

Psalms and Proverbs

“Prayers”

Psalms 20, 61, 67, 88, 122, 142; Proverbs 30

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“Prayer - the freedom to talk with the Almighty God, Creator and King, Shepherd and Father - is beyond question the greatest privilege bestowed upon the human soul.” Jack Countryman, *God Listens*.

Unfortunately, last year’s Gallup poll revealed that only four in ten “Christian” Americans believe God can hear prayer or intervenes when He is prayed to. How can anyone believe in God but not believe that He will act?

Perhaps, in your journey as a disciple of Jesus, you’ve read many books or heard many teachings on prayer, I know I have. There are numerous psalms in God’s Word that contain prayers, however, this week we focused on six psalms and one Proverb that contain prayers.

The book of Psalms is both a hymnal and a prayer book. It leads us to the intimate thoughts of its authors who talked directly to the Creator of the Universe. Prayer is an opportunity which builds **our** relationship with the **same** God to Whom the psalmists prayed.

I love to hear each of these precious boys pray before we eat a meal together. [picture in presentation] Often, **each** of them wants to pray, which means my food gets cold, but it’s worth it! When the oldest was three years old, he told his mother, “Mom, I prayed on the swings today at school.” Thinking he would tell her a deep theological epiphany, she asked what he prayed for. He replied, “To not fall off.” Oh, how I wish I had the faith of a child when I pray, especially like these children:

- “Dear God: Could you please give my brother some brains? So far he doesn’t have any.” Angela
- “Dear God, thank you for the baby brother but what I asked for was a puppy. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.” Joyce
- “Dear God, please send Dennis Clark to a different summer camp this year.” Peter
- “Dear God, I do not think anybody could be a better God than you. Well, I just want you to know that. I am not just saying that because you are already God.” Charles

The psalms and proverb in this week’s lesson may not be examples of a child’s faith, yet the author’s petitions teach us to pray:

- In affliction – Psalm 88
- For those in authority – Psalm 20
- For global salvation – Psalm 67
- When distressed – Psalms 61, 142
- For Jerusalem – Psalm 122
- For contentment – Proverbs 30

Regardless of the desire, despair, or desperation the psalmists experienced, they called on the name of God because they **believed** in the name of God. In review of this week's Scriptures, I would like to begin with Psalm 88, said to be one of the most sorrowful of all the Psalms. I kind of just want to get it out of the way!

PSALM 88: PRAY IN AFFLICTION

The Psalms deal with **all** aspects of life, not just the good parts. Psalm 88 deals with darkness in life and the eminence of death. Joni Earkeckson Tada said, "The Psalms wrap nouns and verbs around our pain better than any other book."

At the age of seventeen, Joni Earkeckson Tada's life changed in an instant when she dove into shallow water and broke her neck, leaving her a quadriplegic for the rest of her life. Joni prayed for healing, but she said, "Her hands and feet never got the message." The Lord did not give her the healing she prayed for.

Joni said, "God uses chronic pain and weakness, and other afflictions, as His chisel for sculpting our lives. Weakness deepens dependency on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away."

Psalm 88 is considered the darkest of all the Psalms. It even closes with: "darkness is my closest friend." The psalmist had been sick and close to death since he was a child; he felt he was as forgotten as is a dead person; he was overwhelmed by the Lord's wrath, blamed God for the loss of his friends and loved ones, and continually prayed for healing.

Still, there are indications the psalmist had an underlying trust in the Lord because he acknowledged the Lord is, "The God who saves me." (Psalm 88:1) In verses 10-12, he also acknowledged God's attributes of love, faithfulness, and righteous deeds.

I believe God placed this prayer-psalm in Scripture because it reflects what many believers can relate to – that at some time in our life we pray during a seemingly hopeless situation, but nothing changes. The Apostle Paul experienced that. Three times Paul asked

God to take away the “thorn in his flesh.” Whatever the “thorn” was, it was chronic and tormenting yet God did not remove it.

God answered Joni Earkeckson Tada’s prayer just as He answered Paul’s. “My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9) God’s strength is made perfect in **our** weaknesses and He has a purpose for every “thorn” we experience.

Through Joni Earkeckson Tada’s journey, her strong faith, the global impact she’s made, and the lives that did not end in suicide because of her testimony, are evidence God had reasons for not answering her prayers to be healed.

G. Campbell Morgan wrote: “We thank God that there is one such [psalm] as this, with its revelation of what results in character when a soul, in the midst of the most appalling suffering, still maintains the activity of a practiced relationship with God.”

Psalm 88 is a reminder that life does not always have happy endings; at least not on this side of heaven, and suffering may often be part of our earthly existence. It takes childlike faith to say, “Lord, I don’t like this, and I don’t understand this, but I will trust you.”

Apostle Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18)

PSALM 20: PRAY FOR THOSE IN AUTHORITY

Psalm 20 is a short prayer-psalm for the leader of Israel – King David. The people, the priests, even the king himself, prayed for his protection and victory for his battles. For the king, they prayed for the Lord to protect him, to remember his faithfulness to God, to give him the desires of his heart, and make his plans succeed.

But this prayer-psalm is for **all** leaders. I believe God placed this psalm in His Word to remind us to pray for those in authority because **God** put rulers in place: “For there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Romans 13:1)

God isn’t surprised by flawed individuals in high places and He knows many of our leaders are broken. But those in positions of authority are there **by** God, **for** His purpose.

I’m sure you don’t have a problem praying for leaders you like. It’s easy to pray for someone you admire and respect, like, Carol Martin, right? What about leaders you **don’t** like or who aren’t even the same political party as you!

- Pray as you would for anyone without salvation in Jesus whose soul is headed to hell.
- Pray their decisions and influence will have a positive impact on our communities.
- Pray believing God's sovereign plans are perfect and will be done.

Another reason for this psalm is to teach us to trust in **God** for victories, not in man or things of this world. The psalmist wrote, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the Name of the LORD our God." (Psalm 20:7) In Bible times, horses and chariots symbolized a nation's military strength and power. Our modern equivalents would be submarines, tanks, nuclear weapons, etc.

Israel trusted in Someone more powerful and stronger than humans and their inventions to preserve their king and nation. The object of their faith was, "The Name of God." We're not to boast in our own strength because no authority or power is greater than God Almighty.

About authorities, Apostle Paul said, "I urge then, petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:2-4)

PSALM 67: PRAY FOR GLOBAL SALVATION

Some of the lyrics in the song, "The Blessing", by Elevation Worship, are: "The Lord bless you and keep you, make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you," which may be from Psalm 67: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine upon us." (Psalm 67:1) And **those** words are actually from the "Priestly Blessing" in Numbers Chapter 6, the most famous blessing in the Bible, which God told Moses was to be spoken over the Israel nation.

Although Psalm 67 is one of the shortest of all psalms, it's actually a thrilling one for those "not Jewish", that is, us Gentiles. The psalmist prayed for God to bless Israel so that His kingdom and His salvation would be offered to **all** people.

The psalmist prayed that when other nations saw God's blessings upon Israel, God's "ways may be known on earth, [His] salvation [known] among all nations." That the nations would be "glad and sing for joy, [because God] rules the people justly and guides the nations of the earth" so that "all the peoples would praise [God]." (Psalm 67:2,4 5)

The "nations" are Gentile nations and when God is known beyond the borders of Israel into the Gentile world: "Then the land [of Israel] will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us... and all the ends of the earth will fear Him." (Psalm 67:6,7)

I believe the focus of the Psalm 67 prayer is for the people of God to pray for Israel to be blessed, and **through** those blessings, God will be glorified and **all** people will hear of Him and accept the salvation He offers through His Son.

Apostle Paul confirmed God's desire for salvation for Gentiles: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." (Romans 1:16)

PSALMS 61 AND 142: PRAY WHEN DISTRESSED

As a teenager, David killed a lion, a bear, and a giant. As an adult, Israel sang songs about his bravery as a war hero. He lived a triumphant life; but also, a tumultuous one.

David was likely hiding in a cave when he wrote Psalms 61 and 142. Both were about his:

- Cry for Help
- Confidence in God
- Commitment to Faithfulness

Hiding from enemies, forced to leave Jerusalem, his family, and God's sanctuary, David was an outlaw among his own people. The circumstances that caused David to write these prayer-psalms could have applied to many occasions in his life including the years when his father-in-law, King Saul, wanted to kill him, and when his son, Absalom, drove him out of Jerusalem. Running for his life and exhausted, David cried to God to be rescued:

- "Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint." (Psalm 61:1-2a)
- "I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out my complaint before [God]; before Him I tell my trouble." (Psalm 142:1, 2)
- "Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me." (Psalm 142:3-4,6)

David could look back on his life and remember God had not failed him in the past and he was confident God would not fail him in the future.

- "For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe." (Psalm 61:3)
- "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living." (Psalm 142:5b)

And, elsewhere in the Psalms, David wrote:

“I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the works of your hands.” (Psalm 143:5) “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life...with your right hand you save me.” (Psalm 138:7)

David’s **expectation** of God’s **protection** was based on past experiences of God’s **deliverances**. Maybe he remembered the sound of Goliath hitting the ground, or the whoosh of Saul’s spears as they flew past him. David’s prayers were rooted in memories of what God had done to protect him, giving him faith that God would deliver him again.

Several modern-day songs have been written from **this** verse in Psalm 61: “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” (Psalm 61:2b) In Scripture, a rock symbolizes God’s unchanging nature:

- He is the Rock of My Salvation (Psalm 89:26)
- The Rock Eternal (Isaiah 26:4)
- The Rock of Israel (2 Samuel 23:3)
- The Rock of Refuge (Psalm 71:3)
- The Rock from which we are hewn (Isaiah 51:1)
- "Trust in the LORD forever. For in God the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock." (Isaiah 26:4)

Because of his confidence in who God is, David would continue to be faithful to Him. He asked God: “Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name.” (Psalm 142:7b) David didn’t want to be free just to go home and have a good meal or take an overdue vacation. He wanted to be free of his cave-prison so he could glorify the name of his God. And David wanted to be a witness for the deliverance God gave him: “Then the righteous will gather about me because of Your goodness to me.” (Psalm 142:7c)

David began his psalm **crying out** in prayer but ended it with **singing out** in praise and confident hope that he would be set free to testify to God’s rescue. And with that, he promised to live for Him:

“Then I will ever sing in praise of your name and fulfill my vows day after day.” (Psalm 61:8)

We may not be hiding in a cave, but each of us has surely experienced something overwhelming in our lives. Yet, God has not changed. He is still our **refuge** and our **strength**.

Reminding us of God’s intervention in our lives, Paul wrote, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned;

struck down, but not destroyed. Faith in God brings comfort even in the midst of crushing difficulties.” (2 Corinthians 4:8,9)

PSALM 122: PRAY FOR JERUSALEM

Back in the day, I looked forward to annual trips to Kentucky to be with family at Christmas time. We would stay at my sister and brother-in-law’s century old home where all the family would gather.

Psalm 122 opens with David’s joy in **also** “going home.” “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’” (Psalm 122:1) David and his fellow Israelites made the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem because: “That is where the tribes [of the LORD] go up and praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.” (Psalm 122:4) David wrote about entering the city, standing within the city’s gates; just celebrating being there.

The city of Jerusalem is situated on the edge of one of the highest tablelands in Israel so all who visit Jerusalem must “go up” to get to it. If you’ve had the opportunity to “go up” to Jerusalem, perhaps on a tour bus, you may remember how exciting it was seeing the City of God come into view. In Psalm 48, the psalmist said, “Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth...is Mount Zion the city of the Great King.” (Psalm 48:2)

David’s exhortation was to: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure...” (Psalm 122:6) “May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels. For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, “Peace be within you. For the sake of the house of the LORD our God I will seek your prosperity.” (Psalm 122:6-9)

Peace for the City of God is an appropriate prayer because although the name Jerusalem, **means** peace, it’s been anything **but** a city of peace. Jerusalem has been built, destroyed, rebuilt, attacked, captured, and recaptured, dozens of times. Of all the cities in the world, it’s believed to be the city where the most wars have been fought. Still, as we learned in last week’s lesson:

- God “founded His city – Jerusalem.” (Psalm 87:1)
- God loves Jerusalem more than all cities in Israel. (Psalm 87:2)
- “God makes Jerusalem secure forever.” (Psalm 48:8)

Because Jerusalem is special to the Lord, it’s mentioned more than any other location in Scripture, including in these passages:

- God said His “unfailing love for [Jerusalem] will not be shaken.” (Isaiah 54:10)

- God's people are to never forget Jerusalem and are to "exalt it above their chief joy." (Psalm 137:5-6)
- It's prophesized that Jerusalem will be called the throne of the Lord and all nations will gather to it. (Jeremiah 3:17)
- Jerusalem is the residency of God: "The Lord has chosen Jerusalem and will dwell there forever." (Psalm 132:13-14)
- Several times in Scripture, God said Jerusalem is where He chose to put His Name.

About God's name in Jerusalem, the following fascinates me. In the Hebrew alphabet, the 21st letter is, "SHIN." In Hebrew, Shin is one of the Names of God. There are three valleys that surround the city of Jerusalem; two on its outskirts and one that runs near the center of the city.

Through aerial photography and topographical maps, the shape of the three valleys can be seen to be the shape of the outline of the Hebrew letter, Shin ש. Perhaps the Lord allowed modern technology and the Hebrew language to let us see what He meant by, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name." (2 Kings 21:4)

I believe Psalm 122 is clearly calling for God's people to pray for Jerusalem, and by extension, Israel. It is the only city on earth where God has placed His name - His very reputation.

The prophet Isaiah confirmed God's love for His chosen nation: "I bring near my righteousness.... I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory." (Isaiah 46:13)

PROVERBS 30: PRAY FOR CONTENTMENT

Contentment is in short supply in today's culture, isn't it? So let me introduce you to Agur, the author of Proverbs 30. The first nine verses of Proverbs 30 a short prayer - the **only** prayer in Proverbs. The last part of this proverb are Agur's observations about life and nature. In poetic humility, he opened his prayer admitting he didn't know much:

"Surely I am only a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One." (Proverbs 2,3)

Then he verbally bowed to the Holy One – the flawless Creator, whose Word is perfect:

"Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is the name of His son? Surely you know! Every word of

God is flawless; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words, or He will rebuke you and prove you a liar.” (Proverb 30:4-6)

Agur brought two requests to the Lord. He didn’t pray for a long life, a beautiful wife, success, or prosperity. He didn’t even pray for Israel. This little-known sage was content. He didn’t pray for **more** than he needed or **less** than he needed, but **only** his daily bread.

“Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread.” (Proverbs 30:7,8)

And Agur explained why: “Otherwise, I may have too much and disown You and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” (Proverbs 30:9) Agur asked God to protect him from dishonesty and keep him from temptations of riches **or** poverty. If he had prosperity and abundance, he might forget about God. If he didn’t have enough, poverty might lead him to steal to feed his stomach, which would dishonor God.

Agur’s prayer of contentment with what God provided is in opposition to what is known today as the “prosperity doctrine” which teaches material and financial success are signs of God’s favor. But Agur was content to ask only for his daily bread and he had faith God would provide what he needed.

Approximately 900 years later, Jesus’ model prayer reflected the righteousness of Agur’s prayer: “Give us today our daily bread And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:11,13)

I enjoyed the later part of Proverbs 30. It contained Agur’s observations on life and the natural world, written with quirky insights and wit. I imagined Agur, curious and wise, walking around cataloging unusual things that either fascinated him or that he felt people needed to know. They included examples of immorality, why people change, creatures who do impressive feats, animals who walk proudly. And then out of nowhere, he interjected that leeches have two daughters and eyes that mock their parents will be pecked out by crows! I encourage you to read all of Proverbs 30 if you haven’t already.

Agur ended his words of wisdom with:

- If you plan to exalt yourself or to do evil, exercise self-control and cover your mouth quick. (Proverbs 30:32)
- Anger creates strife, just as sure as churning cream makes butter, and twisting your nose makes it bleed. (Proverbs 30:33)

Agur's prayer had a spirit of contentment and trust in God, and it's considered a model prayer for Christians to:

- Pray with humility
- Pray acknowledging the greatness of God
- Pray for neither riches nor poverty
- Pray to be provided with what God knows you need

Apostle Paul supported Agur's teaching: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." (1 Timothy 6:6-8)

Regarding prayer, this week's Scriptures teach:

- Don't hesitate to pray when "darkness is your closest friend" (Psalm 88)
- Trust God in His placement of leaders (Psalm 20)
- Pray for the salvation of all nations (Psalm 67)
- Openly express heartfelt feelings to the Lord (Psalms 61 and 142)
- Pray for the City of God (Psalm 122)
- Be content with God's provision (Proverbs 30)

In your prayer life, may you be confident that your prayers are heard by:

YAHWEH-SABAOTH: "The Lord of Hosts"

The Lord of heaven and earth,
of Jews and Gentiles, of rich and poor, master and slave,
the Mighty Holy One
who will accomplish what He determines to do.