

We Bear Your Name

George Müller: The Man of Prayer

“When God wishes anew to teach his Church a truth that is not being understood or practiced, he mostly does so by raising some man to be in word and deed a living witness to its blessedness. And so God has raised up in the nineteenth century, among others, George Muller to be his witness that he is indeed the Hearer of prayer.”¹

Born in Prussia, George Müller moved to England early in his Christian life to serve with the London Society. Finding the ministry practice hindered his freedom in following the Spirit, he soon relocated to Teignmouth, a small town on the southwestern peninsula of England, to pastor a congregation. At Teignmouth the Lord helped him turn to the Word and Holy Spirit for absolute guidance. Surrendering himself to God and his will led to Müller’s unique approach to personal and ministry finances. He set four standards for himself: (1) not to receive any fixed salary, (2) never to ask people for help, but only to make his needs known to God in prayer, (3) to sell all that he had to give alms, never saving up any money (taking Luke 12:33 as his scriptural basis), and (4) never to be in debt (from Romans 13:8). His approach to his earthly possessions reveals his unrelenting faith in God and his commitment to make that faith visible to those around. This commitment led to a remarkable life of God-centered prayer.

After leaving Teignmouth for Bristol, he began working with the Scriptural Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad, an organization dedicated to mission work and Bible instruction. Müller is best known for his ministry to orphans with this organization. For God laid it on his heart to found an orphan home after being touched by an orphan brought to Christ in one of the schools his organization ran. This

¹ Andrew Murray, “George Muller and the Secret of his Power in Prayer,” in *With Christ in the School of Prayer*: 87. Much of the narrative information for Müller’s life comes from this article.

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orphan had to leave the school for financial reasons, being sent to a poorhouse where he received no spiritual nourishment. On November 25, 1835 he listed in his journal the three reasons he wished to found the orphanage: “The three chief reasons are (1) that God may be glorified, should he be pleased to furnish me with the means, in its being seen that it is not a vain thing to trust him and that thus the faith of his children may be strengthened; (2) the spiritual welfare of fatherless and motherless children; (3) their temporal welfare.”² The right ordering of his desires led to a right ordering of his life and prayers.

Over the course of the next few decades, Müller founded five orphanages caring for more than 2100 orphans, after waiting upon God for guidance and provision. To the man who had spurned his £35 per annum salary, God had entrusted more than £1 million for the building of these homes, as well as other schools and missions, and Bible and tract circulation. And all this *without ever asking for financial help from anyone other than God*, indeed, even to prove to others that “it is not a vain thing to trust him.”

Why such abundant blessing? Why such answer to prayer when we see so little?

Müller’s Legacy

More than most people, Müller prayed self-consciously and single-mindedly for the glory of the Father. Andrew Murray, commenting on Müller’s remarkable life, wrote, “As the great root of all sin is self and self-seeking, so there is nothing that even in our more spiritual desires so effectually hinders God in answering as this: we pray for our own pleasure or glory. Prayer to have power and prevail must ask for the glory of God, and he can only do this as he is living for God’s glory.”³ Müller lived for God’s glory and

² Ibid., 89.

³ Ibid., 93.

thus sought God's glory foremost in prayer. This passion guided and informed his every decision. As a result, and wholly unsurprisingly, he received God's abundant blessing.

In particular, Müller longed for an increase in faith among those who surrounded and served with him. While many Christians profess faith in God—and in the power of prayer—most also live as functional atheists, trusting in their own strength or the resources of others rather than God's gracious provision. In truth, many do not really believe God will answer prayer. Müller wished that his co-laborers in the gospel would see and believe that God is still the living God, that he stills hears and answers the prayers of his people when they are offered in faith. With this desire in mind, he wrote,

I therefore judged myself bound to be the servant of the Church of Christ, in the particular point in which I had obtained mercy, namely, in being able to take God at his word and rely upon it. The first object of the work was, and is still, that God might be magnified by the fact that the orphans under my care are provided with all they need, only by prayer and faith, without anyone being asked; thereby it may be seen that God is faithful still and hears prayers still.⁴

Having learned to pray in Jesus' name, with an unrelenting trust that God answers those types of prayer, he desired others to receive similar mercy, to exhibit similar faith. This reveals an extraordinary focus in his prayer life: not the orphans' needs, though they were real and important, but the majesty and fame of God, as many different people see that he exists, hears and answers prayers, and lavishes his love on those who trust in him.

Müller understood that, as one who bears the name of Christ, his approach to life, ministry, *and even prayer* proclaimed God's worth and glory to those around him. By turning to prayer instead of people for the provision he needed, Müller gave "a practical demonstration as to what could be accomplished simply through the instrumentality of prayer and faith,"⁵ to the glory of God the Father. Many in his day saw his faith and God's grace, multitudes believed, and the church continues to be

⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁵ Ibid.

strengthened by his example. His faithfulness—especially to his foremost desire, the glory of God—led to a massive outpouring of grace, the tremendous display of God’s wondrous power, because he had a single-minded aim, his chief object: the glory of God.

As he neared the end of his service, he summed up his life and, in many ways, the heart of this study: “All this leads me to desire further and further to labor on in this way in order to bring yet greater glory to the name of the Lord. That he may be looked at, magnified, admired, trusted in, relied on at all times, is my aim in this service.”⁶ Müller’s life is a powerful and instructive example of humility, unflagging faith, and single-minded devotion to our chief purpose.

So we have finally have come to the profoundly practical in this study, examining our prayers in the light of Scripture and God’s revealed will to see how we might pray more effectually—and for a greater purpose—than we have been. Like Müller, we long to experience remarkable, miraculous answer to bold prayers of faith, offered in his name and for his sake.

We Bear His Name

Of course, Müller was not alone in his approach to prayer, praying foremost for God’s name and only secondarily for human considerations. There are many examples in Scripture of those who pray with the recognition that “we bear his name,” and thus our lives and his honor are bound together.

Take, for example, Jeremiah, praying in behalf of Judah during a time of national crisis. A severe drought has stricken the southern kingdom. The cisterns are empty, the ground cracked and aching; even the doe abandons her newborn fawn because the land can provide no sustenance. Both rich and poor, farmer and city-dweller seek comfort but find none. In the midst of such despair, Judah cries out to her God: “Although our sins testify against us, do something, Lord, for the sake of your name. For we have often rebelled; we have sinned against you” (Jeremiah 14:7). The prophet uses a number of

⁶ Ibid.

different words to describe the people's sin here, covering a wide semantic range: being perverse, turning away, missing the mark—not unlike David in his famous penitential prayer (Psalm 51:2-5). This is Judah's contribution to the discussion: every possible sort of wrongdoing and rebellion.

Worse still, they have sinned so brazenly despite their covenant relationship with God: "You are among us, Lord, and we bear your name; do not forsake us!" (14:9). Though they bear his name, they have not borne it carefully, mindful of his grace and their rightful response of loving obedience and praise (cf. Romans 12:1-2). Instead they have muddied the unutterable name of God by perverse forays into the pigsty of human desire and pagan idolatry. On what basis, then, will they pray?

As we have seen so many times before, God's honor and his people's circumstances have been linked together. They bear his name, and thus his fame depends to some extent upon their survival. Should Judah fail, perish in this drought, what would that say of their God? They have no ground upon which to stand except to plead with God to love his glory. "The only reason offered for Yahweh's action is that his reputation and honor are at stake. He must act for the sake of his name."⁷

In light of what we have seen already concerning the name-glory complex, there is likely another element to their prayer. By bringing up Yahweh's name, which for the Hebrews signified his essential character, Jeremiah may be imploring God to act according to that character—to reveal himself as "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God" once more. John Stott explains, "In other words, 'although we cannot appeal to you to act on the ground of who *we* are, we can and do on the ground of who *you* are.' Judah remembered that they were God's chosen people, and begged him to act in a way which would be consistent with his gracious character, for, they added, 'we bear your name.'"⁸ They bear his name—their fate and his glory seem inextricably linked—so the Lord must act to save them and thus save his honor as well. Or so they think.

⁷ J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980): 380.

⁸ *The Cross of Christ*, p. 127.

Interestingly, the plea fails. Jeremiah, after acting as intercessor on behalf of Israel, brings the Lord's response in verses 10-12. He prophesies not restoration, grace, or mercy, but the sword, famine, and plague. Of course, this is not because Jeremiah's approach to prayer was wanting, but because his people had forgotten the essential nature of Yahweh that his name should have called to mind: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love and faithfulness to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. *Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation*" (Exodus 34:6-7). Does Yahweh reveal his character any less powerfully when he brings judgment on the rebellion of his people? Surely not, as we have seen before (cf. Exodus 16:4, Ezekiel 20:38-39). In both restraint and wrath, grace and judgment, love and holiness, God reveals himself to be who he is, worthy of full honor and praise.

Jeremiah, in response to this word of judgment, renews his plea, once more asking for redemption on the basis of God's name: "For the sake of your name do not despise us; do not dishonor your glorious throne. Remember your covenant with us and do not break it" (14:21). The nations know him to be Judah's God, so if they were obliterated, it would reflect poorly on him. This was especially so because his throne was in Judah. Both his people and the city bear his name. What happens to them in some sense happens to him as well. Should "the reputation of Israel's God [be] laid in Babylonian dust"?⁹ Surely not. If Jerusalem were destroyed, so would the temple be, the site of his glorious throne (cf. 3:17, where Jerusalem is called "The Throne of the Lord"). Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem could only be read as a sign of God's impotence—or, perhaps worse still, as a sign of his fickleness, as he breaks the covenant he made with his people.

This is curious reasoning, of course, as Israel had broken the covenant time and time again, ensuring God brings down upon them the promised curses (cf. Deuteronomy 28), a point they seem to

⁹ Robert P. Godron, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986): 130.

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have missed. As commentator J.A. Thompson notes, “There is a strange inconsistency in this plea, since it lays stress on Yahweh’s obligations and overlooks the strong obligations of Israel to Yahweh.”¹⁰ They understand that what happens to them reveals God’s character; however, they have not understood that their *whole* lives—not just their desperate pleas for mercy after experiencing just wrath—should have been for the sake of his name. Unsurprisingly, then, the Lord’s final answer (15:1-4) confirms his character- and covenant-keeping judgment. There will be no relenting.

The City That Bears His Name

Not long after Jeremiah’s ministry (and in part *because* of it, cf. Daniel 9:2), Daniel adopts a similar posture in prayer—seeking God’s glory, conscious of the fact that his people bear his name. Daniel proves a moving and instructive example of God-centered intercession as he prays for the rescue of his people from captivity after the seventy years of desolation (which Jeremiah prophesied) have come to an end. Acknowledging his sin and the sin of the people in whose behalf he prays, he cries out:

Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. *For your sake*, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of *the city that bears your Name*. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! *For your sake*, my God, do not delay, because *your city and your people bear your Name*. (9:17-19)

Much like Moses, in whose line he stands, he seeks the rescue of his people not for their sake, but for the sake of God. That is, he prays for God and not for humanity.

Of course, he does offer requests that will benefit people. He asks God to look with favor upon the sanctuary, to listen to their cries and see their desolation, to forgive and act. But when he prays for humanity, he does so sensible of God’s righteous character: “We do not make requests of you because *we are righteous*, but because of *your great mercy*.” (One suspects he almost hears the words of Exodus—the compassionate and gracious God—ringing in his ears as he prays.) In other words, he prays

¹⁰ Thompson, 386.

that God would reveal himself as the God he is (since his people have already revealed themselves as the people *they* are); he prays that his essential worth would radiate forth and fall upon his unworthy beloved.

But this is secondary, really, to Daniel's concern for God's name, honor, fame, reputation, glory. "For your sake," he repeats twice, come and rescue us. The nations know who you are, know that you are the God of Judah; make yourself known to us and them to your everlasting praise.

Like the other intercessors before him, he apprehends that God has bound his honor to his people, that there is a city on earth that bears his name. Cognizant of this fact, then, he asks for redemption. It is not that the suffering of exile is too much for him to bear; no, it is that the dishonor *God is suffering* is too much for him to bear. This is God-centered prayer—that cannot fail of an answer.

Sure enough, God answers, sending his messenger of light Gabriel to bring his decree, promising his ultimate deliverance (likely from the Antiochene crisis, when Antiochus Epiphanes IV sets up the "abomination that causes desolation" in the temple precincts). Daniel remembers that God's people bear his name, that God's fame outweighs our desires, and prays accordingly.

Ezra and the Return from Exile

Consider one more example of praying for the sake of his name, consciously remembering that we bear his name. Standing on the banks of the Ahava River, with the temple priests and Levites freshly assembled, ready to embark on a journey back to the Promised Land, Ezra proclaims a fast for his people. Like all fasts, this one included a time of prayer, to "ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions" (8:21). The petition itself is uninteresting, not altogether unlike asking God for safe travel when heading off on a short-term missions trip with a group of youths.

What *is* interesting is his motivation in *praying*, rather than simply asking the powerful king, Cyrus, who is sending them on their way, for a military escort. He says, "I was ashamed to ask the king



for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, ‘The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him’” (8:22). While not explicitly mentioning God’s name, glory, or reputation, this concern drives his whole approach to the situation.

He had told the king that God is gracious to his people and powerful in protecting them, pouring out his wrath on those who forsake him, who would seek to harm his people. If he then asked the Persian king for a military escort, what would it say of his God? He is an ever-present help *except* in times of trouble, when we’d really rather have a legion of pagan soldiers by our side? Ezra understands well that he and the people he leads bear God’s name—and as such, they must deliberately live (and pray) that they might bear it well, to his praise and glory. Living and praying like unbelievers does nothing to glorify the God by whose name we are called.

As we would expect of a petition so steadfastly centered on God’s glory, it finds a ready answer: “So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer” (8:23). Remember the words of Andrew Murray: “Every answer to prayer He gives will have this as its object. . . .The glory of the Father must be the aim—the very soul and life—of our prayer.” Ezra experienced this truth firsthand, and saw God exalted—even to our own generation—as a result.

We Bear His Name

At every stage of the exile—the impending doom under Jeremiah, the captive life under Daniel, the promised return under Ezra—God raises up intercessors who will seek his glory, remembering how God’s fame and his people’s history tie together. Now that God’s Christ has come, delivering his people from spiritual, eternal exile—has anything changed?



We bear his name. It is not just the Israelites of old, the “heroes” of the faith from our favorite Bible stories, but every believer called by the name of Christ even now who bears his name. God has inexplicably, but ever so graciously, bound his fame and honor to “a wretch like me.”

The question we face as we turn to specific, concrete, practical steps we can take to pray for the sake of his name, instead of praying human-centered, even selfish prayers, is—are we sensible of this fact?

Do we intentionally seek his fame as we offer prayers driven in form and content by this chief object?

Standing by the banks of our own Ahava River, would we seek human comfort in a powerful military escort—savings accounts, insurance, physical safety far from the mission field? Or would we shun these false harbingers of safety and fling ourselves publicly and faithfully on the protection of an omnipotent, gracious God?

Suffering and imprisoned in a foreign land because of unchecked sin, would we ask for mercy without repentance, discipleship without cost, presume upon grace instead of pleading his glory? Or would we seek his honor first and ask that he would deal with us however would most magnify his glory in our eyes and those of our captors?

Crying out to God in the midst of a drought-stricken land, baked with thirst, weary with hunger, would we seek our own will and comfort, asking God to meet our physical requirements and not our spiritual needs? Or would we submit our wills to his, asking only that he manifest himself as the God he is, true to his own ineffable character, glorifying himself in acts of loving grace and holy wrath?

At the end of it all, do we pray remembering that we bear his name? If we do, we will seek his glory, not our comfort, in our circumstances, and make petition of him accordingly. And if we do, we will both live and pray faithfully and deliberately, as George Müller did, so that others will see his splendor and exalt him in praise.

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He wills his own glory and wills that we who bear his name seek it in prayer. Do we?

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