

What Prayer Is *Not*

First, a few comments about what prayer *is*

In the Bible, prayer takes on a variety of forms. Some of these include: *adoration, confession, making requests, intercession, thanksgiving, praise, entreaty, meditation* (thinking about God and what he has done), and sometimes even *objecting* to something.

There are also many words used to describe the *act* of praying. Some of the common words used in the Bible are: *prayer, request, ask, supplication, vow, entreaty, thanksgiving, praise, worship, beg, confess, beseech, intercession, and appeal*. (Some Bible translations may use other words.)

The Bible contains many examples of people praying. When we read such accounts, we discover that many of the words used to describe the act of praying are a normal part of everyday life. For instance, when a person asks for something, he would use the same language when asking God, as he would when asking a person. Confession of sin and expressions of thanks would use the same language, whether they were directed toward God or toward people. In time, a word might develop a special significance in prayer; but even then, the original concept would have been a normal part of life.

What does this mean to us? To start with, prayer involves "normal" language, not some special "religious talk." Though it may be associated with various activities, such as worship, studying Scripture, and singing, the prayer itself does not involve "holy language" or special ceremonial rituals!

Below, we are going to focus on what prayer is *not*. Future studies will focus on more of what prayer *is*.

Prayer Is Not ... Trying to Manipulate or Control God

Prayer is not an attempt to "harness" God's power for our purposes, so that he will give us what we want! This is called "ego-centric" praying - prayer that is centered around *us*.

This is the way the *pagans* pray! Tribal animists, often motivated by fear, attempt to engage divine power for their own prosperity, long life and protection.

- We would *never* do that... or would we? Do we pray out of love and trust in a Father who we know will take care of us? Or do we pray out of fear for what the future holds - issues related to our financial well-being, our safety and health, long life, and other things related to prosperity and happiness? We don't need to use the chants and potions of a tribal animist; there are more "sophisticated" ways of doing this! Many of the modern-day techniques that people use in prayer could be compared to the magical words, formulas and "recipes for success," that the pagans might use, when they attempt to get their gods to "move" in their favor.

Below are examples of how we might do this. *Note that some of the things listed may be perfectly legitimate at times, and wrong motives may be the main issue.*

1. Doing things to "bribe" God

Do I try to "bribe" God by what I do? ("If I do something for God, then God will 'answer' my prayer." "If I'm good and don't sin much, then I'll get answered.")

- This is an issue of motives! Do we obey and serve God, just because of what *we* will get? (This is what Satan accused Job of doing - Job 1:9-11.)
- If we love God and want God's will to be done, we will want to obey simply because *obedience is God's will for us!* It won't be because of what we can get out of doing so!
- Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane is a wonderful example of praying with the right motives. "Not my will, but yours be done" - Luke 22:42. (See also 1 John 5:14.)

2. Trying to influence God with the "quantity" of prayers

If I really want something, do I "bombard" God with lots of prayers throughout the day? Or do I think that getting lots of people to pray for my request will get God to move faster in answering it?

- Again, the primary issue is motives.
- "Prayer chains" are sometimes misused this way, almost like a magic formula. Yet they *can* be legitimate. (Esther 4:16 describes something like a "prayer chain." Queen Esther ordered all the Jews in the city to fast for three days and three nights, before she went into the king's presence. Though the word "prayer" isn't mentioned, fasting is often connected with prayer, in the Old Testament.)

3. Impressing God with repetition

Do I rely on repetition of words, phrases, or even entire prayers?

- Merely reciting prayers (such as the "Lord's prayer"- Matthew 6:9-13) is *not* praying! It's more like quoting poetry.
- The constant repetition of God's name can almost become a "mantra" (a technique used in various eastern religions). It's OK to use God's name in prayer, but *never* in a trite or irreverent way (Exodus 20:7).
- The phrase "in Jesus' name" can easily become be a ritual, a "prayer ending" that's supposed to somehow cause the desired results. (Do you have any idea what that phrase means? Essentially this: "My prayer is in agreement with everything that Jesus' name represents." If we use this term, the *we had better be careful what we pray about!*)
- Jesus forbids the use of constant repetition - which he calls "babbling." That's what *pagans* do (Matthew 6:7-8)! The constant repetition of "spiritual-sounding" words does not make one's prayer "spiritual."

4. Using unnatural language and strange speech patterns

Do I think that praying requires a "spiritual-sounding" tone of voice that doesn't match normal life? Or, do I pray with strange jargon or phrases that would *never* be used in any other context? (An example would be praying for "journeys' mercies." *Who* uses that term in normal life?)

- Prayer that is based on the New Testament involves *normal* talking, not a special "holy language." There's nothing in the Bible to suggest that God is impressed by "spiritual-sounding" prayers, or by strange "religious" words. Such things are more compatible with impressing people.

A few comments about the Bible's focus in prayer requests

The whole idea of trying to manipulate God to accomplish our purposes is totally foreign to the Bible. In the Bible, the primary focus of prayer is *God-centered*, not *self-centered*. There *are* legitimate prayer requests that focus on the individual; but they are not the *primary* focus. And as mentioned in the initial comments about prayer (above), asking for things and getting "answers" are *not* the only aspects of prayer that exist!

Prayer, if genuine, *does* have power to accomplish things (James 5: 16b), because God is working through the prayer. But it focuses on *God's* will, rather than on *self* will. When the focus *is* on the individual, it's primary goal is *spiritual growth*, rather than personal gain. Consider the types of answers to prayers that are described in the following verses.

- Salvation (if the prayer is accompanied by repentance) - Luke 18:10, 14
- Receiving the gift of Holy Spirit (related to salvation) - Luke 11:13
- The ability to tell others about the good news - Ephesians 6:19-20
- The ability to overcome anxiety and to trust God - Philippians 4:6-7
- The ability to withstand temptation and the evil one - Matthew 6:13

There *are* prayers that focus on personal needs (such as food - Matthew 6:11), for they also can be in agreement with God's will. These will be examined in a future study.

Prayer Is Not ... the Pursuit of Feelings, Experiences or Reputation

Misguided views about prayer are not always oriented toward "getting" something tangible. They can also involve the pursuit of intangible feelings or experiences, or wrongly used as an indicator of a person's "spirituality"!

1. Mystical prayer

Is my prayer an attempt to get some type of "experience" that seems to make me "feel" closer to God?

- In many respects, this is the *opposite* of the types of misguided prayer, mentioned above. Here, the purpose is *not* to get goods or protection; but to transcend (or "get beyond") them, often with the goal of getting a supposed "union" with God. (This is *not* the "union with Christ" that the Bible mentions, which begins with salvation, is related to our *submission* to his will, and does *not* blur the distinction between God and humans. The "union with Christ" described in the Bible is *not* a "feeling" or an "experience on a higher level"!)
- In the early church, this was often the product of mixing Gnostic teachings with Scripture. More recent types tend to combine the influences of various eastern religions (such as Hinduism), and/or the occult, with the Bible. This type of "praying" is experiencing a resurgence among many religious people; and often promotes itself with harmless-sounding names, such as, "Contemplative prayer."
- To get such a view, a person must combine elements of eastern mysticism (or the occult) with the Bible, or get it from reading books written others who have done this. Carefully selected Scripture verses may sometimes be "pasted" into the view, and legitimate Scripture terms (such as, "the presence of God") may be *redefined* and used in a distorted way, to make the view sound more compatible with the Bible. However, it is *impossible* to find this type of "praying" by simply reading and studying what *Scripture* says about prayer! It can *only* occur within the context of theological ignorance.
- What does the Bible say? The Lord's prayer illustrates the Bible's focus. Though there is a look to the future (an anticipation of Jesus' future return, and all that it will bring), there is a strong focus on glorifying God in the "here and now" and "on *earth*," rather than going after some type of "other worldly" mystical experience, or wanting to just "feel close" to God. (A study of other examples of prayer in the Bible will confirm this, as well.)

2. Praying as "self therapy" or "spiritual release"

Do I pray in order that I can "feel better" about my problems (or even about myself)?

- Though there can be comfort and encouragement associated with prayer, this is *not* the purpose of praying! Such a motive is really no better than the attempts to manipulate God for personal benefit, described above!

3. "Answered" prayer as a demonstration of "spirituality"

If a person gets his prayers "answered," does that prove he is "spiritual"? If his prayers are "unanswered," (or at least not answered the way he wants), does that suggest he is "unspiritual"?

- Many godly people have *not* gotten the answer they wanted. The apostle Paul is such a person (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). And Hebrews 11:35b-40 says that *many* godly people did not get what they asked for. But does the passage say they were "unspiritual"? No! There are *other* issues that define whether or not a person is "spiritual" (such as their willingness to trust God regardless of what type of answer they get to their prayers).

So then, WHY PRAY?

It has already been shown that motives are a major issue. There are many legitimate reasons to pray, but the primary reason is *not* because of supposed benefits we may get. Rather it is because prayer is *commanded* by God.

- That fact alone should be reason enough for us to pray. Even if we were ignorant of any other reason to pray, we *know* that God never requires us to do anything that is without purpose or value. Even if we don't understand why we should pray, the very fact that God commands it *proves* that it is important, and that we *need* it.
- If prayer is *not* characteristic of our lives, *we are living in sin - direct and willful disobedience to God*. If we refuse to repent of this sin, like any other, we have legitimate reasons to question our salvation.

Think about it. What is *your* prayer life like? Prayer is supposed to be the distinctive characteristic that marks us out as being the people of God. Yet it is almost non-existent among most "church-goers."

- Imagine this: People who claim to know God, but don't even talk to him! What do you think it is going to be like for them, when God says to them, "Depart from me; I never knew you!" (Compare with Matthew 7:23 and Luke 13:27.)

It is important to realize that prayer takes *discipline*. It is not a "technique" or a "feeling." There will be times that you don't "feel" like praying, as well as times you will find yourself struggling with what to say. (Compare with Romans 8:26.)

- Prayer can be hard work. If you wait until you "feel" like praying, you will probably never pray!
- Most people have been so influenced by non-Christian values, that they aren't interested in "discipline." They'd rather have instant results, techniques, "How to" books, or *anything* but struggle, discipline and hard work!
- You have to deliberately set aside time for it, putting aside other things you would like to do. You will even have to discipline your *mind*, so you won't spend the whole time thinking about other things!

But after all is said and done, you will have no regrets. In the end, you will be more like your "Father in heaven," who's will you have grown to love.

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!

"The Lord's Prayer" (Part 1) - Introduction

The "Lord's Prayer" - actually a "model prayer" - is found in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. The Matthew account was given during the "Sermon on the Mount." The Luke account, a shortened form of the prayer, was given at a later time.

In both accounts, additional comments about the nature of prayer, and of trust in God, can be found in the surrounding verses. In Matthew, the prayer is preceded by instructions about how *not* to pray. Later portions of the chapter focus on trusting God for our needs, and seeking first God's kingdom and the righteousness he desires in us. In the Luke passage, the prayer is followed by comments about the importance of trusting God, and about God's eagerness to give us what is best.

"Teach us to pray!"

In Luke 11:1, we read that one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Why would this be? Was it because they didn't know how to pray? Actually, as God-fearing Jews, prayer would have played an active role in their lives. Besides learning about the numerous prayers recorded in the Old Testament, every devout Jew would have prayed specific memorized prayers, several times a day.

However, with the coming of John the baptizer (Jesus' forerunner), a new era was dawning. John was proclaiming a message of repentance, preparing the people for the one who would come after him (Jesus). In keeping with the purpose and mission for which he was called, John had taught his followers a *new* way to pray.

Jesus also proclaimed a new message - the good news about the kingdom of God - and he also prayed differently. Because of this, it seemed quite natural to the disciples that there would be a different way of praying that *they* should learn.

How did devout Jews pray in Jesus' day?

Three times a day - daybreak, mid-afternoon, and nighttime - they prayed a group of 18 benedictions (blessings) called the "Tefillah." Twice a day they would quote the "Shema" - a creed based on Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. Both of these would be in the Old Testament Hebrew language, even though the everyday language for communication had become Aramaic.

The Synagogue service also contained various prayer activities, including time for spontaneous prayer. All the liturgical prayers were in Hebrew, except for the closing prayer, the "Kaddish," which was in Aramaic.

- The first three lines of the "Lord's Prayer" have similarities with the "Kaddish." Jesus took these ideas and defined them so that they fit his mission and purpose.

How was Jesus' praying different?

- *The time of prayer* - Jesus would pray any time, not just during the "regular" times.
- *The language of prayer* - Jesus prayed in the "regular" language of the people (Aramaic), not in the "religious" language of the Hebrew liturgies. He used the common language, but respectfully.
- *The manner of addressing God* - Jesus called him "Father" (example, Matthew 11:25-26).

- *The content of prayer* - In addition to the usual topics of prayer, Jesus prayed for things that weren't considered "normal." For example, he prayed in behalf of his disciples (Luke 22:31-32); he gave thanks even in bad circumstances (Matthew 11:25-26); on the cross, he even prayed for those who were killing him (Luke 23:34)!

How NOT to pray

Matthew 6 starts out by focusing on three of the practices that were observed by all devout Jews: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In each case, Jesus teaches both *how* and *how not* to do them.

- The other three practices of devout Jews were: study of the Torah (the books of Moses), temple reverence and Sabbath observance.

Prayer is an aspect of personal righteousness or piety; and to not pray is sin. But one's intent or motives for praying is also a factor. Because of this, praying for the wrong reason is also sin.

Don't pray to be seen by people (v. 5-6)

This is what hypocrites do! This is the way the religious leaders were doing it!

Who are we trying to impress? We only need "our Father's" attention. This passage does not forbid praying in public; but if we do so *more* than in private, there may be a problem! It's easy to fall into the trap of doing good things for the wrong reason.

- Sometimes hypocrisy may be obvious only to others (example, Matthew 7:1-5); or it may be obvious to everyone, including the hypocrite himself (example, Matthew 22:15). But here, it may be that nobody, including the hypocrite, is aware of it.
- The word translated as "hypocrisy" was originally a theater term, meaning "hiding under a mask"!

Don't try to "push" God with wordiness (v. 7-8)

This is what pagans do! They think that repetition and long-windedness will get God's attention and make him do things for them. This is manipulation.

Prayers can be short! (Compare to Ecclesiastes 5:2.) Don't confuse "quantity" of words with "quality" of prayer.

It's easy to fall into this trap, even when doing something that is often considered good.

- A "prayer chain" (a network of people who share prayer requests with each other) can become guilty of this, if its goal is to "bombard" God with a huge quantity of words.
- We also need to be careful how we use God's name in prayer. If God's name becomes mere repetition, perhaps even like a magical phrase, we may be guilty of breaking the third commandment that forbids "taking God's name in vain" (using it in a useless manner).

The word "OUR" - emphasizing "community"

Prayer is a corporate activity. The primary focus of prayer is *not* on the individual; it goes beyond individuality. We are part of a group; the "our" represents "us."

Why is this? Because we're *all* baptized into *one* family, and *together* are the people of God. It is a *shared* relationship.

- As individuals, we have no relationship, access or clout which isn't shared with all others in the family. We are an *interdependent* body, not individualistic and exclusive.
- This does *not* mean that we should never have private prayer! Yet even when we are praying in secret, we are *still* part of the body. Don't act (and pray) as though you're alone and *not* part of this greater family!

The phrase "OUR FATHER" - the basis for how we approach God

Jesus frequently referred to God as "Father." This can be seen in Luke 10:21-22, where he refers to God as "Father" five times, and to himself as "Son" three times.

The disciples, following the pattern Jesus gave them for prayer, would approach God in a way that marked them as distinct: They would address God as "Dear Father." This would be a change from the way they would have been previously taught to address God.

- Even so, there was some precedence for this in the Old Testament: The idea is present, though not emphasized. See Deuteronomy 32:6 (The LORD, your Father who bought/made/established you.), as well as Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8 (You are our Father).

The meaning of the word "Father"

The Greek word is "pater"; the Aramaic equivalent (which the disciples would have used) would be "Abba" - the word found in Romans 8:15. It was a typical child's word that was both respectful and intimate, perhaps half-way between the English words "Father" and "Daddy." Perhaps the best way we can translate it is, "Dear Father." The word acknowledges God's strength and authority, yet also implies intimacy with him.

We now have a *family* relationship with God, and can address God as Father. Jesus is our brother, and he shares with us the intimacy he has with the Father. However, there *are* differences between our relationship to the Father and Jesus' relationship to him.

- Our relationship with the Father is through *adoption*, and is made possible by the redemptive victory of Jesus on the cross. We are children by adoption, not by native right.
- Because of his *unique* son relationship (one that we don't have), Jesus could pray "*my* Father." He never prayed "*our* Father."

The significance of being part of God's family

The following are true of those who can rightfully call God "Our Father":

He has chosen us to be in this special relationship

A person is not just *born* into this relationship. He must come into a *covenant relationship* with God, based on the promises of God, or else he remains an outsider. There is *no* "Universal Fatherhood of God."

Jesus tells us that this relationship is made possible because he has revealed the Father to us. (Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27 - "No one knows the Father, except the Son, and those the Son reveals him to.")

- When he does this, we find ourselves in a unique kingdom relationship; the Holy Spirit is in us; and we have the great honor of talking (praying) to our Father.

From the perspective of *our* responsibility, we can only enter the kingdom (or family) of God, as humble (lowly) children - Matthew 18:3.

- This child-like relationship is referred to quite often in the gospels, such as in the phrase, "little one," which has the connotation of being "insignificant." Some of the verses about these "little ones" (people who are considered the "least") are: Matthew 10:42; 11:11; 18:6; 18:10; 18:14; Mark 9:42; Luke 7:28; 9:48; 12:32; 17:2.
- It's sad that most people want to be considered "big" (important), rather than "little" (insignificant)! Their attitude is a barrier that keeps them out of the kingdom of God.

We have security for the future, the assurance of eternal salvation

Not one of the "little ones" will be lost - this is what the Father has willed (Matthew 18:14)! This guarantees that we will have participation in the final day, when Jesus returns in victory.

We have *already* been given the kingdom - we have it *now* (Luke 12:32), and this also guarantees to us that we will share in the coming victory.

- Note that this is a gift, the kingdom is not something we have to create, or "build."
- When did we get this gift? At the same time Jesus revealed the Father to us - the moment we entered into a relationship as part of family of God.

We have security for the present, provision for today

In the last half of Matthew 6, Jesus reminds us about the way our Father takes care of the plants and animals. How much more will he take care of us who are members of his family!

- We see this concept even in the Old Testament, in verses that mention God's care for widows, the oppressed, and the hungry.
- God knows our needs before we ask. (Compare to Isa 65:24 - Before you call, I will hear!) But prayer is the means by which this provision comes.

We know he hears us; and we can trust him when things are not going well for us

It was with *great pleasure* that God chose to adopt us into his family (Ephesians 1:5). He is now our "Dear Father," who cares dearly for us, so we *know* we can trust him with a childlike trust. Because of this relationship, we have the assurance that our prayers are heard (Mark 11:24; Matthew 7:7-8). Moreover, Jesus assures us that the things our "heavenly Father" gives to his children are far better than *anything* that an earthly father might give to his own children (Matthew 7:9-11).

Sometimes life's experiences look as though our prayers are *not* being heard. Yet they *are* heard, and our Father *will* answer at the right time. He understands, and so does our brother, Jesus.

- This is what Jesus experienced at Gethsemane (Luke 22:42) and as he was dying on the cross (Matthew 27:46). It might seem that his prayers weren't being heard. Yet Hebrews 5:7-10 tells us that God *did* hear his prayers, and then describes the final outcome of all that Jesus experienced: He has now become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (v. 9)!

"The Lord's Prayer" (Part 2) - a Longing for the Glory of God

This prayer is a model, a guideline that encompasses the whole concept of prayer. It was not given as something to be merely repeated, but is like a set of "handrails" to teach us how to compose our own prayers.

- This is emphasized in Matthew, where Jesus tells us that it is the "way" or "manner" (i.e., guideline) for us to use.
- Repeating this prayer is *not* wrong, as long as we use it as a *reminder*, not as the *prayer* itself. Repeating it is a good training tool for children.

This prayer shows us that our prayers are to be *God*-centered. It is within this God-centered context, that we interpret our own personal needs. The prayer reflects the order of the two greatest commands (Matthew 22:37-40): first, love for God; second, love for people.

The first three requests in this prayer focus on God - his reputation (name), kingdom and will. These are examined in detail, below. The last three requests focus on people - our needs, forgiveness and protection from evil. These are examined in a separate study.

Our desire to see God's glory revealed (the first three petitions)

"On earth, as it is in heaven"

In heaven, God's glory is seen by all (Revelation 4-5). It is our desire that his glory be seen here on earth, as well. The intent of our prayer is something like this: "Cause your fame and reputation to be spread *across the whole earth, just like it is in heaven!*"

- Note that the reference is to God's glory being revealed "on earth." We are not praying for it to be revealed just "in me" or "in the church"!
- Though this phrase comes after the third request (in Matthew 6:10), it applies to all three of the requests, not just the third.

"Begging" God's to do it

The first part of the prayer focuses on God and his glory. Note that the petitions in this section are not expressions of praise or doxology ("blessed be..."); rather, they are commands ("let it be..." or "cause it to be..."). We are begging *God* to do these things, to *cause* them to happen on earth, the same way they are happening in heaven!

- These are the three most important things to God, so they get our primary attention.

These are not things that *we* accomplish. We are asking God to do them, not volunteering to do them for God.

- Only God can reveal himself (on earth) the way he really is. Two of the ways that he's done this in the past are: 1) he made creation (which reflects his glory); and 2) he made us (his image - Genesis 1:26).
- Because of the influence of sin, we tend to *not* recognize his glory when we see it, until God saves us.

We know that God is the one who will accomplish these requests; but God has ordained that they will be done *in connection with our praying*.

"Cause your name to be central!"

"Hallowed" - being "set apart" as special

Unfortunately, our concept of "set apart" often implies being "set to the side" (perhaps in a special place); but in this passage, it means the opposite. We pray that God's name will be in the *center of attention*.

"Make your name central!"

"Name"

God's name is "weighty" (all-important) - it represents all that God is and does. So don't misuse it as though it were meaningless "fluff"!

- Consider the third commandment: "Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not let anyone who misuses his name go unpunished." (Exodus 20:7) We are misusing God's name any time we use it in a careless or superficial way. Since his name represents everything about him, we are also misusing his name any time we have a distorted perspective of God. (An example related to prayer is: thinking that *God* exists to serve *us*, anytime we ask for something.)
- "Cause your fame, reputation, and person to be the central focus of life!"

It's already this way in heaven; it will be this way on the future earth

In heaven, God's fame, reputation, and person are the central focus, *right now* (as seen in Revelation 4-5).

It will be this way on the future earth (Rev 21-22; also Ezekiel 36:23, which focuses specifically on Israel).

- This accomplishment will happen because of Jesus redemptive victory on the cross. (He bought us - Revelation 5:9!) It won't be merely a display of all-mighty power, but a display of love.

We desire it to be this way even now

We want God to be central. We want God to be seen as he truly is. "Cause your glory to be seen here on earth, the way it is seen in heaven!"

We want his name honored on *all* the earth, not just in the church or home, or in ourselves. And we ask *him* because only *he* can accomplish it.

- Remember that *no* person knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son reveals him (Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27). This is the only way people can come to recognize God's glory.

From the perspective of *our* responsibility, what are some of the ways this can be done?

- Corporate worship; private prayer; public presentation of the good news with people repenting; we ourselves repenting and changing the direction of our will (Romans 12:2); etc.

"Cause your kingdom to be central!"

What is meant by "kingdom"? How does it become "central" on earth? This concept has many dimensions. Some of them are:

The future rule of God on earth (which already exists in heaven)

The day is coming in which the throne of God will be located on earth, on the main street of the "New Jerusalem" (Rev 21-22). The glory and power of God will be visible to all. God and the Lamb (Jesus) will

be present, and we will see him with our eyes. All evil will be removed from the earth, along with all pain, suffering and death.

- Pain, suffering and death may seem like a normal part of life; but from the perspective of eternity, it is *abnormal*. It didn't exist at creation; and in the future, it won't exist on the new earth!

We look forward to this future world order and the visible power of God. It's coming is guaranteed, because of Jesus' redemptive victory; but it's still in the *future*.

- This anticipation is expressed by the phrase "Come Lord!" (or Aramaic, "Marana tha"), in 1 Corinthians 16:22; also in a similar expression, in Revelation 22:20.

In the meantime, we don't wait passively for it to come, but pray that his rule and presence will be seen in the world *today*.

- Our *present* relationship with Christ is *future* oriented. So we ask, "Bring the power of the future into the world today!"

The rule of God as the proclamation of God's Word

The very proclamation of the Word of God is an expression or aspect of the kingdom of God. Every time the good news is clearly preached or taught, with people accepting and obeying it, the power of God's kingdom is seen.

- This aspect of God's kingdom - the proclamation of the good news ("gospel") - is *necessary* before the following two expressions of God's kingdom can take place.

The rule of God in the heart (which exists now, in each child of God)

This refers to the internal, moral reign of Christ "within" us (Luke 17:21), and it exists right now. For those who are followers of Jesus, "the kingdom of God and his righteousness" are our highest priority (Matthew 6:33).

- God's kingdom and rule must be central in our hearts.

The rule of God demonstrated in history

God's rule is relevant to life. *All* of life is to be placed under God's rule - and this includes the way we interact with others. It is *not* a "private" matter, but must impact all of society, including public policy.

- This has to do with the concept of *social justice*, a theme common to both Old and New Testaments. This is more important than doing religious activities (Isaiah 1:14-17), and was strongly emphasized by Jesus Christ, during his ministry (Luke 4:18).
- If we have a genuine desire for the rule of God on earth in the *future*, we will want to see it (at least in part) *now*. This is one aspect of what it means, when we pray, "Cause your kingdom to be central!"

Application to prayer

We want God's kingdom to be central. In the future, it will be; and at that point, *all* other powers in heaven and on earth (including all kingdoms and nations) will be overthrown!

- It's like praying, "*May your kingdom overthrow all other kingdoms!*"

We want the power of the future to be here today!

- We want God's kingdom to rule over our own lives, as we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33).
- We want God's rule to be expanded throughout the earth; we want people to abandon the kingdom of darkness and come into the kingdom of light.

"Cause your will to be central!"

This is another way of asking for God's kingdom to come, and is not present in the Luke account. It's inclusion in the Matthew passage focuses on the *moral will of God*, such as expressed in the Ten Commandments and in the various moral teachings given in the Sermon on the Mount.

- It is our desire that God's moral law be obeyed throughout the earth.

Do you delight in God's moral law, or is it a burden to you?

- The moral law is addressed to us in two ways: *externally*, it is written in Scripture; *internally*, it is written on the hearts of God's children.
- If God's law is written on your heart, you will delight in it - even though you will still have to deal with temptations and will often need forgiveness - as seen later in this prayer.
- If God's law is *not* written on your heart, obeying it will probably seem like a burden to you. (Trying to live a genuine Christian life with a pagan heart can be one of the hardest thing in the world to do!) In this case, it probably means your heart is still unchanged, and you are still spiritually dead in your sin.

How do the first three petitions affect the way we pray?

Remember the purpose of prayer

The purpose of our prayer is the centrality of God. We pray in harmony with God's person and work (which his "name" represents). We ask God to bring the power of the future (his kingdom and will) into the present.

Praying to God is *not* presenting to him a huge wish list of goods, services and demands! God doesn't *owe* us safety, health, good weather, etc., even though he often graciously gives them to us.

How do we know if our prayer request is honoring to God?

A good way to evaluate our prayer is to ask ourselves this question: "If our request is *not* granted, will it cause God's name to be defamed? Will it cause his kingdom to fail, or his will not to be done?" Some examples:

- Why might you pray for someone to repent? If he *does* repent, God's name, fame and reputation "on earth" will grow in this present age.
- Why do you want grandma to be healed? It's true that you might miss her if she dies. But it is even more important to realize that, if God chooses to heal her, his power will be seen and his reputation will grow on the earth.
- How about the prayer, "Don't let it rain on my picnic!" Will God's name, fame and reputation be hurt if it *does* rain? There might be legitimate times for such a prayer; but we tend to focus on the convenience it will have for *us*, instead of any benefit for God and his kingdom.

At times, direct statements in Scripture will show us if our prayer is legitimate. Some examples:

- We know it is good to pray for those in authority, because Scripture *commands* us to do so (1 Timothy 2:1-2). It would be sin to *not* pray for them.
- Praying with the wrong motives is sin, and when we do this, we should not expect God to pay attention to us (James 4:3).

"The Lord's Prayer" (Part 3) - The needs of People

It is good to pray for the physical and spiritual needs of people - in fact, it is necessary. But it must be done within the context of the first three (God-centered) petitions. We must remember that "people-centered" petitions are our *second* focus.

Note that, in all three of these petitions, the emphasis is on "us" as a *group*. The corporate focus is predominant.

"Provide for our 'daily bread' (physical needs)!"

This is the first of our needs - without it, we cannot live. Without sustenance for life, there wouldn't be any "people of God" on earth! There would be no one to pray the first three petitions. (We couldn't even pray the last two petitions about forgiveness and protection!) This petition acknowledges our dependency on God for these things. Note also that the focus is on the group, on giving "daily bread" to *us*, rather than just to *me*.

"Daily"

This is a unique word, not found elsewhere in the New Testament (or in other ancient writings); so there is some uncertainty as to meaning. Does it mean "give it for *today*," "give it for *tomorrow*," or simply "give it as *needed*"? Most evidence suggests a combination of the last two ideas, with a focus on the *future*. "Give us what we need for tomorrow."

- Many of the church fathers compared this petition to Israel's experience with manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:1-36). Each day, they had enough for "today." (God had already provided.) During the night, God would provide all that they "needed," for "tomorrow."

"Bread"

This would include *anything* that affects our ability to survive. It involves not only food, but economy, jobs, money, the political situation, good government, transportation, justice, labor, and anything else related to survival.

However, this does *not* mean asking for a luxurious lifestyle. This "bread" refers to basic provisions, not steak; and it refers to "just what we need," not to a massive stockpile, laid up for the future!

- We can compare it to what Jesus did when he fed the 5000 (Matthew 14:15-21). The bread and fish were very basic provisions.
- Many of us have difficulty understanding the significance of this petition. We don't have the problems of obtaining "daily bread" that most people in the world have.

What if "daily bread" doesn't seem to come?

We live in a world characterized by pain, suffering and death. These will *not* be totally (and permanently) gone until Jesus returns and establishes his kingdom on the earth (Revelation 21-22).

Until then, there will be times when things don't go the way we desire or pray. How should we respond in such times?

- We trust "our Father," who understands all things.
- We remember his promises to us, such as Romans 8:28, which tells us that God uses all things to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him.
- We look forward to the day that all pain, suffering and death will be forever gone. After all, any trial we experience today - any lack of "daily bread" - is only temporary.

"Forgive us, the same way we forgive others!"

"Forgive us" - release, pardon, let go

We are constantly getting ourselves indebted to God, so we have a constant need for forgiveness. We are asking God to release us from our debts, our sins.

- Asking is a "shameless" act, because we not worthy. We ask like beggars because we *are* beggars who don't deserve it.

What type of forgiveness do we want? We want it *unconditionally*, not based on what we deserve! We want *grace* - God's "undeserved kindness" given to us.

Note again the focus on "us." We (as individuals) can't ask for a forgiveness that we aren't willing to share with others!

"The way we forgive others" (or "as we herewith forgive others")

There is one requirement or condition for forgiveness: It is not to be hoarded, but shared! We cannot ask forgiveness for ourselves, without offering it to others. Otherwise, we will *not* be forgiven by the Father.

- Consider the parable of unmerciful servant - Matthew 18:23-35.
- How can we pray for God's name, kingdom and will to be displayed on earth (the first three petitions), if we are unwilling to let them be seen in the way we treat others?

Offering forgiveness is *not* the same as "making others ask for it." Don't wait until they ask! Simply release them from their debt.

We cannot demand that people do something to "deserve" our forgiveness! We need to forgive *others* the way we want God to forgive *us*. (Does God make *us* earn forgiveness?) Don't expect or demand anything back!

"Don't let us give-up when we are tested; protect us!"

Evil (in whatever form it may come) wants to create desires within us, which go against the name, kingdom and will of God. By ourselves, we have no power to resist; and when we pray this petition, we are admitting our weakness. We know that, without God's help, we will give in to the pressure of temptation. We are asking, "Don't allow us to reach our breaking point!"

"Testing / temptation"

This term is a broad concept, including *any* type of "pressure" that would try to get us to turn away from godly conduct. This is not a prayer to *escape* pressure, but for protection *in the midst* of it.

- Think about what happens when grapes are squeezed to the point that the pressure bursts the skins. In a sense, we are asking God, "Don't bring us to the point that we burst!"
- We need forgiveness (the previous petition), because we too often *choose* to give-in to temptation.

Temptation or testing is not always sinful. It can have a neutral connotation and simply refer to being "tested" or "proven" in some manner. But some types of testing *are* negative, the result of sinful inclinations (as seen in James 1:13-15).

"Don't lead us into it!"

"Leading" has to do with guidance. "We're in the middle of a mine field (of temptations) and need your guidance through it!"

- Without his leading, the *opposite* of the first three petitions will occur. God's name will be defamed; and we will act contrary to the kingdom and will of God.

"Show your grace (undeserved kindness) by sustaining us; don't bring more than we can handle!"

- 1 Corinthians 10:13 reminds us that God will *not* allow us to be tempted beyond our abilities, but will enable us to endure it. If we *do* give in, it is because we chose to do so (James 1:13-15).

"Deliver us"

We know our weakness and admit that we are in danger of committing evil. We are asking God to rescue us from our precarious situation. It's like crying out, "HELP!!!!!"

- The word "evil" can refer to *either*: 1) the evil we are tempted to commit, or 2) the "evil one" (Satan) who is tempting us. We need deliverance from both.

The conclusion to the prayer

"Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

This is found only in some translations of the Bible. Originally, there was no specific ending attached to the prayer, but one was implied. (It was normal practice for a person to conclude his prayer the way he thought appropriate.) As time progressed, early church began to end the prayer in a uniform manner; and eventually the standardized ending was added to the text.

- Some of the common prayer endings that were used at that time are: 1) "For the kingdom is thine," 2) "Thou shalt reign in glory for ever and ever," and 3) "Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom, for ever and ever." Note the similarities of these to the ending that was eventually adopted by the church.

Final comments: We can trust God!

Immediately after answering the disciples' question about prayer (Luke 11:1-4), Jesus gives two parables to teach them about trust in God. Similar thoughts (stated in a different way) are also seen at the end of Matthew 6. Also, Matthew 7:7-11 parallels part of the Luke passage.

Here is a summary of what Jesus said, as described in both the Luke and Matthew passages:

The "friend" who was unwilling to help - Luke 11:5-10

Who would have such a friend? In the typical Jewish community of that day, *nobody* would have had such a friend! *All* would have been willing to give the person what he needed. To not do so would have resulted in shame and disgrace for the whole community!

- This is *not* a parable about *persistence*, but about *boldness*. The neighbor had to ask only once, and he didn't have to pound on the door (which would have scared those who were inside)!
- What does this teach us? The Father is even *more* willing to give, when we have a need.

The human father who gives good things to his children - Luke 11:11-13

Even human fathers, who are by nature sinful, tend to give good things to their children, rather than harmful things.

- Each pair of items mentioned in the illustration shared some basic visual similarity. When looking down from above, the fish and the snake both looked long and thin. A coiled-up scorpion would have looked somewhat round, similar to the small loaf of bread.
- What does this teach us? Human fathers give *good* gifts; but our Father in heaven is eager to give us the *best* gift, the Holy Spirit. There is *no* greater gift possible. (Receiving the Holy Spirit is equivalent to receiving salvation.)

Putting trust in God, not in the false security of riches and possessions - Matthew 6:19-34

After teaching about personal piety, with prayer being the main focus (the first part of Matthew 6), Jesus warns against trusting in the temporary "treasures on earth" (v. 19-21). We are to be "single-focused," and trust (and serve) God alone (v. 22-24). The Father takes care of the plants and animals, and he is even more eager to take care of us (v. 25-30). We don't need to be preoccupied with our needs, like the pagans are (v. 31-32), but can trust God. We are to focus on his kingdom and the righteous things he desires; and let *him* "worry" about the rest (v. 33-34)!

God's Sovereignty and Prayer, in the Difficult Times of Life

God's sovereignty and human responsibility go together

The world has taught us a distorted view

The society we live in teaches us that *either* God is sovereign *or* people are responsible for their actions, *but not both*. Because of this, many people have difficulty in accepting what the Bible constantly affirms - namely, that God is sovereign over everything, *and* people are responsible for their actions - *both at the same time*. The Bible treats these as two different (though related) issues that coexist without conflict. But since the false views promoted by society tend to influence our thinking, we need to constantly go back to the Bible, in order to understand how to interpret them.

Two ways that God interacts with us

God interacts with us on two levels. As Creator, he is sovereign over his creation. He knows and understands all things. He directs all things in a way that, in the end, will bring honor and glory to his name, and good for all who love and follow him. From this perspective, he already knows what we pray before we say it - in fact, he knows what is on our hearts and understands our burdens, *even when we don't*.

On the other hand, God interacts with us on *our* level, revealing his glory in creation, teaching us his will in the Bible, and providing us salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the realm where human responsibility exists - and in this realm, we worship, pray and express our concerns and desires to God. God delights in our prayers, and has even chosen to use our prayer as the means by which he accomplishes his will!

Responding to these truths

In Scripture, people who understood these things *rejoiced* in God's sovereignty in life; and it influenced the way they prayed - especially when everything seemed to be going wrong. It should be our goal to be like them: to learn to pray - and even to *think* - the same way they did in these matters. Their prayers were "powerful" (James 5:16b), and we have the opportunity to learn from their examples.

There are many values in having an awareness of God's sovereignty. For instance, when we pray, we don't have to be excessively wordy, trying to get God's attention (Matthew 6:7-8). Our Father knows our needs before we ask him! Also, since he understands us fully, he is the most qualified to help us when we are in need.

Below, we are going to focus on the value of knowing that God is sovereign during the "rough" times of life. This may help us to know how to respond, when things don't go the way we would like them to go.

Trusting the Sovereign God, when things go bad.

Here, we are going to look at two examples: the apostles (during persecution) and Jesus (when he had been rejected by most of the people).

Acts 4:23-31 - Trusting God during times of persecution

This passage contains a prayer, in which God's sovereignty and human responsibility are *interwoven*. The apostles didn't shy away from sovereignty. Rather, they clung to it as the *foundation* on which they would make prayer requests - and on this foundation, they would pray about things related to *their* responsibility! They didn't ask God to *change* what he had sovereignly brought to pass. Instead, they asked God to *give them strength* to do his will, in fulfilling their responsibility in the world.

In this chapter, we read that the apostles were experiencing persecution - imprisonment and threats - for speaking the truth about Jesus (4:1-22). When they were released, their first response was to pray as a group, the same response we should have (4:23-31). Did they pray, "Stop this persecution"? No! Instead, they appealed to God's sovereignty in the *past*, and applied it to their own situation at the *present*.

First, they acknowledged God's sovereign work in the past, referring to its presence, both in creation, and in what happened to Jesus (coupled with the human responsibility aspect). They prayed something like this:

"You are the Lord over all things, the Creator (v. 24). Psalm 2:1-2 foretold what would happen to Jesus (v. 25-26). Indeed, this is the very thing that happened. The leaders and the people conspired against Jesus (= human responsibility, v. 27), and they did the very thing that you had willed to happen (= sovereignty, v. 28)."

Second, they applied this fact to their own situation. They knew that persecution was often a part of following Jesus. So rather than demanding that God change what he was doing (and make the trials go away), they prayed for boldness to respond properly. They followed Jesus' example (Luke 22:42), choosing to pursue God's will through their obedience, rather than trying to get God to change his will.

"These same people are now coming against us; so give us the boldness to speak the truth (v. 29). Show your power through us (v. 30)!"

The results? God did just what they asked him to do (v. 31); and they lived in a way that demonstrated the love of God in their lives (v. 32+).

Matthew 11:25-26 - Praising God in times of failure

Jesus traveled throughout the area of Galilee, preaching and teaching, and performing many miracles. Yet much of his effort could be summarized by the word "failure." Most people rejected his message and did not repent (11:20-24). What was Jesus' response to this? He rejoiced, because it was the Father's will for it to be that way (11:25-26)!

From the human responsibility perspective, the people did not repent, because they considered themselves too wise and intelligent to take Jesus' words seriously. They thought themselves too important to become like children, and were thus *unwilling* to humble themselves and come to Jesus.

From the sovereignty perspective, the Father was not revealed to these people (11:27). Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that this sovereignty perspective was directly connected to their *willful* unrepentant response to the good news. Those who *did* humble themselves would find rest for their souls, just as Jesus promised (11:28-30).

Differences between God's "sovereign" will and his "moral" will

Some people ask, "If God is sovereign, why should I pray?" The answer is easy. We should pray simply because God tells us to pray! It's part of his moral will for us. According to God, sovereignty and responsibility *do not* go against each other! In the Acts passage we looked at, the apostles demonstrated that fact.

- God's *sovereign* will is secret - we do not feel any compulsion to do it, and can see it only as it is addressed in prophecy or worked out in *history*. However, God's *moral* will has been revealed to us in Scripture, and we are responsible for obeying it. God's *sovereign* will is not addressed to us (as something we need to do or obey), but his *moral* will is.
- God's sovereign will includes not only the final outcome (the *ends*), but also the way we get to that final outcome (the *means*). One of the means that God uses to accomplish his purposes is *prayer*. And since God's moral will instructs us to pray, we will be held accountable for doing so.

There is much practical value in knowing about God's sovereignty and responding rightly to it. For instance, there are many things we *don't* have to pray about - or at least we can pray differently about them (in a way that is of much greater value). As the apostles demonstrated, we can ask God for strength to change the things *we* are doing (things related to his *moral* will), rather than demanding that he change what *he* is doing (things related to his *sovereign* will). We can focus on becoming more "Christ-like" in our values and conduct.

The joy of knowing that the Father understands the difficult times in our lives

We who are followers of Jesus have become members of the family of God (through adoption - Romans 8:15). This is because the Son, Jesus, has made the Father known to us (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22). As we get to know the Father, through the Scriptures and prayer, we learn that he understands all our needs (Matthew 6:8), and that we can *trust* him.

Life is unpredictable; and when things don't go the way we had hoped, it is sufficient to realize that "Father knows." We often *don't* have answers for things that happen; but we *do* have the Father. And we can follow our brother Jesus' example, and commit everything in life to the Father. As Jesus said, "not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). We can rest assured that our Father will not allow things to get worse than we can endure (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Knowing this provides us with a hope that we can hold on to, a future we can look forward to. It can be a source of confidence during the difficult times of life, during unjust suffering, or even when we are facing death.

The issue of suffering often results in questions and misunderstandings, especially when it seems senseless and unjust. The Jews in Jesus' day thought that suffering was always the consequence of one's sins, even when no obvious sin could be found. This can be observed in passages such as: Luke 13:2, 4 (tragic deaths); John 9:1-2, 34 (the man born blind); and Isaiah 53:4b (the way they interpreted Jesus' death on the cross).

Jesus, in contrast, taught the disciples a different way to interpret suffering. Sometimes it *might* be due to our sins; but much of the suffering we experience exists simply because of sin's general effect on the world itself - not because of any specific person's sin. And rather than being "meaningless," God can use it to accomplish something good in our lives.

There are many ways that God can accomplish good through suffering. For instance, suffering can be for the glory of God or for a demonstration of his power (John 9:3; 2 Corinthians 12:9). It can even serve as a warning

to those who refuse to repent (Luke 13:3, 5). But whether or not we see immediate value in suffering, we can rest on the fact that God has promised to use *all* things to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

When we accept the *fact* stated in Romans 8:28, we can even accept Job's comment that the *trouble* we experience is from God (Job 2:10) - though we may prefer to describe it as being *indirectly* from God. In Job's case, Satan caused the trials; but God permitted him to do so. Job didn't know the verse we call "Romans 8:28," because it hadn't yet been written; but he *lived* it!

Romans 8:15-39 - The Holy Spirit prays for us in such times; God uses those times to accomplish good in our lives

This is a wonderful passage of hope, a source of encouragement during the difficult times of life. There are many times we *don't* know how to pray, and we can be encouraged to know that, "behind the scenes," the Holy Spirit is praying for us! This passage explains not only *why* we need the Spirit's help in praying, but also *the final outcome* of that prayer. Here is a summary of that passage:

We live in a world that has been fractured by the consequences of sin (see Genesis 3). It affects not only us, but everything around us - all of creation (v. 20). Even though God has adopted us as sons (v. 15), the adoption process will not be complete until Jesus returns and makes all things new (vs. 17-18, 21, 23a). All creation waits for this event (v. 19).

In the meantime, we experience difficulties, trials, suffering and pain (v. 23b). The Holy Spirit (who is in us, because of our adoption as God's sons) helps us in two ways:

First, he enables us to endure our troubles, reminding us that we are God's children (vs. 16-17), and encouraging us to focus on our future hope (vs. 24-25).

Second, he takes our weak (and sometimes misguided) prayers and "translates" them into strength, something fully compatible with God's will (v. 26). And God, the one who adopted us (v. 15), and who knows what the Spirit prays (v. 27), will use *all* things (even physical evil and the trials of life that make no sense to us) to accomplish good in our lives (v. 28-30). Nothing can stop him from doing so (v. 31-39)!

If we understand the relationship of God to our prayers, especially as it relates to the difficult times of life, we will be able to respond the same way that the apostle Paul did, at the end of this passage:

... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)

Communication with God

Those who are following Jesus are *growing* in their salvation (1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18). If some of the responses described in the section about prayer *don't* describe what your prayer life is like, find out why. If you are a *genuine* follower of Jesus, you will grow in these areas. If you aren't, then you won't grow.

Some sections include a selection of Scripture references. Other sections may have few references, but were covered in previous studies in this series.

We communicate with God (prayer)

Prayer is made possible because of what God has done in and for us. It is our response of trust and loyalty to him. In prayer, we come to God, expressing our needs, as defined by the Word of God. Abandoning any techniques and attempts to manipulate God, and without making demands, we place ourselves in God's hands, and allow him to decide the outcome.

Made possible because of what God has done

Below are just a few of the things God has done in and for us. Many of them happened "behind the scenes"; and if God had not told us, we would have never learned about them. Yet they influence our very *ability* to pray.

Getting to know God

- The Father chose to adopt us into his family, and sent the Son to make it possible (Ephesians 1:5). The Spirit testifies to us that we are sons of God (by adoption), and puts within us the desire to call out to the Father in prayer (Romans 8:15-16).
- The Son has revealed the Father to us, so that we are now able to know him (Matthew 11:27).

The work of Christ

- Jesus took on human flesh (Philippians 2:6-8) and became our substitute, to bear God's righteous wrath for our sin (Hebrews 2:14-17; Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21), so that we may share in his righteousness (Romans 3:22-24). By his blood, he redeemed (purchased) us for God (Ephesians 1:7; Revelation 5:9).
- Jesus' resurrection, the victory that sealed this redemption, brought us into the New Covenant (Luke 2:20; Hebrews 9:14-15), and made us recipients of the covenant promises of God (Ephesians 2:12-13).
- By his resurrection, Jesus conquered death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57), brought us into the kingdom of God (Revelation 1:6, 9; Colossians 1:13), and has made us participants in the covenant community of believers (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19-22), which is the "church" (Ephesians 1:22-23), the "body" of Christ (Colossians 1:18).

Living for God (a new set of values)

- The Spirit teaches us the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:9-16), leads us into a righteous life as God's children (Romans 8:13-15), and helps us in our prayers (Romans 8:26).
- God puts his laws in our hearts (Hebrews 10:16), so that we begin to have a *desire* to obey him (which also means we are willing to pray - Philippians 4:6; Matthew 6:6-13). He gives us both the *desire* to obey him, and the *ability* to do so (Philippians 2:13). This is why we are able to "abide" in Jesus (John 15:4-10, 16), and why we desire for God to be glorified "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Our response of trust and loyalty to him

Because of what God has done in and for us, our lives are characterized by an ongoing response of trust (faith) and loyalty (allegiance) to God. The God who created all things has become *our* God, and we have come to realize that we can trust him.

- Faith does not mean "believing the impossible," but is an expression of *trust*. Our faith is based on the solid foundation of what God has done.

Prayer is one of the ways we express our trust and loyalty to God.

- In our prayer, we can talk to God about *anything* in the full range of life experience. We can do so at any time, and from any place (even though there are special places where the presence of God is manifested - such as, "where two or three are gathered together," Matthew 18:20).

Expressing our needs, as defined by the Word of God

Because of what God has done to and for us, our purpose and goals in life have *changed*. Now our ultimate goal is not *human*-centered (personal needs or fulfillment), but *God*-centered. Rather than demanding that God "meet my needs," our greatest desire is for God to be glorified - not just in eternity, but also in this present world.

Need is just one aspect of prayer; but it's an important - though often distorted - part of it. Our need is genuine and heart-felt; but it goes much deeper than personal issues such as health, food, jobs, etc. We discover this as we go to Scripture to find out what our needs really are.

- Scripture defines the nature of our needs - and this is to influence our *thinking*.
- Scripture also teaches us the moral will of God - and this is to influence our *actions*.

In Scripture, we discover that "need" is not same as "desire"; and knowing this will influence the types of things we pray about. There are many things we *need*, whether or not we *desire* them!

- Two examples of needs that people do not always have a desire for: All people *need* repentance, even though few *desire* it! / All of us are in constant need of God himself.
- Knowing this fact, we give up the making of demands based on *our own limited perception* of need, and ask *God* to determine what we need, and bring it to pass.

Abandoning any techniques and manipulation; not making demands

We know we have a Father who cares for us, and has promised to cause all things to work together for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). We know that he is *eager* to do this, so why would we want him to do less? Why would we want him to *change* what he is doing?

Because of this, we don't try to manipulate God with means, techniques and a grab bag of tricks, in hopes of controlling how he responds. Rather, we go to God without demands, simply laying before him our needs, and submitting ourselves to his will, based on the content of Scripture.

Placing ourselves in God's hands, allowing him to decide the outcome

Since our goal is to want what God wants, we place ourselves in his hands and allow him to decide what is best, and to accomplish it the way he determines, based only on his mercy and grace. By observing what he does, we can interpret his response to our prayers, and in this way, understand his will for our lives.

God communicates with us (special and general revelation)

All the ways we can learn about God and his will for us, and about how to interpret his answers to our prayers, can be grouped into two basic categories: Special Revelation and General Revelation.

Special Revelation

This refers to God's self-disclosure through the Word of God - a term used to describe both the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. Regarding Scripture:

- This revelation is *objective*: It exists as eternally true and reliable, whether or not we accept it (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). It is perfect, precise and accurate, and *not* affected by sin. It does not submit itself to our opinions; rather, we are to submit our opinions to it.
- This revelation is *redemptive*: It is the only means used by the Spirit, by which a person can be brought to repentance and salvation (Romans 10:17).

Jesus Christ, the "Word of God," is the *fullest* revelation of God, God in human form (Jn 1:1-3, 14, 18).

However, Jesus is temporarily absent from the earth; so at this time, the only special revelation we have is Scripture, also called the "Word of God." In his absence, Jesus has sent his Spirit to use the Scriptures, and to enable us to accept what it says (1 Peter 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6).

General Revelation

This refers to all other means by which God reveals himself, or something about himself, to humans. This includes God's revelation in creation (Psalm 19:1-3; Romans 1:20), and in us as humans created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). It also includes his works, as demonstrated in history (a concept called "providence"), and *any other way that may exist*.

God has put his mark in creation so that we encounter revelation of him in *all* that we do, not just when we are involved in worship or prayer. But this revelation has limitations.

- This revelation is *not objective*: Because of sin and its effects in the world, it *cannot* be understood by itself. It is subjective and easily misunderstood. *We need special revelation, in order to understand it correctly.* (Even before sin entered the world, Adam needed special revelation, God's instructions, to know how to interpret the world around him - Genesis 2!)
- This revelation is *not redemptive*: We can learn *about* God, his nature and his power. But we do not, and *cannot*, learn about salvation. (It was never made for this purpose.) General revelation cannot *save* us, though it may be used by God to *lead* us to Christ, the one who can save. (This "leading" would be similar to the idea expressed in Romans 2:4, "God's kindness leads you to repentance.")

Because of sin, we by nature, *suppress*, this revelation, distorting it in a way that results in worship of the creation rather than the Creator. We interpret the world based on our own interests, and influenced by the views of society around us. Even if we *do* have a "God concept" (as most people do), it will be distorted, until the Spirit uses the Word of God to open our eyes.

- We cannot begin to interpret the world rightly, until the Spirit has used the Word of God to open our eyes and change our perception. Then, to whatever degree the Word has influenced our thinking, we will stop suppressing this revelation. However, until then, our suppression of it brings only judgment and wrath (Romans 1:18-23+).

More about providence

The concept of "providence" refers to God's active role *now*, in what happens in the world. Though once a widely acknowledged concept, it has become largely ignored (especially with the corrupting influence of naturalism and atheism within the realm of science). Today, our tendency is to *ignore* God's active work in creation, and to focus on creation *without God* - and even to live as though everything revolves around ourselves and other created entities! (See Romans 1:25.)

- Consider these statements in the Bible: The Father is always at work, even on the Sabbath (John 5:16-17) / Jesus upholds or sustains all things (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17 - an *ongoing* action).
- Another example of God actively at work in our "daily life" is seen every time someone receives salvation. Scripture reminds us that *he chose us* (John 15:16, 19), and that his power is at work in us (Ephesians 3:20)!
- *This is why Romans 8:28 can exist.* God is actively working all things together for the good of those who love him.

Scripture teaches us that God is active *now*, revealing his purposes and accomplishing them in what happens. This would even include the accomplishing of his purposes by means of the sin and injustice that are in the world - though *indirectly*.

- An example of God using people's sins to accomplish his purposes can be seen in the death of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:25-28). God accomplishes his purposes in the evil that people do; but to be understood correctly, such events *must* be viewed along with the end results, when the justice will finally be attained.

ALL people respond to God's revelation on a regular basis

Do not forget this fact. All people respond, in one of two ways... and it affects their attitude toward prayer.

Response #1 - People who have *not* repented and are unwilling to humble themselves before God:

- They *suppress* the truth. They are not filled with thankfulness and praise to God; so they don't pray - at least not in the way the Bible defines prayer!
- Most who claim to be "religious" belong to this category. They either have a false concept of God, or (if they have been exposed to the truth) they simply ignore him most of the time!
- Those who claim to be "*not* religious" may say there is "no evidence of God"; yet they are face-to-face with revelation every time they see a human being (including themselves) or anything else in creation! But they *suppress* this knowledge, and their awareness of it (Romans 1:18-20).

Response #2 - People who *have* repented, and with faith (trust), have humbled themselves before God:

- They pay attention to the Word of God. They accept God's revelation of himself in the Word (special revelation) - accepting not only the "set of facts" about God, but also the *person* revealed in those facts.
- They accept Scripture's interpretation of general revelation, and respond to that revelation appropriately.
- They begin to have a relationship to God that involves trust and loyalty to the one they have come to know.
- Based on this, prayer becomes a person-to-person relationship, between two people, one created and one divine (uncreated).

Understanding this revelation enables us to know how to pray, and how to interpret God's response

- How to pray: God's Word and his moral commands show us how to pray. Examples of prayers, scattered throughout the Bible, teach us about values and priorities. Scripture defines the nature of our needs, and helps us to interpret the circumstances we face in life.
- Interpreting God's response: We have asked that God's will be done. God providentially brings events and circumstances into our lives, as *answers* to our prayer. We observe what happens (general revelation), and interpret it based on God's Word (special revelation), and then respond in whatever way is fitting.