

“The Best Prayers in the Bible” (Part 1)

Genesis 20:1-4, 17; 24:10-27; 25:20-26; Exodus 2:23-25

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We begin a new series today, a series on prayer; specifically, prayers in the Bible. The *best* prayers in the Bible. Which is, admittedly, a very subjective enterprise. What makes a prayer *good*? Are some prayers *better* than others, and if so, what is it that *makes* it better? Is it the beauty of the words? Poetic eloquence? Does it have to do with one’s *intent* when one is praying? The *sincerity* of the prayer? Or is it the *results* of the prayer? Did the prayer make any tangible *difference* that people can detect with their own five senses? I’m not going to answer that question yet; I think we may discover the answer to that question as we go along. Honestly, I’m not entirely sure which prayers I’m going to include in this series. I have some in mind, but I’d like to hear from you. Which prayers would *you* say are the best prayers in the Bible, and why? Are there some that have spoken to you powerfully? There was a pastor/teacher/scholar I knew during my Princeton days; he and his family had a special place in their hearts for Psalm 103. They used it at all the special family gatherings. Weddings. Funerals. There was a history within that family surrounding that particular psalm. It wasn’t just words on a page; it *spoke* to them powerfully. That’s what I’m looking for here; I would genuinely like to know which psalms, which prayers, in the Bible have meant something special to *you*, or to *your* family. Please, tell me. Clearly, those prayers – at least for *you* – are among the best prayers in the Bible.

Now you might be wondering, *why*. Why a series on biblical prayer? Simply put: because prayer *matters*. We have in this book a record of people’s personal encounters with almighty God. Their cries of joy, suffering, hope, pain. Heartfelt wishes for circumstances to be different in their personal lives or in the life of their nation. They took these cries not just to their journals, not just to their trusted confidants, but to the Almighty. To the one who had – and still has – the power to effect a change.

In some ways, it’s an unfashionable thing to do today. There’s a lot of skepticism in our world. A lot of people are indifferent, or apathetic, about the Almighty; a lot of people deny that there is any such Almighty; and others who think that even if there is, *talking* to the Almighty as if he would listen to *you* is pointless. Honestly, a lot of people seem to have given up on prayer. They might, in a pinch, ask a Christian to pray for them, but they might need some convincing to pray for themselves. Even many Christians today will ask others to pray for them, but won’t pray for themselves. Sometimes, Christians will even say to a friend that they will keep them in their prayers ... but then they never quite get around to actually doing it. Some people really don’t believe in prayer. Others aren’t very comfortable with it.

We have in this book a record of a people who prayed. And, in many instances, a record of *what happened* when they prayed. We can learn from their prayers. We can be *inspired* by their prayers.

The first reference to something resembling *prayer* in the Bible is a few chapters into the book of Genesis, after the birth of Adam and Eve's grandson Enosh; it says "at that time people began to call on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4.26). Call on him, *why*? Call on him, *for what*? Were they offering praises? Petitions? Confessions? Who knows. Whatever was going on, people were sensing that the Almighty was a being who could be *approached*. Called upon. That God would *listen* – the fundamental premise of prayer. For why would anyone bother *praying* if they don't believe that God will *listen*?

Fast forward to Genesis 20. Abraham and Sarah. They're in a place called Gerar, where Abraham (foolishly) tries to pass off Sarah (his wife) as his sister, and so the King of Gerar, a man named Abimelech, has Sarah brought to him. God comes to Abimelech in a dream and warns him to keep his hands off Sarah. Abimelech does so; he returns Sarah to Abraham; the two men have quite a talk; and then *Abraham prays to God* for the well-being of Abimelech and his family. It's the first specific mention of prayer in the Bible. It's a prayer for healing, really, although not the ordinary kind of healing, because Abraham is simply asking God to restore everything to the way it was *before* this incident occurred. God grants Abraham's request – but I find myself wondering if the prayer was even necessary, because *Abimelech was doing the right thing*, restoring Sarah to her proper place at Abraham's side. God had told Abimelech that he and his household would live if he did the right thing. It makes me wonder if there are times we pray for God to do something that he was *already planning* on doing.

Look now at Genesis 24. Abraham has sent his servant on a long journey back to his homeland, to find a wife for his son Isaac. He arrives in the town of Abraham's ancestors, takes a rest beside the village well, and wonders how will know which of the various unmarried women in the town would be the *right wife* for Isaac. "Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today," he prays. He asks God for a *particular set of circumstances to happen* so that he will know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, which woman he should approach. A woman named Rebekah comes to the well, and does *precisely* what the servant had indicated in his prayer. *This* is the woman who should become Isaac's wife. So – what did the servant's prayer *do*? Did it affect Rebekah's actions? Did she receive some kind of *nudge* telling her what to say and do when she arrived at the well? It would appear that she did. She may not have even been aware of it. Is it possible for *us* to affect other people's actions by our prayers? To affect the unfolding of events? It would seem so. And it would seem that if we are wanting to know the will of God, we can ask God to give us a sign – and he might just answer.

Next chapter, Genesis 25: Isaac and Rebekah are now married, and they are trying to have a baby – but it's not going so well. They try, and try again, but she remains childless. Not unlike some families in our world today. So, verse 21, "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord heard his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived." Isaac prays; she gets pregnant; you might think that the conception happened shortly after the prayer. And if you're in the boat that they were in, wanting to have a child and not getting one, and you try praying, and nothing happens, you might conclude that God's not listening, or that God doesn't want you to have a child, or that prayer is pointless. But there's a critically important detail here. We are told that Isaac was 40

years old when they got married, and 60 years old when they finally had a child. That's *twenty years*. At what point in that 20-year period did Isaac begin praying for a child? How many years did Isaac *keep* praying before something happened? Did he ever question whether it was really going to work? Did he ever give up in frustration and despair, and then decide, some while later, to try again? *Twenty years!* If you're praying for something, and it's not happening, *how long have you been praying?* Prayer sometimes requires an *incredible* amount of patience. God does not always grant our requests on the timetable that *we* would choose. If you're praying for something, *don't give up too soon*.

I want to take you to one more prayer story this morning; this time, in the book of Exodus. The Israelites have settled in Egypt because there was a famine in Israel. The Israelites are numerous, but in Egypt they are a minority. A cruel Egyptian Pharaoh turns them into slaves. Their taskmasters are heartless and mean. This goes on for some length of time. That Pharaoh dies, another one takes office; he continues the oppression. "The Israelites groaned because of their difficult labor, and they cried out; and their cry for help ascended to God... God heard their groaning... God saw the Israelites, and he took notice." (Genesis 2:23-25) It's not clear from the text if they were actually *praying* – taking their appeal to the Almighty – or if they were just weeping and wailing from the extent of their suffering. Which raises a question: do you have to *direct your words to God* in order for God to respond? Or does God simply take notice of people who are suffering? In the next chapter, God says to Moses, "I have *observed* the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have *heard* them crying out because of their oppressors, and I *know* about their sufferings." God *sees*; God *hears*; God *knows*. This is a God who is not *oblivious* to the cruel and heartless things we humans do to one another. This is a God who, at least sometimes, *responds* to suffering and misery. God sees; God hears; God knows – and then God *acts*.

Now you may have noticed that we seem to be generating at least as many questions as we are answers. There are aspects to prayer that are hard to figure out. And it's not just prayer that is sometimes perplexing; it's also sometimes *the nature of God*. When does God respond to people's requests, and when doesn't he? Why does it seem that sometimes God answers people's prayers quickly, and other times not till *years* have passed? Does God only answer *some* prayers? Is God *partial* to certain people, or certain groups of people? God heard the cries of the Israelites, and rescued them; but does God hear the cries of *other* enslaved people? And if so, *how long* will they have to *wait* for God to *act*? You can see why – even just looking at this handful of prayers here – people have *huge* questions about prayer. And, I think, not just prayer. They also have huge questions about *God*.

Which brings me to my second request. I want to know your stories. Your *personal experiences* with prayer. I want to know when you prayed for something, and you felt like God *really answered* your prayer. If you give me permission, I might share that story. Because one of the things I've come to learn over the years is that *people need to hear the stories of how God actually works in people's lives*. Not just two or three thousand years ago, in far-off Israel. But *here. Now*. The God we worship is the same God who heard and responded to the prayers long ago. *He still does that today*. Some of you *know* that to be true. Others might need to be convinced. Those of you who have experienced God's power at work through prayer ... trust me: *other people need to hear your stories*. Share them with me. Please.

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