

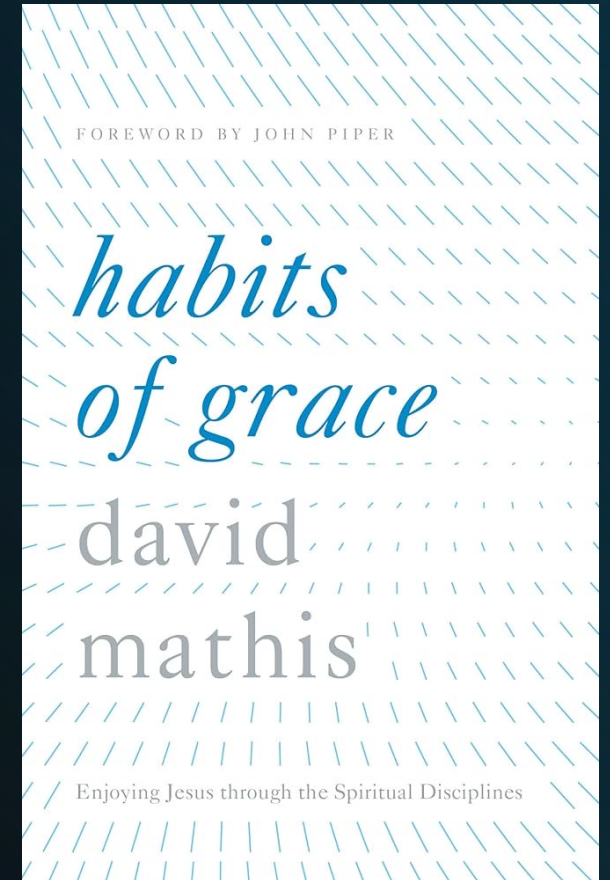


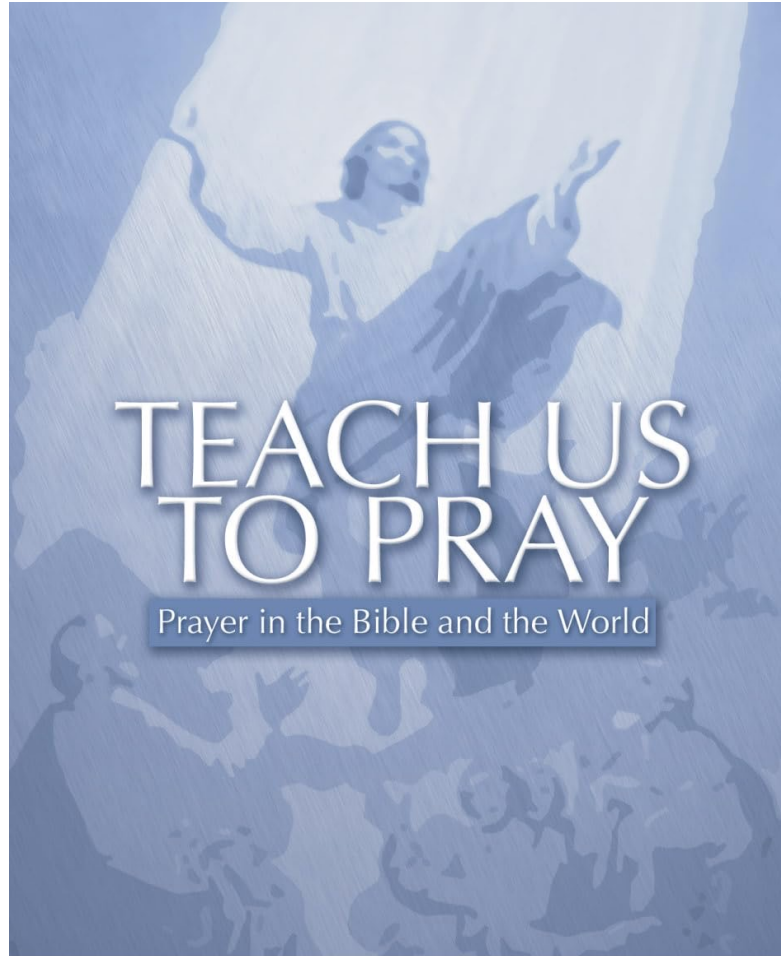
A Biblical Theology of Prayer

Defining Prayer

Prayer is “an address (such as a petition) to God or a god in word or thought” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Prayer is our talking to God and knowing that we have his ear because we are his adopted children through faith in Jesus Christ (David Mathis, *Habits of Grace*)





EDITED BY
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NSBT NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Calling on the Name of the Lord

A biblical theology of prayer



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Prayer in the Pentateuch

²⁵ 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.” ²⁶ 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

Prayer in the Pentateuch

The language of calling on Yahweh's name is used often in the OT, across the biblical genres, and it always assumes three interrelated truths:

- 1) Yahweh's people are in covenant relationship with Him
- 2) This covenant relationship includes communication
- 3) What is being communicated is a desire for Yahweh to make good on His covenant promises

Prayer in the Pentateuch

⁹ And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. ¹² But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”

Genesis 32:9-12

Prayer in the Pentateuch

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Exodus 2:23-25

Prayer in the Pentateuch

On several occasions, especially in Exodus and Numbers, Moses prays that God would not revoke his covenant promises because of Israel's sin, but would show them mercy, even though that mercy is undeserved (Exod. 5:22-23; 17:4-7; 32:11-13; Num. 11-14)

Prayer is not a major theme in either Leviticus, which focuses on ritual holiness and atonement, or Deuteronomy, which offers further explanation of the law

Prayer in the Historical Books

¹² At that time Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, “Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon.” ¹³ And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. ¹⁴ There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded the voice of a man, for the Lord fought for Israel.

Joshua 10:12-14

Prayer in the Historical Books

²⁸ Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.” ²⁹ And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. ³⁰ And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.

Judges 16:28-30

Prayer in the Historical Books

¹⁰ She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. ¹¹ And she vowed a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”

1 Samuel 1:10-11

¹⁰ The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.

1 Samuel 2:10

Prayer in the Historical Books

²⁷ For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house.’ Therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. ²⁸ And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant. ²⁹ Now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you. For you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever.”

2 Samuel 7:27-29

Prayer in the Historical Books

In 1 Kings 8:22-53, Solomon offers a prayer at the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple, which praises God for his perfectly holy character and his covenant faithfulness

Throughout 1-2 Kings, Elijah and Elisha regularly pray that God would intervene miraculously, and he answers those prayers

In 2 Kings 19, Hezekiah prays that God would deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrians on the basis of God's covenant promises to David

In 2 Kings 20, Hezekiah prays for his own healing that David's line might be preserved

Prayer in the Historical Books

³⁵ Say also: “Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather and deliver us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. ³⁶ Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!”

1 Chronicles 16:35-36

Prayer in the Historical Books

¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people (Neh. 5:19)

¹⁴ Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds which I have done for the house of my God and for his service (Neh. 13:14)

²² Remember this also in my favour, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love (Neh. 13:22)

²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites (Neh. 13:29)

³¹ Remember me, O my God, for good (Neh. 13:31)

Prayer in the Prophetic Books

In Isaiah 1:15, God says he refuses to listen to the prayers of his people because of their rebellion: “When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.”

It's not until Isaiah 55 that prayer becomes a theme again, in anticipation of the return from exile, culminating in a lengthy prayer in Isaiah 63-64 about the future deliverance of God's people

Prayer in the Prophetic Books

Most of Jeremiah 11-20 are prophetic prayers that alternate between indicting Israel, interceding for Israel, and pleading with God to remember his covenant promises

Lamentations, which was likely written by Jeremiah, echoes these same themes from Jeremiah 11-20

Prayer in the Prophetic Books

¹⁸ O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. ¹⁹ O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.”

Daniel 9:18-19

Prayer in the Prophetic Books

Jonah calls upon God to save the ship he is on—but only after the pagan crew begs him to pray to his God because they are calling out to their gods (Jonah 1:5-6, 14)

Jonah prays to the Lord to deliver him a second time—this time from the belly of the great fish: ⁹ “But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (Jonah 2:1-9)

The entire pagan city of Ninevah repents by calling upon the Lord (Jonah 3:1-10)

Jonah prays an angry prayer to the Lord where he vents because the Ninevites repented—Jonah knew God is faithful to forgive all who call upon his name, and he didn’t want Israel’s enemies spared! (Jonah 4:1-3)

Prayer in the Wisdom Literature

¹ Then Job answered the Lord and said: ² “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ⁴ ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’ ⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent^[a] in dust and ashes.”

Job 42:1-6

Petitionary Prayers (Psalm 13)

¹ How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Penitential Prayers (Psalm 51)

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

Intercessory Prayers (Psalm 72)

- ¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
- ² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
- ³ Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
- ⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!

Prayers of Thanksgiving (Psalm 40)

- ¹ I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
- ² He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
- ³ He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
- Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the Lord.

Hymnic Prayers (Psalm 113)

¹ Praise the Lord!

Praise, O servants of the Lord,
praise the name of the Lord!

² Blessed be the name of the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore!

³ From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the Lord is to be praised!

Summary: OT Theology of Prayer

The promise of Yahweh's past grace, present grace, and future grace precedes the invitation to prayer and forms the assumptions of the one who is praying

As the story of prayer progresses, two other sub-themes emerge: (1) the desire for God to deliver Israel from exile and (2) the desire for God to send a messiah who will bring final fulfillment to God's covenant promises

Jesus and Prayer

In Luke 2 Jesus is presented at the Temple, where Simeon and Anna have been waiting with prayerful anticipation for many years for God to fulfil his covenant promises through the birth of the Messiah—both of them recognize Jesus as that messiah upon meeting him

⁵⁰ And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:50-53)

Jesus and Prayer (Faithful Persistence)

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus and Prayer (Modeling Prayerfulness)

In Mark 1:35-39, at the very beginning of his public ministry, we learn that Jesus's practice is to pray alone in the quiet of the morning before stepping out in public to proclaim the good news, heal people, and cast out demons

Mark 14:32-42 finds Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he spends many hours in prayer, asking his Father to give him the strength he needs to see his messianic mission through to the crucifixion

Jesus and Prayer (The Lord's Prayer)

⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 9:9-13)

Jesus and Prayer (Covenant Relationship)

²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

John 16:26-27

Jesus and Prayer (High Priestly Prayer)

Jesus prays that the Father would glorify him because he has glorified the Father through his ministry

Jesus prays that those who follow him would experience the same sort of intimacy with the Father and the joy that comes from faithfulness that Jesus himself experiences

Jesus prays that his followers would enjoy the same sort of unity that he enjoys with the Father

Jesus prays for their sanctification, which is guaranteed

Jesus prays all this, not only for his current followers, but for all those who follow him

Prayer in Light of Jesus

God's people continue to pray, but not in hopeful anticipation of a salvation that is to one day come, as was the case under the old covenant

Rather, under the new covenant, we pray as those whose hope is built on nothing less than Jesus's blood and righteousness—because all of God's promises find their yes and amen in Jesus