

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY? THROUGH A PRIEST

John 17

We come to the last in this short series on prayer: How should we pray? And one of the answers to that question is: through a priest. Now if you're steeped in Protestant history and reformation theology you may be getting a bit worried. It sounds a bit suspect, doesn't it. Surely the whole point of the reformation was to get back to the truth that we don't come to God through a priest. We have direct access, any time, any place, in any circumstances.

You may be comforted to know that I'm not going to set up a little confessional in the vestry and listen to your darkest secrets. But it's not true that we come direct to God without a priest. And that's not Roman Catholic theology. That's Protestant theology. More importantly, that's New Testament theology.

We do need a priest and the priest we need is Jesus. A priest is an intermediary between God and us. God is holy. God is pure. Isaiah said, 'Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear' (Isaiah 59: 2).

In the Old Testament God provided an elaborate system of priests and sacrifices and laws to deal with this problem of sin. But that system was always inadequate. The New Testament tells us why. Hebrews chapter 7 gives some of the reasons.

Verse 23 tells us that there were many of those priests because their ministry was very temporary. Death prevented them from continuing in office.

Verse 27 tells us that they needed to offer sacrifices day after day for their own sins as well as the sins of the people.

Verse 29 tells us that those who were appointed as high priests were weak.

It's summed up in chapter 10. Verse 11 says, 'Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.' The priests weren't good enough and the sacrifices weren't good enough. Verse 4 says simply, 'It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.'

So if it was so inadequate why was this system set up by God? Firstly, to teach us that we can't just rush into the presence of a holy God. We need a priest, an intermediary; we need forgiveness; we need a sacrifice. But secondly, it was set up to be a pointer to a better system, God's perfect provision: a perfect priest, a perfect sacrifice, a perfect salvation. That priest is Jesus. That sacrifice is his death on the cross. That salvation is the forgiveness and new life which is guaranteed by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus is the priest we need and we cannot come to God unless we come through him. Hebrews 10 verse 1 says that the Old Testament law was only a shadow of the good things that were coming.

Shortly before his death Jesus said to his disciples, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). Paul put it like this: 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all' (1 Timothy 2:5, 6).

Let's go back to those passages in Hebrews which tell us so much about the priesthood of Jesus.

Hebrews 7:23-28. 'Now there have been many of those [Old Testament] priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest

meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.'

Jesus lives forever. Death has no hold over him. Jesus is able to save us completely, no matter what we have done. We can come to God through him and we can only come to God through him. Jesus intercedes for us. He prays for us at the right hand of God. He is completely sinless: holy, blameless, pure. He is exalted above the heavens. Jesus meets our need.

Jesus is in heaven for us but he knows all about what it means to live on earth. He knows all about the weaknesses we feel and the temptations we face. Hebrews 4:15–16. 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.'

Jesus has experienced weakness and temptation. Jesus sympathises with us in our suffering. Jesus overcame weakness and temptation and he can help us do the same. Jesus is exalted in heaven now but he has not forgotten what it's like to live on earth and he is praying for us. He is praying for you and he is praying for me.

One of the most precious passages in the Gospels is John chapter 17. It's known as the High Priestly prayer of Jesus. It gives us an insight into Jesus' own prayer life. The NIV headings show us how it develops. Jesus Prays for Himself. Jesus Prays for His Disciples. Jesus Prays for All Believers.

When you pray to God the Father, by faith, in the name of Jesus, you leave this earth and enter heaven. And as you do you can hear another voice, already speaking to the Father. It's the voice of Jesus. What is he saying? What is he praying for?

We're not going to look at this prayer in huge detail but I want you to notice some of the themes.

1. Glory

Verse 1. 'Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.' When we think about God we should think about glory. Glory is the opposite of dullness. God is not dull, and may we be forgiven if we have represented him in that way. We've been thinking about the Old Testament priests. The worship of the tabernacle described in the law is a blaze of colour and quality. With all its limitations it is characterised by excellence. Only the best was good enough for the LORD. When Moses came from the presence of God having seen his glory his face shone. He was radiant.

Glory is the opposite of dullness, shoddiness. And glory is the opposite of shame. We live in a society that's often proud of the things it should be ashamed of. In Psalm 4:2 God says, 'How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?' There's something in us that aspires to excellence, that responds to glory, and true glory is to be found in God. Jesus prayed for that.

He said, 'I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do' (verse 4). As he prayed for his disciples he said, 'Glory has come to me through them' (verse 10). When he prayed for us he said, 'I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one' (verse 22) and 'Father, I want those you

have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world' (verse 24).

2. Protection

As Jesus contemplated his return to the Father he prayed, 'I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name —the name you gave me —so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me' (verses 11, 12).

Power, protection, the power of God's name. God's name stands for God's nature, all that he is. There is danger in the world because the world is in rebellion against God. Jesus went on to pray, 'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one' (verse 15).

3. Joy

Verse 13. 'I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.'

4. Holiness

Verse 17. 'Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.' The root meaning of holiness is to be set apart. That's what being 'sanctified' means. An archaeologist goes searching for ancient artefacts. Amidst the dirt and the debris of accumulated centuries he finds a three thousand year old fragment of fine pottery. He picks it out. He analyses it. He cleans it up very carefully. He documents it, photographs it and puts it in a glass case in a museum. He sanctifies it. It's not just any old piece of rubbish. It's special.

Jesus said, we're special and what will make us even more special is to be polished and preserved by his truth, the truth of God's word.

5. Unity

Verses 22, 23. 'I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' It's a unity that is forged by love. The very last words of Christ's prayer in verse 26 are, 'I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.'

When we pray to God the Father in Jesus' name these are the concerns that should occupy us. This is what Jesus is praying for.