

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

AN INTERACTIVE DIGRESSION ON PRAYER

I was taught to pray growing up. As a family we prayed before meals (except in restaurants where mom and dad were concerned we not be “showy” with our prayers.) Every night before I went to sleep, first by teaching, then on my own, we prayed. I was taught the child’s prayer,

Now I lay me down to sleep.

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Added to this prayer was the request, “God please bless...” and I was taught to name my family and those I was concerned about.

As I got older, I learned that prayer was not rote. Prayer was dialogue. At least it was supposed to be dialogue. The problem was (and sometimes is) that prayer can seem to be more monologue than dialogue! After all, it is not an audible conversation where God answers back audibly (at least not for me).

This was brought to mind when I was seated at a dinner table in L’Abri, Switzerland in 1988. The table conversation was “prayer,” and one young man across from me said, “I feel like prayer is simply my words going up to the ceiling and bouncing back to me. There doesn’t seem to be anyone there or anyone listening. I pray, but it seems futile.” Some responses around the table were confirming of prayer, but others echoed the young man’s sentiments.

I thought to myself, “What do I have to add to this conversation?” I knew the pat answers that are meant to be reassuring, but I wanted to respond with something more genuine than regurgitation of what I’d been taught. I wanted to be able to respond out of the lessons of life.

I can give life stories of uncanny answers to prayer. The kind of answers that to write off to chance, would be akin to winning the lottery. Yet, I also have stories of deep, genuine, prayers that did not get the answers I sought.

The decades since have seen my life grow in prayer. As my life has grown, my perspective on prayer has matured too. I ascribe the growth to aging, but also to putting into practice teachings of the Scriptures as well as the early church.

This class is designed to explore the Scriptures around prayer, especially those in Hebrews. Hebrews has multiple passages that helped to change my perspective on prayer. Since we have spent four weeks in Hebrews, it is a propitious time to let the Hebrews passages serve as the core of this lesson in this New Testament Survey series, as we interpose a practical lesson on prayer and praying.

PRAYER

Think about all the Passages in the Bible on prayer. As I randomly type, I am reminded of Paul telling the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes. 5:16-18). In Philippians 4:6, Paul helped the Philippians understand the solution to worry was “prayer,” making requests to God while giving him thanks (Phil. 4:6). James taught his readers that when they prayed, it was not to be divorced from the way they live. Prayer should be accompanied by trust in the Lord to answer (Jas. 1:6).

Jesus taught his disciples prayer was not for show, but was personal between each person and God (Mt. 6:5-6). He added that we are not to pray by volume, but content (Mt. 6:7-13). Jesus modeled a life of prayer (Mt. 14:23; 19:13; 26:36; Mk. 1:35; Jn. 17) and wanted his followers to be considered a praying group (Mt. 21:13). Jesus prayed for his followers, those who would follow in the future (Mt. 9:38; Jn. 17:20), and even taught us to pray for our enemies (Lk. 6:28). We are to pray out of humility, not pride (Lk. 18:10ff).

The early church was a praying church (Acts 1:14; 1:24; 2:42; 3:1; 4:31). The apostles devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 6:4). Paul was constant in his prayers for the churches where he ministered (Rom. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:9; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:3-4; Col. 1:13; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 3:1). Paul also sought the prayers of the churches (Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 1:9; Col. 4:3; 1 Thes. 5:25). The prayers of the saints are mentioned in Revelation as constantly before God as incense permeates a room (Rev. 5:8; 8:3).

Paul taught that we do not pray in isolation, but God’s Spirit is praying with us, able to intercede at times where we are unable to frame our words to the Lord (Rom. 8:26-27).

Church history gives us a number of ancient writings, but my favorite may well be *The Didache*. The book contains very straightforward and simple instructions about life, closely akin to parts of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). We do not know who authored the *Didache*. Scholars believe that it was never written by “an individual,” but

rather was the end product of a number of people and communities. The *Didache* was circulated among a number of Christian communities for their use and practice.

The *Didache* teaches that the trainees are to pray The Lord's Prayer three times daily. Found in chapter 8, the prayer reads very closely to that recorded in Matthew:

Our Father, the [one] in heaven, your name be made holy, your kingdom come, your will be done upon earth as in heaven, give us this day our bread [that is] coming and forgive us our debt as we likewise forgive our debtors, and do not lead us into the trial but deliver us from evil because yours is the power and the glory forever. (8:2).

Many today use The Lord's Prayer as a backbone for a strong prayer life.¹ As we explore the practicalities of prayer-life, I will explain some ways to incorporate The Lord's Prayer into an active daily prayer cycle.

¹ The Lord's Prayer is generally considered a "Christian prayer," and it certainly is. But it is more than that. Jesus and his immediate followers were Jewish. The prayer we call the Lord's Prayer is rooted in the Hebrew *Kaddish*. An ancient Hebrew prayer, the *Kaddish* dates from the diaspora Jews in Babylonia, and it closely resembles the beginning verses of Jesus's prayer. The *Kaddish* can be translated:

Exalted and hallowed be His great name

In the world which he created according to his will

May he let his kingdom rule in your lifetime

And in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole household of Israel, speedily and soon

Praise be his great name from eternity to eternity.

And to this say, Amen.

While the content of the two prayers are very similar, the Lord's Prayer has a major distinction. The Jewish prayer is one of praise to God as a third party, but Jesus used a direct discourse and dialogue. The Jewish prayer says "hallowed be his name," While

HEBREWS ON PRAYER

Hebrews gives the communication between God and people not as a monologue, but as a dialogue. God does not simply listen and act. God speaks.

God has been speaking throughout history. The book of Hebrews begins explaining that God *spoke* in a variety of ways through the Prophets in the past. Since the close of the Old Testament, God spoke through his Son (and those his Son assigned to speak under the authority of the Holy Spirit) (Heb. 1:1-2-).

If you see the many references to the Old Testament in Hebrews, you read passages introduced by the powerful and stunning language, “God spoke...” or “God says...” Consider these quotations and how they are introduced:

- For to which of the angels did **God** ever **say**, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? (Heb. 1:5 quoting Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14)
- And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, **he [God]** **says**, “Let all God’s angels worship him” (Heb. 1:6 quoting Dt. 32:43).
- Of the angels **he [God]** **says**, “He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.” (Heb. 1:7 quoting Ps. 104:4).
- But of the Son **he [God]** **says**, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” (Heb. 1:8-9 quoting Ps. 45:6-7).
- And to which of the angels has **he [God]** **ever said**, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”? (Heb. 1:13 quoting Ps. 110:1).

We also read the Holy Spirit as the source of Scripture in Hebrews 3:7-11,

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath,

Jesus says “hallowed be *your* name.” Jesus’s prayer was a conversation in relationship, not simply a declaration to the world.

‘They shall not enter my rest.’” (quoting Ps. 95:7-11)

This passage warrants special consideration for the message it contains. The writer references multiple times the Psalm warning people not to harden their hearts. People turn to prayer and psalms often in times of trouble. That is a good thing. But the message of God they often fail to hear, because they DON’T turn to him in prayer and from Psalms. Instead, those crises that should drive us to the Almighty often turn rebellious hearts bitter and hard.

This is a warning in Hebrews as the “if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts” portion of the Old Testament is repeated over and over (Heb. 3:7-11; 3:15; 4:7). It is a danger we are triply warned about.

The challenge for the believer is to pay attention to God’s word as we watch in faith the world unfold around us. God’s word is worth listening to. It is insightful into humanity as well as the world. It exposes us for who we are just as much as it reveals the Lord who is over all.

Consider the well-known passage from Hebrews 4:12-13, but focus on the end of the passage (in italics below).

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. *And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

This is important and not to be overlooked. Everyone – EVERYONE – is naked and exposed before the eyes of the Lord. His word explains it in a way that explains who he is and who we are. This can (and should be) scary in a sense. After all, his word teaches that,

every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution (Heb. 2:2).

This is a principle taught over and over in the Old Testament. (See, e.g., Num. 15:30,31; Dt. 4:3; 17:2, 5, 12; 27:26). Our responsibility to these words of God is to pay attention!

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard (Heb. 2:1).

If we pay close attention and hear the purity of God, the justice of God on sin, then it should make one pause and say, “How are we ever going to be in the presence of such a God, much less talk to him in any sense of the word?”

Here Hebrews provides the answer. We draw near to the throne of God not in fear and trepidation, but in confidence! How? Why? Because we have a “high priest” who has already gone and prepared the place for us. We have Jesus, a high priest who was human and can sympathize with the human condition as only a human can

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16).

We know that Jesus as high priest is acceptable to God because God appointed him for that very role.

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” (Heb. 5:5-6).

Furthermore, God heard Jesus’ prayers while Jesus walked on earth, why would it be any different once Jesus has ascended into heaven? (Heb. 5:7).

Jesus is, as noted earlier and at the very start of Hebrews, the way God has spoken to us of late. In Jesus we are hearing God speak. We are hearing him speak of righteousness, but also of love and mercy. Jesus doesn’t ignore sin, he forgives it. He saves not only to good, or even the marginally good. He saves anyone who seeks him. This is what he lives for! He lives to save.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb. 7:25).

Consider what is written there. Jesus saves “to the uttermost.” Now that is the confidence that allows us to approach the throne of God in prayer. Not because of our own merit. We approach in the name of Jesus. That means we approach based on what Jesus has done. God hears our prayers for the sake of Jesus! He is,

holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens (Heb. 7:26).

With him as our intermediary, praying under his name, we pray with confidence, not fear.

Since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is,

through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, (Heb. 10:19-22).

This is prayer of power. This is prayer that moves us to praise. We can now continually offer up a sacrifice and prayer of praise to the God who *wants* to be in dialogue with us (Heb. 13:15)!

PRACTICAL IDEAS

How does this lesson work itself out in my life? Different ways in different times. But as of the last five years or so, I find myself required to use a pray list. It is the only way I can genuinely keep to the commitments I have made to pray for people and things. I have three lists, one in paper I keep in a private area of the house where I can pray without being showy or without interruption. A second I keep on my computer, for when I am on the road. The third I keep on my cell phone for access when the first two are not around.

These lists are divided into several categories. I have a column for those for whom I am praying for faith. These are people that need to be in fellowship with God but are estranged, in rebellion, or perhaps never knew him. I have a second column for those who I pray to grow before the Lord. A third column is dedicated to those who are having health crisis. I have a fourth column that contains what is basically “miscellaneous.” These are requests that I get for anything from job searching to mission efforts.

On top of these listed names are the areas of prayer to cover, the nation and its leaders, our church and its leaders, and more.

Generally, I either open or close the prayer time with The Lord’s Prayer. Often I will break The Lord’s Prayer apart, praying, “Thy kingdom come” and interposing those for whom I am praying for faith. “Thy will be done” is a great place to be praying for the sick people on my list. “Hallowed be thy name” is a marvelous time to pray for those on my list I am praying will grow in the Lord.

I also love to use the psalms to open or close the prayer time. Some of my favorite psalm passages are,

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Ps. 19:14).

Or,

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night (92:1-2).

I find first thing in the morning and last thing before climbing into bed the best times for me to pray deliberately for these things.

I am attaching to this lesson, a sheet with categories ready for you to fill in. You may a better alternative for keeping your list, but this one certainly works well. If you want it on your phone too, it is easy to fill this out, then take a picture with your phone. You can add to the list or take away from the list (it is *really cool* when someone moves from your list of people you are praying to come to faith onto the list of people you are praying for to grow in the Lord).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“My house shall be called a house of prayer”* (Mt. 21:13).

Prayer is a good thing. Here Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7. It was not something new Jesus was saying, it is the story of the Bible, Old and New Testaments. God desires a relationship with the people made in his image. God desires a relationship with us. He initiated the conversation both in Holy Scripture and in the incarnate Jesus. Also through Jesus, he has placed all of us in a position to access the throne of God directly. He sustains our conversation through his Holy Spirit. Our blessing is to plug into him through prayer and watch him change us and change the world.

2. *“It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night”* (Ps. 92:1-2).

The morning and evening have long been recognized as great times to pray to the Lord. We acknowledge him at the start of each day, thanking him for sustaining us through the night, and laying our actions for the day before him. Then at night, we have a chance to think back over the day and God’s faithfulness. We can proclaim it in praise and prayer, seeking his continued presence through the night on the lives of those we commit to him in prayer.

3. *“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving”* (Col. 4:2).

Here is where the rubber meets the road. Let's commit to prayer for others, starting with your own approach or with the attached chart. Fill it out! Put it where you will see it. Become more intense in your prayer life and watch God bless you and those you pray for!

PRAYER LIST

THE LORD'S PRAYER

FOR FAITH

FOR GROWTH

FOR HEALING

MISC.