

Prayer

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray that, Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight.
- In Jesus' name, amen. Prayer is, to me, an amazing thing, but it's also a little bit mysterious.
- It seems that I just sort of wonder about it, because what are we actually doing when we pray?
- We're not telling God anything he doesn't know. Jesus, well, the scriptures tell us that he knows what we need even before we ask.
- So it isn't passing on knowledge. Now, some people see it as a way of almost manipulating God, getting him to do what we want, getting him to act.
- [1 : 0 8] And that's blasphemous, in fact. God is sovereign. His action doesn't need us to trigger it. And his purposes can't be thwarted.
- And prayer doesn't actually add anything to God, either. God is complete in himself. He doesn't need our prayer.
- And yet, somehow, wonderfully, incredibly, God wants us to pray. God commands us to pray.
- And he acts in response to our prayers. I find that mind-blowing. Now, our passage today doesn't answer the question or solve the mystery of prayer.
- But it does put forward some really good principles for prayer. Some helpful things of how to pray and what to pray.
- [2 : 1 7] So we'll look through the passage. And then, after that, come back and think about what the implications are for us and how we can apply that.
- So let's just remind ourselves of the context of today's story. You'll remember that Peter and John, outside the temple, had healed a man who was crippled.
- You'll remember that Mark made a lame joke about that. I won't do that. But they were preaching that this was done in the name of Jesus.
- They were declaring his death and resurrection and that salvation came by faith in him. Now, that message is still very relevant today.
- They're still very true today. And yet, those authorities back then could only see it as a threat to their position and their power.
- [3 : 3 1] And so, they arrested Peter and John. The problem was, the problem they had was that no crime had actually been committed.
- They didn't have a basis for arresting them. So, what they did, in effect, was to invent a crime, make it a crime to preach the name of Jesus.
- And they put that to the apostles. Peter said, well, who should we listen to? You or God?

You be the judges. Peter said, well, who should we listen to? And they blustered and threatened and warned them and made all sorts of ominous threats. But they had to release them and let them go.

And so, this is where our story starts. Verse 23. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

[4 : 41] Peter and John tell everybody in the church what the chief priests have said. And so, of course, they form a committee.

They prepare strategy. They revise their vision statement. They consult the lawyers. They advocate for legislative change. They protest to their local MP.

They involve the regulatory authorities. They get the human rights people involved. No, they don't, actually. They don't do any of that.

The reflex of the church is to pray. They bring all this stuff to God. They pray together as a body to him.

I find that an incredible reflex. He is their first port of call. God is their ultimate authority.

[5 : 44] And the content of their prayer makes it very clear that that is the case. So, what do they pray? They pray.

They pray. They pray. They pray. When they heard this, they raise their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said.

Sovereign Lord. The first word of their prayer is the word, the Greek word is despotes, which is the word we get our English term despot from.

Now, the Greek doesn't have the negative connotation that despot has for us as English speakers. But it is a ruler of absolute authority and ultimate power.

That is who they address God as. Their sovereign Lord. The one who is their ultimate authority.

[6 : 54] The Sanhedrin could utter their warnings, threats and proclamations and try to silence the followers of Jesus.

But their authority was subject to a higher authority still. Their edicts can't challenge the decrees of God. Any more than the rules of monopoly can challenge the law of Australia.

That's the levels of authority that they have. So their prayer recognizes God.

And when I say it recognizes God, what I really am saying is that it praises God. Coming into prayer, the people of God fill their minds and their lips with thoughts of divine sovereignty.

And they express that in three dimensions. If you look at the passage, the first way they express it is addressing him as the God of creation, recognizing God as the God of creation.

[8 : 10] Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in it. He's the God who created everything.

Implied in this is that he made those puny humans who dare to challenge his authority, who dare to defy him as well.

It's recognizing him as the God of creation. They also recognize him as the God of revelation. Verses 25 and 26.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

He spoke through the mouth of his servant. He spoke. Psalm 2 is quoted. And God has foretold the opposition to his Christ, his king.

[9 : 27] With nations raging, kings rebelling. You get the sense that all earthly authority is up against God and his anointed.

But as we heard from Psalm 2, it's not just, that's not the point of the psalm.

The punchline is in the next verses in Psalm 2, which talks about God laughing. Is that the best you can do?

God isn't fazed by human opposition. And in fact, Psalm 2 makes it clear that those who oppose God, even the highest authorities who oppose God, are doing harm to themselves rather than harm to God by opposing him and his anointed one.

So he's the God of creation. He's the God of revelation. And he's also the God of history. They come to that in verses 27 and 28.

[10 : 50] They recount the story. They think back to what happened to Jesus. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant, Jesus, whom you anointed.

So they're pointing back saying he's the anointed one of Psalm 2. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

The enemies of God gather together. They make an alliance. The most unlikely group of people, Herod and Pilate, who were opposing political entities of the time.

And the Gentiles and the Jews and, you know, all sorts of people got together and conspired to kill Jesus, the anointed one of God.

And yet verse 28 says that that was what God's power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

[12 : 08] God can use even evil, even the evil plotted by his enemies to bring about his good purposes. That is how powerful God is.

He even uses his opponents to bring about his purposes. Amazing. So, he's the God of creation.

He's the God of revelation. He's the God of history. And that's summed up by the three verbs that are used in these verses. Verse 24 says, you made.

Verse 25 says, you spoke. And verse 28 says, you decided. God is sovereign. God is sovereign.

God is in control. And they recognize God first up. And then they turn their appeal to their appeal to God.

[13 : 05] God is sovereign. God is sovereign. Now, I want you to imagine. You are going to the first prayer meeting that is to be held after a law has been passed.

That criminalizes the preaching of Jesus in any context, anywhere. What would you pray for? What would you pray for? I imagine that we might pray that the law would be repealed.

We could pray that God would deal with those who push through that law. That we would be given new ways to operate as a church.

That the gospel would spread through other means like dreams and that sort of thing if preaching isn't allowed. But I doubt that we would have a prayer meeting quite like this one recorded in Acts.

The people of God make three requests of God. God. So, verse 29a, they request that God would consider their threats.

[14 : 20] The threats of the authorities. Now, Lord, consider their threats. Not that the threats would fall under divine judgment.

Not even that they would be unfulfilled. But just that God would consider them. You see, this is faith in a God that used the same God who used the violence against his anointed one, Jesus, in fulfilling his sovereign will.

So, they say, consider those threats as well. And then carry out your will. Amazing.

Amazing sort of faith to be having. They also pray that God would enable his servants, that is, literally his slaves, to speak his word with great boldness.

That's just the thing that has been made illegal. They say, those guys made it illegal to preach Jesus.

[15 : 35] Please, may we preach Jesus more? Again, breathtaking prayer. Breathtaking prayer. And they also pray.

In verse 30. They pray that God would do miraculous signs and wonders.

Now, we would expect them to ask for miraculous acts of vengeance or destruction of the foes or something.

But no, these are ones of healing and mercy that are asked for. Ones which would commend the gospel to those who hear.

So, in summary, they're asking, consider the opponent's words.

[16 : 47] Enable our words. And do the things that validate your word. And that can be a pattern, maybe, for prayer for us as well.

And so, we read in verse 31 that God hears and answers. After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Earthquakes are quite often found in the Old Testament as signs of God's presence. We see that in various places.

From the giving of the Ten Commandments to in the Psalms and Isaiah's vision of the Lord. Shaking the ground. Shaking the place.

Is a sign that God is there. One writer commented, The place was shaken so that the disciples' faith might be unshaken.

[18 : 03] And their prayer was at least partially answered straight away. They spoke God's word with boldness.

It was just what they were asking for. And we read later in chapter 5 that the signs and wonders that the apostles did commended their testimony and their preaching of the word.

So, God not only hears, not only is there, but he actually answers prayers. So, coming to think about what that means for us.

My first suggestion is that we should develop a prayer reflex. If I was to throw a cricket ball at you, what would you do?

Now, those who don't play cricket would be wise and would rightly get out of the way. But those who have practiced and trained cricket catch the ball or try to catch the ball at least.

[19 : 25] That's just the reflex that a cricketer trains themselves in. When I'm in trouble, when I'm suffering, when I have a difficult situation, when I see a loved one who is in difficulty, or even in the face of persecution, very often my first reflex isn't to pray.

But like a cricketer, we can train ourselves to a reflex action. When I used to train at cricket, a lot of our training would be spent developing a reflex of catching the ball.

We can develop that reflex of prayer in ourselves, in each other. We can pray that God would develop it in us.

We can encourage each other to develop a reflex of prayer. We can suggest to each other, why don't we pray about this? Actually, can we pray right now?

Well, those sorts of questions, those sorts of suggestions, train each other, build each other up in a reflex of prayer, like the disciples had here.

[20 : 56] Their first port of call was to go to prayer. That's not to say that we neglect any of the other ways that God's given us to deal with situations or problems or whatever, but it does mean that we can first go to prayer.

Secondly, I think that this prayer, this story, challenges me to recognize God in my life, with my life, with all of my life.

And recognizing God is what true praise really is. It's filling our minds and our lips with thoughts of divine sovereignty, filling our lives with thoughts of divine sovereignty, just as the Jerusalem church did.

We can recognize him as the creator of all life, revealer through his word and the mover of history, especially the history of his action in our lives, his saving us through his son, Jesus, and his working in us to make us more like Jesus.

And if we have that perspective, if we recognize God in all those different dimensions, it changes the way we see everything else.

[22 : 37] It puts everything, all our problems, all the things that we come up against into perspective, elevating the things of God to their proper place.

And it also enables us to be more confident in God's goodness. We recognize Jesus as God's anointed one, his Messiah, the king of the kingdom, not only for us, but in us by his Holy Spirit.

So we can develop a reflex of prayer. We can recognize God. And we can also pray to live for God's glory.

We can pray that God would consider the reality that we face. It's not always roses, is it?

It's not always nice. There are bad things as well. We can pray and bring those before God. God, consider this situation.

[23 : 50] And recognize our weakness in the face of it, that reality. But if we've remembered that God is the one who rules reality, then we can be confident.

We can have faith. We can pray that God would enable us to declare his word in our lives. Not just what we speak, but that we would live it out loud in front of everybody else.

Living our faith out loud is a phrase that some people have used. And I like it. It talks about showing our faith on the outside.

It's not just something personal on the inside that rules our hearts. Yes, it is that. But it's something that we can just live naturally in front of other people.

Live that faith out loud. And that might mean something even as small as how we give thanks in a restaurant.

[25 : 03] I know I'm tempted to mumble, thank you God for this good food. And then get on with things and hope that nobody noticed. Or we can pray to him as naturally as we do in our own homes.

And let people see that we're praying to the one true God. Why should we be ashamed of that? Or if we are visiting or see somebody or in conversation come across somebody who's going through some difficulty or is sick or has a problem of some sort.

We can just offer to pray for them, no matter who they are. Very often they'll say no. Not me. Don't bother.

Well, I'll pray for you at home or in my own time or whatever. Oh, all right.

Do whatever. But you've lived your faith out loud. You've shown on the outside that this is what I want to do.

[26 : 18] This is what rules my life. It's challenging. It's confronting a little bit.

But it's boldness. We can pray for boldness. What bold declaration of God's word at work in our lives are we going to make?

Are we going to pray for this week? I'll challenge you. Pray that God would enable you to boldly live out your faith in some way, some new way this week.

We can pray that God would be at work to bring others to faith. We can pray. We don't have to pray that we are the one who does the miracles.

But God does act. And he will validate his word to people's hearts. Let's pray that he will do that, that we will see it, that we will be able to praise him more and more because of it.

[27 : 30] He's a God who's alive and active and at work in the world. Let's not forget that. Let's pray as though we believe it because he is.

He is that God. So, in other words, we will be praying that God will enable, consider that he will enable us and that he will act.

Just like the Jerusalem church did. And we can be confident that God hears and answers. May our faith be unshaken.

And may we glorify him as we see him at work. Let's pray. Lord God, our heavenly father, we thank you. You are the creator, God.

You are the God who reveals yourself by your word. You are the God who is at work in this world. And we pray that you would consider our lives, that you would see and that you would use our situations to your glory.

[28 : 42] Lord, I pray that you would give us boldness. And that you would act in our situations, in our loved ones, in our circles.

Lord, would you be at work? And would you be glorified in all things? For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.