

Prayers of the Saints: History of Prayer in the Bible

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SCRIPTURE

Ex 30:7-8: And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it [*the altar of incense*]. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations.

Mal 1:11: For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.

Rev 5:8: And when He [*the Lamb*] had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, reach holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.



PRAYER* IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

I. Genesis

A. Adam & Eve conversed with God on a regular basis (implied by Gen 2:19-20; Gen 3:8 ff). What do you think they talked about?

B. To whom do you think Adam was talking when he said: *This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man* (Gen 2:23)?

C. Cain & Abel (Gen 4).

D. Gen 4:26: At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD. What does this mean?

E. Abraham

1. God calls, Abram answers (Gen 12:1-9)

2. God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:1-6)

3. Abraham intercedes

a. For Sodom (Gen 18:16-33)

b. For Abimelech (Gen 20:7; 17)

F. Isaac (Gen 25:21)

G. Jacob (later named Israel)

1. Prays in Bethel (Gen 28:20)

2. Wrestles with God (Gen 32:22-32)

a. All night

b. Israel: one who struggles/contends with God

II. Exodus-Deuteronomy

A. Cry of God's people (Ex 3:7-10)

B. Moses intercedes for God's people (Ex 32:30-34; 33:12-18; Num 14:11-20)

C. Moses: spoke "face to face" with God (Num 12:1-8)

* Prayer in Hebrew (OT)

The verb [*to pray*] is found eighty-four times in the OT. There is a rich nomenclature for "praying" in the OT. There are at least a dozen Hebrew words for pray and prayer. But easily the most common word for "prayer" is *t'peelah* and the related verb, *fallah*. A number of suggestions have been made for the etymology of *fallah*. Wellhausen in the 19th century connected it with the Arabic *falla*, "to notch the edge of a sword" and thus *palal*, it was thought, meant "to cut or wound oneself," and reflected the pagan custom of slashing oneself in a frenzy during worship, a practice forbidden by the law (Deut 14:1).

A second suggestion also relates Hebrew *fallah* to Arabic *falla* but sees the connection between the two in the common meaning "to break, cut" with the subsequent development: to cut > to divide > to compare > to distinguish > to pass a judgment (Ap-Thomas).

A third suggestion is that Hebrew *fallah* and *nafall* are developments of the same bilateral stem meaning "to fall," emphasizing prayer and prostration...

Most often both the verb and the noun [*to pray*] refer to intercessory prayer. This is best illustrated in Solomon's prayer for the people at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8 and its parallel 2 Chr 6) where the root occurs 30 times in these chapters alone. The first reference there, 1 Kgs 8:28, reads, "listen to the prayer (*t'peelah*) of your servant and to his entreaty (*t'Heenato*)... listen to the cry (*reenah*) and the prayer (*t'peelah*) your servant makes to you today (*meet-fallel*)." —*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. R. Laird Harris, Editor; Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Associate Editor; Bruce K. Waltke, Associate Editor.

III. Samuel

- A. Hannah
 - 1. Praying without speaking (1 Sam 1:12-13)
 - 2. Hannah: praying = worship (1 Sam 2:1-10)
- B. Samuel
 - 1. Interceding (1 Sam 7:5)
 - 2. Praying AND instructing (1 Sam 12:23)

IV. The Temple

- A. A place to meet with and be reconciled to God (Ex 25:8-9)
- B. A place to hear from God: the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:21-22)
- C. A place to pray to God
 - 1. Dedicated as such by Solomon: 1 Kings 8:27-30 ff
 - 2. Prophesied as such by Isaiah (Is 56:6-7 – which was quoted by Jesus)

V. David

- A. The psalms: Israel's prayer book
- B. Eugene Peterson once said, "The psalms teach us how to cuss without cussing." What do you think he meant?

VI. Exilic & Post-exilic Prayers

- A. Daniel's prayer for Jerusalem (Dan 9)
- B. Nehemiah's quick inner prayer (Neh 2:1-6)
- C. Ezra's prayer of confession (Ez 9:5-15)

VII. Application

What do we see in all these former examples? Are there any common denominators?

I found that the psalms broadened my notion of prayer by taking more risks, demanding more of the relationship, expressing more passion. In short, they exposed the shallowness of my own prayers and challenged me to engage with God at a deeper level. Here is some of what I learned:

- Work out animosity toward enemies not by gossip or hostility, but by informing God of their injustice and asking God to set things right.
- It's all right to express impatience to God, asking for a speeded-up answer to prayer—and even to spell out God's own interests in achieving the desired results.
- Prayer sometimes involves talking to yourself ("Do not fret... Trust in the Lord... Be still"), saying aloud what you know to be healthy but have a hard time putting into practice.
- Focus not just on the unfairness and problems of life, but also on all that does turn out well. Review the good things of the past, and don't forget in the darkness what you learned in the light.
- Project yourself into the future as a changed person. Behavioral psychologists would call this the "Act as if" principle.

Beyond these principles, I learned from Psalms to converse with God as I would converse with my employer, my friend, my wife—in short, to treat God as a Person in every sense of the word. I had seen prayer as a kind of duty, not as a safe outlet for whatever I was thinking or feeling. Psalms freed me to go deeper.

—Philip Yancey, *Prayer*

VIII. Praying through Psalm 51

- Wait! Why are we praying through this prayer corporately? Isn't this prayer for someone who committed adultery and now feels ashamed?
- Yes! And as a church, we have committed spiritual adultery when we have faithlessly looked to other gods (idols, ideals, distractions, etc.) and not to the Lord Jesus Christ.

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

- 1 Have mercy on *us*, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out *our* transgressions.
- 2 Wash *us* thoroughly from *our* iniquity, and cleanse *us* from *our* sin!
- 3 For *we* know *our* transgressions, and *our* sin is ever before *us*.
- 4 Against You, You only, have *we* sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment.

Let us confess to the Father areas where we, as a church have wronged Him (in sin, rebellion, wickedness, dishonesty, deceit, etc.)

- 5 Behold, *we were* brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did *our* mothers conceive *us*.
- 6 Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being, and You teach *us* wisdom in the secret heart.
- 7 Purge *us* with hyssop, and *we* shall be clean; wash *us*, and *we* shall be whiter than snow.

Let us thank the Father for sending His Son to die for us. Let us rejoice that we can be plunged into the fountain of Christ's blood (whereas before we were drowning in sin and death).

- 8 Let *us* hear joy and gladness; let the bones that You have broken rejoice.
- 9 Hide Your face from *our* sins, and blot out all *our* iniquities.

Let us thank the Lord for His Fatherly discipline of us: for the times He has had to break our bones to get our attention. Let us thank Him for blotting out all our sins through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

- 10 Create in *us* a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within *us*.
- 11 Cast *us* not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from *us*.
- 12 Restore to *us* the joy of Your salvation, and uphold *us* with a willing spirit.

Let us ask again to be filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ. And let us ask that the Spirit would bring us renewed joy in God's salvation in addition to sustaining us with a willingness to love Him more.

- 13 Then *we* will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You.
- 14 Deliver *us* from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of *our* salvation, and *our* tongues will sing aloud of Your righteousness.
- 15 O Lord, open *our* lips, and *our* mouths will declare Your praise.

Let us ask for a renewed passion for the Gospel. David deserved death (according to OT Law, he should have been stoned by the people of Israel because he had committed adultery and murder). Likewise, as those who have rebelled against God, we deserve misery, death, and hell. But thanks be to Christ Jesus, we have been given joy, life, and eternal life. Let us ask God to help us understand this more to the point that He would "open our lips and our mouths to declare His praise" to each other and to the world.

- 16 For You will not delight in sacrifice, or *we* would give it; You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
- 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.
- 18 Do good to Zion in Your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem;
- 19 then will You delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Let us ask the Lord to build His Church. Let us ask Him to build up our "walls" with new living stones into His holy Temple (new converts). Let us ask for the joy in giving to God right sacrifices: not just tangible gifts but our lives as well.