

PRAYER



The Third Gospel, more than any other, emphasizes the prayers of Jesus. It is Luke who tells us that the descent of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism occurred as he was praying (3:21). It is Luke who describes Jesus as often withdrawing to lonely places for prayer (5:16), sometimes in the mountains (9:28), sometimes all night long (6:12), often in private places (9:18). Luke's account of Jesus' travail in Gethsemane is the most graphic of the gospels, and in it he details Jesus' exhaustion and anguish (22:39-44). The prayers of Jesus were so striking to the disciples that on one occasion, when they were with Jesus while he was praying, they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1)! He responded with what we know as The Lord's Prayer.

But just what is prayer, and how did it begin? Prayer did not originate with Jesus, though he certainly altered the way in which it is to be performed.

Actually, although there is no formal doctrine of prayer in the Old Testament, the people of faith from earliest times communicated with God spontaneously with implicit trust, usually in the form of intercession for special needs (Ge. 20:17; 24:12; 25:21; 32:9-12). The fact that they prayed for divine help implies that they believed God to be sovereign in the universe and that he could direct the outcome of their personal experiences. The character of prayer in the Old Testament contrasts sharply with that of Israel's pagan neighbors. Pagan prayer consisted of the magical use of the name of the god(s), a frequent repetition of phrases, a prescribed manner and tone, such as murmuring or whispering, the practice of radical actions to draw the attention of the god(s), such as self-inflicted wounds, and frequently enough, a self-induced ecstasy, either through psychological manipulation or narcotics.

These sorts of approaches are absent from the Old Testament. There were no restrictions on posture or length. God was not to be manipulated, but rather, his sovereign will was to be examined and sought. Often enough, especially in the Psalms, prayers took the form of questions about God's purposes as well as requests for assistance or deliverance. Personal requests in the Psalms include such things as prayer for pardon (51), communion (63), justice (10, 13), protection (3, 7, 16), healing (6), and vindication (17, 109). Prayer also took the form of praise, and there are Psalms which are affirmations of confidence in God (5) as well as expressions of the joy of God's forgiveness (32).

By the time of Jesus, however, the practice of prayer had degenerated into form without relationship, a kind of rigid externalism which aimed at earning merit with God. There was a daily regimen of recitation, which included praying the Shema every morning and evening (a combination of Dt. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Nu. 15:37-41) along with three scheduled periods of prayer each day. For many, prayer was staged so that one's personal holiness could be publicly emphasized. The more that formality grew, the more distant God appeared to become.

It is into this tradition of prayer that Jesus was born, and he publicly challenged the distortion. Prayer was not to be an arena for exhibiting one's piety, long and drawn out, but it was to be private, to the point, and accompanied by a willingness to forgive others (Mt. 6:5-8; 23:5; Mk. 11:25). Jesus commended persistence in prayer (Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8) along with humility (Lk. 18:9-14).

Above all, Jesus left a pattern for prayer which indicated its essential character. This pattern, commonly known as The Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:1-4), contains basic elements which should characterize the prayers of Christians. It begins with the simple, intimate address of God as Abba, the child's word for "father" in the native language of Jesus. The next two clauses are directed toward God himself. One is a

statement of deep reverence, and the other is a request for God's sovereign rule to be established in the earth. Then there are two personal requests, one for daily sustenance and the other for forgiveness. Finally, the prayer closes with the request that the petitioner be preserved safely in the time of great trial. The familiar phrase "lead us not into temptation" should probably be taken in the sense of "do not let us fall victim to temptation" or "do not allow us to succumb in the great trial."

This model of prayer redirected the externalism into which traditional Jewish prayer had fallen. Instead of prayer being formal and rigid, it was now intimate and close. In fact, the address of God as Abba, which Jesus himself practiced (Mk. 14:36), is directly motivated by the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ro. 8:14; Ga. 4:6). Furthermore, Christians have a new focus for the future, the establishment of God's sovereign rule in the world, and their prayers are directed toward that ultimate goal. Of course, the fullness of God's kingdom shall not come until the King himself comes at the end of the age (2 Ti. 4:1), but it has already been inaugurated in the life and ministry of Jesus (Lk. 11:20; 17:20-21), and it is being proclaimed by those who share with others the good news about Jesus (Ac. 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23). Prayerful trust in God for daily protection and provision are always in order, even though God already knows our needs before we ask (Mt. 6:25-34). Martin Luther aptly stated that the Lord's Prayer can be prayed either "forwards" or "backwards". It is prayed "forwards" when the order of its clauses is observed, and one prays first for the coming of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will. It is prayed "backwards" when one begins with personal needs and anxieties. In the Lord's prayer, forgiveness plays a significant part, not only God's forgiveness for our own sins, but our own forgiveness for the offenses of others. In fact, the two are tied together, for if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us (Mt. 6:14-15; 18:21-35).

Among the early Christians, prayer continued to function as a part of the normal Christian life. Some Christians of a Jewish background continued to observe formal periods of prayer (Ac. 3:1), but by far, most examples of prayer by early Christians were released from the formalism of Jewish tradition. They prayed both privately (Ac. 10:9) and corporately (Ac. 12:5, 12). In emergencies, they confidently put their trust in God (Ac. 9:40). Similar to Jesus when he forgave his executioners, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of the mob that lynched him (Ac. 7:59-60) and Paul prayed for the forgiveness of the Christians who failed to stand with him at his trial (2 Ti. 4:16). Prayer was offered when facing decisions (Ac. 1:24-25), when making farewells (Ac. 20:36; 21:5), when confronting difficult circumstances (1 Ti. 5:5; Ja. 5:13-16), and even when eating (1 Ti. 4:4-5). Leaders were consecrated with prayer (Ac. 6:6; 13:3; 14:23), and the church petitioned God's help in spreading the gospel (Col. 4:2-4; 2 Th. 3:1). Paul's letters abound with prayers for the maturity and perseverance of his converts (Ro. 1:9-10a; Ep. 1:16-17; Phil. 1:3-6, 9-11; Col. 1:9-12; 4:12; 2 Th. 1:11; 2 Ti. 1:3). Sometimes prayer was so intense that it was expressed by inarticulate groans as the Holy Spirit enabled believers to pray in spite of weakness and in spite of not having a clear understanding of God's purposes (Ro. 8:26-27). In fact, the gift of the Spirit to each believer revitalized their prayers so that they might pray with the help that God in his Spirit offers, rather than merely out of their own strength (Ep. 6:18; Jude 20). Finally, all prayers were offered to God, the Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son (Col. 3:17).

Prayer was so natural, so thoroughly a part of the Christian life, that Christians developed a greeting which was in effect a prayer—*maranatha*, "Our Lord, come!" (1 Co. 16:22). Paul's advice to the Thessalonian Christians still stands: "Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Th. 5:17-18).



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