“Prayer in the Bible” [GM 14]

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Prayer is part of the fabric of the Bible. Genesis 4:26 first mentions that “at that time people began to call on the name of the LORD” (TNIV except where noted otherwise), and Revelation 22:20 closes the Bible with the prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus” (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22). The entire history of redemption is framed in prayer. In between these terminal references we find a database about prayer that is so large it requires description beyond a simple definition.[[1]](#endnote-1) There are over 40 extended prayers and hundreds of brief prayer texts in the Bible. Lockyer’s classic devotional on prayer treats 355 occurrences.[[2]](#endnote-2) The endeavor to treat “Prayer in the Bible” is like trying to capture the ocean in a bucket. The articles in this book will merely launch you onto the sea that is prayer.

Why is prayer such a dominant feature in the Bible? Prayer testifies to the basic beliefs of the Jewish and Christian faith. Prayer validates the ultimate belief that the God of the Bible exists. Prayer integrates all the essential elements of faith and life, including our dependence on God, submission to a biblical worldview, our recognition of God’s superintendence of all of life, the approachable nature of God as we struggle with life, and all other matters relating to the relationship of humankind to God and his created order.

*Prayer reflects God’s orchestration of the world*. In a conversational manner, the prayers of the key figures of the Old and New Testament illustrate the intimate relationship between God and his people in the flow of redemptive history. We observe Adam and Eve conversing with God in Eden (Gen. 3:9-13). In a similar manner God calls Cain to account for his actions (Gen. 4). The narrative of Noah reflects similar conversation. Abraham continues the conversation but he particularly becomes an intercessor in regard to a number of key events (Gen. 15; 18; 20:17).

Prayer texts cover all aspects of life, but one particular category in the Bible is intercession.[[3]](#endnote-3) A classic text that reflects how the intercession of appointed leaders is crucial in the plan of God is Exodus 32-34. In this text Moses intercedes “face to face” with God (Exod. 33:11) for wayward Israel in order to reinstate the unique covenant relationship between God and Israel. This event portrays God’s chosen, often prophetic, leaders as “the mouth of Yahweh.” This unique role of intercessory prayer is imaged in Exodus 4:10-17 although Moses struggled as a spokesman (cf. Numbers 12:8; 22:38; 23:5, 12, 16). The role of an Old Testament prophet as intermediary between God and the world is defined in Deuteronomy 18:17-22. In the biblical narrative, the prophet intercedes for the community, receives an answer from God and then becomes God’s “mouth”/spokesman to the people concerning the divine will (cf. Gen. 20:7; Num. 11:2; 1 Sam. 7:5; Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 42:4; Dan. 9:3). 4 Maccabees 4:11 illustrates how pervasive the idea of intercessory prayer was in ancient Judaism, “Then Apollonius fell down half dead in the temple area that was open to all, stretched out his hands toward heaven, and with tears begged the Hebrews to pray for him and propitiate the wrath of the heavenly army.”

Jesus continues the tradition of intercession as prophet, priest and king. The plan of God moves forward in consort with Jesus’ prayers. The Gospel record contains numerous summary references to Jesus going off alone to pray. John 17 records the classic intercessory prayer of Jesus for the future work of his disciples. Jesus tells Peter that he has prayed for him that his faith would not fail in times of testing (Luke 22:31-32). Hebrews pictures Jesus as our great high priest who intercedes on our behalf (Heb. 7:23-25). Acts and the epistles continue the tradition of prayer as the intercessory lifeline to God for the community.

*Prayer provides a venue for the redeemed community to reflect their view of God and their world.* Prayer reflects the creature to creator relationship as conversation with God. Whether we listen in on Adam in the garden of Eden or the Second Adam (Christ) in Gethsemane, we hear an intimate conversation. The terms that introduce us to prayer texts (e.g. said, spoke, call, cry out, etc.) testify to the personal nature of biblical prayer. This language “largely reflect[s] the emotional state of the one praying rather than a technical vocabulary related to elaborate prayer ceremonies.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Consequently, prayer as conversation with God, is the property of all believers regardless of their status or skills.

Prayer *reflects* the community’s struggle with the pain of life. We can listen in on Moses as he struggles with leading a nation to the promise land (Deut. 9:25-29). The various Psalmists frame every aspect of human emotion in the struggle of life by their prayers. God is invoked during times of personal distress (Pss. 4:1; 32:6; 102:17), in regard to the stress of feeling abandoned by God in regard to prayer (Ps. 80:4), as a form of worship (Ps. 141:2). A significant feature of the Psalmists’ prayers is how they are framed in regard to God’s covenant loyalty toward his people (“steadfast love” Pss. 42:8; 66:20; 69:13). The value of the Psalms for the believer today is reflected by how quickly we turn to them in our own times of stress.

The Gospels present Jesus as a model of relating to the Father the issues of life. Jesus praying in the presence of the disciples and his frequent withdrawal to places of prayer dominate the flow of the gospel story. When the disciples requested that Jesus teach them how to pray, the model he gave them turned them first to God and then to their own needs in life (Matt. 6:9-13). The model that prayer connects the believer with God in life’s struggle is also captured later by the fact that Jesus was “tempted in all points” like we are as preparation to be our Great High Priest and intercessor (Heb. 2:18; 4:14-16). His model encourages us to approach boldly God’s throne in prayer.

Prayer *reflects* the community’s attitude that nothing in life is apart from God. Life is not to be separated into secular and sacred components but is a constant act of dependence on God. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament (certain Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes) views life without compartmentalizing divine space and human space. All reflection and all life is viewed in terms of God’s knowledge and presence.

The New Testament continues this mindset. Prayer images dependence on God and each other in numerous ways. We have a relationship with God because of the work of Christ. Consequently, prayer is now framed “in Jesus name.” Prayer is the vehicle of confession to enter the kingdom (Rom. 10:9-15) and a means to maintain a proper relationship to it (1 John 1:9). Our connection to God and dependence upon him is illustrated in the “Lord’s Prayer” (Matt. 6:11) and in the developing life of the early church (Acts 1:24-25; 6:6; 13:2-3; Phil. 4:6). Jesus teaches dependence on God for our internal and external life and the Book of Acts portrays how the apostolic community continued Jesus’ example. Prayer is our lifeline to heaven.

Prayer is a means to bind the believing community together in its service to God (1 Thess. 5:25). Paul pleads for the Roman church to join in his struggle by praying for his mission (Rom. 15:30-33). This same attitude of community inter-dependence is referenced in Paul’s work with the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 1:8-11). Prayer binds the community together in its mutual work for the advancement of God’s kingdom on earth.

Community attitudes are fostered in the introduction and closing sections of epistolary literature. These sections are often written in prayer type language. Paul’s epistles typically begin with a prayer of thanksgiving and statements of his desires for the church he is addressing (Rom. 1:8-10; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 1:15-16; Phil. 1:3-6, 9-11; Col. 1:9-14; 1 Thess. 1:2-3; 2 Thess. 1:11-12; 2 Tim. 1:3; Phlm. 4; cf. James 1:5-6; 1 Peter 1:17). Salutations define the church as “those who call on the name of our Lord” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2). Epistles also usually close with promises and requests in regard to prayer (cf. Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-6; 1 Thess. 5:17, 25; 2 Thess. 3:1-5; cf. James 5:13ff.). The epistles truly present the early church in terms of prayer. Prayer is not just what they do but who they are. They are a community dependent upon God and each other and prayer seals that bond.

The New Testament language of prayer utilizes a variety of terms to image its multifaceted practice. 1 Timothy 2 lists petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving. The variety of terms testifies to the fact that prayer is appropriate for every category of life.

Prayer *reflects* the bewildering fact that God does not always answer our requests. The Apostle Paul presents unanswered prayer as an important experience in his struggle in the Christian life (2 Cor. 12:1-10). All prayer is conditioned by God’s sovereign will, a will that is often not immediately known or understood. Prayer is not a means to manipulate God so that our circumstances of life are more acceptable or comfortable. Rather, prayer is our opportunity to struggle with a world that often leaves us bewildered (cf. the Psalms).

Prayer *reflects* the forwarding of God’s agenda and kingdom on earth. Prayer highlights the progress of the history of redemption in the Bible. We observed how God utilized the intercessory prayers of key persons like Moses, Abraham and Jesus in regard to the divine plan. The prayer of Elijah in 1 Kings 18:36 validates the prophet as acting on God’s behalf within Israel’s history. Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the Temple (2 Chron. 6). The prophet Daniel repeatedly illustrated the role of prayer in God’s program even at the risk of his own life (Dan. 6). Jesus’ prayers illustrated how his earthly role was to do the will of the Father in heaven. The major events that unfold the growth of the early church as recorded in Acts are marked by prayer (cf. Acts 1:14; 1:23-26; 6:4, 6; 7:59; 8:15; 9:11; 10:9; 12:5; 13:3; etc.).

God has ordained that prayer be a vital part of how he achieves his purposes in the world. The balance between our pleading that God act in a certain way and our submission to God’s will is not easy to define and is even less easy at times to accept. Various religious traditions will address this tension differently in terms of their theological understandings. It is clear, however, that our role is to pray and God’s role is to fulfill his plan according to his infinite wisdom. Our prayers are a vital part of the process whether we always understand how it is so or whether we remain puzzled and voice the same sentiments we often hear from the Psalmists.

Prayer *reflects* the believing community’s hope. The Book of Revelation views earth history from the perspective of prayer and worship. Whether the stress of “how long O Lord” (Rev. 6:10) or the expectation of “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20), prayer is the voice of the Church to God to intervene into life’s events and culminate earth history.

Prayer in the Bible is truly an ocean of voices captured for the benefit of successive generations of God’s people. The current comments can only stand on the shoreline of this testimony and cast an eye to the awesome nature of the ocean before us. The Bible presents prayer as the lifeline between the Creator and his creation. Prayer captures the relational attitudes internal to the believing community. Prayer in the Bible records every aspect of redemptive history and provides the current believing community with a model for a God-centered life.

Questions for Further Thought or Discussion

1. When a biblical figure intercedes for the community, what are the categories that occur in such prayers? (Read Exodus 32-34 or John 17 as a sample)

2. Does your church model how to pray in reference to Jesus’ teaching in “The

Lord’s Prayer” (Matt. 6:7-15)?

3. Thankfulness is a major theme in biblical prayers. What do you thank God for in

your prayers?

Additional Reading: Items in addition to the endnotes include Gary T. Meadors, “Prayer and God’s Will,” in *Decision Making God’s Way: A New Model for Knowing God’s Will*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003; Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980; David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006; “Prayer” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996;

1. Since the reading of a few good dictionary articles on prayer can address the brute facts of prayer in the Bible, the present article will only reflect on select aspects of prayer in the Bible. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Prayers of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See David Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992; Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul’s Intercessory Prayers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Prayer,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 659. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)