

What is prayer? Part 1

STUDIES IN PRAYER

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STUDY ONE: WHAT IS PRAYER?

PART ONE - SYNONYMS FOR 'PRAY'

A. 'SEEK THE LORD'

In the table below the numbers in the centre column refer to the following meanings of 'seek the Lord' in the immediate context of the references:

[1] Seeking *the Lord*, (including, but not limited to, the opposite of rejecting the Lord), that is, seeking God himself - not his will, not his gifts, not his salvation, simply *him*.

[2] Desire for the Lord's help in a difficult situation.

[3] Desire for the Lord's wisdom in a difficult situation.

[4] An expression of one's dependence on the Lord.

[5] Desiring communion/intimacy with the Lord.

2 Samuel 21:1	2	David sought the face of the Lord
1 Chronicles 16:11	1	Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always
2 Chronicles 16:12	2	... even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord
2 Chronicles 20:3ff	2,3,4	... The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him ...
2 Chronicles 26:5	1,2,3,4	Uzziah ... sought God ... as long as he sought the Lord, God gave him success
2 Chronicles 30:18f	1,2	Hezekiah prayed for them ... 'May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God ... '
2 Chronicles 33:12,13	1,2	In his distress he sought the favour of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his Fathers. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea ..
2 Chronicles 34:3	1	Josiah ... began to seek the God of his father David
Ezra 6:21	1	So the Israelites ... separated themselves ... in order to seek the Lord
Psalms 22:26	1,4	... they who seek the Lord will praise him ...
Psalms 27:8	1,4,5	My heart says of you. "Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek.
Psalms 34:4	2	I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me ...
Psalms 34:10	1,4	... those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
Psalms 63:1	1,5	O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you ...
Psalms 69:32	2,4,5	... you who seek God, may your hearts live!
Psalms 70:4	2,4,5	May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you ...
Psalms 77:2	2	When I was in distress I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands ...
Psalms 83:16	1	Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O Lord

Psalm 105:3,4	1,5	Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always
Psalm 119:2	1	Blessed are they who ... seek him with all their heart
Psalm 119:10	1	I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands
Isaiah 9:13	1	The people have not ... sought the Lord Almighty
Isaiah 55:6	1	Seek the Lord while he may be found ...
Jeremiah 29:13	1	You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.
Jeremiah 50:4	1	... the people of Israel and the people of Judah together will go in tears to seek the Lord their God
Lamentations 3:25	1	The Lord is good to ... the one who seeks him
Hosea 3:5	1	Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God
Hosea 5:15	1	They will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.
Hosea 10:12	1,4	... it is time to seek the Lord ...
Amos 5:4,6	1	Seek me and live ... seek the Lord and live
Zephaniah 1:6	1	... those who neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him
Zephaniah 2:3	1	Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land ...
Zechariah 8:21	1	'Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.' And many people and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him.

It is obvious that the majority of these texts relate to seeking *the Lord himself*, and some might argue that this is not prayer at all. Such an argument has made the mistake of regarding prayer as simply asking God for things. Such a minimal perception of prayer is headed for disappointment and disillusionment. Some comments of Harry Fosdick are helpful:

'Definite petition has its place ... *But ... the thought of prayer as communion with God puts the centre of the matter where it ought to be.* The great gift of God in prayer is Himself, and whatever else He gives is incidental and secondary. ... '

' ... the thought of prayer as communion with God makes praying an *habitual attitude*, and not simply an *occasional act*. It is continuous fellowship with God, not a spasmodic demand for His gifts. '

' ... prayer is not beggary, it is not soliloquy, it is communion with God.'

' ... the innermost nature of prayer (is) the search of the soul for God rather than for His gifts...'

'Recall St Augustine's entreaty in the fourth century, "Give me Thine own Self, without Whom, though Thou shouldest give me all that ever Thou hadst made, yet could not my desires be satisfied." Recall Thomas à Kempis ... praying "It is too small and unsatisfactory, whatsoever Thou bestowest on me, apart from Thyself." And then recall George Matheson ... : "Whether thou comest in sunshine or in rain, I would take Thee into my heart joyfully. Thou art Thyself more than the sunshine; Thou art Thyself compensation for the rain. It is Thee and not Thy gifts I crave." '

Harry Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*, pp 32-35.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus made it clear where our number one priority should be: 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness ... ' (6:33). To seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness is to seek God himself, to be wholly committed to *him*. As we have seen in the Lord's Prayer, the first priority in prayer is God's honour, God's kingdom and God's will. With God himself at the centre of our prayer, at the centre of our desire, everything else - our perceptions of our own righteousness (5:17-32), our desire to be believed (5:33-37), our desire for revenge and 'justice' (5:38-48), our perceived need to display our goodness and be thought well of (6:1-19), our earthly 'treasure' (6:19-24), and our anxieties about our physical survival (6:25-34) - all of these occupy a very distant second place to our dominant desire - the desire, the seeking, the reaching out and communing with God himself.

B. 'WAITING ON THE LORD'

In the table below the numbers relate to the following uses of the concept of 'waiting on the Lord':

- [1] Waiting for (trusting) the Lord to act in a situation of suffering, danger, injustice or oppression.
- [2] Waiting for the realization of the Lord's forgiveness and mercy.
- [3] The attitude of prayerful expectation that the Lord will act.
- [4] Sure dependence on God as opposed to any other source of help or salvation.

Psalm 5:3	3	In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.
Psalm 25:1-5 KJV	1,3	Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in thee ... let none that wait on thee be ashamed ... Shew me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day. (NIV = 'hope')
Psalm 25:21 KJV	1	Let integrity and uprightness preserve me; I wait on thee ... (NIV = 'hope')
Psalm 27:14	1,2,3	Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.
Psalm 33:20,21	3	We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.
Psalm 37:7,9	1	Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him ... those who hope (=wait KJV) in the Lord will inherit the land.
Psalm 37:34	1	Wait for the Lord and keep his way ...
Psalm 40:1	3	I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry ...
Psalm 52:9	1	... in your name I will hope (= I will wait on thy name KJV)
Psalm 59:9	1	O my Strength, I watch (=wait) for you; you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God ...
Psalm 62:1 KJV	4	Truly my soul waiteth upon God: from him cometh my salvation.
Psalm 62:5,6 KJV	4	My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defence; I shall not be moved.
Psalm 69:3 KJV	1	I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God
Psalm 106:13	4	But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel.
Psalm 123:2 KJV	2	... so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us
Psalm 130:5,6	2	I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning ...
Psalm 145:15 KJV	4	The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. (Compare 104:27)
Proverbs 20:22	1	Do not say "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.
Isaiah 8:17	1	I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.
Isaiah 25:9 KJV	3,4	And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord: we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
Isaiah 26:8	4	Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you, your name and renown are the desire of our hearts.
Isaiah 30:18	2	Yet he longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!
Isaiah 33:2 KJV	1	O Lord, be gracious unto us; we have waited for thee: be thou their arm every morning, our salvation also in the time of trouble.

Isaiah 40:31	4	... those who hope in (wait on) the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.
Isaiah 49:23	4	Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me (=wait for me) will not be disappointed (=ashamed).
Isaiah 64:4	3	Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
Jeremiah 14:22 KJV	4	... art not thou he, O Lord our God? Therefore we will wait upon thee: for thou hast made all these things.
Lamentations 3:25,26 KJV	1,4	The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.
Hosea 12:6	4	But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.
Micah 7:7	4	But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me.
Zephaniah 3:8	1,4	Therefore wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day I will stand up to testify.

Various Hebrew words are translated by the English 'wait for' or 'hope'. The word used most frequently in the above texts means 'to wait for or look for with eager expectation'. This eager, but also quiet and confident, expectation that the Lord will act, that the Lord will respond, also expresses our acknowledgement of our utter dependence on him - that without his sustenance, without his salvation, without his mercy, without him, we are also without hope ... This waiting on God also involves (1) patience - in allowing God to act in *his* time, and (2) patience - in not forsaking God's ways while waiting for him to act. In all of this the element of *trust* is greatly significant.

A comment from Leonard Coppes:

'Waiting with steadfast endurance is a great expression of faith. It means enduring patiently in confident hope that God will decisively act for the salvation of his people ... Waiting involves the very essence of a person's being, his soul (Psalm 130:5).

Leonard Coppes, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, p791.

Andrew Murray, commenting on Psalm 62:5,6:

' "My soul, wait thou only upon God." Never forget the two foundation-truths on which this blessed waiting rests. If ever thou art inclined to think this "waiting only" too hard or too high, they will recall thee at once. They are: thy absolute helplessness; the absolute sufficiency of thy God. Oh! Enter deep into the entire sinfulness of all that is of self, and think not of letting self have aught to say one single moment. Enter deep into thy utter and unceasing impotence ever to change what is evil in thee, or to bring forth anything that is spiritually good. Enter deep into thy relation of dependence as creature on God, to receive from Him every moment what He gives. Enter deeper still into His covenant of redemption, with His promise to restore more gloriously than ever what thou hadst lost, and by His Son and Spirit to give within thee unceasingly, His actual divine Presence and Power. And thus wait upon thy God continually and only.

' ... our God, in the infinite tenderness and omnipotence of His love, waits to be our Life and Joy. '

Andrew Murray, *Waiting on God*, p110.