

# Jesus and believers at prayer

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**T**he scripture Christians in the second and third centuries produced most frequently (in codex form) was the book of Psalms, according to Larry Hurtado, a scholar of early Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Why would that be the case? Because the Psalter was for them, as for Jesus, the primary book of prayer.

## Prayer in the Gospels

Prayer was essential to Jesus' spirituality, reflecting his complete dependence on God. This prayer relationship is a constant in John's Gospel; there Jesus often affirms that he can do nothing on his own: he speaks what the Father gives him to speak and does what the Father gives him to do.

While all four Gospels portray Jesus as a person of prayer, Luke especially highlights this feature of Jesus' person and work:

Jesus prays on the occasion of his baptism. The heavens open and God speaks words affirming Jesus' identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (3:21-22).

Jesus prays when he withdraws from the crowds to a deserted place to find strength and direction for his ministry (5:16).

Jesus prays all night before appointing the twelve for their special leadership roles (6:12-13).

Jesus prays on the occasion of Peter's confession that Jesus is Messiah (9:18-20). The teaching that follows, about the Son of Man's anticipated suffering, suggests that the nature of Jesus' messianic mission is at issue: will he remain true to God's call or yield to Satan's subversion of that call?

Jesus prays at his transfiguration, when “the appearance of his face changed” (9:28-29). As at his baptism, a voice from heaven affirms his divine sonship and beckons the inner circle of three disciples to “listen to him” (9:35; echoing Deut. 18:15).

Jesus’ prayer at “a certain place” elicits from a disciple the request that Jesus teach his followers to pray.

Jesus then provides a pattern in what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. This teaching is linked to a parable in which Jesus promises that God will give the best gift, the Holy Spirit, when we persistently ask (11:1-13).

Jesus further instructs his disciples on the importance of persisting in prayer, by telling a parable about a widow and an unjust judge (18:1-8).

Jesus prays for Simon Peter, for protection and deliverance from Satan’s power: “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail” (22:31-32).

Jesus prays in Gethsemane—both for himself and for his disciples—to counter the temptation to turn to violence. He prays that he will stay faithful and that his disciples will not resort to fighting evil with evil (22:39-46).

These nine texts specifically say that Jesus prayed, but they give little content. Other texts consist of prayers, such as the notable prayer in Luke 10:21-22 (parallel in Matt. 11:25-27):

*At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”*

Further, Mary’s Magnificat, Zechariah’s Benedictus, and Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis (in Luke 1–2) are forms of prayer: Mary’s

hymn of praise echoes Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2; Zechariah's "Blessed be ..." draws on lines from Psalms 105 and 106; and Simeon's song reflects lines from Isaiah 40:5; 42:6; 52:10. It is fair to say that prayer and praise—along with salvation, joy, and peace—form the ethos of Luke, and of Acts as well.<sup>2</sup>

Two of Jesus' three sayings from the cross in Luke are prayers. The first, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34), is unique to Luke, and it models fidelity to God amid martyrdom (Stephen follows Jesus' example; see Acts 7:60). The other prayer from the cross, "Father, into your hands I

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commend my spirit" (23:46), echoes Psalm 31:5, an entire psalm of prayer and praise in the midst of severe distress. Another well-known prayer from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt. 27:46b; Mark 15:34), similarly recalls Psalm 22, a trust-lament of the dying righteous one.

John's Gospel mentions other occasions on which Jesus prayed, most notably his "high priestly" prayer in chapter 17. Commentators generally agree that this prayer passes through three stages of focus: prayer for his own glorification (1-8), prayer for his disciples (9-19), and prayer for those who by the disciples' testimony will also come to believe and be Jesus' followers (20-26). Three overarching petitions in this prayer for disciples and believers are for protection from the evil one (14-16), for sanctification in God's truth (17-19), and for unity, that they may be one as Jesus and his Father are one (20-24). This latter portion is about us—those who will have come to believe through the word and witness of the first disciples:

*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have*

*loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

Jesus prays that the mutual indwelling that marked his relationship with the Father before the foundation of the world will include his followers, so that believers will be incorporated into this divine indwelling, mediated through Jesus. As Andrew Lincoln puts it:

*To believe in Jesus ... means being incorporated into this relationship of oneness and love that exists between Christ and God—that is, to experience the reality of Jesus' prayer: "may they also be in us!" (v. 21). And that relationship implies that believers in Jesus are part of the unique prayer experience between Christ and God, and so are caught up in his intercessory praying and share in it themselves when they pray in Jesus' name.<sup>3</sup>*

Seen in this light, prayer becomes a holy privilege, a renewal of our deepest identity, a participation in our oneness with God and Jesus Christ. Prayer reminds us and assures us about who and whose we are.

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Writers on Jesus at prayer summarize the significance of Jesus' prayers variously. Donald Goergen mentions five reasons why Jesus prayed: (1) for self-understanding and acceptance of divinity; (2) to sustain relationship to his heavenly Abba; (3) to maintain right thinking about and relationship to others; (4) to find direction and strength for major decisions; and (5) to pass over into God's life and return to share what he received.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Griffiths and John Koenig identify what and why Jesus instructs us to pray: (1) to praise, bless, thank, worship, glorify, and extol God; (2) to hold neighbors and enemies before God for reconciliation; (3) that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers; (4) for deliverance from temptation and Satanic attack; and (5) for forgiveness and healing.<sup>5</sup> Also, the Lord's Prayer provides a pattern for prayer, with

regard to scope and specific needs. It begins with three petitions about God: God's name, God's reign, God's will. It continues with four petitions about human material and spiritual needs, and ends with a doxology.

In recent decades many scholars have written about the significance of Jesus' address of God as "Abba" in prayer. The key point is that the Abba address indicates a relationship of honor, love, obedience, and intimacy between Jesus and his Father. Marianne Meye Thompson's discussion of the history of the debate is the best single treatment I am aware of, of this sensitive and important matter.<sup>6</sup>

### **Prayer in Acts**

This rich portrait of Jesus in prayer has analogies in the prayers of the early church as narrated in Acts. Bonnie Thurston notes there are twenty-five instances of prayer in Acts.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Stephen Barton's description of the spirituality of Acts,<sup>8</sup> I provide a summary of the early church's prayer life:

Prayer features regularly in the accounts of the life of the early church (1:14; 2:42; 12:5; 14:23).

The apostles and leaders of the church are depicted as people of prayer (3:1; 6:4; 7:59-60; 8:15; 10:9; 16:25; 20:36).

The coming of the Holy Spirit to empower the church is presented as a response to prayer (2:1-13; 4:31; 8:15).

Each turning point or crisis in the life of the church comes in response to prayer or is negotiated with the help of prayer (1:24-26; 7:59-60; 8:14; 9:11; 10:2, 4, 20; 11:5; 13:2-3; 22:17).

Both women and men engage in prayer (1:14; 12:12; 16:13; 21:5).

Prayer brings deliverance, including physical healing (see 9:40, for example), forgiveness (7:60; 8:22), personal salvation (8:24; 10:2, 30), and release to prisoners (12:12; 16:25-34).

Prayer, thanksgiving, and rejoicing are linked, giving the church a doxological ethos (2:46-47; 13:48; 27:35; 28:15).

The prayer in Acts 4:23-31 reflects the manner and content of the prayer of early church leaders in times of persecution and gratitude for God's deliverance. The prayer draws on portions of Psalm 2. Acts 4:25b-27 echoes and contextualizes Psalm 2:1-2. Referring to Jesus as God's "holy servant" (vv. 27, 30), the prayer borrows from Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son ..."

*After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.*

The scripture-based, situation-facing prayer of Peter and John and their friends resulted in a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit, inspiring them with freedom and courage to speak the word of God boldly. John Koenig's marvelous book, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus*, breathes this emphasis, inviting us to enter into the boldness of the early church as we experience afresh the Holy Spirit and as we witness in the name of Jesus. The book is a must for pastors.

Given to me by a pastor, it has enriched my spirituality and teaching.

### **Paul's contribution**

Paul's letters contain many prayers and early Christian confessions that function as prayers. The extended "Blessed be ..." paragraph-long sentence in Ephesians 1:3-14 is the Hebrew *berakah* (blessing) form of prayer, and the later part of the chapter is the thanksgiving (*hodayah*) form.<sup>10</sup> Paul's many benedictions—in four of which the "God of peace" blesses—are also prayers.<sup>11</sup> The well-known text of Philippians 2:5-11 is a confession, but it can also be prayed. It extols Jesus Christ. Four Pauline prayer-texts are prominent: Philippians 1:9-11; Ephesians 1:16-23; 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-12.

In these prayers Paul thanks God for the believers' faith. His prayers ask that believers may (1) abound in love and know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge; (2) receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation so they may come to know Christ; (3) have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to know the hope to which Jesus Christ has called them, the riches of his glorious

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inheritance among the saints, and the greatness of his power for those who believe; (4) be filled with all the fullness of God (reflect God's character); (5) be filled with knowledge of God's will to lead lives worthy of and pleasing to the Lord; (6) bear the fruit of new life in Christ, the harvest of righteousness; (7) draw strength from God's glorious power to endure adversity with patience; and (8) joyfully give thanks.

Paul's prayers contribute to Christian character formation. They are part and parcel of Paul's extensive "in Christ" consciousness, and of his explication of this reality as the context for facing every challenge. His prayers are complemented by frequent calls to imitate himself, Christ, or God. All these modes of apostolic appeal foster Christian growth, empowered by Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation. New creation is Paul's leitmotif, and everything else flows from it. Prayers emerge from the new birth (of which Paul's Dam-

ascus road encounter is an example) that transforms being, values, and mission.

Other New Testament portions contribute to this prayer panorama, as *Into God's Presence: Prayers in the New Testament*, edited by Richard Longenecker, attests (see Heb. 5:7-10, for example). In *Covenant of Peace*, I include a service of worship from the book of Revelation.<sup>12</sup> Hymns of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving punctuate this “revelation of Jesus Christ,” given to John for his Lord’s Day worship. Prayers arise both from the martyrs under the altar of sacrifice (6:9) and from the altar of incense (5:8 and 8:4).<sup>13</sup>

### **New Testament prayer for today's Christians**

For us as for New Testament believers, prayer should be the breath of our being and the source of sustenance for our lives and ministries today. The variety in New Testament prayer challenges us to speak aloud to God out of the context of our experiences and concerns. The Lord’s Prayer provides a pattern: we address God as heavenly Abba<sup>14</sup> and implore God that the divine holiness, will, and purpose prevail; we petition for our material (daily bread) and spiritual needs: we seek forgiveness of our sins, salvation from temptation, and deliverance from evil (“the evil one”); and we extol God’s kingdom, power, and glory.<sup>15</sup> Yes, “prayer is the Christian’s vital breath.”<sup>16</sup>

Praying the Lord’s Prayer with other believers discloses the significance of praying to *our* Father, as William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas stress in *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*. Further, it is our Christian catechism, for we learn “how to be a Christian by learning how to pray as a Christian.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike prayers in which we petition God for *our* wants, this prayer “bends our lives to God.” “In praying [the Lord’s Prayer], our lives are being bent away from their natural inclinations toward God. We are becoming the very holiness, obedience, forgiveness for which we ask in the prayer.”<sup>18</sup>

In reading reflections by Eastern Mennonite University students on their experiences in Ivory Coast,<sup>19</sup> I noted a recurring emphasis: they learned that prayer was most important to the life and growth of the church; they were impressed and awed at the time their host parents spent in prayer—sometimes praying all



night, and regularly at the start of the day, as well as before and even after meals, in some cases.

In our busy culture's preoccupation with productivity, we find it difficult to set aside time to pray or even to permeate our work with prayer. Yet these very pressures increase our need to seek the way of Jesus, to sustain a breathing relationship with our Abba in heaven. When Professor David Flusser from Hebrew University in Jerusalem visited Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in the 1980s, he sustained a constant (twenty-four–seven) “mumble” over scripture, God, and life. I believe it was a form of prayer. Mine and yours will probably take a different form from his. But finding our identity in the Lord's Prayer and asking for the Holy Spirit who prays for us when we don't know how to pray (Rom. 8:26), let us by all means in Jesus' name pray.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I learned this information in a July 2006 conversation with Larry Hurtado.

<sup>2</sup> For these emphases in Luke, see Willard M. Swartley, “Luke: Gospel of Joy, Salvation, Peace, and Praise,” in *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 121–51. Unfortunately, I did not include prayer in the title of the chapter; had I written the present article three years ago, that chapter subtitle would likely be “Joy and Salvation, Peace and Justice, Prayer and Praise.”

<sup>3</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, “God's Name, Jesus' Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 171.

<sup>4</sup> Donald J. Goergen, *The Mission and Ministry of Jesus* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1986), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Griffiths, *The Example of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 167–74; and John Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 66–113.

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Meyer Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 1–34.

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie Thurston, *Spiritual Life in the Early Church: The Witness of Acts and Ephesians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 90–91.

<sup>9</sup> The Septuagint uses *pais* to translate “son” (*bn*) in Psalm 2:7, and here (and in chapter 3) in Acts, *pais* is used and translated as “servant.” The Greek *pais* means either “son, child” (KJV) or “servant” (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> For the different forms of prayer in Hebrew scripture and Jewish liturgy, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church: A Study in the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 12–17. For listing and frequency of various Greek words for prayer in the New Testament, see I. Howard Marshall, “Jesus, Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Into God's Presence*, ed. Longenecker, 113.

<sup>11</sup> For these texts and discussion, see Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 209–11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 345–55.

<sup>13</sup> For explication of the significance of this double prayer ascent, see Richard Bauckham, “Prayer in the Book of Revelation,” in *Into God’s Presence*, ed. Longenecker, 252–71, esp. the diagram on 271.

<sup>14</sup> What a father did in first-century Jewish culture included aspects of both maternal and paternal roles in our culture. Thus in the contextualization process, *Abba* denotes heavenly parent. In addressing God as *Abba*, we should not fall victim to our projections of bad—or even good—parental experience, but name the divine parental person (and character) that provides a model and a norm for human parenting. For the problematic dimension of this view, see Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, chapter 14.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Paul Boers, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray: A New Look at the Lord’s Prayer* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 21–22. Boers’s exposition is well suited to small group study.

<sup>16</sup> From the hymn text “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire,” by Stephanie Martin (1990); no. 572 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, with Scott C. Saye, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 110.

<sup>19</sup> In “What I Learned from the African Church: Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience,” *Missio Dei* 11, ed. James R. Krabill (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2006).

## About the author

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