

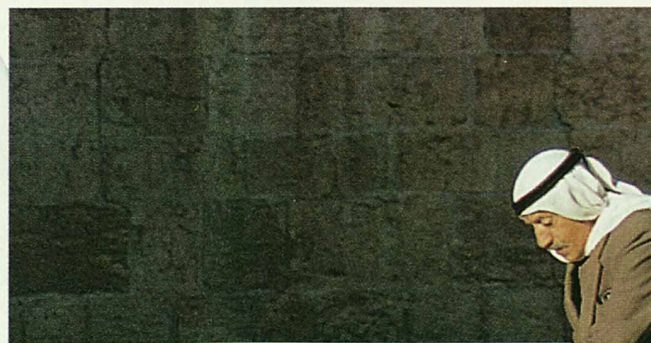
*Although both asking and receiving are aspects of prayer, such a definition is woefully inadequate.*

**W**HAT IS PRAYER? Negatively, prayer is not a dramatic monologue or soliloquy, like Hamlet's speech, beginning "To be, or not to be—that is the question." A biblical example of soliloquy is the so-called prayer of the self-centered Pharisee in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:10-14). Although the Pharisee "stood and prayed"<sup>1</sup> (*proseucheto* [pro SEU che toh], the usual verb for "prayer"), he actually prayed to himself instead of to God. Some people interpret prayer simply as "asking and receiving."

Such a view implies that we pray only when we need something from God. Although both asking and receiving are aspects of prayer, such a definition is woefully inadequate.

Many Christians believe communion with God is the essence of prayer. I agree with that view, yet I believe it should be expanded to include a dialogue between God and His spiritual

**Left:** A contemporary Jewish man praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He wears a phylactery from a tradition of Jewish dress dating to the 2nd Cent. B.C.  
**Below:** A Moslem Arab in traditional head-dress is removing his shoes for afternoon prayer.



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children on a one-to-one basis. The communion may be either vocalized or silent. According to 1 Kings 19:12, God spoke to Elijah in "a still small voice." Whether the description means barely audible or inaudible—meaning outside His written Word—I believe God usually speaks inaudibly by means of mental impression and deep conviction.

In addition to a two-way communion, prayer also may include adoration (praise), worship, confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, and commitment. Actually, intercession (asking

**Above:** The modern Israeli port of Haifa as viewed from the western summit of Mount Carmel where Elijah prayed for rain.  
**Below:** A limestone altar from Megiddo dating to about 1000 B.C.

on behalf of another) is a special kind of petition (asking in general but usually for oneself). I see the main purpose of prayer as the right adjustment of our relationship with God in accordance with His

**Lesson Reference:**

LWS: Psalm 28:6-7; Colosians 4:2-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; 1 Peter 5:6-7



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# Prayer

*A Word Study*

*by Fred Howard*

will. The scope of prayer includes all human concerns. Consequently, nothing—regardless of how remote or apparently insignificant—is beyond the scope of prayer.

Both the Hebrew and the Greek languages have a word for prayer in general. The common Hebrew word for prayer is *tephillah* [te PFEE lah], occurring many times in the Old Testament. For example, it appears twice in Psalm 66:18-20. The nearest Greek equivalent is *proseuche* [pro SEU che] (noun) and *proseuchomai* [pro SEU cho my] (verb). This term occurs both as a noun and a participle in Colossians 4:2-4. The Hebrew word for “petition” or “entreaty” is *tachanunim* [ta cha NU neem] and appears in Psalm 28:6-7. The Greek equivalent of “petition” or “entreaty” is *deesis* [de AY sis]. One example occurs in Luke 1:5-17 where Zachariah’s entreaty evidently was for a son, God’s response being the birth of John the Baptist.

Uniquely, 1 Timothy 2:1-2 contains four words pertaining to prayer: *deeseis* (petitions), *proseuchas* (prayers), *enteuxeis* (intercessions), and *eucharistias* (thanksgivings). Evidently, the difference between *proseuche* and *deesis* is that *proseuche* refers to prayer in general, whereas *deesis* refers to prayer for particular benefits. According to New Testament usage, *enteuxis* [en TEU chis] occurs only in 1 Timothy 2:1 and 4:5. However, the verb form, *entugchano*, occurs four times (Rom. 8:27,34; 11:2; Heb. 7:25). “Giving of thanks” translates a single word, *eucharistias* [eu cha RIS tee ahs], literally,

“thanksgivings.” The term *eucharist* comes from the same Greek root and is used by some churches to designate holy communion or the observance of the Lord’s Supper. In addition, the New Testament writers often used the verb *eucharisteo* to express thanks to God.

Another term for prayer occurs in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, concerning Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” that he saw as “the messenger [angel] of Satan (v. 7). Whatever the affliction was, (poor eyesight, malaria, epilepsy, insomnia, or something else), Paul “besought” (*parakalesa*) God three times to remove it (v. 8). The verb *parakaleo* literally means called alongside. Other meanings include exhort, encourage, implore, request, and entreat. The noun form, *parakleton*, appears as “Comforter” in John 14:16 and refers to the Holy Spirit. We may transliterate the Greek noun as “Paraclete.”

The longest prayer in the Bible is Solomon’s prayer dedicating the temple (1 Kings 8:22-53). According to verse 22, “Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven.” This passage reminds us that posture in prayer was not uniform in Jewish practice. Although Solomon stood at the beginning of his prayer, after he had finished praying, “he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven” (1 Kings 8:54 KJV). Therefore, at some point in his prayer Solomon changed from his standing posture and dropped to his knees.

Examples of various postures in prayer are evident in Scripture. In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:10-14), both men stood when they prayed. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus “fell on his face, and prayed” (Matt. 26:39). Daniel “kneeled . . . three times a day, and prayed” (Dan. 6:10). Jonah likely was prostrate when he “prayed . . . out of the fish’s belly” (Jonah 2:1).

Another common aspect of posture in prayer has been bowing the head. Also, as we observed in Solomon’s dedicatory prayer, upraised hands sometimes accompanied prayer. Smiting one’s breast during prayer symbolized penitence (Luke 18:13). However, when Jesus criticized and labeled as “hypocrites” those who loved “to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets” (Matt. 6:5), He referred to motive, not posture. Neither did Jesus condemn public prayer by telling His audience to pray in a closet (Matt. 6:6). Rather, He was condemning prayer when the motive was to impress others with the subject’s piety. In this same context, Jesus gave the Model Prayer to His disciples (Matt. 6:9-13). According to Luke’s version, Jesus’ disciples had requested Him to teach them to pray “as John [the Baptist] also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1-4).

One of the most insightful biblical passages on prayer is James 5:14-16. Two main reasons account for the significance of this passage. First, it relates prayer to a particular problem, physical illness. Second, it uses three different

words for prayer. The imperative form of *proseuchomai*, translated “let them pray,” appears in verse 14 and also in verse 16 as “pray one for another.” However, rather than the usual *proseuche*, in verse 15 the word for “prayer” is *euche*, without the preposition *pros* prefixed. *Euche* occurs only three times in the New Testament, here as “prayer” and twice as “vow” (Acts 18:18; 21:23). Yet since the preposition *pros* basically means “to” or “toward,” *proseuche* implies praying to or toward God.

Just as the Israelites worshiped Yahweh (Jehovah), their covenant and only true God, their pagan neighbors also worshiped their so-called gods, which in reality were lifeless idols. Pagan worship included prayer and sacrifice as did Israel’s worship. Perhaps the most detailed biblical example of pagan worship is the contest involving the prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal (meaning lord or master), a fertility god (1 Kings 18:19-40). According to Elijah’s proposal, the God who answered with fire was the true God. After the prophets of Baal had prepared their sacrifice, they “called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And

they leaped upon the altar” (v. 26). The Hebrew word for “called” is *qara* [qah rah], the same word David used when he “called upon the Lord” (2 Sam. 22:7). Later, Baal’s prophets “cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them” (1 Kings 18:28). This description reminds me of Jesus’ instructions on prayer to His disciples: “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt. 6:7).

In contrast to the highly emotional and frenzied efforts of the prophets of Baal, Elijah calmly went about preparing his sacrifice. To prove that the forthcoming consumption of his sacrifice by fire would not be a fluke, he dug a trench around the altar and had 12 barrels of water poured over his sacrifice and the wood under it. Then Elijah calmly prayed: “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God

in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again” (1 Kings 18:36-37). When God answered Elijah’s prayer by consuming the sacrifice with fire, the people reacted by falling on their faces and saying, “The Lord [Yahweh], he is the God; the Lord, he is the God” (vv. 38-39). Although many of the Israelites later drifted into various kinds of idolatry, the prophet Elijah corrected his generation and pointed them and their descendants in the right direction.

Paradoxically, visible but lifeless idols can neither hear, see, nor speak, whereas the invisible but living God can hear, see, and speak. I particularly like the way the writer of Hebrews stated the permanence of divine sovereignty: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

<sup>1</sup>Luke 18:11. This and subsequent Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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**Below:** A section of the Carmel mountain range with the plain of Jezreel in the foreground. On Mount Carmel Elijah prayed down fire from heaven in a contest with Jezebel’s 450 prophets of Baal.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (10/24/7)

**Right:** A bronze statuette of Baal, the Canaanite weather god who was also worshiped as a god of fertility.

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