An Overview on Prayer

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AN OVERVIEW ON PRAYER

It may be said that no sinner is saved without prayer and no believer is sanctified (to grow in grace) apart from prayer. The prayer may be like Solomon’s prayer (one of the longest in the Bible, with 31 verses; see 1 Kings 8:23-53) or like Peter’s prayer (one of the shortest, with 1 verse containing three words, see Matt. 14:30), but in any case, prayer must be exercised.

1. Definition of prayer – Prayer may be best defined as “having fellowship with God.” It is more than simply talking to God, but rather talking with God. It implies a two-way give-and-take.

2. Elements in prayer – “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” (Matt. 6:9-13).

According to this model prayer of Jesus’, which was given to us at the request of the disciples, prayer includes 10 elements:

a. A personal relationship with God: “Our Father” – The word “our” signifies the believer’s brotherly relationship between himself and all other Christians. While the Bible nowhere presents the universal fatherhood of God, it does declare the universal brotherhood of believers. The word Father signifies the relationship between God and the believer.

b. Faith: “which art in heaven” – Paul declares that without this element, our prayers are useless. “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarmer of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

c. Worship: “hallowed be thy name” – David felt this part of prayer to be so important that he appointed a select group of men who did nothing else in the temple but praise and worship God. “Moreover four thousand were porters; and four thousand praised the LORD with the instruments which I made, said David, to praise therewith” (1 Chron. 23:5). “Moreover David and the captains of the host separated to the service of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals.... So the number of them, with their brethren that were instructed in the songs of the LORD, even all that were cunning, was two hundred fourscore and eight” (1 Chron. 25:1, 7).

In the book of Revelation, John sees four special angels who exist solely to worship God and who “rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come” (Rev. 4:8).
See also Christ’s statement to the Samaritan woman: “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24).

d. **Expectation:** “Thy kingdom come” – This kingdom is that blessed millennial kingdom spoken of so much in the Old Testament: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isa. 2:2-4).

This kingdom was later previewed by John in the New Testament. (See Rev. 20:1-6.)

e. **Submission:** “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” – Jesus would later give the finest example of this element in Gethsemane. “And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39).

f. **Petition:** “Give us this day our daily bread” – This suggests that our praying should be as our eating – daily.

g. **Confession:** “And forgive us our debts” – The blood of Christ will forgive us of every sin, but not one excuse. Only confessed sin can be forgiven. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

h. **Compassion:** “as we forgive our debtors” – “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20). (See also Matt. 18:21-35.)

i. **Dependence:** “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” – It should be understood that, while God has never promised to keep us from temptation, he has promised to preserve us in and through temptation. “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

j. **Acknowledgment:** “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever” – See David’s great prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:10-19, where he actually anticipates the final part of Jesus’ model prayer.

3. **Reasons for prayer** – Why should we pray?

a. **Because of the repeated command of God** – “Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way” (1 Sam. 12:23). “Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in
prayer” (Rom. 12:12). “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). “I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Tim. 2:8).

b. Because of the example of Christ – “Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared” (Heb. 5:7). “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

c. Because of the example of the early church – “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren” (Acts 1:14). “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Acts 12:5).

d. Because prayer is God’s chosen method for the following:

- Defeating the devil – “But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:32). “But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer” (1 Pet. 4:7).
- Saving the sinner – “And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:10).
- Restoring the backslider – “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.... Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (James 5:16, 19-20).
- Strengthening the saint – “But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost” (Jude 20).
- Sending forth laborers – “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:38). “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2-3).
- Curing the sick – “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him” (James 5:13-15).
• Glorifying God’s name – “And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints” (Rev. 5:8). “And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand” (Rev. 8:2-4).

• Accomplishing the impossible – “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21:22). “And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit” (James 5:17-18). (See also Acts 12:5-17.)

• Giving good things – “He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer” (Psa. 102:17). “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Matt. 7:7-11). (See also Matt. 21:22.)

• Imparting wisdom – “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5).

• Bestowing peace – “Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:5-7).

• Keeping one from sin – “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

• Revealing the will of God – “And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Luke 11:9-10).

e. Because of the example of the greatest Christian of all time – Paul

• Paul began and ended his Christian life by prayer.
  ◦ The beginning – “And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth” (Acts 9:11).
• Paul prayed everywhere he went.


◊ On a seashore
  i) At Miletus – “And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36).
  ii) At Tyre – “And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed” (Acts 21:5).

◊ In Jerusalem (Acts 22:17)

◊ On an island – “And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him” (Acts 28:8).

• Paul prayed for almost everyone he met.

◊ For the churches (Rom. 1:9; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Cor. 13:7; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 1:16; 3:14; Phil. 1:4, 9; Col. 1:3, 9; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 5:23; 2 Thess. 1:3, 11; 2:13)

◊ For Philemon (Philem. 4)

◊ For Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3)

◊ For Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16-18)

◊ For those who forsook him in Rome (2 Tim. 4:16)

◊ For Israel – “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1).

◊ For all men (1 Tim. 2:1-3, 8; 4:4-5)

• Paul constantly asked others to pray for him (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Philem. 22; Rom. 15:30; Col. 4:3).

4. Direction of prayer – To whom should we pray? To the Father? Son? Spirit? The basic New Testament rule is this: Prayer should be made to the Father, through the Spirit, in the name of Jesus. (See Rom. 8:15-16, 26-27.)

5. Objects of prayer – For whom should we pray?

a. For ourselves – In the Scriptures Abraham’s servant, Peter, and the dying thief prayed for themselves. The first prayer was for guidance, the second for survival from drowning, and the third for salvation.

◊ Abraham’s servant – “And he said, O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham” (Gen. 24:12).

◊ Peter – “But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me” (Matt. 14:30).

◊ The dying thief – “And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42).
b. For one another – “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers” (Rom. 1:9).

c. For pastors – The apostle Paul requested prayer for himself from both Ephesian and Colossian believers. “And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:19-20). “Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds” (Col. 4:3).

d. For sick believers – “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him” (James 5:14-15).

e. For rulers – “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour” (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

   How easy it is (and how sinful) to criticize our leaders but never remember to pray for them.

f. For our enemies – “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you” (Matt. 5:44). “Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you” (Luke 6:28). “And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60).

g. For Israel – “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee” (Psa. 122:6). “I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, and give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth” (Isa. 62:6-7).

h. For all men – See 1 Timothy 2:1.

6. Positions for prayer – No specific position is required. It is the heart that counts. Note the various positions as described in the Bible.

a. Standing (suggested by Jesus) – “And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25).

b. Sitting (done by David) – “And David the king came and sat before the LORD, and said, Who am I, O LORD God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?” (1 Chron. 17:16). (See 1 Chron. 17:16-27.)

c. Bowing (Moses) – “And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped” (Exod. 34:8).
d. Lying (David) – “I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears” (Psa. 6:6).

e. With lifted hands (David) – “Hear the voice of my supplications, when I cry unto thee, when I lift up my hands toward thy holy oracle” (Psa. 28:2).

f. On one’s face (Jesus) – “And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39).

g. On one’s knees (Solomon, Daniel, Jesus, Paul)
   ◇ Solomon – “And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto the LORD, he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven” (1 Kings 8:54).
   ◇ Daniel – “Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime” (Dan. 6:10).
   ◇ Jesus – “And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed” (Luke 22:41).
   ◇ Paul – “And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36).

h. With the face between the knees (Elijah) – “So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42).

7. Time of prayer – Anytime
   a. Early in the morning – “And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed” (Mark 1:35).
   b. At noon – “Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice” (Psa. 55:17).
   c. Late in the afternoon – “Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour” (Acts 3:1).
   d. In the evening – “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Psa. 141:2).
   e. At midnight – “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them” (Acts 16:25).

8. Hindrances to prayer
   a. Known sin – “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Psa. 66:18).
   b. Insincerity – “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward” (Matt. 6:5).
   c. Carnal motives – “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3).
d. Unbelief – “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed” (James 1:5-6).

e. Satanic activity – “And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees and upon the palms of my hands. And he said unto me, O Daniel, a man greatly beloved, understand the words that I speak unto thee, and stand upright; for unto thee am I now sent. And when he had spoken this word unto me, I stood trembling. Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia” (Dan. 10:10-13).

On certain occasions the sovereign God for a short period of time may allow satanic interference to block the prayer line of the believer. This is usually for the purpose of testing and purifying his child, as the book of Job and tenth chapter of Daniel so vividly illustrate.

f. Domestic problems – “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered” (1 Pet. 3:7).

g. Pride – “Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14).

h. Robbing God – “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Mal. 3:8-10).

i. Refusing to help the needy – ’Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard” (Prov. 21:13). “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (1 John 3:16-17).
j. Refusing to submit to biblical teaching – “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination” (Prov. 28:9). (See also Prov. 1:24-31; Zech. 7:11-14.)

k. Refusing to forgive or to be forgiven – “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.... For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matt. 6:12, 14).

9. Qualifications of prayer – What are the ground rules of prayer? The following points absolutely must be met.

a. Prayer should be humble – “LORD, thou hast heard the desire of the humble: thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear” (Psa. 10:17). (See also Luke 18:13-14.)

b. Prayer should be bold – “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him” (1 John 5:13-15).

c. Prayer should be in faith – “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

d. Prayer should be sincere – “The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth” (Psa. 145:18).

e. Prayer should be simple – “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt. 6:7).

f. Prayer should be persistent – “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?” (Luke 18:7). “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2).

g. Prayer should be definite – “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple” (Psa. 27:4). “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Acts 12:5).

All too often our prayers are so vague and indefinite as to render them totally meaningless. Petitions such as “Lord, save that soul nearest hell,” or “Heal all the sick and comfort all the lonely,” simply provide no basis for divine action.

h. Prayer should be in accord with Scripture – “And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1 John 5:14). Prayer must be grounded in and bounded by the Word of God if we are to find his will for our life.