

1. Why do we Pray? - Because God is a Speaking God

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[0 : 00] Why do we pray? That's our question over these next few weeks and we're beginning to think about that tonight.

I had been thinking for quite some time about a series on prayer, but I have to confess that I'd often been put off. So, perhaps because very often I find things that I've read or things that I've heard preached about prayer often just, well, I find made me feel rather depressed.

You know, somebody would tell you about John Wesley getting up at four o'clock every morning and praying for six hours before breakfast. And if only you would do the same as John Wesley, that would be the secret to the spiritual blessing in your life.

Well, I just find that thing absolutely depressing. Don't you? I find I'm doing very well indeed if I can manage to get myself out of bed at all before breakfast. Never mind have any hours of prayer.

And I just find that that kind of exhortation, which I suppose is supposed to make me determined to go on praying and not giving up, well, it just makes me want to give up altogether even before I've begun. Maybe I'm more perverse than you, but that's the way I feel.

[1 : 20] I guess perhaps you're the same. But a little while ago I was reading for the first time a very, very helpful book on prayer. I think perhaps the most helpful book I can recall reading on this subject ever by a theologian called Graham Goldsworthy.

It's a book called Prayer and the Knowledge of God. I'm not sure if we have it in the book room at the back. We may do. It's not a light book by any means. But the reason that I find it so helpful was because it's a book that looks at what the whole Bible teaches about prayer.

And especially what we learn about prayer simply by learning about God. And that's a great thing, you see, because God is never depressing.

God's never as depressing as some very well-meaning and over-pious Christians often are or make you. God is never depressing.

And after reading that book, which really turns out to be a book about knowing God, I find that for the first time I really did want to preach about prayer. Because I thought I could prepare for it without getting depressed myself.

[2 : 32] And I thought perhaps I could preach on it without getting you depressed. And that's not what I want to do, get you depressed. The Word of God should never be something that depresses us. So we're going to look for a few weeks at this question, why we pray.

And maybe later on we'll come back and think about the question of how we pray. That's really another topic. But first of all, the most important thing is why.

Why do we pray? Not why should we pray, or not why we should pray. Not an exhortation. That's not what I'm talking about.

But an explanation. Why prayer exists at all, as it were. Why there is such a thing as prayer. If prayer is speaking to God, then just think about it for a minute.

Why should there be any such thing as speaking to God? Why would God want us to speak to Him? Why would God need us to speak to Him if He controls all things as He does?

[3 : 35] Why would we, for example, need to speak to God? Just because He's there. Well, we have a queen in this country, don't we?

But I don't speak to the queen. I don't suppose you do. Not very often, anyway. Why should we speak to God? Just because He is a powerful being. Well, the answer to that, at its most basic and fundamental, is that we pray because God is a speaking God.

And prayer derives from who and what God is. And one great feature of the God of the Bible is that God is a speaking God. And as we saw in the very first chapter of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 1, it's very, very plain.

Just perhaps turn there again and let's read a few of those verses together once again. Verse 24. God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures, and so on.

And it happened. And verse 26. Then God said, Let us make man in our own image, after the likeness of ourselves.

[4 : 51] And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him male and female. He created them. Here's the first thing to think about.

All the way through that chapter, as we've seen, God spoke the whole of the created order into being. He didn't just imagine it into existence.

As no doubt He could have done. He didn't wave a magic wand and bring it out of His hat. He didn't do it any other way, according to Scripture. He spoke it into being.

Let there be light. And light was. Let there be creatures. And creatures were. Including man.

[5 : 53] He spoke into existence everything that we see. Now, why so? Well, because, and we'll think more about this in just a minute, because the Creator God is, the Bible tells us, the covenant God.

What does that mean? That means He is not a distant deity. He is not aloof. He's not disinterested and afar off. But He is a God who is involved intimately and totally with everything He makes.

From the sparrows that fall to the ground that Jesus tells us about. To the very hairs of our heads. To the hills. To the valleys. The rivers. Everything. And the covenant God is a God of relationship.

That's what it means, that He is the covenant God. That's what it means. And that's what speech does when you think about it. Speech creates relationship.

In fact, speech requires relationships. You can't speak to someone without creating a relationship with them. It's impossible. It might be a very short, a very cursory relationship.

[7 : 02] Like the relationship you have with the bus driver when you get on. And you say, oh, does this bus go to Strathbongo? And he says, yes, hop on. Well, you've created a relationship. It's short. It's rather shallow. But it's a relationship.

The other end of the spectrum, there are relationships which are lifelong and deep. I suppose the most obvious of those is in marriage. And you can't sustain a relationship without speech.

And Genesis 1, you see, is a chapter that tells us that God creates the world in perfect relationship with Him. And the creation, as it were, speaks back to God.

It's praise to Him. God saw everything that He had made, we're told, and it was very good. That was creation's speech back to God. The whole of the created order was telling God by everything it was, this is very good.

The creation speaks back to God. That's what Psalm 19 that we quoted at the beginning of the service was saying. The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky proclaims His handiwork.

[8 : 13] Or Psalm 96 calls the whole of creation to speak forth praise. Let the heavens be glad. Let the earth rejoice. Let the sea roar and all that fills it. Let the field exult and everything in it.

Or Psalm 98, as we sang just a few moments ago. The seas, the rivers, all of these things speaking back to the God who spoke them into being.

And in that sense, you see, you could say that the whole of the created order, in a sense, prays. Speaks back its praise to God, the Creator.

To the one to whom it owes everything, its own existence. Because God spoke everything into being. And He spoke it, therefore, into a relationship with Himself.

Of course, these verses that we read also tell us, don't they? About God speaking human beings into being. He did that as the very crown of creation in a very unique way, a very special way.

[9 : 21] Look at verse 26 again. It's an astonishing thing that we see here in Genesis 1, 26. We see God speaking to Himself. Let us make man, He says, in our own image.

Now, don't you think that is a very extraordinary statement? Just think about it. This is being recorded by Moses. Moses, the great leader and teacher of Israel.

And what was the great emphasis that Moses constantly taught the people of Israel, all through their journeys in the wilderness and at Sinai, and for their life in the land.

Well, his great message was that Israel should be devoted only to the one God. The God who Moses told them so clearly was one.

Not the many, many gods of the idols and the pagans who lived in the lands round about, but the one God and the only God. Remember Deuteronomy chapter 6 and the great Shema, the prayer of the Israelite people.

[10 : 28] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. It's the very essence, isn't it, of the whole of the Old Testament faith.

God is one. The very essence of the Christian faith. And yet here we have, in the very first chapter of the Bible, the one God speaking to Himself.

Using plural terms like us and our. Let us make man in our own image. Now, of course, we who know the whole of the revelation of God as His ultimate word to us in Jesus Christ, we can understand exactly how this can be, because we know that the one God is also three.

Three distinct persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity. Indivisible. Inseparable. One God, but nevertheless, the scripture testifies, within Himself.

A God who speaks. Who speaks to Himself. And therefore is in perfect relationship with Himself. The Father speaks to the Son.

[11 : 42] The Son speaks to the Father in the Holy Spirit. That's what we see here, right before the very beginning of our own creation. In just the same way as later on in John's Gospel, for example, John chapter 17, we see Jesus on earth, the Son, speaking in the Spirit to His Heavenly Father.

Now you see, it is uniquely, according to the Bible, it is uniquely in the image of this God, this God of relationship, this speaking God, in this image that we are made.

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And that's why, fundamentally, we human beings speak. That's why we human beings are relational beings, covenantal beings, because we image the relational covenant God, the speaking God.

See, speech is so intrinsic to our human nature. We can hardly imagine what it would be like to be human, and yet to be totally denied any communication.

That would be for us to become unhuman, wouldn't it? In fact, we even use that very language, if you think about it. We talk about somebody who has lost all that capacity, being sometimes in a persistent vegetative state.

[13 : 09] They are totally unable to communicate, and no one can communicate with them. And what we're saying there is that they're not really like a human anymore, they're like a vegetable. They're not human, they're not communicating.

We also know that to deny communication, to deny speech, to deny that kind of relational interaction, will dehumanize people.

That's why it's used horribly, isn't it? In torture, sensory deprivation. People are denied all communication, and it unhinges them.

Some of you will remember years ago, when the Eastern Bloc of Europe was for the first time being exposed to the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall and so on.

Some of you will remember those awful pictures that we saw on television of some of the orphanages in Romania, where children had been abandoned and treated so awfully. No one ever spoke to these babies and young children.

[14 : 17] And it stunted not only their emotions, their psyche, but it stunted their physical growth. They were stunted. Because there'd been no speech, no communication, no warmth of human relationship.

See, because we are made as human beings for relationship. We're covenantal beings. We image fundamentally the covenant God, the relational God.

Our marriage covenant, I suppose, is the most intimate reflection of this. This image that we bear of the three in one God.

Because in marriage, two become one, don't they? One flesh. That's why, of course, in marriage, and only in marriage, according to the Scriptures, is that physical, that very physical speech communication of sexual intercourse.

We are spoken into being by the speaking God to be speaking beings, to be relational beings, one to another. But, of course, above all, we are spoken into being for relationship, not just with one another, but with God himself.

[15 : 36] man was created for that perfect, harmonious relationship with the God of creation. And to be in perfect relationship with the whole of that creation over which God had placed human beings.

Verse 28, God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over it. There's not a hint there, by the way, as some people have wanted to say, not a hint of exploitation of the earth.

That verse is not the root of all the problems and ecology in our world today. That's just nonsense. Far from it. It's a picture here, isn't it, of a perfect relationship, a perfectly ordered relationship between human beings and their world.

It's a picture of man imaging God's gracious relationship over his creation in his place. Because it flows out of a perfect relationship between human beings and their God.

That's why in Genesis 1 and 2 we see a whole picture of that perfect relationship. God commands man as his vicegerent to rule over the earth.

[16 : 49] He sets him to work in the Garden of Eden. Chapter 2, verse 15 tells us that the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to keep it.

By the way, that word put him literally says gave him rest. God gave him rest in the Garden of Eden to work it and to keep it. Perfect rest is doing the work of God.

We should remember that. In fact, all the way through the Old Testament, the promise of the future, of rest in the land is what God lays before his people and it's what God lays before us too.

A rest still awaits the people of God. Sometimes we think when we go to heaven and we're into God's eternal kingdom, we're going to be sitting about doing nothing. That's not true at all. The perfect rest of God is doing the work of God.

And that's the situation that we see here right in the beginning. God puts man in the Garden at perfect rest, in perfect harmony to work under his direction.

[17 : 57] And he speaks his gracious words of command to human beings. And man and woman answer in obedience to God.

That's the visible form, if you like, of their trust of God. It's the visible form of their expressing that right relationship with God, that they were created for. The New Testament would call it the obedience of faith.

But the audible form of that right relationship with God, of that trust in God, is their speech with God, their verbal communion with him.

Apparently God had the habit of taking an evening stroll in the Garden of Eden to have a chat with Adam and Eve all about the goings-on of the day. Because when we come to Genesis 3 verse 9, God comes looking for them and says, where are you?

He wanted to talk. The Lord God called to the man and said to him, where are you? But that was the problem. That leads us to the second thing.

[19 : 02] God spoke man into being as a speaking being, above all, to be in relationship with him, to be on speaking terms with him, with humans, who would respond to God's call.

But what happened? Man stopped answering God. Adam hid. The Lord God called, where are you?

Adam said, I heard the sound of your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself. He hid himself because the human beings had cheated on that exclusive relationship with God.

They'd broken that special relationship that they were created for. And as we know, when a special, when an exclusive relationship is broken, when that communion is broken in such a relationship, well of course, communication breaks down.

People talk now in the newspapers, don't they, about the special relationship that Britain used to have with the United States.

[20 : 14] Remember Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, we were led to believe they were hardly ever off the phone together. Poor old Ronald Reagan stepped out of line, Maggie would be on the phone putting him right, just like that. But they had, it seemed, a great relationship.

Seemed to be something similar, didn't it, with Tony Blair and George Bush. It's very different now though. You just don't get the impression that that red phone on the desk is going very often and the White House is there on the phone between Mr. Obama and Mr. Brown.

All kinds of things seem to have happened that have changed that. There was a Lockerbie bomber business and various other things no doubt. No special relationship, no communication.

Well think about a marriage, we know that, don't we? When a marriage is in trouble, what's the first sign? You're not talking anymore. Or perhaps first, it's that deeper intimacy of sexual intercourse that's gradually lost.

But ultimately, it's all kind of communication. We just don't talk. We live almost separate lives. See, speech, speech is the audible form of a real and living relationship.

[21 : 29] If there's no speaking happening, if there's no talking, there's no relationship. If you shout to somebody in the street, hello John, and he just turns around and doesn't answer and keeps going, well you know, it's not John.

He doesn't know you. That's why he's not speaking. And he had a very embarrassing incident like that just the other week. I was walking down the road to the station and I saw what I thought was one of the Cornhole students with a long pigtail on a bicycle at the traffic lights and I was just about to yank on the pigtail.

They just turned their head and I saw it with somebody quite different. That would be very embarrassing, wouldn't it? Yank on the pigtail, hello, who? Who on earth are you? You see, when all speech, when all talk is cut off completely, there can't be an ongoing relationship, can there?

And that is where Genesis chapter 3 leaves humanity. Man is shut out of the garden of God. He's shut out from God's voice.

He's barred from talking to God. There's no more strolls in the twilight, in the cool of the day. There's just total silence. Man has refused to respond to God's gracious words.

[22 : 52] He's taken his own way and therefore, with great sadness, God has to say, okay. He won't listen. I'll stop the conversation.

I'll back off. And so man, created as human for communion with God, becomes, well, subhuman. Not talking anymore to God who made him.

And that's pretty much the way the world has been ever since. Man won't listen to God. He puts his fingers in his ears and says, I don't need to listen to this. I reject God if there is a God.

I don't need God. I live as my own God. I'm not listening. But like a cross teenager storms into the bedroom and slams the door and turns up the music very, very loud so they can't hear their parents' voice if they're calling them.

With any hope their parents won't go anywhere near because the music's so awful. We've seen that, haven't we? But it doesn't, in fact, solve teenage angst, does it?

[24 : 04] It doesn't bring happiness and peace and fulfillment, hiding away and refusing to listen. And nor has it done for our world. Nor has it done for the lives of the people of our world.

And that's the tragedy of the human condition. That's why we are as we are and that's why the world is as it is. God created us for speech, for communion, for relationship with him and yet we've broken that relationship because we've refused to respond and now, therefore, we can't relate to God.

There's nothing to say. Our relationship is in irretrievable breakdown. But the Bible does tell us another thing, a third thing and it's this.

Despite all of that, the God of the Bible would not stop speaking to us. See, when a relationship is destroyed by unfaithfulness, the guilty party can't just initiate themselves back into that relationship, can they?

They don't have the power to do that. They don't have the right to do that. Too much has been forfeit. A huge price has got to be paid. A costly, costly price of forgiveness before that could ever, ever happen.

[25 : 26] And only the wronged party is in a position to invite the guilty party back in.

That's because only the wronged party, only they are the one who can bear the cost of that forgiveness. It costs them desperately to be able to forgive, to be able to say to the one who has abused them, yes, you can come back into this relationship.

And we're seeing that all the time at the moment, aren't we, in the news. Lots of sporting stars, golfers, footballers. Only if the wronged party, in each of these cases, these men's wives, only if they initiate that communication, is there any possibility whatsoever of that relationship coming back into being.

No matter how rich you are, when you've messed it all up in that way, you can only respond, you can only say, yes, please, I do want back into this marriage. You can only say that in answer to an invitation from the person that you've wronged.

And so it is with God. You see, the whole story of the Bible, the whole story of the Gospel is of a God who from the very beginning determined that he would say those words, determined that he would be a God who says, yes, come back in.

[27 : 01] Yes, the rift is terrible. Yes, the pain to me has been absolutely unspeakable. Yes, the cost to me will be infinite. But I will bear that cost so that once again you will be truly human.

Creatures made for me to be with me, to know me, to be able to converse with me and commune with me intimately so that you'll be able to answer me again and we'll be able to talk together.

And that's what God did. He called out in grace to human beings, calling man back on the basis of a great promise. His promise was, yes, one day I will deal forever with all the pain, with all that vast disappointment, with all the vast and righteous anger in my own heart because what you have done, I will deal with that.

I will bear the cost so that I will be able to say to you, I want you to know me again. I want you to hear my voice.

I want you to rejoice with speaking to me again and coming to tell me all the things that you want to tell me. To have that relationship of a son with a father once again.

[28 : 25] And so it was, God called out, he called out to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob and to many others after him and they answered him. They spoke to each other, God and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses, God spoke, says Exodus chapter 3, God spoke to Moses just as a man speaks to his friend face to face.

They spoke with God because they knew God again. They had a real relationship with God because they responded to his call, to his speech, to his voice, calling out to them to trust him, to believe in him, to obey him.

Because, in other words, they had what the Bible calls faith. How do we know Abraham had faith? Well, Hebrews 11 is very plain because he obeyed God when God called him, when God spoke to him and told him to go out to a place that he never knew.

He responded and he obeyed. And that was the visible form of Abraham's faith. It was his obedience. But the audible form of his faith was his real and living relationship in speaking to God.

He prayed. God spoke to Abraham that word of great promise and Abraham responded. Genesis 12 tells us Abraham called upon the name of the Lord.

[29 : 51] He prayed. That was the audible form of Abraham's faith. That's the audible form of all faith. Speaking to God.

Prayer is just the audible response to God's call to us. Just as following him in obedience is the visible response to that call that he makes upon us. Just the evidence of a real and living knowledge of God.

Prayer is just responding to God's gracious word of salvation in his wonderful promise of his saving gospel. And if Hebrews chapter 1 tells us that God spoke his ultimate word to us in the person of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, then that means that prayer is fundamentally at its very deepest level, prayer is simply responding in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer is answering God's call to human beings in Jesus. Answering it with all that we are and all that we have. Not just with our lips, but with our lives.

And our words in that sense are simply vocalising what's on the inside. It's the inside coming out in an audible form. So my father used to put it this way often.

[31 : 14] It's not so much what we pray, but what we are when we pray that matters. Because real prayer is anything that comes out of a heart that is responding to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's the response that comes from a life that has found the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you remember in Acts chapter 9 when we read of Paul's conversion, Saul of Tarsus, Ananias found him and what do we read?

Behold, he's praying. And why was that so significant? Saul of Tarsus had said his prayers all the days of his life, but the thing is he had never ever really prayed before, because he never answered God's call, but now he was.

He met him in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. And so he was praying, truly, communicating with God. You can't respond until God has called out to you to respond.

You can't say, I do, until somebody has said, will you marry me? You see, in Jesus, God has broken that heavenly silence.

[32 : 32] He's called out. He said, I do want you back. Will you have me? Will you have me? And he wants you to say yes.

And in saying yes to that call of Jesus, that's the essence and the beginning of all real prayer. prayer. So let me ask you this tonight.

Are you a praying person? I'm not asking, do you say your prayers? Anybody can fool themselves into thinking that they're praying because they're saying their prayers. Are you a praying person?

Are you responding from the very bottom of your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ? To God's call to you in the gospel of Christ? Are you answering audibly and visibly the God who has called out to you in Jesus' Son?

Are you doing that? If you're doing that, you're praying. But until you do that, well, you can say all the prayers you like, but you'll never be really praying because praying is answering that wonderful call of God.

[33 : 52] Never too late. never too late to start really praying. And you can pray because God is a speaking God and he's called out to you wonderfully in the message of his Son, the Lord Jesus.

We can pray because God is a speaking God and he wants us to be answering people. Amen.

Well, we're going to sing to close a beautiful hymn about answering God going right back to the fourth century, Saint Augustine of Hippo. And verse three says this, you call and cried, yet we were deaf.

Our stubborn wills you bent, you shed your fragrance and we caught a moment of its sense. You blazed and sparkled, yet our hearts to lesser glories turned.

Your radiance touched us far from home and your beauty in us burned. to him about the response of the heart in real prayer to the beauty of our God in Jesus Christ.

[35 : 10] Number 737.

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837. 837. 837. 837. 837. pleaded and heart scomes in with beauty in the where can o give what is the conteúdo All ■■■ left with you, All faith beisu we love you Lord, As longest of all our lives Your duty's feet from all that is, your life will be within.

Your hope and pride, yet we were there, but the earth will be there.

Your day, your brave man, we call a fallen holy day.

[37 : 11] Your flame and sparkles yet the light, your better glory's end.

Your radiant sun, the spark of hope, your beauty in the land.

And your day, your weak and fall, my name will be within.

Your beauty, love the power of hand, and sea of water, bless.

Your light, your beauty, love the power of love.

[38 : 52] Your light, my future view. And so may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God our Father, and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever.

Amen.