

The Church Ethic 312: A Study of All Biblical Prayers



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This study is intended to present findings from a survey of all of the prayers in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. In the effort to avoid excluding any potentially relevant passages, a wide net was thrown. The survey included every place that prayers were made (whether the words of the prayer were recorded or not), instructions pertaining to prayer, oaths invoking God, and expressions of worship such as psalms, sacrifices and offerings.

In a general sense, the purpose of this study was very much to identify and categorize the types of things that people pray for in the Bible in order to better understand how we ought to pray as Christians today.

But, in addition to determining what we should pray for, there were some other noteworthy items that were produced from reviewing every prayer in the Bible.

1) Righteous and Answered Prayer

There are from time to time clear assertions that righteousness is a necessary precursor to God answering our prayers. Now, this righteousness is not surprisingly twofold as can be seen from two passages in John's Gospel.

Number one, consider John 15.

John 15:3 Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. 5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. 6 If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 **If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.**

Here we begin with the opening phrase in verse 3, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." This phrase is immediately followed by the phrase "Abide in me, and I in you," which is slightly modified and explained in verse 7 where it is connected to prayer. Verse 7 reads, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."

Here, our ability to ask and receive is directly tied to our remaining in the words spoken by Jesus, which have made us clean.

For the Jewish mind, the idea of “cleanness” speaks of ritual purity. So there is a sense here of being made pure by Jesus’ words. While the passage does not mention the idea of atonement or Christ’s sacrificial death to bring about atonement, there is a connection to such things. The idea of remaining in Christ and his words or teachings speaks to the idea of faith, faith in Christ and faith in what Christ has taught. In a New Testament sense, we know that Christ’s atoning work, his death and resurrection, are applied to those who have such faith. Therefore, although the atoning sacrifice is not directly mentioned, this passage is teaching specifically about the vehicle for how that atonement is applied, namely, faith.

We see these things confirmed in John 14, just one chapter earlier.

John 14:12 Verily, verily, I say unto you, **He that believeth on me**, the works that I do shall he do also; and **greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.** **13 And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do**, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14 If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.**

Here in chapter 14, Jesus begins in verse 12 by again stipulating that belief in him is a prerequisite for asking and receiving in prayer in verse 13. But, here he connects this concept to the phrase “because I go unto my Father.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ return to the Father via his post-resurrection ascension is, in fact, inherently tied to Jesus’ death of the cross. One chapter earlier during John 13, we see Jesus’ himself anticipating this return to the Father in connection with the impending Passover feast, which was the occasion for the last supper.

John 13:1 Now **before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father**, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.

Both the Passover and the last supper commemorate Jesus’ atoning death as God’s sacrificial lamb. So, here again we see the underlying connection between Jesus’ return to the Father and his impending sacrifice on the cross.

We see this connection again one chapter after John 15, when Jesus further instructs his disciples concerning prayer.

John 16:16 **A little while (3397), and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while (3397), and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.** **17** Then said some of his disciples among themselves, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? **18** They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith. **19** Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I

said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? 20 **Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.** 21 A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. 22 **And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice,** and your joy no man taketh from you. 23 **And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.** 24 Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. 25 These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father. 26 **At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you:** 27 For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God. 28 **I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.**

Throughout chapter 16:16-27, Jesus repeatedly speaks of two things, his return to the Father and his disciples being able to ask and receive in prayer. But what does Jesus' mean by "that day" in verse 23? The full phrase is, "in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you." Chapter 2 of John's Gospel provides several cues that the timeframe in chapter 16 is in reference to Jesus' death and resurrection.

John 20:11 But **Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping:** and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, 12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. 13 And they say unto her, **Woman, why weepest thou?** She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. 14 And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus saith unto her, **Woman, why weepest thou?** whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. 16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. 17 **Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father:** but go to my brethren, and say unto them, **I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.** 18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her. 19 Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut **where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst,** and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. 20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. **Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.**

The details of these verses correspond to items mentioned by Jesus in chapter 16. One, verse 11 begins with Mary weeping. Chapter 16:20 explains that Jesus'

departure would result in his followers weeping and lamenting while the world rejoiced. Two, in verses 16-17, Jesus appears to Mary. And in verses 19-20, Jesus appears to his disciples. As verse 20 denotes specifically, his appearances made them “glad, when they saw the Lord.” This corresponds to chapter 16:16 in which Jesus explains that his disciples would not see him for a short while and then, after a short while, they would see him again. It also corresponds to chapter 16:20 and 22 in which Jesus states that, “now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice.” Three, in verse 17 Jesus explains to Mary that he had “not yet ascended to my Father.”

So, here we have a short duration in which the disciples have sorrow and do not see Jesus because of his death followed by them having joy because they see him again after his death. And the immediate setting for the seeing Jesus again also seems to be before Jesus returns to the Father.

The most relevant point here is that we can now identify the meaning of the phrase “that day” in John 16:23 and 26. “That day” is the day on which Jesus’ disciples would see him again and have joy after having sorrow due to being separated from him for a short time as a result of his death. Jesus’ permanent return to the Father could only happen once his death and resurrection occurred. Having accomplished his atoning work on the cross, Jesus could not only now return to the Father but his disciples would now be able to ask the Father and receive. In short, because Jesus could go to the Father, Jesus’ disciples could now ask and receive from the Father. His death and resurrection had accomplished both.

Consequently, the first sense in which righteousness is a necessary precursor to having our prayers answered pertains to the righteousness that is brought by faith in Jesus Christ and accomplished by his atoning work on the cross.

Number two, John 9 also informs us about another sense in which righteousness is a prerequisite to God answering our prayers.

John 9:31 Now we know that **God heareth not sinners:** but **if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.** 32 Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind. 33 If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.

First, in this passage a blind man is testifying about Jesus before the religious authorities (John 9:13) and explaining to them what the ability to heal the blind means about the moral character of Jesus. In short, he argues that Jesus could not heal the blind if he was a sinner because God only answers the requests “if any many be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will.” Notice here that this statement is generalized. The word “sinners” is plural. The phrase “if any” is translated from the Greek word “tis” (5100), which means “a certain, some” and is also broadly inclusive.

What we see here is a general category of men, of which Jesus is the perfect and complete example. But, the righteousness emphasized in this passage is not a righteousness derived solely from atonement. After all, this axiom “God heareth not sinners” is applied to Jesus who was not a sinner and who was in no need of atonement. Moreover, Jesus hadn’t accomplished our atonement yet. So, this formerly blind man isn’t speaking of a category of men who’ve been made righteous by Christ’s atonement. Instead, verse 31 begins by listing what “we know.” In other words, the man is citing common perception among the Jewish people that there is a category of men that God answers because they generally do not practice sin but who obey God. Consequently, the righteousness emphasized in John 9 is not a righteousness of unmerited forgiveness of sins. It’s a righteousness of obedience and abstention from sin. (Now, of course, in New Testament Christianity, these two aspects of righteousness go hand-in-hand perfectly reconciled and cooperating with one another. Christ’s atonement provides unmerited forgiveness of sins for sinners who then respond in faith to Christ and turn from sin to obedience.) But the point here is that John 9 prevents us from thinking we can expect to hear from God if we continue to sin and disobey God thinking that we’re righteous unconditionally through Jesus’ atonement.

Second, James 5 affirms this same sentiment.

James 5:13 Is any among you afflicted? **let him pray.** Is any merry? let him sing psalms. 14 Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and **let them pray** over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: 15 **And the prayer of faith** shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. 16 Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. **The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.** 17 **Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.** 18 **And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.**

Verse 16 of James 5 famously declares, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” It is interesting that Elijah is cited here as the teaching example.

Number one, Elijah is an Old Testament saint who lives long before the atoning work of Christ. It’s not that Christ’s atonement isn’t ultimately applied to Old Testament saints.* However, using an example from so long before Christ naturally precludes the idea that James wants to emphasize men that God heard primarily on the basis that Christ had already died for them.

(*Ephesians 2:11-16, for example, explains that “in times past” before Christ, Gentiles were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel who were in covenant with God, but that in Christ, God has “reconciled both unto God in one body by the cross.” Here the Jews of the past are in a good position, near to God and

inheriting his promises. But the Gentiles of the past are excluded. When Christ comes, his death reconciles both those in need of atonement among the Jews who were close to God throughout history and to the Gentiles who now turned to Christ. If we view the Jews of the Old Testament as equally excluded to the Gentiles of the past, then the advantageous position of the Jews and the excluded position of the Gentiles at the core of Ephesians 2 makes no sense.)

Number two, notice James' use of the phrase, "Elias was a man subject to passions as we are." Although Christ also became a man and was subject to passions, Christ was simultaneously also God. By choosing Elijah as his example, James is emphasizing two things. He is emphasizing that this is something we, as mere men, can do. And, he is emphasizing that we must abstain from sinful desires. Why would James mention that Elijah was subject to passions like we are? The Greek word of "passions" here is "homoioopathes" (3663), a compound word formed from "homoios" (3664), which means, "like or similar," and "pascho" (3958). "Pascho" means "to be affected or have been affected, to feel, have a sensible experience" either "in a good sense or good case" or "in a bad sense, to suffer, etc." The obvious point is that Elijah is similar to us, that his body has needs and desires. Yet, he remained righteous and God heard his prayers. In other words, Elijah is a great example of the kind of men that provided the basis for the formerly blind man's statement in John 9. When this man spoke of common Jewish perception at the time, saying, "we know that God heareth not sinners," Elijah is the type of Old Testament figure this common Jewish perception was based on. (And Jesus, of course, is the perfect example.)

Third, even Jesus' teaching in passages like John 14 and 15 emphasize voluntary obedience to God's words. As we have seen, John 15:7 plainly states that in order for us to "ask what ye will, and it shall be done," we must "abide in" Jesus and his "words abide in" us. Even chapter 14, which used the phrase "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it" in verse 14, goes on immediately to use the phrase, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" in verse 15.

Consequently, as we move ahead with our study on prayer, if the goal is to determine the optimum way to pray if we hope have our prayers answered, the New Testament is clear. God will not hear our prayers if we do not believe in Jesus and his words, if we do not remain in his words and commandments, and if we do not take actions to turn away from sinning. This cannot be underemphasized. It won't do any good to study in detail what kinds of things we should and shouldn't pray for or even how to conduct and compose our prayers before God if we continue in unabated sinful living. God will not hear even the most perfectly worded prayer of a man who continues to live in sin.

2) The Content of a Prayer

Another general conclusion that emerged from the survey of biblical prayers pertained to the content of prayer in terms somewhat related to what might be called literary composition.

First, prayers in the bible are not journal or diary entries. There are prayers that recount a historical narrative, typically in the context of national repentance. And we must also consider the Psalms. But outside of these examples, prayers in the bible are not an opportunity to tell God about our day, or how we feel, or our hopes or dreams, etc. Instead, they are occasions for thanksgiving, for praise or rejoicing, or for asking God for specific types of needs either for ourselves or for others. (For a list of the specific types of needs that comprise the gamut of prayers in the bible, see the next main section below.)

Concerning the Psalms, there are a couple points worth noting. For the purposes of this study, prayer was defined as anything that might be considered human communication in which God is a member of the intended audience. Our goal was to throw out a wide net in order to avoid missing any passage that could bear relevance on the question of how to pray or what to pray for. Consequently, our survey included more than just the stereotypical petitions or thanksgiving to God. It also included things like oaths, blessings from one human to another, sacrifices, public rejoicing before God, and even passages giving instruction pertaining to prayer or worship. On some of these occasions, such as sacrifices or offerings, we have no record of the words spoken to God. On other occasions, such as oaths or blessings or even public rejoicing, the speaker certainly intends to include God as a witness of sorts, but his intention is often more to communicate with his fellow man than with God.

The inclusion of the Psalms in our survey is another example of this deliberate, overly inclusive strategy. Because we assumed a rather liberal definition of prayer, each Psalm was counted in the study. In reality, it would be oversimplified to lump all the Psalms together as entirely homogeneous in content. Psalm 1, for instance, is six verses that are largely a benediction intended to instruct other men, proclaiming blessings on the obedient as well as the downfall of sinners. Other than presuming it must be addressed to God simply because it is a Psalm, there is nothing in the context that suggests it was addressed to God at all. Other Psalms, like Psalms 2 and 3, are simple professions of faith for deliverance or petitions for deliverance before God. In fact, what can be generalized about the Psalms is that the vast majority are either expressions of praise or petitions for mercy and deliverance from the political aggression of other men, or both. (See the included full survey results.) And certainly some Psalms of this type (Psalm 22:12-16, Psalm 41:7-9) contain pleading before God that involves recounting the specific wrongs done to the Psalmist by other men or detailing the dire circumstances the Psalmist found himself in as well as his need for help. But even these examples include such details as a strategic, thematic way of making a case to God to substantiate a very specific request. It would be inaccurate to simply imagine the Psalms as an ancient form of journaling or diary writing to freely narrate our thoughts, feelings, or experiences in self-reflection before God.

Concerning historical narration, we do find a limited number of prayers in the bible that fit this pattern. Clear examples of this kind of prayer can be found in Psalms 68, 77, 78, 81, 105, 106, 114, 135, and 136 as well as Daniel 9, Ezra 9 and

Nehemiah 9, Jeremiah 32:16-25. But there are three important facts about such prayers that include longer narratives.

Number one, these prayers are national in character, not personal. In other words, they recount events in the history of a nation rather than a personal narration from one individual about their own life, thoughts, or feelings.

Number two, these narratives of history are not aimless chatter or a wandering stream of consciousness. The narrative details drive toward specific, strategic purposes. As can be seen in each of the example passages, these prayers either function as part of a petition of repentance for forgiveness or deliverance or as a declaration of praise to God.

Number three, they are flush with specifics, not merely inane, fuzzy ideas or qualities. The specifics either pertain to historic events or particular things that God had done. And, on the rare occasion when divine qualities are repeated, they are still linked to a list of thoughtful, specifics. For instance, Psalm 136 frequently repeats the refrain, "his mercy endureth for ever," but each occurrence of this phrase is tied to over twenty, individual things that God had done. A lot of thoughtful composition went into that Psalm.

Ultimately, neither the Psalms nor the limited number of prayers with historical narration provide any basis for thinking of prayer as a form of narrative, personal reflection before God. Prayers are always thoughtful, well-composed, and strategically driven toward a premeditated purpose, whether that purpose is thanksgiving, petition, repentance, or praise, etc. If we want to pray in the manner that we find in the bible, our prayers must also be composed and purpose-driven, not aimless, "think-as-you-go" rambling before God.

Second, none of the prayers that we find in the bible involve the author searching for words or using verbal "fillers" such as "uh" or "um" or even repetitious usage of divine titles, like "Father," "Lord," or "God" said frequently to plug in the gaps between our freshly forming thoughts as we pray. Our point here is not to censure such things as the occasional pause or "um" while we choose our words or collect our thoughts momentarily. But such things should be minimal. Neither do we use the word "composed" to imply that prayers should be scripted before they are offered. Rather, we mean it simply in contrast with what might be described as undirected rambling. We mean to convey that we should speak with our minds focused and with our thoughts collected. Our concentration and preparation should be sufficient to largely remove this kind of inane filler material. In other words, prayers in the bible uniformly display the characteristic of being composed and succinct, which we will touch on more momentarily. While prayers in the bible are extemporaneous in the sense that they are not scripted or rehearsed, careless meandering and searching for what to talk about next is not consistent with the manner and sobriety of prayer in the scripture.

3) *The Length of Prayers*

We begin this segment with a look at some instructions from Jesus regarding prayer, starting with a parallel set from Mark and Luke.

Mark 12:39 And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: 40 Which devour widows' houses, and **for a pretence make long (3117) prayers:** these shall receive greater damnation.

Luke 20:46 Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts; 47 Which devour widows' houses, and **for a shew make long (3117) prayers:** the same shall receive greater damnation.

The Greek word for “long” is “makros” (3117), which here means, “long of time, long lasting.” Of course, the context of these remarks concerns the idea of making a public display for personal praise. Consequently, we should not assume these remarks would likewise prohibit “long prayers” in private. But nevertheless, here Jesus recognizes the concept of a “long prayer,” which begs the question of what Jesus’ considered a normal length prayer.

We’ll return to this question momentarily. For now, we turn to another comment Jesus’ makes concerning prayer.

Matthew 6:7 But when ye pray, use not **vain repetitions (945)**, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard **for their much speaking.**

There are three noteworthy items in this instruction.

First, we note that this is prohibitive. In other words, this isn’t a matter of liberty. These are specifically things that Jesus does not want his disciples doing when we pray.

Second, we note the phrase, “vain repetitions.” This is the Greek word “battologeo” (945), which means “to stammer.” The Online Bible’s Greek Lexicon includes additional commentary, which states, “to repeat the same things over and over, to use many idle words, to babble, prate. Some suppose the word derived from Battus, a king of Cyrene, who is said to have stuttered; others from Battus, an author of tedious and wordy poems.” These words confirm conclusions that we’ve already mentioned above when we noted that biblical prayers should not be composed of a lot of pointless words used mostly for “filler” to bridge gaps between our thoughts. This might include anything from the more neutral “um” or “uh” but also things like repetitive use of the Lord’s name or titles or idle superlatives thrown thoughtlessly into prayers.

Some Psalms repeat phrases.

Psalms 32, 39, 46, 52, 62, 66, 68, 77, 84, 88, 89, and 140, each use the single Hebrew word “selah” a couple times. “Selah” (05542) literally means, “lift up, exalt” and the Online Bible Lexicon notes that it is “a technical musical term probably showing accentuation, pause, interruption.” In other words, it’s a direction for how to say the content of the Psalm rather than a recurring part of the content itself. In other words, “selah” is not an example of mindlessly repeating a concept as a refrain or filler.

Other Psalms do repeat actual content. Psalm 24, for example, repeats the phrase “Who is this king of glory,” once in verses 8 and again in verse 10. But the phrase is only repeated twice. Other Psalms that repeat a phrase twice include Psalm 29 (“Give unto the Lord”), Psalm 67 (“Let the people praise thee, O God”), Psalm 96 (“Sing unto the Lord”), Psalm 98 (“Sing unto the Lord”), Psalm 103 (“Bless the Lord, O my soul”), Psalm 112 (“His righteousness endureth for ever”), and Psalm 114 (“mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs”).

Out of 150 Psalms, only 5 Psalms (a little more than 3%) repeat a phrase more than twice. Psalm 135 uses 5 slight variations on the phrase “praise ye the Lord” in 2 verses (verses 1 and 3). Similarly, Psalm 146 uses 4 slight variations of the phrase “praise ye the Lord” in 2 verses (verses 1 and 10). But again, this is highly limited repetition since it is confined to only 2 verses in each Psalm. This leaves only 3 Psalms with more extensive repetition. Psalm 148 uses slight variations on the phrase “praise the Lord” twelve times in a thematic manner in 8 of its 14 verses. Similarly Psalm 150 uses variations of the phrase “praise the Lord” 13 times in every one of its 6 verses. And lastly, Psalm 136, which is comprised of 26 verses, each one ending in the phrase, “for his mercy endureth for ever.” Yet in these last 3 Psalms, the repeated phrases are always connected directly to a thoughtful list of varying concepts or individual acts of God. The thoughtful list of items makes these thematic song-like refrains, but provides no real justification for the kind of thoughtless, un-composed repetition that Jesus condemns. And certainly these highly limited statistical occurrence of repetition even in a book as poetic and lyrical as the Psalms sends a strong message against the use of regular repetition in prayers. While there may be some limited place for it, particularly in songs of praise, it should be very sparing and certainly should only be used in praise. There are no examples of repetition of this kind in ordinary prayers of petition.

Second, we turn our attention to the other interesting phrase from Jesus in Matthew 6. As we have seen, Jesus explains one of the reasons for prohibiting “vain repetitions” when he criticizes that the pagans, “think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.” The message here is plain and simple. A lot of words and talking for a long time are not what God is looking for in our prayers. In fact, trying to talk for a long time in prayer out of some sense that this is what makes a prayer a “good prayer” or somehow better fulfills our obligation to pray is exactly what Jesus is trying to discourage. Jesus’ instruction indicates that God wants prayers that are succinct not verbose.

In the segment above, we mentioned this idea of succinctness. We also looked at some examples of prayers involving historical narration, which as it turns out are some of the longest prayers recorded in the bible. Here is an interesting look at some statistics. The longest prayer recorded in the bible is Psalm 119, which is 176 verses long. However, this is the proverbial exception to the rule, a true statistical outlier. It is more than twice as long as what might be considered the second longest prayer, which is 72 verses long in Psalm 78. And it is more than three times the size of what might be considered the third longest prayer, which is 52 verses long in Psalm 89.

But the vast majority of prayers are significantly smaller. Out of the approximately 986 prayers that we found in our survey, 425 of them took one verse to record the prayer. 682 of them were recorded in 3 verses or less, which is 69% of all biblical prayers. 756 of them were recorded in 5 verses or less, which is 76% of biblical prayers. And 849 of them were recorded in 10 verses or less, which is 86% of the prayers recorded in scripture.

However, looking at the length of a passage in terms of verses still doesn't put much of a clear picture on the issue. After all, when we are reading through several chapters of the Bible and come across a prayer that is 30 verses long, that probably seems like a lengthy prayer. If we want to answer our earlier question, "What does Jesus consider a normal length for a prayer?" the real question is, "how much time does it take to say a prayer?" And to answer that question, we need to convert the number of verses to an amount of time. We can do this simply by taking a sample of some of the longer prayers in the bible and using a stop watch as these prayers are actually read aloud. Our sample prayers will include Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32, King Solomon's prayer inaugurating the building of the Temple in 1 Kings 8, and Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17.

First, concerning Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32, this prayer spans 43 verses from verse 1 through verse 43. To read the prayer out loud at an average speaking pace took 5 minutes and 34 seconds. It should be noted that this song is arguably intended as instructional with the people of Israel, rather than God, as the primarily audience. Consequently, we could have alternately used Moses' prayer of blessing in Deuteronomy 33:1-29, which is 14 verses shorter and took only 4 minutes and 3 seconds to pray aloud. However, because there is a certain element of praise to God throughout Deuteronomy 32 (as can be seen in verse 3, for example), it seems just as reasonable to use Deuteronomy 32 as our sample of a lengthy prayer from Moses.

Second, concerning Solomon's prayer at the completion of the Temple in 1 Kings 8:23-61, this prayer spans 41 verses. To read this prayer aloud at an average speaking pace took six minutes and 20 seconds. Third, concerning Jesus' prayer before his crucifixion in John 17:1-26, this prayer spans only 26 verses. To read this prayer aloud at an average speaking pace took 3 minutes and 15 seconds.

What is interesting here is that these are not only among the longer prayers in either Testament, but they are momentous events including Moses' swan song

before the Israelites conquer the Promised Land, the completion of the building of the first Temple, and Jesus' high priestly prayer for his followers before his sacrificial death. If we were just imagining with a blank slate, we might expect the somewhat public and significant nature of these occasions to warrant prayers that are maybe an hour or half hour long, or at least 20 minutes. But none of them even reached 10 minutes in length. On average, these examples of some of the longest prayers in the bible took only 5 minutes to pray, give or take a minute or so.

Now, of course, there is more to say about the Psalms. Out of the 137 prayers that were over 10 verses long, 91 of them are from Psalms.

First, this means that outside of the Psalms, the overwhelming majority of biblical figures who offer prayers are recorded as praying for less than 10 verses in length. If prayers that are from 29 to 43 verses in length take anywhere from 3 minutes to 6 minutes to pray, prayers that are 10 verses or fewer in length could be said in a minute or less. This is worth restating. Out of the 986 passages in the bible recording prayers, thanksgiving, offerings, oaths, blessings, or instructions on prayer, 86% of them can be said in a minute or less. Of course, it could be theorized that the biblical record of prayers is often characterized by abridged or summarized accounts and that the actual prayers were very often much longer. However, if we restrict our idea of prayer to what biblical authors actually saw fit to depict for us, we are left with some interesting and perhaps surprised expectations about the length of a typical, biblical prayer. We'll have more to say on these implications in a moment.

Second, inside of Psalms, oddly the number 137 also marks the number of Psalms that are 29 verses or shorter. Since Jesus' prayer in John 17 was 29 verses long and took about 3 minutes and 15 seconds to read aloud, this means that the picture presented by 91% of the Psalms is one in which prayers take less than 2-3 minutes. Of the remaining 13 Psalms, only 7 are over 40 verses. The grand total of all the verses in the book of Psalms is 2,289, which means that even if we include the longest Psalms, the average length of a Psalm is only 16.45 verses. This is roughly half of Jesus' prayer in John 17, which means that the overall picture from Psalms is one in which prayers take around a minute and a half.

Lastly, there are two more passages that we should note in this section. Luke 6:12 denotes that on the night before Jesus chose his twelve apostles, "he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." (Although Mark does mention that Jesus went up to a mountain and called certain people to him, neither Matthew nor Mark contains any parallel statements regarding prayer by Jesus in their account of the selection of the twelve apostles. However, Luke 6 is certainly not the only passage that describes Jesus' withdrawal by himself. John 6:15 similarly states, "When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone." But, John 6 does not say anything about prayer at all, let alone the length of time spent in prayer. It seems that what we have here is another rare exception to the general rule about prayer length in scripture. It is noteworthy that this

precedes a very important event, the selection of the twelve apostles, which might warrant such an exceptional prayer. The point here is, of course, that while lengthy prayers are certainly not prohibited or unheard of in the bible, they are rare and, as far as can be deduced from scripture, these rarities relate to extremely central and foundational events in human history.

The same might be said of such passages as Matthew 26:40 and Mark 14:37 which record Jesus' prayer on the night of his arrest and, when he finds his disciples asleep, asks them, "could ye not watch with me one hour?" Of course, this is another monumental occasion, the night before Jesus' is killed as Jesus himself prays concerning his upcoming suffering. There would certainly be reason to consider this occasion might have exceptional status. But it should also be noted here that it is far from clear that Jesus or his disciples prayed for an hour. First, the words of two separate prayers from Jesus on this occasion are recorded in Matthew 26:39 and 42 and each prayer is short enough to be recorded in a single verse. (Mark 14's account records the first prayer in 2 verses instead of one.) Second, the text suggests that Jesus primarily wanted his apostles to "watch," presumably for the impending arrival of the arresting soldiers. His critique that they are asleep is an apt critique of a poor watchman who falls asleep during his shift on lookout. While it is clear from verse 41 that times of watching are good times to say a prayer, it is neither clear nor necessary for Jesus to have meant that the entire shift on watch should be filled with prayer. Third, the Greek word for "hour" is "hora" (5610), has a very broad meaning. This meaning does include an ordinary hour defined as a twelfth part of the daytime, but the first entry of the definition refers to "a certain definite time or season fixed by natural law and returning with the revolving year" such as the four seasons of winter, spring, summer, and fall. The second definition refers to a day or to the half of the day when there is normally sunlight as opposed to night. An "hour" in the sense of one twelfth of the daytime is the third definition. But the fourth definition is very generally, "any definite time, point of time, moment." In short, it is very possible that Jesus is not chastising the disciples for failure to watch or pray for an hour, but merely for failure to do so for any short period of time.

Ultimately, these passages in Luke 6, Matthew 26, and Mark 14 should not be taken to overturn the pattern we have seen throughout scripture regarding the length of the average daily prayer. Consequently, we leave this section with an apt and explicit summary from Ecclesiastes regarding the length of an everyday prayer.

Ecclesiastes 6:1 Keep thy foot **when thou goest to the house of God**, and be more ready to hear, than to give **the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not** that they do evil. **2 Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven**, and thou upon earth: therefore **let thy words be few**. **3** For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and **a fool's voice is known by multitude of words**.

What can we conclude from this analysis? If the whole of scripture is intended to be a useful measure and an accurate depiction of the picture God wants us to get

of prayer, then the answer to the question, “What does Jesus consider a normal length for prayer?” is “a prayer that is five minutes or less,” maybe even “usually under two minutes.” Now, our point here is not to put a firm restriction on longer prayers. Rather, we are simply trying to take a statistical, comprehensive look at prayer as depicted in the bible and to dispel any misconceptions that “good prayers” are long prayers, especially since for some the idea of praying for a “long time” can unfortunately be a stumbling block to praying regularly or even at all.