

“Hallowed Be Thy Name”

Introduction: Have you ever had a child rush up to you, either so filled with excitement or so troubled by anxiety, that they just can’t get the right words out to explain what is on their mind or what is happening to them? When this is the case, it’s usually helpful to have them take a deep breath and ask them a few clarifying questions to enable them to organize their thoughts.

Oftentimes, I think, prayer can be like that. We find ourselves in some sort of a mess, or with several pressing needs, and we want God to rescue us and take care of us. It may then strike us that there’s a larger world out there and that it might be good for God to feed the hungry, straighten out the Middle East, and fix our politicians. Finally, it may dawn on us that there’s also a larger God out there that we just might want to slow down and try and relate to in some way. Now while none of this content of our praying is wrong, in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus does significantly reverse their order.

He begins this outline of prayer by having us focus on who we are praying to—Our Father in heaven. We are praying, as a part of a family of faith, to the Creator and Redeemer of the world, to the one who is perfect, and who has ultimate perspective and power. Once we reflect on that for a bit, Jesus moves us on to pray for what he believes should be our three greatest desires: for God’s name to be hallowed, for God’s kingdom to come, and for God’s will to be done. So grounded, he then moves us on to our need for provision, pardon, and protection. It’s not that we’ll never shout out an anxiety-filled prayer. But, in general, according to Jesus, beginning by talking to the Father about who he is will affect how we pray about who we are, and about what we need.

Today we’ll think about what the first of our three greatest desires should be, that God’s name be hallowed. To hallow something is to hold it in highest honor, to revere it. What we’ll see is that while we matter very much to God, we don’t matter most. What matters most to God is his reputation, his glory, within which our good is then found.

I. The Experience of Israel – Profaning God’s Name

A. Let’s begin in the OT, with the experience of Israel. In the OT, God’s name is designated by the word LORD. In antiquity, one’s name denoted one’s nature, character, and personality. So, we hear God explaining his character to Moses in this way: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Ex. 34:6-6). This description in particular describes the God who rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. Thus, in our opening psalm, to “sing the praises of God’s name” (9:1-2) is to celebrate who God is, and what God has done.

B. Now, when we follow the story of Israel, what we learn is that God did not just rescue his people from slavery so they could enjoy an extended vacation at a Red Sea resort! He rescued them so that they would become a blessing to the nations around them (cf. Ge. 12:1-3), that through their words and their deeds they would reveal the character—the name—of the LORD to their neighbors. This is how God described their vocation: “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). As a holy nation, they were to live as a people “set apart.” Their godly actions were to look different from the ungodly who lived all around them. And they were to be priests, that is, a people whose role it was to serve as intermediaries, connecting God with those who needed him, bringing them together.

C. Thus, as they lived their lives, the world was to see a visible display of the love, mercy, and faithfulness of the invisible God who reigned over the entire universe.

Illustration: If you're involved in teaching, coaching, or training in some way you have a feel for the implications of this. When your class sits down to take a test, or your pupil begins her recital, or your team heads out on the field, or your trainee is sent out on his own, yes, they have full responsibility for their actions. Still, how they perform reflects on you. Like it or not, your reputation is on the line.

Incredibly, what God had done was to stake his entire reputation—his name—on the actions of his people. Unfortunately, they did not perform very well. Israel did not honor God's name; they profaned it. This doesn't mean that they ran around cursing all the time. Rather, as Ezekiel describes it, "they had shed blood in the land and . . . defiled it with their idols" (Ez. 36:18). Instead of relating to one another in a way that reflected God's justice and mercy, they had let hatred run rampant to the point of shedding blood. And instead of worshiping the LORD as the King of all kings, they had replaced him with the many and various things the culture around them was pursuing. They were not loving God or their neighbor. The bottom line? Ultimately God's people were saying to the world around them that he was not worthy enough or powerful enough or merciful enough for them to trust and build their lives upon.

D. In response, and as a measure of much deserved discipline, God sent invaders from Babylon who carried his people into exile. As we read the description in v. 20, we need to use our imagination a bit: "And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.'" Picture, theologian Chris Wright suggests, the Israelite prisoners of war passing through various countries on their way to Babylon. Local people would ask, "Who are these people?" The answer: "Israelites from the land of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar has captured Jerusalem and deported the survivors." "What's the name of their god then?" "The LORD, or so I've heard." "So these are the LORD's people but they've been expelled from his land? The LORD is not much of a god then is he? All glory to Marduk!" [The Babylonian god]

E. This would have been the natural conclusion in the ancient world of international politics; the defeat of a nation meant the defeat of its god. Through the exile, the LORD's name would have been mocked as just another common loser god. Far from being a royal priesthood, bringing honor to God's name, God's people had become roving profaners, bringing dishonor to his name (Chris Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, p. 290). The LORD, in his mercy, would eventually bring his people back from exile because he loved them—yes—but even more, because his reputation was at stake. As he puts it: "It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things [return from exile], but for the sake of my holy name...." (v. 20). God's name is holy; he is utterly different and distinct from the rest of the gods. So, while we matter very much to God, his glory, his reputation, matters most. Is that arrogant of God, we might ask? Not if he is the greatest good. If he is the greatest good, then God would be wrong *not* to direct us to seek him and honor him and glorify him above all things.

II. God's Call on the Church – Hallowing God's Name

A. If, then, revealing God's glory was Israel's vocation, where does it leave the church? Well, we've been given the same vocation as Israel. For, what we see in the arrival of Jesus, in his teaching, and in the writing of the NT, is that God has now staked his reputation on the church. As Peter writes in his first letter: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation . . ." (1 Pe. 2:9). Does that sound familiar? It's the same vocation God gave to Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai. As Peter goes on, he

writes that as royal priests, we are to declare and live out God's goodness so that all around us may come to know and glorify this incredible God who loves us so.

B. This is a vocation that Jesus had earlier described in this way: "Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Ma. 5:16). Paul scatters this call throughout his letters to the churches, summing it up, perhaps, in his hope that the Corinthians, no matter what they did, would do it all for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Even more, it's the vocation that fleshes out what it means to be created in God's image (Ge. 1:26-27), serving as God's "vicereagents." We are to rule as God would rule, being good stewards over all he has entrusted into our care ("royal"). We are to stand between heaven and earth, bringing people to God and God to people, as the Spirit enables us ("priests"). As we do so, we reveal the glory of the God whom we serve.

One of the petitions found in *The Book of Common Prayer* sums it up well:

Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world. [p. 388]

It's why Jesus teaches us to pray: "Hallowed be thy name."

C. Like Israel, we will fall short of that goal, we will "miss the mark" of our God-given vocation. When we fail to worship and fall into idolatry, and when we fail to steward responsibly all that God has put into our care, including our neighbor, we need to pray for God's forgiveness (as Jesus later instructs), and for the Spirit to not give up on his work of renewing us in the image of our Creator (Col. 3:1-10), that we might hallow his name in all that we say and do.

D. What might such hallowing look like?

1. How about at our places of work? Can we pray that those would be places not primarily to earn a paycheck or advance a career, but to display the character of God as we relate to both co-worker and customer?
2. How about in our families? Could you pray for your marriage to be a place, not where your needs get fulfilled, but where you seek to glorify God by demonstrating his grace to one another? Could care for your ageing parents not be in order to manage a possible inheritance, but to glorify God by offering the sacrificial love to those who are having a hard time caring for themselves? Could your prayer for your children not be that they get good grades, get into good colleges, get good jobs, and get a good retirement plan, but that they would glorify God in their lives, whatever their circumstances turn out to be?
3. How about in our church? How might we glorify God as we offer family promise, support various missionaries, walk with Brendhan and family through chemotherapy treatments, and interact with our town to restore our bell tower?

Praying, "hallowed be Thy name," as the first of our three greatest desires, puts us on the right path. It reminds us that we matter very much to God, but we don't matter most. And yet, as we seek his glory, we will find our good.