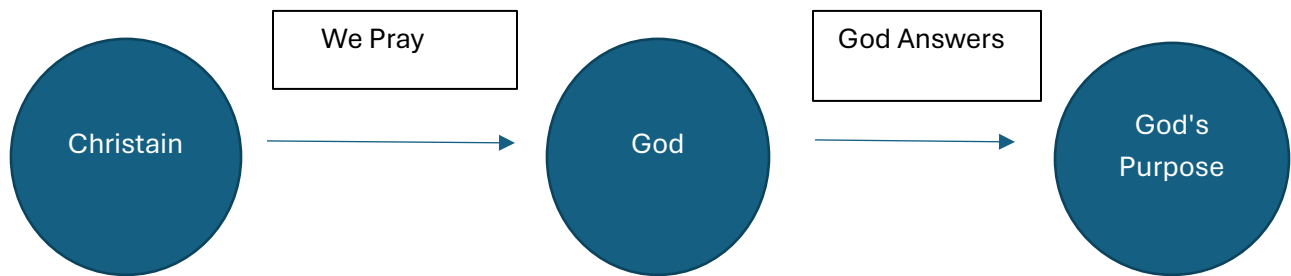


Revelation and Prayer

The question is begged, *From where does prayer arise?* Whose idea is it? Man's? Or God's? Who initiates the conversation? The answer to that question will impact everything we think about prayer and our practice of prayer.

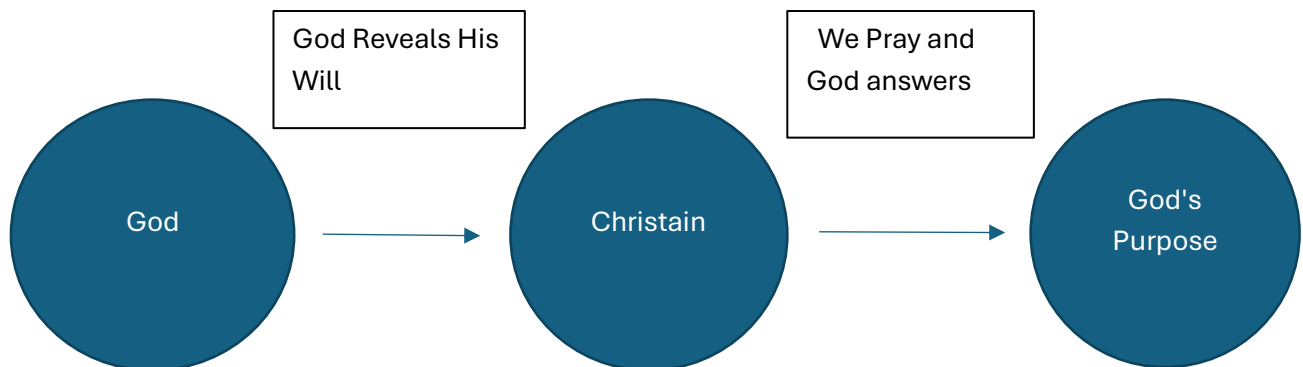
To help us with this I want to borrow a couple charts from Graeme Goldsworthy. We have to choose one of two answers.¹

First, prayer is initiated by man.



In this scenario prayer starts with us, somehow influences God, and then produces some outcome. Here prayer is a human initiative. The burden is on us to pray for God to act.

Second, we could answer, “no,” prayer is God’s “idea,” and he is the One who initiates it. Prayer, then is a response to God.



This is the biblical view of prayer. God in his kindness brings us into his purpose and allows us to be involved in carrying out his will. Here is both the biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

All prayer is answering God. I hope to show why that think that is the case the Bible presents. I, also, hope we will be encouraged as a result of this time together to pray all the more.

That prayer is answering God should encourage us to pray. Perhaps, we approach prayer as us talking to God, i.e. prayer as a human initiative, our engaging an otherwise distant or silent God. In a previous lesson, I said that prayer is communion and communication with God and that it is bi-directional: God speaks, and we speak. Those can be mysterious terms for us. Someone could respond, I talk to God, but I don't hear his voice. I don't hear him talking to me.

For example, we hear texts like Revelation 3:20, *Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me*, and think that is not my experience. We, perhaps, understand that text in light of salvation. Most of us have heard that verse as an invitation to salvation. Maybe when we were converted, we had some sense of the presence of Jesus, as it were, at our heart's door. It may be surprising to learn that text is written to the church, to Christians, with Jesus inviting us into fellowship with him.

According to Revelation 3:20, Jesus is drawing us into conversation with him. To underline the importance of this reality, let's back up and then move forward.

1. General revelation

In my previous lesson, I said that prayer is a global reality. The world is a prayerful place. Humans pray from the foxholes of war to the major world religions, even some atheists pray. I argued that the global reality of prayer does much to argue for the existence of God and testifies to his eternal power and attributes.

Why is prayer a global reality? People are responding to God; they are answering the voice of God albeit incorrectly, but they are responding to the revelation of God that they see in nature. We could even go so far as to say the voice of God in is heard in creation, the echo of *Let there be* and *Let us make man in our image*....

In the creation account, God speaks. In Genesis 1, we hear the powerful Word of God as he speaks the world into existence, "*Let there be light*" and *there was light* (Gen 1:3). We hear the voice of God in and through the things he made.

Surely, most of us have experienced the Divine Presence mediated through nature—a golden sunrise, a fiery sunset, a mountain peak, ripened fields of grain, hazy forests, or a cloud formation. Psalm 19:1 says, *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

Then, we hear him speak, “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness* (Gen 1:26). Image and likeness is the language of sonship. He is the God who speaks. As those made in his image, we speak. That God speaks and made us in his image is foundation of prayer.

In Genesis 3 with the fall into sin, the image of God (man) is marred, not destroyed but damaged. Sonship was lost. Mankind became the *sons of disobedience* (Eph. 2:2). The marred image of God in man cries out to the creature rather than the creator. He creates his own gods and devises his own rituals to know him.

Paul said in Roman’s 1, *...what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things* (Rom 1:19-23).ⁱⁱ

Often you will hear this unveiling of God in the things he has made called general or natural revelation. The Scripture testifies in many places that the creation itself testifies to the existence of God.

When Paul and Barnabas were preaching at Lystra, a Gentile city, they declared that the *living God was the creator of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them.* They went on to explain, *In past generations he allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heavens and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness* (Acts 14:15-17).

The Gentiles could have argued, if Paul and Barnabas were correct, why were they just now hearing the message Paul and Barnabas were declaring? Paul and

Barnabas in effect are answering that argument. It did not please God to reveal this to you before now. He allowed you to walk in your own ways, even as he witnessed to his nature and character in giving you rains, seasons, food, and gladness of heart, but you have responded in pagan ways. Now, it pleases him to make himself known to you more perfectly.

Notice what is going on in the text. God had engaged the people of Lystra through natural revelation. They responded to the voice of God in creation by creating a pantheon of gods, going so far as think Barnabas was the incarnation of Zeus (the head of the Greek pantheonⁱⁱⁱ) and Paul, Hermes (the Greek god of oratory and the inventor of speech, since Paul was doing most of the speaking^{iv} (cf. Acts 14:12)).

The same was true in Athens. The wise of the world in Athens worshiped among their many gods, *the unknown god*. Paul enlightened them concerning the unknown God saying, he is *the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven of earth...* (Acts 17:24). Like the people of Lystra, the people of Athens responded to what could be known of God in nature and reason in pagan ways.

Like the people of Lystra, a new religion that they had not heard of was inconceivable. Paul tells them, as well, that in times past it did not please God to disclose himself savingly to them. He had been speaking to them of his nature and power, but they had misrepresented him in their idolatry. Yet, they got one thing right, they did not know him. Now, however, God was pleased to inform them directly that they must repent because the world will be judged in righteous by the man God raised from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

This reality is why I say wherever you go and with whomever you share the gospel, you can be sure God has already been speaking to that person or people. You can also be sure that in their prayers and in their religious infrastructure they have responded incorrectly to the voice of God. Yet, their prayers and their religion testify that God has spoken first, and they have responded albeit insufficiently.

The praying pagan world is responding to the revelation of God in nature in pagan ways. We see from these text that God has engaged the world in general revelation, and humans respond in inadequate ways.

2. Special revelation

All humans have a sense of the existence of God, i.e. some knowledge of God is available to them.^v When they pray, they are responding to, defining, and filling in the gaps in that knowledge. We can call this reality general revelation.

There is, also, another category of knowing God we call special revelation.

A. Special Revelation and the Son of God and Prayer

Consider again the creation story, *And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light* (Gen. 1:3). Commenting on the creation story, John said, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God* (Jn.1:1).

1) God the Son

Two things are here said about the Word. **One**, the Word was *with* (pros) God, which denotes a personal intimacy and love between the Word and God. **Second**, the Word *was* God. We are told two things about the Word: The Word was with God, the closest fellowship between God and the Word. The Word was God; the Word is God's own Self.^{vi} This is not merely using personification to speak of God's Word, but a declaration that the Divine Word is a Divine Person, co-equal and co-eternal.

John goes on to say, the Word is the Eternal Creator: *He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made* (Jn. 1:2-3). God's Word is God's action. So, we see in the creation account, the internal communication of God the Father and God the Son issuing in the external creation of all that exists: God the Father and God the Word and God the Spirit of God in powerful communication giving shape to creation. Through that act of creation God testifies to his eternal power and divine nature (cf. Rom 1:20).

On the 6th day of creation, God made man. Hear his words again the words of God, *"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."* Scholars have debated the meaning of this text. Some have said that God is speaking to the angels. This can hardly be the case because nowhere in scripture is there any indication that angels are made in God's image. Some argue that Moses could not have conceived of the Trinity. I don't know how we can know what Moses could or could not have conceived of. Regardless, God did not become the Trinity. If He is the Trinity, He

has always been the Trinity. It's not surprising that He would make that known even in Genesis 1. And it is not surprising that would become clearer as God continues to reveal himself in history.

2) Sonship

I want to emphasize here that God speaks, he is tri-personal, and man in his image. Adam had the high honor of being God's son (cf. Lk 3:38) and living in communion with God in the Garden. The fall marred the image of God in Adam, and Adam was expelled from the Garden. Adam failed as a son. The genealogy of God's sons in Genesis 5 moves from Adam to Noah. Noah, a covenant head, failed in his sonship, as did Abraham, Israel, and David.

Special revelation reached its zenith in the incarnation of God the Son. In his incarnation the Word became flesh. John went on to say, *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth* (Jn. 1:14).

The writer of Hebrews put it like this: *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world* (Heb 1:1-2).

In his incarnation, which continues to this day and will forever, he took on the title Son of God, which point both to his divine nature and his human nature, as the image of God. He came to be God's successful Son and to bring many sons to glory (Heb 2:10): *For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering*. He came to call from among the fallen sons of Adam, many sons, conforming them to His image, as he is flawless image of God (Rom 8:29; cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

As the obedient Son of God, Jesus prayed and taught us to pray. There is a link between sonship/image and prayer. Adam lived in communication and communion with God until he is exiled from the Presence of God. Jesus, the Son of God, was made in God's image after his likeness. He enjoyed communion and communication with the Father.

His life is set in the context to prayer. We can't mention all the references to Jesus praying here, but I've listed them in an endnote.^{vii} The writer of Hebrews sums up well Jesus's habit of prayer: *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to himself who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence* (Heb 5:7).

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, not only in the *Lord's Prayer*, but through parables and exhortations (Mt. 6:9; 9:38; 24:20; Mk 13:18; 14:38; Lk 11:1; 18:1). Remarkably, Jesus appeals to our sonship in teaching us to prayer. He told us when we pray to say, *Our Father*. Through faith in Christ, we are being conformed to his image and thus sonship is restored.

B. Special revelation as the Bible

Special revelation comes to us in the Bible. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article 1, states: *The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man.*^{viii} Al Mohler commented, *The Bible is not merely a record of revelation. It is revelation itself.*^{ix}

It is through the word of God, giving testimony to the Son of God, accompanied by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, that nature's night turns to light. Charles Wesley wrote of this in his hymn "And Can It Be":

[4] *Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee.*
[Refrain]

[5] *No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him is mine! Alive in
Him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine. Bold I approach
th'eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.* [Refrain]^x

Grudem says, *...Scripture nowhere indicates that people can know the gospel or know the way of salvation, through ... general revelation. They may know that God exists, that he is their Creator, that they owe him obedience, and they have sinned against him...[but] the Bible [does not] give any hope that [salvation] can be discovered apart from specific revelation.*^{xi}

The London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 says, *The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave man inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation.*^{xii}

Pagans grope after God in the dark responding to what they see of him. When a more clear word from God comes in the gospel in the power of the Spirit, our understanding is enlightened. We respond in faith that issues in prayer.

1) Prayer and the Bible

I want to emphasize there is an inseparable relationship between prayer and the Word. *Both the Bible and prayer are covenantal privileges. God speaks to his people through the Bible and listens to his people through prayer, who are bound to him in covenantal relationship.*^{xiii} Through the Word, God brings us into conversation about himself, us, and the world. He spoke first. Because God speaks, we speak, and we pray.

Special revelation is the knowledge of God that comes to us in the words of the Bible.^{xiv} The primary way we encounter God, and the way through which all encounters with God are to be tested, is through God's words given to us in the Bible.^{xv} The place of prayer and devotion must have an open Bible. Every subjective encounter we have with God must be measured by the Word of God.

If we rely solely or primarily on impressions and feelings for guidance, we open ourselves to deception. I don't want to give the impression that feelings and impressions are bad or should be disregarded. I want us to have more not less of these things. I simply think the Word will fuel greater passion, deeper feelings, and more accurate impressions, leading to a deeper fellowship with God.

Some, perhaps, pursue a relationship with God based primarily on impression and feeling, even when those are impressions and feelings are contrary to the Scripture. For example, I have heard people say, *I felt like I was supposed to stay home today instead of attending church.* You run right up against Hebrews 10:25, *Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some....* Such a case is placing an impression above the Word of God.

If you go down that road, the deception will get stronger. A pastor and a woman in a church entered into an adulterous affair and said that the Holy Spirit confirmed their relationship. How do we know that cannot be true?

There can be a lot of reasons people get to that point of deception. I think, however, it begins with neglect of the Word.

There seems to be a tendency in some to seek a relationship with God built on the paltry authority of impressions and feelings. A couple reasons this happens is, one, the Bible is hard/difficult and often confusing. Yes, it takes a concentrated, lifelong commitment to read, study, and know the Bible, but Scripture is sufficient and your personal relationship with God will be no deeper than your knowledge of Scripture.

A second reason we elevate experience above the Scripture is we misunderstand the nature of Scripture. To say, "*The Bible says,*" is to say, "*God says.*" We tend to think of God's word as we think of human speech, but God does not have idle words. His words are powerful.

Isaiah 40:8, *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.* He word is eternal, and thus has staying power.

Isaiah 55:11, "*so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*"

Hebrews 4:12, "*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*"

God's words are his acts. Scripture gives us the story not of the idle thoughts of God, but Scripture is the story of God in action.^{xvi}

Let's say a man is struggling to love his wife. The Bible says, *Husbands love your wives* (Eph 5:25). He should read the Word, pray the Word, and then go and love his wife. Will not the God who has spoken the Word also give the power to do it? What if a wife is struggling to respect her husband? God has engaged her with

the word telling her to *respect her husband* (Eph 5:22,33). Will not the God who has engaged her with his words give her the power to obey?

If you are tempted, the Word of God says, *No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it* (1Cor 10:13). The God who spoke these words will give you a way of escape.

If God says he loves you, does he not also pour his love into your heart by the Holy Spirit who is given to you (cf Rom. 5:5)?

I fear we approach the Bible as a magic book. If you read a text and “God gives it to you,” then it is to be claimed, obeyed, done, etc. I have a cousin who said the Lord gave her a revelation on a text. I’m like, no, the text is revelation. Maybe the Spirit gave you some insight on its meaning, but the Bible is revelation. It is true that the Spirit illuminates the Word or understanding of it, but you don’t simply interact with texts that give you chills and thrills.

God’s Word has come to us in Scripture. Keller said, *The Bible is the way to actually hear God speaking and also to meet God himself.*^{xvii} Prayer is always a response to the voice of God. In Scripture, we hear God speaking, and we respond in prayer.^{xviii} God has engaged us in a conversation with him. God has initiated the conversation in nature and deepened it through grace. Through his verbal revelation in the Scripture, the conversation becomes clear.

I hope this helps you; it really helps me to know that prayer is response, it is answering the conversation that God initiates and sustains in his word.^{xix} In prayer, we are not initiating the conversation. The conversation is simply continuing. The more we know God, the word of God, the Gospel, and good theology, the richer the conversation has the potential to become. We need Christ for the conversation to deepen. Only through him can we approach God rightly.

Keller illustrated:

We cannot look directly at the sun with our eyes. It would destroy our sight. Through a filter we can see the great flames and colors. When we look at

Jesus Christ as he is shown to us in Scripture, we are looking at the glory of God through the filter of human nature.^{xx}

This is some of what it means to pray in Jesus's name: *For through him we...have access in one Spirit to the Father* (Eph 2:18).^{xxi} We look deeper at what it means to pray in Jesus's Name in my next lesson.

ⁱ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God: What the Whole Bible Teaches*, 55ff.

ⁱⁱ I am dependent on Grudem for the Romans and the Acts illustrations of general revelation. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 121.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pohill, Acts, TNAC, 314.

^{iv} Pohill, 314.

^v Keller quotes Calvin's comment on the *divinitatis sensum*, the sense of deity that all humans have. See Keller, *Prayer*, 44.

^{vi} Carson, *John*, 116-117.

^{vii}This reference come from a Grok search in which I asked the question: *Biblical references to Jesus praying?*

- **Matthew 14:23** After feeding the 5,000, Jesus goes up on a mountainside alone to pray.
"After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone."
- **Matthew 26:36-44** In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays intensely before his arrest, asking God to take the cup of suffering from him but submitting to God's will.
"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (v. 39).
- **Mark 1:35** Early in his ministry, Jesus rises before dawn to pray in a solitary place.
"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."
- **Mark 6:46** After feeding the 5,000, Jesus prays alone on a mountainside.
"After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray."
- **Luke 3:21-22** Jesus prays during his baptism, and the Holy Spirit descends as he prays.
"When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened."
- **Luke 5:16** Jesus frequently withdraws to lonely places to pray, showing a pattern of prayer.
"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."
- **Luke 6:12** Before choosing the twelve apostles, Jesus spends the night praying.
"One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God."
- **Luke 9:18** Jesus prays privately before asking his disciples, "Who do you say I am?"
"Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?'"
- **Luke 9:28-29** During the Transfiguration, Jesus prays, and his appearance changes.
"As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning."
- **Luke 11:1** Jesus prays, prompting a disciple to ask him to teach them to pray, leading to the Lord's Prayer.
"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'"

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- **Luke 22:32** Jesus tells Peter he has prayed for him, that his faith may not fail.
“But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”
 - **John 11:41-42** Before raising Lazarus, Jesus prays aloud, thanking God for hearing him.
“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me.”
 - **John 17:1-26** The High Priestly Prayer, where Jesus prays for himself, his disciples, and all future believers, asking for unity and glorification.
“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (v. 1).
 - **Hebrews 5:7** A reflection on Jesus’ prayers during his earthly life, emphasizing his cries and tears.
“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears.”

^{viii} *An Exposition from the Faculty of TSBTS on the Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, 47.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 1.

^x Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be” written in 1738.

^{xi} Grudem, 123.

^{xii} *The London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 and Keach’s Catechism*, (Gospel Mission, Choteau, Montana), 7.

^{xiii} Keller, 297-298n133. Keller quotes Timothy Ward in this footnote.

^{xiv} Grudem has a helpful introductory discussion of special revelation that I have been aided by. See Grudem, *ST*, 123.

^{xv} Keller, 66, alluding to Timothy Ward, *Words of Life*, 48.

^{xvi} Keller, 66, quoting Timothy Ward,

^{xvii} Keller, 54.

^{xviii} Keller, 45.

^{xix} Keller relies on Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tool for Prayer*.

^{xx} Keller, 49.

^{xxi} Keller, 49.