

1.

What are you doing when you pray?

‘In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven...’ (Matthew 6:9). ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you’ (Matthew 7:7). ‘Then he spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart’ (Luke 18:1). ‘Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit’ (Ephesians 6:18). ‘Pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Clearly, God wants you to pray. The whole Bible makes that obvious. But what exactly are you doing when you pray?

The spiritual activity of prayer is rather like the colours of the spectrum. If you send a beam of white light through a glass prism, the light spreads out into seven colours — red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. In a similar way, if you look closely at prayer you will find it spreading out into seven ‘spiritual colours’, or seven aspects of prayer. To these aspects I am going to give the following names: adoration, praise, petition, thanksgiving, confession, supplication and intercession.

I’m not saying that every single time you pray, you have to make sure that your prayers are made up of all these seven ingredients. I’m simply saying that prayer is a wide-ranging activity which can include any of these ‘spiritual colours’. You need also to remember that like the seven colours of the spectrum, these aspects of prayer blend easily into each other; you can’t separate them too sharply. For example, adoration and praise blend together as worship.

Let’s spend some time looking at these seven aspects of prayer.

2.

Adoration and praise

‘Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness’ (Psalm 29:2).

Have you ever wondered why you exist? According to the Bible, the ultimate reason is to worship God. That’s why God made you different from the animals, bestowing wonderful powers of thought and feeling on you. We human beings are designed to be the priests of creation; we give silent nature a voice with which to worship its great Creator.

All the powers of your soul equip you for this glorious purpose of worshipping your Creator. Your mind can think about him. Your heart can love him. Your longing for immortality makes you turn away from time to eternity. Then there is your conscience, that invisible judge within you, distinguishing between right and wrong. There is the instinctive reverence and awe that you feel for everything spiritual and divine. In fact, as a human being made in God’s image, worship comes naturally to you, if only in the silence and solitude of your own thoughts.

But how can you worship God without praying? To bow down humbly in the dust before God’s greatness — **that is the very essence of what prayer is**. It exists in your heart before it is expressed on your lips. It means recognising, in the inmost attitude of your spirit, the amazing contrast between the majestic Lord God almighty and your tiny self. To pray is to worship.

When we look at the worship expressed in the prayers of the Bible, we find it has two aspects, which I’ve called ‘adoration’ and ‘praise’. Sometimes in the Bible we see people worshipping God for what he is in himself — his own glorious nature and being. This is what I call ‘adoration’. Sometimes we see people worshipping God for what he does — his works, his mighty deeds in creating and ruling the universe. This is what I call ‘praise’.

The difference between adoration and praise is very faint. They blend swiftly and naturally into each other. But there is a difference of emphasis, depending on whether we are looking more at who God is or what he does.

If you want to adore God in your prayers, to worship him for what he is in himself, how should you do it? You can learn from God’s people in the Bible. They often expressed their adoration by means of the various names and titles of God. Here are a few examples of how they addressed God in their prayers:

The Lord God

The Lord our God

The Lord God Almighty

The great and awesome God

The great and mighty God

The Lord strong and mighty

The Lord of hosts

The Lord of lords

The King of kings

The King of glory

The Father of glory

The Most High

The High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity

The Maker of heaven and earth

The Lord our shield
The Lord our strength
The Lord our righteousness
The God of hope
The God of our salvation
The only wise God
The blessed and only Potentate
The King eternal, immortal, invisible
Our Father in heaven

You can see what a wonderful variety of ways the Biblical writers have of addressing God in prayer. Copy them! Adore God by giving back to him the names and titles he has given to himself in his Word. They will wake up your spiritual feelings and help you to speak to God in a worshipful way. They will also give you confidence to ask him to do things for you, by impressing on you how great and mighty his power, wisdom and love are.

God's people in the Bible also adored him by describing him in other ways in their prayers. Look at the following examples and see how they express deep spiritual adoration in the way they speak to God:

‘Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?’ (Exodus 15:11).

‘Blessed are you, LORD God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head over all’ (1 Chronicles 29:10-11).

‘He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power. Amen’ (1 Timothy 6:15-16).

‘To God our Saviour, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever. Amen’ (Jude 25).

See how exalted these prayers of adoration are. They focus on God himself — who he is, what he is, his own brilliant nature and attributes, his greatness and majesty and holiness. This wonderful adoring worship teaches you an important lesson in your spiritual life: **you shouldn't limit your prayers to asking God to do things for you.** Is a feeling of need or a sense of guilt the only thing that will bring you to God? Will you come to God because you are empty, and then forget him when you are full? Don't be self-centred in your praying. God is infinitely beautiful in himself, and his beauty ought to attract you like a magnet to him. Can you think of a better use of your powers than to employ them in adoring your beautiful Lord? This aspect of prayer is independent of your changing moods and circumstances. Whatever state you may be in, God is always there, in the unchanging perfection of his supreme beauty and glory, to inspire your soul to worship.

Adoring God will have a healthy effect on your spiritual experience. When you adore him, you turn away from yourself and gaze on him in all his matchless loveliness and majesty. This will give new life to your spiritual feelings. It's so easy for Christians to get gloomy and despondent in their spiritual lives. Simply lying at God's feet, seeing him in his pure and lovely perfection, and adoring him for it, will help to drive away dark feelings; it will bring freshness and health back into your soul. It will help to cure you of your natural tendency to stare at yourself and be obsessed with your sins and problems. In fact, your whole

spiritual life will suffer badly, unless you frequently adore the beautiful King of heaven in your prayers.

‘But I can’t always be adoring God.’ That is true. There is something overwhelming and exhausting about concentrating the mind constantly on God himself. You will find your mind turning from God’s infinitely glorious being to his works. Adoration passes over into praise. (Remember, worshipping God for his works is what I’ve called ‘praise’). God’s works reveal a little part of his glory at a time, and you will find that easier to bear than the pure and naked beauty of his being. You can dwell on a particular thing God has done, see how some aspect of his glory is revealed in it, and praise him for it.

If you want to see how God’s people in the Bible praised him in their prayers for all that he had done, I suggest you read your way through the book of Psalms. Many of them pour out praise to God, both for his material and spiritual works:

‘Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with understanding. God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne’ (Psalm 47:6-8).

‘Praise the LORD! Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! For his mercy endures for ever. Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD? Who can declare all his praise? ... Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the Lord!’ (Psalm 106:1-2, 48).

‘Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. I will meditate on the glorious splendour of your majesty, and on your wondrous works. Men shall speak of the might of your awesome acts, and I will declare your greatness’ (Psalm 145:3-6).

Your fellowship with God will never get closer to heaven than when you adore and praise him. The inhabitants of heaven are unceasingly adoring and praising their King. ‘And they do not rest day or night, saying: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”’ (Revelation 4:8). We, God’s people on earth, should imitate our heavenly friends. The more you adore God for who he is, and the more you praise him for what he has done, the more of his spiritual radiance you will enjoy in your soul. You will be in tune with those who sing the new song in the Lord’s presence (Revelation 5:9-10). What better way could there be of making yourself ready for heaven?

Points for reflection or discussion

What place should you give to adoration in your private and public prayers?

How much use do you make of God’s various names and titles when you speak to him?

What does the Bible say about the ‘beauty’ of God?

‘Sing praises with understanding’ (Psalm 47:7; compare 1 Corinthians 14:15). What is the relationship between praise and understanding?