

Praying, Part 1 - The God We Pray To

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[0 : 0 0] I ask you to pray with me before we do anything else. O Lord God, for as much as without Thee we are not able to please Thee, mercifully grant that Thy Holy Spirit may now, in all things, direct and rule our hearts.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. I thank Olaf for his introduction and move straight into what I suppose I should call the beef.

These talks on prayer that I'm going to offer you are, I hope, the groundwork for a book which I'm committed to attempt.

Its working title is Praying, and its focus will be on the activity, the life of prayer, not just on the theory, the theology of prayer, which, of course, is important, and you will hear a great deal about the theology of prayer as I go along, but if you're just discussing the theology of prayer, well, the danger is that you're left up in the air.

Your heart says, well, all right, that's very fine, but now, how does one actually pray? And then one realises that in discussing the theology of prayer, that question hasn't yet been answered.

[1 : 5 1] My book attempts to deal with the reality of praying as a life activity. I'm stressing this right at the outset, because after all, I am by profession a theologian, and that makes it appear that I am a theoretician.

I'm not going to deny that I'm a theoretician. Not all theoreticians, however, are any good when it comes to the practice of that about which they know the theory.

I, for instance, know a good bit about English cricket, and have long animated conversations with Bill about English cricket, where we share our knowledge.

Bill has played the game, but for various reasons, I have never played cricket. I just know about it. I am a theoretician, then, in that area, but no more.

And if you put me on a cricket field, the results would be deplorable. Or again, take musical performance. I know a fair amount about music.

[3 : 0 7] I can talk music theory with people who work in that area. I can talk about musical performance with Miss A down here, who is big in that area herself.

But I can't play an instrument. So I'm very conscious of the distinction between merely knowing the theory and applying the theory in practical action.

So I want, I'm lowering this point a bit, I want you to know that in giving these talks, and then please God in writing the book, my identity and my trust, my perspective, and my emphasis will be that first and foremost of a pilgrim who is on the road himself, as best he can manage, and a catechist that in younger churches is a recognized category.

A catechist is a man who teaches basic, practical Christianity to young converts and who, where there's no young converts as yet apparent, becomes an evangelist to lead people into new Christianity, new at least to them, and then as catechist, he sets himself to ground them in basic Christianity.

I have come to think over the years that catechist is perhaps the best description of me as a theologian, because I've never been happy dealing with any theological subject until I've brought it down to the level of the Christian who is still relatively at the beginner stage, but who wants to see how these matters that I've been discussing can help him or her forward from where they are.

[5 : 13] And in this book, praying, the agenda will be similar. So, think of me as pilgrim, catechist, pastor perhaps, and maybe tour guide.

I can remember a tour in the Arctic. My wife was anxious that we should go to the Arctic for our 40th wedding anniversary, and so we did.

Well, it's a bit rough up in the Arctic, but we went on one of these conducted tours, and the tour guide really was marvelous. And if I can be as good a pastor and catechist as he was a tour guide, I shall feel happy about what I'm doing.

So, how do I define my aim in giving this series of talks? If you read the detective stories of Martha Grimes, you will know that she likes to title each of her epics, call them that, after an English pub.

And she's sought out the most fascinating pub names with which to do this. And one of her books has as its title the name of a pub somewhere in England, Help the Poor Struggling.

[6 : 44] And I nicked that phrase from her because I need it. Helping the Poor Struggler is what this series of talks is all about.

I'm the Poor Struggler to start with. You, I'm sure, and all Christians with us, we are all poor strugglers in this matter of praying.

We, all of us, attempt it. We, none of us, are content with what actually happens when we attempt it. And that's the human condition, the Christian condition, to which I seek to speak.

We know that prayer is natural, that prayer is normal, that prayer is necessary for Christians. We have no doubt about that. We know that the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and very specifically the New Testament lays on the direction that we should pray.

Men ought always to pray and not to faint. Luke 18, 1, Jesus said things and in that place told a story in order to drive that point home.

[8 : 05] the whole armor of God which we've all of us got to put on in order to stand against the wiles of the evil one includes all prayer.

Praying at all times with all prayer, that is all appropriate forms of prayer, that comes at the end of Paul's description of the full armor of God and clearly for him it's as important as the rest of the specifics that he's mentioned.

And, well, I could go on. There are many texts in the New Testament which express the direction that Paul reduces to three words in English translation in 1 Thessalonians 5, 17, pray without ceasing.

Keep praying. And when they ask Jesus, Lord, teach us to pray, as on one occasion the disciples did, well, as you know, Jesus came out with the Lord's Prayer, both as a form of words to start with and as a pattern to develop.

Luke 11, 1, when you pray, say, and in Matthew chapter 6, where the Lord's Prayer again is taught, after this manner, in this way, you must pray.

[9 : 38] So, yes, in a sense, it's all there, as clear as can be. We are given the direction to pray, when Jesus gives us the pattern for prayer, it all ought to be plain sailing.

But somehow, it isn't. we end up struggling, we struggle day by day to make time for prayer, and many folk have to struggle to find a place where they can be on their own to pray.

And when we got over those hurdles, well, thoughts wander, and we dry up. We know what we want to pray about, we know what we want to sort out in God's presence, but everything seems to run into the ground and we finally can't do it.

We don't know quite what to say, and our muddle reduces us to silence. Everybody seems to have that experience, I know that I have had it more times than I like to remember.

And then, of course, there's a boomerang effect in our own minds. we made the effort to get alone so that we could pray, but look what's happened.

[11 : 00] What then have we been doing? Is there anything real about my attempt to pray today? Isn't it really empty?

Is there anything better, wiser, more fruitful in the life of prayer than this? we struggle. We need help.

All right. As one who takes his place in that category, I attempt to produce what may help me, experience will tell, and what may help you.

I believe I'm taking the lid of a very widespread problem, not just a problem for us 30, 35 people, whoever we are in this room today, but for most of God's people, if not all, at most periods, if not all, in church history.

And so I now put the problem in larger terms. People try to pray, do we really manage it?

[12 : 20] Some of us use forms, some of us use prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, others of us use prayer from various devotional manuals, we use prayers that were composed by Celtic pastors, donkeys years ago, we use prayers that come from the Middle Ages, prayers that come from Roman Catholic sources, prayers that come from Protestant sources, some of us try to get on without using set prayers at all, most of us I suppose could remember what it was like when we were younger Christians, and not so self-conscious about this, and we used to burble before the Lord in the way in which young children burble to their parents about the things that are going on, and now that we are older Christians, older in years anyway, we are less certain about what we ought to be doing when we pray, and less and less happy about what we achieve, or manage when we pray.

We make requests to God, and we wonder whether they make any difference. Is God answering our prayers? If not, why not? If he is, well how?

Because what's happening isn't exactly what we asked for. I think that these are universal problems among Christian people, not just your problems and my problems.

There are lots of folk who pop up and say, I can help you, I will teach you a technique that works. That's what they say, and then they tell us about, here's some of the headings, listening prayer, and centering prayer, and the prayer of silence, and mental prayer, and the prayer of union, and how to get through the dark night of the soul.

Yes, the phraseology is there, and I'm not saying that the things that are set before us under these headings are useless, but I am saying that I think the general experience is, well, thank you for the encouragement, but you haven't focused for me the way through my problems about praying.

[14 : 49] So, people who have sat gratefully through talks and techniques about prayer, prayer, they are very soon found at further conferences on prayer, listening to further talks, because the problems haven't yet been solved.

I'm trying simply to be objective friends when I say these things, I'm not trying to be satirical. This is a serious problem, I think we are all in it together, and I think the first thing we have to do is to be realistic about where we are and where we aren't in this matter of praying.

Well, I have put it to you, friends, that deep down we all of us have found that prayer isn't as easy as some people make it sound.

And I put it to you further that all of us are somewhat embarrassed to admit how general, how, how, how, how can I say, how far-reaching are the problems about praying that they have, or we have.

And those of us who, those of us who don't feel that way have to check whether prayer hasn't become for us a routine which we are able to carry out to our satisfaction just because it's a routine in the way that we carry out the daily exercise of cleaning our teeth.

[16 : 36] We do clean our teeth, but we don't think about it, we just do it. And there is in the church, you find from time to time this quite separate problem of people who routinize prayer simply as their own personal answer to the problem that we've been trying to take the lid off, the problem that is of prayer becoming a genuine, a genuine exercise of communion with God.

So if you routinize something, you just do it, you don't have to think about it, then you can go through the day with a nice warm feeling inside, I've done it. Same as one, if you're anything like me, you don't like to venture out into public society in the morning until you clean your teeth.

But that's not the fullness of prayer, and all of us, without exception, I think, would have to acknowledge, no, that's a sort of band-aid for this feeling of perplexity.

It may diminish the intensity of the feeling, but if we're honest, we have to recognize the perplexity remains. We are not sure of ourselves in prayer.

We've had, I suppose, all of us, specific encouragements in prayer when we brought problems to God and things have happened which we've been able to recognize as answers to our prayers and therefore encouragements to go on praying.

[18 : 11] But then, on a day-to-day basis, we're struggling and we need help. I brought a book which has as its title, almost the best word of the book, The Struggle of Prayer.

Here it is, a book by a theologian named Donald Blesch who is also, I think he would like to call himself an evangelical pietist. I'm very happy to call him that.

In other words, he's an evangelical theologian who's concerned about Christian experience and struggle is the key category which he has taken as the focus of his book.

And when P.T. Forsythe, a hundred years ago, wrote his little book titled The Soul of Prayer, you read through the book and you realize he doesn't make a verbal point of saying struggle is my focus, but the substance of what he has to say is dealing with precisely the struggle.

So, I'm putting it to you, friends, one, that this is a real problem, and two, that those who have thought most seriously and written most deeply, most weightily, as I think Donald Blesch and P.T.

[19 : 32] Forsythe did, about prayer in our time, they have acknowledged that the struggle category is the most realistic category in terms of which to address the problem and the reality of praying.

How do I pray? Well, that's the question of the book. And, I shall do the best I can with this question, as I give you my series of talks, and you will have to decide how well I'm getting on.

But, before we go any further, I would like to read you some challenging stuff from the first bishop of Liverpool, of whom we've heard already in this session of Loneer's Exchange, John Charles Ryle, who wrote a tract that sold by the thousand.

It was in its 24th edition by 1552. It was published under the title Do You Pray? Later, it was published under the title A Call to Prayer, and it's a reprint with the title A Call to Prayer, that I have in my hand.

But, it's the same tract, and I'd just like to read you a few sentences, in case what I've said makes you feel, well, there are some things that are out of my reach, and perhaps wisdom says I'd better give up.

[21 : 14] This is right. I ask whether you pray, because a habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian. All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect.

From the moment there's any life and reality about their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing and squealing, so the first act of men and women when they're born again is praying.

This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God. They cry day and night to him. The Holy Spirit, who makes them new creatures, works in them the feeling of adoption and makes them cry, Abba, Father.

He means it's the natural thing for them to do. They have the filial instinct, to use the phrase that I would use and others in our time have used.

And so it goes on. It's as much a part of their new nature to pray. This is God's children. It's as much a part of their new nature to pray as it is of a child to cry.

[22 : 27] They see their need of mercy and grace. They feel their emptiness and weakness. They cannot do otherwise than they do. They must pray. Well, my soul resonates with that and I hope that yours does also.

then he says, I ask whether you pray because there's no duty in religion so neglected as private prayer. And he hammers away at that one and he says, I believe there are tens of thousands whose prayers are nothing but a mere form, a set of words repeated by rote without a thought about their meaning.

that's the teeth-cleaning image of prayer which I shared with you a moment ago. Many of those who use good forms, good forms of prayer, already said, mutter their prayers over after they've got into bed or while they wash or dress in the morning.

We may think what we please but we may depend upon it but in the sight of God this is not praying. Words said without heart are as utterly useless to our souls as is the drum-beating of the poor heathen before their idols.

Remember he's talking in the middle of the 19th century remember. Where there's no heart there may be lip work and tongue work but there's nothing that God listens to.

[23 : 54] There's no prayer. And so on. And then he says, have you forgotten that it's not fashionable to pray.

You've got to swim against the stream if you're going to become a praying person he says. It's one of the things that many would be rather ashamed to own.

There were hundreds who would sooner storm a breach. He's thinking in military terms expressing it in mid-19th century language. There are hundreds who would sooner storm a breach to make some sort of brave public gesture than confess publicly that they make a habit of prayer.

There are thousands who if obliged to sleep in the same room with a stranger would lie down in bed without a prayer. And so on. And then there's this.

Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin or sin will choke prayer. I cannot forget this, he writes.

[25 : 05] I look at people's lives and I believe that few pray. And then he says diligence in prayer is the secret of eminent holiness.

And explains, without controversy there's a vast difference among two Christians. There's an immense interval between the foremost and behindest in the army of God.

They're all fighting the same good fight, but how much more valiantly do some fight than others? They're all doing the Lord's work, but how much more some do than others do?

They're all running the same race, but how much faster some get on than others? They all love the same Lord and Saviour, but how much more some love him than others?

I ask any true Christian whether this is not the race. Aren't these things so? And he goes on to develop that one. And then he says, I believe the difference in 19 cases out of 20, the difference that is between the front runners and the people behind, the people who are coming on behind, arises from different habits about private prayer.

[26 : 21] I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray little, and those who are eminently holy pray much. And then on he goes, makes the point that backsliding generally first begins with neglect of private prayer.

And then I just mark particular sentences in this tract. It's a fairly extended piece of work. Where are we?

Let me speak to those who do pray. I trust that some who read this tract know well what prayer is and have the spirit of adoption. To all such, I offer a few words of brotherly counsel and exhortation.

Brethren who pray, if I know anything of a Christian's heart, you're often sick of your own prayers. And so on. Well, he's making the point that I was making ten minutes ago.

When he ends up with scripture quotes, let's keep in mind the words of Solomon, be not rash with thy mouth, let not thy heart be hasty to utter anything before God, for God's in heaven and thou on earth.

[27 : 42] The previous is five verse two. So when Abram spoke to God, he said, I am dust and ashes. And when Job spoke to God, he said, I am vile.

Let us do likewise. Let us remember the difference between God and us, and remember that we're not only weak physically, we are weak spiritually, we are sinners, we are doing something awesomely great when we pray.

and it wouldn't be surprising if our prayers don't always satisfy us and we're often sick, as he says, of our prayers.

And then he goes on, well, there's lots that I'd love to quote here. I think perhaps I should leave it there. Oh, yes, just one point about what I call, what others call, arrow prayers.

Never forget you may tie together morning and evening devotions by an all-lift chain of short ejaculatory prayers through the day. Even in company or in business or in the very streets, you may be silently sending up little winged messengers to God, as Nehemiah did in the very presence of our exiles.

[29 : 06] Remember, he prayed when the king had asked him what the trouble was. He prayed before he ventured to tell the king that his heart was broken over the state of Jerusalem where, you know, the walls were broken down and everything was in a real mess.

Ah, never think, Israel, that time is wasted which is given to God. A Christian never finds he's a loser in the long run by persevering in prayer.

Well, so on to go on, the whole tract is well worth reading and you can find the substance of it in the chapter on prayer in J.C.

Ryle's book, Practical Religion. But now we must advance. Here at last, you wondered if there was going to be anything like this, here at last is my thesis and my theme for the book and for the series of talks.

So up to now I've been diagnosing an area in which we need help and that's all I've been doing. I am going to try and give substance to the following thesis.

[30 : 18] The key to reality in prayer is threefold. I learned this from the Bible, I shall try in due course to show you how.

A threefold key to reality in prayer. one, realising the reality of God, which starts with knowing about him, practising the presence of God, which is the theme that Ryle was leading up to when he talked about arrow prayers shot up to heaven at various times during the day, developing this thought as sometimes taught in public, that you should think of the Christian life as hiking with God.

When you're hiking, you're going through a country which has its ups and downs and all kinds of difficulties and problems present themselves, but you're hiking with God, hiking in God's company, whatever the situation then, whatever the pressure, whatever the difference of things today from the way things were yesterday, well, you're in God's company and you remember it, you practice God's presence, we'll do that later on.

And the third key to reality in prayer is that you want to please God by showing love to God.

First great commandment which the Lord by his grace moves us to try and keep. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.

[32 : 01] love and how does one love God? By seeking to please him and exalt him. You may have heard me say, because I do say very often, the best definition of love that I know is a purpose of making the loved one great, great in whatever mode of greatness is appropriate.

We make God great love and praise, by homage, by obedience, by making it our business to do his will and thereby to give him pleasure.

Yes, the thought is an appropriate one, give him pleasure. He is pleased with the obedience of his people. And thus we glorify him.

that's the way, I think, to expound the thought of glorifying God as the goal of life. Glorifying God, loving God, pleasing God, there are three notions which meld into one.

Well, that's the thesis of these talks and of the book that's coming. You see, it isn't going to be so much a how-to book as, sounds rather silly to say it, but I will say it, as a who-to book, or to whom book.

[33 : 34] The focus is going to be on God and being God's person in this matter of praying, just as we seek, by God's grace, to be God's person in every activity and ordinary everyday life.

I don't know if I can bring it off, but that's what I'm going to try, and that's what these talks are all about. As I told you, they are dummy run for what's going to be in the book.

Well, now, having said that much, I get to the beef of my title for today, the God we pray to.

You heard me say, didn't you, that focusing, realizing the reality of God, focusing on God himself, starts with knowing about him.

And so, what I'm going to do is to raise and try to answer the question, what is it that we need and ought to know about God?

[34 : 49] What is there for us to know about God? And straight away comes the answer, we need to know what the Bible tells us about God.

And when you say that, of course, you are saying something quite substantial, because no translation of the Bible, has in it less than a thousand pages of fairly small print.

There are translations which run to 1400 pages of medium to small print. The English Standard version, of which I had something to do, uses slightly smaller print than some Bibles, and so gets the translation into a thousand and fifty pages.

But there's a lot of stuff there. Yes, there is. the Bible tells us a great deal about God, and I think that some of us need to slap our own wrists because of our neglect, or comparative neglect, to focus on what the Bible tells us about God and get it clear in our minds.

What I'm going to set before you is going to be offered to you in the form of a scheme, that the substance of it is material that the church's Bible teachers have agreed that the Bible presents to us.

[36 : 19] They've agreed on that over a period of nearly two thousand years. Note this for a fact, friends, in the church of God, over two thousand, for two thousand years since the age of the apostles to our own time, those who receive the Bible as the word of God have not had any serious doubts and uncertainties as to what the Bible tells us about God.

It's been an area of substantive agreement in a very striking way. A lot of what they knew is forgotten today, and so I bring it back and I've dressed it up in a form which may seem streamlined and up to date, but it's the old, old stuff.

I shall say it as briefly as I can, but it's not new, and if it sounds swift and modern, well, remember, it is substantively the church's historic understanding of the truth about God, neither more nor less.

One of the sadnesses of our time, I think, is the way in which people, people in the churches as well as people just outside, they are hazy about God, they speculate about God, they go subjective in their thinking about God, you know, I like to think of God in this way as if my thoughts were the criterion of truth and wisdom, and the bottom line is uncertainty and people at sixes and sevens, as we would say, about the God who is supposed to be the focus of their life.

Well, here I'm putting it in what seems to me the most memorable form that I can encompass, I put it as I would try to teach it to children and to anyone else whom I was instructing in my character as a catechist.

[38 : 41] And I do it by the use of the preacher's favourite flower, the sweet tea, and here are seven headings, all beginning with tea, which are supposed to make the essential truth about God memorable and clean.

one. God is personal. Personhood, or personality, is the highest category of existence that we know.

There is nothing higher than the personal. C.S. Lewis tells the story of a young lady who was brought up by parents who thought of themselves as higher thinkers.

they, for some reason, thought that the personal category was unworthy of God and they taught their daughter to think of him as higher substance. When she got to years of discretion and unpacked the contents of her mind, she realised that all these years she'd been thinking of God as an infinitely extended rice pudding.

and since she wasn't a devotee of rice pudding, it wasn't in fact a very helpful idea.

[40 : 00] No friends, impersonal ideas about God are inferior. Depersonalised ideas about God are a disaster. God is personal.

that is to say, he addresses us as I and speaks to us as you. And all the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, not only does he speak that way, but he relates to people, person to person.

And yes, that's how he relates to us. Well, of course, he knew that, but one has to say it because it's the fundamental category within which everything else that I say is to be set.

God is not an it, and at no point listening to me now, or in the rest of your life, at no point must you allow yourself to think of God as it, and yourself as an observer watching it, in the way that the biologists observe what we call the lower animals, the lower creatures, or whatever, it.

No, no, no. God is above us, not below us. God presents himself to us as the he who is they, that's the next point actually, but he presents himself to us in personal terms, and we must always think of him in personal terms as the God who is there and who confronts us and takes an interest in us as persons the way that we, being persons take an interest in each other, and then the relationship of speech, you address the other party and look for a response, and then whatever bond is created between you as the word spoken gets its response, that's God's way with us, and it's within that frame that we are to think of everything that has to do with God and everything that has to do with our relationship, which of course brings us back to prayer right at the center of the relationship.

[42 : 16] Okay, one, God is personal, two, God is plural. There's the mysterious us of Genesis chapter 1 verse 26, let us make man in our image, remember, creation story, the plurality of God isn't taken any further than that mysterious us at the beginning of the Bible, but when you get to the New Testament, God is revealed as what we call a trinity, that is to say, God is revealed as a divine team, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons within the unity of God's being, three persons related to each other as persons, and working as a team for the salvation of God's people, which, of course, means, when you get right down to it, my salvation and your salvation.

And the doctrine of the Trinity, which Trinity, of course, isn't a Bible word, but the doctrine of the Trinity was developed as a defensive formulation to ensure that the reality of the divine team, if I said trio, of course, I would be in danger of cheapening the whole reality of the thing, it's a mystery, it's a Bible, but the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are distinct in the New Testament, and they work together for our salvation.

Jesus introduced Nicodemus to the truth of the Trinity when he talked to Nicodemus about being born again by the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God, that's God the Father, and then explained that the way into that kingdom, the way the Spirit leads you in the process of your new birth, when you're being born again, is the path of faith in himself, as the one lifted up to die for the salvation of his own people, remember?

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man, that's Jesus talking about himself, be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. That's the truth of the Trinity, and it runs all the way through the New Testament.

[45 : 05] A nice phrase to describe this state of affairs is to say it's in solution in the New Testament. Think of colorless liquid that has, say, sugar, in solution in it.

Well, that means it's possible in principle to crystallize out what's in solution there, and similarly in the New Testament it's possible to crystallize out the doctrine of the divine team working our salvation which is there from Matthew to the end of Revelation in one form or another.

So, there's the second truth. God is personal, God is plural. Mystery, yes, glorious mystery, and it means salvation for you and me.

God the Father planning it, God the Son executing it as the mediator, God the Holy Spirit applying it as the gracious, willing guest who indwells us.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Thank God we'd be lost were it not so. Third truth, this God is perfect.

[46 : 23] What that means is that he is not limited and so lacking anything or deficient in any way or needing improvement.

No, God is beyond all of that. He is perfect of his own kind which is a kind but unique to him.

In the book Exodus, we have time I'm afraid to go into this in detail, but in the book I want to. In the book Exodus, twice over God tells Moses his name.

And name, I expect you know, in the Bible world of thought signifies the nature of the person whose name it is.

the name is a clue to what that person is. At the burning bush, God encounters Moses, sends Moses back to Egypt to bring out his people.

[47 : 25] Moses says, if they ask me the name of the God who sent me, what am I to tell them? And in Exodus 3 verse 14, God answers that question.

he says to Moses, I am who I am. And in the Hebrew of that phrase, you've got embedded the name Yahweh, which became Jehovah, and is the name God gives himself as a covenant name to express his commitment to his people.

They know his name. and that's the sign of his relationship with them. But the thought expressed in the phrase, I am who I am, which could also be rendered, I will be what I will be, or I am what I am.

The thought is that it's an answer to the question, how does God exist, really? and it's the thought that he is the God of self-sustaining independence, he simply is, and this determines his sovereignty over his world.

In relation to his world, he is the God who is there, and he's the God who's in control. He determines what shall be. I am and I will be what I am and what I choose to be.

[49 : 01] There's another question that we ask about God, namely, how does he behave? That's a different question, and that is the question that's answered in the second story of God telling his name to Moses, which comes in chapter 34 of Exodus, straight after the business of the golden calf.

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with Moses, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord is Yahweh. Every time you find Lord in capitals in the English Bible, it's Yahweh.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children to the third and the fourth generation.

What's that saying? Well, it's saying that God acts, God offers himself to men to act towards them in grace and mercy, which they need, but yet in holiness, which will express itself in retribution if they don't take him seriously, if they don't respond to him, if they don't accept his overtures of love.

Well, it is, and at both levels, God is declaring himself perfect. You can't have better than that.

[50 : 59] You can't exist in a better way than God's way of existing. You can't act morally in a better and more glorious way than God's way of acting.

That's what I mean, that's what theologians have always meant when they say God is perfect. perfect. We reflect on how he exists, we reflect on how he behaves, and we say God is worthy of all our praise and adoration, he's great and he's good to the last degree, and there's no qualification of either of those adjectives to be made.

You've got it actually in one of the Psalms. In Psalm 86, verse, oops, yes, verse 5 says, you, Lord, are good.

Good means generous and kind and gracious in the Old Testament. It's a word of very broad meaning. You, Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.

It's an echo of Exodus 34, as you can see. And then you go on to verse 10 in that Psalm. You are great. And do wondrous things.

[52 : 16] You alone are God. God is good. God is great. God is perfect. Let's carry on. Fourth truth about God. God is powerful.

Personal, plural, perfect, powerful. powerful. This is the thought that theologians express by saying God is omnipotent, meaning he is able to do everything that he chooses to do.

They express it by saying God is omnipresent. Every bit of God's world is permeated by God all the time.

That's one of the dimensions of his power. God is omniscient. He knows everything, literally everything, that has been, shall be, and is.

He knows us through and through, and so on. In the Psalms, of course, you don't get that kind of portentous language. What you get is a whole series of Psalms celebrating the fact that the Lord reigns.

[53 : 26] God is king. And the image there is of absolute monarchy, because all the kings of the ancient world were absolute monarchs. They were what we would call today dictators.

And it's that sort of king that the Psalms are saying that God is. He is on top. He is in charge in his own universe.

The Lord reigns. The Lord is king. And then Psalm 139, for instance, dwells on the fact that God is present everywhere, and God knows a sort of fill of you, and I can't get away from his presence, can't escape his observation and his knowledge.

He knows us through and through, and so on and so forth. Well, time doesn't allow me to go into that. But suffice it to say, scripture is constantly emphasizing that unlike the idols, God is alive and powerful.

He is God in church, stabilizing thought for his own people, and always true. Our fifth truth, God is purposeful.

[54 : 38] Now, the clock is beating me, friends, so I have to be very sketchy here. Let me just give you the formulae, without giving you the scripture illustrations that I have in my margin here.

What is God's purpose in the world that he's made? Answer, it's twofold. on the one hand, it is the honoring and glorifying of his incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who in turn glorifies him by obedience and giving the Father honor through his obedience.

But the Father is concerned to honor and glorify and exalt his Son. And there's much in the New Testament that highlights that. But that's only the one side of his purpose.

The second aspect of it, bound up with the first, is the holiness and happiness of God's adopted family, which is the church, the people of God, you and me.

Now, the way it works is that the Son, as the Father's agent, and the mediator of his grace, gives the saints the glory, that is the blessing of a new life and a new heritage and a new joy.

[56 : 17] And the saints give the Son, along with the Father, the honor and glory that are their due. blessing is used in two senses in scripture to mark this, just as the word glory is.

You've probably heard me say in the past, glory in scripture means both. God on display, the glory God shows, and people praising God.

We give him glory for what he's shown us. And it's the same with blessing. God blesses us by his gifts, the Son blesses us by his gift of salvation, and then we bless God by words of gratitude and devotion, thanksgiving and joy in his presence.

And that ambiguity, or no, not ambiguity, that duality of use in these words, glory and blessing, points to that fact. it's a double purpose, where really the two halves blend into one.

The honor and glory of the Father's incarnate Son is one aspect of it, and the holiness and happiness of the Father's adopted family is the other half of it.

[57 : 39] This is the purpose of God. And within this purpose, the Lord Jesus comes to us as the Father's messenger and gift-bearer, and he makes friends with us.

He said so to his disciples. I don't call you servants any longer, I call you friends. John chapter 15, verse 14.

I call you friends, because all that the Father's made known to me, I make known to you. I have no secrets from you, I open my heart to you, as friends do to their friends.

And now you can see why it is, but from time to time, this particular speaker, J.I. Packer, beats the drum to establish the thought that the Christian life is a matter of developing friendship with God, friendship that focuses on the approach and the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, who on his father's behalf, makes friends with us.

Abram was called the friend of God, and we ought to be believers in the same way that Abram was, so says the New Testament in a number of places, and that means friendship with God for us.

[59 : 04] So that's a way of focusing the purpose of God, friend loving his friend, friend serving his friend, friend rejoicing in intimacy with his friend.

That's one way we should think of ourselves as Christians. That's what we really are. Sixth and seventh points, we'll have to rush. Sixth point, the God who is all these things that I mentioned thus first, is a promise keeper.

Before ever the word promise keeper was used for a men's movement in the state, which I think came over the border into Canada a couple of years ago, promise keeper was the thought which God taught all his people to think with regard to himself.

The basis of all our asking in prayer, all our trusting of God, is knowing his promises, claiming them, relying on them, holding fast to them, whatever else happened.

Peter, 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 4 talks about the exceeding great and precious promises that God has given us. And as I shall be saying at length in a future talk, receiving the promise and trusting the promise is an integral building block, a truly foundational reality for a Christian life.

[60 : 47] And then seventh, rounding off, the God who is personal, plural, perfect, powerful, purposeful, and promise keeping, is a praiseworthy God, a wonderful, adorable God who merits all the adoration that we can give him for the beauty, the goodness, and the faithfulness that he shows us in all sorts of different ways.

No time to develop that. I round off this presentation by saying, in the light of this knowledge of who and what our God is, you and I must be clear who we are when we come to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in our prayers.

The first thing to understand as we contemplate approaching God in prayer is that we come as, as what?

Redeemed rebels, sinners saved by grace, who are now adopted sons of God, as well as being servants of the Father, friends of Jesus, as well as being followers of Jesus.

That's the shape of the relationship. Christ is at its center, first to last, in terms of what it means to live as a son and servant of God.

[62 : 33] Jesus is our model, our example, and in terms of what it means to live as a friend and follower of Jesus, well, Jesus, our mediator, mediator of the grace that makes this relationship a reality, is also our master.

So, we are very much under the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and it's as those who are under this triune God in terms of authority, that we are able joyfully to be with this triune God in the reality of fellowship.

And when we approach God in prayer, this is what we need to be clear on. This is where it all starts, knowing these things and embracing these truths about the God to whom we pray.

I have overrun a bit, friends, and I'm sorry that I did so, but this is pushing the boat out, you know, and this first chapter in the book, I think, is going to be quite a long one, and I did want to say all that to you, so that you understand what my foundation is for all the rest of what I'm going to say as we go along.

But we've still got a few minutes, I think, for questions. We'll leave the mic on, Bill, and I will repeat the question as I understand it for the microphone to make sure that it all gets on to the tape, and then we go on from there.

[64 : 12] But please, have I bewildered, puzzled, generated problems, whatever? Harry, I see you signaling. You were a great comfort in the beginning of your lecture.

Do you see Ryle made us very uncomfortable, at least made me very uncomfortable. But you didn't intend that, I don't think. No, I didn't. I intended Ryle.

The comment from the floor, let me say first, is that whereas I generated some comfort by saying we, none of us, are very good at prayer, we better admit it to ourselves and start from that point, Ryle made us uncomfortable by, I suppose you have thought, was by insisting on the importance of prayer and talking as if this was, so to speak, a mountain that could be climbed.

Do I get your mind right, Harry? Okay, well it's perfectly true that he did. And I'm going to assume two things about Ryle.

one is that in the manner of any preacher, he was being as positive as he could be in order to help people, encourage people, make them aware that these problems and perplexities are not insoluble.

[65 : 40] And on the other hand, in addition to that, I am prepared to consider, indeed I do in fact consider and will continue to consider, that Ryle was a very wise, mature saint who was a good deal further along the path of prayer than I am.

So I'm not going to hold it against Ryle that he's very positive speaking of prayer as something which if we're serious about it, we can make progress in.

And what I shall do, rather, is to look to him for further help. And as the talks go on, you may very well find me doing that. Well, yes.

Thank you. Right. I'm too prayer-based and no prayer to me. I think we've got this certain time over the years.

And it's been a precious experience to me since I've happened in the way to do that. Plains are ugly, not necessarily by any of the other people.

[66 : 43] other people and my purpose in doing that perfectly was to praise the Lord. So I do sometimes form-layer prayer when my little discussion is open.

And then I keep general everything that I feel about strength. And I always started wanting me to praise for the mix of the people I'm going for.

prayer. So for me it's been a real blessing. And even though it's irregularly once a week, I really feel that at least to do work on a routine basis is not praying and just a moment's prayer and the days before.

Let me tell the microphone that we've just had really a very precious testimony to the reality of prayer from a questioner who asked isn't this is how it was put routine praying better than haphazard praying or not praying at all.

My answer is most certainly planned prayer is better than no prayer at all and better than haphazard prayer. I wouldn't actually use the word routine myself for something as rich as you have described to us.

[68 : 20] When I talked about routine praying if you remember my point of comparison was the way that we clean our teeth or in the case of us males shave.

We just do it and it's part of the routine of life and we don't think about it while we're doing it. At least we don't think about it at a deep level. We just think about it enough to know well we're doing it.

I have brushed teeth on both sides of my mouth not just one. It takes a bit of thought to think that far but that's really the point at which it stops.

Now what you were talking about in the testimony you gave is much more like the way in which wise couples who live busy lives do plan the time of day when they're going to talk about what the day has held and just be together and thus avoid the trap which is so widespread these days for busy couples the trap of living alongside each other and never fellowshiping with each other because you don't have time so that it isn't in fact a case of best friendship being developed but it's just a case of juxtaposition and no more.

Well what you were saying was that you have found it a wonderful thing to schedule times with God and to plan in advance how you're going to structure them.

[70 : 05] It's like scheduling an afternoon where spouse and spouse will be together and nobody is going to interfere and there's a lot of stuff that we need to go over together and there's a lot we need to do for refreshing our relationship to each other.

Let's go off for the afternoon and do it. That kind of action. That's the analogy which you pulled in. I thought what you said was enormously wise and enormously heartening because I believe actually that there's endless benefit to be gained from periodic times that you book to be alone with the Lord and to do business of which you've got some idea of the ground that will be covered before you go in.

That's tipping my hand a little bit on things that I may say, I think I shall be saying later in this course but to have you saying it right at the outset.

is tremendously good of encouragement to us. So thank you for sharing that. You've blessed us all by what you share. the love to the thing is so important because it comes up to the constancy of prayer.

The covenant of God did that unregulates it. I don't want to break my covenant with him and he certainly won't break it with me.

[71 : 43] So there's the journey once again a great word has been spoken this getting together with God should be covenanted on our part so says Betty and she's so right and we can be very sure that God will not absent himself or ignore us.

His covenant with us will be faithfully kept and on the basis of the covenant commitment friendship our friendship with him will be developed by our regular appointment times for prayer.

I hope you recognize your thoughts being expressed in slightly different words as I say it that way Betty. Again you're saying something that's very precious and very encouraging to us in this room this morning so once more I want to say thank you.

I expect one more comment could be forthcoming and then we should have to quit. What is an exaggeration saying that the encounter of God at our salvation and our pardon might contain all of those seven elements?

I don't think you know. Oh the question is wouldn't our encounter with God from the very earliest time that it becomes reality and our new birth first entry into faith are becoming shall I say children of God friends of Jesus in the full relational sense doesn't that very first event have in it in embryo that's my phrase not my friend's phrase doesn't it have in it in embryo or in solution all that I was talking about and the answer is yes yes yes every time but alas unhelpful nurture and distractions and other matters of that kind do I think often keep the Lord's people from developing this sevenfold awareness in the way that makes it permanently enriching and encouraging for everyday's prayers we forget some of these things and then we're in trouble so that I think is the proper comment to make on the truth that you just expressed to us

[74 : 34] I believe friends that time has gone and we should stop so I'm going to suggest simply that we join together to whom we pray so may we the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore Amen