

What is prayer? Part 3

STUDIES IN PRAYER

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STUDY THREE: WHAT IS PRAYER?

PART 3: PRAYER IS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF DEPENDENCE

A. PRAYER ACKNOWLEDGES OUR DEPENDENCE ON GOD AS CREATOR AND SUSTAINER

This is expressed in the Lord's Prayer in the words 'our Father in heaven', 'your will be done' and 'give us today our daily bread'. Go to **Studies in the Lord's Prayer** on this website, for studies on this aspect of prayer.

It is under this aspect of prayer that many of our 'prayers' are identified - those prayers that ask God to give us something or to change something or to intervene in some circumstance.

B. PRAYER ACKNOWLEDGES OUR DEPENDENCE ON GOD AS SAVIOUR

This is also expressed in the Lord's Prayer in the words 'our Father', 'your kingdom come', 'your will be done', 'forgive us our debts' and 'deliver us from the evil one'. Go to **Studies in the Lord's Prayer** for studies on these aspects of prayer. Note particularly the references to the Psalms where God is addressed or referred to as Shield, Refuge, Stronghold, Fortress and Rock, all of which express dependence on his power to save and protect. In addition, note the following selection of examples from the Psalms where God is addressed as Saviour, Redeemer or deliverer:

Psalm 18:2,3	The Lord is ... my deliverer ... the horn of my salvation ... I call to the Lord ... and I am saved from my enemies.
Psalm 18:46-48	Exalted be God my Saviour! He is the God who avenges me ... who saves me from my enemies.
Psalm 19:14	... O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.
Psalm 25:5,20,21	... you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long ... Guard my life and rescue me; ... for I take refuge in you ... my hope is in you.
Psalm 27:1,5,9	The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear? ... he will keep me safe in his dwelling, he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle ... Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Saviour.
Psalm 28:8	The Lord is ... a fortress of salvation for his anointed one ...
Psalm 32:7	You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.
Psalm 35:3	Say to my soul 'I am your salvation'.
Psalm 38:22	Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Saviour.
Psalm 62:1,2	My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him, He alone is my rock and my salvation ...
Psalm 65:5	... O God our Saviour, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas ...
Psalm 68:19,20	Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death.
Psalm 70:5	I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer ...
Psalm 79:9	Help us, O God our Saviour, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake.
Psalm 88:1	O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.

Psalm 118:14,21	The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation ... I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.
Psalm 130:7	... with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins
Psalm 144:2	He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield in whom I take refuge.

For your study and personal expression of dependence read through the Psalms and as you do so acknowledge your dependence on God your Saviour.

Within this dependence on God as our Saviour is our knowledge that God has, as part of our salvation, adopted us as his children - he is our Father. His Spirit within us enables us to cry to him 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 4:6,7); this prayer to God as our Father, is the natural and spontaneous expression of those whom he has made his own in Christ, and in whom he has come to dwell.

C. PRAYER AS REPENTANCE/CONFESSION

The opposite of repentance and confession is self-righteousness, which is the ultimate expression of independence. Refer to **Study Seven in the Studies on the Lord's Prayer**, where we look at the meaning and implications of praying 'forgive us our debts', and Biblical examples of prayer as repentance and acknowledgement of sin. It is only on the basis of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus that anyone can approach him in prayer. In coming to God in prayer we come with an awe-filled awareness of his mercy and grace, without which we would be utterly banned from his presence.

D. PRAYER AS THANKSGIVING

Because prayer is an expression of our utter dependence on God for both our physical and spiritual lives, prayer is also of necessity an expression of thankfulness. In this aspect of prayer we acknowledge his mercy and goodness to us, we express our realization that all that we are, and all that we have, is sheer gift, totally undeserved and unmerited, and in no way our *right*, in no way something that God owes us. As well as numerous references in the Psalms note the following New Testament texts. Note particularly the *continuity* of thankfulness; this continuity includes not only verbal expressions of thankfulness, but indicates a constant state of mind. Only those who know their utter dependence on the power and the mercy of God can live in this attitude of thankfulness.

Romans 1:8ff	I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you ... constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times ...
Romans 7:24-25	Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Romans 14:6	He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.
1 Corinthians 1:4	I always thank God for you because of the grace given you in Christ Jesus
1 Corinthians 15:57	... thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
2 Corinthians 9:12	... overflowing with many expressions of thanks to God. ...
2 Corinthians 4:15	... so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.
2 Corinthians 9:14f	... in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.
Ephesians 1:16	I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.
Ephesians 5:4	Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking ... but rather thanksgiving.
Ephesians 5:20	... always giving thanks to God the Father for everything ...
Philippians 1:3	I thank my God every time I remember you.

Colossians 1:3	We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you ...
Colossians 1:9-12	We have not stopped praying for you ... giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you ...
Colossians 2:7	... overflowing with thanksgiving.
Colossians 3:15-17	Let the peace of God rule in your hearts ... and be thankful. ... with gratitude in your hearts to God ... whatever you do ... do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
Colossians 4:2	Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.
1Thess. 1:2	We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers ...
1Thess 2:13	We also thank God continually ... that you accepted (the word) ...
1Thess 3:9ff	How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you ...
1Thess 5:18	... pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will ...
2Thess 1:3	We ought always to thank God for you ... because your faith is growing ...
1Timothy 2:1	I urge ... requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone
1 Timothy 4:3-5	... which God created to be received with thanksgiving, For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.
2 Timothy 1:3	I thank God ... as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.
Philemon 4	I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers ...

For your study and personal expressions of thanksgiving read the Psalms, focusing on this element of constant and continual thankfulness that characterizes true prayer.

E. PRAYER AND SACRIFICE AND OFFERINGS

In the Old Testament particularly, a variety of sacrificial offerings and incense offerings were understood as prayer (and/or the right accompaniment of prayer) - prayers of repentance/confession, prayers for forgiveness/cleansing, and prayers of thanksgiving. **This concept of sacrifice and offering as a form of prayer, and/or as a necessary companion of prayer, is directly related to the acknowledgement of one's utter dependence on the mercy and goodness of God.**

Reference	Content or summary of the text
Exodus 34:20	No one is to appear before me empty-handed. (Read verses 18-20)
Leviticus 1-7	All the sacrifices for sin and guilt offerings were prayers for atonement.
Lev 7:11-15	The fellowship (peace) offering was an expression of thankfulness.
Lev 7:16-21	The fellowship (peace) offering was the affirmation of a vow
Lev 16:20-21	The wickedness, rebellion and sins of Israel are confessed over the scapegoat
Numbers 16	Read the whole chapter for the role of incense offering for atonement.
Deut 26: 5-15	Prayer accompanying the offering of firstfruits
Judges 2:4-5	... the people wept aloud ... they offered sacrifices to the Lord
Judges 20:26-28	... they sat weeping before the Lord ... fasted ... present burnt offerings and fellowship offerings ... inquired of the Lord
1 Samuel 13:9,12	Saul offered burnt offerings to seek the Lord's favour.

2 Samuel 24:24,25	David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered prayer
1 Chron 21:16ff	David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. He called on the Lord and the Lord answered him ...
2 Chron 11:16	Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord ... followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord ...
Nehemiah 12:43	They offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy ...
Isaiah 1:11-17	Meaningless sacrifices ... meaningless prayer. Also Jeremiah 6:20; Micah 6:6-8; Malachi 1:10-12
Jeremiah 14:11ff	Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them ...
Jeremiah 33:11	The voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord, saying, "Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good; his love endures for ever ... "
Jeremiah 44	Read whole chapter - incense burned of false gods seen as prayer to, and dependence on, those gods. (Read also Ezekiel 8:6-18)
Ezekiel 43:18-27	Seven days of sacrifices and offerings necessary before the Lord will accept them
Luke 1:9-10	... when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside ...
Revelation 8:3	He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand.

It is not possible for sinful man to approach God or gain access to God on the basis of our own credentials - for this reason, in the Old Testament, sacrifice accompanied prayer, indeed it was a prerequisite for entering the presence of God. **With the coming of Jesus Christ, and his offering of the one, real, ultimate sacrifice for sin, there is no longer any need for the individual supplicant to offer individual sacrifice for his/her own sin, but there is still the need of the mediating sacrifice, which is effective once-and-for-all for those who trust in him.** He is the Mediator, he is the atonement. By him and by him alone do we have access to the Father in prayer. Hence we pray always and only *in his name*. Never do we come to God trusting in our own righteousness or our own sinlessness. In this way it is written that Christ 'ever lives to make intercession for us' (Hebrews 7:25).

F. FASTING AND PRAYER

In a similar way to sacrifices, offerings and incense offerings being identified as prayer, fasting is also seen as a way of approaching God, and frequently as the accompaniment of prayer. The Bible doesn't spell out the purpose of fasting. It does, however, indicate that fasting is associated with sustained communion with God and urgent need or grief. It is also obvious that fasting involves self-denial and humility. It is not to be pursued for its own sake, nor to gain merit or be used as a bribe, nor to create a spiritual 'high' for the participant. It is a focused expression of the supplicant's commitment to and dependence on God and his mercy, and urgency/helplessness/sincerity in petition. Below is a brief look at some Biblical instances of fasting.

Text	Situation	Comment
Judges 20:26	The Israelites have been defeated by Benjamin, an Israelite tribe. The battle had been to establish justice. They face two undesirable alternatives - either to give up the battle, and hence not enforce justice, or to fight, facing the possibility of further defeat, as well as the horror of fighting their 'brother'.	Their fasting, along with the presentation of sacrifices and offerings, is an expression of their great grief, helplessness and ignorance, as they ask the Lord for direction.
1 Samuel 7:3-6	Samuel challenged the people to put away their idols, etc, which they did, then assembled at Mizpah for confession and fasting.	Fasting associated with repentance, confession and commitment, on the people's part, and intercession on Samuel's part.

2 Samuel 1:12	Death of Saul and Jonathan	Expression of grief
2 Sam 12:16-23	David fasted while his child was sick, then stopped fasting when the child died.	Fasting associated with deep sorrow and pleading with God, hoping that God would be gracious. Once the child died there was no hope, so he stopped fasting.
1 Kings 21:27ff	When judgement was announced to Ahab 'he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.'	Fasting associated with true repentance - Ahab 'humbled himself before' God. The judgement was lifted.
2 Chron 20:3-13	With great enemy armies approaching Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast for all Judah. The whole nation stood before the Lord in Jerusalem while Jehoshaphat prayed.	A situation of dire and urgent need, in which the people were quite helpless, and seek help from the Lord. The fasting associated with prayer.
Ezra 8:21-23	Israelites about to return to Jerusalem. Ezra proclaimed a fast. [He did not want to ask the King for protection, because he had told the King that God looks after those who seek him.]	The fast was seen as humbling themselves before God and associated with asking him for a safe journey.
Nehemiah 1:4	Nehemiah was upset when he heard of the state of affairs in Judah.	Fasting associated with weeping, mourning and praying. His prayer included acknowledgement of God, confession of sin, and remembrance of God's redemption.
Nehemiah 9:1	Israelites gathered together after the reading of the law, fasting, wearing sackcloth and with dust on their heads.	Associated with confession of sins, listening to the word of the Lord, worshipping God.
Psalms 35:13	When his enemies were sick. David prayed for them with sackcloth and fasting.	He said: 'I humbled myself with fasting.' (See Ps 69:10).
Isaiah 58:1-5	Wrong fasting.	External fasting not acceptable to God.
Isaiah 58:6-14	True 'fasting'.	Will evoke a response from God.
Jeremiah 14:12	Unacceptable fasting.	No answer from God.
Daniel 6:18	King Darius fasted.	Also spent the night 'without entertainment'. Hopeless situation.
Daniel 9:3	Daniel 'turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.'	Direct association with prayer. Prayer included acknowledgement of God, of sin, of God's mercy.
Joel 1:14; 2:12-15	Call for a holy fast.	Associated with mourning, sackcloth, weeping, crying out to the Lord, leaving aside one's normal pursuits, depending on the mercy of the Lord.
Matthew 4:2	Jesus fasted forty days.	Associated with isolation.
Luke 2:37	Anna ... worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.	Associated with worship and prayer.