

Steps to Successful Prayer, Part 6

Scripture: Jeremiah 32:16–22; Daniel 9:3–18; Jonah 2:1–10

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Part 6: Stick to Godly Patterns

A church in Florida recently began offering drive-thru prayer services. Men and women at the end of their rope and in need of prayer pull up outside the church to order up petitions to the Lord the way you and I might order a burger or coffee. Of the roughly 150 people they've prayed with so far, many of them have never actually set foot inside a church.

That is clearly a ridiculous and unbiblical stunt. But how often are we guilty of using our prayers just like a drive-thru window? We're too often driven to prayer by the needs of the moment only, concerned about our circumstances alone, and eager to get on with life as quickly as possible. We're prone to myopic, self-centered thinking that focuses on how events impact our lives rather than how the Lord is working through them.

Instead, we need to discipline ourselves to put God and His purposes first and look for what He is accomplishing in every situation, regardless of our desires or circumstances.

I want to close out this series on prayer by taking a closer look at some practical examples from God's Word. We're going to consider the prayers of three Old Testament prophets—each of them in the midst of truly dire situations. But as you'll see, none of them allowed their circumstances to be an excuse to let the focus of their prayers shift away from the Lord, His supreme glory, and His sovereign plan.

Jeremiah

In the thirty-second chapter of the book of Jeremiah, the prophet of God is in prison. He had preached to a nation of people who would not hear. They just wanted to shut his mouth. They were not interested in anything he or his God had to say. Ultimately they threw him into a pit. He had seen no measurable success in his ministry (as the world counts success). Jeremiah 32:16-22 records his prayer:

I prayed to the LORD, saying, "Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You, who shows lovingkindness to thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty God. The LORD of hosts is His name; great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds; who has set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and even to this day both in Israel and among mankind; and You have made a name for Yourself, as at this day.

"You brought Your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and with wonders, and with a

strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terror; and gave them this land, which You swore to their forefathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Here is a man in great distress, torn with feelings of loneliness and grief, despairing of hope for his people, rejected by the entire nation. But the preoccupation of his heart was to extol the glory, the majesty, the name, the honor, and the works of God. He was not preoccupied with his own pain. He was not obsessed with being liberated from his circumstances. Out of his suffering came worship.

All our prayers should be of that flavor.

Daniel

Daniel, caught in the transition between two great world empires, was interceding on behalf of a dispossessed people in a foreign land. But notice the spirit with which he brought his requests. He tells us, “I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes” (Daniel 9:3). And notice how his prayer begins: “Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances” (Daniel 9:4-5).

The starting point is praise. That gives way to penitence. And as the prayer continues in Daniel 9, there are twelve more verses of self-abasing confession as Daniel rehearses the sins of Israel. It’s filled with phrases like “Open shame belongs to us, O Lord” (Daniel 9:8); “we have rebelled against Him; nor have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God” (Daniel 9:9-10); and “we have sinned, we have been wicked” (Daniel 9:15). Those expressions are mingled with more praise: “Righteousness belongs to You, O Lord, but to us open shame” (Daniel 9:7); “the LORD our God is righteous with respect to all His deeds which He has done” (Daniel 9:14); and “[You] have brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and have made a name for Yourself” (Daniel 9:15).

Finally, in the very last sentence of his prayer, Daniel makes *one request*, and it is a plea for mercy. All Daniel’s praise (focusing on God’s righteousness and His mercy) and all his penitence (outlining the history of Israel’s disobedience) culminates in a prayer for forgiveness and restoration: “O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (Daniel 9:19).

And that one request was preceded by this summary argument: Daniel gathered up all his praise and all his confession; condensed them into one more affirmation of God’s transcendent greatness and Israel’s complete lack of merit; and then cited those very things as the grounds on which he was making his plea: “We are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion” (Daniel 9:18).

Again, notice that Daniel’s prayer began with an affirmation of the nature, glory, greatness, and majesty of God. It is an expression of worship, and the request at the end thus flows from a worshipful, penitent heart. That is always the godly perspective.

Jonah

Jonah prayed an exemplary prayer from the most unnatural and unimaginable of settings—the belly of a fish. If you can picture the wet, suffocating darkness and discomfort of such a place, you might begin to have an idea of how desperate Jonah’s situation was at that moment. The whole second chapter of Jonah is devoted to the record of his prayer, and the entire prayer is a profound expression of worship. It reads like a psalm. In fact, it’s full of references and allusions to the Psalms—almost as if Jonah were singing His worship in phrases borrowed from Israel’s psalter while he languished inside that living tomb.

The prayer is as passionate as you might expect from someone trapped inside a fish under the surface of the Mediterranean. Jonah begins: “I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me” (Jonah 2:2)—not a plea to God for help, but an expression of praise and deliverance, mentioning God in the third person and speaking of deliverance as if it were an accomplished fact.

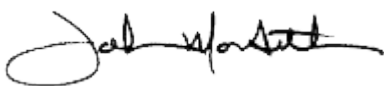
The remainder of the prayer is addressed directly to God in the second person—and the whole thing is an extended expression of more praise. Jonah rehearses what has happened to him (“You had cast me into the deep,” [Jonah 2:3]; “Weeds were wrapped around my head,” [Jonah 2:5]). Notice: Jonah is still inside the fish while he is praying this prayer (cf. Jonah 2:10); yet he consistently speaks of his deliverance in the past tense. And here’s the amazing thing about this prayer: though Jonah must have been as desperate as anyone who ever prayed for rescue from the Lord, his prayer contains not one single *request*. It is a pure, resounding expression of worship and faith in God, who alone *could* deliver Jonah. The key sentence is verse 7: “While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple.”

The focus of Jonah’s prayer—like all great prayers—was the glory of God. Although no one, perhaps, has ever been in a situation where it would be appropriate to plead and beg God to answer more than Jonah was, there was none of that in his prayer. And the past-tense references to Jonah’s deliverance were the furthest thing you can imagine from the contemporary prosperity-preachers’ notion of “positive confession.” Jonah wasn’t under any illusion that *his* words could alter the reality of his plight. He was simply extolling the character of God. And that is precisely what our Lord was teaching when He gave the disciples that model prayer in Luke 11.

So it ought to be clear that when Jesus taught His disciples to regard prayer as worship, that wasn’t anything novel. The great prayers we read in the Old Testament were likewise expressions of worship—including those that were prayed in the most desperate situations. The parallelism between prayer and worship is no coincidence. Prayer is the distilled essence of worship.

How much more, then, do you and I need to reevaluate our own priorities in prayer? Rather than paying momentary lip service to God before we get to our list of requests, we need to constantly examine our hearts in prayerful worship before the Lord, making sure we’re holding to the pattern Christ provided.

Successful prayer isn’t about getting what you want from God. It’s about bending your will to His, recognizing His supremacy, and reflecting on His glory. It’s an act of worship—one that knits your heart and mind to the Lord in consistent communion with Him.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Osteen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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