

Q&A: Should we pray for blessings for unbelievers?

Sarah A writes:

Hi Will,

Should we as individuals or churches offer prayer for unbelievers for God to intervene in day to day challenges or bring his blessings on a situation?

I completely appreciate that the motivation to offer this is loving and evangelistic and that God of course can use these interactions for his glory.

But is it right to be offering this kind of prayer? It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever's first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer. But we know that only Jesus is the intermediary between man and God and the promise of Hebrews 4:14 – 16 is for Christians who now have access to the throne of God to receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

1 John 5:14 – 16 tells us that if we ask anything according to God's will, he hears us. So does God hear these kind of prayers?

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Thanks Sarah,

Great question. In summary, you ask “Should we pray for

unbelievers for God to intervene or bring blessings?" In summary, my answer is "Yes." Does he "hear these kind of prayers"? Yes, but as with all pastoral encounters, praying for someone in this way comes with a responsibility to exercise care, faithfulness, and discernment.

There's a lot going on behind this answer, though, and I'd like to unpack it if I may. The first thing to consider, although it may seem like a simplistic question, is this:

What do we mean by "unbeliever" anyway?

I'm not sure I actually like the term "unbeliever" as it's a little denigrating: everybody believes in *something* after all.

But clearly we do need to grasp some sort of distinction between those who do and do not believe those things that *Paul* tells us are of "first importance", "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day." We are at least talking about those who do not have a personal faith in Jesus.

That's simple enough. If we start there, it is biblical example that leads us to conclude that praying for someone who doesn't have this faith is not only permissible, but it is often desirable.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus himself intervened in the lives of many who had not yet put their faith in him in a formal sense. Similarly, in *Matthew 10*, he commissions the disciples to go and "freely give" just as they have "freely received" and in practice that means that they are to "heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons." I think that puts us in the ballpark of "praying for God to intervene in day to day challenges and to bring his blessings on a situation", to use your words.



I find the example of Peter and John in Acts 3 particularly informative. Here the lame man does not ask for salvation, not even healing; he is simply asking for money. Peter and John do not take the opportunity to evangelise to him (although the end result has the man dancing in praise to God), rather we get the following famous line (emphasised below):

*When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, **'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.'** Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.*

This phenomenon appears to be writ large in Acts 5:12-16 where we read that "a great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured." None of this appears to depend on those involved having a pre-existing state of belief in Jesus. In fact, usually the intervention and intercession *leads* to belief.

We could just about leave it there, but **let's push a little deeper.**

That push begins with something of a counterpoint to what I've just suggested: You see, one problem in using the examples I have is that all those who are being blessed are, in some

way, *already part of the people of God*. That is, they are members of the Jewish people, under the covenant promises of God. The miracles, blessings, and interventions that we see being ministered through Jesus and his disciples are not so much prayers for unbelievers, but a demonstration that God's promises to his people have been fulfilled.

This, itself, is gospel: The kingdom of God is here, the blessings of the covenant are fulfilled in Jesus; enter into the hope of your people. Or simply, in application, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"

In some sense, then, these blessings and interventions are "in-house." The covenant blessings come to God's people when the covenant is obeyed, (just consider *Deuteronomy 28* if you have the time). It is no surprise, then that these blessings of healing, restoration, and divine intervention are made manifest through the faithful *obedience* of Christ, especially in his death. The blessings now flow, through him, to the "*lost sheep of Israel*". Examples such as the healing of the lame man in Acts 3 are not so much about "praying for unbelievers who are on the outside" but "demonstrating that the gospel is true on the inside."

But that doesn't mean I've contradicted myself. What we've done is dug down to the roots of the gospel, and found them grounded on the covenant promises of God. So let's go back to that covenant:

What is at the heart of the promises of God?

Look at the covenant that God makes with Abram (later called Abraham) in *Genesis 12*:

*'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and **you will be a blessing**.
I will bless those who bless you,*

*and whoever curses you I will curse;
and **all peoples on earth**
will be blessed through you.'*

Here's the impetus: Whatever blessing comes to God's people, it is to flow out into the world. Whatever blessing we have in Christ, we are to share it.

So perhaps we should turn to a different biblical example to interact with your question. Consider something like Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman in *Matthew 15* as he heals her daughter. This example is particularly telling: Both the woman and Jesus make a point about blessings for those who are currently *outside* of covenant grace. The dialogue about Jesus only going to the "lost sheep of Israel" and whether or not she might "eat the crumbs that fall from the table" serves not to diminish but *amplify* the faith she has exhibited outside of the fold. She was not yet been brought into the fold, so to speak, but the blessings can and do *flow* to her. Her prayer *was* heard and it was answered. Jesus is simply doing what the promises of God demand; sharing the blessing.

So our very foundation, the grounding of God's words of promise that sets the shape of who we are in Jesus, shifts us to look outwards. Seeking the blessing of those who are "outside" in some sense is not just one possible outworking of our own belief and covenant inclusion, it's *essential* to its very character. We bless because we are blessed, we freely give because we have freely received. **We, who are in Christ, are to act as he acted, and continues to act through his Spirit in us.**

To pray for a person who is not yet "in Christ" doesn't usurp Christ's role as an intermediary, it *exercises* it, as long as we pray according to his character. We can only pray from the basis of the covenant blessing we have in him, i.e. we can only pray in *his* name. To offer to pray for someone in their

circumstances, is therefore an act that *reveals* Jesus more than it hides him. To pray for someone in their circumstances is to act *according to* the promises that God has fulfilled in Jesus, not against them.

That's the foundation I'm coming from, in answering your question. There are, however, a couple of things to tease out:

Firstly, you write *"It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever's first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer."*

I think I get what you mean, but excuse me if I miss the mark.

Clearly, our longing for people to share in the blessings of God is ultimately met if they, too, become a part of the covenant people; if they turn to Jesus in faith, and receive forgiveness, renewal, and all the other things. But we cannot separate prayer for other forms of blessing from this. If comfort, healing, or divine intervention comes from answered prayer, this is more likely to draw people to the ultimate blessing rather than hide it. To separate prayer for salvation from prayer for blessing in general creates a **false dichotomy**.

But **secondly**, your concerns are valid, and should remind us to **be careful** in how we pray. In some way, this is why I bother to go to some of the depths that I do in answering these sorts of questions. If we pray as if "God is a fixer" then that is the "gospel" that we will proclaim in those prayers; and, especially in the event that the "fix" doesn't come as we thought it might, we might *hinder* people's view of God.

But if we pray from an understanding of who we are in Christ,

covered by his grace, filled with his spirit, inheriting his blessing, that is what we reveal. We know how we pray for ourselves and for our fellow brothers and Christians, with confidence in God's character, with an understanding of how he works all things together for good, with an assurance of God's love even in the midst of suffering. We pray from the same place when we pray for those who don't share this understanding, and we must be additionally careful to ensure that this understanding, and our meaning, is clear.

I've seen it done badly. I've also seen it done well. I've been to big events where it's all about the guru fixing things on some messiah's behalf. I've also been to big events where sweet prayer and intercession has been offered, and things were gently and clearly explained along the way; the heart of God was spoken of, shared, manifested.

In short, wisdom is required. Whether it be a "Healing On The Streets" ministry, or an opportunity that comes from a conversation with a friend, as we come to our Father on their behalf, we need to ensure that our words help them to come along with us.

In the end, that's the sweet childlike dynamic on which it all rests. We have found the one who is our, Saviour, Lord and Leader, who has the words of eternal life, the blessings of eternity. In him we are caught up into our Creator. This is a precious, beautiful, sacred thing. It's not ours to hide, but we share it carefully, with wonder, joy, and delight. And who knows what our Lord will do?

Q&A: What do we learn from the use of “saying” and “breathing” to describe creation in Genesis 1 and 2?

Dave0 asks:

Will, looking at creation accounts a Gen 1 & 2. In Gen 1 in various English translations it is 'And God said...' In Gen 2 God's creative act (in English translation at least) becomes 'breathed'.

Is this nuance there in the original Hebrew or is it the same word with a sense of say/breath and translators have followed precedent with said in the G1 and breathed in G2.

John picks this idea up and plays with word/life, at the start of his gospel.

I have some vague recollection of the idea that when we 'speak' this difference in our living being from the other creatures is this free will act of God emulating (in a very small way) speaking and changing, stewarding his creation.

Thanks, Dave0

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Oh I do miss your questions, Dave0.
Forgive some interesting tangents in
what follows!



Some interesting thoughts to think about here. Three parts to
my answer

1. Let's look at the original text.
2. What does the story tell us about human distinctiveness?
3. Let's think about that in terms of creativity.

Part 1 – Original Text

*(Intended for the technically minded; feel free to jump to the
next heading)*

I'll start with a big caveat – I am nowhere near being a
Hebrew scholar! In all that follows, I'm relying on
internet tools, interlinears, and Strong's numbers etc! I
know from my (slightly greater) NT Greek work that such tools
can give a good beginning, but are sometimes a false path.

In Genesis 1, there is indeed a series of places where "God
said." It begins in Genesis 1:3 with the famous:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light

Eventually we get to the creation of the man and the woman
1:26 and following. Here we have (I'm using the ESV as it
tends to have some lexical precision) this, with some
highlighting from me:

*26 Then God **said**, "Let us **make** man in our image, after our
likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea*

and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

*27 So God **created** man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

*28 And God blessed them. And God **said** to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*

*29 And God **said**, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the **breath** of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

In each place, this speaking (“said”) is described using the Hebrew root word, *amar* (אמר) which simply means to “utter” or “say.” What God says he wishes to do is “make” (Hebrew *asah* (עשה) meaning “do” or “make”) and it is the same word used for the making of the various animals etc.

Here, however, in verse 27, when it comes to describing what God actually *does*, the word is *bara’* (ברא) meaning to “create”, “fashion”, “form”, “choose”. It’s the same word used to describe creation of the heavens and earth in verse 1. But while it is used *distinctively* here, it is not unique; *bara’* is also used, for instance, to describe the creation of the sea creatures in verse 21.

There *is* a sense of breath/breathing which in the English in verse 30 with the reference to the “breath of life” but (and I found this surprising) this appears to be overplaying the “breath” imagery. The *Complete Jewish Bible* (which tends to

get its Hebrew nuances right) simply renders it as “everything... in which there is a living soul.” The Hebrew is more literally “everything with a living life” where “life/living being/soul” is *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ). There is some connection with the verb “to breathe” (*naphach* (נָפַח), see below) but this link is *not* emphasised. Nor is it particularly connected with the speech-acts of God in this context; it is language that simply seems to be a descriptor of all of the living and breathing creatures – human and animal alike.

The Genesis 2 parallel hones in on verse 7 (in the ESV):

*...then the Lord God **formed** the man of dust from the ground and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath** of life, and the man became a **living creature**.*

Here “formed” is *yatsar* (יָצַר) meaning “to form” or “to fashion” and is used exclusively of the man and woman in this context.

“Breathed” is *naphach* (נָפַח) which is close to *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), which we saw above relates simply to the liveliness of animal creatures. It is interesting that the ESV has deviated from its earlier rendering, using “living creatures” rather than “everything that has the breath of life”. It is forced to do so because there is an explicit reference to the “breath of life” here that uses *neshamah* (נֶשְׁמָה). This *does* seem to emphasise the breathing as part of God’s act of forming the man. In my mangled grammar, the dynamic it’s like this: God forms by breathing (*naphach*) the breath (*neshamah*) of life so that the man becomes a living (i.e. “breathing” *nephesh*) creature. That is, there are three “breathing” words in the sentence – verb, noun, and adjective.

However, I don’t think this emphasis alone would make us consider that this “breathing” creative dynamic is unique to

the creation of humanity here, differently to the creation of the other animals. If there is any difference at this level of analysis between the creation of animals and the creation of the man, it is one of “more so” rather than “differently to”.

To draw a conclusion then, I would argue that while there is a contextual link between words relating to “creating”/“making”/“forming” and those relating to “breathing” and those related to “saying” this link is attached to the lexical choices, rather than derived *from* them.

Which is to say, that we’re on pretty safe ground with the decent English translations; there doesn’t appear to be anything of significance in the Hebrew that is particularly hidden or skewed by the translation choices. And so:

Part 2 – What does the story tell us about human distinctiveness?

Clearly, the creative acts of God are preceded by his *speaking*, and *saying*, his intent. There is no narrative that expands this causation (e.g. we could imagine a mythology in which God makes his orders known and some minions carry it out). Rather, as we see from 1:3 – God says and then something simply is: *God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light*. It is right to think of creation as a speech-act of God, an outworking of triune communication (as I alluded to in a previous post), which, as you point out, is later picked up in passages such as John 1.

It is also clear that there is both a similarity and a distinctiveness between the creation of the man and woman and the creation of other animals. The similarity is clear as the word *nephesh* – “life”/“soul”/“existence” with a nuance of “breath” – is applied to all living things. And there is nothing theologically wrong with this – we *are* of the same

category as animals for some sense of it, and it is right to affirm this. Much gospel imagery, particularly when it derives from the concept of animal sacrifice, hangs on this point. But I'll leave it to others to unpack the implications of animals having *nephesh*, which can have the sense of a "soul"!

But there is also a distinction. It is only of human creatures that God declares them to be "made in our image, in the likeness of ourselves" (1:26). It is only the human creatures that are delegated dominion over the other living things. There are little phrases that emphasise the distinction: For the other creatures, God decrees "let the earth bring them forth" (1:24) almost as natural outworkings of the creation at that point, but for the man God himself "forms him from the dust of the earth" (2:7); there is something much more intimate and "hands on" – the man and woman don't just have the *nephesh* (life-breath) of the other creatures, but receive the very breath of life itself (2:7).

The speech-act of God with regards to the creation of humanity does indeed *breathe* something into us that makes us unique. The narrative makes this clear.

Part 3: Let's think about that in terms of creativity.

Clearly there are ways in which we can be creative that is similar to the animals. Across the animal kingdom, not only is there reproduction and procreation, but degrees of communication, and even emotion.

But your point, I think, is about how humanity operates creatively in our unique divine image? Particularly, can we do *speech-acts*, can our speaking also be *breathing* something new?

The answer, I think, is in the affirmative.

To limit ourselves to Genesis, we see that Adam speaks things

into existence. In 2:19 it is the man who *names* the animals and in 2:23 Adam's *declaration* over Eve is almost a consummation of God's creative act, i.e. it *does* something.

Even the concept of sexual intercourse and conception as the man *knowing* his wife (4:1) is not some euphemism (have you known the Bible to be squeamish?) but a connection of the creative act with knowledge/understanding and the *intercourse* (defined in its broadest sense) of the couple. The ultimate "speech"/communication is the intimate sharing of oneself with another – no surprise that it is also creative!

We see it also in the concept of "blessing" – of speaking words over others, particular offspring. God continues his speech acts, over, for instance, Noah, in 6:1. Noah then himself speaks over his sons (positively *and* negatively) in 9:25. It is also interesting that when the Lord wants to frustrate humanity's creativity (with good reason!), he does it through confusing *language* (11:7).

To extend beyond Genesis, consider, of course, Jesus. His speech is powerful, but not just in terms of his teaching. Most of his miracles attend to a declaration, an imperative, or even a rebuke. The Kingdom of God comes near, in a real and material sense, through speech. And the imagery comes full circle when Jesus *breathes* on the disciples as an act of imparting that same hovering Spirit of creation and re-creation. It is by that same Spirit that we *pray*, which is truly creative speech, resonant with intimate communion between our maker and ourselves.

The biblical narrative brings speech, breath, spirit, and creativity together as a powerful dynamic. And I don't think this is something strange within the general human experience: it derives from our roots as created beings.

I think, then, that we can generalise: Human creativity rests on our speech, and in a much more deeper sense than the mere passing on of information; our speech is creative, and unique

amongst the animal kingdom. It literally “puts ourselves out there” expressing ideas, imagination, hopes, dreams, and so forth. It externalises our intent, our will, our purpose, our self-understanding. Its initial effect is relational (speech requires a speaker and a listener), but also sociological, and even material.

It also grounds the gospel in our createdness: it makes absolute sense that the gospel turns on the God who *reveals* himself to us still, who *speaks* to us, and would have us speak to him. It is the basis of our mission, that would have us *speak* to the world, discipling and baptising nations in the name of the one who is the Word of God.

Q&A: Do you believe in Soul Sleep after death?

Megan asks:

Do you believe in soul-sleep after death, where we will awake at the second coming, or that our spirits will be with God immediately after our death? I Googled this the other day, and found scriptural foundation for both answers. What does the church teach? What do you believe?

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Thanks for the question, someone asked me something very similar a number of years ago: Q&A – As an Anglican, what do you believe [about the intermediate state]? and I still agree with the substance of my answer. The focus of that answer is the “What does the church teach?” question and goes to some of the doctrinal formularies, with some of my personal conclusions. My position is that after death we will be “with God” in some way, and this is prior to the Lord’s return and the time of *general resurrection*.



Turning to the “scriptural foundation” that you explored – there isn’t an absolute-proof-text to turn to. The difficulty is, of course, that the focus of the gospel has more to do with our *present* state and our *final* state. The question of any *intermediate* state is a technical question that isn’t precisely addressed.

There are, of course, many biblical references in which those who have died are referred to as *sleeping* – e.g *Psalms 13:3, 1 Kings 2:10, John 11:11* etc. etc. I am unable to find any reference, however, that suggests that this is anything more than imagery. In fact, it is powerful imagery – *sleep* as an image of death, from the point of view of those left behind, speaks of both the *absence* of a person in death, and also the *temporary* nature of it in the gospel scheme of things. It is the sense of “they are gone, but we will be reunited one day.”

On the other hand, there are other descriptions of post-death experiences that make very little, if any, sense if that experience is limited to a form of slumber. Jesus’ *assurance* to the thief on the cross, that “today, you will be with me in paradise” is the famous example. Similarly, in Revelation 6 we hear the voices of those who have been martyred, *crying out in a loud voice*, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true,

until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Clearly, this presumes a post-death, pre-resurrection-and-judgement, conscious existence!

Of course, one of the conceptual problems is as to what this non-sleeping intermediate state is actually like. This question goes to *theological anthropology*, i.e. what is a human being after all? Are we soul, spirit, and body, and what does that mean? Where is our *personhood*? After all, Christian thought emphasises the value of the *embodied* self.

We affirm, for instance, that a violation of someone's body is not just the wounding of flesh, it is an injury done to *their person*. It is why we (along with *Jesus*) *mourn death*, which is (at the very least), the ending of bodily function. In the final state we are looking forward not towards an eternal disembodied state, but towards an *immortally glorified* bodily existence, an "*eternal house*". Moreover, this is exactly what we understand of Jesus' current existence as a physically resurrected human being: he has a human body that is real and glorified, and the first fruits of our final eternal life.

So how do we conceive of ourselves in a disembodied state, if this is what happens immediately after death? This is where I don't have a complete answer. Some resolve it by suggesting that there is no intermediate state at all – sleeping or otherwise – and it's just that time works differently in paradise and our experience of death is to jump ahead to the general resurrection. I'm not convinced. Others suggest (and I lean this way) that it is possible to conceive of personhood without physical referent, especially in an interim or temporary sense. We *are* much more than our bodies: Close your eyes and imagine someone who is very close to you... you will be thinking of and "experiencing" them as much more than just the recollection of their physical face, you are touching upon a deeper sense of who they are.

The biggest question, however, (as it is for many theological

things), is “so what?” What difference does it make to the gospel itself, to our proclamation of the gospel, or to our experience of living out the gospel? In my reflection I am taking to think about how, while this world is our home, being with Jesus is even more so. Our “enduring city” is not here.

As Gill and I pass through more and more seasons of life, especially difficult ones, we get a growing sense of what Paul alludes to in *2 Corinthians 5*. We are of “good courage” and make it our purpose to please Jesus in our earthly life. Yet, we “long to be at home with him” even if that is “absent from the body.”

So here is good news to me (although it is not the whole of the good news): I know that, when I die, I shall be at home with the Lord. And it is hard to think of such a joyous existence being of nothing but sleep.

Q&A: Should we make more of Baptism in the Holy Spirit?

MK asks:

It's taken me an age to get to this point, but certainly for some, baptism is just the start. Simply recognising another broken person wants to be fixed. Sometimes, of course, a recognition that parents see their child needs to be fixed which the child confirms later. There is another baptism we need, that from the Spirit. This one must necessarily come later as our brokenness is being mended. Nonetheless it seems crucial. We don't seem to make too much of this in 'official' church, but should we?

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This is an interesting question, and it goes where angels fear to tread... to some of the most precious parts of our Christian experience, and the words that we use to describe them. As a church we *should* be making more of these experiences, but we often struggle for the language, and the courage.



There is a pastoral dilemma, you see. In our insecurities, often the exuberant expression of one person's testimony can feel like an invalidation of our own. And "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" is fraught in this regard. I think what you have described is an excellent expression of the Christian journey, but we must be careful in how we talk about it... but sometimes we are too careful and we avoid the difficult conversation.

Here's the problem: the word "Baptism" is being used in multiple senses – to speak about both the *beginning and promise* of the Christian journey, and also for the ongoing *experience* of the Christian journey.

Baptism rightly describes the beginning. Baptism with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a sacramental *beginning* of the Christian journey – it so symbolically embraces the promises of salvation and covenantal inclusion that we can look upon it as the foundation on which our faith experience is built. It incorporates a "fixing" as you say, either for ourselves or as an embrace of our children.

That "fixing" includes the understanding of being "born again" (Baptism symbolises a dying and resurrection), of having the Holy Spirit come and dwell within us (an important declaration in the act of *confirming* one's Baptism), of being

regenerate by the grace of God, and of taking our place within the Body of Christ.

Our Baptism with water is therefore much more than “John’s Baptism” of repentance only. Yes, it is a sacramental symbol of repentance, but it is also a baptism *into Christ*. John himself says “I baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit” (*Mark 1:8*), and he is referring to the new *beginning* that Jesus will bring about.

Similarly, in Acts we see a couple of occasions when new Christians had only received John’s Baptism. Paul’s experience in Ephesus in *Acts 19:1-6* describes this:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’

They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

So Paul asked, ‘Then what baptism did you receive?’

‘John’s baptism,’ they replied.

Paul said, ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Paul baptises them “in the name of Lord Jesus”, as the foundation and beginning of their faith, and the Holy Spirit coming upon them is part and parcel of that. Amongst the baptised people of God there are no gradations, and no one is a second class Christian needing another dose of God’s grace, if you know what I mean.

It’s in this sense of beginnings that I prefer the use of the word “Baptism.” The “official church” does talk about this

lot, and usually reasonably well.

Nevertheless, “Baptism in the Holy Spirit” describes a genuine experience, which I share and affirm, even if I might use slightly different language. And, yes, it’s usually something we don’t talk about well at all. Indeed, often we prefer stability and order, and so we inhibit new experiences, misconstrue and misunderstand them, or seek to restrict them to controllable structures and programs. In so doing, even when well-intentioned, we discourage growth and maturity.

The genuine experience that we’re talking about here takes many forms. It invariably involves a sense of God being closer than he has before, of being filled, touched, moved, even overcome by the Spirit of God. It often comes with a sense of freedom, restoration, healing, and sometimes an increase in boldness and courage. I think this is the sense of “being mended” that you are talking about.

It’s an experience that for some can be almost spontaneous and unexpected, for some it comes as an answer to prayer in the midst of trauma or darkness, for some it’s because someone has laid hands on them, others have experienced it in ecstatic worship, others have found an encounter in times of deep contemplation. It is an experience that is often accompanied by the manifestations of the Spirit that we see in Acts and read about in places like *1 Corinthians 12* – tongues, interpretations, prophesying and all the other sorts of gifts of the Spirit.

For some it is a unique one-off phenomenon, for others it’s like a new chapter in their “deeper walk with thee.” It is not wrong to call it a “baptism” with the Holy Spirit, in the broad sense of an “immersion” in the Holy Spirit, a filling up, an overflowing etc. But I try to avoid the “baptism” language so as not to confuse with Baptism as the sacrament that speaks of being included in Christ.

The two senses come close together sometimes though. I have observed that an experience with the Holy Spirit can feel like a fundamental new beginning. I observe this in three ways:

1) Sometimes, in people's experience, their actual Baptism was not a matter of faith. It had meaning, but it was the meaningfulness of ritual, social expectation and so on. In experiential terms, their Baptism was akin to "the Baptism of John." The subsequent encounter and "Baptism with the Holy Spirit" coincides with a coming to faith. They have an experience of regeneration and renewal and the presence of God. Theologically, I would affirm this as a "coming to life" in faith of what was previously done in ceremony. In experience, it would feel like a new beginning, an initiation in itself.

2) Sometimes, it is an experience that precedes receiving Baptism in water. People come to faith, and encounter the Holy Spirit in a real and tangible way. In this experience the encounter is a new beginning, and the sacrament is a means of catching up to what God is doing, just like in *Acts 10:47*.

3) For others the experience so marks a significant step in their walk with God, that it feels like a new beginning, a refreshing, revitalisation of faith. This is especially so if there had previously been resisting of the work of God in their lives, or if they had received a fundamental shift in their understanding of God through the reading and hearing of Scripture, prayer, or prophetic word. This sense of a new beginning can also come with the "laying on of hands" in a commissioning into a ministry (e.g. *Acts 13:3*) or to impart a spiritual gift (e.g. *2 Timothy 1:6*). In all these cases, the encounter with the Spirit is a *significant moment*, and precious, but it's a part of the journey, a fresh chapter in something already begun. Something broken has become significantly, experientially mended.

In all of these experiences I don't *mind* if people call it a

“baptism in (or of/with/by) the Holy Spirit” but often I find other language to be more helpful.

But your question is a necessary provocation. Whatever language we use, we *must* make more of these experiences. We must talk about what’s it like to journey with Jesus through the realities of life. This *experience of God*, as opposed to the mere theory, must be part of our preaching and teaching, our praying, our sharing, our testimony, our pastoral care, our intercession etc. We must be willing to pray for and help people encounter the Holy Spirit in their lives in real and substantial ways, and help provide the language to describe it.

Instead, it seems to me, that our tendency as the church at large is to practise a form of ongoing abandonment as we act more like a boarding school than the family of God: We’ll give you some rites of passage, teach you some theory, and expect you to act your part – but for everything else you’re on your own. “Discipleship” in this caricature is a classroom, and “vocation” is about appointment to house captain or something.

Rather the Holy Spirit calls us to an intimacy with God and a vulnerability, a depth that can we come to share with one another. As we receive him, are “overcome” by him, and yes, in that sense “baptised” in the Holy Spirit, we come to see God, and see one another. We walk with each other, share those experiences of brokenness and restoration (this is discipleship), and we call out to one another what we can see the Holy Spirit is doing and gifting in us and through us (this is vocation).

So yes, we should make much more of these experiences, providing the context, the space, the protection, the understanding, the language, and the simple *care* for people to grow and encounter God. Sometimes I think we would rather be organised, but at what cost?!

Thanks for the question!

Q&A: Who are the poor? Is our first challenge the spiritually poor?

Anonymous asks:

We are challenged certainly in some Anglican communities to look after the poor. I suppose the biggest question is going to be who are the poor? May seem a daft question, but in financial terms we have very few poor. However, certainly some of the financially richest people I know are very, very poor; spiritually and otherwise? My personal thought is that we do have poor with us, right now. Our challenge is to reveal those clothes they are wearing are actually rags. Is that our first big challenge?



[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks for the question. I have some general thoughts on this in a recent review: A Church for the Poor?

My first thoughts on the poor usually arrive with the famous “sheep and goats” passage of *Matthew 25*. In this passage the returning King, acting as judge, declares (for the righteous):

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

‘Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?”

‘The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

And of course, there’s an equivalent and negative judgement for those who did not feed, give drink, clothe, or visit etc.

This gets us into your question. **Who are the poor?** They are indeed those who are financially, physically impoverished: hungry, destitute, excluded by their circumstances.

We can’t overlook this. There is a clear gospel challenge to look after and to care for the physically poor. This is clear from the Scriptures: the laws on *gleaning* is about providing for those who are literally hungry, as are the many passages that talk about caring for widows and orphans, who lack the stability and security not only of societal standing, but also of the basics of life. James considers the care of these physically vulnerable people to be an aspect of “*genuine religion*”.

It also gives some exhortational force. **Who are the poor?** The ones who we *can* see. We are held to account for who is *in front of us*; we have *personal* responsibility for those who God brings across our path. There is also *communal* responsibility for those who are in front of us *as a community*. This is just as serious and calls us to *move* our community towards caring for the poor through advocacy and social justice and personal example.

We cannot ignore the physically poor. As Keith Green would imply, we make too many excuses, individually and together, we ought to care for those who do not have as much as we do. It is good in its own right. It is a gospel imperative. Or shall we insist that what we have is ours alone, and not God's?

But you are right, there is also a **spiritual poverty**. But there are *two ways* in which we need to take this.

Firstly, there is spiritual poverty that speaks to a hardness of heart, a self-righteousness that, as you say, dresses itself in resplendent rags. This is not just preening and pride, but facade, self-reliance, the idolisation of financial security, and other "decent" sins.

Such folk are the "goats" of Matthew 25. They are the *rich man with Lazarus*. They are the *fat cows of Bashan*. Such hardness of heart is rightly and justly judged harshly. And notice how the *spiritual* poverty is often marked by the hardened attitude towards those who are *physically* poor, or a general dismissiveness of those who are weak and dependent in some way.

Is it, then, as you say "our challenge to reveal those clothes... are actually rags"? That is, **is it our task to reveal this hypocrisy, this hardness of heart?** To some extent, yes. We are called to not only advocate for the poor, but also to exhort people to repentance, to soften their hearts, to take a posture of faith and humility, to enter into the insecurity of

faith whereby their hearts might break with the massive longings of God's own heart. Biblical and Christian history is full of characters who have served us in this way, by provoking us towards righteousness.

We must feed them, as we must feed the physically poor. These people need the Word of God ("All they need is Moses," the rich man is told...), and they are in front of us. If church members and even clergy find themselves uncomprehending of how to apply the *elementary teachings of the faith* then it's not somebody else's job. We must dig into the Word, speak the truth, exhort repentance, paint a vision of hope, etc. etc. That is, we are called to "feed the sheep" that are in front of us, even if they think they are princes.

Secondly we might think of *spiritual poverty* in the sense of being **poor in spirit**. This is a more positive sense.

There is a recognition that those who are physically poor, by their circumstances, are dependent, vulnerable, reliant, weak.

The poor in spirit may have enough to eat, but they may be dependent, vulnerable, reliant and weak in other ways – even if they don't know it. In our middle class town I know those who are involved in picking up the pieces from addictive behaviours, neglected children. The book that I reviewed, *A Church for the Poor?*, understands this, for instance, and speaks of things such as *aspirational* poverty and *relational* poverty.

There is a similar imperative to care for these who are in front of us: If we encounter a depressed young man, we cannot turn aside. If there is a lonely widow in front of us, we should not simply "leave her to the professionals." And when society begins to produce a younger generation with increasing incidences of anxiety we should be amongst those standing up and saying "Come on, we can do better, let's change how we do this!"

But here is the difference between hard-hearted “spiritual poverty” and being “poor in spirit.” It is this: the way of Christ moves away from one and toward the other.

You see, in this context, being “poor in spirit” is an indicator of faith, a positive thing – the opposite of being “poor in spirit” is being “rich in ourselves” that is, self-righteous. The *physically* poor teach this lesson, they weather circumstances in which they are weak, vulnerable, and dependent, and God *honours* them by valuing the related things of *faith, trust, and honesty* and judges the rich-in-themselves for their lack of them.

No wonder Jesus identifies with the physically poor! They look more like Jesus than the self-secure rich!

Just as we are all relatively physically wealthy in the global scheme of things, we must realise that we are all relatively poverty stricken, hardened in the spiritual sense. I know for myself that while I might have “done good” from time to time, I am most likely to be moved by the financial and other physical insecurities that beset my own family. I find myself protecting myself emotionally as I encounter those who are wounded by life. I cling to my wealth, my strength.

The Christian journey begins and continues with the basic understanding of “nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” Any challenge to “reveal the rags” must begin in us. When we realise that we are spiritually poor, we are also drawn to our weakness, vulnerability, and dependency, and, faith, trust, and honesty is the sweet fruit of it. We cannot turn to ourselves, so we turn to God, and inherit the *kingdom of heaven*.

The Christian journey is one of constant relinquishment and surrender in this regard, a long slow walk of obedience. We become poor in spirit, and find ourselves with riches that are not limited by our capacity, but strength in our weakness,

life in our death. This is what Jesus looks like.

That is our first big challenge. To look to our own posture before God, a posture of faith that is soft towards God and others, and not self-reliance that just builds fine looking decent protective, hard, walls.

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