

Luke 11:1-2

A Pattern for Prayer, The Old Testament Context

All religions are a combination of faith and practice. That is, there is what one believes, and what one does. Christianity is no exception. As Christians, there are things we believe - things we take on faith. The idea of the Trinity, the nature of the Incarnation, the work of the atonement are examples. As we practice Christianity, there are also things we must do. Obviously positive actions such as kindness and generosity to others come to mind. Also, the avoidance of evil. We are commanded to fellowship, “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (Hebrews 10:25). We are commanded to know and share the Scriptures, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). We are commanded to spread the gospel, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).

Another discipline of the faith is prayer. Thankfully, it is a particular discipline for which we have the instructions of Jesus on how to proceed. And we are reminded in this passage, and in others, that prayer is much more than a simple obligation of a Christian’s duty, it is a way of living.

Matthew 26:41, “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation”

Luke 18:1, “Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart”

Colossians 4:2, “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving”

1 Thessalonians 5:17, “pray without ceasing”

The only way that last command is sensible, is if we broaden our understanding of prayer from an eyes closed, head bowed, ending with ‘in Jesus name’ moment and recognize that any and all conversations with and thoughts toward God is prayer. And true prayer is always God-centered. It is based on truths about God from His Word. It is focused on His sovereignty. Its end is to bring Him glory.

Jesus did not have to teach His disciples how to pray; He had to teach them how to pray differently. Prayer was not a New Testament contribution to the faith. An awareness of, and appreciation for, the fact that God heard prayer was deeply embedded in the minds of the Old Testament men and women of God.

Proverbs 15:29, “The Lord is far from the wicked,

But He hears the prayer of the righteous”

Genesis 20:17, And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so they bore children.”

Numbers 14:13-19, “Moses said to the Lord . . .”

2 Samuel 7:18-29, “Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord, and he said . . .”

1 Kings 8:22-53, “The Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, and he said . . .”

1 Kings 17:21, “The he [Elijah] stretched out himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord”

2 Kings 19:15-19, “And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord . . .”

Ezra 9:5-15, “But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the Lord my God . . .”

And as we have already seen, Jesus Himself modeled prayer.

At His baptism, Luke 3:21, Now it came about when all the people were baptized that Jesus also was baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened”

On regular occasions, Luke 5:16, “And He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray”

Prior to choosing the disciples, Luke 6:12-13, “¹²It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God. ¹³And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles”

Before He fed the five thousand, Luke 9:16, “And He took the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them . . .”

Before teaching, Luke 9:18, “And it came about that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them . . .”

Before the Transfiguration, Luke 9:28-29, “²⁸Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming.”

Context

Luke is not specific, but simply records that a conversation happened “while Jesus was praying in a certain place” (v. 1). While Jesus often prayed alone, it seems on this occasion He prayed with His disciples. We can wonder what it was about His prayer that prompted the question, but “after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples’” (v. 1).

It is easy to be surprised at the question. After all, had not these disciples heard Jesus pray hundreds of times. Why this question? And why now? Perhaps something powerful in the prayer of Jesus caught their attention. Perhaps they had finally begin to remember Jesus’ teaching on the difference between the prayers of the righteous and the ritualistic redundant prayers of others, Matthew 6:5-8,

“⁵When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁷And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”

John the Baptist had taught his disciples how to pray apparently. The two groups of disciples obviously knew each other (Luke 7:18-24). In fact, it is likely that many of those following Jesus now had been among those who had first gone out to hear John.

The disciples did not just want a prayer to recite. That was the point Jesus had made previously. Though there is nothing wrong in reciting the prayer Jesus gave, He was not being prescriptive or giving a formula. The disciples already had a rich tradition of prayer recorded for them in the Scriptures. Jesus was elaborating on that.

Characteristics of Old Testament Prayer

There are several elements of prayer in the Old Testament that we can recognize. These were the prayers known by Jesus and His disciples, and they served as the point of reference for prayer at the time of Christ. The disciples had been raised with these truths. They knew the stories; they chanted these psalms. Sadly, over time the true faith of Israel had been taken captive by a religious elite that served itself rather than the one true God. Prayer had become ritual and routine. It had become something you did rather than a way of life. It was just another task to perform.

One of the primary motives we see is a deep and passionate desire to praise God.

Psalm 7:17, "I will give thanks to the Lord according to His righteousness
And will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High."

Psalm 34:1, "I will bless the Lord at all times;
His praise shall continually be in my mouth."

Prayers were also based on an attitude of thanksgiving.

Psalm 9:1, "I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart;
I will tell of Your wonders."

Isaiah 12:1, "I will give thanks to You, O Lord;
For although You were angry with me,
Your anger is turned away,
And You do comfort me."

Daniel 2:23, "To You, O God of my fathers, I will give thanks and praise"

Jonah 2:9, "But I will sacrifice to You
With the voice of thanksgiving"

In addition, they proclaimed a genuine desire to be obedient.

Psalm 119:5, "Oh that my ways may be established
To keep Your statutes"

Psalm 119:34, "Give me understanding that I may observe Your law,
And keep it with all my heart"

Psalm 119:88, "Revive me according to Your lovingkindness,
So that I may keep the testimony of Your mouth."

They recognized the need to confess sin.

Psalm 51:1-4, "¹Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.
²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.
³For I know my transgressions,

And my sin is ever before me.
⁴Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.”

Prayer was offered in humility.

2 Chronicles 7:14, My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven . . .”

Ezra 8:21, “then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.”

Psalm 10:17, “O Lord You have heard the desire of the humble;
You will strengthen their heart, You will incline Your ear.”

Finally, when supplications were made, they often focused on things larger than the individual’s personal needs.

Exodus 33:13, “Now therefore I pray, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways, that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is Your people.”

Deuteronomy 26:15, “Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel, and the ground which You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You did swear to our fathers.”

In addition to evidence about prayer itself, it is also clear that other aspects of prayer were learned from the Old Testament. For example, there was no specific physical attitude or posture for prayer. People prayed

The servant of Abraham prayed while he was standing by a well, Genesis 24:12-14

The people of Israel prayed while sitting before the Lord after losing a battle, Judges 21:2-3

Solomon prayed while kneeling when he dedicated the temple, 1 Kings 8:54

Moses prayed while bowing before the Lord when he received the tablets of the Law, Exodus 34:8-9

Ezekiel prayed for the people while lying face down, Ezekiel 9:8

David prayed with hands raised, Psalm 28:2

Prayer could also be done at any place.

The men of Judah prayed on a battlefield, 2 Chronicles 13:14

Elijah prayed in a cave, 1 Kings 19:9-10

Hezekiah prayed in bed, Isaiah 38:2

Jonah prayed in the stomach of a fish, Jonah 2:1-9

People prayed at all times.

David prayed in the morning, Psalm 5:3

David prayed at night, Psalm 4:4
Elijah prayed in the evening, 1 Kings 18:36
Nehemiah prayed all through the day, Nehemiah 1:6

People prayed with different emotions.

Sadness and heartbreak.

Daniel 9:3, “So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.”

1 Samuel 1:9-11, “⁹Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰She, greatly distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.”

Job 1:20, “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and fell to the ground and worshipped.”

Deuteronomy 9:18-19, “¹⁸I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke Him to anger. ¹⁹For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the Lord listened to me that time also.”

Psalm 62:8

But also great joy and gladness,

1 Samuel 2:1, “Then Hannah prayed and said,
‘My heart exults in the Lord;
My horn is exalted in the Lord,
My mouth speaks boldly against my enemies,
Because I rejoice in Your salvation.’”

Psalm 63:5, “My mouth offers praises with joyful lips”

Psalm 66:1, “Shout joyfully to God, all the earth”

Psalm 95:1-2, “¹O come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord;

Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.

²Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving;

Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.”

Take Aways

Let us assess our prayer life in light of the truth of Scripture, and not be lulled into complacency by ritual and routine.