

The Trinity and Prayer

Ephesians 2:18

Last lesson we saw how the word as special revelation relates to prayer. The incarnation of God the Son is clearest the indication of the reality of the ⁱ Now, I want to look at the Trinity as it relates to prayer.

We saw in the comparison of Genesis 1:3 and John 1:1-3 that Persons of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal. Also, we saw that there is the closest relation and communication between the Persons of the Godhead—*the Word was with God and the Word was God*.

In the internal life of the Trinity, aka the imminent Trinity,ⁱⁱ is the reality of perfect love and happiness. Paul in a sense indicated this when he said to the philosophers at Athens, *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by humans hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything* (Acts 17:24-25).

God has no needs, Paul says. He is perfectly satisfied within the relations of his persons. It is nonsensical to think that God benefits from his creation in anyway. He did not create the world because he was lonely or in need of fellowship. He created to share his own self. He created simply because it is fitting that He be known, enjoyed, and reflected in the created. The catechism asks, *What is the chief end of man*. Answer: *To glorify God and enjoy him forever*.

When we encounter God in Scripture, we encounter God in the plurality of His Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hear Ephesians 2:18 again, *For through him [Christ] we...have access in one Spirit to the Father*. Access is the issue of mankind since the fall into sin and exile from Eden. Sin had separated us from God, so that he would not hear us: *But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear* (Isaiah 59:2).

The Trinity works together for our salvation. John Owen, reflecting on Ephesians 1, pointed to the Trinitarian nature of our salvation: The Father initiates redemption in His choosing sinners; the Son redeems sinners; the Spirit calls and seals

sinner.ⁱⁱⁱ This saving work gives us access to the Father:

For through him [Christ], we ... have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18).

In whom [Christ Jesus] we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him (Eph 3:12).

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (Heb 10:19-22).

You cannot separate prayer from the Gospel or from the Trinity. Christian prayer is trinitarian in its nature. God is One in Being and Three in Person: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—One Divine Nature, 3 Divine Persons. Grudem summarizes what Scripture says about the Being of God with 3 statements: *God is three Persons; Each Person is fully God; There is one God.*^{iv}

Edmund Clowney said:

Our prayer is always directed to the triune God. We dare not address the Father without awareness of the Son. To do so would be to fail to pray in the name of Jesus. Nor should we pray without recognizing that the Lord is present to help us, present in the abiding reality of the Holy Spirit.^v

Tim Keller said, *The primary theological fact about prayer is this: we address a triune God, and our prayers can be heard only through the distinct work of every person of the Godhead.*^{vi} The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the proper understanding of prayer in the Bible.^{vii}

Let's look at the Trinitarian nature of prayer and follow the simple outline of Ephesians 2:18; Prayer is to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

Having said that, I don't think this means that we can't talk to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Jesus said, *If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it* (Jn. 14:14). Stephen's dying words were, *Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit* (Acts 7:59). Both Paul and Annanias talked to Jesus in the account Paul's conversion and convalescence in Damascus (cf. Acts 9). *Our Lord come* (1 Cor. 16:22) and *Come, Lord Jesus!* (Rev 22:20) were common prayers of the early church.^{viii}

While there does not appear to be any prayers recorded in Scripture to the Holy Spirit, there is nothing in Scripture to forbid it. We know the Spirit has come as our Helper (Jn. 14:16,26). He dwells with and in us, and we know him (Jn 14:17). He distributes gifts to the church (1Cor 12:11). He aids us in prayer (Rom 8:26-28). He directs the church and empowers its mission (Acts 1:8; 13:1-5).^{ix}

When we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, we are not depending on some hierarchy in the Godhead. One Person of the Trinity is no more powerful than the Other, no more eternal than the Other or no more divine than the Other. There is one divine mind.

Prayer as we have said is Trinitarian no matter which Person of the Divine Being you are addressing. One member of the Trinity is not jealous of the attention of the Other. The Father is not going to say, *I would have done that, but you asked the Son, and He did want to do it.*

We may pray at times thinking more of one Person of the Trinity than another.^x You can't pray, however, thinking you don't need Jesus. Without his mediatorial work, there is no access. You can't pray thinking you don't need the Spirit. Without his work, you would not know what to pray or be able to pray effectively at all. You can't pray thinking you don't need the Father. Without his electing grace, you would be lost.

But I fear that some may fall into a pattern of prayer that ignores, or worse, disregards the Trinitarian and Gospel reality of it. We should train ourselves to relish, embrace, and glory in the Trinitarian nature of prayer. We will do well to follow the primary biblical pattern of prayer.

Biblical/Christain prayer is Trinitarian in its nature. Our prayers are only heard

because of the distinct work of each Person of the Godhead giving us access to God. The whole notion of prayer is tied to the Gospel in the work of the Triune God to save sinners and make them sons of God.

We would do well in our praying to follow the overwhelming pattern of prayer in the Scripture.

1. **Prayer to the Father**

Primarily, prayer in the NT is addressed to God the Father. The idea of God as Father is *directly* present in the OT (cf. Deut 32:6; Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:19; Mal 2:10; Ps 68:5; 89:26),^{xi} but comes into full view in the NT.

The Fatherhood of God is, also presented in the OT in *indirect ways* that we see fulfilled most clearly in the NT. It is presented in terms of sonship. If there is a son there must be a father.

Consider Adam, the first man, as God's son. While he is not explicitly called God's son in the Genesis account, the idea is there. Genesis is a book of genealogies. In genealogical records, you have fathers and sons in a family lineage. God made Adam in his likeness and image (Gen 1:26), which communicates the idea of sonship. Adam in turn had a son in his likeness and image (Gen 5:3).

I know the sonship of Adam is being communicated in the Genesis account because that is the way Luke read the Genesis account when he gave his genealogy of Jesus. In Luke 3, right after Jesus was baptized, *a voice came from heaven [saying] [the voice of the Father], "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"* (Lk. 3:22). That statement of the Sonship of Jesus leads immediately to Luke's genealogy of Jesus to show that Jesus is God's Son.

He started his genealogical account with Jesus (Lk 3:23) and worked his way backward to Adam. In Luke 3:38 after a long line of *the son of ... the son of ... the son of ...*, Luke gets to Adam: *the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.*

Jesus is God's Son in two ways. **First**, he is the eternally and only begotten Son of the Father, that is God of very God. **Second**, he is God's righteous Son, his anointed son, the last Adam, who is fully God and sinless man. In one person, Jesus, we see two unmixed natures, God and Man. He is fully God, representing

God; and he is fully man, representing his people.

Adam as God's son failed in his mission, but Jesus is the Son *with whom God was well pleased*. The OT highlights some of God's sons along the way—Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David, each as covenant heads.

Lest we miss they are sons, occasionally the language in the OT gets explicit. For example, in the case of Israel, God told Moses to tell Pharaoh, Then you shall say to Pharaoh, *Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son* (Ex 4:22-23; cf Hosea 11:1). Another example is the case of David: *"I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men"* (2 Sam 7:14).

Just as an aside, anytime you see the phrase in the OT, *children of Israel*, a literal translation of that phrase is, *sons of Israel*. It is translated *sons of Israel* in older English translations. Presumably, the modern versions change because they want the reader to know the phrase refers to both men and women, and it does. But the phrase was always a theological category, not a social category. All of God's people are his theological sons. That is whether male or female all the benefits and status of sonship belong to them.

All of God's sons in the OT failed: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David. They, however, serve to foreshadow the coming of a Son who would not fail. In Jesus, we finally have a Son, who is pleasing to the Father. He is the true Son and the true image and likeness of God.

It is not surprising that most of the prayers in the NT are addressed to God as Father because most of the prayers in NT are prayers of Jesus. He was both God's divine Son and his human representative, a kingly Son like Adam, but sinless. To call God, "Father," is a claim of Sonship. The Jews wanted to kill him for such a claim because they understood it as him, *making himself equal with God* (John 5:18), and they rejected him as their Messiah, God's Son.

When Jesus prayed, we see occasions where he seems to be praying according to

his human nature, and other occasions where he seems to be praying according to his divine nature. As the God-Man, He speaks out of both his humanity and his deity.^{xii} In the Garden, we see what seems to be his human nature cry out: *Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless not my will but your will be done* (Mt. 26:39).

In Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17, we have the opportunity to hear Jesus speaking with the Father according to his divine nature of the relationship He had with the Father from all eternity.

An now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (Jn 17:5).

Jesus as the God-Man is here praying that in his resurrected incarnate state, he might show forth the glory that he shared with the Father from all eternity. We know that prayer was answered as his appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road left Paul blind (cf Acts 9) and to John in exile left him lying at his feet like a dead man (Rev 1).

What we see in Jesus's praying is the true image and true Son of God speaking to the Father.

2. Through the Son

Since Jesus is the Divine Son, it is no surprise that he addressed his prayers to the Father. What is shocking is, He instructed us to do the same: *When you pray say, Our Father who art in heaven...* (Mt. 6:9). To call God Father is a claim of sonship. When we called God, "Father," what are we confessing? In what sense are we sons?

When we address the Father in prayer, we are most closely responding to the full revelation of the redemptive work of the Trinity on our behalf.^{xiii} When we pray to the Father, we have access because of the work of Christ. Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn 14:6).

The Father chose us to salvation, and the Son brings those whom God has chosen to the Father (cf. Jn 17:6, 12,20-21, 24-26).

The Son not only brings us to the Father, but he does so because he makes us to

share in his sonship according to his human nature. Jesus is the Son of God in **two ways**. **One**, he is the eternal Son, eternally begotten of the Father, not made. **Second**, he is the Son of God according to his human nature as the second Adam. When we are united to Christ, the Son of God, we are born of the Spirit into the family of God as sons.

How does this reality impact prayer? It is the reason we can pray, the reason we have access, and the reason our prayers are heard. Let's see how this works out in Paul's argument in Galatians.^{xiv}

In Galatians 3, Paul lays out his argument of justification by faith because the promise to Abraham preceded the law (cf. Gal 3:17). He argues that the promise to Abraham of offspring is singular, referring to Christ. *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ (Gal 3:16).*

He continues that the purpose of the law was to teach us our need of Christ. *But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal 3:25-27).* Paul is saying that through our union with Christ, we are sons of God.

Remember what I mentioned about the *sons of Israel* rather than *children of Israel*. Paul is rolling out the theological meaning of being sons of God. That is why he gives the much misused text of Galatians 3:28, *neither Jew nor Greek, ... slave nor free, ... male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. That is, we all have the status of sons (cf Gal 3:26). He states our sonship again in 3:29 with the words, *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise*. That is, we are sons by our union through faith with Christ who is the true Son.

Paul continues his sonship argument in Galatians 4:4-7:

4) *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5) to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6) And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7) So you are no longer a slave,*

but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Paul argues that we have been adopted as sons by virtue of our union with Christ, the True Son. I can say it like this, because we are united to Christ, what is true of him is true of us. If he is the Son, we are also sons. Sonship is not a matter of gender but of union with Christ through faith.

There is more than one way to be a legitimate son. God has no biological sons. Yet, God the Son is the eternally and only Son of the Father, begotten not made.^{xv} Our sonship uses the beautiful language of adoption (Gal 4:5). Adoption bestows all the rights and privileges of heirship that belong to natural born children. Thus we are joint-heirs with Christ, our brother (Rom 8:16).^{xvi}

How does this connect to prayer? Let's not miss the vital connection between sonship and prayer. Galatians 4:6 says: *And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* The sonship of Christ that we share in through faith, gives us audience with the Father. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus prayed, *"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me (Jn. 11:41-42)."*

Think of this in terms of what Jesus said in explanation of the Lord's prayer (Lk 11:11-13):

11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; 12 or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Through Christ, we approach and have access to God the Father. Prayer belongs to the sons of God, that is believers.

Think of it this way. The devil tries to tell us God is distant to keep us from praying. Then, he tells us we have no standing, so God will reject us. He tries to convince us we are not worthy to pray.

I think the NT believers were fascinated by the idea that we have access to the

Father in prayer. We know from our study of the OT that *drawing near*^{xvii} to God was totally through an elaborate system of sacrifices with the worshipers held at a distance, a distance when crossed demanded death. In light of that, hear the writer of Hebrews speak of drawing near:

Hebrews 4:16: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

Hebrews 7:19: *...(for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.*

Hebrews 7:25: *Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

Hebrews 10:1: *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*

Hebrews 10:22: *Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

Dear believing friend, we do not come to the Father on our own merit. We do not come because we are deserving or sin free enough. We come simply and only by virtue and the truth that we are united to Christ. The Father sees us in Christ and like Christ as sons. To turn us away, he would have to turn his own Son away. The Father always hears him (cf. Jn 11:41).

Christ intercedes for us:

Hebrews 7:25 (ESV): *"Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."*

Romans 8:34 (ESV): *"Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."*

1 John 2:1 (ESV): *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."*

3. In the Spirit

Prayer is to the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. You can see the close association to the fulness of the Spirit and prayer in Galatians 4:6: *And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*

The Holy Spirit is here referred to as *The Spirit of his Son*. God has sent the Spirit of Christ into our hearts for the express purpose of prayer, that we might cry "Abba! Father!" So eager is the Father to bring his sons, his people, to himself, knowing our weakness, he sends the Spirit of Christ into our hearts to aid us to call on him as our Father.

We need the Holy Spirit to pray. Back to our theme verse for this lesson, Paul said, *For through him, we ...have access in one Spirit to the Father* (Eph 2:18). Paul has so much to say about the Spirit in the book of Ephesians: we are sealed with the Spirit (1:13), the church is being built by the Spirit (2:22), we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit (4:4), not to grieve the Spirit (4:30), be filled with the Spirit (5:18), take the Sword of the Spirit which is the word (6:17), and last pray in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication (6:18; cf. Jude 20).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prayer. He moves us to call on the Father as sons. Echoing Galatians 4:6, Paul elaborates further on our Spirit empowered sonship and prayer in Romans 8:14-16:

14 *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15* *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16* *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*

The Spirit takes the theological truth of our sonship moves it to the level of experience

as we call on the Father. We have no fear that we will not be heard but in full confidence that we are God's children, we call on him.

This doesn't answer every question we have about prayer in general and prayer in the Spirit in particular. So Paul elaborates further on how the Spirit helps us as we pray in Romans 8:26-28:

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

We are weak and don't know what to pray for, *but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*. The question arises, who is groaning in this text, the Spirit who perfectly knows God's will or the Christian who does not know how to pray as he ought. We are helped by the word *likewise* (8:26). Paul has used the idea of *groaning* already in this passage, which is the idea of unspoken or inexpressible words. In verses 22 the creation groans, in verse 23 the Christian groans, in verse 26, *likewise*, the Spirit groans.^{xviii}

As we groan awaiting the completion of our adoption as sons in the resurrection of our bodies, we are weak and helpless unable to even pray. But the Spirit comes to our aid. He intercedes with unuttered words, because the Father knows his mind. He knows the unspoken prayer of the Spirit interceding for us because the Spirit prays according to the will of God. The Spirit prays perhaps even at depths we would not even be able to speak.

This text on the Spirit praying is capped by Romans 8:28: *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*. Perhaps, we often tie verse 28 to everything simply working out for good. It always does. Paul ties it to the intercession of the Spirit aiding the Saints to pray.

How praying in the will of God expands our prayers! We need the Spirit to help us and pray through us. Notice Romans 8 in its Trinitarian construct. Paul takes us from our freedom from condemnation to new creation. The Spirit is at work in believers

(8:1-27), the Father foreknows, predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies (8:28-30), and the Son gave his life to secure salvation for us (8:31-34).^{xix}

Prayer is a gift of the Triune God to His people. It is to the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit.

ⁱ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God: What the Whole Bible teaches*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 39.

ⁱⁱ Immanent Trinity is from the Latin *immanens*, meaning "indwelling" or "remaining within." Sometimes you will hear the term *Ontological Trinity*, which is simply the Trinity as it exists necessarily and eternally, apart from creation (See John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 489). Older theologians might use the Trinity "ad intra" for the internal life of the Trinity and "ad extra" for his relation to his creation. The operations of the Trinity outside himself are called his "missions."

ⁱⁱⁱ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, Crossway Books 1990, p. 204.

^{iv} Grudem, ST, 1st Ed., 231.

^v Edmund Clowney, "A Biblical Theology of Prayer," in *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World*, 172.

^{vi} Tim Keller, *Prayer*, 66.

^{vii} Goldsworthy, 39.

^{viii} Grudem, 380-381.

^{ix} Grudem, 381.

^x Edmund Clowney, "A Biblical Theology of Prayer," in *Teach Us to Pray*, ed D.A. Carson, 172.

^{xi} **Deuteronomy 32:6** "Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?"

Isaiah 63:16 "For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name."

Isaiah 64:8 "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Jeremiah 3:19 "And I said: 'How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations.' And I said: 'You shall call me, My Father, and not turn away from following me.'"

Malachi 2:10 "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?"

Psalms 68:5 "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation."

Psalms 89:26 "He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.'"

^{xii} Goldsworthy, 28.

^{xiii} Clowney, 172.

^{xiv} I am largely dependent on Graeme Goldsworthy for this argument (39-52).

^{xv} Nicene Creed 325 A.D.

^{xvi} Goldsworthy, 45.

^{xvii} *Draw near* (Heb. *Qarab*), various translated, *come near, bring, approach, offer*, is a technical term for drawing near to God, which the whole Levitical system facilitated is used Leviticus alone here: 1:2,3,5,13-15; 2:1,4,8,11,13-14; 3:1,3,7,9,12,14; 4:3,14; 5:8; 7:3,8-9,12,14,16,18,25,30; 8:13-14; 9:5,7-9,15-18; 10:3;16:1,6,9,11-12,20;18:6,14,19; 20:16; 21:17-18,21,23; 22:3;23:16,17; 27:9,11. Drawing near is a serious theological idea.

^{xviii} Douglas Moo, *Romans*, NIVAC, 268.

^{xix} Goldsworthy, 32.