

A Biblical Theology of Prayer
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Prayer as we know it, conversing with God from a distance doesn't appear within the biblical narrative until significantly after the fall of mankind, specifically not until Genesis 4:26 which says "at that time men began to call on the name of the Lord." Prior to this, Genesis records all the conversations that man had with God as occurring directly between the two, apparently in person between God and man directly, face to face. For the creation narrative implies that God walked in the cool of the day each afternoon with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8), in fact even the story of Cain and his murder of Abel implies that Cain and God converse directly and its not until Cain leaves and goes out that distance is created between God and man (Gen. 4:16). It is this reality that is the setting for Genesis 4:26, man separating themselves from the physical presence of God which gives rise to our current practices of prayer, of calling or crying out to God.

Humanity in its separation from God's physical presence yearns for God's active participation in their lives and so we cry out to God. This is paramount to understand as we explore the various phraseologies used in the Word for prayer. This study examines the words *pray**, *call* on*, *call out*, and any other words which begin with *cr* and are followed by *God* or *Lord* within 5 words except the *creat** words. While this obviously misses a whole aspect of prayer, particularly the part of prayer where God speaks to man, which I hope to take up at a later time, this will provide an impetus for our motivations for praying to God.

Genesis

Following the brief introduction of sinful, separated humanity desiring God's active participation in their lives, crying out for relief from sinful oppression, the next person to call on God is Abraham in Genesis 12:8 with little detail given, however following 13:4, the next record of Abraham calling on the name of the Lord, we are given the details of the separation with Lot. Presumably Abraham called out seeking wisdom and desiring harmony with his nephew, uncertain of how to proceed. This inference would insinuate that Abraham recognized God's care and concern as well as his sovereignty in being able to work in all hearts and bring about lasting peace among men.

Amazingly, the next reference to prayer is indirect in the story of Sodom, where Abraham pleads for the city to be spared from destruction. In fact, he bargains with God in an eastern way, seeking the lowest possible price needed for the redemption of a place, eventually settling on 10 righteous lives to save an entire city (Gen 18:32). While the city is destroyed nevertheless since ten cannot be found, this shows that prayer to God has the reassuring affect of calming our concerns and soothing our ideas of God's justice.

While Genesis 20:7 doesn't record an actual prayer and is part of a conversation God is having with King Abimelech regarding Abraham's wife. God assures his people that their prayers offered on behalf of the innocent have the effect of sparing them from judgment. Prayer is efficacious, God chooses to work through the prayers of his people as is evidenced by Abraham's prayer in Genesis 20:17f.

Genesis 24:12f records a prayer offered for a successful endeavor in finding a wife for Isaac, which is answered even before the prayer is finished (Gen 24:15). Prayers are offered on behalf of one's spouse, as in Isaac praying for his barren wife Rebekah (Gen. 25:21) and she in turn even praying for understanding of the situation she finds herself in with rambunctious twins in her womb (Gen. 25:22).

Furthermore, men pray in order to call God as a witness to their actions and vows to one another (Gen. 26:25).

People also pray in times of fear when danger is on the horizon, asking for safety as in Jacob before his meeting with Esau (Gen. 32:9f).

Yet God doesn't always wait for us to call on him. He takes the initiative as well and speaks to humanity, sometimes as a result of our calling on him as in the case of his communication with Noah after "men began to call on the name of the Lord" or simply because he sees our situation and desires to be in conversation with us about it, as in his directions about what we were to eat in the garden (Gen. 1:30) and following the flood (Gen. 9:4). Likewise, in the story of Noah, God is particular in defining what Noah must do in order to escape the wrath of God. He must build a boat, to very specific dimensions (Gen. 6:13f, 7:1f, 8:15f). Furthermore God may speak and interact with humanity simply to bless them as he did at creation (1:22, 28f) and after the flood (Gen. 9:1). Additionally, God speaks to humanity in order to covenant with them, to promise them certain things as he did with Abram (Gen. 12:1-3).

God also sees our sorrow and pain, as in the case of Hagar and speaks directly into it, again reassuring Hagar of his caring presence but also directing her in what to do (Gen. 16:7f). This is repeated again when she and her son are sent away without any provisions into the desert by Sarah and God hears the cries of the boy Ishmael, speaks to them and provides for them all that they need. Furthermore the Scriptures tell us that as a result of their cries, and God's hearing them, Hagar's eyes were opened (Gen. 21:19). Thus even when we don't think we are praying, our suffering is seen and heard in heaven and God takes notice of it.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is also a story of God speaking in order to test the obedience of his people (Gen. 22).

Thus in the book of Genesis alone we find the following reasons for man speaking to God:

1. Lament evil in the world;
2. Seek wisdom and harmony in human interactions;
3. Plead for safety of believers in an unholy world;
4. Calm our concerns about God's actions and judgment in the world;
5. Pray for God to stop punishment on the innocent
6. Pray for success in the activities we undertake
7. Pray for our spouses and their concerns;
8. Seek understanding about life situations;
9. Ask God to witness our vows and promises;
10. Pray for safety when we appear to be in danger;

Furthermore God speaks to us in order to:

1. Bless us and make promises/covenants with us;
2. Tell us what we are to do and not to do;
3. Help us in time of trouble, sorrow and pain;
4. Open our eyes to the resources around us in our times of need;
5. Test our obedience.

Exodus

The stories in Exodus about prayer begin early in the text. By 2:23-25 the Israelites are groaning under the injustices of Pharaoh, and crying out for help and rescue. That is the setting for the entire book. Men are praying for release from the effects of sin, one upon another, and God answers by speaking to one particular man, Moses and commanding him to rescue his people, fight for them and bring them out of the effects of sin (Exo. 3:4f). As with Noah, God gives Moses specific directions on what to do, but unlike Noah, God reveals something about his character and his name to Moses when he gives his name to him (Exo. 3:14) thus prayer becomes a means of conversation between God and man where God reveals himself to mankind. In fact, in the case of Moses, quite a lengthy revelation is given, as Moses eventually becomes the mediator of the covenant of the Law between God and the Israelite people. What is significant about this initial conversation is that as God and Moses interact, God becomes angry with Moses and his refusal to obey and submit and alters his original good plan to use Moses as a sole redeemer, and incorporates Aaron into the picture as well (Exo. 4:14). This serves as a warning that prayer goes two ways and our conversations can bring affect God's good will for our lives by refusing to obey that which he reveals to us.

Furthermore God, speaks to Aaron and informs him of the need to go meet Moses in the desert, showing that God speaks to many people seeking to bring them all into one coherent plan (Exo. 4:27). At the first sign of trouble, men grumble and complain when the plans of God don't go as we expect as Moses and Aaron illustrate after their first encounter with Pharaoh (Exo. 5:22). From which, God reminds us of his promises to his people (Exo. 6:2f), and sends them back to do his work (Exo. 6:10) while simultaneously telling them the future course of this interaction with Pharaoh (Exo. 7:3). Thus God speaks to men to reassure them and foretell the future to them.

During the second plague, the plague of frogs, Pharaoh summons Moses and requests his prayers for the removal of the frogs (Exo. 8:9). Thus men in desperate situations seek out men of God and request prayer on their behalf which these followers offer and which God answers (Exo. 8:13). Two plagues later, during the flies, Pharaoh again summons Moses and asks for prayer, which Moses agrees to again (Exo. 8:28f). Again, three plagues later, during the hail, the situation again repeats itself (Exo. 9:27), as it does immediately again with the plague of locusts (Exo. 10:17f). At the final point in the redemption, the people are terrified as Pharaoh presses upon them at the Red Sea and they cry out to God in terror, however this time the answer of God is different. He says, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on" (Exo. 14:15). Here we see that prayer is answered, but not as might be expected, God simply commands the people to continue on the course already laid out for them. Thus prayer serves to redirect people to obedience.

As the interactions progress, God begins laying out directions for worshipping the Lord, recollecting redemptions, etc. as he speaks to Moses (Exo. 12).

As in Genesis, when hardship or trouble presses in, when we are unsure what to do, people cry out to God for direction as Moses did at the waters of Marah (Exo. 15:22f), or when he struck the rock and water issued forth (Exo. 17:4f). Another interesting thing about prayer is that God calls to men just as men call upon God. For in Exodus 19:3, "The Lord called to [Moses]." This implies that God desires to be in relationship and to converse as much as men desire to have him interact in their lives and save them from hardship and distress. God does this by relating his commandments for life in Exodus 20 and following.

Thus Exodus presents the following reasons men speak to God in prayer:

1. Be rescued from sinful situations;
2. Grumble and complain about present circumstances;

3. Seek direction in difficulty;
4. Seek release from desperate situations;
5. Pray for those who are in desperate situations;

Further more God speaks to men in order to:

1. Encourage and redirect them to obedience;
2. Learn from God about his plans, his person;
3. Reassure men of God's plans

Leviticus

Leviticus opens with God calling to Moses again. The rest of the book is God's direction to man regarding living life and worshipping appropriately.

Numbers

Numbers, like Leviticus, begins with God speaking to Moses and directing him to certain actions, namely to take a census (Num 1:1). Thus God speaks to men to direct even their political affairs as is evidenced further by his details for how the camp is to be laid out (Num. 2). God directs even how we are to proclaim blessings, God's best, upon one another by setting out the High Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6:24f.

Like Exodus records, Numbers too highlights men complaining about their life and God hearing this and being aroused to anger at their ungratefulness for all that he has provided (Num 11:1). Thus, while men might complain, we must remember that God hears all and assumes that every word spoken is as if it were spoken to him alone.

Men pray for physical healing for one another, especially when God's judgment is upon ones they love as in the case of Miriam when she opposes Moses and is turned leprous by God (Num. 12:13). Furthermore they intercede for those who are seeking to live life apart from God's decree as when the Israelites began planning to return to Egypt and Moses immediately falls facedown and although not stated, intercedes on their behalf before the judgment of God comes upon the people (Num. 14:5). This is again repeated in the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:22). Thus prayer is offered to intercede for those who are seeking to abandon God. Like Pharaoh requested prayer for having sinned, the Israelites request Moses to pray for them similarly (Num. 21:7).

Thus men pray for the following reasons:

1. Complain about situation but this is dangerous it may bring judgment;
2. For the physical healing of those they love;
3. To intercede for those who are seeking to live apart from God;
4. For those who recognize their sin and want to be right with God.

God speaks to mankind to:

1. Direct their political affairs;
2. Teach us how to proclaim God's best upon one another.

Deuteronomy

Moses makes a beautiful statement about the presence of God when people pray. It is as follows: “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?” (Deut 4:7). Thus prayer is a means of being near to God, of experiencing his presence. This is a powerful reality and motivator for a Christian life of prayer.

Much of Deuteronomy is a recollection of the earlier stories, so while no significant time will be given here, we see that Moses recognizes the efficacy of prayer in the following cases:

1. When the Israelites sinned with the golden calf and Moses interceded for them and Aaron (Deut. 9:18);
2. When they rebelled against God at Kadesh and refused to enter the Land, Moses interceded (Deut. 9:25);
3. The story of the Exodus as God’s saving them from misery, toil and oppression and answering those prayers (Deut. 26:7)

There are a few passages worth mentioning. The first is Deuteronomy 24:14-15 regarding the wages to be paid to a poor man on a daily basis. If they are not and the poor man cries out to God, sin is declared. Men cry out in times of desperation and when others are not being concerned about their plight, and God hears it.

Thus men pray in Deuteronomy in order to:

1. Be in the presence of God;
2. To cry out in need at unfair circumstances;
3. To intercede for those who are angering God.

Torah Synopsis

Thus the Pentateuch presents the following reasons for praying to God:

1. Lament evil in the world;
2. Seek wisdom and harmony in human interactions;
3. Plead for safety of believers in an unholy world;
4. Calm our concerns about God’s actions and judgment in the world;
5. Pray for God to stop punishment on the innocent
6. Pray for success in the activities we undertake
7. Pray for our spouses and their concerns;
8. Seek understanding about life situations;
9. Ask God to witness our vows and promises;
10. Pray for safety when we appear to be in danger;
11. Be rescued from sinful situations;
12. Grumble and complain about situation but this is dangerous it may bring judgment;
13. Seek direction in difficulty;
14. Seek release from desperate situations;
15. Pray for those who are in desperate situations;
16. For the physical healing of those they love;
17. To intercede for those who are seeking to live apart from or are angering God;
18. For those who recognize their sin and want to be right with God.
19. Be in the presence of God;
20. To cry out in need at unfair circumstances;

God speaks to mankind to:

1. Direct their political affairs;
2. Teach us how to proclaim God's best upon one another.
3. Encourage and redirect humanity to obedience;
4. Learn from God about his plans, his person;
5. Bless us and make promises/covenants with us;
6. Tell us what we are to do and not to do;
7. Help us in time of trouble, sorrow and pain;
8. Open our eyes to the resources around us in our times of need;
9. Test our obedience.