

## PRAYER

### **What do you think prayer is? What is it for you?**

Communicating with God, not just talking but listening as well (listen by spending silent quiet time, reading God's Word etc)

Prayer isn't just a Christian idea, praying to the Lord goes right back to the origins of Judaism. So in Genesis 20:

"6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. 7 Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die.'" (Ge 20:6-7 NIV)

and chapter 32:

"9 ¶ Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' 10 I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. 11 Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. 12 But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" (Ge 32:9-12 NIV)

However, after Moses received the Law, prayer seems to have become more of a priestly function and its surprising that there are no instructions about prayer in the Torah.

Nevertheless, it's clear that individual prayer was still important:

"When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray towards this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them," (1Ki 8:35 NIV)

Also many of the Psalms are a kind of prayer in which the Psalmist is wrestling with God.

Certainly the prophets were people who prayed and God's word was often revealed to them through prayer and Jeremiah in particular seems to have argued with God in prayer:

"19 Listen to me, O LORD; hear what my accusers are saying! 20 Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for me. Remember that I stood before you and spoke on their behalf to turn your wrath away from them. 21 So give their children over to famine; hand them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in battle. 22 Let a cry be heard from their houses when you suddenly bring invaders against them, for they have dug a pit to capture me and have hidden snares for my feet. 23 But you know, O LORD, all their plots to kill me. Do not forgive their crimes or blot out their sins from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger." (Jer 18:19-23 NIV)

but he also had settled fellowship with God:

"7 Although our sins testify against us, O LORD, do something for the sake of your name. For our backsliding is great; we have sinned against you. 8 O Hope of Israel, its Saviour in times of distress, why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveller who stays only a

night? 9 Why are you like a man taken by surprise, like a warrior powerless to save? You are among us, O LORD, and we bear your name; do not forsake us!" (Jer 14:7-9 NIV)

At the exile, with the establishment of the synagogue, corporate prayer became an element in Jewish worship. God's face was sought in prayer (Ps 53:1; 100:2):

"1 ¶ A psalm. For giving thanks. Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs." (Ps 100:1-2 NIV)

while after the exile there is an emphasis on spontaneity in prayer, and on the need for devotion to be more than mechanical and routine (Neh 2:4; 4:4, 9).

"The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven," (Ne 2:4 NIV)

In the NT prayer is dominated by Christ's teaching and Christ gave us have much teaching and instruction and I'm going to start by reading some key verses:

"1 ¶ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Lu 18:1-8 NIV)

"18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. 19 ¶ Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel," (Eph 6:18-19 NIV)

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Php 4:6 NIV)

### **What do these verses teach us about prayer?**

Be persistent, don't give up if your prayer isn't immediately answered in the way you want – God may be saying not yet the timing isn't right. We can pray about all kinds of things no matter how great or small. Next time you're late pray for a parking place or for God to clear the traffic jam on the way to the airport. When you pray, wait patiently for God to act, don't be anxious.

Let's look at another key passage:

"5 ¶ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 ¶ "This, then, is how you should pray: "'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' 14 For if

you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Mt 6:5-15 NIV)

### **What do you think this is telling us about prayer?**

Prayer is an expression of sincere desire. It is not to inform God of matters that he would otherwise be ignorant of – God already knows everything, and the validity of prayer is not affected by length or repetitiveness. Private prayer is to be discreet, secret.

In those verses Jesus also gave us a kind of template or outline for prayer that we usually call the Lord’s prayer. We’re planning to look at the Lord’s prayer in more detail in the Autumn, so I’m not going to go into it in great depth now, but I do want make a few comments.

There is the blend of directness (“Our Father”) and distance (“Who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name”). The requests given in the Lord’s Prayer are concerned first with God, his kingdom and his glory, and then with the disciples’ needs for forgiveness and for daily support and deliverance. We need to put God first in our lives and then everything will fall into place. Note also the need for continual dependency on God we’re meant to ask each day for our needs for that coming day. Lastly we acknowledge God as the almighty ruler over all.

Occasionally it seems from our Lord’s teaching that anything that is prayed for will, without restriction, be granted. But such teaching ought to be understood in the light of Christ’s overall teaching about prayer (“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven”).

Christ stated that when the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, came the disciples would pray to the Father in the name of Christ:

**“23 ¶** In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. **24** Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. **25** ”Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father.” (Joh 16:23-25 NIV)

So we should pray to God the Father in the name of Jesus and we certainly shouldn’t pray to saints or indeed anything other than God. Also there is no other mediator between us and God except for Christ:

“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” (1Ti 2:5 NIV)

As Paul teaches we are now all sons of God and so enabled to approach our Father directly and with confidence. God is concerned about our material needs, but His greatest concerns are with our spiritual needs. In Paul’s mind these spiritual needs are a deepening of faith in Christ, love for God, and a growing appreciation of God’s love in turn:

**“14 ¶** For this reason I kneel before the Father, **15** from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. **16** I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17** so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, **18** may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, **19** and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Eph 3:14-19 NIV)

As we've already seen, Prayer is a part of the Christian's armor against satanic attack (Eph 6:18), the effective ministry of the Word of God depends on the prayers of God's people (Eph 6:18, 19), and the Christian is enjoined to pray for all sorts of things, with thanksgiving (Phil 4:6), and so to be free from anxiety.

Christian prayer is rooted, objectively, in Christ's intercession for us with the Father; and subjectively, in the enabling of the Holy Spirit. All Christians should certainly pray. The church is a kingdom of priests, offering spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name." (Heb 13:15 NIV)

"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1Pe 2:5 NIV)

but Christ is the "great High Priest."

Because of Christ's human sympathy, the power of his intercessory work enabled by the triumph of his atonement and his superiority over the old Aaronic priesthood, the church is encouraged to come to God ("the throne of grace") boldly, to find grace when it is needed: "14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Heb 4:14-16 NIV)

"For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence." (Heb 9:24 NIV)

"19 ¶ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." (Heb 10:19-23 NIV)

Prayer and obedience are linked both in the case of Christ, who learned obedience by the things that he suffered:

"7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb 5:7-8 NIV)

and in the case of the church:

"21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up

meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb 10:21-25 NIV)

Although prayer is, typically, an unself-conscious activity in which the person praying devotes himself to God, it is possible to distinguish various elements in prayer, as we’ve seen from the Bible passages we’ve looked at. Praise involves the recognition of who God is and what he does. It is “giving God the glory,” not in the sense of adding to his glory, which would be impossible, but of willingly (and where appropriate, publicly) recognizing God as God. Typical expressions of such praise are to be found in the psalms (Ps 148; 150). When the recognition of God’s goodness is in respect of what he has done for the one who prays, or for others, then the prayer is one of thanksgiving, for life itself, for the use and beauty of the physical universe, for Christ and his benefits (“Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift,” 2 Cor 9:15), and for specific answers to prayer. Confession of sin recognizes the holiness of God and his supreme moral authority, together with the personal responsibility of the one making the confession. Confession thus involves the vindicating or justifying of God, and an explicit and unreserved recognition of sin, both as it takes its rise in sinful motives and dispositions, and as it finds outward expression. Psalm 51, David’s confession of sin regarding Bathsheba, is the classic biblical instance of a prayer of confession. Petition can be thought of as it concerns the one praying, and also as it concerns others, when it is intercession. Scripture never regards prayer for oneself as sinful or ethically improper, as can be seen from the pattern of prayer given in the Lord’s Prayer. Prayer for others is an obvious expression of love for one’s neighbor which is fundamental to biblical ethics.

God doesn’t always answer prayer in the way we want – ultimately it’s his will. It is necessary to distinguish between those matters that God has declared that he will unfailingly grant upon true prayer being made and those matters that he may grant upon true prayer being made. The guide for prayer is not the petitioner’s own needs, either real or imaginary, nor his feelings or state of mind when he prays, nor his or others’ speculations about the future. The important fact is God’s will and the guide to God’s will is Scripture alone. And the Scriptures distinguish between those things a person may pray for that are desirable or good in themselves and yet that are not for every believer’s highest good, and those things that concern redemption. For instance, health or wealth, or a particular career, though each is desirable and lawful, may nevertheless not be best, in the wisdom of God, for a particular individual at a particular time. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7–9) and the death of the child of David and Bathsheba (2 Sm 12:15–23) are examples of unanswered prayer. So we absolutely can pray for health or wealth, yet God in his wisdom and sovereignty may decline to grant these things, they not being included in that particular array of things that are working together for the good of the believer concerned (Rom 8:28).

By contrast, the blessings of redemption—such as forgiveness of sins, sanctification, and strength and wisdom for the fulfilling of duties—are always given to those who truly pray for them (Ps 84:11; Lk 11:13; Jn 6:37; 1 Thes 4:3; Jas 1:5). Even such unqualified or unconditional blessings may come after apparent delay, or from an unexpected source, and allowance for factors such as these must be made when judging whether or not prayer has been answered. An important part of petitioning God is the discipline of conforming desires to the revealed will and the ongoing providence of God. In this sense prayer is educative for the believer. “Not my will, but thine be done” is the concern of the sincere petitioner. The exercise of faith in prayer to God is seen in submission to the express will of God. Otherwise faith becomes presumption, and humility becomes arrogance.

But just because God's will is supreme and he knows the end from the beginning doesn't mean that we don't need to pray. For whatever reason we can't fully understand God wants us to pray and to be part of the working out of his will and purpose. Also God has commanded us to pray and Christ has given us a template for our prayers. As the hymn writer Joseph Hart quaintly but concisely puts it:

Prayer was appointed to convey  
The blessings God designs to give.

There is no inconsistency between petitionary prayer and the unchanging will of God. For example when God said the king Hezekiah would not recover and then allowed him to recover after prayer was offered up for him, we have to understand God's original statement to Hezekiah would not recover as being subject to the condition "unless he is sincerely prayed for". In other words, in his wisdom God is willing to grant certain things upon persistent prayer being made for them, and the assertion "Hezekiah will not recover" is intended to elicit that believing prayer that God has ordained as a means to the recovery of Hezekiah. There is nothing here that is inconsistent with either God's changelessness or his eternal foreknowledge of all events, or with the efficacy of petitionary prayer.

We might ask, "Why does God go to such lengths?" The answer lies in two directions. One part of the answer is the educative function of prayer—to teach God's children their entire dependence on him for all their good. The other part of the answer is to be found in God's sovereignty, in the day-to-day and moment-to-moment dependence of his people upon him.

We all need to pray sincerely for our needs and the needs of others every day.