
CHAPTER 7 : PRAYER

For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? (Deut 4:7)

A. What Is Prayer?

A dictionary will give you a rather dry definition of prayer, but the Bible gives an epic picture of it being a dynamic communion with the living God—whom Jesus revealed as our loving Father. The same God who walked with Adam in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day (Ge 2-3) desires our close fellowship today.

Jesus says in Mk 12:30 that the most important commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Genuine prayer is thus everything to do with relationship and nothing to do with empty religion or ritual—it’s a love relationship involving dialogue with God.

Man is the crown of God’s creation, made in His image, for fellowship with Him. “I will take you as my own people and I will be your God” (Ex 6:7) echoes like a refrain throughout Scripture.

Remember that the Bible shows us that through Adam’s disobedience we are born sinful and that sin separates us from God (sin cannot come near His holiness). But God so loved us that he sent his son Jesus to die for us on the cross. Jesus’ death makes atonement for our sin and gives us direct access to the Father (Jn 3:16-17). While we were still sinners God reached out to save us. How much more now that we are believers, co-heirs with Jesus, is our heavenly Father concerned about us.

In the Old Testament, only the high priest could enter the most Holy Place, that is, gain access to the presence of God, and then only once a year after complex ritual requirements had been completed.

In the New Testament, under the New Covenant, Christ's death gives all who believe in Him direct access to God's presence. The book of Hebrews explains why priests are no longer necessary as mediators between us and God. The resurrected Jesus, our great High Priest, now seated at the right hand of the Father, is our mediator. He gives us confidence to come boldly to the throne of grace to "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Jn 1:12 says of Jesus: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." It is an awesome thing when we realise that the Creator of all things desires to have a personal relationship with us and that He knows us by name.

In Mt 6:7-8 Jesus says: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." God's love and knowledge of us is emphasised here. We are not strangers to Him because He lovingly created us and through prayer we can discover Him.

In Mt 6:9 Jesus then gave a pattern for prayer. Any good Bible commentary will elucidate⁴ the principles of prayer contained in this pattern. The opening line is "Our Father in heaven." Seeing God as Father was a radical concept for the people of Christ's day. His use of the Aramaic term of endearment, "Abba," meaning "Daddy," was revolutionary.

Jn 20:17b says: "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." What an awesome privilege to be able to come to the Creator of the universe and be received as His child.

B. Why Should We Pray?

Throughout Scripture we see God desiring a relationship with His people. We need to pray because without communication there is no relationship. Isa 55:6 encourages us to "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near." Eph 6:18a urges, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."

⁴That is, to throw light on, or to explain

Php 4:6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

Col 4:2 exhorts us to “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” 1Th 5:16-18a says: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances.”

We need to abide in Christ for without him we can do nothing (Jn 15:5), and we do this through a life of increasing prayer.

As we pray in the Spirit, He helps us to align ourselves with God, since He is our Teacher. “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1Co 2:13). Prayer moves God’s hand and changes us and circumstances. In prayer we find grace to forgive, courage to admonish, as well as strength to persevere and zeal to run the race God has placed before us.

C. Examples Of Prayer

C.1. Examples In The Old Testament

- Abraham (Ge 18:22).
- Jacob (Ge 32:24).
- Moses (Ps 90).
- Joshua (Jos 10:12).
- Hannah (1Sa 1).
- Elijah (1Ki 18:36).
- Hezekiah (2Ki 19:14).
- Jonah (Jnh 2:1).

C.2. Examples Of Jesus Praying

- In secret (Lk 5:16).
- In public (Jn 11:41).
- In solitary places (Mk 1:35, Mt 14:23).
- Through the night (Lk 6:12).
- Before daybreak (Mk 1:35).
- During crises (Mt 26:36-44).
- After his baptism (Lk 3:21).
- Before choosing disciples (Lk 6:12).
- With loud cries and tears (Heb 5:7).
- On the cross (Lk 23:46).

D. Jesus' Teaching On Prayer

Example	Lesson	Ref.
A friend going to borrow loaves	Persistency	Lk 11
The woman and the unjust judge	Tenacity	Lk 18:1-8
The Pharisee and the tax collector praying	Humility/ Penitence	Lk 18:10-14
The unmerciful servant and his debt	Charity/ Forgiveness	Mt 18:21
Praying in secret and with simple, unpretentious words	Simplicity	Mt 6:5, Mt 23:14
Two or three agreeing in Jesus' name	Unity	Mt 18:19
Standing firm, watching and praying for one hour	Intensity	Mk 14:38, Mt 26:41
When you pray, believe that you have received	Expectancy	Mt 6:6

E. How Should We Pray?

Christ is our pattern. Paul says we should imitate him as He imitates Christ (see 1Co 11:1 and 1Co 4:16, Heb 6:12, Heb 13:7 and 1Jn 2:6). "So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.' (Jn 8:28-29) We need to be the same, understanding that prayer is essentially a heart turned towards God at all times. Paul urges us to pray without ceasing.

Scripture shows people praying in many different ways. A few examples follow:

- With intelligible words (Ne 1:5-11).
- In a tongue (1Co 14:2).
- With groans (Ro 8:23, 1Sa 1, Ex 2:23).
- In poetry or song (see the Psalms for many examples).
- With cries (Heb 5:7, Mt 27:46).
- Silently (Ne 2:4).

F. Hindrances To Prayer

The Bible teaches that there are things that stop God from acting on our prayers. Although the Bible encourages us to turn to God in prayer because He hears us and works through our prayer, there are warnings in the Bible against certain things that hinder our prayer life with God. Below are a few examples. If we find such hindrances in our lives we need to start making adjustments. By tapping into God's grace we can then work through the problem and be restored to Him. God is not

demanding that we be perfect before we pray—if this were the case we would not be able to be saved—but rather that we desire to start the process of removing every obstacle in our relationship with Him. In 1Ti 4:15 Paul makes mention of Timothy's progress, not his perfection. In the same way, our faith should be progressing (see also Php 1:15).

F.1. Unforgiveness And Resentment

Mt 5:22-24 teaches that we are not to remain angry at our brothers (primarily fellow Christians). It also teaches us that before we come to God with our gifts we should deal with outstanding issues between each other, even if the resentment is from a brother towards us. Also, 1Ti 2:8 teaches that we should not have disputes or anger between each other when we pray.

F.2. Unresolved Relational Tension At Home

In 1Pe 3:7 we are taught that we should keep our relationships on the home front in a godly state to ensure that there are no obstacles in our prayer lives. Ongoing, unresolved relational tension between family members (especially husband and wife) can become a hindrance in our prayer lives.

F.3. Wrong Motives

As we get closer to God we may fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to others (Gal 6:3-4). We need to beware of this because it can make our religion into a set of empty works. See Lk 18:10-14 and 2Ch 7:14. Jas 4:3 goes on to tell us that we also do not receive from God when we ask with wrong motives. We need to pray in Jesus' name (and thus in accordance with His nature) for our prayers to be effective.

F.4. Unrighteousness

In Mic 3:4 we see how God chooses not to answer His people because of their lifestyles of injustice and wickedness. We are separated from God by sin (Mt 27:46, Ps 22:1-5) and we need to ensure that we are dealing with any patterns of sin in our lives so that our relationship with Him grows: then He will be attentive to our prayers (Ps 34:15-16).

F.5. Deliberate, Unconfessed Sin

When we choose to run from God when we have sinned we separate ourselves from God so that He does not listen to us (Ps 66:18). Rather, when we sin we should turn to Him for forgiveness and He will show mercy (Pr 28:13). We may not continue to sin deliberately thinking that God will just ignore our sin because of His love (Ro 3:8, Heb 10:26). He is holy and desires us to seek holiness too.

F.6. Not Giving God His Right Priority In Our Lives

It is good for us to set apart special time for God (Mk 1:35). In Mal 1:6-10 God tells us that He is not interested in second class offerings—He wants the best. He wants our best time and our best effort. Lk 14:26 teaches us that compared to God all other things take second place—even those things that are very important. God does not want a “lukewarm” church (Rev 3:16). Yes, we can pray whenever we have spare time, but God wants more than just spare time. Time devoted to prayer pleases God.