

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament
J. Embracing God's Priorities
29. The Prayers of God's Servants

Besides carefully attending to God's Word in Scripture, another indispensable way we can get in touch with God's priorities and embrace them is through prayer. But this is probably not the first thing that comes to mind in thinking about prayer. The acronym ACTS reminds us that our prayers should involve Adoration, Confession, and Thanksgiving, as well as Supplication. But for too many people, prayer is mainly about supplication—asking God for stuff. And so I want to look particularly at what we can learn from the Old Testament about prayers of supplication. Not that other kinds of prayer aren't important; they are. But how can we learn to embrace God's priorities in our prayers of supplication? How can our minds and hearts become more conformed to God's own heart.

Consider Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah, found in Genesis 18. God's coming to tell Abraham about his plans for those wicked cities show that he was treating him as a covenant partner, and he wanted his partner to appreciate the demands of divine justice. And Abraham did. Although he argued for mercy, he knew that Sodom and Gomorrah deserved to be judged by God.

But Abraham also had an eye for the righteous who would be destroyed along with the wicked. His heart went out in compassion to them. He did not want them to share the fate of the sinners. And this too, showed that he was coming to share God's heart. After all, God himself would so much rather forgive repentant sinners and multiply the righteous than judge the unrepentant. So God welcomed Abraham's persistent prayers and was not at all displeased at Abraham's attempt to test the limits of his mercy.

Genesis 32 records another prayer, this one by Abraham's grandson, Jacob, on his way home after spending more than twenty years working for his father-in-law Laban. Jacob had the proper attitude for prayer; he was desperate, humble, and persistent. But fully as important as this was that he was wise enough to plead the promises of God. In v. 9 he prays, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper...'" And he finishes the reminder in v. 12: "You have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"

What right does Jacob have to pray about his fear that Esau will take his revenge? He certainly cannot plead innocence to the charge of taking advantage of his brother. But he can remind God of the promises made to grandfather Abraham and father Isaac—promises which are supposed to be transmitted through Jacob: promises of a homeland, many descendants, and being a blessing to the world. What's more, Jacob can remind God of the call that initiated his journey home, and the accompanying promise of prosperity for him. It isn't that God is forgetful. Jacob's prayer was more for his own benefit than for God's. Jacob was the one who was reminded, while he was praying, of his continuing dependence on God and that his standing before God was entirely due to the grace of one who will not go back on his word.

Let's look next at Moses. One of his most desperate prayers had to have been when he and his people were trapped between the Red Sea and the pursuing and revengeful armies of Egypt. Could it be that Moses did not share at all in the terror of the Israelites at their impending doom?

To be sure, Moses gave the answer that people of faith must always give in the face of despair (Ex. 14:13-14), “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

But, even if he believed it wholeheartedly, Moses had no idea of just what would happen. And the only guarantee he had that God would deliver them was faith in what God had said he would do. So even though he may have said it confidently, Moses was all the while praying his heart out that God would not make him out to be a liar, but would do what he said he would do. And God did.

A little later came another crisis (Ex. 32), this one occasioned by Israel’s own rebellion. While Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people down below asked Aaron to make images to bolster their flagging faith and enhance their worship. God threatened to punish the flagrant disobedience of his law by destroying the people. Moses himself could receive the blessings intended for all the people. But rather than justice, Moses prayed for mercy for the sake of the fame and reputation of God himself. “Don’t give the Egyptians an opening to question your acts on behalf of your people.” And Moses also asked God to remember the covenant he had made with the patriarchs. He pled the promises just as Jacob had before.

And when God relented, but said he would not accompany the people to the Promised Land (Ex. 33), Moses went back to praying. He knew that religious institutions and ceremonies are not enough to keep faith alive. It’s only the presence of God with his people that distinguishes them from the world and also provides them both protection and power for service. So Moses asked (Ex 33:16): How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” And the Lord answered Moses in the way he’ll always answer the prayer of every true servant for his presence (Ex. 33:17): “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Moses had the opportunity to go back to the Lord in prayer many more times before he died. And each time his prayers showed that what he could ask the Lord to do was connected to God’s priorities and promises.

The next prayer I want to draw your attention to is that of Solomon in 1 Kings 8 (cf. 2 Chron 6). Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple shows his full awareness that the Almighty God cannot be confined to any earthly dwelling, even such a magnificent one as this. Solomon is aware as well of God’s faithfulness to his covenant despite the checkered history of Israel’s faithfulness to him. It is something for which Solomon is very grateful.

And yet, knowing that his own people are likely to forget this awesome and celebrative occasion and their God, he presumes to ask the LORD to honor the future prayers made from this place. He asks that when the people repent, God will listen to their prayers and forgive and restore them. Nor does Solomon pray only for Israel, for he knows that God’s heart for the whole world has prompted his promise that Israel will be a blessing to the nations. So he prays as well for God to hear the prayers of believing foreigners so that the whole world may know and fear the LORD. From beginning to end, Solomon’s prayer is one that fits this occasion and honors the LORD who made it possible.

The prayers of Elijah, the foremost prophet of ancient Israel, are very instructive as well. James (5:17) says, “Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.” The occasion was covenant disobedience in Israel during the reign of King Ahab. Finally, after three years, Elijah called King Ahab to bring the leaders of Israel and the false prophets to Mount Carmel for a showdown (cf. 1 Kings 18).

The first thing Elijah asked for was: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel.” He wasn’t asking the LORD to do something new and different here, for God had a history of revealing himself as the true God and worthy of all praise, adoration, and obedience. So really what Elijah was asking was that God would do it again, not for Elijah’s sake but for God’s sake, so that the people would get beyond a merely formal understanding of God and get to know him as their LORD.

The second part of Elijah’s prayer followed from the first: “[And] let it be known...that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.” Elijah was quite properly praying for God to validate him, not for personal reasons, but because of the importance of his work—to reveal the glory and promote the honor of God. Only as a servant on a mission did Elijah demand the people’s attention; he wanted everyone to recognize they were all called to be the servants of the Most High God.

The third part of Elijah’s prayer was for a proper response—for the people to recognize God and confess him. “Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” Elijah knew that every revelation of God—whether of mercy or of power—demands an answer from the people who witness it. He also knew that people would not necessarily be changed by such a revelation. So along with the outward and visible revelation of God in fire, Elijah prayed for an inward revelation, a change of heart, demonstrated by repentance and conversion.

Elijah’s prayer was heard and magnificently answered by God, who did just what Elijah asked. He revealed himself as Lord, he proved that Elijah was a faithful prophet, and he brought the people to repentance and devotion. But, Elijah still had one more important thing to pray for—the return of the covenant blessings and specifically the blessing of rain. This did not come automatically, but only after prolonged prayer. But it came, and with it came an end to the physical drought to accompany the end to the spiritual one.

What an excellent prayer for us today—

- That the church and the world both will know that the LORD God is the true God. God wants to do that, so we can pray that prayer with confidence, sure that God will confirm himself to his people as their sovereign creator and redeemer, and that he will also help the unbelieving world know this truth.
- We can and must also pray for the LORD to support and defend his true church as servant and agent of his saving work. We can pray boldly and confidently for this because God tells us that this is his desire. God lifts up his church not so it will get the glory, but so the attention of the world will be focused more and more on Christ, so the world will realize, in its encounters with God’s people, that they are dealing with God himself.
- We must likewise pray that people today not only recognize God’s power, but that they also respond to his call to put away their idols and come over to his side.
- And once they do so, that they will experience the rich blessings of the Lord.

I wonder how often our prayers are like Elijah's. We are invited to approach God with pitiful cries for help, painful prayers of repentance, and joyful prayers of thanksgiving and praise. But, also, as partner-servants of Almighty God, we need to pray the bold, working prayers of Elijah. The more we get to know the Scripture in which God reveals so much of his plans, goals, and promises, the more we can pray like this.

Prayers like Elijah's, that conform to God's purposes, always work. But don't make the mistake of thinking they're unnecessary because God will do what he wants to do anyhow. Prayers are part of the process by which God uses his covenant partners to advance his kingdom and fulfill his promises.

The book of Daniel also offers some valuable insights about prayer. During the reign of Darius (cf. Dan. 6), some of his officials, more concerned about power than about worship, concocted a scheme to bring Daniel down by forcing a choice between his service to the king and his habits of praying to God. Daniel refused to compromise and went on praying as usual. He knew that prayer is indispensable for those who are truly engaged in the service of God. For his disobedience, Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. And you know the rest of the story. God saved him and vindicated his priorities which were God's own.

Daniel's experiences with prayer, as described in Dan. 9, also give us some important insights about what stimulates prayer, the content of it, and the timing of God's answers.

What stimulated Daniel was examining the events of his day in the light of the Scriptures. The particular Scripture that caught his attention was Jeremiah's prophecy that the exile of Israel would last seventy years. The seventy years, Daniel discovered, was just about up. It was that very truth that motivated him to plead with God for the fulfillment of God's promise.

The beautiful thing about Daniel's prayer is that the issue at stake was the LORD's cause. Daniel didn't have much to gain personally from a return to Jerusalem; he was too old. But he had his mind on greater things. He knew that the exile of God's people had brought the LORD's stated purposes into question. God had set apart his people as his special possession and to be a testimony to the nations of the way life was supposed to be lived. So Daniel knew that asking God to show his saving grace and complete what Jeremiah had prophesied was a prayer sure to be answered.

For us too, prayer is not just to tell God what we want. God does allow and even encourage us to ask him for things, with the understanding that it is our goal to conform our will to his. But, more than this, prayer that is inspired by and consistent with Scripture is the way we cooperate with God to bring his plans and purposes into reality.

Just a word here about a godly man who came after Daniel but prayed much the same as he did, and whose prayers actually resulted in leading a contingent of exiles back to Jerusalem. I'm talking about Nehemiah. You can read his story in the book that bears his name. But back to Daniel.

After reading about the imminent end to Israel's exile, Daniel prayed a prayer of confession. He knew that his people were in exile because they had ignored and resisted God. Even though Daniel did not personally commit these sins, he took responsibility for confessing them on behalf of his people. What had started out as sins of neglect had led to active rebellion against God. Soon, not even God's special messengers, the prophets, were taken seriously.

Daniel made no attempt to transfer blame. He knew that although the Babylons of the world will not escape their own responsibility, shifting blame misses the lesson that God wants to teach his people—that evil rewards always follow sin. Confession of sin, therefore, is always the first step in helping people regain wholeness and make God’s agenda their own.

After Daniel asked for forgiveness for himself and his people, he asked for deliverance and restoration. He was convinced now—after confession—that God would regard the restoration of Jerusalem as a matter of his own honor. The Almighty God is the only one who can protect his honor and he always does it, for he cannot be unfaithful to his promises, especially where unconfessed sin no longer stands in the way. God has placed his name on the heads of those whom he has redeemed and he will not treat his name lightly.

In our day too, we need to take care of our own relationship with God through regular confession of sin and repentance. Then we may pray confidently for the restoration and revival that God has promised his people, and that will make us a blessing to our world.

It may be that God sometimes acts apart from prayer, but we don’t see much evidence of that in Scripture. Quite the opposite, we see in Daniel’s case what is often implied: God acts in response to godly prayer, and he does so immediately. Gabriel tells Daniel, “As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given.” The messenger of chapter 10 confirms that: “Since the first day...your words were heard.” To be sure, Daniel had to wait for God’s answer and to receive what he prayed for. God sent Gabriel immediately, but we aren’t told how long it took him to get there. In the case of the messenger of chapter 10 it took three weeks of spiritual warfare.

There’s a connection between prayer and what happens in heaven. Communications between God and his faithful servants are so important that the demon princes of Satan will do all they can to break the connection, even waging war against the angel messengers of God. Our part in all this begins as we become broken and repentant before God on account of our sin. Everything flows from that—all restoration, all victory, all life. God always responds to repentant prayer, and from what we see in Daniel, it seems he responds quickly, even immediately.

As long as Satan and his partners remain active on earth, there will be hindrances and delays in the delivery of God’s answers. Continuing prayer, then, is our way of cooperating with God to make sure his answers get through. It is certain that God will accomplish what he wants to accomplish and that all his promises will be fulfilled. All the same, knowing this should lead us to pray. It did for Daniel, and it must do so for all God’s people however long this spiritual war continues.

Sometimes we cannot know the details of what will best serve God’s purposes. But we know the big picture by what he has said in his word. And we have his promises. So it’s never a mistake in our prayers of supplication, to plead the promises, as specifically as we can, and to always pray that God will use our current difficulties and opportunities to advance his purposes. That helps keep our prayers from being self-centered, and makes them instead, a way to embrace God’s priorities and partner with him in his redemptive work.