

## **Prayer (Acts 4:23-31)**

*We are often taught that to pray you need to put your hands together and close your eyes. However, the Bible does not teach this. Rather, as we pray, we need to open our eyes to the God we are praying to, to his people, his character, his ways and his mission. This is how we grow in prayer.*

### **Open your eyes... Psalm 121:1-2**

"Hands together and close your eyes..." that was what we were told to do when it was time to pray. Why? Well I guess for children it was particularly important to stop them being distracted by things around them. But of course there is nothing in the Bible that says that is the way we should pray!

In fact our opening verse today comes from Psalm 121.

It doesn't say: close your eyes and bow your head, but:

" I lift up my eyes to the hills--where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."

The rest of the Psalm focuses on God as the one with his eyes open, watching over him. Verse 5 for example says:

"The LORD watches over you--the LORD is your shade at your right hand;" (Psalm 121:5)

The important thing is not to look to the mountains, but have your eyes opened to the God you are praying to. Our prayer life doesn't grow from learning flowery ways of expressing our prayers, but from a clearer vision of the great God we are praying to and the Psalms so often lift our eyes to contemplate our God as the key step in prayer.

So although you may literally pray with your eyes closed, open the eyes of your heart to see who it is that you are praying to. Let God be the vision of your soul as you come to him in prayer. After all you wouldn't have a conversation with another human being and not look at them!!

### **Peter and John**

When we come to Acts 4 and that fantastic prayer there, we see that is what happens. Peter and John have been imprisoned for preaching about Jesus and commanded to stop speaking about Jesus and threatened if they carried on.

How were they going to respond to these threats by the same people who had arranged Jesus's crucifixion. Were they going to be overwhelmed by anxiety at what might happen to them, be consumed by an unhelpful anger about their unfair treatment or just give up in the face of such pressures, despairing that such important people wouldn't realise who Jesus was?

Peter and John do none of these things. Rather they turn to God in prayer. And when you read their prayer you see that their eyes are wide open to see God, his plans and purposes.

#### **1. Open your eyes to God's People - 4:23-24**

Firstly, they open their eyes to see God's people. They don't go off by themselves they return to the church community and tell them all that has happened, then they prayed together.

God has not called us to be individual Christians he has called us to be part of a body. Jesus said when 'Two or three are gathered together, there am I with them.' When we face great difficulties and troubles, we need one another. And if you do not have difficulties, then others in the church family need you.

That's why it is so important to gather together as Christians and why it is such a challenge that we cannot meet together at present. However, since last March we have tried to make sure we keep connected as a church, partly so we can pray for one another and so we can be encouraged to pray.

In the online survey on prayer I asked: ***What has helped you to pray (and praise) since last March?*** Many of the responses referred to the connection and encouragement of other Christians:

- Sunday service online and encouragement for other Christians.
- Online services. Listening to praise music. Wonder of nature.
- My Growth Team meets. Asking others what can I pray for them.
- Seeing different contributions, feeling purposefully connected to church family. Being able to watch services and attend church. Seeing God's work happening in the community.

Other Christians are God's gift to you, to be encouraged in your prayer, to pray for you and to be prayed for by you. Let's open our eyes to this aspect of God's work.

## **2. Open your eyes to God's Character - 4:24; Psalm 146**

Secondly, we need to open our eyes to God's character. This is where the prayer in Acts 4 starts. They talk about God as the creator God and call him, 'Sovereign Lord', which basically the one who is in ultimate charge.

This is where Psalm 121 starts:

"...My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:2)

But actually it is more clearly a quote from Psalm 146:6:

"Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the LORD his God,  
**the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them--**  
the LORD, who remains faithful for ever" (Psalm 145:5-6)

The Psalm itself begins with the Psalmist telling himself to focus on God: 'Praise the Lord, Praise the LORD, O my soul.' (Psalm 146:1). Our prayers need to begin with praise as a way of opening our eyes and souls to the glory of God's true nature.

As Acts 4 says and the Psalm says, he is the creator God. That means that everything we have is because of him, but it also shows his immense power and that he is somehow beyond and above everything we can possibly know or see.

Yet, the Psalm goes on to remind us that this awesome God is not so above and beyond that he does not care or notice. The next line says:

"He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry." (Psalm 146:7).

When we begin our prayers by focussing on God's character we gain confidence that he is both caring and capable. He is the best person to turn to in our deepest needs. When we realise that it gives us a deep strength even through the most difficult times.

In the prayer survey I asked: ***How has prayer helped you through this time?***

The responses illustrated how this perspective on God had been such a help in these worrying times:

- It has helped me keep calm and trust God
- Keeps my focus on God and my relationship with the Holy Spirit who also keeps my focus on the teachings of Jesus
- Learnt to rely on God instead of others
- Sure foundation
- Handing my worries and insecurities on to god makes me feel I'm not alone
- Because knowing that God hears even the merest of prayers, and answers it as He knows is best.

And in fact people found that their prayer life had begun to focus more and more on praise:

***How has the way you pray (or praise) changed since last March?***

- Spending more time in thankfulness.
- More intense there has been so much to be grateful for in answer to prayer.
- Trying to praise and thank God in every situation and to take everything to Him and to trust Him to answer in His perfect time.

So when you pray, begin with praise and open your eyes to the powerful God who cares for you.

### **3. Open your eyes: God is Bigger than your Problems - 4:25-28; Psalm 2**

Thirdly, we need to open our eyes to see that God is bigger than our problems.

The heart of the prayer in Acts 4, quotes and interprets Psalm 2. Psalm 2 talks about God's son, referring to the king of Israel. It is real about the conflict the son or king will face when the enemies of God rise up against him, but it is confident that they have no hope of defeating the Sovereign Lord. Indeed, verse 4 of Psalm 2 says:

"The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them." (Psalm 2:4)

In the prayer the early Christians apply this Psalm to Jesus. He was God's Son, his special king. King Herod and Pontius Pilate representing the Roman power and the people of Jerusalem plotted against Jesus and had him crucified. Yet, God had the last laugh. This was actually God's plan. The cross was not a defeat for Jesus, but his victory and the resurrection had proved that. God may look like he's defeated by the powers of the world, but God will always have the last laugh!

So now as the disciples face threats from the same forces, by reflecting on Scripture and the cross and resurrection, they see once again that God is bigger than their problems and so they turn in confidence to him for help.

In the same way facing our own problems, may be especially in this time of crisis when we open our eyes to see that God is bigger than our problems.

In the online survey I asked, ***How has prayer helped you through this time?***

One of the responses said this:

- Learning to trust God, to know He is in control and to believe all His promises no matter how bleak worldwide, national, local or personal needs might seem.

In seeing that God was bigger than even the worldwide problems they were helped to face the difficulties we face.

I also asked, ***What specific answers to prayer have you seen?***

Again, the answers showed that turning to God helped no matter what the problems:

- keeping depression at bay, and knowing His comfort many times when feeling low and finding things hard to keep going.
- God protecting my bubble, the miracle of the vaccine so soon,
- He has graciously healed family members and friends of serious and minor illnesses. He has helped comfort friends, family and neighbours in their grief. He has kept family safe from Covid 19, enabled all young family members to continue working safely either as key workers or from home and is helping their children to find ways of overcoming their anxieties. His timing and guidance has been amazing in many situations every day.

#### **4. Open your eyes to God's mission - 4:29-30**

Finally, we need to open our eyes to God's mission. Prayer is not just about finding comfort and support in our hour of need. It is about finding God's strength to do his work.

After all the prayer in Acts 4 begins by saying that God is 'Sovereign Lord'. If he is the one ultimately in charge, then how can we see ourselves as anything other than his servants. If we are his servants, then surely we should be seeking to do his work.

In the prayer, the early Christians call themselves servants. In response to the threats of the authorities they don't pray for their safety, but they pray for God's help to carry out his mission, despite the threats!

They are not anxious, because they have opened their eyes to see that God is bigger than their threats.

They are not angry, because they can leave the judgement to God.

And they don't give up, because this is just the normal pattern of a world resisting God, they know that God will have the last laugh.

So, they pray for boldness to preach the good news about Jesus even more!! Their eyes are open to God's mission.

In the online survey I asked, ***What specific answers to prayer have you seen?***

Two answers in particular highlighted answers to prayer for God's mission:

The first focussed on God helping them to grow in faith and for the church being effective in its mission in these new circumstances:

On a personal level, a better quality of life, growing in understanding that everything that happens is according to God's plan. Seeing a Church which has adapted and able to reach out, seeing God's light shine within our Church family and within our community.

The second focusses on praying for our world, but also for the chance to talk to others about Jesus:

I pray for a number of things daily, including our government, the Body of Christ in this country, the people in our nation and their needs, both spiritual and practical needs. I have prayed earnestly to have 'conversations' with unsaved people to witness about Jesus. Then I unexpectedly had one, (which I must admit surprised me), so that was a very real answer to a specific prayer)

**Have you opened your eyes?**

So will you open your eyes as you pray? Maybe not literally, but in your heart open your eyes to focus on the God you pray to.

Open your eyes to his people.

Open your eyes to his character.

Open your eyes to see that he is bigger than your problems  
and open your eyes to his mission.

When the early Christians did that, God encouraged them with a spectacular answer - the place was shaken, they were filled with the Spirit, which often means a special anointing to serve God and they were enabled to speak boldly for Jesus in the face of severe threats from the authorities!

Perhaps God may answer your prayers in a spectacular way. If only you opened your eyes!