

Living in the "Age of Prayer"

Introduction

We live in the "Age of Prayer." This is the time between Jesus' ascension into heaven (Acts 1) and his future return. During this time, prayer has a greater significance than at any other time in the past, or in the future. Today, prayer has a uniqueness that it did not have even when Jesus Christ was walking on the earth!

Prayer, as it exists today, has a direct connection with every aspect of who Jesus is and what he did.

- It focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ - his birth, his ministry and teaching, his death and resurrection.
- It looks forward to the future - Jesus' return to earth, when the victory of his resurrection will be completely manifested.

We need to remember that, in the "Age of Prayer" (i.e., today), prayer is *imperative* - it is *commanded*. A failure to pray is *sin*. It's not that praying means a person is "spiritual"; rather, it means he is *obedient*.

Jesus' birth - "The beginning of the change"

What was prayer like *before* the "Age of Prayer"? Before Jesus' birth, people prayed to God as the majestic sovereign Creator, the King of Kings, who is holy, righteous, and to be feared. They prayed to him as the coming judge; and they rejoiced in the fact that "we are his people" (Psalm 100:3).

Jesus' birth marked the *beginning* of a change in the significance of prayer - a change that would not be completed until the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles, as described in Acts 2. This change would have two significant aspects to it:

- People would still pray to God as the majestic sovereign Creator, the King of Kings, who is holy, righteous, and to be feared, etc. But a new, intimate dimension that never before existed would be added - that of "Dear Father" (Matthew 6:9). Now we can pray to him as his *children*, having been adopted into his family (Romans 8:15), because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross.
- Prayer would also become the vital link between us and Jesus Christ, during this time period that he is away from us. It is in connection with prayer that the Holy Spirit enables us to have the special relationship described as being "united with Christ."

Jesus' ministry - "Teaching us how to pray"

During Jesus' time with the disciples, he taught them *how* we are to pray. He did it in two ways. First, he provided them with examples:

- *His own praying.* The disciples noticed a difference between the way he prayed and the way they had been taught.
- *The model prayer, often called, "The Lord's Prayer."* This prayer example is found twice in the gospels, given on different occasions - Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4.

Second, he gave them specific instructions, a few hours before his death. Some of his final words to them, recorded in John 14-16, include several instructions about prayer and about "asking" for things in prayer. (He also prays for them, after giving these instructions - John 17.)

- Some key passages include John 14:13-15; 15:4-10, 16; 16:23-28.
- The key concepts related to prayer are:
 - (a) Requests will be asked directly of the Father
 - (b) Requests are to be asked "in Jesus' Name"
 - (c) There is a connection between prayer and "*abiding*" in Jesus
 - (d) The purpose of asking is "fruit bearing" and glorifying the Father
- These concepts did not exist under the Old Covenant. But now they will become mandatory, a part of what it means to "follow Jesus."

Asking the Father - John 15:7, 16; 16:23, 26.

- This focuses on the new, intimate relationship that Jesus' followers will have, as adopted "sons" in the family of God.
- Note the connection between: (a) asking, and (b) "fruit bearing" and glorifying the Father.

Asking "In Jesus' Name" - John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24, 26.

- This is *not* a magical formula or phrase that gets added at the end of a prayer. Rather, this means that the basis of prayer would be centered in who Jesus Christ is and what he did.
- In using this phrase, we are claiming that, as his representatives on earth, we are in agreement with him, as far as mission and goals are concerned. We are claiming that our prayer is in harmony with his person and work - who he is and what he does.
- It also implies that we have been united with Christ and are abiding in Him and in his words. This is related to our present moral conduct. (See below.)

"Abiding" in Jesus Christ - John 15:4-10, 16. (Some translations may use the word "*remain*.")

- This is *not* "feelings of peace, ecstasy and joy." Nor is it a reference to our "mystical union," the connection that exists between the *body* of Christ (the church) and Christ, the *head* of the body, which is brought about by the work of the Spirit.
- Rather, it has to do with "having and obeying Jesus' words." A person *cannot* rightfully pray "in Jesus' name" unless he is "abiding" in Jesus!

Note that the Word of God *always* comes in the context of a *demand* that we accept it as true, and the *obligation* that it be obeyed. This is true every time we are exposed to it! (It wasn't written merely to answer questions!) Because of this, we could say that the Christian life is one of "perpetual repentance," a constant changing that results in thinking and living *more* "like Christ." Every time we are exposed to Scripture, we must have this attitude: "I will believe (accept) and do what God's Word says."

The above three concepts work together in what we could describe as a "**Prayer-Obedience Cycle.**"

- All three concepts are related, and **without them all, we are *not* praying "in Jesus' name"!**
- We begin by reading God's Word, which reveals to us God's will. Once we understand God's will, we can begin to *obey* God's will and to conform our *thinking* to God's will. (Compare to Romans 12:1-2.) *This is what it means by "abiding in Christ."*
- Once our thoughts and actions are in conformity to God's will, we can *pray* God's will.
- Every step of the way, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' death and resurrection - "The victory that makes it all possible"

The future victory

The full significance of Jesus' resurrection victory is yet to be realized on earth. Jesus has *conquered* sin and death; and the day is coming, in which the application of his victory will result in the elimination of *all* sickness and death (1 Corinthians 15:51-58; Revelation 21:4) on earth. The earth itself will be made new (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). Sin, and everything associated with it, will be forever removed.

- This will not merely be a demonstration of the fact that Jesus is all-powerful. Rather, it will be the application of the victory that Jesus accomplished in his death and resurrection.

The present "tension"

In heaven, Jesus is already declared the triumphant victor (Revelation 5); and the full application of this victory is coming on earth - it's just a matter of time. Nevertheless, there can be a *partial* application of this future victory at the present time - and that is through prayer.

- We live in a time of *tension*, between our future hope and our present situation. We want what is coming in the *future*, and long to see it even *now*. This tension influences the *content* of our prayer.
- Prayer is asking for a partial display *now* of that future, final victory that was guaranteed by the resurrection.

This "tension," seen in Jesus' teaching about prayer

The way this tension impacts prayer is seen in the "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9-13), and is expressed in the phrase, "*...on earth as it is in heaven.*"

- We pray, "*... as it is in heaven,*" in anticipation of a future time, in which God's name, kingdom and will are central to all that happens on earth.
- We pray, "*... on earth...*" because we desire his name, kingdom and will to be manifested, at least to some degree, right now.
- It is as though we were saying something like this: "Based on what you are going to do in the *future*, would you bring some of this power into the world *now*?"

"In the *future*, your name (and all it represents) will be central in the world. Let it be central *today*, in my life and in the lives of those around me!" The same applies to his kingdom and will... "Let them be central *today*, in my life and in the lives of those around me!"

An illustration of how this works

- When we pray for something, such as for the healing of a person who is sick or dying, we are **not** praying for a miraculous "Poof!" - and they are suddenly healed. Rather, we are praying for the power of Jesus' redemptive victory to come and be revealed in us. Answered prayer is the application of his *future* victory, brought into world *today*! (Even a prayer *not* answered the way we would like will be to God's glory, though we might not see it at the present moment.)
- How do we know if we're asking the right type of prayer? Ask yourself: "If God answers my prayer, will it extend his fame and reputation in the world... or is it mere convenience for me?"
- Sad to say, most church-goers are governed by convenience - trying to get God to give them what *they* want. This is "manipulative prayer," and is simply putting one's self first. Jesus becomes little more than a genie! It is legitimate for us to pray about our needs, but our definition of "need" is illuminated by the Word and will of God. Instead of relying on manipulation and techniques, we rely on: "You (God) decide what is best."

When Jesus sent the Holy Spirit - "The 'Age of Prayer' is now here"

Pentecost, ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven, was the final event that affected the significance and place of prayer. It was at this time that the Holy Spirit came down and the church was born. This was the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of the "baptism in the Holy Spirit." This era will end when Jesus Christ returns.

- When Jesus was on earth, the Holy Spirit *controlled* everything Jesus did. At Pentecost, he sent the Holy Spirit to us. Just like Jesus, everything we do is to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. *This is a reflection of our union with Christ.*

Some features about this age

Jesus Christ is currently not present with us. He is the resurrected, triumphant Lord over all; but physically, he is seated in a place we call "heaven."

Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to *link* us together with him. The Spirit is the link between the head (Jesus) and the body (us), between the king and the citizens; and his focus is to implement what Jesus has purposed to accomplish.

Prayer can also be described as a link - the means used by the Holy Spirit, to accomplish all this. It is the link between Jesus' accomplishments (his redemptive victory) and us; between his power and our ability to keep "going on" in life. Prayer is the means by which the power of his victory impacts the life of the church.

The "Age of Prayer" will end

This "prayer link" between us and our head (Jesus) is needed only *now*. It was not needed in the past (before Jesus' birth) or in the future (after he returns and is present with us).

Today, we pray that some of Jesus' *future* glory might be seen in the *present*. After Jesus' return, we will no longer pray this. The future will be here! The time will arrive, when God's name, kingdom, and will *are* central in the world, just like they presently are in heaven!