

Prayer & Providence

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Prayer & Providence • Session 1

What Exactly is Prayer?

An ancient philosopher once said, “man is incurably religious.” He was right. We *all* worship someone or something. It’s not uncommon in times of shock to hear people almost instinctively cry out to God. To the Christian, prayer is a sacred privilege that should never be taken for granted.

Foundational Aspects of Mankind’s Relationship with God

- Human beings, frail creatures that we are and living for such a brief moment in so vast a universe, stand in need far beyond our own ability to provide. *What sort of need?*
- There is an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present Being who is responsible for all of Creation and with whom human beings can communicate. *How can we know this?*
- This Being is perfectly compassionate, tender, loving, and holy toward those he created in his image. *What reason do we have to believe these things about his character?*
- If this God is infinite in all of his attributes and holy in all of his character, we—as weak and sinful people—should submit our wills to his divine wisdom and perfect will. *Why?*

What Exactly is Prayer?

- In praying, we acknowledge our dependence upon this Being who is higher than ourselves.
- Prayer is more than wishful thinking. *In what way?*
- In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul employs several relevant terms. In your own words, what are:
 - Supplications -
 - Prayers -
 - Intercessions -
 - Thanksgivings -

Whose Prayer Does God Hear?

- Prayer is the privilege and right of God’s children (Matt 6:9; John 3:3,5). *Why?*
- When the man born blind had his eyes opened by the Lord, he saw more than just the physical features of life about him (John 9:24-31; Prov 28:9). *Was he correct?*
- In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul stated another quality of character that is essential to having prayers answered—holiness (see also Isa 1:15; James 4:8). *Why does holiness matter?*
- The apostles stressed the fact that prayer is the privilege of one who is righteous (James 5:16; 1 Pet 3:12; 1 John 3:22).

How, then, do passages like Ecclesiastes 7:20, James 3:2, and 1 John 1:8 relate to prayer?

Can one who has never been born again pray to God and be reconciled to God? Why or why not?

What about the person who has been born again, but who subsequently sins against God?

What should we make of the example of Cornelius in Acts 10 (note especially 10:1-4)?

Some passages of Scripture to meditate upon: Luke 18:1-8; Rev 8:1-5; Matt 7:7-11; Rom 12:12; Acts 2:42; 1 Thes 5:17; Matt 15:22-28.

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“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

“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’” (Luke 11:1). Notice several things:

1. Jesus’ prayers so impressed his disciples that they wanted him to teach them how to pray.
2. Jesus’ response indicates the validity of being taught to pray.
3. John had taught his own disciples to pray. If these disciples had been taught, why wouldn’t we search for similar instruction? And what better source could there be than the Bible? Studying what is revealed by the Spirit about prayer, as well as the prayers of men and women recorded throughout the period of divine revelation, is extremely worthwhile.

Since Matthew’s account of Jesus’ instruction is more comprehensive, let’s analyze it (6:9-13):

- **Prayer and God**
 - Our Father in heaven –
 - Hallowed be your name –
 - Your kingdom come –
 - Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven –
- **Prayer and Us**
 - Give us this day our daily bread –
 - Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors –
 - Lead us not into temptation –
 - Deliver us from evil –

This “model prayer” that Jesus taught his disciples covers the basics of life: God and his kingdom, and us and our needs. Peter points us in much the same direction when he writes, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6-7).

However, we should recognize a principle that stretches across all of God’s dealings with mankind: prayer must come within the scope of God’s will and providence. In your own words, what is the significance of praying “in Jesus’ name”?

“In the name” is not a magical formula attached to prayer or some other act of devotion; rather, to act, speak, or pray in the name of Jesus involves at least three core elements:

1. These are to be done according to, or out of, the relationship we have with God through our redemption in Christ; it is acting in harmony with his Messiahship and mission.
2. “In the name” frames the prayer as being consistent with God’s will and word and has his glory as its ultimate end (Col 3:17).
3. In using “in the name,” we recognize God’s authority and act or pray within the limits of that which he has authorized (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:4-5).

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Jesus and the Early Church as Models of Prayer

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1-8). How was Jesus able to complete his incredible task on earth? Through a perfect relationship with his heavenly Father, sustained by constant prayer. From beginning to end of his public life, Jesus was dedicated to prayer. His earliest disciples followed suit. As those who are dedicating themselves to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17), what can we learn from Jesus and the early church as models of prayer?

JESUS

- At his baptism: a prayer of dedication (Luke 3:21-22) –
- Before day: preparing for life’s demands (Mark 1:35) –
- At the close of day: still in need (John 6:15; Matt 14:22-23) –
- All night: prayer of dependence (Luke 6:12-13) –
- At his transfiguration: a prayer of fellowship (Luke 9:28-36) –
- Jesus’ report to the Father and prayer for his disciples (John 17) –
- Gethsemane: prayer in crisis and submission (Luke 22:39-46; Mark 14:33-34; Matt 26:39) –
- On the cross: prayers of victory (Luke 23:34, 46) –

THE EARLY CHURCH

- “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14) –
- “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42) –
- “Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer” (Acts 3:1) –
- “They lifted their voices together to God and said...” (Acts 4:24-31) –
- “We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4) –
- “They prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6) –
- “[Peter and John] prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:15) –
- “Look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying” (Acts 9:11) –
- “Cornelius...prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:1-2) –
- “Peter went up on the housetop at about the sixth hour to pray” (Acts 10:9) –
- “Earnest prayer for [Peter] was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5, 12) –
- “After fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:3) –
- “With prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23) –
- “We went outside the gate to the riverside... there was a place of prayer” (Acts 16:13) –
- “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25) –
- “[Paul] knelt down and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36) –
- “Kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another” (Acts 21:5) –

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What Should I Expect When I Pray?

Have you ever given serious thought as to what you expect from your prayers? Do you confidently look for God to answer them? How often do we pray with the expectation that God will actively respond to the petitions we offer?

Taking our survey of Jesus and the early church as models of prayer from last week one step further, what can we learn and apply to our own prayers when we consider the examples of:

- Jesus (John 11:1-44) –
- Paul (2 Thes 3:1-2; Eph 6:18-20; Col 4:2-4; Rom 15:30-33; 2 Tim 3:10-11; 4:9-18; 2 Cor 12:9) –
- Jabez (1 Chron 4:9-10) –

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When God Says “No” or “Wait”

It's not unusual to hear someone say, “I prayed about my problem, but God didn't hear or answer my prayer.” Is it that God didn't hear, or did he say “wait” or “no”?

The claim that God doesn't hear or answer prayer is not new. Consider the example of Habakkuk (1:1-4). The LORD responded by telling the prophet that he was thoroughly familiar with the situation and condition of the people and that he was doing something about it that would astound Habakkuk because what he was doing about the matter was completely different from what Habakkuk was looking for (1:5-11). The Chaldeans would be the instrument of God's judgment against the conditions about which Habakkuk had been praying. Yes, God heard and saw and was acting.

I must realize that, precious as I may be as an individual in God's sight, I am but one strand in a huge and complex tapestry on which God is working out his eternal plan.

When God Refuses to Hear or Regard Prayer

- When I turn away from God, refusing to hear him when he speaks (Isa 59:1-2; 55:6-7; 58:9).
- When I seek to hide iniquity in my heart (Psa 66:13-19; Prov 28:9).
- When I am proud, arrogant, and self-righteous before God (Luke 18:9-14).
- If I am seeking forgiveness but refuse to forgive others (Mark 11:25; Matt 6:14-15).
- If I do not believe that God hears and is going to answer my prayer (James 1:5-8; Heb 11:6).
- If I am praying selfishly, with impure motives, seeking to gratify the flesh (James 4:1-4).
- If marital troubles are destroying the spirit in which I ought to pray (1 Pet 3:7; Col 3:18-19).

When God Hears, But Says “No”

- Moses (Psa 106:32-33; Num 20:10-12; Deut 3:23-27)
- Paul (2 Cor 12:1-10)

When God Hears, But Says “Wait”

- Job (19:7; 30:20; 42:1-6)
- The woman of Canaan (Matt 15:21-28)
- Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-42)
- Mary and Martha (John 11:1-45)
- Souls beneath the altar (Rev 6:9-11; 20:1-6)

Prayer & Providence • Session 6

What Exactly is Providence?

It's not uncommon to hear people say, "It's a miracle!" even under very non-miraculous circumstances. Providence and miracles are sometimes confused. A *miracle* could be defined as a deed or event that is impossible under the ordinary circumstances and limitations of the universe. When we talk about providence, we are not talking about miracles.

Providence is a force that does not violate certain things:

- The freedom of the human will.
- The nature or laws of God.

Our English word *providence* stems from the Latin *providentia*, a term that literally means "to foresee, to see before." Two parallel Greek words express the principle of providence:

- *Pronoeo* – "to have regard for" (Rom 12:17; 2 Cor 8:21; 1 Tim 5:8).
- *Pronoia* – "forethought, foresight, care, to make provision" (Acts 24:1-3; Rom 13:14).

Providence as it relates to God presupposes certain things:

- His creation of the universe and his government in and over that which he created.
- This Creator is eternal in his being, absolute in his attributes, and sovereign over all.
- The Bible is his infallible revelation concerning himself and his plan for his creation.

From his revelation to mankind and our own personal experiences, we learn:

- We live under a natural order; we are subject to natural laws and consequences. Within the scope of this natural order, we experience blessings, accidents, suffering, and death.
- God has the power to guide and influence us without interfering with our freedom.
- God can directly alter the course of events if he wills, in answer to human prayer, or without it.

A key word to remember as we wrap our minds around providence? **PURPOSE**. Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:7-12, Romans 8:18-30, Ephesians 3:8-12, and 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. What is being revealed in these passages of Scripture concerning God's providence?

Can you think of some examples of God's providence that have been preserved in the Bible?

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Providence and the Problem of Evil

Throughout this study we have repeatedly returned to the premise that God is and that he is absolute in all his attributes—holiness, intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, and power. If this premise is true, God cannot make a mistake; the world that he created was complete, and perfect for the purpose for which he created it. When the creation was finished, God “saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). This raises the question, if everything was very good, how do we account for and explain the presence of evil as it is found in such a world?

What impact does a second premise have on this discussion? – Man is a moral creature, possessing a moral conscience with the ability to choose his own actions.

What impact does a third premise have on this discussion? – God put his creation and man under law—laws in the physical world to control and direct it, and laws in the moral realm to govern the free beings in it. Compliance or non-compliance—obedience or disobedience—to these laws brings inevitable consequences that produce good or evil results.

Using your knowledge of the overall scope of the Bible, how would you answer the following:

- What is evil?
- From where did evil come?
- Can evil be overcome?
- Can God so control his world in the midst of evil that his purposes may be achieved?
- If so, how?

What does Romans 1:18-32 contribute to this discussion?

And Romans 8:18-25?

God’s redemptive plan for man’s salvation also includes divine revelation concerning the defeat and final destruction of Satan. What can we learn from Genesis 3:15? Revelation 12:7-17? 1 John 3:8? Hebrews 2:14-15? Revelation 20:7-10?

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God's Sovereign Control Over His Universe

If God is to carry out his good purposes, he must be able to exercise rule and control over the world he created. This rule includes the inanimate, animate, and moral realms in which he has established the principle of law and over which he rules according to law. God did not entrap himself in his creation; with divine foresight exercised in divine forethought, he created a world and established laws through which his eternal purposes can be realized according to his will.

Perhaps the first question should be this: by what right can he claim universal rule and direction? What sort of input do Genesis 1:1, Psalm 33:6, Psalm 93:1-2, Psalm 104:1-9, Psalm 148:5-6, and Colossians 1:15-17 provide for our question?

In his bewilderment and perplexity, Job said some hard things about God, even passing judgment on God's moral conduct (Job 9:22-24). Though he did not understand or have an answer to the problems he faced, Job was not justified in sitting in judgment against the Lord. In bringing the patriarch to realize his total inability to judge him, the LORD asked Job a long series of questions, none of which Job could answer. What can we learn from this interaction? Take the time to carefully read and reflect on what God is revealing about himself in relation to:

The Inanimate World:

- The Creation itself (Job 38:4-7) –
- Control and government of the sea (Job 38:8-11) –
- The bringing forth of the dawn (Job 38:12-15) –
- The springs of the sea (Job 38:16-18) –
- The dwelling of light (Job 38:19-21) –
- Snow and hail (Job 38:22-24) –
- Rain, lightning, and thunder (Job 38:25-30) –
- The heavenly bodies (Job 38:31-33) –
- The clouds and rain (Job 38:34-38) –

The Animate World:

- The lion (Job 38:39-40) –
- The raven (Job 38:41) –
- The mountain goats (Job 39:1-4) –
- The wild donkey (Job 39:5-8) –
- The wild ox (Job 39:9-12) –
- The ostrich (Job 39:13-18) –
- The horse (Job 39:19-25) –
- The hawk and the eagle (Job 39:26-30) –

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Providence in the Moral Realm: The Hebrew Nation

We've divided the last phase of our study into four parts: (1) God's selection of the Hebrew nation and his direction of them as the people through whom he would bring a redeemer into the world, (2) God's providential use of the heathen nations in rebellion against him, who sought the destruction of the chosen people, (3) Christ's rule in national and spiritual kingdoms, (4) and the exercise of God's providential working in the individual.

First, we consider the Hebrew nation. What stands out to you from the following significant Old Testament verses? How do they manifest or demonstrate God's providence?

- Genesis 3:15 –
- Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5, 13-14; 22:18 –

Abraham had two sons born unto him from whom Jehovah chose Isaac; from the two sons of Isaac, the LORD chose Jacob; and of the twelve sons of Jacob, God chose Joseph through whom in his providence, Jacob's descendants would be brought into Egypt, the land in which they would sojourn and grow into a nation.

The story of Joseph and the events which brought Jacob's family into the land of the Pharaohs is one of the best illustrations of providence revealed in the Scriptures. Using Genesis 45:1-8 and 50:15-21 as "the end of the story" and your overall knowledge of Joseph's life (beginning in Genesis 37), what very well could be traces of God's providence in Genesis 37-50?

Considering the broad scope of events that transpired from Genesis 50 through the time of Nehemiah, what can we learn about God's providence from statements like Nehemiah 9:6-8?

Do you remember what Mordecai said to Esther in Esther 4:12-14? What can we learn about God's providence from the incredible story contained in the book of Esther?

Prayer & Providence • Session 10

Providence in the Moral Realm: The Heathen Nations

God chose Abraham and his descendants through whom he would bring the “seed of the woman” into the world, and controlled the direction of that people to achieve his purpose. Another aspect of God’s providence in the moral realm which must be considered is his control and use of the heathen nations who continually strove to destroy the Jewish people and to overthrow Jehovah-worship. Unless God could control these in working out his purpose, the heathen nations would succeed in destroying the chosen people. God’s use, judgment, and destruction of them when they had served his purpose is a vital factor in the study of providence.

God’s Universal Rule

- Acts 17:26-31 – Paul: “He made from one man every nation of mankind.”
- Psalm 22:28 – David: “For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.”
- Jeremiah 10:6-7 – “Who would not fear you, O King of the nations?”
- Proverbs 14:34 – Solomon: “Righteousness exalts a nation.”
- Proverbs 16:12 – “The throne is established by righteousness.”
- Psalm 9:17 – David: “The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.”
- Jeremiah 27:5-7 – “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar...”
- Daniel 2:36-37; 4:17 – “O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given...”

From the beginning of the development of Abraham’s descendants into a nation, and the disciplining of them in their later years, Jehovah exercised control over the heathen powers. He raised them up, used them, and then destroyed them.

God’s Mighty Hand of Judgment

- Romans 1:18-32 – “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness.”
- 2 Peter 3:8-9 – “Not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”
- Genesis 15:12-16 – “For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”
- Exodus 3:7-10, 16-22 – “I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled.” In the contest between Moses and Pharaoh, it is said nine times that Jehovah hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and nine times that Pharaoh hardened his heart against the LORD.
- Deuteronomy 28:49-50 – “Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God.” This promise was fulfilled by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Romans.
- Ezekiel 32:7, 11-12, 18, 22-23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31-32 – “When I blot you out.”
- Daniel 2:31-45 – “The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.”

This use and destruction of the nations is determined by Jehovah; it is the exercise of his providential control over them, determined by their moral character, pride, and cruelty. When Gentiles humbled themselves before him (Melchizedek, Jethro, the mixed multitude of the Egyptians, Rahab, Balaam, Ruth, the widow of Zarephath, Nineveh), God was for them.

Prayer & Providence • Session 11

Christ's Rule in National and Spiritual Kingdoms

For over 400 years the voice of prophecy remained silent, but God had not been inactive. He had been preparing both the Jewish and heathen nations for the coming of the Christ. During the period between the testaments, the Jews passed through many trials; they suffered from both within and without. The high priesthood had become a political football to be kicked back and forth in the conflict between Syria and Egypt; it was no longer what God intended it to be. Sects had arisen within the Jewish religion, corrupting the religious life of the nation. Rome now dominated the world, calling the plays in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. The people were looking for a Messiah, one after their own preconceived ideas, not after God's.

The Fullness of Time

In fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1; 4:5-6), John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord, heralding the arrival of the Christ and the approach of the kingdom of Old Testament hope (Mark 1:14-15). Paul summarizes the period like this: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4-5). What stands out to you about Mark 1:14-15 and Galatians 4:4-5?

After his resurrection Jesus proclaimed, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18-20). His apostles made clear that Jesus' death and resurrection were no accident (Acts 2:22-24, 33, 36). Carefully read the following passages. What can we learn from:

- Ephesians 1:20-23 –
- 1 Peter 3:22 –
- Revelation 1:5 –
- Revelation 19:12, 15-16 –

Take the time to enhance your understanding of what God was planning all along. What do we learn about the purposes and providence of God from:

- Psalm 2 –
- Psalm 45 –
- Psalm 110 –
- Isaiah 11 –

The Messiah's judgment and destruction of wicked nations could be demonstrated in the New Testament by two examples: Jerusalem (and the rebellious nation of the Jews), and Rome (and the Roman Empire). What can we learn from passages like Matthew 24 and Revelation 13 and 19?

Prayer & Providence • Session 12

Living in the Light of God's Providence

As a practical conclusion to our study of prayer and providence, take the time to seriously reflect on the following passages of Scripture from the New Testament. What can we learn about God's wondrous providence from:

- Jesus' words in Matthew 6:1-34 –
- Paul's voyage to Rome (Rom 1:9-10; 15:22-24; Acts 21-28) –
- James 5:13-18 –