

The Basis of Prayer

When I was younger, I saw my late grandmother and it seemed like she was talking to herself. I asked what she was doing and she said she was praying. “Praying?” I asked, “Isn’t that something you do in your head?” “Praying,” she responded, “doesn’t have to be this complicated thing. Prayer is speaking to God. You don’t even have to ask for anything; just talk to him like a friend. You don’t talk to your friends in your head do you?”¹ My late grandmother’s example frequently comes to mind when I hear a message about prayer. I admit I’ve tried her approach of praying out loud by myself casually as if to a friend various times since then and it has never quite worked for me. I’ve always felt the “this is weird” factor. Praying out loud only seems normal to me if other people are “in” on the prayer too.

On what basis do you pray? For many, prayer is a strange act of rituals. Close your eyes, bow your head, fold your hands together, and cry your heart out without making a sound. Is this really what prayer is? Some of these movements do help us get into a posture of prayer, but they also can make prayer so rudimentary and remove us from what we’re doing. Certainly in the church context when we pray together these prayers are more formal; they’re pre-written. But in a private context or before a meal or at night with your kids, prayer is not a formal exercise of piety. Prayer is speaking to God our Father. Prayer is speaking to Jesus our Friend. Prayer is expressing the good, bad, and ugly parts of our day that move our hearts.

In prayers, we often ask for things. I recently prayed with a friend of mine, asking God to remove the quick temper from his heart and to give him opportunities to practice patience. In this prayer, I was stating a problem: my friend has been losing his temper. To be sure, God already knew this. So, why pray at all? We pray, not because God needs the information from us, but because God has commanded his people to call upon his name through prayer. When we call on the name of Lord in prayer, whether firmly through a prayer of bold resolve or whimperingly through a prayer of quiet tears—whether in the highs or the lows, when we call on the name of the Lord in prayer, we are declaring that the God we pray to is the one who rules all things. To call on the name of the Lord in prayer is to declare his sovereignty over the matter for which we are praying. When I prayed for my friend, I was declaring to my friend but also to God that I think God is the only one powerful enough to soften his angry heart; the only one sovereign enough to direct the events of our world to send this friend opportunities to practice patience.

¹ Of course, I’m paraphrasing this conversation that happened perhaps twenty years ago.

Not all prayer requests are for positive changes to our circumstances. Sometimes praying sounds like Psalm 58: *O God, break the teeth of [the wicked]; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O YHWH! Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun... sweep them away!* Sometimes praying sounds like Psalm 94: *O YHWH, God of vengeance... Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay the proud what they deserve!* Sometimes praying sounds like Psalm 139: *Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!* Have you ever prayed like that? Do you know you're allowed to pray like that? When we pray like this, though we are lifting matters that we deem to be evil and ultimately leaving them in the sovereign hands of the true Judge.

Sometimes prayer involves returning to previous matters we've prayed for. "God, I asked you to protect my niece after she was born too early under emergency circumstances; I asked you to keep the doctors calm and collected during those scary days, and you did. Thank you for answering my prayer and blessing our family with this baby girl. May she grow up and know of your loving hands that protected her before she knew anything was wrong." Sometimes things don't go as we expect. "God, I have asked you for freedom from this ongoing struggle too many times to count. Will you ever respond?" One of the lies of the Word of Faith movement is that as long as I ask in Jesus' name, God has to give me anything I ask for. But this is a gross misinterpretation that amounts to attempting to manipulate God, for Jesus taught us always to pray in submission to God's will. When we ask God for something and then question who he is because he didn't give us what we want, we are revealing that our prayers are actually being asked according to our own will rather than God's. Sometimes it's not God's will to give us what we want, even if we think what we want is good. If we are living in submission to God's sovereignty, we must acknowledge that sometimes God answers our prayers with "No." What do we do when that happens?

Psalm 116 doesn't tell us to praise God because he gives us what we want. Even if the answer is 'No,' Psalm 116 calls on us to praise God for hearing our requests. Well, how can we thank God when the answer is 'No'? Last September I faced a situation like this, and the details don't matter, but I had to grapple with a really disappointing 'No' from God. Well, in early October, I tried to express the tension of submitting to a 'No' from God in a hymn that I wrote.

Lord tis sometimes hard to raise prayers to you,
For I'm unsure what my asking can do;

Help my unbelief, speak to you I must,
Show how you hear me so that I may trust. //
Humble my pride to submit to your will,
When I get anxious, Lord make my heart still;
Help me to praise when I don't get my way,
That I may lift thanks to you day by day. //
Bring to my mem'ry times you have said 'Yes,'
Merciful Lord, forgive my ignorance;
Help me accept, now, that your 'No' is good,
I'd understand if from your view I stood. //
All-gracious Father who hears ev'ry prayer,
'No' is sufficient, this answer is clear;
Help me content be when walls are kept up,
Lord, you're protecting from what I see not. // ²

In the seven months since writing this, I've returned to this song many times and have sort of made it my prayer of submission when God tells me 'No.'³

This raises a great theological question: If God is sovereign, then why pray at all? The late theologian R.C. Sproul answers this question, saying that “God works in and through the prayers of his people, and so it's not that the NT says ‘God is sovereign, so you can just go back and put up your heels and take a nap and [not] be engaged...in any activity.’ On the contrary: it's because God is sovereign that we get so excited about the whole role of prayer because in his sovereignty he has so designed his plan of salvation as to work through the prayers of his people. And that's why the Bible again and again...commands us to be actively involved in prayer.”⁴ Or if I can ask it another way: *because* God is sovereign, why wouldn't we pray?

And sometimes prayer doesn't involve asking for something. Like my late grandmother taught me, sometimes praying is just talking to God about your day. When we do this, we declare to God that he is sovereign even over the little details of our lives; not just the big events; not just the earth-shattering requests. Whether big or small, we are to submit to God's will. Whether to

² These lyrics come from my original hymn, “When the Lord Says No.”

³ Whether in the worldclass concert hall of my car or aided by bathroom acoustics, my vocals have never been better.

⁴ R.C. Sproul, [If God is Sovereign, Why Pray?: Prayer with R.C. Sproul - YouTube](#)

make requests, whether to call God to action against the wicked, whether to question God’s apparent unresponsiveness, or whether to simply tell God about our day—to call on the name of the Lord in prayer is to submit the parts of our lives we pray for into the sovereign hands of God.

The Basis of Prayer – Exodus 2:23-25

On what basis do we pray? While there are prayer passages all over Scripture, to answer the question: On what basis do we pray? – one of the most profound passages in Scripture is the last paragraph of Exodus 2; turn there if you will. Israel is enslaved in Egypt; a pharaoh-directed infanticide has terrorized God’s people; Moses murders an Egyptian and flees the country; life for Israel sucks. Then, in vs. 23, we read that *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. And God heard their groaning, God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew* (Ex. 2:23-25).

Those four words describing God’s actions give us the basis for why we pray. We pray because God *hears* our prayers. We make requests to God because God *remembers* his covenant—when you read the prayers of Scripture those who are praying frequently remind God of his covenant promises. When things happen that don’t seem to fit with what God has promised to do or who God has promised to be, we can ask God why there seems to be a disconnect. Did you know you can ask God questions like that?

We ask for relief when our enemies and God’s enemies persecute us because God *sees* our persecution and he *sees* us as his children. And we cry out to God in the midst of that suffering because God *knows* our suffering. The word *knows* doesn’t refer to simply an informational knowing. This is an intimate knowing. The Latin root for the word compassion means “to suffer with” or “to suffer alongside.” This is one of the most frequent words God uses to describe himself to us, that he is compassionate. When we are hurt, God hurts with us. When we cry, God cries with us. When we suffer, God suffers with us. God *knows* our pain because God *experiences* our pain with us. We pray because God *hears* us. We pray because God *remembers* his promises to us. We pray because God *sees* us. And we pray because God *knows*.⁵ You would do well to incorporate these four words into the regular vocabulary of your prayers.

⁵ Paul David Tripp spoke on this passage and prayer at the Getty Sing Conference in Nashville in September 2022, and his message has had a profound effect on me.

Calling on the Name in Psalm 116

Psalm 116 opens with a statement of thanks. *I love YHWH, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy, because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.* The basis on which the psalmist prays is not *how* God answers his prayers, but on the fundamental reality that God *hears* his prayers. That God, this omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, omni-etc. being *hears* the prayers of his teeny-tiny people who are alive for brief moments of time in his eyes is enough to leave you dumbfounded if you sit and ponder that for more than a couple of minutes. He *hears* your prayers. And not just that he hears each of these prayers from each of his people; but that he *cares* and *responds* to our prayers. On this basis the psalmist calls on the name of the Lord in prayer; vs. 2 says for the simple fact that God *hears* his prayers does he commit to call on the name of the Lord in prayer all the days of his life.

The psalmist recounts a past prayer of his. The details don't matter, but when life seemed to be at its end and suffering abounded, the psalmist called on the name of YHWH as he previously committed to do. The psalmist said that he would call on the name of YHWH all his days, and when life took a sharp downward turn, he called on the name of YHWH for help. We know that the psalmist is recounting a past prayer experience in vss. 1-4 because of how he talks about the Lord's response in vss. 5-9. The psalmist prayed for deliverance from death, and sometime later the psalmist says *when I was brought low, he saved me.* The psalmist's prayer to God in response to God's answer was a declaration of praise rooted in the covenant-character of God. *Gracious and righteous is YHWH; our God is merciful... You have delivered my soul from death... I will walk before YHWH in the land of the living.*

Whereas the snares of death encompassed the psalmist—meaning all the components of our lives that cause decay, that take away our energy, that destroy our joy; along with of course death—these things surrounded the psalmist. He was surrounded by pain and sadness; he was as good as dead; and in fact, he did die, with the only thing left being the abandonment of his dead body to Sheol, the place of the dead to decay and suffer forever. But God's grace, mercy, and righteousness, the psalmist says, pulled him from death to life and it is this place of life—full, vibrant life—where the psalmist will peacefully be for all eternity. The Hebrew word translated “before” carries the fuller connotation of walking before the face of. Sometimes translators will include this fuller personification; the conflation of presence and the face. What we get here is not just that the psalmist will be among YHWH, but that YHWH will *see* his people who walk before

his face; he will see them as his people. The psalmist’s answered prayer led the psalmist to praise God for his covenant-character. God *remembered* his covenant. And as a result of God’s answer, the psalmist knows he is *seen*.

The psalmist speaks of a profound faith in vss. 10-11. Though YHWH has answered his prayer this time, the psalmist makes clear that the reason he prays is not simply to manipulate God to get the results he wants. Rather, the reason is because he has faith in YHWH. *Even in my great affliction, I believed and I spoke*. When life gets tough and we want to ask God why he is allowing us to suffer or be persecuted in the various ways we are, sometimes we feel guilty for asking those kinds of questions. “If I have faith, I can’t ask a question like that,” we may say to ourselves. Respectfully, these verses seriously call that mindset into question. The difference is that when we question God, we are to question *while still believing*. Questioning is not automatically a lack of faith. Questioning God and submitting to his will are not mutually exclusive realities. What do the friends of Daniel say to Nebuchadnezzar? *Our God is able to deliver us, he will deliver us, but even if he doesn’t he’s the only one worthy of our worship* (Dan. 3:17-18, paraphrased). *Even in my great affliction, I believe and I speak*. In the afflictions, in the sufferings, in the traumas we face, asking those deeply personal questions that make us feel guilty for asking are sometimes the only prayers we can lift to God in those moments that are honest. The psalmist tells us it’s okay to ask those questions while simultaneously clinging to our faith in who God is and what God has done for us. In 2 Cor. 4, Paul quotes from Psalm 116 to speak of his own confidence in the Lord despite facing his own afflictions, but I’ll leave that for your Emmaus groups.

Why does the psalmist maintain this confidence in God? Because God saved him from death. God didn’t save the psalmist from experiencing death; he saved the psalmist *through* death. *The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me*. The first phrase doesn’t describe something *like* death. The psalmist died. The second phrase doesn’t say he was abandoned to Sheol; it says that Sheol was grasping for him. We have a psalmist who is dead but not abandoned to Sheol, and the reason he rejoiced for not being abandoned to Sheol is because YHWH *delivered my soul from death*. It’s why the psalmist can speak over himself, *Return, O my soul to your rest... I will walk before YHWH*.

Precious to God is the Death of His People

Verse 15 says, *precious in the sight of YHWH is the death of his saints*. This seems like such a strange thing to say. How could it be God’s will for his people to die? Because, as vs. 16 continues, *I am your servant... you have loosed my bonds*. To be saved from death means to be delivered from death. This is the salvation the psalmist sings in vss. 12-13: *What shall I return to YHWH for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of YHWH*. Earlier in his life, the psalmist committed to calling on the name of YHWH all the days of his life (vs. 2), and in this psalm we read of the psalmist fulfilling that commitment in bad times (vs. 4) and again in good (vs. 13). What shall we render or return or give to the Lord in thanks for the benefits of receiving his salvation? The obvious answer is “Nothing.” How can we repay such a gracious gift as salvation? We can’t, and yet with the psalmist we “repay” God by praising him for who he is and by continuing to submit ourselves to his sovereign hand all the days of our life.

To us, deliverance from death means medicating to prolong life and trying to avoid death as if this life is all there is. To God, though, deliverance from death means removing the shadow and fear of death that lingers over our mortal flesh so that we can be with him forever. And the way God has done this is by putting death to death decisively in the work of his son Jesus Christ.

The death of God’s people is precious to God because he has loosened the bonds of death that have enslaved us since the beginning, and the only way for us to know that at an intimate level is to die and have the shackles of death loosened from us. If the death of death is something that happens outside of us; something in the abstract, then the shadow of “what if?” would remain over us. Only through our own resurrection can we ourselves experience and know that death has died. The death of God’s people is precious to God because he knows what death feels like. God doesn’t know what death feels like by simply observing people dying; God knows death himself; God has endured through death; God died.⁶ “Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should die for me?”⁷ The death of God’s people is precious to God because though he knows death, he also knows what it feels like for the bonds of death to be loosened. God doesn’t just know death; God knows resurrection.

⁶ This language is intentionally extreme, though I worry it may open theological cans of worms. If death = ceasing existence, then what I’ve said is wrong. But if death = existing differently, then what I’ve said is true. These things are true so long as we maintain that in dying God never ceased to be God. Since I previously quoted R.C. Sproul positively, here’s an article by Sproul saying that God didn’t die; however, you’ll notice in his argument that he’s taking death to be equivalent with ceasing to exist. [Did God Die on the Cross? \(ligonier.org\)](http://ligonier.org)

⁷ A lyric from Charles Wesley’s “And Can it Be?” [And Can It Be, That I Should Gain? | Hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)

Though Jesus has two natures, they are, as the Belgic Confession says, “inseparably united” to one another.⁸ For the fullness of God to be *inseparably united* to human flesh means we can join Luke who writes in Acts 20:28 that when Jesus bled on the cross, it was God who bled on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, God died on the cross. When Jesus was raised from the dead; God was raised from the dead. God knows death; God knows the loosening of the bonds of death; God knows resurrection. When God’s people face death; when God’s people are humbled by the weight and just penalty for our sin, vs. 6 says that YHWH preserves his humble people *through* death. The death of God’s people is precious in the sight of God because God knows better than we do that death is the doorway into true life; the doorway to live before the face of YHWH in the land of the living, in the presence of all God’s people in the New Jerusalem.

On what basis do we pray? The psalmist praises God because God *hears* his prayers. The psalmist thanks God for saving him by his faith because God *remembers* his covenant promises. The psalmist finds peace in God’s answer to his prayer, for the answer will enable him to come before God’s throne joyfully where God will *see* the psalmist as his own child. And the psalmist is assured of his resurrection from the dead because God *knows* how death leads to resurrection.

On what basis do we pray? We can call on the name of the Lord in prayer confidently because the sovereign God of the universe hears our every prayer; our every request; our every cry; our every question.⁹ Regardless of whether his answer is yes, no, or not yet, we pray because God hears us. We can pray in submission to his sovereignty, knowing there is not a trial or a suffering that is missed or that violates what is good from his vantage point.

When things happen that seem to jeopardize or conflict with what God has promised, we can call on the name of the Lord in prayer confidently because the sovereign God of the universe remembers what he has promised us. If your child made a profession of faith that you deemed to be genuine and now they seem to be wandering away, pray to God; call on God to remember his promise that not a single person he gave to Jesus would be lost; call on God to remember his promises and ask him to steer your child back.

When we suffer, we can call on the name of the Lord in prayer confidently because God cares about our suffering. God’s eye on your suffering does not give him pleasure; it brings him

⁸ Language comes from Article 19 of the Belgic Confession; see also my message, “The Humility of Christ.”

⁹ There are, of course, passages that speak to certain actions that preclude God from hearing our prayers, but these are not relevant to bring up at this time; cf. 1 Pet. 3:7, *et all*.

sorrow. God *sees* the pain we face and God *sees* us as his beloved children. And we can call on the name of the Lord in prayer confidently because not only does God see our suffering and care that we suffer; but he also knows suffering himself.

Think of Jesus just before the cross in the garden of Gethsemane, praying in agony to his Father to take away from him the task of bearing the fullness of his own wrath. Please take this away! But the answer was no. And in submission to God’s will, Jesus slowly carried that cross however many miles to the mountaintop to watch hammers of hate swing one by one; to watch spikes penetrate his flesh in one end and out the other; like a firework bursting across the sky and rippling downward did he watch his blood shoot forth with every piercing blow. In the Garden Jesus made a request to God—a request to which the answer was ‘No’—and on the Cross Jesus asked that most heart-wrenching and honest question: why have you forsaken me? But then Jesus yielded his spirit up to God. *Even in his great affliction, Jesus believed and Jesus spoke.*

This is why we pray, especially when we suffer or when we are at the edge of death as the psalmist who wrote Psalm 116 was. We call on the name of the Lord in prayer as a declaration that YHWH is the only God who is sovereign over the matters we bring him. We call on the name of the Lord in prayer because God hears us. We call on the name of the Lord in prayer because God remembers his covenant promises secured for those who put their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We call on the name of the Lord in prayer because God sees us where we are and sees us for who we are. And we call on the name of the Lord in prayer because God knows our suffering; God knows our death; God knows what we face and is willing and ready to suffer with us as the compassionate Father he is.

This week, I challenge you to add those four words, the words “hear,” “remember,” “see,” and “know” into your prayers so that in the restlessness of this life you may rest instead in the resurrection of Jesus and the promised resurrection of God’s people; that that you may join the psalmist in committing yourself to call on the name of the Lord as long as you live.

Let’s pray -