

Introduction to *Prayers from the Bible*

(Kate Graham)

On my fridge is a magnet that says, “Things go better with prayer”; it’s an echo of an old Coca Cola slogan. Christians often speak of ‘the power of prayer’. Yes, wonderful things have been and are achieved through prayer. However, it’s not the activity of prayer itself that we’re to put our faith in, but the power of God. What matters is not how well, how often, or what we pray for, but *who* we pray to. There is only one God who hears and answers our prayers – the God who made us for relationship with himself.

From the very beginning, in Genesis 3, the Bible introduces the idea of talking with God. In the Garden of Eden, God invited Adam and Eve to speak to him. And this open invitation to communicate with God continues throughout the Bible.

In times of crisis, helplessness or great fear, even people who don’t profess a faith will cry out to their Creator. “Help!” is probably the briefest and most urgent of prayers – “Lord, save me”, Peter cried out when fear overcame him and he began to sink after walking on the waves to Jesus (Matt. 14:30). “Thankyou” is another short prayer we should use often.

The Bible tells us that God made human beings for fellowship with himself and he wants us to know and love him. He has given us the capacity to pray so that we can speak with him in the love language of the heart. Prayer is really a two-way conversation with God. It includes speaking, listening and learning and involves the whole person — body, mind and spirit. Have you ever considered what a wonderful gift and privilege it is to be able to talk with our Creator?

Sometimes we don’t know how or what to pray. There are times when we find it hard to pray. Then prayers spoken or written by other people can help us to find the words to express how we feel. They can give direction to our thoughts and inspire our faith. Many people love the psalms for this reason.

But this series is not a study on the subject of prayer. There are plenty of helpful books about prayer available and you may have read some of them. In this series we’re going to look at particular prayers in the Bible that will help us to respond to God from our hearts as we pray.

There are eighty-five prayers in the Old Testament, and at least sixty psalms or parts of psalms which could be called prayers. In the New Testament we have Jesus’ teaching about prayer, as well as many prayers written by the apostle Paul and others. Although we’ll look into just a few, these prayers will show us what motivates prayer, and why we can come confidently to God. We’ll find wisdom and guidance in how to pray. And we’ll be blessed, encouraged and inspired to develop our own personal and group prayer times.

From the New Testament we’ll look at two well-known prayers of Jesus and later, two from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. From the Old Testament we’ll explore two wonderful prayers of Israel’s kings, David and Solomon. David’s prayer commissioned the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Several years later Solomon’s prayer dedicated the new temple for the Name of the LORD as God’s place of worship for the people of Israel. This occasion was a wonderful celebration of God’s faithfulness and a reminder to God’s people to remain faithful to him.

The prayers of Jesus

The prayer that begins this series is familiar to everyone. Along with Psalm 23, it’s one of the most loved and repeated passages of Scripture. It is a universal prayer — used by millions, spoken in many languages and on all sorts of occasions. It’s repeated in churches and in some parliaments; at weddings and funerals; at community events and in private worship; in time of peace and in times of war. Regardless of race or status; whether we’re rich or poor, powerful or helpless, young or old, this prayer connects with people all over the world. It also reveals God’s

desire for the world. Probably we know it by heart. We may have learned it in childhood and said it hundreds of times in many different situations. But how well have we understood it?

It is known as ‘the Lord’s Prayer’ because the Lord Jesus himself taught it to his disciples. But it would be more correct to call it ‘the disciples’ prayer’ because Jesus gave it as a model for them. In Luke 11:1 we read that one day after Jesus had finished praying, the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. What did they see in Jesus’ prayer life that was so different from their own? Prayer was such a priority for Jesus. He was up before dawn to spend time with his Father. He was in constant communication with him and did nothing without prayer; it was fundamental to his life and ministry. What an example for us.

We will study this prayer where it is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, at the centre of the Sermon on the Mount. This short prayer has six petitions; three show us how we relate to God, and three how to relate with one another. It is a prayer about depending on God’s provision for all our needs. It is about our highest priorities in life, and God’s desire for his world. It shows the unshakeable position we have in Christ, and therefore the confidence we have to pray to God, our Father. It is an open door, inviting us into his presence.

Jesus’ prayer in [John 17](#) gives us wonderful insight into his relationship with his Father. It also clearly reveals his loving concern for all who know him. This beautiful prayer, spoken in the presence of his disciples, is truly our Lord’s prayer — uniquely his. Much blessing awaits us as we study it.

We will come to realise something of what it cost both Father and Son for Jesus to come to earth in obedience to God’s plan for the salvation of humankind. This prayer helps us to appreciate the extent of Jesus’ love for us and respond to the certain expectation that one day we shall see him face to face. It shows too how Jesus equips his disciples to fulfil their mission in the world.

This moving prayer in John 17 has three parts: Jesus’ prayer for himself (verses 1–5); his prayer for the disciples (verses 6–19); and Jesus’ prayer for all believers who will form the church (verses 20–26). It also speaks to us in three main ways: in the comfort it gives; in the purpose it shows; and in the pattern it sets. The study will go into this in more detail.

Jesus knew he was soon to die in terrible agony on the cross. We could understand if he was too filled with thoughts of what he would suffer to be concerned about praying for others. Instead, here is more evidence of his love for his disciples — and for everyone who would come to believe in him. Jesus’ example challenges our commitment to pray for others.

Jesus knew he was leaving his disciples in a world hostile to God and his people. But that was where they were to do their work. Jesus’ prayer reveals his priorities for his disciples in equipping them for their mission to be his witnesses and take his message to the world.

As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends everyone who believes in him. What a special blessing to know that Jesus prayed for us all — and that he prays for us still in the glorious presence of his Father. We long to be with Jesus in heaven, but it is on earth that he sends us on mission. In this powerful prayer, we’ll see what Jesus prayed for us, his followers, in this great task.

The prayers of two kings

Between the two prayers of Jesus we’ll look back at the prayers by David and Solomon. There’s a reason for this order. It’s because the familiar words that conclude the Lord’s prayer in the King James Bible -- “for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever” (Matt. 6:13b) -- come from David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:10–19. As those words suggest, this is a magnificent prayer full of praise and thanksgiving.

David and his son Solomon are Israel's most renowned kings. King David dearly wanted to build a temple for the LORD, a place for his Name. God gave the plans to David, but he said that Solomon was to oversee the project. As David conferred the kingship of Israel on his son, he charged Solomon with this task. David also donated all of his personal wealth towards the cost. This, in turn, inspired the people to give generously. David's prayer of thanks to God in response to their willing support is one of the greatest prayers in the Old Testament. It reveals him as truly 'a man after God's own heart'.

God's provision of finance and materials through David and his people enabled Solomon to begin the building of the temple in the fourth year of his reign. The project took seven years to complete. The silver and gold and furnishings that David had dedicated were placed in the temple treasury. Solomon summoned all the elders of Israel and then the ark of the covenant was brought to its place in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place

Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 came during this huge public ceremony to mark the dedication of the temple. What a wonderful structure it must have been! But its true glory was not in the building itself. Rather, it was in the glory of God's presence, represented in the cloud that filled the temple, as he called his people to worship him.

May the prayers of these two famous kings inspire our praise, worship and thanksgiving, and encourage our confidence in the God who hears and answers those who trust and honour him.

The prayers of Paul

Paul's prayers illustrate what a mighty man of God he was. For Paul, prayer was never a dull ritual. It was always a dynamic exchange with the Lord of his life. His prayers are never empty or pathetic pleadings. They are strong, Spirit-led and joyful. Over and over again they give us glimpses of the riches of Christ which are ours to claim. As we study two prayers from his letter to the church in Ephesus we'll find spiritual truths that will profoundly challenge us.

What motivated the prayers of this deeply humble apostle? Paul's sincere love and concern for the believers in Ephesus kept him praying for their spiritual understanding, and growth. He wanted them to be mature in faith, and to miss out on nothing of all that God intended for them. Love for people leads to prayer for them, and prayer leads to love for people — even those we may not know or like.

Paul was full of joy at what God had done in Christ and at the news that the believers were growing in their faith. So he could not help but lift his heart in praise to God. From Ephesians 1:3–13, take in the magnitude of all Christ has accomplished for us. Consider what he has done in your own life and in the lives of people you know, and be filled with joy.

Thanksgiving will be a natural outcome of joy. It was for Paul when he heard good news about the faith of the Ephesians. But even when we feel anxious we are to pray, giving thanks. In every situation we are to bring our concerns to God with thanksgiving. Then we will know God's peace guarding our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:6–7).

The faith of other believers is always cause for joy and thanksgiving. Faith motivates all of our prayers — but it is *who* we place our faith in that makes the difference. We can have faith in our mighty God because he is faithful. He wants only the best for us. He has shown us his love in Christ, and we can have every confidence that he hears and answers the sincere prayers of our hearts.

With great reverence and earnestness Paul asked God to bless the believers. He prayed

- * for inner strength by the power of the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16);
- * for Christ to dwell in their hearts by faith (v 17);
- * that they would be "rooted and established in love" (v 17) so they would have
- * power to grasp the magnitude of Christ's love (v 18);

- * and to know this love that is beyond human understanding,
- * so that they might be completely filled with all the fullness of God (v 19)

What a magnificent prayer. Ponder it, remembering that this is God's will for you too!

You may wonder if all these blessings are truly possible. Paul remembered the abundant resources and mighty power of his God, and the answer was a resounding 'Yes — and much more than we can even imagine!' (3:20–21). Our focus is not to be the difficulty of what we ask, but the ability of our God. God is ABLE! Almighty; Boundless; Limitless; Everlasting. May he enlarge your understanding of who he is and all that he offers. For every gift to us is for God's glory in the church and in Jesus Christ, now and forever.

Communicating with God

The prayers of David, Solomon, Paul and of course Jesus himself, reveal hearts in close relationship with the Father. As a child of God, desiring to do his will, there is always an open line of communication between you and the Father. This is true even if you're experiencing a dreary wilderness, a sea of despair, or a dry, exposed wasteland. God hears our prayers when we come to him in faith, not clinging to sin in our hearts (Psalm 66:18).

In prayer we can express the full range of human emotion: grief, joy, pain, regret, appreciation, gratitude, anxiety, confidence, love, wonder, expectancy and hope. And, as we look at the prayers in this series we'll recognise that worship, praise, meditation, repentance, thanksgiving, dedication, petition and intercession all have a place in our praying.

In the Bible, the reasons for prayer are as varied as the circumstances. They include reverence for God and the desire for his presence. People prayed to celebrate or to strengthen the bonds of fellowship. They prayed from a sincere concern for others. They prayed about issues like trials and suffering, problems in the church and false teaching. But above all else there is the desire to know, love and honour God because of his great love, mercy and grace shown in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

True prayer is initiated by God. Essentially, it's our response to God, who first speaks to us — through his created world, through the life of Jesus, the living Word, and in the Bible, his written word. We don't need to impress God with many eloquent words. He delights in the sincere prayer that comes from a pure heart. As you begin to study these prayers from the Bible, ask God to increase your spiritual understanding. Spend time with him. And give him praise and thanks for all he has done to make you his child.

Let's come to this series with open hearts and minds, and join with the disciples in saying 'Lord, teach us to pray.'