

Prayer - how and why?

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Date: 22 September 2019

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[0:00] We're going to spend a few minutes just now thinking about this matter of prayer. I'm going to go back to square one with prayer really and say why pray?

He's standing. People kneel in prayer, kneel before the Lord. Our traditional method is hands together and eyes closed. I'm not sure that's in the Bible at all actually, but that's the traditional method, isn't it? Sorry? Yeah, I'm all in favour of teaching kids to be still in quiet. Anyway, and the mouth is used in prayer. There's thinking silent prayers. Well, silent prayers, aren't they? But prayers, I think in the sense the Bible uses it, largely connected with words. Anyway, why to have a special time? Why together? I found that an interesting question to think about biblically if we pray together. So the question I'm mulling over is what is prayer while I'm talking to God? Why pray? Is it, if we were to take a very cynical view, we say is it right? Is it good? Is it meaningful? Is it valuable? Or in some religions, it's irreverent to ask God for things because he's far above that. It's superfluous, makes no difference whatsoever. Why pray? And I'm going to answer by taking a very quick tour of the Bible, sort of from beginning to end, as it touches on the matter of prayer. So we're going to do a sort of quick tour of the Bible from the beginning to end and hopefully, as we do so, we will learn some answers to these two questions. What is prayer and why pray? So let's just try and give a definition we're talking about. Something in general, prayer, is understood to be human beings talking to God and talking to God in things like asking. Because pray, old English, means to ask. So prayer takes its name from the idea of asking. So I pray your attention as we think about prayer. I'm asking for your attention.

Prayer is generally asking for things. So typically asking for guidance, asking for protection, asking for provision. Prayer includes thanksgiving. So when God has given guidance, protection, thanks and provision, it is very natural to say thank you to God. Now I'm going to give a more elaborate description of Christian prayer later, but this is just to get us going. Human beings talking to God in that sort of area of things.

There's many mysteries about prayer. And please let us not think that prayer is nothing but simple. children can pray, but there's much more to prayer than just childishness. Think about what this says about God himself. Now there are many so-called gods, and many of the so-called gods get prayed to in the way that suits them. But what about the real God of the Bible? The real God of the Bible is sovereign, and he is personal. Sovereign meaning he rules all things in a way that I'll explain in a moment. And personal meaning we're made in his image. We are like him. He is like us in this matter of personalness. And the thing about being personal is that you can have a conversation with a person.

And they listen and react and are pleased or angry. God is personal. There's a deep mystery in putting those two words together. God is sovereign and he is personal. The sovereign means he has total control over everything that takes place. Everything in the world to do with things and to do with people.

[4:56] He has total control over all those things. And his control is implemented around a plan that he has to bless this rebellious and lost world. So he reveals something of this plan to Abraham back in Genesis, where he says, this is my plan, Abraham. All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.

That's a revelation of his plan. Ephesians 1.11, Paul the apostle says this about his plan. He says, we, Paul, etc., were chosen in Christ, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. There's Paul putting God's plan in a little nutshell. What was his plan? Well, his plan includes everything. Everything works in

accordance with this. And swept up in this was God choosing Paul, predestinating him, saying, this is my plan. It's fixed. I've decided Paul is going to be saved. And this plan sweeps through the world of things and people. And God works it all out for his glory. God is sovereign. He is sovereign in saving people.

He is sovereign in his grace. And he works everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. That's who God is. That's our God. And then we ask, well, if God already has his plan, and he has chosen people to be saved and everything is already included in his plan, then what's the point of prayer? What is the role of prayer? If God already has his plan, prayer cannot be us advising God. As if God says, oh, I'm a bit stuck on this. I need some people to give me a bit of an idea. And we say, Lord, why don't you save my neighbour across the road? It's not like that. God doesn't need our advice. He already has his plan. God already has his will. He doesn't need extra motivation. It's not like getting kids to do their homework. There's the homework. Go on, do it. God is not a little child who needs extra motivation. And God is already all-powerful.

He doesn't need to be urged to try harder. So where does prayer fit in? Because here is a mystery. Because God says, I want you to pray.

It is part of my will and my plan for you to pray. God invites his people to pray to him and is pleased to hear their prayer. It's a mystery, isn't it? But it's a wonderful mystery. And as we survey through the Bible, hopefully it will become a little bit clearer, but also perhaps a little bit more, what's the word I'm looking for? Inviting. That it will say to us, I actually want to be part of that. Now I think about it a bit more, I want to be part of that during this week. Okay, let's go, let's, if you have a Bible, you find it helpful to turn up. I'm going to go to creation. And I'm going to go to Genesis chapter 1 verse 26, where on the sixth day, God says, let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. Just bear with me. That's what God said. And [9:17] I asked the question, who is he talking to? And I answered the question because man wasn't there. He wasn't talking to human beings. He's saying, I'm going to create humans. He was talking to himself. He says, let us create. He is deliberating within himself. And somehow in the revelation of scripture, we're invited to overhear, sort of retrospectively, what God was saying to himself. And I find this fascinating, that when God was fulfilling his plan to make human beings, he talks to himself. He knows what he's going to do. But in part of that process, he makes it a matter of words. And within the Trinity, as we now as Christians look back on that, within the Holy Trinity, there is conversation, which to us comes across as God deliberating.

Listen, this is what I'm going to do. There are words of an internal conversation within the Trinity. Let us make Father, Son, and Holy Spirit an internal deliberation. God's words are the active agents of creation. So God speaks and it is done. But words are also part of the internal process of the triune God in this act of creating. Words are part of this action.

He talks to himself about it. That's number one. Let's move on. Go into the Garden of Eden. You might have it before you. It depends how quick your eyes are. I invite you to scan through to find Adam praying. I invite you to scan through and see an example of Adam asking for guidance, Adam asking for protection, Adam asking for provision, Adam giving thanks. And I invite you quickly to scan through that and I think you will actually find nothing.

Nothing is recorded of prayer in the unfallen Garden of Eden. Now, I wouldn't like you to think that's all there was to it because there was the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and we can assume that there was some sort of intercommunion going on or expected to go on. But nothing's recorded about prayer. The relationship that God has with Adam is God speaks to himself. He speaks to Adam. Adam, the only thing that I'm seeing recorded in chapter 2 is talk about his wonderful wife. The man said, verse 23, this is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman for she was taken out of man. That's what Adam is recorded as saying. He just blurts that out. First poem in the whole world. Not much else. And I would like to suggest, and I'm not going to go to the stake for this, but I would like to suggest to us this morning that there is a development down the centuries of the Bible in this matter of prayer. And so I'm going to put a triangle ramping up. There it is. Starting there and getting higher and higher and higher. I would like to say that we in the New Testament are a high watermark of the privilege and

possibility of prayer.

that we have the highest privilege of prayer. And I would like to invite us to realise that and to use it. If we have this privilege, let's pray. Well, Adam didn't pray much, apparently.

[13:29] Nothing much recorded. Think about the rest of Genesis. Actually, there's not much prayer. In the rest of Genesis, the examples of prayer are few and far between. For the patriarchs, the Bible says, Abraham, when he got into a pickle saying that his wife was his sister, Abimelech king of Gerar. Abimelech king of Gerar got ill and it said, Abraham is a prophet. He will pray for you and you will live. So there's one example. Not many, there's one example. Abraham's servant prays when he's going to find a wife for Isaac. Am I getting that right? Yeah. And he prays, give me success. Jacob prays when he comes back from his wanderings, save me from my brother. It's a bit of a prayer to have to pray. That's not much. With one notable exception, which we will stop and look at, which was Genesis 18. Please have a quick look at Genesis 18.

Genesis 18, which was read to us. This is Abraham and the matter of Sodom, the wicked city and God with two angels. So three people all together, God with two angels. The Greek Orthodox Church, I think says it's the three persons of the Trinity, but I think it's actually God and two angels, so making three people. They visit Abraham, they call in on him. And in Genesis 18, 16, when the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom and Abraham walked along with them to see them to see them on their way. And what is said now seems to me to be extremely significant. He says, the Lord said, so he's deliberating with himself, it would appear, shall I hide from Abraham, shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation. And all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised for him. And then we have the explanation of this. And Abraham, in verse 23, approaches the Lord and begins this remarkable haggling over numbers for mercy towards Sodom. It is almost like haggling, isn't it? If, verse 23, will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of 50 righteous people living in it? And there is this arguing with God. There is this haggling with God, which seems to be a remarkable instance of this matter of prayer. And God doesn't say it's none of your business. I'm sovereign. He actually engages with the process, as we will see. So what can we see here?

It's set in the context of choice. So verse 19, I have chosen Abraham. It's set in the framework of the God who sovereignly chooses. It's set in the context of faith, because Abraham is par excellence, the man of faith. You have that in chapter 15, verse 6. Am I right? 15, verse 6, where Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. Abraham is the man of faith, and this is in the context of faith. And I also notice, verse 19, we're in chapter 18, verse 19, I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing, two favourite Hebrew words, tzedakah and mishpat, what is ordered, good, right, mishpat, tzedakah, which is righteous, honourable, morally pure and good.

[18:17] And this is part of the context too. And God says, leading up to this haggling, he says, I'm going to show Abraham something. I'm not going to hide from him what I will do.

And this whole conversation comes in this context of choice, sovereign choice, faith, alignment with God's ways. Do you know what I mean by alignment with God's ways? So, himself and his family are going to not go their own way, but align themselves with God's way, the things that are right, the things that are just, the things that are God's way of thinking and doing things. That's the line that they're in. And because of this, God says, I'm going to reveal to Abraham. I will not hide from him what I'm going to do. The revelation of his purposes, and on this basis, God is willing to bring Abraham in on the act via his prayer for mercy for the wicked, for the sake of the righteous. And I think we have something quite remarkable going on here.

Here is the sovereign, choosing God, who says, this is the way I'd like to do things. Abraham, I've chosen him. He's aligned with me. His whole family is aligned with me. I'm going to share with him what I'm going to do. And God knows that Abraham will come back to him and engage with him in

this intercessory prayer for mercy. I think that's very instructive. And perhaps it'll become a little bit clearer why that's instructive later. But here is prayer, God revealing his purposes to believing people who are walking in his ways. And he says, that's what I love to do. I love to do things this way.

Okay. Let's move on. I can't stop too long on too many things. If we move ahead, so we've gone from Abraham, we go to Moses, and we think, what's the Moses prayer thing? Quite a lot of prayers that Moses himself prayed, a single person. Remember the burning bush? It's got a lot of conversation there, isn't it? Take off your shoes for the ground you're standing on is holy ground. And conversation, prayer with God. Certainly Moses. In the set-up, the covenant set-up, Moses, the people of God, their God, you get this remarkable statement. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us, I should say near, whenever we pray to him.

So certainly prayer in Deuteronomy. The privilege of having a God who is near to hear prayer.

[21:31] So I'm going to move straight on from Moses to David. David. There's many psalms which are prayers of David, of course. And there are particular incidents where God shows his purposes for David and his son and his sons after him. And that forms the basis of prayer. I'm not going to stay on that. I'm just going to notice that. You might like to look it up because it's very instructive as well. But I'm going to move on to the son of David and to the temple. So one of the things, as you know, the history of it, David captured the city of Jerusalem, the mountain of Jerusalem, made that his headquarters. And he had this desire to make this place into the temple of God so that God's presence was not in the tent, the tabernacle, but in the building, the glorious temple. It was Solomon who built the temple. But if you recall that, if you don't recall, I'll tell you anyway, when the temple was built and commissioned, there are lengthy chapters about the key position of the temple for prayer. And I might as well just put one thumb in it. 1 Kings 8 is the reference I've got.

1 Kings 8, verse 22 and onwards. This is Solomon praying about the temple. It's a long prayer and it's about prayer.

1 Kings 8, 22, Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands towards heaven and said, well, O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below, etc. And in verse 27, concerning the temple, which was however many meters long, wide and deep, will God really dwell on earth?

2 Kings 9, 1 Kings 9, sin and so on.

Pray. We have an institution of prayer. This temple is going to be the place of prayer. So I put a sort of a step change there.

[24:53] One of the key points here in growth in prayer, here is an access point to God, despite the sins of God's people, the temple.

And here is the context for this. Sinful failure, the need for forgiveness, and the rebuilding of relationship and the furthering of God's purposes. When you hear forgive.

When you hear forgive. Solomon and the temple let's move on the temple being the place of prayer I move on to the abuse of the temple the history of God's people goes on there and Jesus comments in his day on the temple as it's been destroyed and rebuilt I haven't got the exact quote but this is the substance of it, he's saying this temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations and you have made it into, remember what he said a den of thieves it was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations but it failed catastrophically it was the exact opposite of that they weren't in alignment with God's way of justice and righteousness here's a quote from Isaiah in those days a fearful quote he says to the people in the temple when you spread out your hands in prayer I will hide my eyes from you even though you make many prayers I will not listen your hands are full of blood quite stern isn't it these people had a place to pray that was what it was there for these people were praying these people spread their hands in prayer so they stood in the right way they said words but what's the but?

the but is God took no notice and wouldn't listen why wouldn't he listen? because their actions their attitudes their ways were completely at odds with God your hands are full of blood it was a violent

corrupt society people I don't know what they did it says that I looked for violence and I heard a cry sorry I looked for fruit and I saw violence I looked for fruitfulness and I heard a cry so injustice cruelty selfishness not mishpat and tzedakah God doesn't hear prayer from people who are not aligned with him that make sense?

[27:53] a lack of alignment with the of the people of God with the ways and purposes of God and God will not hear such prayer it eventually led to disaster and exile teaches us doesn't it that if we're to come to pray we make a serious matter in confession and repentance we want to be aligned with the ways of God it takes a little bit of effort what should we be how should we be coming what sins should I be confessing how can I be turning towards God as we pray I don't want to just turn up I want to turn to the Lord and as we pray what is in alignment with his will and purposes what sort of prayers will he hear I suppose what sort of people will he hear prayer from number eight let's go on to Daniel so I've just whooshed through history here

Daniel again it's just one man so I can't use him as an example to say it's good for us all to pray together because he was a solitary man one man he prayed three times a day do you remember that the government wanted to make it illegal to pray and he you could see him praying because he wanted to open the window and pray towards Jerusalem or something like that so you could see that he was praying and when the government made it illegal he didn't stop praying so good for him despite the king making it illegal to pray and what was he praying for now then have I got a reference here yes he was praying for the restoration of God's city and God's people and God's purposes and it's in Daniel chapter nine which I will find Daniel chapter nine and here again is a remarkable prayer fascinating to think how this comes off the back of God revealing his purposes to Daniel and then as it were opening that as an opportunity for Daniel to step in and pray chapter nine verse two I Daniel understood from scripture according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years so I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition in sackcloth and ashes I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed I noticed that he aligns himself with God's purposes the fasting and the sackcloth and ashes is a way of saying I'm deeply grieved about this it really matters to me about this different cultures have different ways of expressing this you don't feel that you need to turn up in sackcloth and ashes but to be concerned is the thing isn't it and he pleads with God in prayer and what does he pray well he prays in confession

I confessed my sin is that right verse 4 am I saying the wrong thing I confessed and go to verse 17 he acknowledges sin and he says now our God hear the prayers and petitions of your servant for your sake oh Lord look with favour on your desolate sanctuary give ear oh God and hear open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your name we do not make requests of you because we are righteous but because of your great mercy oh Lord listen oh Lord forgive oh Lord hear and act for your sake oh my God do not delay because your city and your people bear your name fascinating isn't it quite moving we're not asking because we're righteous we're asking because you are merciful

Lord have mercy on us and what we're asking is for your name and honour in that period of history God's name and honours were tied to a geographical city and a geographical nation now that is different God's name and honour are tied to his people across the whole wide world not in one particular city that Jerusalem is in bondage the real Jerusalem is our mother in heaven that's what Paul says about that and we are surely like Daniel to pray Lord build your church Lord see the degree of dishonour that comes to your name in our nation in our city that can't be right may your name be hallowed hear our petitions and prayers for your sake oh Lord look with favour on the state of the Christian church on the state of your kingdom in

[33:22] Brighton and Hove give ear oh Lord and see open your eyes and see the people that bear your name bless them build them encourage them we do not make requests of you because we are righteous but because of your!

great mercy! O Lord listen O Lord forgive O Lord hear and act O Lord for your sake O my God do not delay because these people this work these causes are bear bear your name Lord don't let Southern Cross church disappear because it's called by your name there's a Hindu temple next door to it Lord don't let the Hindu temple prosper and the gospel church drop out of existence

chapter that was number 8 Daniel I'm going to whiz straight on to the New Testament to our Lord and Saviour put into this context Jesus is above all the man of prayer we find him praying it depends on which gospel you read the number of times that it's mentioned Luke if I remember correctly specifically says at certain key points in Jesus life when he was baptised he was praying when he called his disciples he was praying he was the man of prayer and the supreme teacher of prayer and I think we've got another step change so I put another triangle in there and let us think about this if the perfect son of God the almighty the second person of the trinity the incarnate second person of the trinity lived his life in prayer if prayer mattered to him how much more should it be part of our lives isn't that right he was sinless he was perfectly aligned with the will of God and yet prayer is an intrinsic part of the life of Jesus like the song said about his native air the air that he breathed as it were was prayer and if I may I would like to just in a suggestion take that right back to God speaking to himself in creation let us let us do this and we have in the new testament the son of God speaking to his father let us do this who shall I have as my twelve disciples what shall I do next and depending on his father in prayer if the perfect son of God lives his life in prayer how much more should we now there are crisis prayers in Mark's gospel prayer time is crisis time so he prays at the burst of initial popularity if I remember correctly I think he gets up early in the morning and goes off by himself to pray at the choice of the twelve apostles he prays at the heady excitement of the feeding of the I should say five thousand actually he sends the disciples away in the boat and he goes up to pray and of course pre-omitantly we know in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed He engaged with his father and aligned himself with his father's will in earnest it wasn't haggling but it was prayer wasn't it if it be possible let this cup pass from me but not my will but your will he prayed!

[37:14] and no wonder the disciples picked up on this and they said Lord teach us to pray that's something we can see that you are such an expert at you understand prayer we don't teach us to pray that's what they said to the saviour and his answer to that was what we prayed right at the beginning of our meeting wasn't it our father in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done that was Jesus' answer to this I've got a couple more things to say about the innovative teaching on prayer and I just like us to refer to a couple of places in John's Gospel I refer us to Jesus description and depiction of the heart of the purposes of

God in chapter 12 verse 30 where he says I'm sorry verse 32 but I when I am lifted from the earth will draw all to myself it doesn't actually say amen it just says all this is to show the death he was going to die Jesus says about his cross when I'm lifted up from the earth that cross will be drawing people to me all over the world all down through history I'll draw all sorts of people to myself as I'm lifted up from the earth and in John 15 14 and 15 and I'm cutting this ever so condensed Jesus speaks about the committing of the fulfillment of these purposes and the explanation of it and the word by which this is fulfilled he commits this to his apostles chapter 15 verse 14 he says to them you are my friends if you do what I command so the apostles are to align themselves with the with the purposes of Jesus

Christ if you do what I command I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business shall I hide from them the things I am about to do seeing as they are aligned with me in my purpose seeing as I've chosen them of taking what God said to Abraham and sort of comparing it with what Jesus might have been thinking!

I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business instead I have called you friends for everything I heard from my father I have made known to you you are completely in on everything that this gospel revelation contains there's not a single thing that the father gave to me to give to you that I have held back there's not a single thing that I have miscommunicated you apostles have got the whole deal the whole understanding of it I've made that known to you and therefore well he says you did not choose me but I chose you I appointed you to go and bear fruit and end of verse 16 the father will give you whatever you ask in my name how wonderfully these things are all knit together aren't they the choosing of

God the purposes of God the revelation of God and it's actually the community of his people because he says you have to love one another and prayer it's all tied together I will do this and I it's

a mystery why would God involve us but he says no I want you to be involved in this I want you to be involved in prayer I've shown you things now you think about them and bring them back to me as prayers and whatever you ask in my name that means you thought about it you thought how it fits in with my purposes whatever you ask in my name will be given!

[41:40] by the Father the truth anyone who has faith in me will do what I've been doing he will do even greater things than these because I'm going to the Father and I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father you may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it so let me conclude by doing what I can to wrap those thoughts up in a fresh definition of what is prayer prayer Christian prayer is the privilege!

of being brought in on the processes and the plans and the purposes of the Almighty we are brought in I think we can dare to say this within the implementation of the purposes of the holy eternal trinity we pray to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit we are involved in the mystery of the trinity itself when we pray God as Heavenly Father through the ministry and merit of Jesus Christ in the influence of the Holy Spirit in a father son father child relationship we pray to God as our heavenly father we are remember Jesus saying you should have guessed that I would be about my father's business because that's what a son is you might have had a dad who showed you how to do things that he did your dad was a baker he might have shown you even when you were a little!

child how to whatever you do with bread blah blah blah or if your dad was a carpenter he might have brought you into his workshop and said this is how you sharpen a stick or this is how you sharpen a chisel this is how you use a saw fathers love to bring their sons into their business and here we have on this eternal scale and I think we dare to say this that you are involved in my business and the way one of the ways a major way you are to be involved is I want you to talk about it I want you to come to me in prayer and I say what a privilege that is we come in repentance and faith for the very fulfilment of the mysteriously revealed will of God this is a superlatively high privilege it's more than Abraham had

I think more than Adam had is it more than David had but it's what we have this superlatively high privilege superlatively meaning very very to be part of the fulfilment of God's sovereign saving plan and enter into that in prayer so I'm going to say who wouldn't want to be part of that so we shall meet for prayer this week and we shall close by singing