

A Brief History Of Prayer

Prayer Today:

We tend to take prayer for granted...

Prayer is there for us when we need it

Prayer is something we can do at anytime and anyplace - that can take away the sacred nature of prayer

We are encouraged to think of God like a friend - but are we a good friend to God ourselves? - or are we the kind of friend that only shows up when there is a need. Are we the kind of friend that only comes around every so often and pretends like everything is fine?

Maybe you, like many Christians have this attitude that I often have: Prayer is always there

If we look at the history of prayer in the bible, I think we'll see that prayer is not something that we should take for granted, it is not a waste of time, it is worth sacrificing for and learning and developing. Prayer is essential and special in the scriptures - is it essential and special in your life? Or is it an add on, good idea, guilt inducer, etc...?

Prayer is communication with God. We are numb to that idea so I'll say it another way: Prayer is a human being, a created, fragile, temporary, sin-filled, one in 7 billion, person; communicating with the creator, all powerful, eternal, perfectly sinless, completely greater than us God who makes universes when he speaks, who rises the dead, who holds the direction of history in the back of his mind, who has total control of everything that happens in our lives and in our world and still maintains freewill on the earth. Prayer should not be a possibility.

And yet it is- here's why:

Start at the beginning

Genesis 3:8-10

There are a few points to note in this passage:

- God initiates prayer from his desire to be close to us. Talking to God was God's idea and he makes it possible. His desire was to interact with us on a daily basis like when you take a walk with your friend. We think that we initiate prayer - but God still works through the spirit to initiate prayer with us.

- Our sin (like Adam and Eve's) has changed the nature of prayer by separating us from God. The rest of the story of the bible and history until Jesus returns could be characterized as God's plan to bring us back to intimate communication and relationship with him.

As we march through the scriptures we see that God is the conversation starter. He starts the conversation with Noah, Abraham and Moses. When God gives Israel his law through an agreement, communicating with God is part of the rules that God lays out.

God would ultimately desire to talk with us directly, but once again, we put barriers in the way of communication with God.

God spoke in booming thunder and lightning (who was totally freaked out by the storm Monday night?) and all of the people of Israel hear the 10 commandments directly from God at the base of Mount Sinai. Can you imagine how cool it would be to hear God's voice, to hear the original speaking of the 10 commandments?

Here is the people's response:

Exodus 20:18-21

They were shaking with fear and they begged Moses to be their representative before God because they truly believed that they would die if they kept hearing his voice. (This is why you should never trust any preacher or person who says that God spoke to them or told them directly to do something - they would be dead.)

So Moses spoke with God (face to face!) and he had to wear a veil when he was among the people because his face would glow from talking to the almighty God.

In the law that God delivered to Moses there were multiple barriers and protections for the people that kept them at a distance from God but allowed them to come close without fear and despite their sinfulness.

For about 1000 years before Jesus came, a faithful person could not just pray to God as we pray to God. They had to fulfill certain obligations to pray righteously.

- Priest: They needed a priest to intercede for them.

- Place: They needed to pray at the one place that God's presence rested (also the place the priests were - the tabernacle or temple)

- Payment: They needed to bring a sacrifice for their sin so they might be pure enough to approach God via the priest

How much would that change the way you prayed?

OPEN QUESTION: What are pros and cons of having to pray like this?

Pros:

Prayer is more sacred

Recognition of sins is mandated

Sacrifice involved means more thought put into it, makes talking to God possible

Rules bring more confidence that you are doing it right - less insecurity

Affect you more - where you lived, where you vacationed

Cons:

No direct line to God

Have to travel

Have to give from your own flock or buy an animal

All of this separation is caused by our sinfulness. God's desire is to be with us, to have a direct line, to hang out face to face without it killing us but the people's sinfulness required this separation. The people's sin necessitated that a priest mediate between them and God. The people's sin necessitated that an animal be burnt with the smoke rising up along with the prayers of the people because those prayers are entering the very presence of God - the true holy of holies, a place that cannot be touched by sin.

All of that was the consequence of our sin.

There's one more con:

What if the temple and the priestly system is destroyed? How then will God's people communicate with him? Indeed, in 70 AD it was destroyed - 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Aren't you glad that you are a Christian? Aren't you glad that all of this has changed and that you have a direct line to God and you can talk to him while you're driving or laying in bed or nervous before an exam or during communion without needing a priest or a place or a payment?

That would be terribly difficult. I wonder how many of us would still be faithful to God if that was the requirement for drawing near to him in prayer.

Here's where I want to change your minds before we embark on this two month journey into prayer:

We still live in a fallen, sinful world and we are fallen, sinful beings, no different from Adam and Eve or the people in Moses' day who prayed at the tabernacle and temple. I take prayer for granted so I seldom remember that because of my sin I have still caused separation from God. He wants to be so close to me but I push him away. I am not righteous enough to just talk to him or to hear his voice and not die. How proud would I have to be to think that I'm good enough to bend God's ear to my will when centuries of sinful people just like me wouldn't imagine that as a possibility. Yet, most of us probably feel quite comfortable praying - I would say too comfortable praying.

Here's the reality: We still need a priest, a place and a payment in order to communicate with God. Our sin still keeps us from God's dream of intimacy.

Here's the difference: Jesus is all of those things for us.

Priest: Hebrews 7:23-25

The priests in the OT were men like us. They died and were succeeded by new priests. But Jesus has conquered death and lives eternally with God. He intercedes for us.

We need a mind change here that will make prayer more special for us as it should be. When you pray you are not talking to God. You are presenting your requests before God but there is separation because of your sin. Isa 59 says that because of our sin he will not hear us. Enter Jesus: he "always lives to intercede." He presents our prayers to God just as a priest would have done at the temple.

Have you ever wondered why we say "in Jesus name" (some of us say in your name addressing God directly - it doesn't disqualify your prayers but it may point to a lack of understanding). Jesus is receiving our prayers and presenting them to God on our behalf and if we didn't have him as our eternal high priest we would have no way of being in relationship to God.

Place:

We need more than a priest - we need a place. We can't just willy nilly pray wherever we want. But we think that's how it works right? Our sin still requires us to pray in one place. But again, Enter Jesus: instead of us going to that place to pray, he's made that place come to us.

Hebrews 9:11-12

Acts 2:38

When Jesus died he created for us a new holy of holies: the place where God's presence resides. And instead of entering into that place, that place enters into us through the holy spirit. We take the holy spirit even more for granted than prayer.

Do you understand what it means when it says you receive the gift of the holy spirit. The holy spirit is called a seal of our salvation (Eph 1, 2 Cor 1). Have you ever thought about why it is a seal of our salvation? Well, if you have the holy spirit inside of you, that means you have indeed been forgiven of all of your sins and thus you are saved. How else could the holy spirit of God come into you. The spirit of God only resides on earth in the temple of God- and so if you have the spirit in you - what does that make you? The temple!

This is why we can pray to God anytime, anyplace - not because the NT is lax on all the rules or takes sin less seriously - you are a cleansed, pure and perfect travelling temple, carrying around the presence of God wherever you go.

This also highlights the importance of praying for people. We think that prayer is not important, prayer is a waste of time, praying for people is a good idea. NO! It's so much more. When you pray for people, especially people who are lost, you are bringing them to your temple. You are putting them before the presence of God. You are making an inaccessible

and foreign God available to them. And only someone with the Holy Spirit can do that. Undoubtedly God hears the prayers of all, whether they are saved or not. And his spirit works on all, if they are unsaved he can work on them from the outside - but we who have the spirit inside of us have an advantage - Jesus hasn't removed the barrier but he's put us on the other side of it.

Payment:
Hebrews 9:13-14

Prayer is not cheap or easy. Prayer comes at a steep price. We cannot take it for granted. Our sin makes it impossible to communicate with God because sin causes death. OUR relationship with God is DOA when we sin. This is not changed in the NT. Blood, death and sacrifice are still the consequences of our sin. The difference is that we have Jesus as our payment. The one man sacrificed himself so that all people could be saved.

His blood is the continual stream of incense that goes before God and appeases his wrath. Every single prayer you have ever prayed is only possible because of Jesus' death on the cross. In every prayer, we should thank God for sacrificing his son as the ultimate passover lamb.

Close:

This is the current state of communication with God that we find ourselves in. We can go through the motions and pray thoughtlessly because prayer seems so easy. This attitude can even cause us to pray less - how can something so simple and easy be so powerful or worthwhile?

I hope that this changes the way you think about prayer. I hope that you'll realize that prayer is not commonplace. It is sacred and special. It is impossible without Jesus who in one person and in one act on the cross became our priest, place and payment.

As we pray more and more over these next months I hope that we'll be more conscious of what is really happening when we pray. That Jesus is talking to God on our behalf, that our sins are removed making it possible, that our very bodies house the holy of holies. How special and amazing prayer is!

And lastly, I hope that the ritual of praying "in Jesus name" will now be flooded with meaning for you. To do something in someone's name meant to do it in a way that completely embodied that person. If we are to truly pray in Jesus' name in these months then we need to pray sacrificially and boldly and with loud cries and tears and with compassion and with honesty just like Jesus. Those are just a few of the characteristics that make up his name.

That is the brief history of prayer up until today, the summer of 2014. There will come a day, however, when this system of prayer that has been created because of our sinfulness will go away. God will win out and we will no longer need a priest, a place or a payment. When we get into Revelation this fall we'll get to see God's plans. Revelation 21:22 describes eternity as having no temple. We won't need a place to go and meet God because instead of him living in a temple or living in us - we'll literally live in him. God's ultimate will of being with us like he was in the garden will be fulfilled. Oh what a day that will be!

But until that day, and especially this summer - we'll keep praying in Jesus' name.