

Who Are You Talking To ?

Have you ever felt a little uncertain about who you are talking to when you pray? Have you heard other Christians praying and either wondered how they seem so clear who they are talking to, or else realised that they too may be a little confused . . . ?

I have certainly found myself in all those different places at different times, so let's see whether we can discover a little more clarity together . . .

As far as I can remember, as a young boy before I became a believer in Jesus (and probably after as well!), I used to 'pray' by asking God to do things that I wanted, perhaps to get me out of difficult situations. These were 'prayers' of minor desperation when I had run out of other options, and many people experience the same thing. Even some common slang expressions probably come from these situations, when people who have no particular faith say things like "Oh my God!" or "God help us!"

In my early years as a Christian, I copied what I heard other believers saying. They said 'Lord' when they prayed, and I think I started by thinking that they were talking to Jesus. But then that bit which usually came at the end – 'in Jesus' name' – made me wonder. If we were praying to the Lord Jesus, why did we need to say 'in his name' at the end? So I sort of worked out that we were talking to God and that the name of Jesus was like some sort of password that (hopefully) made sure that God would listen to what we were saying to him. I had heard about the Holy Spirit but was not really clear how he was involved. And, I must admit, I definitely thought of him as 'it' rather than 'him' and found it a bit strange that some people **insisted** that we had to refer to him as a person. More of that later.

People have been talking to God – or at least trying to – since the dawn of time, and the world is full of stories and myths from countless different and often ancient traditions.

In **Genesis 1**, the creation story speaks simply of 'God', but by **Genesis 2:4** we begin to see that he has a name. In almost all modern Bibles, that name is represented by LORD in small capitals. This name continues to be used throughout the books of the Old Testament. Perhaps this is another reason that we use 'Lord' when we talk to him, but it is easy to forget that **this was not a title but the name of God.**

We need to turn forward to **Exodus 3:13-15** to find the origin of that name. God appears to Moses in the burning bush and commissions him to go back into Egypt and rescue the descendants of Jacob (the 'sons of Israel') from their centuries of slavery there. Moses protests that the people will want to know who this God is who claims to be 'the God of your fathers'. And so God reveals his name 'I AM WHO I AM' in **v. 14**, or just 'I AM' for short.

It is easy for us to miss the connection with the next verse, where he says that his name is The LORD, the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The word represented in our Bibles as LORD is a Hebrew word written with the four sounds YHWH, which has sometimes been pronounced as 'Jehovah' but is probably more accurately 'Yahweh'. Its meaning is generally accepted as being 'The One Who Is', so this is really a concise way of expressing the same as 'I AM WHO I AM'. See some more explanation in **Exodus 6:3** and **Genesis 17:1, 35:11 & 48:3.**

All the other nations around had their own 'gods' and the Egyptians had several of their own. They all had names, so it was important for Moses to be able to report the name of God to his people. Remember that they had been in Egypt for more than 400 years since Jacob had travelled there with all his family, then about 70 people. They now numbered more than

600,000, but we know almost nothing about them for those 400 years. Now Moses appears and says that he has a message from ‘the God of the ancestors’ – a real ‘blast from the past’ – and that his name is ‘The One Who Is’. In other words, the only true God; all the others are not God at all. By saying ‘Our God is the LORD’, Jews were making a strong claim!

Why am I looking at this? Simply because the whole of the Old Testament uses this word YHWH as the name of God and our Bibles invariably write it as LORD. As a result, we tend to miss that **this is God’s personal name**. Many Jews treated it with such respect that they did not dare to say it out loud and they substituted their word for ‘Lord’, (*Adonai*) especially when in prayer. This is how we got the use of LORD. *Adon* means lord or master and it was also commonly used as a respectful form of address, like ‘Sir’.

We know that the British queen is Queen Elizabeth and we have no hesitation in referring to her by her personal name. But, if we were to meet her in person, we would not call her ‘Elizabeth’ to her face but would call her ‘Ma’am’, which is the feminine version of ‘Sir’. So maybe this is something like the Jewish practice.

Personally, I am becoming a little less convinced! How about all the place names like ‘The LORD Will Provide’ (**Genesis 22:14**) and all the people’s names beginning with ‘Jeho’, ‘Je’ or ‘Jo’. Every time they spoke the name of Jehoshaphat, for example, they were saying ‘YHWH has judged’! And Moses changed the name of his assistant from Hoshea (‘Saviour’) to Jehoshua (‘YHWH is Saviour’)! (**Numbers 13:16**) The Psalms are full of proclaiming the Name of the LORD. See **1 Chronicles 16:31**, which is also **Psalms 96:10**.

In the New Testament, the Greek word is ‘*kurios*’, which once again means lord or master and was also used as a respectful form of address, like ‘Sir’. So it is not surprising that the disciples called Jesus Master and Lord. In fact, every time that they called him Master or Lord, it is that same word *kurios*. It was not just a religious word; it was the general word used for the master, the boss, the ‘governor’, the chief. So, you would call your employer *kurios*. Would our attitude change if we started calling Jesus ‘the Boss’ ?

We don’t see the Name of God in the New Testament. He is referred to simply as God.

But Jesus introduces a new and very personal name for him: Father. There are 6 times in the Old Testament where God is referred to as ‘Father’¹, and some of them seem to point forward to a new relationship between the people of God and God himself as their Father, but no-one in the Old Testament addressed God as ‘Father’, not even King David.

The Lord Jesus changed all that. Right from the Sermon on the Mount onwards, Jesus referred to God as ‘your Father’ when speaking to the crowds. This was something new! When he referred to God as ‘my Father’, the disciples began to understand (slowly!) that he was the Son of God. The Jewish authorities also understood, and objected strongly because he was making himself equal with God².

And then, when the disciples ask him to teach them how to talk to God, he tells them to call God their Father (**Matthew 6:9, Luke 11:2**), in the same way as he does ! I wonder whether they tried it – ?

In **John 14** and **16**, at the Passover meal, after Judas had left the upper room, Jesus introduces the eleven to the Father and the Holy Spirit in more depth. And now he takes them on another stage in talking to their Father – asking the Father **in the name of Jesus!**³

¹ **Psalms 89:26, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8, Jeremiah 3:4, 3:19, 31:9** plus **Isaiah 9:6** referring to the Messiah.

² **John 5:18, 6:41**

³ **John 14:11-14, 15:7,16, 16:23-30**

It is significant that the Lord Jesus tells them at this point, when he has been telling them about the Father, about the Holy Spirit, and about the fact that he is about to leave them to go back to the Father. Everything is about to change.

Up until then, there had not been free access into the presence of God for everyone who believed. Jews needed to go through the process of offerings and sacrifices for sins, and even then only the high priest could enter the 'holy of holies', not the ordinary people. Now, through offering himself as **a sacrifice that was able to put away sin**, Jesus was about to open the way into the presence of the living God.¹ The curtain in the temple, which separated the holy place from the rest of the building, was torn from top to bottom when Jesus died on the cross, symbolising the removal of the barrier.²

Until then, the Holy Spirit had only been given to special people and sometimes for 'one-off' situations. In just a few weeks, he would be poured out on all the disciples, not just the eleven, and then believers would continue to receive him, right up to the present day.

The Holy Spirit is intimately involved in our relationship with our Father. Because we are sons of God through faith in the Lord Jesus, "*God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" (**Galatians 4:6**). We have seen before how we have been released from slavery to law and have been made sons and heirs. **Romans 8:15** uses that same word (meaning 'being recognised as a son' but usually translated 'adoption') and says, "*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you received the Spirit of being recognised as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'*"

'Abba! Father!' is used in just one other place in the New Testament, in **Mark 14:36**, when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane and asking his Father that, if it were possible, he would not need to die. We have been brought into a relationship with our Father where we can talk to him in the same way as Jesus did!

Even in the specific details of talking to our Father, we need the Holy Spirit to work. See **Romans 8:26 & 27** and **Ephesians 6:18**.

The Holy Spirit is not just some sort of divine force, he is a person. How could he not be, if God has sent forth **the Spirit of his Son** into our hearts? How could the spirit of Jesus be just a force? Jesus himself says to the disciples "*you know him because he abides with you and will be with you.*" (**John 14:17**) In other words, they have already known the Holy Spirit in the person of Jesus. Quite apart from that, even the language of what Jesus says makes it clear: the Greek word for 'spirit' or 'breath' is *pneuma*, a neuter word, so normally this would be referred to as 'it'. Jesus very clearly uses masculine words when talking of the Holy Spirit, referring deliberately to 'he' and 'him'.

Paul is clear, too: "*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty . . . Just as from the Lord, the Spirit.*" (**2 Corinthians 3:17-18**)

I can't find any Bible examples of people praying to the Holy Spirit. To me, this is not surprising, as the Holy Spirit is chiefly concerned with working inside us and with his power upon us. It somehow seems strange to think of talking to the One who lives in me!

Perhaps surprisingly, there don't seem to be many examples of people praying specifically to the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. I can think of only a few: Stephen, as he is dying, says "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!*" and "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them!*" (**Acts 7:59,60**). And then Saul of Tarsus in **Acts 9:5** asks "*Who are you, Lord?*" when Jesus meets

¹ **Hebrews 9 & 10** are full of the details, and especially **9:11-14, 23-28, 10:1-10, 19-22**

² **Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38**

him on the Damascus road. Then possibly the disciple Ananias in Damascus, later in the same chapter. Paul has a conversation with the Lord Jesus which he records in **Acts 22:17-21**. There may be some more . . .

The emphasis seems to be strongly on a relationship with our Father God **through** the Lord Jesus, who is the one through whom the relationship has been made possible. As Paul writes to Timothy, “*There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*” (**1 Timothy 2:5**). The word translated ‘men’ and ‘man’ is the word *anthropos*, which means a human being. Jesus has not stopped being human. There is a human being seated at the right hand of God, The One Who Is! Wow!

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So, is this beginning to be a bit more real to us? Are we getting a bit clearer who we are talking to? Do we know the basis of how we can approach ‘The One Who Is’ and actually call him our Father?

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Getting back to my own experience, for years I continued to pray ‘Lord’ in very general terms. I heard some people pray ‘Father’ but never ventured to do so myself. And then I began to see that I was **in Christ**, that God himself had placed me in Jesus and had joined my life to his, that in Jesus he really had given me ‘everything pertaining to life and godliness’.

Because I had been placed in Christ, Jesus’ death on the cross was effective for me, my failures and sins were forgiven and I was no longer in slavery to them. My old life was gone, I had the new life of the Holy Spirit inside me and his power was upon my life.

I had begun to see more clearly what had already been true from the time I first believed: I was a child of God. **God was my Father because I was joined to his Son.** Because I had been joined to the Son, I could ask in his name.

I started to call him Father because now I really knew that he was my Father. Looking back on it, I can see that I began to understand fatherhood much more clearly as a result. Sadly, like many men of my post-war generation, I had never had a close relationship with my father, so this had been largely unknown territory for me.

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So, who are you talking to?

Perhaps to the Lord Jesus himself, to thank him for what he has done, but more likely to the all-powerful Creator, ‘The One Who Is’, who has become your Father through what his Son accomplished, once for all, through his death, burial, resurrection and ascension.

*Therefore, since we have confidence
to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus,
by a new and living way
which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh,
and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
let us draw near with a sincere heart
in full assurance of faith . . .*
Hebrews 10:19-22

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