

The Church Ethic 312: A Study of All Biblical Prayers



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Brian K. McPherson and Scott McPherson

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4) *The Attitude of a Prayer*

A significant undercurrent for the points we've been making surrounds the idea of reverence. Hebrews has some important things to say about reverence and prayer.

First, Hebrews 4 compares our petitioning God in the imagery of approaching the throne of a king.

Hebrews 4:15 For we have not **an high priest** which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. **16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.**

When reading this verse, it is important to balance two of the striking images in it.

First, it might be tempting to focus only on the word “boldly” and think that this passage is encouraging us to be carefree and unfiltered when we speak to God. The Greek word for “boldly” here is “parrhesia” (3954), which means “freedom in speaking, unreservedness in speech” or perhaps more aptly, “openly, i.e. without concealment, and fearless confidence.” Such language has to be understood against the backdrop of redemptive history. Having been warned by God that eating of the tree of knowledge would mean death, when Adam sinned, he made clothes to conceal himself and then hid before God (Genesis 2:15-17, 3:6-8). The priests of the Old Testament could be killed if they approached God in an inappropriate way, so they approached with caution (Leviticus 10:1-3, 16:1-2). Not incidentally, we can see the idea of priestly service is invoked in the preceding verse of Hebrews 4. With such obvious and central scriptural precedent from Adam and the Levitical priests, we have a fairly well-established avenue for understanding the word “boldly” here. When this passage speaks of our coming boldly before God, the intent is to show how Christ’s intercessory work (particularly on the cross) removes the otherwise prohibiting fear of being found unworthy and marked for death when we come before God. Instead, we can come “openly” and “without concealment” before Him to ask for what we need. But it would be a mistake to stretch “boldness” here to include an invitation for careless or unbridled speaking before the Lord in prayer.

Second, this conclusion is affirmed by the depiction of God seated on a throne. A throne is a kingly and authoritative image. Why would the author even think to

encourage his audience to assure themselves when they come before God? The imagery tells us. There is a need for boldness because the setting itself is naturally intimidating, and it should be. Notice that the author of Hebrews does nothing to unravel the image of God on the throne. He doesn't attempt to depict prayer in terms of a softer, more familial, comfortable, or equalized setting. Instead, he maintains the appearance of a king on a throne. So, although we no longer need to withdraw from God in fear of death simply for coming before Him as sinners, we should maintain the awareness that coming before God to petition Him is properly understood as similar to coming before a powerful king. It is right and necessary for us to retain a clear attitude of reverence before God as we pray and that reverence should govern the way we conduct ourselves and the way we compose our prayers. We are, after all, speaking to the King and it would be inappropriate to act or speak cavalierly when addressing a king.

Of course, there are other verses that employ fatherly language when speaking of our petitions to God. We find such language in passages like Matthew 6:9, Romans 8:15, and Galatians 4:6. But there are two facts which should prevent the image of God as our Father from becoming a pretense for discarding our reverent thoughtfulness when speaking before Him.

First, in scripture fathers are figures to whom reverence is also due. Today, the word "father" might most commonly conjure up images from Father's Day cards ranging from a young dad with a newborn baby boy curled up asleep in his arms or a welcoming older father always eager to listen and cherish every word from his growing teenage daughter. But in the bible, Fathers were also figures of authority endowed with the right to discipline and punish and dispense inheritance. Even Hebrews itself describes fathers in direct association with discipline and fear.

Hebrews 12:5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh **unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. 7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? 8** But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. **9 Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? 10** For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. **11** Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Notice that verse 7 identifies that disciplinary authority is a defining component of how we understand our Father-son relationship to God, and without it we are not sons. Verse 9 then connects this disciplinary authority, which was present even in our human fathers, to our need to have reverence for God as a Father.

Again, the echoing theme still lingering from verse 7 is hard to ignore. If we do not exhibit reverence toward God as a Father, then are we really his children?

Our point here is not that God doesn't love us or want to spend time with us or hear from us. Hebrews 4 wants to encourage us to talk to God. Redemption is about God bring forth a family for Himself to live forever with Him (Hebrews 2:10). But we must also forget that in God's love for us there is also His authority to discipline and punish, even as Hebrews 12:6 states that God punishes every son He loves. But we should not skew our perception of God our Father solely into a variation of sitting on Santa's lap at the mall chatting about any idle thought that comes to our mind. That kind of lax attitude about prayer is more of a byproduct of contemporary church convention in the midst of modern values. The bible actually has a lot to say about the need to maintain an attitude of fearful reverence in our prayer life and the way we approach God, our Father and our King. Consider again, these words from Hebrews.

Hebrews 5:5 So also **Christ** glorified not himself to be made **an high priest**; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. 6 As he saith also in another place, **Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.** 7 **Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications** with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and **was heard in that he feared (2124).**

Notice that Hebrews 5 is describing prayers from Jesus. If anyone should have had a casual, carefree manner of conversation with God the Father, it would be Jesus. He is the ideal teaching example for how having God as our Father should impact our attitude in prayer. On that point, notice that verse 7 specifically states that Jesus "was heard in that he feared." But what was it that this verse intends to say that Jesus feared? Death on the cross? The Greek word for "fear" is "eulabeia" (2124), which means "caution, circumspection, discretion, reverence, veneration, and piety," all of which would seem to be directed toward God, not his impending death. However, "eulabeia" can also mean, "anxiety or dread" which could apply to death. Fortunately, "eulabeia" only appears two times in the bible and the second time is also in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 12:28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, **whereby we may serve (3000) God acceptably with reverence (127) and godly fear (2124).**

First, in Hebrews 12 we see a description of our service before God. We'll talk more about the word "serve" momentarily. But for now, we continue our focus on the word "eulabeia" (2124), which we see here at the end of verse 28. It is clear that "eulabeia" is applied as a characterization of our service toward God Himself.

Second, notice that here "eulabeia" is coupled with "reverence," which is the Greek word "aidos" (127). "Aidos" means "a sense of shame or honour, modesty, reverence, regard for others, respect." This confirms for us the way "eulabeia" is being used. And consequently, the meaning of "eulabeia" in chapter 12 all but

insists that its occurrence earlier in Hebrews is intended to have the same meaning, respectful fear of God.

Third, now that we have confirmed the meaning of “eulabeia” in Hebrews 5, we can see that the author of Hebrews is telling us that God heard Jesus prayer because Jesus exhibited the proper attitude of circumspection, discretion, and reverence before God when he prayed. And if it was necessary for Jesus to approach God the Father with circumspect words in an attitude of composed reverence, how much more so for us.

Fourth, consider the word “serve” that appears here in Hebrews 12:28. It is the Greek word “latreuo” (3000), which generally means “to serve for hire” but in a religious context such as this, it refers to “religious service or homage, to worship” or more specifically, “to perform sacred services, to offer gifts, to worship God in the observance of the rites instituted for his worship.” It is also used “of priests, to officiate, to discharge the sacred office.” In fact, “latreuo” is used to refer to various priestly activities in Hebrews 9:9, 14, 10:2, and 13:10. And we have already seen how Hebrews describes the role of the priest as including the act of offering prayers. Consequently, Hebrews 12 not only confirms for us the meaning of “eulabeia,” it also confirms once again that our prayers to God must be conducted with circumspect words in an attitude of composed reverence toward God. Not only is this the manner in which prayers are conducted throughout the whole of the bible, but according to Hebrews 5 whether or not God hears our prayers depends on conducting ourselves in this manner.

5) Corporate Prayer

On what is perhaps a more minor point, we might take a moment to say a few words about what we do see and what we do not see with regard to corporate prayer in scripture. By corporate prayer, we mean to refer to those occasions when multiple people are assembled with the intention to offer up a prayer expressing their collective petition or sentiment, for example, a prayer offered at the beginning of a communal meal.

On such corporate occasions, the bible does not depict individuals taking turns speaking aloud in prayer one after another. Instead, what we find falls into two categories. First, there are occasions when one prominent person, such as Solomon, or Ezra, or Jesus is identified as speaking on behalf of everyone present (1 Kings 8:22-61, Nehemiah 8:6, John 6:10-11, John 17:1-26). Second, there are occasions in which the specific speaker is not identified but nonetheless the prayer is presented by the author of the passage as an unbroken speech uttered by a single voice. What we never find is a passage in which a prayer is broken into different parts with each part spoken by individually identified, distinct speakers.

In addition, we should also offer some important distinctions.

First, we can distinguish between corporate prayers and personal or individual prayers. While the scripture provides no instances of multiple people praying as a group one after another, the bible does designate certain places and, perhaps more relevantly, certain times for prayer (Matthew 21:13, Luke 18:10, Acts 3:1, Acts 10:8-9). More on the topic of specific times for prayer can be found in our position paper, entitled, "New Testament Priesthood Study." For now, the important implication is that a specific time for prayer would logically necessitate that wherever they are (whether at home or in a foreign land or in the Temple, etc.) most or all of God's people would be praying at the same time. However, there is a distinction between multiple persons each praying individually at the same time, particularly in different locations, and a corporate setting in which a group of people have gathered specifically to pray to express their collective will.

For example, in the early decades of Christian history there were tens of thousands of Christians scattered in Jerusalem, Judea, the near Middle East and southeastern Europe. At any particular time, hundreds or thousands of these Christians in different cities might have been praying. But this does not mean they are praying corporately. They are not necessarily aware of the specific prayers of one another. As such, they cannot specifically offer knowing agreement with one another's prayers. Nor can they be said to have gathered intentionally to pray together since they are in different locations. This is obviously quite different from all of the Christians in Corinth or Ephesus, for instance, intentionally assembling in one house for communion and offering a prayer. Consequently, identifiable factors such as separate locations or the lack of awareness of each other's specific prayers distinguish individual prayer from corporate prayer.

Second, it is also possible that multiple prayers might be offered at different times over the course of a gathering. For example, we might imagine an opening and a closing prayer. It is also conceivable that each prayer could be spoken by a different individual. However, this scenario fits with what we have already outlined since the two prayers are not offered back to back.

Third, we might also consider the relevance of the word "Amen" (Nehemiah 8:6, Matthew 18:19-20, 1 Corinthians 14:16). The term "Amen" is originally a Hebrew word (Strong's No. 0543) and later a Greek word (Strong's No. 281), that means, "so be it." In other words, it is a way of adding one's own agreement to something. And in the corporate setting, the participation of others (beside the speaker) is generally limited to adding an, "Amen."

Fourth, in this sense prayer also differs from singing praise, prophesying, and teaching. Singing can be done by a choir of simultaneous voices (1 Samuel 18:6, Matthew 26:30). And Paul permits as many as 2 or 3 people to take turns prophesying or speaking in foreign languages (i.e. to foreigners) one after the other (1 Corinthians 14:27-32). But we do not find any such instructions or descriptions of prayer occurring in this way.

Ultimately, while there is nothing offensive about the idea of Christian brothers and sisters each offering a prayer in a corporate setting, there are no instances in

scripture when we find a record or instruction concerning a group of people taking turns praying, one after another. It is conceivable that this practice or other practices (such as prayers measuring a half hour or an hour in duration) were commonplace in biblical times but they simply weren't recorded in scripture, if we want to model our understanding of prayer based on the evidence we do have in the Bible, we must be attentive to these trends.

A Few Final Notes

Before we move on to describe the types of prayer requests that we have catalogued in our study of biblical prayers, we would like to include a few notes adapted from our previous, more abbreviated prayer study, which are worth highlighting again.

First, this survey suggests that God only responds to prayer for certain types of things, or at least that the whole of the biblical record expresses that biblical figures and authors only anticipated God's response to requests on these topics. The repetitious occurrence of these same types of general requests also affirms that this is a consistent expectation, not just a cumulative list of independent, randomly varying petitions. Though passages in the NT do use the phrase "whatsoever" when referring to prayer, the passages often specify particular objectives of prayer. The survey of the NT prayer requests, likewise, indicates the kinds of things that the NT church felt were contained within the limitations of terms like "whatsoever."

Second, as will be substantiated by the exhaustive survey and corresponding analytical notes to follow below, the prayers recorded in the Bible do not suggest or warrant the notion that God overrides human will. On this point, it might be noted that God's means of responding to prayer come through either his own direct action or the willful, cooperative obedience of agents who submit to and seek after God's will. This may include angels or other humans. It is not difficult to imagine God using either his own or cooperative agency by angels to affect the following items: weather, healing, removal or appointment of governing authorities, casting out of demons, the coming of the kingdom, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from evil, the sending or giving of the HS, the commissioning of laborers for the harvest or for leadership in the church, conception and pregnancy, giving understanding of teaching through direct conversational interaction or by means of a messenger, and by extension instructing human agency through messages. Likewise, it is not difficult to imagine God using either his own or cooperative agency by men to affect the following items: material provision, shelter, teaching or evangelizing God's word to those in need, or correcting bad behavior by means of verbal rebuke. Of course, these lists are not meant to be exhaustive, but merely to illustrate that it does not require Calvinistic unilateral control over human (or angelic) decision-making faculties in order for God to have the wide ranging impact on events that we see depicted throughout the Bible.

Third, although not covered in detail in the rest of this study, it is important not to overlook these additional yet basic facts and principles that are also a part of biblical prayers.

Regarding the manner of how to conduct prayer, we find the following scriptural instructions:

1. The Bible warns us about praying in public to get notice or praise and instructs us instead to generally make our regular prayers in private – Matt. 6:5-6. Jesus often withdrew to pray alone away from the public (Matt. 14:23, Mark 1:35, Mark 6:46, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12, Luke 9:18). In contrast, the scribes and Pharisees were criticized for making long prayers for show (Matt. 23:14, Mark 12:40, Luke 20:47).
2. Whatever we pray for, we must not doubt (or be angry with) God or Jesus Christ when we pray (Matt. 21:22, Mark. 11:24, 1 Tim. 2:8, James 1:6-7, 5:15-18).
3. We should maintain an attitude of humility about ourselves when we pray (Luke 18:10-14).
4. The laying on of hands was customary when praying for someone (Matt. 19:13-15, Acts 6:6, Acts 13:3, Acts 28:8).
5. Sometimes fasting accompanied prayer (Acts 10:30, Acts 13:2-3, 14:23, Matt. 9:14-15, Matt. 17:21, Mark 2:18-20, Mark 9:29, 1 Cor. 7:5, Luke 2:37, Luke 5:33-35). However, we are instructed not to make a show of our fasting in order to get others to notice (Matt. 6:16-18).
6. Prayers were sometimes conducted in a kneeling position (Acts 9:40, Acts 20:36, Acts 21:5).
7. Prayers were sometimes conducted with hands raised (1 Tim. 2:8).
8. Men are not allowed to have their heads covered when praying (or prophesying), but women are required to cover their heads either with their hair or some other covering (1 Cor. 11:4-5, 13).
9. When praying with others, there must be general agreement, including with regard to the petition itself (Acts 1:14, Rom. 15:30, Matt. 18:19).
10. Husbands (and wives) are to live with each other and treat each other as God instructs them or their prayers will be hindered (1 Peter 3:7).
11. We are to confess our faults, sins, trespasses to one another along with our prayers (James 5:16).
12. We should be joyful as we pray for the saints (Php. 1:4).
13. We must abide in Jesus' teachings for our prayers to be answered (John 15:7, 16, 1 John 3:22).

Regarding who to pray for, we find the following scriptural instructions:

1. We are to pray for our enemies, not just our love ones (Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:28).
2. We are to pray for children (Matt. 19:13).

Regarding when to pray, we find the following scriptural instructions:

1. We are instructed to pray at all times, which also can generally refer to the custom of designated hours for prayer in the morning and evening (Luke

- 6:12, 18:1, Ephesians 6:18, Col. 1:3, 1 Thess. 3:10, 1 Thess. 5:17, 2 Thess. 1:11, Acts 2:42, 3:1, 6:4, 10:2, 9, 30-31, Rom. 1:9, Rom. 12:12, Col. 4:12, 1 Tim. 5:5, Luke 2:37).
2. Although praying in front of the public for show is discouraged, we are encouraged to pray when together with other believers (Acts 1:14, Acts 12:12, Acts 20:36, Acts 21:5).
 3. We are to pray over meals, including thanks and prayer that the food is sanctified (Matt. 15:36, 26:27, Mark 8:6, 14:23, Luke 22:17, 19, Acts 27:35, 1 Tim. 4:3-5).

Categories of Biblical Prayers and Petitions

Below is a list of the classifications of prayers that were catalogued during our survey of prayers from Genesis to Revelation. There is very little surprising about this list. However, several general facts do emerge from these categories. In particular, it should be noted the extent to which biblical prayers are largely about meeting basic needs or providing justice and deliverance. In other words, biblical prayers are overwhelmingly and primarily “need based” petitions asking for God’s help, whether the requested help is directed toward others or oneself. The popular modern idea of prayer as primarily relational activity akin to casual conversation with God is strikingly hard to find in the bible. Of course, thanks and worship are notable exceptions to this. But prayers are not presented as lingering moments of thoughtful examination, exploration, or working out ideas or issues before God. Instead, they are typically expedient and strategic. Certainly, the Bible presents the saints of all ages as contemplative persons who often reflected deeply on God’s Word in private and with one another for the purpose of understanding it thoroughly. But the biblical record of prayer definitely does not confuse the two, and neither should we. Prayer may often come after contemplation or reflection. But they are not the same. Prayer is one thing. Contemplation (or reflection) is another. These distinctions, along with the following categories, help provide fundamental patterns to follow if we want to cultivate a prayer life that follows the record of prayers in the Bible.

(In addition to the category summaries below, the full table of the entire survey including every prayer in the bible is available in the related PDF, entitled, “catalog-of-bible-prayers.pdf.”)

1. **Petition** –
A very broad, overlapping category that includes any prayer where a request is made for God to do anything.
2. **Intercession** –
Another very broad, overlapping category that includes any time one person petitions God on behalf of another person or group concerning related concepts as forgiveness, mercy, grace, divine acceptance, sanctification, etc.
3. **Self-Intercession** –
Contrasted with intercession. A prayer in which someone petitions God

specifically on their own behalf (or at least including himself/herself) with regard to related concepts such as forgiveness, mercy, or grace. Also includes prayers expressing one's own repentance or prayer in which an individual petitions God to test himself or herself.

4. **Blessing or Exaltation for Others** –
A prayer or simple declaration either petitioning God to or expressing one's own hope and desire for someone else to be blessed or elevated in status. Also includes prophetic utterances about someone else that depict the elevation of that person.
5. **Self-Exaltation or Blessing** –
A prayer someone makes to petition God to bless, exalt, or show divine approval for himself or herself.
6. **Cursing** –
A rebuke, simple proclamation of personal desire, or petition for God to bring harm (whether to a specific individual or a general group) including through calamities like drought or famine but also including afflictions such as loss of sight or loss of health.
7. **Oath before God** –
Either an oath made to others invoking God or an oath made to God. Also including any act of volunteering oneself to God for a purpose or duty, etc.
8. **Permission** –A petition made to God either for permission regarding something or to recuse oneself from something.
9. **Thanks and Worship** –
Any expression either to God or about God conveying sentiment of thanks, worship, praise, or testifying about God's attributes. Also including actions such as of sacrifices or offerings, etc.
10. **Provision** –
A prayer petitioning for God to provide items typically related to material sustenance, such as food, a good harvest, land, wealth/prosperity, or rain (good weather) and including general petitions for the care of the poor.
11. **Health and Life** –
A prayer petitioning God for healing, good health in general, long life, physical strength, resurrection, or restoration of sight, etc.
12. **Descendants** –
A prayer petitioning God for a child, children, or a line of descendants including petitions for the removal of barrenness.
13. **Speed and Safety** –
A prayer regarding travel or a journey (regardless of duration) petition God for either speed or safety.
14. **Wisdom or Knowledge** –
A prayer petitioning God for wisdom, information, knowledge, instruction, correction, or answers and including petitions for God to give knowledge concerning the right words to say.
15. **General Reference** –
Any communication to or with God or nonspecific reference to prayer in the Bible that is not accompanied by details that would associate it with a particular category (including whether or not the prayer is a petition),

often related to sentiment for one's own comfort, encouragement, relief, restoration, or blessing.

16. **Justice and Deliverance** –

Any prayer petitioning God to enact justice, judge or punish others, to provide protection, deliverance, or salvation from enemies, trials, temptations, or even possession, or to give victory or strength (over others).

17. **Miraculous Intervention** –

Any prayer petitioning God for specific acts such as a miracle, intervention in natural phenomena, a sign for confirmation, or a supernatural gift.

18. **Visitation of Heavenly Beings** –

Any prayer petitioning God to experience His fellowship, summon His Presence, see His Glory, including for the Father to send the Holy Spirit, for Jesus' return, or even for God to send an angel.

19. **God's Self-Exaltation** –

Either a simple proclamation of one's own desire or a prayer petitioning God to vindicate or exalt Himself or His Name, to confirm or establish His covenant, His promises, His word in general, or His prophets, or to accomplish His will, especially with the (unspoken) implication of miraculous intervention.

20. **Ministry of the Word** –

Any prayer petitioning God to appoint and send fellow laborers or helpers, particularly in the ministry of His word, and also including petitions for opportunities to preach to others.

21. **Peace** –

Often generically stated, any prayer petitioning God for either general wellbeing or a state defined by the absence of warfare, violence, or injustice.

22. **Divine Reward** –

A prayer petitioning God to reward others or oneself (in the sense of a positive reward) and including petitions for God's kingdom or for entry into the kingdom (whether for oneself or for others).

23. **Interrogatory** –

Any expression or communication questioning or demanding answers from God, including the related sentiment of complaining or lamenting before God. Conversely, communication in which one is responding to God's inquiry or message. Also including proclamations of one's own righteousness before God, which also tend to overlap the related sentiment of petitioning God to test oneself. (By extension, a petition for God to test others.)

24. **Confession** –

Any confession before God or to God, whether confessing sin or professing faith in general or specific.

25. **Instructional** –

Either outright instructions regarding prayer, including prescriptive models for prayer, or prayers that function in part to instruct or admonish others.

26. Encouragement –

Any prayer petitioning God for help with encouraging or strengthening in faith (typically by means of opportunities to visit and speak to someone or miraculous evidence as further confirmation), often with a unifying, collective, or mutual setting, and by extension simply petitions for opportunities to visit or see someone.

Internal Control of Human Behavior – This is a theoretical category that was never observed in scripture but describes Calvinistic prayers petitioning God (or expressing the expectation for God) to unilaterally and irresistibly control human behavior (and perhaps human thought or emotion) by means of direct, internal exertion on the decision-making faculties within individuals.