

Prayer is often something that people struggle with. As Christians we are fairly certain that prayer is important. But we're not always sure how to go about it. It's often one of the most difficult aspects of our spiritual journeys.

But that's to be expected. We are flawed and fallible human beings. And in prayer we are attempting to make contact, to commune with the sovereign Lord and Creator of the Universe. That should give any reasonable person pause. It's a daunting and daring thing to be doing.

In fact, I know a number of Christians whom I consider mighty prayer warriors. But when I talk to them, they are always VERY self-deprecatory about their own prayer life. They are all too aware of their own flaws and failings.

I've talked to monks who devote 4 hours per day to prayer and meditation, 365 days a year. And those monks will be the first to say that they are really amateurs and novices when it comes to prayer.

In fact, the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century monk and spiritual guru, Thomas Merton, says the following about prayer:

"One cannot begin to face the real difficulties of the life of prayer... unless one is first perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience himself as one who knows little or nothing, and has a desperate need to learn the bare rudiments. Those who think they 'know' from the beginning will never, in fact, come to know anything."<sup>1</sup>

Merton is telling us that those who think they've got the prayer thing all sewn up are probably deluding themselves.

Merton continues:

"We do not want to be beginners (when it comes to prayer). But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life!"<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to prayer, we will never be anything but beginners all our life.

So as beginners, as perpetual prayer rookies and neophytes, we should seek out wisdom to help us in our own prayer lives. And one of the greatest sources of wisdom is the Old Testament book of Psalms.

Psalms is the prayer book and hymnal of the ancient Jewish people. Psalms also became one of the backbones of worship in the Christian Church. And the book of Psalms continues to be one of the greatest primers for prayer in existence.

Today we read a wonderful psalm, Psalm 103:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name."

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

{{10:30 And we didn't just read it together—we also sang it as the sequence hymn, the hymn before the Gospel reading.}}

I want to spend a few minutes with Psalm 103. What can it tell us about our relationship with God? How can it be instructive for our own prayer life?

Psalm 103 starts out with some statements that seem simple, but have incredible depth.

v1 Bless the Lord, O my soul, \*  
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.

Bless the Lord. What does it mean to bless the Lord?

We usually ask God to bless us. God, please give us this, please help us with that. Much of our prayer life is supplication, asking for things. Nothing wrong with that, and we'll come back to it in a minute.

But how do we bless God? What can we possibly offer to God?

We can only offer God one basic thing: praise / worship / thanksgiving / blessing.

The Hebrew word here<sup>3</sup> means "to bless" when it refers to God doing it. God bless us. But when it refers to us doing it, it means "to praise, to extol, to give thanks."

Bless the Lord. Praise God. Give thanks to God O my soul.

Soul. The Hebrew word for soul<sup>4</sup> means our total self, our whole being, our emotions and desires, everything about us.

"Bless the Lord O my soul" means 'I want to praise God with my entire being, with everything I am.'

And one of the features of Hebrew poetry is repetition, restating an idea in slightly different words. Thus the second line is a repeat and an echo of the first line:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.

May all that I am offer praise to God.

This is a wonderful reminder; this is a wonderful prayer lesson for us. So often we come to prayer with a laundry list, asking for things.

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<sup>3</sup> *barak*

<sup>4</sup> *nephesh*

But Psalm 103 begins by simply praising God for who he is, offering worship to God, offering adoration, blessing his holy name.

It's no accident that when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he doesn't teach us to start by asking for things. Nothing wrong with asking for things. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask for our daily bread, for forgiveness of our sins, for deliverance from temptation and evil. But the Lord's Prayer doesn't start with a series of requests. It starts with praise. It starts in a similar way to Psalm 103:

Our Father, hallowed / holy / praised / blessed be your name.

Maybe our prayer life would be richer if we followed this pattern. Before jumping in and asking for things, maybe we need to praise God, to bask in his presence, to offer worship for who he is, not for what we can get out of the relationship.

I once heard a monk say, "We don't pray because we want to attain X, Y, or Z, but because God is so great that there is really no higher human activity, there's nothing more beautiful to do."<sup>5</sup>

That's the kind of prayer Psalm 103 begins with:  
Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.

And then Psalm 103 goes into a list. But it's not a list of requests. Instead, it's a list of the good things God has done:

v2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, \*  
and forget not all his benefits.

And then the psalmist gives a long list of those benefits, those good things God has done.

3 He forgives all your sins \*  
and heals all your infirmities;

4 He redeems your life from the grave \*  
and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness;

5 He satisfies you with good things, \*  
and your youth is renewed like an eagle's.

8 The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, \*  
slow to anger and of great kindness.

And our section of Psalm 103 ended there. But the whole psalm keeps going:

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<sup>5</sup> Fr. Alkuin, Stift Heiligenkreuz Abbey, in the show *Top Ten Monks*

10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, \*  
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.

11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, \*  
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.

12 As far as the east is from the west, \*  
so far has he removed our sins from us.

This is an amazing list. These are all things to be thankful for. I could spend a whole sermon on any one of these verses. There is tremendous richness here.

But for our purposes this morning, let's step back and look at the pattern.

Verse 1 started with a statement of praise for who God is. And then the psalm gives a long, long list of reasons to be thankful to God for what God has done.

Again, this is different from the way many of us typically pray. And again, this is a tremendous way to enrich our prayer life—not to jump right away to a laundry list of requests for things that we want. But to praise God first and foremost. And then to reflect thankfully on all of God's blessings in your life.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, \*  
**and** forget not all his benefits.

As the old saying goes, if you pause to think, you'll have cause to thank.

There's one more theme I want to touch on briefly. Again, it's past the section of Psalm 103 that we prayed this morning. But it's a section that deals with our relationship with God.

v13 begins an incredible section that talks about God and us:

13 As a father cares for his children, \*  
so does the Lord care for those who fear him.

14 For he himself knows whereof we are made; \*  
he remembers that we are but dust.

15 Our days are like the grass; \*  
we flourish like a flower of the field;

16 When the wind goes over it, it is gone, \*  
and its place shall know it no more.

Psalm 103 says, yes, we are finite and limited creatures. But God loves us and cares for us like a loving father. But actually God is more than just a loving father. "As a father cares for his children," the Psalm says, or "As a father has compassion for his children, so does the Lord care for those who honor and have respect for him." And the word we translate as "cares" or "compassion"<sup>6</sup> actually stems from the Hebrew word for "womb." So God doesn't just love us with fatherly love. He loves us in the same way a mother loves us as well. An extremely rich image.

But that love, that compassion, is for those who fear him, or respect him, or treat him with reverence or worship. And this is an important reminder to us as well. We have to keep the paradox in mind.

We are invited to approach God as loving father, a father who cares for us with pure father-and-mother love. But we are also approaching the sovereign creator of the entire universe, the ground of all being. We need to respect that power.

I respect the power of electricity. I don't cavalierly take my keys and stick them in an electrical outlet.

We need to have that kind of respect for God. He is different from us. He is above us. We need to be cognizant of the ways we fall short of who he calls us to be. In other words, we need to be aware of our fallenness, our brokenness, our sinfulness. We need to be willing to confess our sins.

But... BUT... when we do so, because of God's tremendous fatherly and motherly love, he offers perfect forgiveness to us.

12 As far as the east is from the west, \*  
so far has he removed our sins from us.

If our prayers followed more of the pattern of Psalm 103, our prayer life, our spiritual life would be strengthened. Prayer is more than just coming to God with our laundry list of requests. That's a part of prayer. Give us our daily bread. Deliver us from evil. Nothing wrong with that.

But there are many other types of prayer as well. People have broken them down as people are wont to do into any number of categories: 10 types of prayer, or 8 types of prayer.

But I like the system that talks about 4 types of prayer. I can remember that. And that system uses the acronym, ACTS.

A-C-T-S.

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<sup>6</sup> *raham*

It stands for  
Adoration  
Confession  
Thanksgiving  
Supplication.

All of those types of prayer are important in our prayer life.

Adoration: Worship. Praising God simply for who he is.

Confession: Remembering who we are and who God is. Asking to be forgiven.

Thanksgiving: Remembering all of the things God has done for us.

And, then, yes, Supplication: Asking for things. Asking for things for ourselves.  
Asking for things on behalf of others.

A prayer life that is focused only on Supplication lacks the richness of a prayer life that is more rounded, that also focuses on Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, AND Supplication.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.  
Forget not all his benefits.

As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our sins from us.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.