

The God Who Hears Our Prayers

Psalm 65

Psalms 65-68 really should be a mini-series of sermons all to themselves. If I had known then what I know now, I would have planned it that way when we made the sermon card.

The reason is these 4 psalms form a group of psalms in Book 2 called *songs*.ⁱ At this point in the Psalter, the Davidic kingdom is firmly established. These songs anticipate the expansion of the Davidic kingdom to encompass the world.

As we have plodded through Book 2, we have had many occasions for lament as Davidic kingdom was again and again in jeopardy. At times, things looked bleak. It looked as if the power of darkness might prevail.

Starting in Psalm 65, however, God turns our lament to laughter. This group of psalms brings God's global, saving interest into view (65:2b,5c,7c-8,9-13; 66:4,7,8; 67:2-7; 68:1,12,21,29,31,32-35). The Davidic reign anticipates the reign of God. God's redemptive work in the world will prevail.

In the meantime, we have prayer and praise. We sometimes capture this truth when we sing:

Haste thee on from grace to glory,
Armed by faith and winged by prayer,
Heaven's eternal days before thee.
God's own hand shall guide us there.

Soon shall close thy earthly mission;
Soon shall pass thy pilgrim days.
Hope shall change to glad fruition,
Faith to sight and prayer to praise.ⁱⁱ

Psalm 65 gives us a peak into the place of prayer in God's masterplan to transform the world into a new Eden where God again dwells with his people. God's answer to the prayers of his people becomes the occasion for our praise, the praise of the nations, and the redemption of creation.

Living in a fallen world tends to hinder prayer and praise. One, we don't know how to pray as we should (Rom 8:26). Two, our enemy uses that against us. The reasons he gives us not to pray are the very reasons God has given prayer to us.

He tells us we are too sinful to pray; God won't hear us; you should not bother the Almighty with that issue; you should be embarrassed to say that to God; praying is so awkward; you don't do it right. The reality is God gave us prayer because of what is wrong with us.

Also, he tells us that prayer does not work; the world is too messed up. We pray and our loved ones die; we get a bad diagnosis; our children walk away from the faith; our marriage is difficult. You can't trust God to work in your spouse; you should yell at them or punish them in some way. How about the silent treatment? That will fix them. The reality is God gave us prayer because of what is wrong in my family, my relationships, and even the world.

Prayer is a gift to us in the present age that inevitably will lead to praise.

Psalm 65 is a psalm of praise for answered prayer that leads to the transformation of creation. Even when I say the words, the language seems fanciful, ethereal, and unrealistic. We don't see the connection between what troubles me now and the new creation being established. The Bible makes that connection. If that does not happen, you can just go ahead and hang up the phone.

The psalm divides into 3 stanzas. Each stanza gives us reasons for prayer and praise.

In verses 1-4, God is praised as the one who has made it possible for us to pray and him to hear our prayers. He is the prayer-hearing God.

In verses 5-8, God has not only made it possible for us to pray, he answers our prayers with awe-inspiring deeds that will bring the nations to hope in him.

In verses 9-13, following the transformation of the nations in answer to prayer (5-8) comes the transformation of the created order. When our redemption is complete, the curse will be lifted and creation set free from bondage. We cannot imagine the world that is coming when God pours out his blessing on creation.

My hope in this sermon is to encourage all of us to pray.

1. We need to pray because of what is wrong in us (1-4)

Praise and prayer are tied together in this psalm. Verse 1 tells us that *praise is due to God*. The harder reading of verse 1 that follows the Hebrew text is *praise is silence to you*. The verse is similar to Psalm 62:1, *For God alone my soul waits in silence*. You can see the ESV footnote for Psalm 65:1, *praise waits for you in silence*. While it is absolutely true that *praise is due to God*, it is equally true that silence often overtakes us in the moments we that we are confronted most directly with the holy.

The awe-inspiring moments of answered prayer can create silence in the soul before God.

The psalmist, in the context of the psalm, seems to have vowed to praise God for answered prayer. Perhaps, we have all made such vows in our prayers. We lay needs before God and end by saying, *we will be careful to give you praise and thanks for these petitions*.

The psalmist vows to praise the prayer-hearing God. What a powerful and encouraging description of God, the one who hears our prayers.

A. God hears prayer (2a)

God is described here as prayer-hearing God. No other god ever heard prayer. Recall Elijah mocking the prophets of Baal: *Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened* (1Kgs 18:27).

Baal obviously did not hear prayer. The Bible gives us so many examples of God hearing prayer. Speaking of Elijah, he is one of the OT examples the NT holds up to encourage us to pray for the healing of the sick among us: *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit* (James 5:17-18).

We read that and think, *That's not my experience in prayer. God does not do that when I pray*.

We more often pray like the early church when they prayed for Peter's release from prison. When Peter was arrested, the Scripture says, *earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church* (Acts 12:5b). An angel broke him out of jail. Peter went to house where the church was meeting, praying for his release, and knocked. Rhoda went to door and saw it was Peter. Out of joy she left him outside and went and told the church, *Peter is standing at the gate* (12:14). They responded, *You are out of your mind* (12:15).

I want to say, you don't know what all God might be doing in answer to your prayers. He may be doing things what you would not believe if you were told.

God identifies himself as the God who hears prayer.

B. What God has done to hear our prayers (2b-4)

On its face, it is remarkable that God is characterized as the One who hears prayers. What makes that even more remarkable is, that weak, frail, sinful humans are the ones he invites to come to him. The *flesh* describes the neediness of humans. Perhaps, the very thing you think keeps you away, is the very reason he is calling you to himself.

How can he do that?

1) God made atonement for our sin (3).

Probably, many of you have stopped praying or never started because you think you are too sinful. You ask, *Doesn't our sin separate us from God?* We feel the weight of Isaiah 59:2, *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.*

The psalmist says, *There is good news, God has atoned for our sins.* He felt the weight of his sin: *my iniquities overwhelm me!*

The truth is, we did not have a prayer. Our human frailty, our moral inability, and our sinfulness made it impossible for us to come to God, but God *atoned* for our transgressions.

*Atone*ⁱⁱⁱ is a word that carries a lot of theological freight. It is used over 100 times in the OT, primarily in relation to the sacrificial system in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. In making atonement, God's justice was satisfied and the guilt of sin was taken away.

The concept of atonement comes over into the NT in relation to the cross work of Jesus.^{iv}

Hebrews 2:17 tells us, *Therefore he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation [atone] for the sins of the people.*

2) So that he might draw us near (4).

Here are two more words that are theological heavyweights: *Blessed in the one you choose and bring near.*

The whole reason for the building of the temple was that God might dwell among his chosen people and through atonement draw them near to *dwell in his courts* and *be satisfied with his goodness.*

These ideas foreshadowed the substitutionary death of Jesus to make a way for those on whom God has set his affection to *draw near*. Because he made atonement for us, we can draw near to God.

We draw near in prayer. We come into to God's presence in prayer not on the basis of our merit but on the basis of the all sufficient merit of Christ.

Hebrews 4:15-16 says, *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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.*

God is the God who hears our prayers. Through the atoning work of Jesus, he has given access to us by grace for the very reason that we are frail and weak and sinful. He invites us to come near through his atoning work because of what is

wrong with us. There, only there, our souls are satisfied. We have reason to praise because God answers our prayers.

2. We need to pray because of what is wrong in the world (5-8)

After showing the foundation of our drawing near to God in prayer and praise is Christ's atoning work, the psalmist shows the relationship between prayer and subduing the nations in revolt against God.

Two ideas are set forward here: one, he will subdue the nations under his rule (5,7c-8); and two, he is the creator and sustainer of the world (6-7b).

The section is framed by God's awe-inspiring answers to the prayers of his people as the nations look on (5,8). God's *awesome deeds* are his acts that provoke awe-stricken responses from the world.

A. God's power to subdue the nations (6-7b)

The question may arise, *Is God powerful enough to subdue the nations in answer to prayer?* To show God's power, the psalmist says, *he established the mountains* (6) and he *stilled the seas* (7).

When God finally answered Job, he asked him *where were you when I set the boundaries for the sea, saying 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed'* (Job 38:11)?

The argument runs like this: if God established the mountains and stills the roaring seas by his power, he will also subdue the contentious nations (7c). At least part of the way he is doing that is through prayers of his people. His *awesome deeds* in verse 5 and his *awe-inspiring signs* (8) are tied to the prayers of God's people.

B. God will subdue the nations in answer to the prayers of his people (5, 7c-8)

God's awesome deeds are *righteous* and secure the *salvation of his people* (5a). He is making a broken world right in answer to the prayers of his people. God moves his people to pray for the setting right of what is wrong not only in their lives, but also in the world.

He works out our salvation in answer to our prayers in the sight of the nations, for them to witness his awesome deeds.

The display shows He is the only hope of the world (5). In verse 5 *to the ends of the earth and the farthest seas* means the whole world. In verse 8, *ends of the earth and morning and evening* means the whole world.

God's answers the prayers of his people with *awesome* or *fearful deeds* (5a) that in inspire *fear* among the nations (8a).^v We have an example of this in Josh 2:11. When Rahab hid the spies in Jericho, she recounted the mighty deeds they had heard that God did in delivering Israel from Egypt and sustaining them in the wilderness, saying, *And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.*

As drawing near to God satisfies the soul of God's people (4), the *fearful acts* of God result in *shouts of joy* from the nations (8b). Through the awe-inspiring works of God in answer to the prayers of His people, those who dwell at the ends of the earth from the east to the west will shout for joy.

In the mystery God, there is an inseparable connection between the prayers of the church and God's saving purpose among the nations. *Everything*, says Christopher Ash, *depends on God putting prayer onto the groaning lips of Christ's church and then answering it.*^{vi}

We need to pray because of what is wrong in the world. When God finally subdues the nations, shouts of joy will rise from the east to the west (8b).

The Lord's dealing with the wrong that burdens my heart, home, work, relationships, etc., is part of the continuum of wrongs that must be righted in world and will be met with shouts of joy.

3. We need to pray because God is making all things new (9-13).

Let's follow the flow of the psalm. God sets his affection on this people and brings them near through atonement (1-4). He moves them to pray and answers their

prayer in a way that brings the nations to awe-stricken fear of him (5-8). When the nations are subdued, the entire cosmos will be transformed (9-13).

In some way all prayer points to the final restoration of all things. He is the prayer-hearing God. He will remake the world to answer the prayers of his people.

Some of what you are praying for will take another world to settle. That doesn't mean you should stop praying. Verses 9-13 should encourage you to pray all the more.

The world of verses 9-13 is a world of abundance, indeed excess in every good sense of the word. Look at the verbs: God *visits* the earth in blessing *to enrich it, to provide, to prepare, to soften and to bless it* (9-10).

The result is he *crowns* it with goodness, making it *overflow* (11b,12a), *gridding the hills, clothing the meadows, and decking the valleys* (12-13). I love the picture of God driving the wagon (11).

This is not the world as we know it. Rather, it harkens back to the world before the fall of man and forward to the world when the curse is lifted.

This is a picture of God dwelling with his people in a new creation (Rev 21:1-5).

The world as we know it can be amazingly fruitful, but it constantly opposes us. We cannot imagine the world of Adam and Eve. Adam reigned, and the earth obeyed its king. We cannot imagine the coming world. I like to try to imagine that world.

My imagination was aided by the movie *Noah*. The earth was violent and desolate when God told Noah to build the ark. Noah went to visit Methuselah who gave him 5 seeds from the garden of Eden. Noah threw the seeds on the ground and a forest exploded out of the earth.

When Adam fell into sin, God cursed the ground, making it uncooperative and hostile to the man, even returning him to dust. When nations are subdued and redemption is done, the curse will be lifted and the sons of God raised to rule, all in answer to Spirit's intercession on our behalf. This is the day that the whole creation groans

for (Rom 8:22), the day we groan for (Rom 8:23), and the day the Spirit groans for as he intercedes for us (Rom 8:26).

This is the day when every prayer is answered. Then all creation will *shout and sing for joy* (13).

Remarkably, God answers prayer. We should pray because of what is wrong in us and in the world. We should not lose heart because God will make a new world to answer your prayer.

ⁱ The superscription of each of the 4 psalm group uses the designation “song.”

ⁱⁱ Lyrics of “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken”

ⁱⁱⁱ *Aton* or *atonement* come from the *kpr* root that means to cover. Related to the sacrificial system it means to propitiate, purge, pacify, appease, or reconcile.

^{iv} The idea of atonement came over in the NT in the *hilas* word family. It means to propitiate, make atonement (Lk 18:13; Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 9:5; 1Jn 2:2; 4:10).

^v Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 2, 419.

^{vi} Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, vol 3, 179.