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A Biblical Focus On Prayer - Part 1
The Object of Our Prayer

By Tal Davis

The friendly barber was intently cutting my hair. As he clipped and combed we talked casually about the weather and sports. Then he asked what I did for a living. I told him I was pastor of a church in the community. "Oh..." he said, a bit sheepishly. I think he was afraid he had said something off-color in our conversation. I asked him where he went to church.

"I went to church when I was a boy," he said, "but now I don't go often. I'm just not sure about that stuff in the Bible."

"Like what?" I queried.

"Well, how about the Lord's Prayer?" It was probably the only Bible passage he knew. But, apparently, he had thought about it. "If Jesus was supposed to have never sinned, then why did he say, 'Forgive us our trespasses?' If he never sinned, why did he need to ask for forgiveness?"

"That's a very good question." I responded.

The barber's question was fair and honest, and deserved an answer. Yet, it illustrates the ignorance and misconceptions people have about prayer (and Jesus). Even many Christians have only a limited understanding of the Bible's teaching on the subject. As a result, their prayer lives are sporadic (if at all) and seemingly unproductive. They want to know, "How can I practice consistent and effective prayer?"

Prayer is a key aspect of a Christian worldview. As Theists we believe God is the Infinite, Omnipotent, Personal, Creator of the universe. As such, we can communicate with Him on a personal level knowing He hears us and knows our needs. We especially believe He has made Himself known to us through His Son Jesus Christ so that we have a direct Advocate with the Father. This makes Christianity unique among the theistic religious systems. God is not just an abstract distant being who we pray to in a vague way or through an earthly intermediary. We can know Him and pray to Him in a personal and intimate way. He is our personal Lord and Savior.

In this seven-part series, titled **A Biblical Focus On Prayer** we will examine the nature and content of meaningful prayer. We will especially look at how Jesus taught his disciples to pray in what is usually called "the Lord's Prayer" (it should be called "The Disciples Prayer" - this is a clue as to how I answered the barber). We will analyze, phrase by phrase from Matthew's Gospel, how Jesus wants His followers, then and now, to communicate with God. We will also see, in future installments, how each element of Jesus' model prayer is exemplified in the Psalms, in the book of James, by Isaiah, and by Jesus Himself.

The Gospel of Matthew, according to ancient tradition, was probably written by one of Jesus' most distinguished disciples. Matthew (or Levi) was a tax collector apparently on the edge of the city of Capernaum. When Jesus approached him and boldly said "Follow me" (Matt. 9:9), Matthew left his lucrative job and became one of Jesus' devotees.

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In chapters five through seven of his Gospel, Matthew records a lengthy discourse Jesus delivered on a mountainside in or around Galilee. That message is usually called the "Sermon on the Mount." It is regarded, even by non-Christians, as one of the greatest ethical and moral statements ever expounded.

In chapter six, Matthew details how Jesus addressed three primary expressions of Jewish piety. His purpose was to warn just how those legitimate forms of religious devotion could be (and were) abused by hypocritical religious counterfeiters like the Pharisees. Jesus accused them of desiring public acclaim more than actually worshiping and serving God. He cautioned his listeners, "*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 6:1 CSB).

Jesus first focused on the practice of almsgiving (giving to the needy) (6:1-4). He next addressed prayer and presented a prototype (6:5-15, the subject of our study). Later, He taught on fasting (6:16-18). For all three devotions, Jesus suggested that each should best be done without ostentation, but privately and cheerfully in order to receive God's rewards

In this installment we will analyze not only Jesus' model prayer, but also several beautiful prayers preserved for us in the Psalms. *Psalms* is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *mizmor*, meaning a religious song. The Psalms, of course, are Hebrew songs used in corporate worship and private devotions. This session spotlights Psalm 103, a heartfelt expression of David's love and worship of God.

The God We Pray to Desires Blessings for Us

"Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy. (Matthew 6:9a CSB)

1 My soul, bless the LORD, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

2 My soul, bless the LORD, and do not forget all his benefits.

3 He forgives all your iniquity; he heals all your diseases.

4 He redeems your life from the Pit; he crowns you with faithful love and compassion.

5 He satisfies you with good things; your youth is renewed like the eagle. (Psalm 103:1-5 CSB)

As mentioned above, Jesus began this section of His sermon (chapter 6), with a warning. He says not to give alms, pray, or fast like the hypocrites. In verses 5-8 he expounds on his admonishment as regards prayer. He says the hypocrites like to stand in the synagogues and on street corners to exhibit their piety. Jesus says, rather emphatically ("Truly I tell you"), that the applause they may garner is all the reward they will get. He tells them that it is better to pray in secret so God can reward them in secret. He also says not "to babble" in long-winded prayers like the Gentiles. Jesus may have had in mind the incantations used in pagan religions. Whatever, He says to pray sincerely in concise and direct ways (see Matt. 7:7-11 and James 4:2b-3). There is simply no reason to pray long and repetitively. Why? God already knows (vs. 8).

After having advised them about the best way to (or not to) pray, Jesus introduces the model prayer for his disciples. "*Therefore, you should pray like this:*" Note He is telling them how to pray, not what to pray. Most people know this prayer as the Lord's Prayer (a shorter version is in Luke 11:2-4). Actually, and this what I told my barber friend, this is not Jesus' prayer (He did not have to ask for forgiveness). He is

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teaching His disciples how they should pray. Jesus' entreaties recorded in John 17 would more accurately be identified as the Lord's prayer.

Note, we must be careful when we recite this model prayer not to be guilty of what Jesus charged the Pharisees and the pagans. Just saying the words over and over without thinking is of no benefit to anyone. Jesus meant this prayer to be a template for us to talk to God in our own unique ways. (This is not to say it is improper to recite this prayer verbatim in appropriate settings.) This prayer gives us the basic components and attitudes we should incorporate into our prayer lives. As Herschel Hobbs wrote, "Prayer is not some battering ram by which we gain entrance to God's treasury. It is a receptacle by which we receive that which He already longs to give us."

Jesus says they are to direct their prayers to "*Our Father in heaven.*" The fatherhood of God is not a major theological concept in the Old Testament. When it does appear it is in the form of analogy and not in a direct address as here (see Deut. 32:6; Psalm 103:13; Isa. 63:16; Mal. 2:10). Jesus, however, spoke directly to God as "My Father" (*Pater*). Sometimes He used the intimate Aramaic word, "*Abba,*" ("Daddy") as in Mark 14:36. He wants us to do the same (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Jesus' audacious attitude is very important because it establishes that God is a loving Father who cares for us and with whom we can communicate intimately. Though He is "in heaven," He is not some mystical abstract being about which we can only meditate or contemplate. He is our loving Father who is very close and hears us when we pray. As we said, this is a key element of Christian Theism.

This personal attribute contrasts to the concepts of deity in other reli-

gions and worldviews. For instance, Islam, though it has a theistic worldview, prohibits calling God (*Allah*) father. Muslims see that as a blasphemous degradation of God to a human level. In their view God is too transcendent to be compared to anything in the created order. Furthermore, Islam says God is unknowable in a personal relationship. Humans only know God's will through the Qur'an as transmitted to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Granted, good Muslims pray five times each day, but their prayers are prescribed and recited by rote in Arabic. When the prayers are translated and analyzed it is evident they talk much about God and why prayer is a benefit, but actually talk very little to God.

On the other hand, Far Eastern faiths (Hinduism, Taoism, the New Age Movement, et.al.) believe God is the impersonal "all" of the universe. This pantheistic (God is everything) worldview makes deity known only through mystical experiences and meditation. The idea of God relating to humans as a personal father is unimaginable. The goal of the Far Eastern worldview is, after numerous reincarnations, to re-merge into the universal substance from which we emerged lifetimes ago.

Let's now turn our attention to Psalm 103. It is the joyful prayer of David, a man who recognized the goodness and love of God. It is clearly the expression of one who knows and enjoys the fullness of the unchanging love of God. Under divine inspiration he delivers a poetic masterpiece from his inner most being. His excellent words impel us to sing right along.

David begins the hymn actually addressing himself using first person singular pronouns (my/me). He tells his own "*soul*" to bless the Lord (vs. 1). "Soul" is a form of *nepesh*, a Hebrew term found 755 times in the

Old Testament. It refers to the totality of a human's existence: mind, body, and spirit. It is also variously translated as "being," "person," "life," or "self." The word embraces one's feelings, desires, and will. It is an expression of the entire human personality. When God created Adam He breathed in the breath of life and Adam became a unified "living soul" (*nephesh*) (KJV). A person does not have a soul, a person is a soul.

"Bless" is *barak* and may also mean "to kneel." In this Psalm it is an expression of deep adoration, worship, and "praise" (NIV). "Lord" (CSB) or "LORD" (NIV, NASB, KJV - all letters in upper case) is the usual English rendering of the Hebrew name of God (*Yahweh*). Ancient Jewish tradition was to refrain from saying God's holy name, so it was always read publicly as *Adonai* (Lord). The translators of the Greek Septuagint Bible, honoring that tradition, substituted the name of God in the Old Testament with *Kurios* (Lord). Most modern English versions still follow that practice. Thus God's holy name (vs. 1) reflects His power, glory, and perfection, all worthy qualities of David's full devotion. So David desires to "bless" the LORD with "*all that is within me*" (literally: "all my insides.")

David blesses the Lord for three reasons (vss. 2-5) or "*great benefits*" which he does not want the people to forget or take for granted. (Notice in verse three he switches from first person [me/my] to second person pronouns [you/your].)

First, God forgives all their "iniquity" (vs. 3a - *awoneki* - "sin"). Sin, of course, creates barriers between humanity and the holy God. David understands, however that God is gracious. If people are willing to confess their sins, God will forgive them and restore a right relationship to Him. David experienced that grace himself in a dramatic way. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. However, he was unmasked by the prophet Nathan. Immediately, David confessed and sought the Lord's mercy (2 Sam. 11:1-12:15; see also Psalm 51). We will address this incident in greater detail in Session 6 of this study.

David further motivates his readers to bless the Lord because He heals their diseases (vs. 3b). His connection of forgiveness and healing may indicate that David considered physical sickness as intricately associated with sin. He states in another passage, "*There is no soundness in my body because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin*" (Psalm 38:3 CSB). We still know that sin damages the total person and, in many cases, destroys physical and emotional health.

Third, David says God redeems his people from "the Pit" (*shachath* - vs. 4). A pit, obviously, is a hole, a ditch, or an animal trap. In this case, David probably uses it as a symbol for death or the underworld. God rescues his people from the grave and then crowns them like royalty with His "*faithful love*" and "*compassion*." "Faithful love" (CSB) translates the word *hesed*, which is sometimes rendered as "loving kindness" (KJV, NASB) or "steadfast love" (NRSV). It is a key term in the Old Testament and probably has the closest meaning in Hebrew to the Greek term *agape* (God's unconditional love, as in John 3:16 and 1 Cor. 13). Love is tied to "compassion" (*werahamim*) which is the empathy or "tender mercies" (KJV) by which God's love is manifested.

Because of all these facts about the Lord, David says that God will satisfy his people with "*good things*." Furthermore, like a young eagle effortlessly takes to wing and soars above the earth, God's grace allows His people to renew their spiritual vitality (see Isa. 40:31).

From these verses we can learn that we can go directly to God who is our Heavenly Father. Also, God will forgive us when we confess our sins to Him directly. We can know that God desires to bless our lives.

We Pray to Our Compassionate Father

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his faithful love toward those who fear him.

12 As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

13 As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

(Psalm 103:11-13 CSB)

In verses 6-10 David continues his ode of blessings to God. He says God is characterized by His "*acts of righteousness*" and intolerance for injustice, especially for the oppressed. He says that God revealed those

divine qualities ("His ways") to Moses and demonstrated them by freeing the Israelites from Egypt. David again extolls the Lord's character of compassion and adds that He is "gracious." That is, God is slow to anger and full of faithful love (*hesed*). Consequently, He forgives sins and does not give us our just deserts.

Notice how David now switches the pronouns back to first person, but this time they are plural (our/us - vs. 9, 10). In verses 1-2, he was speaking essentially to himself (my/me - first person singular) and indirectly to his audience. In verses 3-5 he addressed his readers directly (you/your - second person singular). Now he says God's grace applies to himself and anyone or everyone else who repents. Verses 11-13 make this even more clear. He says that God's "*faithful love*" is as "*high as the heavens are above the earth.*" Perhaps David was gazing at the millions of unreachable stars in the sky as wrote this line.

Notice, however, the one condition of the Lord's forgiveness (vs. 11): "*for those who fear Him.*" Fear (*yare*) of God is an important principle in the Old Testament. It is evident especially in times when individuals are confronted by the presence of the divine. When people realize the infinite power and holiness of the Lord they are struck with a deep sense of awe, humility, and their sinful unworthiness. Usually they react by falling on their face or kneeling in contrite reverence, confession of sin, and desire to know God's will (cf. Isa. 6). This experience is truly best described as fear of the Lord.

David then uses another easily visualized metaphor (vs. 12). He says God has removed our transgressions "*as far as the east (mizrach) is from the west (maarab).*" Of course, the directional compass had not yet been invented. Most ancient people did not comprehend the earth as a sphere, as we now know it is (despite the denials of the Flat Earth Society). Nevertheless, as David observed the rising and the setting of the sun each day (east to west) he was struck by the infinitely wide expanse between the two. Interestingly, we now know that east and west never meet and never end. Unlike north and south, which meet at the poles, they continue forever around the globe of the earth. Strange as it seems, though, at the exact points of the north and south poles, both east and west simply disappear.

So David's description, inspired by the omniscient God, had even greater application than he knew. From the New Testament, we know that if we sincerely repent of our sins, turn to God and seek His redemption in Jesus Christ, we know He will forgive us and remove our sins an infinite distance from our lives. That is the great assurance that we have in Jesus, and that David presaged in this psalm.

David then (vs. 13) uses another descriptive term for God not so prominent in the Old Testament. He says, "*as a Father has compassion on his children.*" As you recall, in the model prayer Jesus addressed God as "Our Father in heaven" (see comment on Matt. 6:9a above). Like David in this Psalm, He used that same title to describe the way God takes care of His people. "*Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!*" (Matt. 7: 9-11 CSB)

As we pray each day, we have confidence that when we admit our sins and repent (turn away from our sins), God will forgive them and restore our relationship with Him. As John says, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (I John 1:5 CSB). This is especially relevant to those who have never received Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. Lost people need to hear the Good News that Jesus died for their sins on the cross and rose again so they can be forgiven. God is indeed our compassionate and loving Father in heaven.

So we can see that God's love and grace has no limit for His people. When we confess our sins, He not only forgives them but forgets them forever. God cares for us like a compassionate father loves his children.

The God we pray to is Almighty

19 The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.

20 Bless the LORD, all his angels of great strength, who do his word, obedient to his command.

21 Bless the LORD, all his armies, his servants who do his will.

22 Bless the LORD, all his works in all the places where he rules. My soul, bless the LORD!
(Psalm 103:19-22 CSB)

In the next section of his psalm David makes a dramatic comparison (vs. 14-18). He starts by saying God is compassionate towards us because He understands what we are made of. He did make us after all, so He remembers from whence we came (as if He could actually forget). He says we are made of dust and our days like the grass and flowers that flourish for a season then the wind blows them away.

Not so with God. Over against our human weakness and temporal existence is the greatness of God's love toward those who fear Him. His care and righteousness is without end and extends for generation after generation for those who keep His covenant and obey His precepts. (From the New Testament we know that in Christ we have eternal life.)

Likewise, in contrast to our human frailty, David extolls the glory and power of the Lord (vs. 19). In the beginning of the psalm, David encouraged himself to worship the Lord. He is so filled with wonderment and joy that he cannot contain his praise. Now he calls on the people to unite with him in blessing the Lord. He tells them to recognize the Lord's universal kingdom over which He rules on His heavenly throne (*kisow*). The image is of a great king sitting on his royal seat from which he directs the business of his realm. In God's case, his dominion is over everything in the universe. He is worthy, therefore, of the blessings of all His people and, indeed, all of the created order.

David has thus progressed from blessing God in his inner self to exhorting the whole of the cosmos to do so as well. That universe even includes spiritual beings. He says God's angels are "*of great strength who do His word.*" (vs. 20) . He calls them "*all His armies, His servants who do His will*" (vs. 21). They are always completely under God's sovereign command.

Angels (*malakaw* - literally "messengers") are the heavenly emissaries who communicate God's truths to humans, who carry out His will, who guard God's throne, and who, as in this case, praise Him. Throughout the Old Testament they are continually active in the lives of God's people. Angels are of a different created order than humans. Some people incorrectly think that good people become angels when they die. They may have watched *It's a Wonderful Life* a few too many times. Actually, the Bible does not say when they were made. Scripture seems to hint their origin was far in the ancient past, perhaps even before the creation of the world (Col. 1:16-17). We are also not told much about their nature except that they are mighty and an innumerable multitude (Deut. 33:2; Psalm 68:17; 2 Thess. 1:7; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 5:11).

In any case, their functions as documented in the Old Testament are varied: proclamation of the will of God and announcing important events (Gen. 19:1-22; Ex. 3:2-6; Judg. 2:1-5; 13:2-23); protection of God's people (Ex. 14:19-20; 1 Kings 19:1-8); and punishment of the wicked among both the Jews and Gentiles (Gen. 19:12-13; 2 Sam. 24:17; 2 Kings 19:35). Scripture also indicates that some angels are in rebellion against God. They are the devil and the demons that stand under God's judgment but still constantly harass humanity (Matt. 25:41; Luke 10:18; Eph. 6:12; 2 Pet. 2:4).

The English word "angel" is derived from the Greek term *angelos* which also means "messengers." In the New Testament, as in the Old, we find angels involved in the affairs of human life, especially as recorded in the Gospels and Acts. Their tasks are similar to those in the Old Testament: proclamation, protection, and punishment (Matt. 1:20-24; Acts 12:7-11).

David concludes his song again acknowledging God's mighty works and sovereignty (vs. 22a). He has come full circle as he repeats his initial personal pledge to bless the Lord with all his soul (vs. 22b).

In summary, David reiterates Jesus' desire for us to go directly to the heavenly Father with our prayers. His psalm provides us a wonderful example of a man in love with God. He professes his blessings on the Lord, as one who desires good things for His people. He says to bless God because He is their loving, compassionate and forgiving father. And he reminds them of the infinite power with which God presides over His creation.

So we see that unlike weak human beings, God's power and knowledge is infinite. The whole created order, including the angels, exalt the glory of God. When we recognize who truly God is, we will worship Him with prayer and praise.

In the next installment we will continue this study of prayer, we will examine how our prayers are driven by a desire to honor God. We will look at Matthew 6:9b and Psalm 96:1-9.

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