

Sydney College of Divinity

**Does the Bible Have a Coherent Teaching of Prayer?**

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE CLASS REQUIREMENTS OF  
SP560R PRAYER AND PRAYERFULNESS  
AS PART OF AN M.A. PROGRAMME

BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE  
(A Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity)

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BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND  
JANUARY 2, 2009

SP560R – Assignment #1

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After offering a definition of prayer, this paper suggests that by examining the prayer of Jesus, themes emerge that, taken together, begin to build a coherent biblical teaching on prayer. These themes recur in the New Testament, and are also alluded to in the book of Psalms. They remain applicable for Christians today.

Prayer is possible because the triune God is personal, and has so revealed himself that men and women, made in his image, may address him by name.<sup>1</sup> Thus, prayer is communication with God.<sup>2</sup> It is by prayer that a person can make contact with God, and it is likewise through prayer that God communicates with an individual.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, prayer may be understood as both a gift and a task.<sup>4</sup> God takes the initiative (Ps 50:3-4; Ezek 2:1-2), but humans must respond.<sup>5</sup>

From the Scriptures, one of the basic themes of prayer is the fact of *an intimacy with God through communion with God in prayer*.<sup>6</sup> This is attested to in Jesus' own prayer. His prayer arises from one who is deeply united with the Father.<sup>7</sup> It is from within that deep intimacy that Jesus fulfills his mission.<sup>8</sup> For example, from the Gospels the mission of

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<sup>1</sup> E. P. Clowney, "Prayer, Theology of", in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 526.

<sup>2</sup> Clowney, "Prayer, Theology of", 526.

<sup>3</sup> D. G. Bloesch, "Prayer", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 946.

<sup>4</sup> Bloesch, "Prayer", 947.

<sup>5</sup> Bloesch, "Prayer", 947. Note: Such prayer is personalistic and dialogic – it entails revealing one's innermost self to God, but also God's revelation of his desires to a person (cf. Prov 1:23).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", in *Be Still and Know* (London: Fontana, 1982; reprint, Cowley, 1992), 17 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

<sup>7</sup> Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 26. Note: The words used by Jesus in prayer affirm the union of the Son with the Father – a union which underlies all the prayers of Jesus (pages 20-21).

<sup>8</sup> Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 22.

Jesus to proclaim the Kingdom of God is in the context of his close relationship with the Father – and within this relationship, prayer occupies a powerful place.<sup>9</sup>

In a parallel manner, the relationship with God expressed in the Psalms also signifies a warmth and closeness to God as Yahweh, the Father of individuals and of the people of God.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, the Psalms have been described as the prayer book of both Jews and Christians.<sup>11</sup> As a collection of songs and prayers, they express the heart and soul of humanity, foreshadowing a dynamic, powerful, and life-changing communion with God.

Likewise for believers today, through communion in prayer, an intimacy exists with the triune God. This is feasible, because according to Scriptures, conversion is accompanied by the *infusion of new life* – that is, the infusion of sanctifying grace and charity, which is the supernatural love of God.<sup>12</sup> In other words, through sanctifying grace, a person becomes a child of God because it makes them partakers of His nature.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the holy Trinity now dwells within them, and this state of grace is entrance into the Kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup>

Another theme is that *prayer links particular events, crucial happenings, and critical moments with the continuing communion of Jesus with the Father.*<sup>15</sup> He began his public ministry in prayer – Luke notes Jesus’ praying at the time of his baptism (Lk 3:21-22). Jesus then marked the turning points of his ministry with periods of prayer (Lk 5:16; 6:12;

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<sup>9</sup> Ramsey, “The Prayer of Jesus”, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms”, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 30.

<sup>11</sup> VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace and the Importance of the First Conversion”, in *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (London: Burns & Oates, 1938; reprint, Tan Reprint, 2002), 8-9 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>13</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace”, 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace”, 15-17.

<sup>15</sup> Ramsey, “The Prayer of Jesus”, 18-20.

9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:32, 41; 23:34, 46 ).<sup>16</sup> Irrespective of life's circumstances, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, prayed to his heavenly Father in unbroken communion.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly in the Psalms, the whole range of human experiences is expressed in the context of prayer – the psalmists confess their sins, express their doubts, share their fears, ask God for help in troubles, as well as praise and worship him.<sup>18</sup>

In like manner, the believer's life situations and circumstances occur in the context of an ongoing communion with the triune God, even though the communion will realistically be typified by varying degrees of closeness. That communion is characterized by the practice of continual (on-going) or regular prayer (1 Thess 1:3; 2:13; 5:17; Rom 1:9-10; 12:12; Eph 6:18; Col 1:3; 2 Tim 1:3).

A third emerging theme is that *prayer is the source of power whereby the work of Jesus in teaching and healing is fulfilled.*<sup>19</sup> For example, he prayed in solitude in the morning, a great while before day (Mk 1:35-37).<sup>20</sup> When Simon and his companions found him, he stated, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (v. 38).<sup>21</sup> Another example occurs in Mk 9:14-29, with the incident of Jesus' healing a boy with an evil spirit.<sup>22</sup> The disciples asked Jesus, "Why could we not cast it out?" (v. 28).<sup>23</sup> He replied that, "This kind can come out only through prayer" (v. 29).<sup>24</sup> Lack of prayer on the part of the disciples was indicated in that they had forgotten that their power over the demonic spirits was from Jesus (see Mk 3:15;

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<sup>16</sup> Clowney, "Prayer, Theology of", 526; Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Clowney, "Prayer, Theology of", 526.

<sup>18</sup> *Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1989), 868.

<sup>19</sup> Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 18.

<sup>23</sup> *New Revised Standard Version*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> *New Revised Standard Version*, 63.

6:7, 13).<sup>25</sup> In short, for Jesus, as for the disciples, prayer is the essence of the work of God.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the Psalms reveal the almighty power of Yahweh on behalf of his people. Even the winds and seas, mountains and plains, are at his command – all of nature is at his control (Ps 65:6-7; 78:26; 93:4). Yahweh’s power is the defence of his people (Ps 18:2-3, 32; 29:11; 46:1; 59:9, 16; 140:7-8). All powers must submit to Yahweh (Ps 66:3-4). In Psalm 51:12, the psalmist prays “grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me”.<sup>27</sup>

In the same way today, it is through prayer that believers receive strength for the challenges that meet them on life’s journey. Jesus’ words to “watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” continue to apply (Mt. 26:41).<sup>28</sup>

A fourth theme regarding prayer is *the pattern prayer that Jesus gives his hearers – a prayer with few words, but grand motifs.*<sup>29</sup> The value lies not in the set of words as such, but in the set of overarching ideas.<sup>30</sup> With heart and mind and imagination, the disciples are to focus on: the Father, the Kingdom, God’s will, daily bread, forgiveness of sin, and deliverance from evil.<sup>31</sup> The physical and spiritual needs of individuals and humankind are lifted into the orbit of God’s purpose, with the conviction that the Kingdom and the glory are God’s.<sup>32</sup>

In a parallel manner, the motifs in Jesus’ pattern for prayer are present in the Psalms: Yahweh’s covenant name (“the LORD”) is holy and precious; the people of Yahweh long for the fullness of his presence: the restoration of Zion; Yahweh sustains and governs in

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<sup>25</sup> *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1922.

<sup>26</sup> Ramsey, “The Prayer of Jesus”, 19.

<sup>27</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, 1067.

<sup>28</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, 1889.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, in *Be Still and Know* (London: Fontana, 1982; reprint, Cowley, 1992), 27 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

<sup>30</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 29.

accordance with the freedom of his will; Yahweh is the Creator who provides for the needs of his whole creation; and finally, his people long for redemption from afflictions: sickness, death, adversity, famine, persecution, and injustice.<sup>33</sup>

Today, Christians still model their prayers on the themes of Jesus' pattern prayer. This is rightly so in view of the fact that many classical expositors treat this prayer as a compendium of the whole gospel concerning God, humankind, and salvation.<sup>34</sup>

A further theme, in the context of the Kingdom and the will of God, is the *ever-continuing tension between what Christian disciples may desire and what lies within God's purpose*.<sup>35</sup> Before Jesus went to the cross, he agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, submitting to his Father's will (Mt 26:36-44; Mk 14:32-42).<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, in the Psalms are prayers in which the psalmists wrestle with God – prayers of doubt and desperation, prayers questioning God's slowness, and prayers demanding answers. VanGemeren describes this tension as follows: "Their expressions of frustration, impatience, anger, and joy reflect the tension between promise and alienation".<sup>37</sup> And, while there is a time to argue and complain to God, there is also a time to submit.

For Christians, Jesus is depicted as one with them in their frailty, not indeed of moral weakness, but of body and nerve (yet one with the Father in the power to turn every faculty towards the Father's purpose).<sup>38</sup> Prayer is both a pleading with God that he will hear and act upon requests, as well as a trusting surrender to God in the confidence that he

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<sup>33</sup> VanGemeren, "Psalms", 15-17.

<sup>34</sup> Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 74.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, "Teaching the Disciples", 33.

<sup>36</sup> Clowney, "Prayer, Theology of", 526.

<sup>37</sup> VanGemeren, "Psalms", 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", 23-24.

will act in his own time and way.<sup>39</sup> However, the confidence comes only through the struggle.<sup>40</sup> In sum, biblical faith sees submission to the will of God coming after the attempt to discover his will through heartfelt supplication.<sup>41</sup>

A sixth theme is that *in the expression of prayer, a double-minded or hypocritical devotion cannot co-exist with obedience.*<sup>42</sup> Jesus deplores long-winded and verbose prayers by those who think that repetition of many words will impress God.<sup>43</sup> Equally criticized is praying ostentatiously in public in order to be observed and admired.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, forms of prayer may be abused, as in “vain repetition” (Mt 6:7).<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, the Psalms echo a stern warning that God hates hypocrites who parrot the law yet abandon it at the opportunity to promote their self-interests (Ps 50:16-17).<sup>46</sup>

In the same way, Christian prayer cannot be separable from the quest of righteousness.<sup>47</sup> Fundamentally, prayer involves the sharing of one’s needs and desires with God to be more fully conformed to his will and ultimate purpose<sup>48</sup>.

Finally, a prominent theme of teaching about prayer is the need for perseverance (persistence), faith (belief), and unrelenting expectation (confidence) (Mt 7:7-12) – especially during times of perceived spiritual aridity and seeming barrenness.<sup>49</sup> Even though Jesus demonstrated the sense of the presence of God, he also experienced of God-

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<sup>39</sup> Bloesch, “Prayer”, 947.

<sup>40</sup> Bloesch, “Prayer”, 947.

<sup>41</sup> Bloesch, “Prayer”, 947.

<sup>42</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 31-32.

<sup>45</sup> Clowney, “Prayer, Theology of”, 527.

<sup>46</sup> VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 377.

<sup>47</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Bloesch, “Prayer”, 947. Note: Prayer for believers, in the biblical perspective, is spontaneous, though it may take structured forms (page 947).

<sup>49</sup> Ramsey, “Teaching the Disciples”, 32.

forsakenness. Mark, for example, depicts the death of Jesus on the hill of Calvary as happening in unrelieved physical darkness and spiritual loneliness (Mk 15:33-34).<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, in the Psalms of lament the people of God confide in Yahweh amid difficulty – such as frustration with God’s slowness or delay in response.<sup>51</sup>

For the Christian, too, there are times when God may appear silent. Prayer, therefore, includes both the dimensions of importunity and submission – both wrestling with God in the darkness, and resting in the stillness.<sup>52</sup>

To conclude, this paper has argued that a coherent teaching of prayer emerges from the Scriptures when the prayer of Jesus is examined and compared with the Psalter. Seven themes have been addressed which begin to form a coherent pattern. These are encapsulated in an appendix entitled “An Emerging Coherent Biblical View of Prayer” at the end of the paper.

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<sup>50</sup> Ramsey, “The Prayer of Jesus”, 25.

<sup>51</sup> VanGemenen, “Psalms”, 30-31.

<sup>52</sup> Bloesch, “Prayer”, 947.



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APPENDIX

**An Emerging Coherent Biblical View of Prayer**

1. Intimacy with God occurs through communion with God in prayer.
2. Prayer brings particular events, crucial happenings, and critical moments into the continuing communion with God.
3. Prayer is the source of power whereby a believer's work is accomplished.
4. Jesus' pattern prayer consists of few words, but grand themes – Father, kingdom, will, bread, forgiveness, and deliverance.
5. Prayer entails the ever-continuing tension between human desire and God's purpose.
6. The expression of prayer must be without hypocrisy in devotion or obedience.
7. Prayer requires perseverance (persistence), faith (belief), and expectation (confidence)