scholars tell us, is nothing less than "I am that I am" or "I will be what I will be". In other words, Moses needed to see what God did to know who he really was. And what did God do? The living God rescued His people from Pharaoh's Egypt.

Come with me this time to Mt Carmel, centuries later. The prophet Elijah faces the hundreds of false prophets of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 18). Which of these gods is the living God?

Only the God who answers by fire in the test of the prepared altar, says Elijah. That God is Elijah's God – the same God who gave his name to Moses, the God who hears the cry of his prophet.

Come once more with me, this time to the first century AD. There is a commotion at Lystra (Acts 14). A man has been healed and the crowds want to make Paul and Barnabas into gods. But Paul won't have it. He and Barnabas are mere men. It is the living God who has done this – the same God who made the heavens and the earth.

This is the living God of biblical witness. He is the living God who speaks, who acts, who sees, who hears and who saves. He has a strong arm and a mighty hand. He speaks and there is a universe. He acts and a non-descript people are brought from bondage to freedom. He speaks and there are prophets to pass on that word. He acts and speaks supremely in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. He acts and there is an empty tomb. He speaks and there are apostles to pass on that word. This is the personal, real, sovereign God of biblical history.

This God is no idol. As far as the Bible is concerned, idols may have hands but they can't grasp; they have eyes but can't see; they have feet but can't move. Above all else, they can't hear the prayers of their people (Isaiah 44, 46 and Jeremiah 10).

Some Christian theologies offer little else than an idol. There is a stale Christian supernaturalism, for example, that so locks God away in his divine decrees that any talk of revival sounds like presumption. Yet the living God of the Bible is not sterile. His ears are creatively open to the cries of His people. He can do new things. He not only initiates, He also responds.

A great Bible teacher of a past generation, G. Campbell Morgan said: "Never say it is written." Instead, he urged that we say: "It is written and again, it is written". According to Campbell Morgan, heresy is almost always the stress of one strand of biblical truth without other balancing ones. It is written that God is utterly sovereign (Genesis 1, Psalm 90, Isaiah 40). It is also written that the prayers of a righteous man make a difference (James 5). Elijah was such a man. Prayer makes little sense without both strands of biblical truth.

If there is a sterile supernaturalism to be wary of then, there is also a superstitious supernaturalism that likewise may make a mockery of prayer and skew Christian expectancy. Either God becomes the great celestial bellhop at our command, or prayer comes close to being magic, as though there are techniques of prayer that constrain God. As I read in one book on prayer, God cannot refuse a double amen placed at the end of our petitions. Or, as an older Christian told me, if two or more of God's people covenant to pray the same petition for at least three weeks, then God would have to grant their request.

The God we are to call on, who has given us His name, is no idol. It is this great God we call on to "revive his work in the midst of the years", to use the language of the prophet (Habakkuk 3). It is this God that sometimes even ministers only encounter after they are ordained. P.T. Forsyth was such a man. Brought up on the liberal theology of the day, Forsyth believed that Jesus was the great humanitarian and that the minister's role was to motivate the flock to be humanitarians too. But a day came when, as Forsyth so movingly put it, "It pleased God therefore, by the revelation of His holiness and grace, which the great theologians taught me to find in the Bible, to bring home to me my sin in a way which submerged all the school [academic] questions...I was

turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace.”

The great question before us is whether we are merely Christians or believers? Could part of the problem with Christianity in our own country be simply that too many of us are Christians and too few of us are believers? You can tell the difference. Believers pray to the living God. They are expectant. They pray to the God whose ears are open to the cries of his people, who know His name and call upon it. Above everything else, they know that this living God has shown us His heart in the cross of his own dear Son.