

Praying the Story

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Prayer in Context to Redemptive History

1. From youth pastors and grandparents to ministry leaders and mentors, we have all been encouraged to be more disciplined in our prayer lives at one time or another. *“It’s just talking to God and asking Him for things!”*, they say. With titles like *Ten Steps to Reignite Your Prayer Life* to *The Power of Prevailing Prayer*, sermons have been preached and books have been written on various topics related to prayer. Yet with so many resources to motivate us to pray, why does it many times seem easier to have a restful nap in the middle of Times Square during rush hour than it does to pray for more than a few minutes by yourself or get more than the usual 2 or 3 “prayer warriors” in the church to attend a corporate prayer meeting?
2. I believe that one of the main reasons that being disciplined and sincere in prayer is so difficult for us is because *its meaning and purpose is so often divorced from the Biblical story*. It only takes a small sampling of passages from the Scriptures to see that fervent prayers were constantly on the lips of the righteous. Yet when we more carefully examine the context of those passages, we see that the “engine” driving them to prayer and directing their prayer is the *grand narrative of redemptive history*, the gospel.
3. Our God has chosen to reveal Himself through a story. He could have merely given us a list of His attributes, accolades, character traits, and qualifications for His role as God and called us to believe and trust Him on that alone, but He didn’t. Instead, He told us about His dealings with weak men like Abraham and Moses and King David. He told us about Egypt, the Exodus, and a nation called Israel. He told us about their prophets and poets and singers and songwriters. And then He told us about Jesus of Nazareth, whose personal story is, in many ways, common to every man - yet it is also so utterly unique because of His identity.
4. Through reading, knowing, loving, and treasuring the story of the Bible - His story - we come to learn the most about what God is like. We see His character “fleshed out” for us as we see Sinai in smoke and fire and then walk the streets of Galilee with Jesus. We perceive His jealous yet compassionate tone of voice as we listen to the message of Israel’s prophets and hear the words of His Son. We take in the full extent of His love as we behold Him bleeding and suspended between heaven and earth on a wooden beam. We discover His tenderness and His ability to conquer a hard heart as we meet people who had been with Him and read the things that they wrote about Him. And we uncover his zeal and jealousy for His reputation as we look ahead to the events at the end of the story.

5. This is not fiction, this is *reality*. We are not merely listeners, but we are characters in His unfolding plot. It is in this context that prayer finds its motivation. In prayer, we are *responding* to what He has done by devoting ourselves to Him and *petitioning* Him to bring to pass what He has promised to do.

"Isn't it a relief that the world's plot is not limited to the brief span of our lives? We make sense of our days in light of this overarching narrative. The big plot of the Bible, with its guarantee of resurrection and new creation, gives confidence even in the face of death. The Bible's big story opens up the windows on stale, stuffy rooms of deadlines and due dates, deaths and disappointments, and fresh winds of the creation-to-new-creation breezes blow through." - Jim Hamilton, "What is Biblical Theology?"

6. The Bible consists largely of the story of one small Middle Eastern nation. God made *covenants* with the forefathers and nation of Israel, declaring His intent to reconcile all of sinful humanity to Himself and to restore what was lost in Eden's garden through the fall by the means of one of Adam's descendants. This promised deliverer was the subject of the first recorded corporate prayer meeting in the Bible.

"And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him." To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord."

(Genesis 4:25–26 ESV)

7. God chose one family (Abraham's) among all of the other families of the earth to be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3). When God later visited Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's descendants at Mount Sinai, He made a covenant with them and gave them the Torah. The Law revealed what God was like and how they should serve Him in order that they might be the vehicle through which all the other nations would be blessed, as He had promised to Abraham. This testimony was handed down to them through the generations, and this "commission" was again given to the righteous remnant of Israel after the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20).

"Now the eleven disciples [Jews] went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations [Gentiles], baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.""****

(Matthew 28:16–20 ESV)

"But you [the eleven apostles] will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.""****

(Acts 1:8 ESV)

"The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy [cf. Deuteronomy 32:21] and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, " 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' [quoting Isaiah 49:6] " And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord..."
(Acts 13:44–48 ESV)

The Apostles' view of prayer

1. Not only are the apostles' lifestyle and doctrine important to us, but their prayers are as well. The promises God had made and the story God was writing was the sole "controlling narrative" of their prayers.
2. Corporate prayer based around the sacrificial system was what dictated the lives of the Jews as commanded by God in the Law. As Jews, the apostles always viewed prayer as connected to the God of Israel and to the assembly of Israel. Corporate prayer was an act of consecration before God, a way of pledging their allegiance to Him and acknowledging their dependence on His power to bring to pass what He had promised.

"Now while he [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense."
(Luke 1:8–10 ESV)

3. Not only did they watch and hear the Lord Jesus pray often, the apostles learned *what* to pray from the Law, Prophets, and Psalms and *how* to pray from men in their history like Moses, David, and Daniel. The apostles' prayers come from a heart of deep humility that is saturated in the story and the gospel.

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel... And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"
(Colossians 1:3-5,9 ESV)

"Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—" (Colossians 4:2–3 ESV)

**"Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God."
(Colossians 4:12 ESV)**

4. The apostles viewed prayer offered in humility as being heard by God. They didn't come to God without a heart that was devoted to Him and without sincerity of repentance, merely praying and imagining that God would grant them whatever the lusts of their hearts were.

**"The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous."
(Proverbs 15:28–29 ESV)**

**"For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."
(1 Peter 3:12 ESV, citing Psalm 34)**

**"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures."
(James 4:3 NKJV)**

**"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."
(1 John 5:13–15 ESV)**

5. The apostles knew and understood what things were "according to His will" because their lives were rooted in the Old Testament scriptures: God had revealed His will for humanity through the Law, Prophets and covenants.

The Lord's Prayer

**"Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."
(Matthew 6:9–13 ESV)**

1. Jesus' disciples ask Him to teach them how to pray, "just as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1) Jesus' response is recorded in Matthew 6 (grouped by Matthew with other teachings of Jesus) and Luke 11 (the chronological occasion in Jesus' ministry for the prayer).
2. Jesus does not set forth a new *method* or *technique* through His prayer (those would have been understood by the Jews He was speaking to because of their history). Instead, the *content* of this prayer is what informs the apostles.
3. Not only is this prayer a *corporate prayer*, it is thoroughly Jewish in origin and in character and is very similar to the *Qaddish*, a prayer prayed in the synagogues before and during the time of Jesus. The Qaddish says:

"Exalted and hallowed be His great name in the world, which He created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and at a near time."

"The Lord's Prayer, in its eschatological orientation, is similar in a number of ways to the Qaddish prayer of the synagogue. This is true not only of the spirit of the entire prayer but especially of the content of the first three petitions."

(Donald Hagner, Matthew 1-13: Word Biblical Commentary, vol 33a, p. 147)

- a. *"Our father in the heavens"*: God is Israel's father, the one who chose them as the nation through which all the others would be blessed. He delivered them from Egypt and He saved them from their enemies. Not only do the Jewish Targums call God "Father" many times, we often see the Old Testament prophets calling Israel, God's son, back to an honoring relationship with their Father, Yahweh.

"Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son' (Exodus 4:22 ESV)

"They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?" (Deuteronomy 32:5–6 ESV)

"Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name." (Isaiah 63:15–16 ESV)

- b. *"Hallowed be your name"*: "to hallow" means "to set apart, treat as holy, or reverence". The word in the original Greek is an *imperative* word. It is not merely a statement ("you are holy!") but a petition or a plea ("show your name to be holy!"). This part of the prayer is a plea for God to *act in such a way as to vindicate His name or His reputation*. God's name was revealed in context to His covenantal relationship with Israel (Exodus 3:13-15; Exodus 34:5-7), therefore the cry for His name to be revered is directly related to His faithfulness to His covenantal promises to Israel. *The Day of the Lord* is the anchor of the Lord's prayer - Israel's redemption from exile, the sprinkling of clean water on them, and God giving them a new heart by which they would never turn away from Him anymore. Undoubtedly Ezekiel 36-38 would have been on the minds of Jesus' hearers:

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate [LXX: "hallow" - same Greek word as Matthew 6] the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes."
(Ezekiel 36:22-23 ESV)

In a Jewish context, this petition refers to God acting in fulfillment of the promises to Israel, and thus to the silencing of the taunts of her enemies. In short, God's name will only be properly honored when he brings his kingdom and accomplishes his will on earth (cf. the Qaddish). Thus, the first three petitions of the prayer are closely linked, referring essentially to the same salvation-historical reality.
(Donald Hagner, Matthew 1-13: Word Biblical Commentary, vol 33a, p. 148)

- c. *"Your kingdom come"*: Jesus is referring to the eschatological kingdom promised to David's son through the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7) and the kingdom that God Himself would establish that would crush all of the other kingdoms and defeat Israel's oppressors (Daniel 2:44). In context and according to the prophets, this kingdom would be established when God vindicated His name through Israel's restoration. This phrase of the Lord's prayer echoes the petition in the Qaddish - that God would establish the king of Israel that would rule righteously from Jerusalem and crush their enemies.

The petition refers primarily and directly to the Messianic kingdom on earth, of which all Scripture testifies. The King of this kingdom is the Lord Jesus, the Son of David; the subjects of it are Israel and the nations, — the chosen people fulfilling the mission which, according to the election of God, is assigned unto them, of being the medium of blessing unto all the nations of the earth; the centre of the kingdom is Jerusalem, and the means of its establishment is the coming and visible appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ. When we pray "Thy kingdom come," our true meaning is, Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly! -Adolph Saphir, The Lord's Prayer

- d. *“Give us this day our daily bread”*: Jesus references God’s provision of manna in the wilderness for Israel (Exodus 16). The Israelites were sojourners on their way to the land that God had promised them. God provided “daily bread” to sustain them. Though the people of Israel were in the promised land in Jesus’ day, they were still strangers and sojourners in the sense that the things God had promised through the covenants had not yet come to pass. Until the day that God vindicates His name by delivering Israel and establishing the Messiah’s kingdom in Jerusalem, Jesus teaches His disciples to ask for daily manna to sustain them in the wilderness of their exile as they are patiently waiting for those things to happen.
- e. *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”*: In Aramaic, the only word for “sin” is “debt”. Jesus used a familiar word to the Jews as it would have been a word they heard in the synagogue every Sabbath. This phrase is also consistent with the Law and other passages in Jewish literature:

**“Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.”
(Sirach 28:2)**

- f. *“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”*: The Greek word used for “temptation” here also is translated as “testing” in the New Testament. To be “tested” or “tried” is to be brought into difficult circumstances that try one’s faithfulness. All of history is leading towards one climactic ending at the Day of the Lord, and this petition has overtones that have to do with the testing of one’s faithfulness especially in the dark times leading up to the Day of the Lord. *“Deliver us from evil”*, in light of the rest of the prayer, is connected to God’s deliverance of Israel from the wicked and oppressive nations that He has given them into because of their disobedience to the covenant:

**“O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Your holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.”
(Isaiah 63:17–19 ESV)**

- 4. Jesus taught His disciples to pray for the redemption of Israel. In summary:
 - a. The Lord’s Prayer is loosely based on a common Jewish prayer from the time of Jesus, and thus would have been somewhat familiar to his hearers.
 - b. The Lord’s Prayer begins by focusing on the story of redemption and praying for the vindication of God’s name through His covenants with Israel.
 - c. The Lord’s prayer then moves to “we”-focused petitions that are all in context to the larger story of Israel and being faithful to God as sojourners before the Day of the Lord.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1

"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come."

(Ephesians 1:15–21 ESV)

1. The book of Ephesians was written to Jew and Gentile believers in Ephesus. Though Ephesians 1:17-19 may be a familiar prayer to many, we must not forget the context. Paul begins the letter by blessing and thanking God for what He has promised and brought to light through Jesus.
2. Before examining the prayer, we must recognize that we have a tendency to read Paul's letters and "over-universalize" all of the pronouns. We must not neglect the historical context of Paul's letters.
3. Paul begins in verse 15 with the phrase "for this reason..". The context of his prayer is:
 - a. God's election of Israel for His redemptive and restorative purposes (verse 4)
 - b. The death of the Messiah on the cross as an atoning sacrifice (verse 7)
 - c. His plan to bring all things under the headship of the Messiah at the Day of the Lord (verses 9-10).
4. Each phrase of his prayer has important Old Testament roots:
 - a. *"the Father of glory"*: as in the Lord's prayer, "father" is one way of how the Jews understood their relationship to God. Gentiles also become "sons of God through faith in Christ" (Galatians 3:26-29), and thus we cry "abba, father!" (Romans 8:15) as ones who, by grace, will partake of God's eschatological promises with the righteous remnant of Jews.
 - b. *"the spirit of wisdom and revelation"*: The Old Testament's "Wisdom Literature", the Psalms, and the Proverbs provide the backdrop for understanding this phrase.

"Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.""
(Proverbs 1:20–33 ESV)

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord." (Isaiah 11:1–3 ESV)

c. *"having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know..."*:

- i. *"the hope to which He has called you..."*: The "hope of the gospel" (Colossians 1:23) realized in God's faithfulness to His covenants with Israel, leading to the restoration of all things and blessing for all the nations through the Messiah's reign from Jerusalem at the Day of the Lord (Acts 3:19-21).
- ii. *"the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints"*: The Jewish people being called "the saints" is a reiteration from the prophets:

"whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.""
(Isaiah 19:25 ESV)

"And they [Israel] shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord; and you [Jerusalem] shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."
(Isaiah 62:12 ESV)

"And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people [Israel] comes to an end all these things would be finished." (Daniel 12:7 ESV)

iii. *"the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe..."*: Just as God did the seemingly impossible in raising Jesus from death, He also has the power to resurrect His wayward nation Israel, demonstrating His covenantal faithfulness and vindicating His name in the sight of all the nations (Ezekiel 36-39). When writing to the Romans, Paul sought to ensure that they understood that God's calling on the redeemed remnant of the "holy people" has not changed. In doing so, he encouraged the Roman church to find their proper place within the redemptive storyline and encouraged them to *not boast in themselves but to have the fear of the Lord*.

**"For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you."
(Romans 11:15–21 ESV)**

5. This prayer, just as the Lord's prayer, is thoroughly rooted in the story of redemptive history, God's purpose for Israel, and the place that Gentiles have in that story.

What can we learn?

1. We can learn much from how Jesus and the apostles prayed. First, we must ground our hearts and minds in the gospel and redemptive history. We must take the time to know the framework and foundation. Christian "fads" will come and go and movements will rise and fall, but we must ground our lives in something that outlasts them all.
2. Secondly, our devotion to the Lord and to His people, our love for our neighbor, and our love for our enemies will never grow unless we immerse ourselves in the gospel.
3. Thirdly, we must embrace the cross and seek to imitate Him when difficulty or persecution comes our way because of the gospel, knowing that God has given proof of His faithfulness to deliver on all He has promised.

4. As we seek to lead and disciple others towards Jesus, the most important thing we must call them to is *the Biblical story*. That story has a *guaranteed* outcome and holds out a hope that will not disappoint. To point people to an ambiguous or uncertain hope is to inevitably point them down a path that leads to some measure of disappointment. *We must first and foremost shepherd our flocks towards the hope of the Gospel as the Apostles taught it.*

5. Far more than any prophecy, dream, impression, or voice, we must allow the Scriptures and the Bible's story to shape our prayers, personal life vision, ministry goals, discipleship meetings, church mission statements, marriages, finances, relationships, and recreation. True Christian discipleship keeps the Day of the LORD, the resurrection of the body, and the messianic kingdom as the *anchor of hope* in the midst of our sojourn through this present evil age. These glorious events are yet future, and so we must be attentive and maintain a *sojourning, pilgrim posture* as we live day by day.