

Readings for July 24, 2022

Psalm 119:33-40 (NET)

³³ Teach me, O Lord, the lifestyle prescribed by your statutes, so that I might observe it continually. ³⁴ Give me understanding so that I might observe your law and keep it with all my heart. ³⁵ Guide me in the path of your commands, for I delight to walk in it. ³⁶ Give me a desire for your rules, rather than for wealth gained unjustly. ³⁷ Turn my eyes away from what is worthless. Revive me with your word. ³⁸ Confirm to your servant your promise, which you made to the one who honors you. ³⁹ Take away the insults that I dread. Indeed, your regulations are good. ⁴⁰ Look, I long for your precepts. Revive me with your deliverance.

Nehemiah 1: 5-11 (NIV)

⁵ Then I said: "LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. ⁸ "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' ¹⁰ "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 (NIV)

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Sermon: Ordinary Prayers For Ordinary People

Last week I spoke on two problems¹ that inhibit many people from praying, namely the assumed predictable world of science leaving no room for God to act, along with the complex matter of suffering.² I also presented five common myths concerning prayer and I concluded that we ought to be aware of our own view of prayer because it tells us something about ourselves, our view of God, and the way we think God works in the world. This week we follow-up by considering the experience of the individuals within the Bible concerning prayer. In doing this, we need to approach the Bible with some care because it *isn't* an indexed book of "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)" with neat answers to be found in specific verses! Rather, the Bible contains narratives, histories, letters, and poetry, and has multiple writers with different styles, genres, and contexts. As a consequence, I am going to suggest we can get a confused or receive mixed messages about prayer from a superficial reading of the Bible. I want to begin by explaining what I mean by what just said in the context of the prophets, priests, and kings of the Old Testament. We may well wonder, are *their* prayers of *any* use to ordinary people today? Having made some generalities, I then want to briefly consider some specific prayers in the Bible because through them we may better understand *how* to pray.

The Old Testament prophets were understood by the people of Israel to be special, holy people who seemed to have a direct line to God.³ They proclaimed authoritative oracles from God, beginning with the phrase "Thus sayeth the Lord!" I confess that I find this a bit odd, yet I believe it to be true because this appears to be the *primary* way God communicated with the Israelites at that time. Prophets, like Moses and Elijah, were therefore *intermediaries* between God and the people. Prophets were *unusual* people and God *called them* specifically for that task; they *didn't* volunteer, and it *wasn't* an inherited role! They also served as the conscience of the nation, including Israel's kings, and the people ignored them at their peril. It could be said that the Babylonian exile was a natural consequence of defying prophetic warnings to repent and reform. In the New Testament, John the Baptist can be considered as the last of the Old Testament prophets. My point is this: Given their special status, we *can't and shouldn't* compare our prayer life with theirs!⁴ If we accept this distinction, we can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief. The prophets' oracles from God were *atypical not* the norm. And because Israel's prophets were venerated, their oracles have been preserved in the Old Testament precisely because the people recognized - at times with hindsight - that God had spoken through them.

¹ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Problems-and-Myths-About-Prayer.pdf> . In that sermon I mentioned Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:22-30, 33-39. It should be noted that subsequently Elijah feels isolated and even depressed: see: 1 Kings 19:3-18. God ministers to him in surprising ways.

² I have addressed this at length in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).

³ The initial "call narratives of the prophets were critical too, e.g.: Isa 6;1-13; Ezek 1:1 – 3:11; Exod 3:1-12; Jer 1:4-10.

⁴ Acts 2:16-18 suggests an important qualification! Even so, not everything a Spirit-filled person says is "prophecy."

This begs another question, “What about all the priests from the tribe of Levi; didn’t *they* pray?” All I can find is Aaron’s *benediction* of blessing that was passed on to his descendants.⁵ [“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”] What about Israel’s kings, who were meant to be shepherds to God’s people; didn’t *they* pray? Yes, they did and the Psalms, attributed to King David, contains Hebrew poetry – including prayers and hymns, some of which could well have been written by priests and musicians. Whoever wrote them, some of them were used in a communal setting.⁶ And they contain various styles, including praise and thanksgiving of God, along with asking for God’s help and forgiveness, to sorrowful laments in times of confusion or trouble. For this reason, many people take comfort from *some* of the psalms because we can identify with what they say. They contain prayers for ordinary people - but do choose them with care!

We had one example this morning in our readings from Psalm 119. The writer seeks God’s help for moral guidance as to how to *apply* the Ten Commandments to daily living. He (or she) seeks wisdom and understanding so that they can become more disciplined and enthusiastic in adhering to them, and to resist temptations to do otherwise. The writer acknowledges that the Law of the Lord is ethically good. I would say that it’s an honest, realistic prayer to say *and* mean with *all* of our heart. While it’s not overly specific neither is it wishy-washy. It’s authentic. And we can anticipate God’s Spirit will answer such a prayer through inspired thoughts, from the insights and encouragement of others, and from wisdom in books.

Our second reading from Nehemiah is another genuine prayer from an ordinary person.⁷ Having said that, Nehemiah was in the comfortable position of being the trusted wine bearer of Persian King Artaxerxes; however, he *wasn’t* a priest or a prophet. One day he hears news from visitors from Jerusalem who have somehow escaped captivity. They report that Jerusalem’s walls are broken down and its gates destroyed by fire.⁸ Nehemiah’s reaction is profound; he weeps, grieves, fasts, and prays. He is overwhelmed with compassion at the plight of his fellow Jews in the homeland. In his prayer, he describes God as one “who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.” He asks for God to hear his prayer, *not for himself* but for God’s people in Jerusalem. He *confesses* his own sin and that of all God’s people, and he boldly reminds God of his promise to Moses to bring back to Jerusalem the truly repentant however far away that they have been scattered.⁹ He then expresses confidence in God’s ability to deliver on his promise. Nehemiah also recognizes his role of cupbearer to the king gives him regular access to the human person who could sanction some kind of action to fulfill the prayer. In other words, as he prays to God, and despite his safe and comfortable existence at the royal palace, he’s willing to be the possible means for the prayer to be

⁵ See Num 6:22-27: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.” (I used this benediction last week.)

⁶ Perhaps particularly in the face of national disaster, like the exile or facing imminent threat/war.

⁷ ca. 445 BC.

⁸ See Neh 1:1-3.

⁹ See Deut 30:1-4.

answered. *He both prays and is willing to act* should the opportunity arise. He prays for *four months* before the king notices Nehemiah's sadness and asks why. The upshot being he is granted permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city.

One obvious message of this story, which is often ignored, is that prayer doesn't always save us from the very worst of circumstances. We can *of course* imagine that the people prayed for deliverance both as Jerusalem was falling and during their many years of the exile. Nehemiah's prayer is a reminder that in such circumstances God *does* care and is able to change the situation, but up to this point God has not. And the reason for this is *not* explained, but it's quite likely that it's simply a natural consequence of the political and spiritual choices made by the people. What's clear is that *concern for people in need* energized Nehemiah to pray.¹⁰ Too often our prayers center on what's important to us, including our families, friends, and work. In Matthew's Gospel we read that Jesus, seeing the great need all around him, had *compassion* on the crowd because "they were like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus acknowledges the reality, namely that "the workers are few," and he encourages his followers to pray to God for more workers.¹¹ In the letter of James, we also read of the importance of linking faith with action.¹²

Before moving on, I want to again highlight the issue of *confession*, this time with a prayer of Daniel.¹³ Like Nehemiah, Daniel's prayer begins by acknowledging God's majesty and love. He then confesses on behalf of the people, saying: "We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land." There is no ambiguity in Daniel's prayer; he has been pricked by his conscience and is remorseful. However honorable Daniel may be as a person, he includes himself with all the people of Israel. He then states, "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving." Daniel is aware of God's *character* and seeks forgiveness. Luke relates a parable of Jesus concerning a stereotypical tax-collector known to price gouge those already disenfranchised by the economic system, but who then prays: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus concludes, "That man returned home vindicated by God because all who humble themselves will be exalted."¹⁴ We also read in 1 John,¹⁵ "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Nehemiah, Daniel, the tax-collector, and the psalmist knew that truth. But they also knew that "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We shouldn't be surprised by this need to confess and receive divine forgiveness because this sentiment is also contained within the Lord's Prayer.

¹⁰ See also Dan 9: 4-6, 9-10, 18-19.

¹¹ See also Matt 9:35-38. (Note too that in Mark 1:34, Jesus healed "many" but not "all," cf. Matt 15:30; Luke 4:40.)

¹² Jas 2; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Faith-and-Action.pdf> .

¹³ Dan 9: 4-6; 9-10;18-19.

¹⁴ See Luke 18:9-14.

¹⁵ See 1 John 1:5-10.

Our third example of prayer in the Bible is one of Paul's prayers for himself concerning his famous "thorn in the flesh."¹⁶ We don't know what exactly this phrase meant, though it seems likely the people of Corinth to whom he was writing knew full well. Speculation usually centers on some kind of physical ailment, like epilepsy, a speech impediment, migraines, depression, or an eye problem. We don't know and it doesn't matter. Whatever it was, Paul repeatedly pleaded in prayer for God to remove it. The irony is that some of Paul's prayers had resulted in *others* being healed, but *not* himself. He believed God's response was, "My grace is sufficient for you." This statement suggests he had to trust that God would give him the daily strength to cope with his affliction. While Paul was an extraordinary individual, his experience in this particular predicament is one that we ordinary people can appreciate, for his earnest prayer wasn't answered in the way he wanted. Recall too the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, "My Father, if possible, let this cup [of suffering] pass from me! Yet not what I will, but what you will."¹⁷ It seems that maturity in prayer means learning to live with some unanswered questions! And that I suggest is also one of the conclusions from the book of Job.¹⁸ Sometimes it's in the experience of the silence of God, commonly called "unanswered" prayer, that faith is deepened.¹⁹ And speaking of "unanswered questions," recall that last week²⁰ I suggested we locate this mystery *not* in God's nature or character but in the *way* God works in our complex world. Albert Einstein wisely said, "Everything should be made as simple *as possible*, but *not* simpler." Understanding *how* God works in the world is simply *not* that simple! Nevertheless, if we *persist in trusting in God's good character*, that – I believe – provides the basis for *hope* when we experience our own "dark nights of the soul."²¹

Finally, we can also consider the teaching of Jesus on prayer. His disciples observed that Jesus routinely prayed and asked him to teach them *how* to pray.²² I have preached on the Lord's Prayer before, so I won't go into details as to its *contents* here.²³ It's *a prayer for ordinary people*. Matthew places this prayer in the Sermon on the Mount and, as a preamble, presents Jesus' teaching on how *not* to pray.²⁴ He condemns praying in public in a manner to be deliberately seen by others.²⁵ That was seen as inappropriate, sanctimonious, even vulgar; Jesus considered it as hypocritical rather than genuine

¹⁶ See 2 Cor 12:7b-10.

¹⁷ Matt 26:39.

¹⁸ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Why-Is-This-Happening-To-Me.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Job%E2%80%9494The-Confusing-Finale.pdf> .

¹⁹ On that note, it's *not* the *amount* of faith that's important rather it's *the God in whom we put our trust*; Luke 17: 5-6.

²⁰ See [1]. Moreover, David Bartholomew says it's more important to establish that God *could act* in the world of chance than to discover *how* he does it. And that is what I explored last week. (David J. Bartholomew (1931-2017) was a noted professor of statistics at LSE and wrote on the role of chance in divine creation.)

²¹ A term coined by St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish mystic.

²² See Luke 11:1.

²³ We can also consider the teaching of Jesus on prayer too, noting that he routinely practiced prayer and his disciples noted that fact and asked him how to pray. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Content-of-the-Lord%E2%80%99s-Prayer-Part-1.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Content-of-the-Lord%E2%80%99s-Prayer-Part-2.pdf> .

²⁴ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Context-of-the-Lords-Prayer.pdf> .

²⁵ See also Luke 18:9-14.

worship!²⁶ Regardless of the America's recent Supreme Court decision, I wonder if those who *want* to be *seen* praying on a football field have thought about this teaching. Of course Jesus would agree it's right to pray publicly in "a house of prayer," like a synagogue or a church, but he instructs his followers to pray authentically in private.²⁷ God knows *all* that can be known; so it's foolish to try to impress, or con, or manipulate God! God knows our hearts and minds as we pray, whatever words we use.²⁸ I believe this point has been illustrated by all the prayers from the Bible this morning, from the psalmist, from Nehemiah, from Daniel, from Paul, and from Jesus. Let's simply *be ourselves* as we pray for, as Jesus put it: "Those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth."²⁹

In summary, I mention five important points: First let's remember *who* we are praying to when we pray. Old Testament prayers can be very helpful here. Nehemiah and Daniel remind us that LORD God is both the powerful creator and the loving God of trustworthy promises. And that means we are to approach God with both humility and confidence. Second, emerging from humility is an awareness of God's *holiness* and our *sinfulness*. This leads to *confession*, genuine *repentance*, and experiencing divine *grace* and *forgiveness*. Third, we pray acknowledging *our continual need of God's help* in life. The psalmist, Nehemiah, Paul, and Jesus all modelled such prayers. Too often, we come to God in prayer as the last resort. Fourth, we might want to ask ourselves more often, "Does what I am praying for correlate with God's values? Or are the petitions mainly about my own desires?" Does our compassion lead us to pray for others? And are we willing to be part of the solution in partnership with God and others? Fifth, *are we prone to give up* when we experience prayers that are not answered in the way that we like? Or do we continue regardless, knowing that God's grace is sufficient for us day by day and that the Holy Spirit is alongside and within us as we journey? With all this in mind, let me conclude with instructions and encouragement from Paul: "Pray in the Spirit *on all occasions* with *all kinds of prayers* and requests. With this in mind, *be alert* and *always keep on praying for all the Lord's people*."³⁰ Amen. Let us pray.

²⁶ And however impressive the oratory, don't think that it sways God; Matt 6:7. (God will *not* be impressed; Matt 6:1, 4b, 6b, 18b.)

²⁷ This is true for *all* spiritual disciplines (giving, praying, or fasting); don't be ostentatious about it. Matt 6:1-8; 16-18. This command is also taken very seriously by the Quakers and the emphasis on silent prayer, even in gatherings.

²⁸ And remember God also knows our *needs* before we ask him; Matt 6:8. See also Luke 18:9-14; 21:1-4; Rom 8:26-27.

²⁹ John 4:23-24.

³⁰ Eph 6:18.