



Jer. 29:11-14: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,
plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.
Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me,
and I will listen to you.
You will seek me and find me...I will be found by you, declares the Lord...”

Ps. 63:1: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O Lord, who has mercy on all, take away from me my sins, and mercifully kindle in me the fire of your Holy Spirit. Take away from me the heart of stone, and give me a heart of flesh, a heart to love you and adore you, a heart to delight in you, to follow you and enjoy you.

[In Jesus’ name. Amen.]

--Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397)

Introduction to Biblical Teaching on Prayer

Meaning of the Principal Words Used to Indicate Prayer in the New Testament

The early Christians lived in a world that had certain assumptions about prayer. They took over words and ideas from the world they lived in, but changed their meaning to reflect their new experience of God as God revealed Himself.

The most common words used to indicate prayer in the New Testament are *euchē* (εὐχή) and *proseuchē* (προσευχή).

- The root of the word *euchē* implies wishing for something to be the case.¹
 - Prayer, in other words, starts with
 - **a holy dissatisfaction with how things are** and
 - **a wish for things to be different (better/more rightly ordered).**
- (We’ll return to this point in the next few weeks when we look at how early Christian writers interpreted the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Your kingdom come.”)

¹ This can still be seen in phrases such as εὐχή ἐστὶ= “we could wish” (cf. *Const.* [536], 1216B: Εὐχή μὲν ἦν ἡμῶν τὸ ἐντεθῆναι ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς διπτύχοις); εὐχῆς τυγχάνειν/εὐχῆ χρῆσθαι= “to have one’s wishes realized”; and δι εὐχῆς ἐστὶ μοι τοῦτο= “such are my wishes.” See also LSJ, s.v. εὐχή, 2; s.v. εὐχομαι, 2; BAGD³, s.v. εὐχομαι, 2.

- Still, a prayer is more than a wish.
 - I can have an idle wish that I lived on a tropical island, but it goes nowhere. I do not really expect it to happen; it does not lead me to sell my house or buy a plane ticket. The wish to live on a tropical island just passes through my mind, makes me feel better for a minute, and then it is gone.
 - Many of the wishes we have are idle and don't involve any real commitment or expectation. Sometimes our prayers go down to this same level too and become less than what prayer really is.
- More specifically, *euchē* and *proseuchē* mean to **ask something from someone who can answer**.
 - Prayer thus rests upon a confidence that the person we are addressing can (and will) answer.
 - It is this specific kind of commitment and expectation that separates prayer from idle wishes or flippant comments like, “Oh, I wish I owned a sports car like that one.”
 - By contrast, prayer looks to someone who can answer and continues to expect an answer.
- In prayer **we ask for what we need to be well**.² (See James 5:14-15 and compare Lk. 17:13,19.)
 - A person's prayers therefore tell us a great deal about how they view their life, i.e.
 - what they think it means to be well;
 - what they think they need to have in order to be well and
 - what they are willing to do in order to get these things.
 - Cf. the definition of prayer offered by Basil of Caesarea *Hom. 5 (In martyrem Iulittam)*, 3: “Prayer is an asking for a good, made by the pious to God.”

Ancient Greek Conceptions of Prayer

In the ancient Greek world, before the coming of the Gospel, things one might want in order to be well might include

- for oneself: glory, fame, and victory in battle;
- for one's rivals: harm, defeat, and other evils.
 - Prayer (εὐχή) could include curses and imprecations:
 - When one calls down a curse (ἀπά) upon others (=praying to a deity that they be harmed), prayer is soured (made acid) and sharpened to a point (ὀξύνεται) (John Philoponus *De vocabulis quae diversum significatum exhibent secundum differentiam accentus*, rec. b, 6.3; rec. c, 31.2).

In the ancient Greek world, the prayer was usually accompanied by a vow, which stated a condition that was intended to sway the god to do what was asked (“Give what I ask, and I shall offer X number of goats in sacrifice”).

- The vow created an obligation between the person who offers and the god who is swayed by the promised offering and persuaded to act in a different way.

² Greek etymological writers suggested that εὐχή “prayer” should be derived from ἡ τοῦ εὖ εἶχειν αἰτησις “asking to be well.” See, e.g., Orion *Etymologicum* (53,14); *Etymologicum Gudianum* (567,12); *Etymologicum magnum* (Kallierges, 400,14); ps.-Zonaras *Lexicon* (913,14).

This way of approaching prayer shows the extent to which the pre-Christian Greek world was

- an activist, this-worldly culture
 - “Actions belong to the young, plans to the middle-aged, and prayers to the elderly” (Aristophanes the Grammarian *apud* Harpocration *Lexicon in decem oratores Atticos*, 134,3)
- based on the idea that if I do something for you, you will do something for me
 - Cf. the Latin phrase *do ut des* = “I give [to you], so that you may give [to me].”

Early Christian Conceptions of Prayer

Early Christians changed this concept of prayer in several ways.

- They believed that the only condition of prayer is Jesus Christ, whom God himself freely gave to us. Nothing else (no gift or vow of sacrifice on our part) is necessary for us to rest in God’s favor or for God to hear and answer our prayers.
 - This is why “prayer in the name of Jesus” is represented as necessary and so powerful in the New Testament; cf. Mk. 9:39; Acts 3:6; 4:10; 4:30; 16:18; 19:13; Jn. 16:24; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Cor. 5:4; Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17.
 - Note also prayer that depends upon the authority of Jesus as a precondition for spiritual warfare and exorcism in Mk. 9:25-29.
- Prayer as a Gift from God: Prayer as a Grace Which Finds Its Ultimate Source in God: Early Christians believed that God moves us to pray and thus is himself the ultimate source of all prayer (Evagrius, *Or.* 58). Even our prayer to God is thus a gift from God (Ant. Mon. *Hom.* 106), rather than something we produce on our own initiative out of our own resources.
 - This is rooted in the idea, found in the letters of Paul, that the Spirit both moves us to pray and makes our feeble prayers intelligible and effective with God. See Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18; compare also Acts 4:31.
- Early Christians emphasized that God could not only change the outward circumstances of life but also people’s hearts. Changed hearts (intentions, desires, and loves) were at least as important as changed circumstances.
- Non-retribution: we do not use prayer to get what we want at other people’s expense.
 - Prayers that ask for others to be harmed--e.g. calling down a curse on people and using magic against them--are to be avoided (see respectively Rom. 12:14 and Acts 19:19).
 - Praying to have a position that others cannot is also rejected (Mt. 20:21).
- Prayer is to regularly involve a two-way conversation, in which we not only talk to God and present our concerns to him, but also listen to God. If we are to speak truthfully with God and to hear what he is saying back to us, we need to prepare ourselves before we begin to pray.
 - Cf. Nilus *De oratione* 3: “Prayer is the mind’s conversing with God. What settling, then, does the mind need to become unalterably quiet so that it can go out to its own Master and to converse with him with nothing intervening?”
 - Cf. also Ambrose (*Ep.* 22,25) on the relation between prayer and the reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*): “You pray, you will speak to the bridegroom; you read, he speaks to you.”

Prayerlessness was regarded by early Christians as a sign of unbelief (Job 21:15; cf. Ps. 14:1a,4b=53:1a,4b) resulting from sinful self-reliance (Jer. 17:5) or trust in other human beings or lesser powers rather than God (Is. 30:1-2; 31:1; cf. the lesser powers mentioned in Dt. 32:17; Jer. 2:5-8).

- Cf. James 4:2-3, where it is the presence of unbelief rooted in self-reliance which moves God to condemn those who do not pray but use forceful human action to get what they want (James 4:2-3).

Prayer as a Withdrawal from the Activities of Ordinary Life

To prepare oneself to pray, it was thought to be essential that one withdraw for a time from the noise and activities of everyday life. One could see the importance of this from looking at the life of Jesus.

- Lk. 5:15-16: "Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that the crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."
- Lk. 6:12: "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God."
- Lk. 22:41: "He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed."
- Mk. 1:35: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed."
- Lk. 6:46-47: "After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake and Jesus was alone on the land."

In such passages, early Christians pointed out, one sees that Jesus regularly took extended periods of time in the morning and the evening to withdraw from everyday activities to engage in prayer, treating prayer as the first thing that was to be done before anything else.

Communal Worship as a Distinctive Feature of the Early Christian Movement

There were a number of features that set early Christian worship apart from the practices typical of Greco-Roman paganism:

- the requirement to meet together regularly (at least weekly, often daily) for prayer;
- the need to daily recite certain set prayers (such as the Lord's Prayer);
- the need to confess one's sins and to be reconciled to others before offering prayer (see respectively James 5:16 and Mt. 5:24; 1 Tim. 2:8). Injustice, deception and lack of mercy were to be addressed before one entered into prayer.

Unlike Greco-Roman paganism which tended to focus on stereotyped acts of individual devotion (e.g. making an offering to a statue of a god) followed by petition, early Christians thought of worship as primarily a communal act of expressing joy and gratitude to God (Is. 56:7; Lk. 24:52; Col. 4:2; Rev. 11:16-18), a kind of worship which was intrinsically connected with the worship going on in the heavenly places.

- Rev. 5:8: “And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”
- Rev. 8:3: “Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne.”

Secondarily, prayer involved petition, not only for oneself (Mt. 7:7), but also for other believers (Acts 12:15; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6) and for the Church as a whole (John 17:20; Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; 3:4; Phil. 1:4; Col. 1:3; 4:12; 1 Thess. 1:2).

Daily Prayer: Times of Prayer and the Early Development of the Liturgy of Hours

In the post-exilic period, it was considered pious for a Jew to pray several times a day (*Dan. 6:10 [3 times a day]; *Ps. 55:17 (evening, morning and noon); cf. possibly Ps. 88:1 and Lk. 2:37 and compare also 2 Enoch 51:4: “It is good to go morning, midday and evening into the Lord’s dwelling, for the glory of the creator”).

- Something similar may be presupposed in Acts 10:9 (prayer at noon); 10:30 (prayer at three in the afternoon).
- Compare also *Didache* 8.3 where one is to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.

Clement of Alexandria, writing in Egypt c. 215, mentions people who advocated prayer three times daily at specified times (*Strom.* VII,7, 40:3: “Now if some assign fixed hours for prayer, such as the third, sixth and ninth...”).

In addition to these Clement also recommends praying additional morning and evening prayers (on rising, before retiring, at night), as well as prayers before, during and after meals (see *Paed.* II, 9-10; *Strom.* VII,7, 49,3-4).

Origen, writing in the middle of the third century, mentions prayer four times a day (morning, noon, evening, and night).

By the end of the fourth century (Jerome, *Ep.* 22,37 [*ad Eustochium*, dated 384]; 107,4 [*ad Laetam*, dated 403]), prayers were regularly offered at dawn the third, sixth, and ninth hour and in the evening (the time from sunrise to sunset being reckoned as twelve hours).

- This later was adapted to become the monastic celebration of the “divine office” at matins, terce, sext, none and vespers.
 - Compare Basil, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, 37,3-5, citing Ps. 76:4 [matins]; 5:4-5 [terce]; 54:18 [sext; cf. Ps. 90:6 LXX]; Acts 3:1 [none]; Acts 16:25 and Ps. 118:62 [vespers; cf. Ps. 118:148].
 - *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.34.1 adds “at cockcrow” (matins being doubled, due to a trend to celebrate it before sunrise??)

Compare also the description of the divine office in its final form in the *Rule* of St. Benedict († c. 553):

- Matins/Vigils/Nocturns (soon after midnight or at least prior to dawn)=principal morning service, includes the Canticle of Zechariah (Lk. 1:68-79)
- Lauds/Prime (early morning, at or shortly after sunrise, at the beginning of the new day)
- Terce (third hour=9 am)
- Sext (sixth hour=noon)
- None (ninth hour=3 pm)
- Vespers (early evening)=principal afternoon/evening service, includes Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55)

vii. Compline (night prayer—sometimes said individually prior to going to bed)

Besides these fixed hours of prayer, early Christians also sometimes observed vigils (night watches) as a special form of urgent and devoted prayer.

- This involved fasting from sleep by staying up part of the night when one would ordinarily be sleeping to devote oneself to prayer and intercession (based on the example of Jesus in Lk. 6:12; Mt. 26:41 [staying up late into the night] and Mk. 1:35 [rising in the early morning well before dawn]; compare also 1 Sam. 15:11 and possibly Lk. 2:37).
- By the beginning of the third century, the night vigil was given an eschatological interpretation based on Lk. 12: 35-37 and the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (see, e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2:9).
- Later it was argued that just as the heavenly powers do not sleep but continue their praise of God unceasingly, so while the world sleeps one might keep vigil with the angels and join in their worship.

The underlying idea behind these daily times of prayer and occasional vigils was that prayer should be offered “always” (1 Thess. 1:2) and “unceasingly” (1 Thess. 5:17).

Special occasions of prayer:

- when tempted (Mt. 26:41; Lk. 18:1)
- at times where discernment is required before a decision can be made (Acts 13:2-3)
- for healing (Acts 9:40) of the sick (James 5:14-16)
- for sinners (1 Jn. 5:16-17) and for the spread of the Gospel (Col. 4:3-4)
- for the Church (Col. 1:9-10) and for God’s servants (Rom. 15:30), who seek to build up the Church

Note also the service of prayer offered by widows supported by church (cf. 1 Tim. 5:5 and compare *Sententiae Apostolorum* 2 [p. 84] in Lampe *sub* χήρα, which describes three groups of widows, two remaining in prayer for all those in trial and for revelations concerning what one must do, the third sitting with those tried by illnesses.

Physical Positions in Prayer: How the Disposition of the Body Can Influence the Disposition of the Soul toward God

Standing at Reverent Attention in God’s Presence (1 Kings 8:22; *Mk. 11:25; Lk. 18:11)

Early Christians commonly faced east when praying. Various reasons were given for this (to face the rising sun=Christ, the true light of the world and the sun of justice, rising in the east; east is the direction of Eden/Paradise, to which we long to be restored, etc.). This is the origin of churches being laid out, so that the congregation faces east toward the altar/apse.

Praying While Sitting (2 Sam. 7:18)

Kneeling as a Sign of Reverent Submission and Dependence (*1 Kings 8:54; *2 Chron. 6:13; *Ezra 9:5; *Lk. 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14-15)

Full Prostration (With One’s Face on the Ground) Showing Complete Humbling of Oneself Before God (Gen. 24:52; *Num. 20:6; Jos. 5:14; 1 Kings 18:42; *2 Chron. 20:18; Mt. 26:39)

Praying with Arms Outstretched (*Ex. 9:29; 1 Kings 8:54; 2 Chron. 6:13; *Ps. 77:2; Is. 1:15)

Praying with Hands Raised (*Ps. 63:4; *1 Tim. 2:8); cf. the “saint *orant* [=praying]” posture in early Christian art.

- Cf. John Chrysostom *Exp. in Ps.* 140:2 (PG, 431C): “Since these [hands] attend to many evils...for this very reason...we are bidden to raise them up, so that the ministry of prayer might be a chain to bind [or: restrict] their evils.”

Extensive Use of the Psalms in Daily Prayer

--Basil *Hom in Ps.* 1, n.2: “A psalm sets demons to flight, brings in the help of angels, is a shield against night terrors, rest from daily labors, protection for children, a glorious adornment for youth, a consolation for the elderly, a most fitting adornment for women.”

--Augustine, *Ennarationes in Psalmos* (*in Ps. 30. ennar.* 3, n. 1): If a Psalm prays, pray; if it groans, groan; and if it is joyous, rejoice; and if it hopes, hope; and if it fears, be afraid. For all the things which have been written here are a mirror of us.”

--Augustine, *Conf.* 9.4.8 (tr. Boulding): “How loudly I cried out to you, my God, as I read the psalms of David, songs full of faith, outbursts of devotion with no room in them for the breath of pride...How loudly I began to cry out to you in those psalms, how I was inflamed by them with love for you and fired to recite them to the whole world, were I able, as a remedy against human pride! Yet in truth they are sung throughout the world, and no one can hide from your burning heat.”

--John Moschus († 619), *Pratum spirituale* 152: “Again the elder [sc. Marcellus the Scelliotte, Abba of the Monastery of Monidia] said, ‘Believe me, children, there is nothing which troubles, incites, irritates, wounds, destroys, distresses and excites the demons and the supremely evil Satan himself against us, as the constant study of the Psalms. The entire holy Scripture is beneficial to us and not a little offensive to the demons, but none of it distresses them more than the Psalter...For when we meditate upon the psalms, on the one hand, we are praying on our own account, while, on the other hand, we are bringing down curses on the demons. Thus, when we say, ‘Have mercy upon me O God after your great goodness: and according to the multitude of your tender mercies, do away with my transgressions’ (Ps. 50:1) and again, ‘Cast me not away from your presence: and take not your Holy Spirit from me’ (Ps. 50:11) and ‘Cast me not away in the time of age: forsake me not when my strength fails me’ (Ps. 70:9), we are praying for ourselves. But then we bring down curses on the demons when, for instance, we say: ‘Let God arise and let his enemies be scattered: let them also that hate him flee before him’ (Ps. 61:1) and...and ‘I myself have seen the ungodly in great power and flourishing like a green bay-tree: I went by and lo, he was gone; I sought him, but his place could nowhere be found’ (Ps. 36:35-36)...”