

The Richness of Jewish Prayer

by Lois Tverberg (Engedi Resources)

One thing that we feel strongly about is that when we teach about Jesus' Jewish culture, we are trying to help people understand Jesus in order to be better disciples. It is good to have a taste of Jesus' customs and culture, but our goal is not to become more Jewish, but to become more like Jesus. It is easy to miss that point and become enveloped in these customs simply for their own sake, and not because they benefit us in any way. There is, however, one Jewish practice that all Christians would benefit from, and that is adopting a style of prayer similar to what Orthodox Jews have used for thousands of years. These prayers that Jesus and Paul used are a powerful experience in prayer which can transform a person's spiritual life.

What was this wonderful style of prayer? It is the habit of blessing the Lord. It is an attitude of continual thankfulness toward God that expresses itself through brief prayers that acknowledge him as the source of every good thing. It ultimately comes from the Scriptures, when Moses admonished the Israelites not to forget the Lord:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 8:10-14)

It was easy for the Israelites to cling to God in the desert, but very easy to forget God when times got better when they prospered in the Promised Land. The cure, according to the rabbis who read Deuteronomy 8, was to continually remind themselves of God's care by uttering a short prayer of thanks, to "bless the Lord." This pervasive act of prayer kept God's presence and love continually on their minds. Jesus and Paul both would have practiced it, and Paul may have had it in mind when he told Christians to "Be

joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances" (1Thes. 5:16-18).

A practice from before Jesus' era

Before the time of Christ, the Jews developed a number of short blessings to be said whenever the occasion arises, in addition to saying longer prayers in the morning and evening. Modern custom begins all of them by obeying Deuteronomy 8 ("You shall bless the Lord") by saying, "Blessed are you, oh Lord our God, King of the Universe." The idea is not to bless objects and people, in our usual Christian sense of the word, but to bless God, with the understanding that we are focusing on him as the source of all blessing. The word for bless, "barak" also means to kneel, suggesting that when we bless God, we mentally bow on our knees to worship him. In Jesus' day the first line was probably just "Blessed is he," but the rabbis felt it was important to be reminded that God is King over us in order to "receive on ourselves the Kingdom of God," so they added the rest of the line later. So in these prayers we mentally kneel toward God, remind ourselves of his goodness, and that he is our King.

In the gospels it says that Jesus "took the bread and blessed." (The NIV says "gave thanks" but more literal translations use the word "blessed.") We know what words he said - most likely, "Blessed is he who brings forth bread from the earth." We read that when Jesus did miracles, the people "glorified God" - probably exclaiming, "Blessed is he who has performed a miracle in this place!" It was customary to pray the blessing before leaving the site where the miracle occurred, or to return to the place to say it. So when Jesus healed ten lepers and only one, a Samaritan, came back and loudly blessed God, Jesus wonders why the other nine hadn't returned to do the same thing (Lk 17:12-19).

For Everything a Blessing

In Psalm 24:1 it says that "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" and the rabbis of Jesus' day and earlier decided that everything that we enjoy in life should cause us to bless God. In the Mishnah, the record of rabbinic thought from before Jesus' time until about 200 AD, the first book

is just devoted to blessings. In the most ordinary things they found ways of praising God. And these blessings have God at their center, without any personal pronouns - focusing utterly on him, and not on the person praying. They are simply statements that praise God for his goodness.

A person was supposed to devote his first thoughts upon waking to praising God once again for each part of his body that was functioning. The very first thing that would have woken them up was probably a rooster's crow. So in the first century they would have said, "*Blessed is he who has given to the cock understanding to distinguish between day and night!*" When they opened their eyes they said, "*Blessed is he who opens the eyes of the blind!*" When they dressed they said, "*Blessed is he who clothes the naked!*" They also said this when they put on a new piece of clothing. That reminded me that God is the one who allows us to earn the money to buy clothes, that many people don't have much more than the clothes on their back, and that the ultimate purpose of all the clothes we buy is to cover our bodies, not just to make a fashion statement!

In their experience of nature they blessed God. When the first flowers were seen on the trees in the spring, they said, "*Blessed is he who did not omit anything from the world, and created within it good creations and good trees for people to enjoy!*" After a long, cold winter, who isn't happy to see these little signs of new life?

When they heard thunder or an earthquake that inspired fear, they also blessed God by saying, "*Blessed is he whose strength and power fill the world!*" Next time there is a windstorm, step outside and remind yourself of God's amazing power.

When it rained, they said "*Blessed is he who is good, and gives good things!*" I thought this was very odd at first, since rainy days are bad days to us. But in Israel where water is greatly needed, rain is source of joy. When you think about it, our abundant food here also is dependent on the rain that we

always complain about. I have since realized that every time I complain about the weather, it is a way of convincing myself that yet another day has come when God wasn't faithful and that he decided not to care about me. It's a

very minor habit to change, but my outlook on life improved when I stopped finding something to grumble at God for every time I stepped outside.

They had blessings for the highs and lows in life as well. When they went through a long, difficult time and finally had relief, or celebrated some happy event for which they waited, they said, "*Blessed is he who has allowed us to live, and sustained us and enabled us to reach this day.*" When a son returned home from war, or when a baby was born, or some other wonderful thing, they stopped to praise God for bringing them to that point in their lives. Even in times of grief, when someone died or they heard tragic news, they blessed God. They said "*Blessed is he who is the true judge.*" It was a reminder that God was still good, even when they heard about tragic events, and that he will ultimately bring justice where justice doesn't seem to be present.

A question we might ask is whether by the sheer number and repetition these become just incantations. But there is another important concept in Jewish prayer that applies, and that is "kavanah". Kavanah means to pray with intention and concentration on God's presence, to "know before whom you stand." They would say that a prayer without kavanah is worse than not praying at all, because it insults God by not showing him the reverence he deserves.

But why?

What is the point of all these prayers? In my own experience, I have found that the practice of them changes a person's entire inner attitude. It is like the way our parents taught us as children to say "thank you." At first we said it because our mothers reminded us each time, but after a while we developed our own sense of appreciation for what others do for us. Continually praising God for his good gifts makes a person feel like the world is saturated with God's presence and that we are under his constant care. The Lord told us to love him with all of our hearts, and becoming people of constant prayer will go a long way towards achieving that goal.