

The Pattern and Practice of Prayer

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The Pattern of Praying

My first very pleasant duty is to thank you sincerely for your kindness and generosity in allowing me to break my promise to be with you at the end of last year. You did so to facilitate our going to Ukraine where, under God, we had a most profitable time. So thank you very much indeed.

The topic you have asked me to speak about tonight and next Sunday, God willing, is the topic of prayer, and I would like to begin by assuring you that I do not speak as though I am some expert in this realm. If it were allowed next week, I should be spending some of my time enquiring from you how your prayer life is going and where you see there are great, huge gaps in my exposition that ought to be filled.

But for tonight let's begin by reading in the Gospel by Luke chapter 11.

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."' And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and he will answer from within, "Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything"? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marvelled. (vv. 1-14)

May God guide us in our study and grant it shall bear fruit for his pleasure.

Our Lord's model prayer for his disciples

We have read together one of the most famous parts of the New Testament that deals with the topic of prayer, when, in response to his disciples' request, our Lord began to teach them to

pray. If we were to examine the context, we should find that it is in that part of Luke where our Lord had recently begun his journey from this earth to glory. 'The days drew near,' says Luke, 'for him to be taken up,'—that is, to be taken up into heaven—and 'he set his face to go to Jerusalem'—because via Jerusalem was the pathway by which he should travel to glory (Luke 9:51). Prayer, then, in life's journey. It will add a certain intensity to our prayer life when we see that life is a journey; we are not here forever, and as believers we are on our way to glory. We haven't got all the time there is. Those who sleep eight hours a night spend a third of their life in bed, and that seriously reduces the time we have to spare.

We're told that when our Lord was on this journey he came to Bethany, and two sisters named Martha and Mary received him into their house. Delightful sisters they were; both of them loved the Lord. Martha set herself about cooking dinner.

I don't know what you would do if the Lord came to your home, and you knew he was coming to dinner. I think I know what you would do! You would put on the best dinner you could possibly invent—all five courses, I suspect. Tesco or Fortnum & Mason would be in great trouble to supply all that you proposed to give to him. You'd want it to be the very best, wouldn't you?

So did Martha. But because she wanted such a wonderful dinner she was very busy in the kitchen, and when Mary left her to get on with the job so she could go and sit by Jesus' feet, Martha naturally complained to the Lord Jesus, 'Look, this isn't fair! Mary wants all the goodies. She wants to listen to your teaching and has left me to serve alone.' There was a great deal in Martha's protest. When our Lord answered, he said what I suspect would be a surprising thing for Martha. He said, 'Martha, you're busy about many things,'—and she was, with a very good heart and intention—'but actually one thing is necessary, and Mary has chosen the good part' (see Luke 10:38–42).

If you look at it from Martha's point of view, you will see she wanted to do the very best she could for the Lord. Of course she did; but if you look at it from Christ's point of view, what do you suppose he would have preferred? A five-course dinner with all the bits and pieces added in, at the cost of comparatively little time actually to talk to Martha, or a simple two-course affair with oodles of time to be able to talk to the two sisters? He was on a journey; he wouldn't have many more times to spend in their home and presently they would come across a very severe trial in the death of their brother. You can understand, from Christ's point of view, that he would have preferred a simple dinner with Martha and Mary both having time to talk to him.

My brothers and sisters, we shall have plenty of time to talk to the Lord when at last we get home to glory; but, to give him his preference, he would prefer that in this life we made more time to talk to him.

If you're going on holiday, what you can take with you depends on what kind of holiday you're going on. If you're going on the Orient Express, you can take all the clothes you can possibly imagine, so that you can change for dinner every night. If you're going in your mobile home, you'll have to limit yourself. Maybe you'll only be able to take one TV, who knows? If you're going hiking, backpacking, and all that, you'll have to sit down and consider whether you can take two tin openers with you, or limit the weight and only take one.

If we are on a journey to eternity, to the glory that lies before us, we do have to sit down and consider seriously what we regard as life's number one necessities. 'One thing is necessary,' says Christ to Martha—one thing—and Mary has chosen the good portion.' It is in our praying that we start to get life's necessities ordered and decide the things that are really necessary.

When the disciples asked our Lord Jesus to teach them to pray, there were two parts to the model prayer he gave them.

The first part is concerned with God's interests

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. (Luke 11:2)

The second part is taken up with ours

Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation. (vv. 3–4)

God's interests first and our interests second. Even as I talk to you, that rebukes me. Left to myself I find I'm so much absorbed in my own interests. 'Lord, help me in this; Lord, help me there; and Lord, supply this.' Whereas, if I knew any spiritual etiquette at all, I would want to put God's interests first.

1. God's interests

Father, hallowed be your name

His name be holy; may it be regarded as holy. How shall we illustrate it to ourselves? You know that I go into many homes, and very often the first night I'm there my hostess will say, 'Do make yourself at home. If you should happen to wake early, feel free to come down and make yourself a cup of tea. All the cups are available; you can use any one of them.'

I normally don't do it, but I have learnt that when my hostess says, 'Use any cup you like,' she doesn't really mean what she says. She has a whole range of cups in the kitchen cupboard, and she has another range in a china cabinet in the best room in the house. They're very rarely taken out, and I know better than to take her at her word and use some of those. They're her great treasure. What if I broke one? They're regarded as especially valuable and she keeps them in the china cabinet for everybody to see.

What is our biggest value in life that we would vastly regret if it was spoiled or broken? Here our Lord teaches us, 'Our Father, hallowed be your name.'

Moses striking the rock

There was an occasion when Moses fell foul of that ambition. He was with the people in the wilderness and they had run out of water, so he had taken the whole matter to God. God had told him to go with Aaron, take Aaron's rod of priesthood, his rod of intercession, and stand in front of the people before a rock. He was to speak to the rock and water would come out. But Moses was tired and at the end of his tether. Instead of just speaking to the rock, he lost

his temper and said, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly’ (Num 20:10). God took it very seriously. He said, ‘You and Aaron shall never be allowed now to lead the people into the land.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them’ (v. 12). ‘That is, by your behaviour you did not demonstrate my holiness before those people. You lost your temper. You didn’t believe my word; you didn’t do what I commanded. You rebelled against me at the very same time as you were accusing other people of rebelling against me. “Hear now, you rebels,” you said, didn’t you?’

It was a sorry thing when that gracious man, Moses, lost his temper and misrepresented God before the people. God’s nature is holy, he cannot endure sin, but his holy nature also delights in restoring his people and crowning them with glory. In their thirst they were asking God to look with compassion upon them and on their cattle and give them water. God was longing to show his compassionate heart to them, but Moses lost his temper and called them rebels. In misrepresenting God, he didn’t demonstrate God’s holiness.

Number one value to aim at in our prayers: ‘Father, hallowed—sanctified—be your name.’ That must include, ‘By my behaviour, may your name be sanctified and demonstrated to the world at large.’

Your kingdom come

‘Your kingdom,’ in the sense of God’s kingly rule. The prayer gives us the promise: ‘Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ We do not pray in vain. The Lord Jesus is coming; he shall set up his kingdom and rule from shore to shore. ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ’ (Rev 11:15).

Implications in praying like this

Our Lord Jesus said, ‘Now when you go to your daily work, don’t be like the Gentiles, will you? When the Gentiles go to their daily work, it is for food and clothes they seek. Don’t be like them’ (see Matt 6:31–32).

You say, ‘Wait a minute, Mr Preacher, come down off your pedestal for a moment. We do have to go to work, even if you don’t in your retirement. And that’s what we go to work for, to get food and clothes.’

Do you really? Is that your prime motivation? If you didn’t have to get food and clothes, you wouldn’t go to work? Well, if that’s so, you’re a lot of old Gentiles! Their first motivation is to get food and clothes. Our Father knows that we need those things, and going to work is one of the ways he has established by which we honestly get our food and clothes. In fact, if we can work but we’re not prepared to, and we don’t provide for our own, then we are worse than unbelievers and have denied the faith (see 1 Tim 5:8). But food and clothes should not be our first motivation; not the first dividend we seek from going to work. That should be to seek the kingdom of God—his kingly rule.

If I pray that God's will should one day be done on earth as it is in heaven and his kingdom come, mere honesty would say, 'Start with me, Lord, that my first motivation in going to work should be that God would rule in my life.' If I seek his kingly rule, not only will I get the food and clothes but his righteousness as well.

That's a very practical thing. Let me speak to my younger brothers and sisters. Do you go to school just to get a career? You do have to think of your career and take school seriously. But if you're a believer, according to our Lord's prayer, your first motivation in going to school is that you seek God's rule in your life.

'Lord, I'm doing this homework for you, as if you set me the job. Help me to do it well so that later on in life I might be equipped to do whatever you have designed for me. I want to read my geography for you, Lord. Help me to be accurate with the facts, to think carefully, and not to skimp my homework. I want to do all my schoolwork for you.'

Yes, seek first the kingdom of God, then all the rest of life's activities and our own needs.

2. Our own interests

Give us each day our daily bread

I once knew a good gentleman, a very sincere believer. He held certain prophetic views that made him think that the Sermon on the Mount in general, and this prayer in particular, was not for Christians of our day and generation. 'It was for the Jews,' he said, 'for Israel and not for us.' So he hardly agreed with praying, 'Give us this day our daily bread.' He said, 'This will be for people who are persecuted under the antichrist during the great tribulation. They'll need to pray for their daily bread, but we don't. Why should we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," when we've got a lot of bread in the cupboard?'

I hope you don't agree with that reasoning, because if our cupboards are so stocked with food that we don't need to acknowledge that it is God who gives it, we are missing one of the biggest delights that go with eating the food.

It's like the little girl who was in a hotel with her mum for the first time. When the waiter served the food she watched as her mother gave thanks. 'Mummy, why did you give thanks for it? We're paying for it today, aren't we?'

We should be conscious each day as we eat our daily bread that it is God who gives it. He is our host, we are his guests, and we are dependent on his generosity.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us

In the family of God that is his rule. '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). But in the family of God, if we come confessing our sins and expect the Lord to forgive us, he lays down the terms. We in turn must be prepared to forgive those who have sinned against us and have come repenting, asking for our forgiveness.

And lead us not into temptation

The word translated 'temptation' can mean what we normally mean in English by temptation, but it can also mean 'testing'. God doesn't test anybody with evil, but God will allow us to be tested. We may be tempted of the devil, if it is God's will that we should undergo that test, but God himself tests us to see whether our faith is genuine and our promises are serious. So, knowing our own weakness, we rightly pray, 'Lord, if it could please you, don't test us too severely.'

In the Upper Room the apostles told the Lord Jesus that they would be ready to go to prison and to death for him. But when he came to the garden of Gethsemane they couldn't keep their eyes open and pray with him; they fell asleep. He came to rouse them, and said, 'Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' They sort of came awake, and then dozed off again (see Matt 26:36-45).

And then in the high priest's court it happened, didn't it? Peter, who had protested the most loudly that he would never deny the Lord, fell into testing and three times denied him. We do need to pray that if God takes us into testing he will deliver us from evil.

'The Lord's Prayer': the first requests represent God's interests; the second requests, my interests.

Praying for the Holy Spirit's work in us

But then our Lord went on to talk about praying for something else. 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (v. 13).

Here our Lord exhorts us to ask for the Holy Spirit. I shall have to stop here and engage with the theologians, and my knees are all a-tremble because serious theologians and men and women who are learned in Scripture would tell me, 'You are desperately wrong here. Our Lord was speaking to the Jews before Pentecost, and they had to pray that God would one day send down the Holy Spirit. Since he did that at Pentecost, we don't have to pray for the Holy Spirit any more. The very moment we believe the Saviour, God gives us the Holy Spirit.'

Do you know, I agree with you one hundred percent! The very moment we trust the Saviour God gives us his Holy Spirit. In that sense, we don't have to pray for him.

When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:13-14)

That's straight enough; so we don't need to pray to receive the Holy Spirit. But then notice what Paul says at the end of that same chapter. He prays for the believers, and this is what he prays:

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious

inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead . . . (vv. 17–20)

Yes, we have received the Holy Spirit, and Paul has just told the Ephesian believers that they received the Holy Spirit immediately they believed; but undeniably now he prays for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts: that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.

You see, my brothers and sisters, it's one thing to read a fact in the Bible, and very good to get it into our minds; but there comes a point when our eyes are opened by the grace of the Holy Spirit to 'see' it. Have you ever noticed how believers talk? They say, 'I've known that verse since I was a child, but I'd never realized it meant that!' Yes, you'd never 'seen' it; the glory and the wonder of it hadn't gripped your heart. Before it was just so many words. We do need that spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, so that we might know the hope to which he has called us. Oh that God would enlighten our eyes to the wonder of it by his Spirit.

When the Irish weather permits me, I go outside some nights and do what God tells me to do in Isaiah 40:26. 'Go on,' he says, 'have a look at it.' The thousands, the millions, the billions, not only of stars but of galaxies. The sheer wonder of it, and the Christ who dwells in my heart made it all. And not only has God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion (Eph 1:20–21), but in principle he has raised us up with him and seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (2:6).

If you're going to be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, I suppose you'd need to work at your studies and prepare yourself. To be the manager of Kellogg's, you would have to do your studies well. You're going to reign with Christ in all the wonderful glories, not only of this universe but all universes to be. If I only had my eyes open to see what is the immeasurable greatness of his power flowing towards me.

They say that when the universe started there must have been a colossal big bang, because the scientists can measure some of the power that is still emanating from it, however multimillion years ago it was. The power that raised the Lord Jesus from the dead is still flowing. 'It's flowing towards you,' says Paul (Eph 1:19). God, give us the eyes to see it. Oh that I would take his calling more seriously, for I have but a little time to stay in this temporary world. I'm on a journey, like the Lord was, and the hope of his calling goes beyond this little life into the uncountable ages of eternity. I do need spiritual wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, and I shall need the power of God's Holy Spirit.

that according to the riches of his glory [God] may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (3:16–19)

So Paul prays for the ongoing work of the Spirit in the hearts of God's people.

Then our Lord uses two analogies, so let's just briefly consider them before we finish.

1. Calling on a friend for help

Someone arrives unexpectedly on your doorstep late at night. As you greet him you say, 'It's lovely to see you,' but you're thinking, 'I've got nothing in the cupboard.' That wouldn't matter so much if you're an Irishman; you'd send him to bed with a cup of tea and the promise of porridge in the morning. But if you're an Oriental living in the Middle East it wouldn't matter what time of day the visitor came, you must offer him food. It would be unthinkable that anybody should arrive at your doorstep and you don't invite him in and feed him. It's like that in Turkey to this present day. If they befriend you and take you into their home, they must offer you food. Please don't say, 'No, I can't stomach that.' That would insult them; you must take it.

Well anyway, our Lord says, 'You have an unexpected visitor', and somehow you must sit him down to food. You haven't anything, so hurriedly you run along the street to a friend's house and knock on the door. 'Please get up and lend me three loaves. I've had an unexpected visitor.' A muffled voice underneath a pillow says, 'I'm in bed with my kids. I can't get up and give you bread.' But outside, you keep knocking.

'I tell you,' says our Lord, 'the chap in bed will eventually get up and give you what you require. Not because you're his friend, but to get rid of the nuisance of somebody knocking on his door at midnight and telling him to get up and give them food.'

He'll give it to you because of your *shamelessness*, to translate it literally. You won't take 'no' for an answer.

A long time ago GPs would come out and visit you in your house. Even if you rang them up in the middle of the night and said you had an emergency, a GP would perhaps get up and come to you. I'm talking about in my youth, decades ago.

You can imagine a mum in the middle of the night and her six-year-old has a tummy ache. He is in a bad way really, and says he is full of pains. Now the thing is this: is it appendicitis, or isn't it? Mum is anxious, because if she calls the doctor out and he finds it's only because the boy's eaten too many plums, that would be an embarrassment. So she'd be 'ashamed' to have the doctor come out for only a little thing.

But suppose it's her husband and he's got severe pains in the chest, and it's a heart attack. Then she'd get on the phone immediately.

'Come, doctor.'

'I'll come tomorrow.'

'No, you must come right now!'

'But, I can't.'

She'll not take 'no' for an answer.

You say, 'The woman is perfectly shameless.'

I know, but it's her need that makes her shameless and she won't get off the phone until the doctor comes out.

We need the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts for enlightenment, for strengthening. How much do you need it, my brother? Is it absolutely necessary? You see, I fear that if you can get through life without it, you will. On our side, it depends how necessary you think it really is. If you say, 'By God's grace I'm going to have it. He holds it out to me in his word, and I mean to go in for it,' then you'll constantly pray for it, won't you? It depends how necessary you think it is.

I repeat, if we think we can get through life without his work in our lives, we probably will; but if we can see that we need it and we must have it, we shall go on praying. Though I mustn't give the impression that God is not prepared to give unless we take every opportunity to twist his arm. You don't have to twist God's arm, for there's another side to this story and the other analogy he uses is this.

2. Knowing how to give good gifts

'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (v. 13).

Would a father give his son a serpent instead of a fish, or a scorpion if he asks for an egg? Of course not. We are all sinners, ruined by the fall, and in that sense 'evil', but we still know how to give good gifts to our children. You don't have to twist God's arm. It's his initiative that he gives us the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

He guarantees that those who ask shall receive, those who seek shall find, and to those who knock on the door it shall be opened. He wants to give it, but it's difficult to give it to those who don't want it and don't see any need for it. On his side he's all-willing.

May God so impress our hearts with the indispensable necessity of the gracious working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, so that we shall not cease asking and seeking and knocking on the door of heaven.

'Lord, teach us to pray,' said the disciples.

The freedom when silence is broken

The very next incident starts off like this. 'Now he was casting out a demon that was mute.' Then, with great practicality, Luke marks the astonishment of what happened: 'When the demon had gone out, *the mute man spoke*' (v. 14). That shook the crowd. The man hadn't spoken for years, and now he spoke. Muteness is a cruel thing. It kind of imprisons a personality, so the person can't express himself or herself. Our Lord released this man, and the mute man spoke.

One of the cruel things that Satan does is to make people mute so that they don't speak to God. I shall have to be very careful what I say, or I shall never be allowed to come back to Scrabo. In some churches, if a certain brother were ever to get up and give a hymn out or pray, it would be like an earthquake. He's never been known to do it before. It's not because he couldn't. He could, but he just doesn't. He has got into the habit of not doing it. I withdraw all such criticisms of course. It was very unfortunate that I said such a thing, but we have to be honest sometimes and confess our feelings. Whether it's in public or in private, let us constantly come to the Lord and not ask him simply, 'Teach us how to pray,' but ask him,

'Lord, please teach *me* to pray,' and he guarantees that the Father will hear our prayers and richly reward us.

So shall we commit our meditation to the Lord in prayer.

Blessed Lord Jesus, we have thought together about thy word on this practical, but important matter of prayer. Lord, we thank thee for the willingness of the Father to give. His very character is involved in his promise, and he shall hear our prayers and grant us what we ask. Teach us, Lord, to pray wisely and to pray for those supreme gifts that thou dost hold out before us. Help us in life to get our ideas of necessities sorted out, so that, whatever blessings, material and physical, you give us, we may be grateful in our hearts for them, but remain unsatisfied until thou shalt give us the supreme spiritual benefits of which thy word speaks. So bless us now as we go our way, and grant that our study might be used of thee for thy glory and for our profit in the days yet to come, for thine own name's sake. Amen.

The Practice of Praying

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you and us all. In your great kindness, you allowed me to choose what aspects of prayer I should deal with on these two occasions. By the time this session is over, if I have not dealt with that aspect of prayer that you would dearly have loved me to deal with, then I can only offer you my apologies in advance and advise you to get a better speaker on the next occasion that you consider the topic.

Two passages will suffice to introduce our evening meditation. The first is Psalm 2.

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury saying, 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.' I will tell of the decree . . . (vv. 1–7)

You will notice, as we read, how dramatic this psalm is. We have listened to the opening words of the psalmist, then we have heard God Almighty respond. Now we are to hear the Messiah himself speaking to us. He says, therefore, in verse 7:

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.' (vv. 7–9)

At the end comes the advice inspired by the Holy Spirit through the psalmist.

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (vv. 10–12)

And for our second passage, we read that part of the New Testament where this psalm is quoted. It is the Acts of the Apostles chapter 4, and we begin at verse 18. We're breaking in upon the remarks of the chairman of the Sanhedrin in ancient Jerusalem. They have recently arrested the apostles, and now they are charging them that they should no longer speak to the people in the name of Jesus. We shall hear their charge and what the apostles did when they heard it.

So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.' And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed" —for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:18–31)

God grant us that same boldness to witness for the Lord Jesus through our reading of the prayer of the disciples in those early days.

So we come once more to the topic of prayer, and if you were here last week you may remember that we listened first of all to the pattern of praying that our blessed Lord Jesus gave us, in which he exhorted us to get our values in right proportion—the things that we feel we really need, the valuable things in life—because we show in our prayers what we think are most important. So our Lord urged and exhorted us that when we pray, we are to put God's interests first and then our interests second.

We went on to study our Lord's teaching, how we ought to persist in praying for the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. All believers have received the Holy Spirit, of course. The moment we trust the Saviour we receive the Holy Spirit, who seals us and is the down payment, the guarantee, of the glorious inheritance that awaits every believer at home with the Lord. But in the meanwhile it is God's desire that his Holy Spirit should go on working in our hearts, and God invites our cooperation. We're to pray for a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God; that the Holy Spirit will strengthen us, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith.

As our Lord exhorted us to pray for this ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, he assured us that our prayers will most certainly be answered, because our prayers can be based on the very character of God. All of us are sinful because of the fall, yet we know how to give good gifts to our children, do we not? The majority do anyway. And if we, being sinful, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more shall our heavenly Father give the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as we persist in prayer? He guarantees that those who

ask shall be given, those who seek shall find, and to those who knock it shall be opened to them. So we spent most of our time last week learning to pray for ourselves, and that's not a selfish thing to do. We're commanded to pray for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

The challenge of preaching in the name of Jesus

Tonight, I want to turn to another thing: our prayer that we might be capable and potent witnesses to the Lord Jesus in our normally hostile world. We shall think of our responsibility as believers in a world that does not grow more kindly to the name of Christ; rather the reverse. It grows more hostile in this part of the world to the gospel and the name of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. That is not necessarily true in all countries. In some that have been long closed to the gospel, such as China and certain parts of India, there are now multitudes of believers; whereas Europe is largely growing more hostile. How shall we find the courage to boldly witness for the Lord in our day and generation?

We found in that passage from Acts that the early Christians had encountered the antagonism of the authorities against the preaching of the name of Jesus. Both the political power—the Romans, and more particularly the religious power in Jerusalem—the Jewish Sanhedrin, were angered by their preaching. The apostles had just been used of God to do a notable miracle on a man who had been lame from birth and never able to walk (Acts 3). He had been placed on the temple steps by his loved ones, who thought that if the general public were going to be generous, it might well be when they were going into the temple to worship, or when they were coming out. So they put him on the temple steps where he'd be more likely to get some monetary aid.

The apostles had no money to spare, but in the name of Jesus of Nazareth they gave him perfect healing. He rose up and entered into the temple, praising God (3:6–8). Of course the people thought this was magnificent, and they came around in their crowds. Presently the religious authorities arrested the apostles and charged them.

Please notice what it was that they charged them not to do. They didn't say, 'Don't do any more of these miracles, please.' They couldn't say that. All the crowds were rejoicing that a man who had been lame was now made completely whole. They didn't forbid the early church to do social work, to improve the lot of the poor, or help in the healing process. The world still doesn't object to that. They say, 'You Christians ought to help the poor.'

What the Sanhedrin forbade the apostles to do was to preach in the name of Jesus (4:18). Why was that? Because these same authorities had had Jesus crucified, and now here were the apostles in Jerusalem itself, preaching that God had raised Jesus from the dead. For the Sadducees, that was utterly intolerable. It challenged their worldview. The Sanhedrin was largely composed of Sadducees. They believed in God, they believed in religion, but they held there was no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. When a man dies, that's that; everything is finished. To have these apostles under their very noses, in the city of Jerusalem where they had crucified Jesus, telling the people that God had raised him from the dead, and death was not the end of everything, that went completely against their worldview.

When they arrested the apostles a second time, they said, ‘You intend to bring the guilt of Jesus’ death on us’ (see 5:28). You can see their logic. They had engineered his crucifixion, but now if Jesus was risen from the dead and God had thus vindicated him to the world at large and indicated that he was the Son of God, the implication for the Sadducees who had condemned him was serious indeed.

The world we live in is not altogether different. It will exhort Christians to give our money to the poor and the homeless, to engage in helping those who are psychologically damaged. Rightly, they tell us that we are to do good to all men. What they don’t like to hear is preaching in the name of Jesus: that Jesus has been raised from the dead, he is the Son of God and ‘there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12). The implications are grave when we preach that Jesus is risen from the dead. Death doesn’t end everything; when we die that’s not the end and a human being goes on existing for eternity. People who don’t want to believe in God, and prefer to think that death is the end of everything, begin to feel very guilty if you start preaching that Jesus is risen from the dead and there’s going to be a day of judgment.

So the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles that they were not to go on speaking in the name of Jesus, and we are to study this evening their response to that prohibition.

Using Scripture to put prayer into practice

They went to their friends and they began to pray. It’s interesting to see what they prayed for. They prayed for two things. 1. That they should be given boldness to speak in the name of Jesus, whatever the world said. 2. That God himself would intervene and vindicate the name of his Son. But you will notice that, before they got round to making their request, they had a *preamble* to their prayer. In the text the preamble is five verses long and the *request* is only two verses long.

I don’t know whether you have listened to a lot of Christians praying or not. I have. In my long lifetime I’ve heard many thousands of Christians praying, and may God bless every one of them. It’s not for me to criticize anybody’s praying—who am I to dare to criticize people praying to their God? Yet, I have noticed that when some dear men pray in public they seem to be engaging in a theological explanation of, say, the doctrine of justification and telling God all about it. I say to myself, ‘That’s very good, but I think God already knows that.’ Why would you preface what you’ve got to say by an exposition of the book of Exodus, or something else like that? Why not come straight to the point?

If I criticize in this way, I’ve got to explain what these apostles were doing. Before they asked their requests—and there were only two—they first had a preamble to their prayer. I’d like you to notice what they said.

The preamble

1. The wonders of God and creation

‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them’ (v. 24). In other words, before they prayed against the hostile prohibitions of the government, they allowed the Holy Spirit to fill their minds and their imaginations and their hearts with

an overpowering sense of the reality of God, the supreme authority, the creator of heaven and earth.

I was brought up with great emphasis on our blessed Saviour as our redeemer, and what a marvellous heritage that was for anybody. But not so much on the study of God. In my old age I've come to love Isaiah for what he has to say about the wonders of God, and I find I have to adjust my mind and imagination to begin to take it in.

Just the other day, somebody brought me a book of the most recent photographs of the universe. To go through its pages, and to think that the millions and billions and trillions of light-years, the uncountable number of the vast galaxies and the millions and billions of stars and galaxies, are the works of his fingers. Oh that we spent a bit more time in prayer, allowing the Holy Spirit to get hold of our tiny minds and hearts and imaginations and fill them with the consciousness of the tremendous wonder of God.

Are you worried about what the government will say, or what the kings of the earth will say? Read Isaiah 40 and you will find Isaiah talking like this. He's beginning to look at things as God looks at them.

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. (vv. 22–25)

If we're old enough, we can remember those great monsters that ruled parts of the world in the 1900s: Stalin, Ceausescu, Enver Hoxha and Pol Pot. Where are they now? They're gone. The sudden collapse of Marxism was a phenomenon. After all the years it seemingly held sway, ambitious to conquer the whole world, it's gone. When we come to God, we come to the eternal. He is not impressed by the so-called might of the nations.

The Lord Jesus had commanded his apostles to get up in the streets and preach. In the face of the prohibition it is understandable that, as they began their prayer, they let the Holy Spirit fill their hearts afresh with the wonder, the majesty, and the supreme authority of God.

2. The worth of memorizing Scripture

Then they let the Holy Spirit fill their minds with holy Scripture. Ask any believer and they will tell you that in times of crisis, when things were tough, a verse came into their mind. It's good to have the mind stored with Scripture because the Holy Spirit can take what has gone into our memory, maybe we've forgotten it, but in the moment when we need it he brings it to our minds.

Our brains are a little bit like computers, and any computer expert will tell you that you can't get anything out until you put something in. I'm an absolute ignoramus on these things. I'm not quite sure what a BlackBerry is, or why there are 3 MPs that we should all buy! But I believe I'm right; you can't get any results out of a computer unless you put the raw material in. I say it reverently, if we want the Holy Spirit to use his word in a moment of our need, we would be wise to put it into the 'computer' of our brains.

The apostles are considering the situation where a few weeks earlier the high priest and the chief priests, along with Pilate and Herod—Gentiles and Jews—had put their Lord to the cross. They said to themselves, ‘Do you know what? The Old Testament prophesied that that’s what they would do.’ And in the presence of God they started to rehearse the words of Psalm 2.

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed. (vv. 1–2)

‘That’s exactly what they’ve done here in Jerusalem,’ say the apostles, and they see the point of Old Testament Scripture, its inspiration and its prophetic power to establish their faith. The crucifixion of Christ was no accident. It was malevolence on man’s part, but deliberate strategy on God’s part. As they pray, they are letting the Holy Spirit comfort their hearts and build up their determination based on holy Scripture. It’s a marvellously good thing to know, so that the Holy Spirit can remind us of it. In Psalm 2 they had read of the marvellous triumph, as God looked upon man’s puny efforts to destroy his Son and raised him from the dead.

Then the Psalm invites the Messiah himself to start speaking, and from the very throne of God, the Messiah says through the voice of the psalmist, ‘I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you”’ (v. 7). In spite of the rage of the heathen, God himself had put his Son upon his holy hill of Zion and enthroned him in heaven.

Oh the wonder of the triumph; and when we must go into the battle, let us take the time in our prayers to allow the Holy Spirit to remind us that the biggest battle has already been won. The world gave Christ a cross, but God has raised him from the dead and seated him at his own right hand in glory. Away with thoughts of defeatism; the one we serve is already triumphant in the glory.

So now they begin to pray, based on their refreshed concept of the authority of the sovereign Creator, the inspiration and authority of God’s word, and fulfilled prophecy based on the actual triumph in history; for it is a fact of history that on the third day our Lord rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven on the fortieth day.

Judgment is part of the gospel

Based on Psalm 2, the other thing they began to think about was the fact of coming judgment, which to many people’s minds is not very pleasant. ‘Why does God threaten us with judgment?’ they say. I don’t know if it’s a question of threatening you. As part of his gospel message to the Stoics and Epicureans on Mars Hill, Paul said that there was going to be a judgment.

How does that strike you when you hear it?

You say, ‘It’s very gloomy.’

No, of course it isn’t. It’s glorious gospel. What would you say about a God who let the world’s cruelty, sadism, filthiness, and all the rest of it go on forever?

I find my friends sometimes tell me, ‘You know, David, there can’t be a God.’

Why not?

'You say there's a God, who is all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowledgeable. Then why does he let evil go on?'

That's the question my friends have.

The answer Scripture gives is: 'The Lord is . . . patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance' (2 Pet 3:9). Some people have a very simplistic idea of how to solve the problem of evil and, to put it very simply, it's like this. 'You put all the good people into one group and all the bad people into another group. You take a big sword, cut the heads off all the bad people and leave the good people. Simple, isn't it?'

If God did that, which group would you be in? The Bible's answer to that is, ultimately there is no difference. We've all sinned, some more than others, and if God executed his judgment and we got what we deserved we must all perish. But God is longsuffering; when his Son died at Calvary, God did not convulse our world with endless earthquakes or blot it out of existence. He has allowed the gospel to go out in the name of that same crucified Son of God, freely offering peace and salvation to those who are prepared to repent and accept the Saviour. The good news is that evil isn't going on forever. God is going to deal with it at the second coming of Christ.

The requests

Fortified by what Psalm 2 said about it, the early Christians raised their voices in prayer. Faced with this command that they were not to speak any more of Jesus, first they asked for boldness to speak as they ought to speak.

1. Boldness to speak

If you read Paul's request in his letter to the Ephesians, he says, 'For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (6:12). Then he says, '[Pray] for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel' (v. 19).

I need to ask for two things, for I am the world's worst coward. 1. How to speak sensibly to a godless world in terms that make sense to them. 2. Boldness to do it.

You mustn't suppose that Great Britain is always going to be well disposed to the gospel. You notice what's already happening, don't you? Two universities in the United Kingdom have banished the Christian Union because it wouldn't let ungodly people be on their committee. And now we have to be very careful what we say about homosexuality. These are but the beginnings; the thin end of a wedge. Presently you will not be allowed to say publicly that Jesus is the only Saviour: 'there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12); '[He is] the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6).

When one church in Britain had an evangelistic campaign and they put a banner outside their church proclaiming 'Jesus is the way', the local authorities told them that they would not be allowed to put it out again, as it would offend other religions. We need wisdom, don't we? But we do need boldness.

2. Vindication of the name of the Lord Jesus

Secondly we can pray, as they did, that God would intervene and vindicate the name of his dear Son. What a marvellous thing it is, when we come as servants of God into his presence and survey what we are pleased to call 'our work' for him. Aware of all its faults and failures—clumsiness, 'I wish I'd said something else,' the unevenness of our behaviour, and all those types of things—to realize that our requests before God shall be granted, not on the ground of our merit. I can argue before God, 'Oh God, look upon the face of your anointed. Consider your dear Son and his infinite merit. There is no blessing, Father, that you could pour out on mankind that would be too big and go beyond the merits of your dear Son. Look not on us fragile vessels, but on his face, and when we attempt to preach his word by the power of your Spirit use us to vindicate his name.'

If we can pray like that, does it mean we shall always be victorious? Will the authorities never persecute any believer because they can pray this kind of prayer? No, it doesn't mean that.

These Gentile authorities, under orders from Herod, imprisoned and executed James the brother of John with a sword. When Herod saw how it pleased the Jews, he had Peter put in prison too. The church prayed for Peter and he was released (Acts 12). We must face the same possibilities, for the battle is real.

I confess to you how small it has made me feel to sit down with believers who have been persecuted for Christ. I remember in the 1970s when Franco was still in operation, I used to go to a summer Bible camp in Spain. The young people went around the villages, giving out tracts and selling Bibles. It was illegal really, but Franco was getting old and the government turned a blind eye. On one occasion, they even had tent meetings in the city of Zamora.

There was a local assembly at the place where the camp was held, and I remember vividly one Sunday morning a senior Christian came to the breaking of bread; Señor Aldalino was his name. He had been a civil servant, but was betrayed and slandered by a younger man whom he had trained and promoted. Señor Aldalino found himself imprisoned in the very town where we were. He told us that the women would come in the mornings with bread and food for their husbands, brothers, or uncles. There were ropes hanging down at the gateway, and on the ropes were chunks of human flesh where the men had been beaten. The women never knew whether their loved ones would still be alive when they came in the morning. Señor Aldalino told us that he was in a cell with ungodly men, and they were meant to come out to a big building where the mass was said every day. All the prisoners had to come out. When the host was elevated¹ they had to bow down, but Señor Aldalino wouldn't compromise his conscience and bow down. Every night the door of the cell would open. It would be the guards, 'You and you and you and you, come out.' They would be loaded on to a lorry, taken down to the river and shot dead.

At the end of the breaking of bread, he told us, 'I used to teach the gospel to the prisoners who were in the cell with me. I taught them choruses and got them singing the gospel. They were the happiest days of my life.' I tell you, there was not a dry eye in the assembly that morning. Afterwards, he took us round the old prison.

¹ The priest raises the consecrated bread and wine, believing that the elements are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. (see Britannica.com)

We work in Ukraine, where I asked one good senior man, 'Under the bad days, were you persecuted personally?'

He looked at his hand and said, 'They broke my fingers.' Then he told us how he and his friends used to go across the border to Poland, where it was easier to get Bibles. Their city was not all that far from the border. They would tear the covers off and put the bulk of the Bible inside the car tyres. They took the tyres off, put the Bibles inside, put the tyres back on again and drove back into the Ukraine, three of them in convoy, with special plans laid if they were stopped by the security forces.

To sit beside men like that, and to think how feather-bedded we have been in these countries, has very often made me feel exceedingly small. We should not ask for persecution, but it's good to get in training. Who knows how much persecution we may yet have to face in our beloved United Kingdom, as the government brings in more and more rules and tells the church what we mustn't say publicly as we preach the gospel.

May God teach us to pray like the early Christians prayed, that we may be given boldness. As we speak, feebly as we do, may God intervene by his Spirit and vindicate the name of the Lord Jesus.

Our Father, as we pause a moment and consider the wonder of thy being, and the wonder of thy gift in Christ and the triumph of his resurrection and ascension, now we ask, Lord, seeing as he has given us this responsibility to witness for him in this hostile world, that thou wilt give us wisdom and words suitable, and above all boldness to speak for him wisely but without compromise. Show our world in its hardened ungodliness the reality of the person of Christ, the reality of his resurrection and his present life. Bless thy word now, we pray, and we thank thee for it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.