

Key Bible Doctrines

Part 2: Mankind / Sin / Prayer

Mankind

Man Created in the Image of God

God created man in his image for his glory and pleasure.

When God said, “Let us make man in our image [and] in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26), he meant that they, the Holy Trinity, would make a creature similar to themselves in nature: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The Bible reveals that our bodies are made of the same materials as the earth, but that we are made alive by the “breath of life” which comes from God (Genesis 2:7). All living creatures share this life-force, but the spirit of man is more like God than is the spirit of any other creature.¹ Sin distorts and corrupts our likeness to God, but the Bible confirms that even sinners are made in his image (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). While sinners become progressively less like God as they continue in their sin, anyone who is “in Christ” is a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17) and “is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:10, NKJV).

The following are some of the ways in which we are most like God:

- *Our innate sense of morality.* Unlike the animals, people have an inner sense of right and wrong. Animals are governed by natural instincts, but man has an overriding sense of justice and the ability to distinguish between good and evil (cf. Romans 2:14-15). While our sinful natures corrupt and distort our moral sensibilities, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit at work within the believer can restore us to right-thinking (Romans 8:5-8; Ephesians 4:22-24; cf. 1 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:15).
- *Our spiritual awareness.* Our physical bodies tend to dominate our earthly lives, but most people have an inner sense of their own spirituality and of the existence of a spiritual realm beyond the physical. This can lead people into the occult and false religion, or it can lead them to God and salvation.
- *Our intellectual abilities.* Man has an intellectual capability vastly superior to any other earthly creature. While animals can learn tricks, people can reason, think logically, learn lessons, solve problems, and teach others. We are also highly creative and derive satisfaction from our creative efforts. Crowning all of this is our remarkable ability to communicate with great precision and detail in many different languages and styles. While these skills can be used for evil purposes, nevertheless, they come from God and reflect his own marvellous intellect.
- *Our personal relationships.* Mankind is unique among all of God’s creatures, including the angels, in the nature of our personal relationships with one another, with God, and with his creation. Our desire to love and to be loved is a reflection of God’s desire to love us and to be loved by us. Conversely, the evil and hatred expressed in many human relationships reflects the hatred that Satan has for us. But those who follow Christ and obey his teachings learn to walk in fellowship and right relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation.
- *Our authority over the creation.* From the beginning man was given the right to rule over the creation (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:6-8). Our sinful natures have caused many

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:21 suggests that the spirit of man “rises upward” (i.e., is eternal) while that of the animals “goes down into the earth” (i.e., is temporal).

people to abuse this authority, but those who are faithful to God in this age will be given authority to rule over the new creation when Christ returns (Psalm 37:10-11, 28-29; Luke 19:11-27).

As noted previously, God does not need anything from his creation. However, the Bible tells us that God created man for his own glory and pleasure (e.g., Isaiah 43:1-13; Ephesians 1:11-14). God's amazing plan is to rescue out of the world a people for himself who will honour him and in whom he will take great delight (Isaiah 62:1-5; Zephaniah 3:14-17). Likewise, God's people will take delight in him as revealed by the prophet David: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11; see also Psalm 27:4; 65:4; Romans 5:1-2; 1 Peter 1:3-9).

The Essential Nature of Man

Man has a physical body and a spirit or soul which act together to form a unified person.

The Bible teaches that we have a spirit or soul which is intimately and securely connected to our physical bodies (e.g., Genesis 2:7; Ecclesiastes 12:6-7; Luke 12:4-5). Some commentators have suggested that the soul and spirit are distinct parts of a person, but this is not supported by Scripture. The Hebrew and Greek words translated as "soul" and "spirit" are often used interchangeably² (e.g., John 12:27 cf. John 13:21; Hebrews 12:23 cf. Revelation 6:9), and when used by themselves the context clearly indicates that the whole of the person is being referred to (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 8:34-37; 1 Corinthians 5:5; James 2:26).

It is our soul / spirit that relates most directly to God in worship and prayer (e.g., Psalm 25:1; 103:1; 146:1; Luke 1:46-47), but it can also lead us into sin (e.g., Psalm 42:5-6; 78:8; Proverbs 16:18; Jeremiah 17:9; 2 Corinthians 7:1). Therefore, Paul exhorted his disciples to be "controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. Thus if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:9-11).

Man as Male and Female

Men and women are the image of God, both as individuals and jointly in the union of marriage.

The creation of "man" in the image of God as described in Genesis refers to both men and women: "God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27; see also Genesis 5:1-2). This means that men and women are of equal value in God's eyes, and neither is superior to the other. The truth of this is evident in the many stories in the Bible where God used both men and women in extraordinary ways to carry out his plan of redemption.³ It is also seen in the promise of God to send the Holy Spirit to everyone who seeks him: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days" (Joel 2:28-29; cf. John 14:15-17, 25-26; 15:7-15). Similarly, Paul taught that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

² In some Bible translations these words are sometimes substituted with other terms, such as "life", "mind", "heart", or "person", depending on the context.

³ For example, Deborah led Israel to victory over the Canaanites (Judges 4-5), Esther saved the Jews from being destroyed by the Persians (Esther), Mary gave birth to the Son of God (Luke 1:26-56), and Saul (Paul), at one time a persecutor of Christ, became his greatest apostle (Acts 7:54-8:3; 9:1-31).

When joined in marriage, the union of husband and wife reflects the unity, love and companionship experienced by the persons of the Holy Trinity: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). But just as each person of the Trinity is equally God, so every man and woman, whether married or not, is equally the image of God. The entry of sin and evil into the world has marred and damaged our likeness to God making relationships with one another difficult and causing individuals to behave more like Satan than God. Nevertheless, we must “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21), because it is Christ who is restoring us again to the perfect image of God.

In the same way that there are differences in roles between the members of the Trinity, so there are differences in roles between men and women. This is obvious from nature where we see that men are physically stronger than women so that they can provide for and protect their families, while it is only women who can bear children and, fittingly, are the more tender and nurturing. Therefore, Paul teaches that “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3). Paul goes on to say that a man “is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Corinthians 11:7-9). On the face of it, this statement appears to contradict the teaching of Genesis that men and women are equally the image and glory of God. However, Paul’s teaching here has to do with propriety in worship, and not equality in status. In effect, Paul is saying that women honour men by submitting to their authority in the same way that Christ brought glory to the Father (John 12:27-28) and the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:13-14).

Paul extends his teachings on propriety in worship in 1 Timothy 2 where he gives the following instructions: “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (1 Timothy 2-15). Paul gave these instructions to negate the tendencies of our sinful natures to affect our worship of God. Thus, men tend to cause pointless disputes in a misguided attempt to assert their authority, while women tend to dress inappropriately, be disruptive with social chitchat, and seek to dominate men. Paul is saying, in effect, that these kinds of behaviours are dishonouring to God.

The roles that God has given to men and women as head and helper, respectively, are based around the family unit. The family is dear to the heart of “the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Ephesians 3:15). Paul provides instructions to wives and husbands, children and parents, and even slaves and masters in Ephesians 5:22-6-9. The key statements in regard to husbands and wives are: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church ... Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:22-28). Children are told that they must obey and honour their parents, but fathers are told, “do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4).

Man Has a Free Will

Man is free to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, to the extent that he understands these things, and is fully responsible for his actions.

The Bible clearly teaches that man has a free will and is fully responsible for the choices that

he makes. This is evident from the very beginning when Adam and Eve were given the freedom to obey or disobey God's command: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Adam and Eve chose to disobey the command and were punished by God with hardship, suffering and ultimately death (Genesis 3:14-19).

Another example is the choice that Moses gave to the fledgling nation of Israel: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). The blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience that Moses had set before them are listed in Deuteronomy 27:9-28:68 and describe the many ways in which God would send good or evil upon them according to their obedience to his commands.

Jesus also held each person accountable for their choices. Even the simple command of Jesus to "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15), requires his listeners to choose to turn from their sins and believe the gospel message. Like Moses, Jesus made many invitations for people to choose life: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). And he rebuked those who "diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). To the weary, Jesus gave the invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Similarly, the Holy Spirit and the Jesus say, "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17).

The fact that Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the "knowledge of good and evil" means that every one of their descendants also has the ability to discern right from wrong, and good from evil. But, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus also showed that the punishment of sinners will vary depending on the extent of their knowledge of what God requires: "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:47-48).

As previously noted, the doctrine of man's free will appears to contradict the doctrine of God's providence (refer to *Part 1: The Nature of God – The Providence of God*). However, both doctrines are true because this is the clear teaching of Scripture. The apparent contradiction arises because of our limited understanding of God (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33).

Sin

Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God.

God's moral law is contained in all of Scripture, from the law of Moses (which includes the Ten Commandments) and the words of the prophets, to the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostles. Scripture in many places testifies to the benefit of learning and obeying God's law (e.g., Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Joshua 1:7-8; Psalm 19:7-11), and warns about the terrible consequences of disobeying it (e.g., Deuteronomy 28:15-68; Psalm 11:5-7; 36:12). Jesus often referred to the law in his teachings and added further insight into its true meaning (e.g., Matthew 5:17-48; 7:12; 22:36-40). The law of God has as much to do with the condition of our hearts as it does our actions. Thus, it is just as much a sin to covet our neighbour's possessions as it is to steal them, or to desire another man's wife as it is to commit adultery, or to hate a man as it is to murder him (Deuteronomy 5:17-21; Matthew

5:21-22; 27-28).⁴

The problem with sin is that it is contrary to the nature of God. While God “exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth”, and in these things he delights (Jeremiah 9:24), sin results in cruelty, injustice and unrighteousness which he hates. God cannot tolerate sin, because this would make him unrighteous and unjust; therefore, he must punish sinners. The ultimate consequence of sin is death. When a man asked Jesus what he needed to do to obtain eternal life, Jesus said, “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments” (Matthew 19:16-17). Paul taught that, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God” (Romans 8:6-8). Jesus said that it was better for a person to lose some part of his or her body than to sin against God and end up in hell (Matthew 5:29-30).

God did not create sin, but he did create the opportunity for sin by giving the angels and man the freedom to chose between good and evil. As previously discussed, the arch angel Lucifer was the first created being to sin against God, and he incited a third of the angels to join him in an ill conceived rebellion against God. After he had been cast out of heaven, Satan succeeded in tempting Adam and Eve to disobey God, thereby introducing sin into the human race (Genesis 3:1-19).

The rebellion of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, which is often referred to as the “original sin” (in regard to the human race), struck at the very heart of truth and morality. Whereas God had said that Adam and Eve would die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17), the serpent said, “You will surely not die ... For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5). Despite knowing God’s command, Eve, when she “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Genesis 3:6).⁵ Adam and Eve had, in effect, decided for themselves what was morally right based on their own judgment rather than trusting God’s word.

The apostle Paul taught that all mankind is guilty of sin because we are all descended from Adam and Eve: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Even those who do not know God’s law, or who lived before the law was given to Moses, are guilty of sin (Romans 5:13-14). This is because we have all inherited Adam and Eve’s sinful nature and, therefore, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). This does not mean that we are not capable of doing good, but any good that we can do in our own strength is far outweighed by the sin inherent in our very natures. Thus, the prophet Isaiah said, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64:6; cf. Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3: 9-20). Furthermore, the Bible confirms that people are sinful even before they are born (Psalm 51:5; 58:3).⁶

⁴ This does not mean that all sin is equal (cf. John 19:11; Matthew 5:19; 23:23). It is obvious that hating a man is not as serious as actually killing him, but both are sins that will be subject to judgment (cf. Galatians 3:10; James 2:10-11).

⁵ We should not conclude from this passage that Adam was with Eve when she sinned, because Paul taught that “Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Timothy 2:14). However, Adam willingly partook of the same fruit and, therefore, was equally guilty of the sin.

⁶ This does not mean that children who die young are destined for hell! Jesus said of children that “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16). In fact, the Bible shows that having a child-like faith in God is essential for salvation (Luke 18:17; Romans 1:17; 4:1-24; Hebrews 11).

While we can say, in summary, that human beings have a “sinful nature”, it would be more accurate to say that we have a “sin-corrupted nature” given that our essential, uncorrupted nature is like that of God. Many people have a desire to do good, but because of sin within themselves and others, they end up doing what is wrong instead. Paul summed it as follows: “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:21-25).

We all know that sin can enslave us (we don’t need the Bible to tell us this), but what only Christians know is that only Christ can deliver us from sin and all its consequences both now and for all eternity (Matthew 26:26-27; Ephesians 1:7-8; Colossians 1:13-14).

Prayer

Prayer his personal communication with God. This includes prayers of petition or intercession, confession of sin, praise and worship, and thanksgiving.

Prayer is an essential part of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul said, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Prayer is both the means by which we communicate with God, and an invitation for him to intervene in our lives. Jesus promised his disciples, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father” (John 14:13).

Prayer requires faith. In the first place, it requires faith that God exists at all, “because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). But often a much greater faith is required in order to receive what we have asked for. Jesus taught his disciples that “if you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 21:21-22).

Prayer is also the means by which we can gain wisdom and understanding from the Lord: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). With this kind of wisdom we can learn to pray according to the will of God: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 John: 14-15). In times of great distress we may not know how to pray, but “the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:26-27).

As noted in the definition, prayer is not just about asking for things. When we praise and worship God through prayer we enter into deeper fellowship with him. The lifeblood of Jesus’ ministry was his intimate fellowship with the Father through prayer (e.g., Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:28-29), and the model prayer that he taught us to pray begins with a word of praise: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9; also cf. Luke 10:21; John 17:1). Prayers offered with thanksgiving and praise often lead to praying which is more in the Spirit than in the flesh. Paul told the early Christians, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). He also encouraged them to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions” (Ephesians 6:18; also Jude 20).

We should never underestimate the power of prayer. For example, when God confided in Moses that he planned to destroy the people of Israel for their sins, Moses intervened in fervent prayer and God relented (Exodus 32:9-12). Again, in 2 Chronicles 7:14, we read of

God’s promise to his rebellious people that “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” The apostle James taught that if anyone is in trouble or sick, then he should pray, because the “prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:13-16). However, Jesus taught that it is sometimes necessary to be persistent in prayer and not give up (Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8).

Apart from a lack of faith and perseverance, there are other reasons why our prayers may go unanswered.⁷ It may simply be that what we are asking for is not God’s will (cf. Matthew 6:10; 26:39), or that the answer is delayed until the proper time has come (cf. Daniel 10:12-14; Galatians 4:4). Disobedience can also block answers to prayer. The psalmist says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18), and in Proverbs 15:29 we learn that, “The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.” The apostle Peter, quoting Psalm 34:15-16, affirmed that “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:12). Often it is prudent for us to confess our sins to God or to fellow believers, according to the situation, before we commence our prayers (e.g., Psalm 19:12; Daniel 9:20; Matthew 6:12; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9). Unforgiveness can also block our prayers. Jesus told his disciples, “when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25; also Matthew 5:23-24).

It is appropriate to conclude this brief discussion on prayer by emphasising that all prayer, whether directed to the Father, the Son or the Holy Ghost, should be made in the name of Jesus, who is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Timothy 2:5).⁸ Jesus said to his disciples, “my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:23-24). What he meant by this is that we should pray in the *authority* of his name (cf. Acts 3:6; 4:7-10; 16:16-18), this being the same authority by which “we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

* * * * *

Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated. Other versions referred to from time to time are:

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

The Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).

⁷ If the reader is concerned that a lack of faith may be responsible for an unanswered prayer, then try praying for more faith, reminding Jesus that he is “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Also, try asking for a specific word on the basis that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

⁸ Note that it is not appropriate to pray to God through any other person such as Mary or Peter or the Pope, since no man or woman is a suitable mediator between God and us.