

4. Why do we Pray? - Because we have God's Spirit

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, perhaps you'd turn in your Bibles to John chapter 15. We're not going to be studying this passage directly, as it were, but we will refer to it and some of the passages around it.
- We've been asking the question in these Sunday evenings, why do we pray? In other words, how is it even possible that there is such a thing as prayer, real communication with the Lord, the Almighty God himself?
- And we've seen that, first of all, we pray because God, at his most basic God, is a speaking God. That's why we pray. God initiates relationship with us and we respond.
- Despite that relationship with God that we were created for, having been destroyed and ruined by our rebellion and sin, nevertheless, God calls out to us. He speaks to us.
- He calls out, in Jesus Christ his Son, and we respond to him in faith. And as we've said several times, prayer is simply the vocal form of faith.
- [1 : 0 6] It's responding to God in Jesus Christ. We pray because God's a speaking God. Second, we saw that we pray because God has made us true sons.
- That is, he has adopted us into his family so that we can share all the privileges of that intimate relationship that Jesus, God's true Son, has with him.
- And third, last week, we saw that because we are sons, we are invited, as it were, into real partnership with a God who is sovereign so that we think his thoughts after him and we join in that sovereign purpose of his for his glory in all the world and in eternity.
- We pray, as it were, in line with God's sovereign purposes. We pray because God is a sovereign God and he has invited us to participate in his sovereign purposes.
- And tonight I want to think a little more about that last point, about prayer that is aligned truly with God's sovereign purpose in his gospel.
- [2 : 1 5] Because obviously God's sovereign purpose is sure and certain. And so if we are praying in line with God's sovereign purpose, then truly we are thinking his thoughts after him.
- We are praying in total alignment with God's own goals. And if that is so, then of course, those prayers must be answered. Because God will achieve his own purpose.
- And we'd expect great certainty about that, wouldn't we? Just because God is sovereign. And indeed, that's precisely what Jesus himself tells us. We are to pray, he says, confidently in faith.
- So in Matthew 21, verse 22, he says to his disciples, Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. And he puts it slightly differently, but certainly no less clearly or definitely several times in the farewell discourse, as we call it.
- John chapter 14 to 16 in the upper room. So John 14, verse 14, Jesus says, If you ask anything in my name, I will do it. Or John 16, verse 23, Whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.
- [3 : 3 5] And then John 15, verse 7, that we read just a few moments ago. Look at it again. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it will be done for you.

Now those are very definite statements, aren't they? There's no doubt about that. They are absolutely definite. And of course they can be, and alas they often are, abused.

They're abused as though somehow or other these were sort of lucky charms to be used whenever we really want to get what we want from God in prayer. But you see, the gospel isn't a lucky charm, is it?

It's not a lucky charm to give us what we want from God, as we were hearing this morning. It's quite the reverse. It's God's grace and mercy at work to give God what he desires from our lives.

It's how God does what he wants to change us to be like him. It's God aligning us with his sovereign purposes. Not us aligning God with our selfish purposes in prayer.

[4 : 46] And that's why that last quote there from John chapter 15 is so important, because prayer that exhibits real faith, prayer that really is in Jesus' name, is prayer, Jesus says, from those who abide in Christ, and his words abide in them.

Of course, the whole of the upper room discourse of Jesus with his disciples centers on how that can be after Jesus leaves his people on earth, after he returns to his Father in heaven, after the ascension.

And the answer, of course, is the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, I'm not going to leave you as orphans, but I will send another comforter, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who will lead, he says, the apostles into all truth, and he will reveal to them all that the church needs to know of his sovereign purposes of grace for his kingdom until he comes again in glory.

He, said Jesus, the Holy Spirit will declare to you the things that are to come. John 16, verse 13. And Christ's followers, who love Jesus, he says, will keep his word so that the Father and the Son will make their home with them through the Holy Spirit.

That's how his people are going to know his words and how his words are truly going to abide in them. He is going to send them the Holy Spirit. So we will abide in Christ and therefore his words that reveal his sovereign purposes.

[6 : 31] Those words will abide in us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit of Jesus who dwells within us. And therefore to say that we pray in Jesus' name and with true faith is simply another way of saying that we pray in the Holy Spirit.

And therefore, of course, we can be confident in prayer because as Paul says to us in Romans chapter 8, verse 26, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

We don't know what to pray as we ought, he says, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. The Spirit intercedes for the saints, listen, according to the will of God.

Through the Holy Spirit, you see, we are enabled to pray according to God's will, according to his good and perfect and acceptable will. We pray because we have God's Holy Spirit.

He alone is the one who can enable us to pray in Jesus' name. He alone is the one who can enable us to pray with real faith. Prayer, you see, is all about the ministry of the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

[7 : 52] It's all about his ministry for us and it's all about his ministry in us and it's all about his ministry to us. And I want to focus on those three things in particular this evening because it's so important, so important in helping us to understand the difference between real Christian prayer, prayer with which we should be utterly confident and prayer that will be answered.

The difference between that, real Christian prayer, and prayer which is just presumptuous and prayer which won't be answered because it isn't actually real Christian prayer at all because in fact it's very often just pagan prayer but dressed up in all kinds of pious Christian language.

And you know, the problem is there's a lot of that kind of prayer around in the Christian church. And so we really need to understand the difference.

So I want us to be clear tonight about two things. The first is this. Only the Holy Spirit, only the Holy Spirit can make us real prayers, people who really pray.

And that's because we can't pray at all without the Holy Spirit's work for us and the Holy Spirit's witness in us. What about the first of those?

[9 : 18] The Holy Spirit's work for us. It's He and it's He alone who can enable us to pray in Jesus' name because it is His work alone that can confer the name of Jesus upon us and can make us bear that holy name of belonging to the family of God.

We've seen that already. We can only be born into the family of God through new birth by the Holy Spirit of God. That's how we receive the adoption as sons that enables us to call God Father.

We don't have time tonight to go through all the Old Testament and see just how important this idea of the name of God is all throughout the Old Testament. But God's people, God's people are those who have been given the privilege to know the name of Almighty God.

He's revealed His personal name to His people, His covenant name, Jehovah or Yahweh, the Lord in capital letters in our Bibles. And so His people are people who bear that name.

They're the people of the Lord. That's why the third commandment is so important. That's why it tells us Him is never, ever bear that name in vain. That is to say, they're never to bear that name falsely because they're the people who bear the name of the Lord.

[10 : 43] It's their identity. We're never to dishonour the name of the Lord. We're never to bring it into disrepute. Now just think about that. Think about when you were at school.

There were all kinds of rules, weren't there, about what you could and couldn't do while you were wearing your school blazer. At least there was when I was at school. So if somebody was caught misbehaving out on a Saturday, that wasn't really a huge issue for the school.

But if they were caught misbehaving on a public bus on the way home wearing their school blazer, that's a real issue, isn't it? Because you're bringing the name of the school into disrepute. It's just the same with your workplace where you work.

There are all kinds of rules about bringing your company, your employer into disrepute. There are things that you can do that will make certain that you're set. You can't bring the good name that you bear into disrepute.

And God himself confers the great honour upon his people of allowing them to bear his name. So in Numbers chapter 6, just after the Aaronic blessing that we were reading this morning at the baptism, God says that Aaron the high priest will bless the people from God and put the Lord's name upon the people and I will bless them says the Lord.

[12 : 03] It's the sovereign work of the Spirit of God to confer his name, his name of blessing upon his people. You see, that's the wonder of the new birth that comes to us through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To all who believed in his name, says John chapter 1, he gave the right to become children of God who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but born of God.

Born by the work of the Holy Spirit for us. Jesus is explicit, isn't he, speaking to Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Only those who are born from above, who are born of the Holy Spirit, who are reborn into adoption as God's family, only those can bear the family name.

And that's why Jesus came, isn't it? That through his death and resurrection as he promised the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon all peoples. That there might be from every tribe and tongue and people and nation a redeemed people who belong to the family of God, who bear his name.

[13 : 18] That's what Peter said on the day of Pentecost. Do you remember? Jesus has been exalted, he says, at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, this he has poured out that you are seeing and hearing.

You see, the Spirit's work for us is to bring us to birth, to new birth as the children of God who bear Jesus' name because we are united to him.

That's why we can be real prayers. That's why we can call out to God our Heavenly Father because we pray in Jesus' name.

We're born again and adopted into God's family. Prayer is all about the Holy Spirit's work for us. But the New Testament also tells us that the Holy Spirit is also a witness in us.

As you see now, our salvation is wholly a sovereign act of God. Christ's saving work on the cross is applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

[14 : 26] He brings life from the dead. He brings us to new birth. It's a spiritual rebirth. You can't make yourself be born. It's all God's doing. But of course, from our perspective, the process by which that happens is through faith, isn't it?

The Spirit of God removes our blindness. He opens up and takes away the hardness of our hearts and He turns our eyes to Jesus, our Savior, that we might see Him, that we might cast everything upon Him.

His Holy Spirit enables us to respond to God in true faith. That's what we read in Romans chapter 8, that having received the Spirit of adoption as sons, we cry out, Father!

It's the Spirit Himself, says Paul, who is bearing witness with our spirits that we are sons of God. So, through the sovereign call of God, through the sovereign work of the Spirit for us, the Gospel of life comes to us and through the same Spirit we answer that call of faith.

We respond. Now, once again, that's the both and logic of the Bible that we were talking about last week, isn't it? Both God's sovereignty and also our responsibility and our response.

[15 : 51] So, the Holy Spirit and our salvation, it's His work for us, but it's also His witness in us and with us. That's why there's never any sense in the Bible of any kind of incompatibility between these two things.

So, when Paul is preaching in Acts chapter 13, he says this, or Luke tells us after that, as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

They were appointed to eternal life and called sovereignly by the Spirit of God, His work for them. But He did it as they believed.

The Spirit's work in them, witnessing with them and responding, Father calling out to God. Jesus says the same in John chapter 6. All that the Father gives me will come to me.

Sovereign work. Then He says, this is the will of my Father that everyone who looks on the Son and believes should have eternal life.

[17 : 00] The Holy Spirit's sovereign work for us and the Holy Spirit's witness in us responding to that call of God.

So, it's the Spirit who is sovereignly at work for us, who enables us to pray in Jesus' name and He's the same Spirit who enables us to pray with real faith through His saving witness in our hearts.

See, the response of faith that we make to God's call is also the work of the Spirit, the Spirit of adoption who calls out Abba, Father, who bears witness with our spirit that we are sons of God.

And we've said, you see, prayer is simply the audible form of that response of faith. Like John Calvin put it very starkly once, he said, prayer is the chief exercise of our faith.

If prayer really is the call of our hearts united to Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit and even vocalized through the witness of the Holy Spirit of Jesus, then prayer made in faith, prayer made in Jesus' name, the prayer that is in the Holy Spirit really must be praying Jesus' prayers after him.

[18 : 26] Just as we're thinking his thoughts after him. That's what real faith is, isn't it? Having our thinking aligned with the thinking of God Almighty, thinking his thoughts after him and praying his prayers after him.

And that's why we can be definite. We can be so certain that such prayer will always be answered if we pray in faith. Because the Holy Spirit, he alone makes us into real prayers.

We pray Jesus' prayers after him through his Holy Spirit. Well, it's obvious. They must be certain. They must be prayers that are going to be answered. It's as clear as that, surely.

That's the first thing. Only the Holy Spirit can make us into real prayers. If he does, it must be sure in certain prayers. Prayers of Jesus. Hang on a second.

That's all very well to say that prayers of real prayers who pray in the Spirit and in line totally with the will and purpose of the Spirit of God, that those prayers will be answered.

[19 : 38] But how does that work in my life? How do I know exactly what the will of God is about something?

How can I, when I'm praying, be absolutely sure that my plan and purpose in prayer is totally in alignment with the plan and purpose of the Lord Jesus Christ?

That's where we find difficulty, isn't it? Well, the answer is the same, again, because we have the Holy Spirit. And just as the Holy Spirit can make us into real prayers, so also, and this is the second thing we've really got to grasp, only the Holy Spirit can make our prayers real Christian prayers.

That is, prayers that truly are in line with the sovereign will and purpose of God. Because if, through the Spirit's work for us, we're born anew as sons of God who can truly pray in Jesus' name, and through His witness in us, we can really cry out in faith to our Father, then it's through the Holy Spirit's word to us that we can be confident totally about the will and purpose of God in all things so that we can pray confidently in all our prayers.

And isn't that a massive, massive relief to us? We can pray confidently and we can know with absolute assurance that we are praying in line with God's Holy Spirit because, because He Himself is our personal assistant.

[21 : 26] And He's put it all in writing for us so that we do not have to guess what God's sovereign will and purpose is. And so we'll never forget it. He's put it all in writing.

I don't know if, like me, you are terribly forgetful, but I'm very forgetful and I need to write things down, otherwise I will forget things. And I guess, probably I have a lot of things to think about, too many perhaps, and I often do forget things, and my work would be a total shambles.

Were it not for the fact that I'm not upon my own? But in God's goodness and grace, He's given me a personal assistant in the church. Her name is Alison Hare. And what Alison does very frequently is she writes things down for me.

So here's a little note here, just on the front of my order of service, just to make sure I knew what I was to be adding in tonight that wasn't in there. And many other such notes appear through the email and through the mail and all kinds of things.

She's written things down so that I remember and so I won't forget. And you see, that is what the Holy Spirit is to us as a helper, as a comforter, as a paraclete is the fancy Greek word that people sometimes use.

[22 : 43] It just means somebody who stands beside you to help you, to make sure you don't forget. And what He has done to enable us to be confident that we know the will and purpose of God is that He has written it all down for us.

And He's written it right here in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. And that is what Jesus is telling us in these chapters in John 14-16. He tells the apostles that when He ascends to heaven, the Holy Spirit will come and lead them, He's speaking to them, remember, directly, the apostles of Christ, lead them directly into all truth.

And that they, with all His authority, through His inspiration and His control, they have written it down for us. So that we, who have the whole of the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments, so we will know what the clear and certain will and purpose of God is about everything that really matters in our lives.

And when we forget and when we get confused, we come back and we open up His words and we read what He has written to us. And then we're not confused anymore. That's why Peter, the apostle, can say in 2 Peter chapter 1 that the church has been given everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of the God who has called us to glory.

And he's talking about the Scriptures. In all these Scriptures and the great and precious promises we have, he says, breathed out by God Himself, able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

[24 : 22] They're there to teach us, to rebuke us, to correct our thinking, to lead us on in a life of faith and of righteousness. He's given us the Scriptures so that we should have everything we need for our life of faith.

And our prayer life is simply a part of our life of faith. It's the audible form of it. And that's just what Jesus said too if you look again at John 15 verse 7. Look again at it.

Our prayers, he said, will be aligned with His will. They'll be assured if we abide in Him. And we'll abide in Him, he says, and in His will if His words abide in us.

Just as we'll abide in His love, he says, in verse 10, if we keep His commandments and obey His words. Jesus' words are for remembering and abiding in and obeying.

Back to my question. Okay, how do we pray confident that we are praying in the Spirit, that we are praying in God's will? Well, you know the answer now.

[25 : 33] It's simple, don't you? We pray in line with the clear revealed will of God's Holy Spirit in Scripture. We listen to the Spirit's words to us.

It's just so plain all through the New Testament when you start to see it. Read Ephesians chapter 6 later on, tonight perhaps before you go to bed. You'll see that Paul talks about praying as being part of the gospel armour.

It's part of standing firm in the gospel, of trusting that what God has said is true is true. That's why he says in Ephesians 6 verse 18, take the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God praying at all times in the Spirit.

See what he's saying? Praying in the Spirit. Some people think it's some kind of strange mystical thing. It's different from ordinary prayer. It's a mysterious thing. It's some special kind of numinous sort of thing.

Nonsense, says Paul. Just praying in line with God's revealed will in his words, in the Scriptures. God's word reveals God's will from his Spirit.

[26 : 44] And so when we pray, if it is real prayer, we're simply asking God to bring our lives and other people's lives into line with his sovereign purposes as they are revealed to us in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures.

That sovereign purpose of God is absolutely clear, isn't it? In terms of the ultimate outcome, in terms of the ultimate goal of God's purpose, that one day every knee will bow to the Lord Jesus Christ and that one day there will be a great multitude, no one can number, from every tribe and nation, loving and serving the Lord Jesus in a whole reborn world.

That's absolutely clear in Scripture. We know that. That's why Jesus says to us, we can pray with absolute certainty, Lord, thy kingdom come.

And we know that God will be answering that prayer. There's absolutely not a shred of doubt about that. And we can pray also, therefore, can't we, for many, many things that will serve that purpose.

And we're commanded in Scripture to do that. We're commanded by Jesus in Matthew 9, verse 38, to pray that the Lord would send out workers into his harvest field.

[27 : 57] And I would take it as a corollary, I suppose, what I was saying there. We pray for that, we've got to be willing to be part of that too. We're to pray for the world, Paul says in 1 Timothy 2, for those who need the gospel and for the conditions necessary for the gospel to spread, peace and freedom.

We're to pray often, says Paul, for the gospel itself, for its proclamation, for its progress, that it would run forth and have free course and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that we can pray for these things.

We're commanded to it. It's the clear will and purpose of God. God must answer those prayers, mustn't he? He made them up. Of course, there are many details, precise details about God's purposes that aren't revealed to us by the Holy Spirit in Scripture.

Things, I guess, that we don't need to know. Things, perhaps, that it's often better for us not to know. We don't know God's secret will in his sovereign electing grace.

We don't know exactly who God is calling, exactly how many. there will be in any place. Instead, we're commanded to preach the gospel to all and to pray to that end.

[29 : 11] We don't know exactly when Jesus will return. In fact, Jesus tells us plainly, we can't know. We mustn't keep asking. But we are commanded very clearly, aren't we, to be ready for that coming whenever it's going to be and to work gladly for the Master so that we won't be found wanting when he does come.

And surely, therefore, to pray to that end. Lord, help me not to be found wanting when you come. Lord, help me help me to be ready for your coming. That must be a prayer that Jesus will answer. Don't you think?

We're not told in the Bible if I'm going to live to see my 44th birthday or my 95th birthday or when you are going to be taken home.

We're not told in the Scriptures which of us is going to lose our job this year. We're not told clearly in the revealed will of the Holy Spirit whether I should do this job or that job or marry this person or that person.

Actually, for me, I'm already married so I'm told about that. We are told some interesting things, aren't we, in 1 Thessalonians 4, that it is God's will always that we should be holy.

[30 : 19] And in 1 Thessalonians 5, that it's God's will always that we should be joyful and thankful in all circumstances. How many times though have you prayed with assurance and certainty asking God to make you thankful and asking God to make you holy?

In comparison to the number of times you've prayed and prayed and prayed and asked God to tell you whether you should do this job or that job. Or marry this person or that person. There are many, many things, aren't there, in the Bible that we don't know for sure.

But the real prayer of faith can pray confidently. Lord, fulfill your purposes among us today. Lord, fulfill your purposes for your glory in my life this coming week.

You can know for certain that that's God's will for you and for your life. That's what he wants you to pray. And you can pray like this, Lord, if it be your will, may I be spared to serve you till I'm 95.

If it be your will. It's not a lack of faith to pray like that. It's very, very important to know that, isn't it? Especially when you're praying for something like the healing of somebody you know and love who has cancer.

[31 : 41] Perhaps when you're praying for some very definite resolution of some difficult situation that you're involved in. It can't be wrong to pray with some uncertainty about these things, to pray, Lord, if it be your will.

It can't be wrong, even though some people would tell you that it is wrong and that you're not getting the answers to your prayers because you're not praying with enough faith. It can't be wrong to pray, Lord, if it be your will, if it is praying for something that God, by his Holy Spirit, has not seen fit to reveal to us certainly and clearly in the scriptures which he says have given us every single thing we need for life and godliness until his coming.

And just to pray on and on and claim faith for some of these things isn't faith at all, is it? If it's claiming something that God's Holy Spirit hasn't promised to us clearly through his word.

Because the Spirit of God in us cannot bear false witness. But to drum up lots of faith like that, to be sure, sure, sure that God's going to answer our prayer.

That isn't faith. It's a self deception. Actually, it's idolatry. It's a terrible thing. It's making up a false god of our own imagining and calling it the true God.

[33 : 07] That's what Aaron did, isn't it, with the golden calf. Here's your God, worship him. Pray to this God and look for the answers that you want. No! That is sometimes what we find ourselves doing.

if we pray presumptuously on and on for something God hasn't promised us that we can be certain about. It doesn't matter how fervent that prayer is.

In fact, it's Jesus who says, isn't it, that sometimes the more fervent that prayer is, the more pagan it is. Read Matthew chapter 6. Don't pray like that, he says, with all those long words and going on and on and on and on half the night.

It's what the pagans do. You'd rather pray like this, hallowed be your name, your will be done.

That was how Jesus prayed, wasn't it, in Gethsemane? Let this cup pass from me, but if it cannot, then thy will be done. Not my will, not my assessment of what God would want and what God ought to do, but thy will be done.

[34 : 17] because my heart's desire is for what you have revealed to be your purpose, the glory of your kingdom. And because I have faith and I trust the Lord Jesus Christ to know best how to accomplish his will in my life, even though I might have some very good ideas of my own a lot of the time.

That's real prayer, isn't it, filled with the Holy Spirit on the lips of our Lord Jesus himself. because Jesus is the real prayer. But his Holy Spirit, and only his Holy Spirit, his Holy Spirit can make us also into real prayers.

His work for us and his witness in us enable us to pray Jesus' prayers after him in his name and in real faith. And he too will make our prayers real, just like Christ's.

If we'll be guided in them by all his words to us through the scriptures. We pray because we have God's Holy Spirit. And that means that we can believe Jesus' plain and simple words.

If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. That's what Jesus means.

[35 : 47] That's how we should pray. Well, let's pray now. God, our Father, we thank you for sending into our hearts the Spirit of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you for his work for us, bringing us to new life, giving us your name. We thank you for his witness in us with our spirits that we might call out to you even when we have no words of our own.

And we thank you for his words to us which are fresh and real and speak to our lives day by day as this living word before us is opened.

So, Lord, through your Holy Spirit, we pray, make us into real prayers prayers, that we might pray your prayers after you and bring great glory to your name.

Amen. Amen.