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THE
**COMPLETE
IDIOT'S**
GUIDE TO

"Welcome to the great adventure of prayer, to the pilgrimage of the heart."

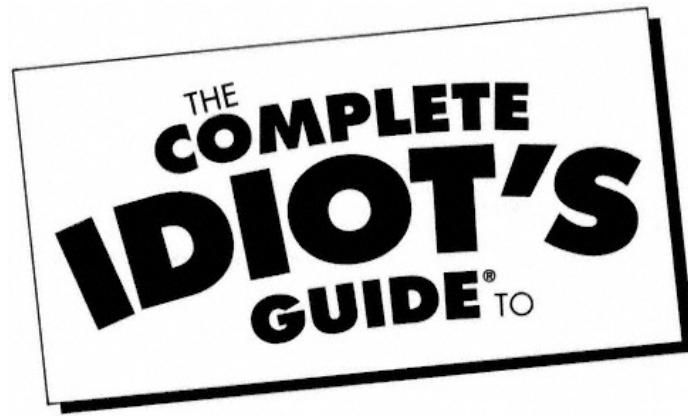
—Dean Timothy George, Ph.D.,
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University,
Birmingham, Alabama

Prayer

- ♦ **Quick and easy ways** to integrate prayer into your daily life
- ♦ **Idiot-proof steps** to learning prayers for every occasion
- ♦ **Down-to-earth** advice on using prayer to help overcome setbacks and disappointments

Mark Galli and James S. Bell Jr.





Prayer

by Mark Galli and James S. Bell, Jr.

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DEAR READER

Dear Reader,

Nearly everyone, at one time or another, has prayed—even if it's only been a short but desperate plea, "Oh God, help!" Many have "prayed" even when they haven't been aware of it: they marveled at an awe-inspiring view and felt briefly connected to "something" or "someone" vastly different than themselves.

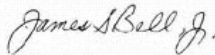
These two types of prayers have names—the first is *petition*, the second, *contemplation*—as do the many aspects of prayer. In this book, you'll learn such terms, but more importantly, you'll learn *how* to pray, or how to pray better. As we've written this book, we've kept in mind the complete novice as well as the person who has been praying for years, both those trying to figure out what to do after bowing their heads as well as those struggling with deeper issues, like why some prayers are not answered.

Yet this book has a deeper purpose still. What finally does it mean to pray "better"? Well, it doesn't mean learning to speak more eloquently or with more profound thoughts. If prayer is "conversation with God" (see Chapter 1), then to pray better means to have a deeper, richer relationship with our Creator.

That may seem like a lot to claim for a book—that it will bring you closer to God—but it isn't our insights we're hyping. We actually hope we have no fresh insights. Instead, we're trying to communicate the experience and wisdom of the great pray-ers and teachers of prayer, particularly in the West, since the time of Jesus to today. We may not quote them much, but they stand behind every word we write. That's why we're confident that a book like this cannot only enhance your prayer life but especially your relationship with God.



Mark Galli



Jim Bell

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CONTENTS AT A GLANCE

Part 1: Let Us Pray	1
1 What Prayer Isn't (and Is) <i>Learn various definitions of prayer, their upsides and downsides, and the essence of prayer.</i>	3
2 What Prayer Promises <i>Discover how prayer can help you experience God, and how prayer can not only change people but also their circumstances.</i>	11
3 What Prayer Requires <i>Find out the importance of faith, honesty, and humility in prayer—and why patience is of the utmost importance.</i>	23
Part 2: The Heart of Prayer	33
4 Getting Insider Information <i>Learn about the greatest resource (the Bible) and the greatest teacher (Jesus) on prayer—and the most important prayer of all time: The Lord's Prayer.</i>	35
5 The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 1 <i>Discover the meaning of the first part of the Lord's Prayer, especially about the God we pray to, as well as how prayer draws us closer to others.</i>	41
6 The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 2 <i>Learn about the meaning of the second part of the Lord's Prayer, particularly, how prayer is concerned about the most mundane things and the most spiritual things.</i>	53
7 The Greatest School of Prayer <i>Find out where prayer is best learned, and why.</i>	63
Part 3: Just Doing It	71
8 Prayer Options <i>Learn about the various ways you can pray, and the pluses and minuses of each style.</i>	73
9 Finding Your Rhythm <i>Discover the importance of establishing a prayer routine.</i>	81
10 ACTS Now <i>Learn one method of prayer that is easy to remember and practice.</i>	87
11 Listen Up <i>Find out how to listen to God, and the difference between meditation and contemplation.</i>	99
12 Sensual Prayer <i>Discover how to employ all the senses in prayer, and how to use physical objects to enhance your prayer life.</i>	107

13	113
Healing Prayer	
<i>Learn how prayer can heal both physically and psychologically.</i>	
14	121
Handling the Seven Distractions	
<i>Find out how to deal with the main distractions that keep people from prayer.</i>	
15	129
Dealing with Doubts: No Answers	
<i>Learn what it means when your prayers don't seem to be answered.</i>	
16	137
Dealing with Doubts: No God	
<i>Discover how to work through periods of prayer when God doesn't even seem to be around.</i>	
Part 4: The Big Book on the Big Issues	145
17	147
Praying the Psalms	
<i>Find out how to use the biblical Psalms in your personal prayer life.</i>	
18	157
Praying the Gospels	
<i>Find out how to use the four Gospels in your personal prayer life.</i>	
19	165
Shaping the Future	
<i>Learn about one of the most humorous biblical "prayers"—and what it teaches about the power of prayer to change things.</i>	
20	173
Handling Fear	
<i>Discover one of Moses' prayers and how it can help you deal with your fears.</i>	
21	181
Mending Relationships	
<i>Learn about Jesus' most personal prayer and how prayer can be a key to healing broken relationships.</i>	
22	189
Suffering: Three Approaches	
<i>Find out the three principal ways people in the Bible have dealt with their own suffering through prayer.</i>	
23	197
Cleansing Prayer	
<i>Learn how to come clean with God, and how to use a biblical prayer that does that most effectively.</i>	
24	207
Seeking the Best for Others	
<i>Learn a prayer of the apostle Paul that can help bring depth and meaning to your prayers for others.</i>	
Part 5: The Greatest Resources of All Time	215
25	217
Let's Get Mystical	
<i>Learn about mystical prayer in the Christian tradition, and the five stages of mystical prayer.</i>	
26	225
The Imitation of Christ	
<i>Learn about the classic book on prayer by this title and how you can use it to deepen your prayer life.</i>	

27	233
The Jesus Prayer	
<i>Discover the history and meaning of the short little prayer known by this name, and how to use it meaningfully.</i>	
28	239
An Uncommon Prayer Book	
<i>Find out how personally to pray The Book of Common Prayer, one of the richest liturgical resources.</i>	
29	249
Singing Prayer	
<i>Learn about the principle types of songs available for prayer, as well as how to use them in your prayer life.</i>	
Part 6: Praying with Others	257
30	259
Going One-on-One	
<i>Discover how to pray with your children, your spouse, and your friends.</i>	
31	265
Small Groups	
<i>Find out about "small groups," how they function and how they can deepen your prayer life.</i>	
32	273
Prayer in the Free Church Tradition	
<i>Learn how congregations in the free church tradition pray during worship.</i>	
33	281
Prayer in the Liturgical Tradition	
<i>Learn how congregations in the liturgical tradition pray during worship.</i>	
Appendices	
A	291
Prayers for Various Occasions and People Taken from <i>The Book of Common Prayer</i>	
B	301
Daily Prayers	
Index	333

CONTENTS

Part 1: Let Us Pray	1
1 What Prayer Isn't (and Is)	3
Clearing Up Some Confusion	3
Prayer as Work?	3
Hyperspiritualizing	4
Self-Help	4
Cosmic Shrink	4
Wishin' and Hopin'	4
Shhhh!	5
Getting Formal	5
Talking to God	5
Schizophrenia or Prayer?	6
Forgettest Thou Queen Elizabeth I	6
A Relationship	7
Problems Are No Problem	8
2 What Prayer Promises	11
The Best Gift of All	11
Gratitude	12
Transcendence	13
Forgiveness	14
Love	15
It Changes Us	16
You Understand Yourself Better	16
Wisdom	16
Courage and Hope	17
Building Character	17
It Changes Other Things	18
Does Prayer Change God's Mind?	19
3 What Prayer Requires	23
1. Faith	24
2. Honesty	26
3. Humility	27
4. Patience	29
With a Little Help from the Friend	29
Part 2: The Heart of Prayer	33
4 Getting Insider Information	35
The Prayer Book for Christians	36
The Center of the Bible	38
The Prayer to Start All Prayer	39
5 The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 1	41
<i>Our</i> Father	41
1. You Never Pray Alone	42
2. Prayer Is Learned Together	42
3. God Is Bigger Than My Ideas About God	43
Our <i>Father</i>	43

1. We Can Have Intimacy with God	44
2. We Become God's Children	44
3. We Can Come to God with Confidence	45
<i>Who Art in Heaven</i>	45
Hallowed Be Thy Name	46
Thy Kingdom Come	47
Thy Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven	48
What to Do if You Hate the Term "Father"	49
God Is Not a Lonely Father	50
6	53
The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 2	
Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread	53
And Forgive Us Our Trespasses	56
. . . .As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us	57
And Lead Us Not into Temptation	59
Lead Us Not into Temptation—More	60
But Deliver Us from Evil	61
For Thine Is the Kingdom	62
7	63
The Greatest School of Prayer	
Why Go to Church to Pray?	64
1. We Learn from Others	64
2. We Get Stretched	64
3. We Hear God in Special Ways	65
4. We Learn to Pray in Community	66
Objections to Going to Church	66
The Church Is Full of Hypocrites	67
I Don't Need the Church: I Can Pray by Myself	67
Church Is Boring	67
The Church Is Not My Kind of Place	68
Churches Make Things Too Complicated	69
I Don't Believe All That Church Nonsense	69
Part 3: Just Doing It	71
8	73
Prayer Options	
Rational and Beyond	73
Shhhh	74
For the Verbal	75
Hodge-Podge Prayer	76
Short and Sweet	77
On the Fly and on the Page	77
Journaling	78
Now What?	80
9	81
Finding Your Rhythm	
Why Regular Times for Prayer?	81
What Time Is It?	82
Morning	82
Evening	83
Noon Hour	83
Finding a Place	83
Posture	85
Establishing a Pattern	85

10	87
ACTS Now	
Adoration	88
Confession	91
Thanksgiving	93
Supplication: Petition	94
Supplication: Intercession	96
11	99
Listen Up	
Silence Is Golden	99
Meditation	100
Contemplation	101
Dreams	103
Lectio Divina: A Method to Listen	104
1. Lectio	104
2. Meditatio	104
3. Oratio	105
12	107
Sensual Prayer	
How It Works	107
Crucifix/Cross	108
Candles	109
Incense	110
Icons	110
Prayer and Fasting	111
Odds and Ends	112
13	113
Healing Prayer	
Healing Happens	113
Physical Healing	114
Psychological Healing	115
Two Misconceptions	117
1. You Have to Have Enough Faith	117
2. You Have to Pray in the Right Way	118
14	121
Handling the Seven Distractions	
"My Mind Wanders"	121
"I'm Bored"	123
"I Feel Restless"	125
"I Don't Know What to Pray For"	125
"I'm in a Bad Mood"	126
"I Disagree with What I'm Reading"	127
"I Just Can't Pray Certain Prayers or Use Certain Expressions"	127
15	129
Dealing with Doubts: No Answers	
The Contradiction	129
The Answer Would Cause More Problems Than It Would Solve	130
It's Not the Right Time	131
We're Getting in the Way	132
Prayer Is Only Part of the Answer	133
The Real Answer Lies Deeper	134
16	137
Dealing with Doubts: No God	
"Dark Night of the Soul"	137
1. Too Tired to Feel Anything	138
2. Secret Sins	139

3. Affliction	139
So What's Going On?	140
The Way Back	140
Hanging On	142
Part 4: The Big Book on the Big Issues	145
17 Praying the Psalms	147
What Are These Things?	148
Getting Around	148
How to Read a Psalm	149
Devotional Themes	151
Week by Week	152
Mechanics	153
The Difficult Psalms	154
18 Praying the Gospels	157
So, What's a "Gospel"?	158
To Each His Own	159
Now for Something Completely Different	160
Big Themes	161
Reading the Gospels Prayerfully	162
Praying the Gospels	163
19 Shaping the Future	165
Subtle Arrival	166
God's Chosen = Us!	167
At a Board Meeting with God	168
Thy Will Be Done—My Way	170
20 Handling Fear	173
Holy Ground	173
God's Family History	174
God Knows Our Suffering	175
Telling God Like it Is	176
Meeting God at Every Excuse	177
God's Failure	178
21 Mending Relationships	181
A Last Prayer for Friends	181
Those Given to Us	182
Letting Go	183
The Mother of All Requests	184
So What?	185
God by the Back Door	186
22 Suffering: Three Approaches	189
Prayer from the Belly of a (Big) Fish	189
Faith at the Bottom	191
Tragic Job	192
God's Critic	192
Looking for a Way Out	194
The Key to Prayer in Suffering	195

23	197
Cleansing Prayer	
Lasting Confession	198
Key Assumptions	199
A Spade Is a Spade Is a	200
Cleanliness Is Next to Joyfulness	203
Getting the Word Out	203
Humility, not Piety	204
24	207
Seeking the Best for Others	
Beyond Daily Bread	207
Thankfulness	209
Knowledge	209
Hope	210
Power	210
How Exactly to Use This Stuff	211
Other Gold Mines of Prayer	212
Part 5: The Greatest Resources of All Time	215
25	217
Let's Get Mystical	
There's Mysticism—and Then There's Mysticism	217
A Brief History of Mysticism	219
The Five Stages	221
Books to Get You Started	222
Getting "Professional" Help	223
26	225
The Imitation of Christ	
A Book for Spiritual Novices	225
The Essence of Imitation	227
On Not Despising Thomas	228
Love of the Alone	229
Recommended Editions	231
27	233
The Jesus Prayer	
The Power of a Name	233
The Way of a Pilgrim	234
The History of Jesus' Name	235
Exploring the Prayer	236
Doing It	237
Getting the Most Out of It	238
28	239
An Uncommon Prayer Book	
Prayer for the Ages	239
Long History	240
To Begin	241
Psalm Prep	241
Prayer Central	242
The Prayers	244
Grand Finale	245
Rich Resource	246
29	249
Singing Prayer	
The Types of Songs Available	250
Poetry of Prayer	252
The Prayer of Music	256

Part 6: Praying with Others	257
30	259
Going One-on-One	
Out of the Mouths of Babes	259
The Family that Prays Together	261
More Intimate than Sex	263
Prayer Partners	263
31	265
Small Groups	
How Small Is Small?	265
Best of Two Worlds	266
Conversational Prayer	268
One-Word Prayers	269
Silence Can Be Golden	270
Where to Find a Group	271
32	273
Prayer in the Free Church Tradition	
Free From What?	273
What Happens When and Why	274
Communion	276
Table Manners	277
Dancing in Church?	278
Should You Attend a Seeker-Sensitive Church?	278
It Sounds Like Gibberish to Me	279
33	281
Prayer in the Liturgical Tradition	
Prayer Book Religion	281
The Word of God	282
Holy Communion	285
Bells and Smells	286
The Church Year	287
Worship for Those Who Haven't Worshipped in a While	288
A	291
Prayers for Various Occasions and People Taken from <i>The Book of Common Prayer</i>	
B	301
Daily Prayers	
Index	333

FOREWORD

Everybody prays. Prayers can be chanted or moaned or sung or whispered, shouted or simply offered in complete silence. Prayers are offered in beautiful churches, in lonely hospital rooms, football stadiums, in the halls of the U.S. Congress, on busy freeways, and, as I know from personal experience, in speeding airplanes racing across the sky. Even atheists pray in foxholes, so the saying goes. Even non-religious people, the kind who would never be caught dead in a church, or perhaps, better, would only be caught in a church dead, even these people pray. When they stub their toes, or mash their finger with a hammer and cry out, "God d—!", what is that but a prayer? In the ultimate sense only God can damn, or bless. Intuitively, we all know this and reflect it in the common curses and minor blasphemies of everyday life.

All persons pray, but not all prayers are created equal. This book is a kind of primer on Christian prayer. It will introduce you to the most famous of all prayers, The Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and which Christians of all traditions have been praying for two thousand years. This book also discusses the fear of praying. It acknowledges that one can get bored with prayer, and tired of prayer. These problems are faced by everyone who prays. We should remember that even the great saints and heroes of the faith struggled with prayer, just as all of us do.

This is a book for beginners, for those who want to enroll in the kindergarten of prayer. But there is a funny thing about the life of prayer: We never get too old, or grow too mature, or become too spiritual but that we still need to come back to the basic formulas of prayer we first learned perhaps as little children. I recently heard a great religious leader tell about an experience he had not long ago. He had been rushed to the hospital with stabbing pains in his chest. The doctors recommended immediate open-heart surgery and soon he found himself being prepared for this ordeal. Lying on the operating table as the anesthesia was beginning to take effect, he said the thing that kept running through his mind were the Bible verses and simple prayers he first learned as a little boy. The little bedtime prayer his mother taught him years ago kept coming back to him now: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." In that moment prior to surgery, he did not know exactly what his earthly future would be, whether in fact he might not die before he awoke. But in that moment, he said he felt closer to the Lord than he had for many years.

So this book is for everyone. For no one is really an expert in prayer. We are all in kindergarten, beginning anew learning how to pray, for what to pray, to whom to pray. Welcome to the great adventure of prayer, to the pilgrimage of the heart.

—DEAN TIMOTHY GEORGE, PH.D.
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INTRODUCTION

You've opened this book because you're at a loss about prayer. You don't know how to get started, or you don't know how to continue. Whatever the reason, you're confused about prayer. Welcome to the club.

We've each been at this prayer stuff for years, and we're still learning. We've known people who've spent their whole adult lives in prayer—as monks—and they are the first to admit that they always feel like newcomers to prayer.

That shouldn't intimidate you as much as encourage you. The great classical guitarist Segovia said that the guitar is the easiest instrument to learn but the hardest to master. That's true of prayer, but we'd put it this way: Prayer may be the hardest human activity to master, but it is the easiest to learn.

And that's the point of this book: to help you learn to pray, or to reacquaint you with the basics of Christian prayer.

Getting Specific

Note the adjective: Christian. As much as we'd like to write a book on prayer as it is experienced in all the world religions, we can't. We're Christians, raised in the Christian tradition. We work for Christian publishing houses. We attend Christian churches. We know Christian. We don't know Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, and others.

But we're not convinced that this is a problem for this book. First, nearly every person who picks up this book will have been born and nurtured in the West, particularly in North America. This is a part of the world steeped in Christian culture. According to George Gallup and Jim Castelli in their book *People's Religion: American Faith in the '90s*, three out of four Americans describe themselves as Christian. According to a recent *Newsweek* article, two out of three pray every day at home—most likely in the Christian tradition. Christianity pervades our communities, our literature, and our everyday expressions ("at their wits end," "apple of my eye," and "scapegoat" all come from the Bible). Whether we like it or not, and whether we believe or not, Christianity is in our cultural veins.

And that means that if you're exploring prayer, Christian prayer is the logical place to start. Kathleen Norris, a writer on spirituality, tells this story in her *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*: "A young man I know was stunned when he went to Thailand and tried to join a Buddhist monastery. 'Go back home and become a Christian monk first,' they told him. 'Learn your own tradition.'"

Perhaps you're interested in comparing and contrasting prayer with different traditions, or maybe exploring Eastern traditions. You are wise, then, to understand the tradition of your own culture first.

This book explores prayer as it has been and as it continues to be practiced in the broadly Christian tradition: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant.

And this book will explore only prayer to God. Praying to saints is a long-standing tradition in some Christian circles, but we don't believe it belongs in the category of the "basics" of Christian prayer. We won't be getting into that here.

The Power of Strange Words

A book on Christian prayer is going to have to stick with biblical vocabulary. This doesn't mean that the book will sound pious. The fact is, for Christians, the Bible is *the* prayer book.

Not only are there a ton of prayers in the Bible (see the Book of Psalms alone), but a lot of the language used in prayers handed down through the ages comes straight out of the Bible.

Even though the Bible sounds strange to modern ears at times, there's something powerful about biblical language. This is the reason the Bible has hung around for thousands of years—it really does speak to human beings in all times and cultures.

We'll be quoting a lot of prayers for the Bible, as well as the teachings on prayer in the Bible (especially those taught by Jesus, the master of prayer). We believe that you cannot learn about Christian prayer without learning what the Bible teaches about prayer—and in the language it uses to teach prayer.

The other vocabulary item to bring up at this point is the pronoun to be used for God. The Bible, and especially Jesus, talks about God as "Father." As such, the constraints of language tend to force writers into referring to God as "he."

Let's make one thing clear, though: God is not male. Nor is God female, the great goddess. God is beyond male and female.

On the other hand, Christian theology teaches that God is not an *it*, an impersonal force. God is not just the "Creator," but a "loving heavenly Father." God is personal—more personal than we can imagine. Thus, we choose to use a pronoun like "he" to refer to God. This has been a part of the Christian tradition from the beginning; "she" (or alternating "he" and "she") causes confusion to most readers—and using "he" just makes writing a heck of a lot easier (especially after quoting a saying of Jesus who has just called God "Father"). But when we use "he" or "him," we mean to suggest only that God is a personal being.

A Long Tradition

Christian prayer is not something that has just developed, nor something that must be recreated in every age for each new generation. It's a long tradition, one that has been practiced for nearly 2,000 years. Along the way, many men and women who have grappled with prayer have had insights that have helped others understand prayer a bit more. You cannot understand Christian prayer without listening to these people, so you'll find that we quote a lot from this Christian tradition. Many of the names will be obscure at first, but hang in there: By the end of the book, some of the names will start to become familiar—and so appreciated that you'll be looking in the appendix to find out more about them.

Cure for Restless Hearts

Augustine, one of the greatest theologians in the Christian church, said this in a prayer to God: "You awaken us to delight in your praise; for you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Prayer is for everyone created by God—even novices when it comes to prayer and religion. We cannot know ourselves fully, we cannot settle (as much as it is possible to settle) the large issues of life, we cannot have the strength and courage to make a difference in the world until we find our rest in God. And the way we do that, more than any other way, is through prayer.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, we invite you to explore Christian prayer to see if it doesn't move you closer to your journey's goal.

Extras

Along the way, we've included boxes that define terminology, make things clearer, or take interesting little side trips. Here's how the boxes are labeled, and what you'll find in each:



From the Book

These quotes come from the Bible, the prayer book of Christianity, and address the nature of prayer.



Meanings & Gleanings

This box covers definitions and explanations of some of the finer points of prayer.



Prayer Hotline

Here we've provided answers to questions and helpful information to encourage prayer.



Prayer Pearls

These quotes about prayer come from saints, monks, mystics, and great pray-ers from the past.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

These are sample prayers, especially from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Acknowledgments

To keep your confusion to a minimum, Jim took responsibility for all the supplemental boxes, quotes, prayers, and appendices; Mark wrote the running text. Thus, all the references to "I" and "me" in the running text refer to Mark, and the personal examples all come from his life.

Thanks also to Andrew McCarthy and Cari Shaw Fischer who served as editors of the project, and to Suzanne Snyder, production editor, whose patience and skill have made this a better book still.

Finally, we would like to thank our families . . .

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PART 1— LET US PRAY

Prayer (in Jewish/Christian tradition, anyway) has been around for a long time—at least 4,000 years. Yet for all that experience, prayer is still something that's pretty hard to get a handle on. It is ultimately a mystery. God is a mystery, certainly—that we can communicate with God is even more a wonder. But through the centuries, many people have experienced that mystery and have found it—well, wonderful.

This has been an astonishing experience for generation after generation because of what prayer is and what it does. Before we can look at the mechanics of prayer, we need to understand exactly what we're talking about when we use the word "prayer."



Chapter 1— What Prayer Isn't (and Is)



In This Chapter

- What prayer is not
- What prayer is
- The purpose of prayer

One reason many of us are intimidated by prayer is that a lot of people such as ministers (like I was), writers (like I am), and theologians (like I wish I was sometimes) have taken something that's basically pretty simple and have managed to make it pretty complicated. Yes, prayer is a mystery, but let's not make it more complicated than it really is. To begin with, let's clear up some misconceptions about prayer.

Clearing up Some Confusion

I've run across some pretty interesting definitions of prayer over the years—okay, not so much "pretty interesting" as "pretty confusing."

Prayer As Work?

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "To lift up the hands in prayer is to give God glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand and a woman with a slop pail give him glory, too." Indeed, people in most any activity can give glory to God in their chosen activity. But some people have gone a step further and said, "Building a chair or bundling hay or fixing a flat tire—anything we do to God's glory is a prayer." Nope.

Fixing a flat tire is, well, auto mechanics. Building a chair is carpentry. Certainly, you can do these things well—so well that they make the world a better place and so well they give you honor and God glory. These activities can be *like* prayer (focused, devoted, selfless), but they are not *prayer*.

Hyperspiritualizing

How about this one: "Prayer is a supernatural activity." This is an example of a definition that makes prayer sound more spiritual than it really is. Certainly, in prayers we're getting in touch with a Being who lies beyond nature. But prayer itself is a common, ordinary, everyday sort of activity, like talking. Natural people in natural settings use natural words when they pray all the time.

Self-Help

Then there's this: "Prayer is a way of lifting ourselves." As if we had the power to lift ourselves into the presence of God. As if we need to lift ourselves in order to talk with God. Again, the problem lies in overspiritualizing things. If anything, God lowers himself to us in prayer—more on that later.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is the rope that pulls God and man together. But it doesn't pull God down to us: It pulls us up to him."

—Billy Graham

Cosmic Shrink

I hate this one in particular: "Prayer is God's psychotherapy for his children." This isn't so much what prayer *is* as much as what prayer *does*. In other words, according to this misguided understanding, prayer helps all those weaklings who need a crutch to get through life—you know, the type of people who need therapy. So these people go to God. Not only are his rates cheap, but it turns out that he's also an awfully good listener. Let's get something straight at the beginning of this book: Prayer is for the strong, the weak, the smart, the stupid, the wise, the foolish, people in their better moments, people in their worst moments. It's for *everybody*.

Wishin' and Hopin'

One preacher said, "A prayer in its simplest definition is merely a wish turned Godward." I almost like this one. It's human, at least. We know what a wish is, and we can figure out what it means to turn Godward. But put this definition in the wrong hands, and it perpetuates the childish stereotype that prayer is about asking and getting things from God.

Shhhh!

Given my previous reaction, you may think I love this definition: "A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until, in the end, he realized that prayer is listening." Nice sentiment, but it's not really true. Listening should be a part of prayer—in fact, much more a part than we usually make it. But prayer is more than shutting your mouth or your mind when in the presence of God.

Getting Formal

The formal definitions of prayer that you find in dictionaries and encyclopedias aren't much help, either. The *Encarta Encyclopedia*, for example, says this: "In its broadest sense, prayer is any ritual form designed to bring one into closer relation to whatever one believes to be the ultimate." Unfortunately, people have some pretty creative ideas about what is "the ultimate." For some it's fine art, for others it's *Captain America* comics, for others it's sex (okay, close). For Kevin Costner in the movie *Field of Dreams*, baseball was the ultimate. When he built a baseball field in the middle of his cornfield, it was *like* an act of worship. Steady meditation on the *Mona Lisa* is *like* prayer. The ecstasy of sex is akin to the ecstasy some have experienced in prayer. But none of these activities are *prayer*.



**When You Haven't
Got a Prayer**

How to Offer Yourself to God

"Take, O Lord, and receive my
entire liberty, my memory, my
understanding, and my whole will.
All that I am, all that I have, you
have given me and I will give it back
again to you to be disposed of
according to your good pleasure.
Give me only your love and your
grace; with you I am rich enough."

—St. Ignatius Loyola, sixteenth
century

Talking to God

Clement of Alexandria, a third-century Christian philosopher from Egypt, said it best and most simply: "Prayer is conversation with God." Pretty simple, huh? Let's make sure it's clear, though.

If prayer is conversation, it means first that we *talk* to God. Prayer is not just wishing and hoping. It is not meditating on ultimate things. It is not doing things for God. It is not lifting ourselves into a foggy spiritual state. Prayer is talking to God and expressing our thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, and fears to God. Most of the time, this means using *words*. Some mystical types say that mere human words cannot adequately convey the feelings and thoughts they wish to express to God. Certainly, words have severe limitations; any writer will admit that. And, of course, there are nonverbal ways to pray: guided imagery, music, painting, and so on. But let's not give up on words too quickly. Think about it: Words are one of the main ways God has communicated with us—in the Old and New Testaments (lots of words there!). Furthermore, the words of Jesus, as much as his death and



Prayer Pearls

At the profoundest depths in life,
men talk not *about* God but *with*
him.

—Elton Trueblood

resurrection, have inspired people through the ages. And when the Bible sums up who Jesus is, it says this: "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Biblical scholars say "the Word" here means much more than "words." But it means *at least* that much—that is, Jesus is God's way of communicating to us. The word is so important to God that he's willing to use it as a name. I may give my children presents; I may coach their soccer teams; I may give them kisses in the morning and hugs at night. But if I never speak with them—and especially if I never say to them, "I love you"—there is a large void in our relationship. In the same way, there are many ways to nurture my relationship with God, but the key way is by speaking with him.

Schizophrenia or Prayer?

On the other hand, if prayer is conversation with God, it means that God also speaks to us. "Sure he does," you say. Maybe it's a one-way conversation, you think, but not two-way. A Moses or an Isaiah—or people locked up in state hospitals—may hear God speak, but most of us don't care to keep that sort of company. But as comedian Lily Tomlin put it, "Why is it when we talk to God, we're said to be praying—but when God talks to us, we're schizophrenics?" The problem here lies in the stereotype: a deep, booming voice falling out of the sky, sternly setting out instructions of one sort or another. Another stock image is the dreamy, mystical encounter: no voices, just a bright light that surrounds and beams down on the person, who freezes in wonder, staring into the light, countenance shining with beatific delight, silently taking in the secret message. One of the things prayer teaches is that God speaks to us in more ways than we can count, in "voices" we can hardly imagine. It also teaches us how to hear God. And speak to us he does; we miss out on one of the great wonders of prayer if we neglect this part of prayer.

Forgettest Thou Queen Elizabeth I

If prayer is conversing with God, it helps us toss out a lot of unhelpful stereotypes right at the start. For one, the idea that God understands only people who talk like Shakespeare and litter their prayers with "thee" and "thou" and "shouldst" and "wouldst." There's a time and a place for such prayers, just as there is a time and a place to watch a Shakespeare play. But it's not something you should do at home (at least without a grammarian present!), nor is it a very effective way to converse with God.

This also means that prayer is not a formal speech. If asked to pray—before a meal, for instance—most people will balk. They become nervous, hesitant, awkward. "Uh, well, I don't know. You know, I'm, not really very good at praying. Why don't you ask

someone else?" That's because they think good English is demanded and that a formal outline is to be followed, after which they'll be judged for their performance. In other words, they think they're being asked to make a speech—something like, "O Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, giver of all blessings: We would give you hearty thanks for the bountiful meal set before us, and for the hands that have so lovingly prepared it. In the name of him who loved us and died for us. Amen." There are occasions when formal prayers are called for: at weddings and funerals, at graduation ceremonies, when installing someone into office, at worship. But in everyday life, prayer is not a speech *at* God as much as a means of speaking *with* God. Therefore, it doesn't have to elicit any more fear than talking to another person. When it comes to meal time graces, for example, it should be no more difficult to say "thank you" to God for the food than it is to say "thank you" to the host for cooking: "Lord, thank you for this food and for those who prepared it. Amen."

A Relationship

When it comes to praying to God, you see, it's not much different than speaking with your spouse, a friend, or anyone else you're trying to have a close relationship with. In her classic book *Prayer: Conversing with God*, Rosalind Rinker put it this way: "Prayer is the expression of the human heart in conversation with God. The more natural the prayer, the more real he becomes. It has all been simplified for me to this extent: Prayer is a dialogue between two persons who love each other." Prayer is not a religious speech to a divine audience, or the groveling petition of a servant to an arbitrary master, or vague, spiritual thoughts directed to no one in particular. It is one key means of drawing ourselves closer to God and opening ourselves up so that God might draw closer to us. Of course, in terms of Christian theology, God is always close—closer than we are to ourselves—and he knows us better than we know ourselves.



Prayer Pearls

"Sometimes when your child talks,
your friends cannot understand what
he says; but the mother understands
very well. So if our prayer comes
from the heart, God understands our
language."

—D. L. Moody

One of the Psalms puts it this way:

O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me.

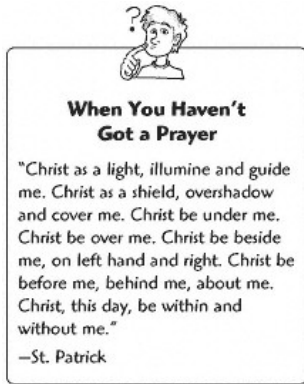
You know when I sit down or stand up.

You know my every thought when far away. . . .

You know what I'm going to say even before I say it, Lord. . . .

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to know. I can never escape your spirit!

I can never get away from your presence!
 If I go up to heaven, you are there;
 if I go down to the place of the dead, you are there.
 If I ride the wings of the morning,
 if I dwell in the farthest oceans,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 and your strength will support me.
 —Psalm 139



And how do we better understand this hand that silently guides us? How do we take in this strength that quietly supports us? You guessed it: prayer.

Problems Are No Problem

Some people, however, can't imagine that God has anything to say to them. Some wrestle with low self-esteem or are haunted by guilt, and they can't imagine that a holy and omnipotent God who rules the universe has time for them or has any interest in their "petty" little problems—let alone have a relationship with them. Others fight against the idea of prayer as conversation because they're afraid it may be true. If they acknowledge it and try to listen to God, some fear that they'll be told to sell their possessions and take up a missionary life in Africa. Others fear that by speaking with "the way, the truth, and the life," they will be forced to explore troubled regions of their inner self—areas they'd just as soon let be.

Some say they've tried prayer and that it didn't do any good. Or, they don't have the patience for it. Or, that they pray by doing good works. Some say it sounds too simple to be true. And on it goes. There are lots of reasons—many of them good ones—to distrust all this talk about conversation with God. Indeed, in many respects, it *is* preposterous to believe that God exists and that God wants to be in intimate relationships with people like you and me. But we are not the first age to have doubts about prayer—after all, it is a mystery, something that can never be fully explained or fully understood. It is something that believers have marveled at for centuries. One of the Psalms put it like this:

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
 the moon and the stars your have set in place—
 what are mortals, that you should think of us?
 mere humans, that you should care for us?
 —Psalm 8

Then again, any relationship is a mystery. After 40 years of marriage, a husband and wife still look at each other some days and wonder, "Who in the heck are you?" and "Why do you still love me?" Yet without fully understanding, the relationship goes on and is enjoyed immensely.



From the Good Book

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

—Numbers 6:24–26

In the course of this book, we'll look at these and other problems that prayer presents, and we'll examine the ways Christians have handled them. As you'll see, though, problems are no reason to stop praying. Nor is the fact that prayer is ultimately a mystery. The most mysterious and complex things of life can be expressed in the simplest ways. When I say to my wife, "I love you," there's a lot going on there—a lot of history, a lot of pain, a lot of ecstasy, a lot of wonder. But this remains a pretty darn good summing up. Prayer has history, pain, ecstasy, wonder, and a host of other dimensions—but, in the end, it is conversation with God.

The Least You Need to Know

- Prayer is a conversation with God.
- Prayer is less like making a speech and more like talking to a friend.
- Conversation with God through prayer is a means of getting closer to him.
- Just because you have doubts about prayer doesn't mean that you can't pray and get something out of it.

Chapter 2— What Prayer Promises



In This Chapter

- How prayer helps us experience God
- How prayer changes us
- How prayer changes others and circumstances
- Whether God is changed by prayer

It seems that a lot of religious types like to tell others that they *should* pray, as if prayer is a duty. I know that I, for one, can become lazy and forgetful, and sometimes I need a kick in the pants to get me back on my knees.

But prayer is less a duty than a gift. And what we usually need is not a scolding, but a reminder of the promise of prayer and the many gifts that God can lavish upon us through prayer.

The Best Gift of All

First things first. With prayer come a lot of gifts: faith, hope, courage, wisdom, and so on (more on that in a bit). But the key gift of prayer is God himself. If prayer is a conversation, it's about a relationship with God—and a relationship with God is less about things he can give us and more about getting to know God.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Lord, make thy will our will in all things."

—Dean Vaughan

This is at the bull's eye of the Christian faith. Some people think Christianity is a set of morals or a certain way to worship or a philosophy of life. That's partly true, but primarily it's about experiencing God.

Let's do a quick *Idiot's Guide to the Bible*: Because of sin, people are alienated from God and cannot experience him truly or fully. Jesus, the Son of God, died and rose to new life to forgive people and make it possible for them to experience God again, in this life and forever.

That's basically it. And though we can experience God in a variety of ways, such as sitting in the woods or contemplating the stars, prayer—conversing with God—is one of the most direct ways God has given us.

People experience God in prayer in a number of ways. Let's look at four and illustrate them with prayers that are found in Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible.

Gratitude

One of my college roommates was a religious skeptic—and a stubborn one, at that. We spent more than a few nights, sometimes going deep into the morning hours, debating theology and philosophy.

One 3 a.m. as we concluded another long philosophical debate about the existence of God, he said, "The only time I'm tempted to believe in God is when I'm in love."

That's because, I believe, he was looking for someone to thank.

Though we can be manifestly selfish a great deal of the time, there are moments when we're overwhelmed with the goodness of life. Maybe you have just taken in the sweeping vistas of the Grand Canyon, or studied a rose up close for 10 minutes. Maybe you've enjoyed a delightful meal with friends, or have just made love with your spouse. Perhaps you've just escaped some crisis, or maybe a child or a spouse has come through an operation. Whatever the cause, you're flooded with joy and a sense of deep appreciation, and you have this urge to say, "Thank you."



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is when heaven and earth kiss each other."

—A Jewish mystic

It's not enough just to "be thankful." This is the sort of drivel textbooks feed children these days when they discuss Thanksgiving. One of my kid's history books said the Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving because they "were thankful." Uh, not quite. They wanted to say "Thank you," and, being devout Christians, they wanted to say it to someone in particular—and it wasn't the Indians (though they were invited to say thanks as well). When the human heart is thankful, it wants to say "Thank you."

The interesting thing when we express our gratitude to God is this: We don't run out of gratitude—instead, we're filled with even more gratitude and joy. That's why the Psalms are littered with prayers of thanksgiving. One example, from Psalm 138, will do for now:

I will give thanks, O Lord, with all my heart;
I will sing your praises before the gods.
I bow before your holy Temple as I worship,
I will give thanks to your name
for your unfailing love and faithfulness.

Even some of the Psalms that begin with desperate pleas ("Lord, help!") end with a note of thanksgiving ("Nevertheless, Lord, I will praise you!"). More on the Psalms later.

Transcendence

This large word expresses a large idea: To experience transcendence is to experience something that goes beyond (transcends) what we can see, feel, hear, smell, or touch.

Several beer commercials on TV have recently focused on people at the beach or at a barbecue, playing, laughing, generally having a good time, with a beer in hand. Then someone says, "It doesn't get any better than this." Sometimes life—just life—is pretty darn nice (even without beer).

But then there are other times when life boxes us in. It seems small, petty, and pointless. And that's when we say, "Is that all there is?"

Well, no, it isn't. There is something, *someone*, who transcends this world, one whose Spirit is *in* the world but not *of* it, one who can enlarge the soul, expand the mind, and help us experience something beyond this world—the Uncreated, the Infinite, the Immortal. One of the great mysteries of prayer is that we can experience this someone who cannot be adequately described, thought of, or imagined.

It would be a pretty dumb thing to say that we can experience the inaccessible, if it weren't for the fact that people have done so for thousands of years. The Psalmist refers to this experience when he writes:

Come, let us sing to the Lord!
Let us give a joyous shout to the rock of our salvation. . . .
For the Lord is a great God,
the great king above all gods.
He owns the depths of the earth,

and even the mightiest mountains are his.
 The sea belongs to him, for he made it.
 His hands formed the dry land, too.
 Come, let us worship and bow down.
 Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker.



Prayer Pearls

"Every time I come to God in prayer, my approach must be with praise and thanksgiving. It is a rude imposition to come to God asking for anything without saying thanks for past blessings."

—Lehman Strauss

He's struggling to sing about the great God he has experienced, greater than his mind can fathom. One of my favorite hymns, which is titled by its first line, expresses it this way:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
 In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
 Most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of days,
 Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Forgiveness

Modern psychology has taught us that we sometimes feel guilty about things we have no business feeling guilty about. Some have run with that insight and have concluded that a healthy human being shouldn't experience guilt at all. Wrong! Emotionally healthy people *should* feel guilt when they've done something wrong.

This is especially true when we turn to God in prayer. God is good, holy, and infinitely perfect in love. We, however, are not good, nor are we holy or very perfect in love. Healthy people feel bad about that. As one prayer, used in many liturgies, puts it, "We confess that we have sinned against you, in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone." That about sums it up—and that's guilt.

Some people, though, feel so guilty, they can't find the courage to face God. So, they stop praying. I was a youth pastor for a number of years, and in one church, one young man had a habit of drinking on Saturday night. Then he'd skip church the next day, he said, because he felt guilty coming to church.

I understand the feeling, but he didn't understand that one of the best places to go when you're guilty is to prayer. In prayer, we can experience the forgiveness of God as we can nowhere else. More on this in later chapters, but for now, let me quote sections of perhaps the most joyful experience of forgiveness ever recorded: Psalm 103.

Praise the Lord, I tell myself,
 and never forget the good things he does for me.
 He forgives all my sins

and heals all my diseases. . . .
 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
 he is slow to get angry and full of unfailing love. . . .
 He has not punished us for all our sins,
 nor does he deal with us as we deserve. . . .
 He has removed our rebellious acts
 as far away from us as the east is from the west.

Love

This brings us to the essence of experiencing God: experiencing his love. This arises from a gradually increasing awareness that God loves not just the world, not just humankind, not just people—God also loves *me*, an individual with a personality and memories like no other, a person with unique faults, special talents, particular sins, and even moments of unusual kindness.

The awareness of God's love grows as we meditate on the teachings of Jesus (a form of prayer we'll talk about later). In passages such as Matthew 18:12–14. Though Jesus is speaking here specifically about children, biblical scholars recognize that the point applies to every human person:

"If a shepherd has 100 sheep and one wanders away and is lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the 99 others and go out into the hills to search for the lost one? And if he finds it, he will surely rejoice over it more than over the 99 that didn't wander away! In the same way, is it not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish?"

Or, take another saying: "Not even a sparrow, worth only half a penny, can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to him than a whole flock of sparrows" (Matthew 10:29–30).

Don't think you can squeeze out of this: God cares about you even if he can't number the hairs on your head because you don't have any. (Believe me, I know this more and more everyday.)

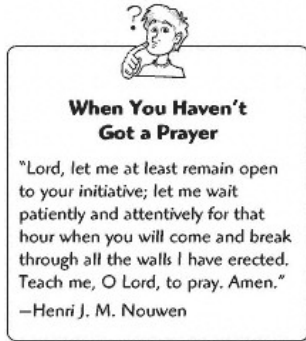
Anyway, you get the idea. No wonder the Psalms are full of praise to God for his goodness and love to us:

Shout with joy to the Lord, O earth,
 Worship the Lord with gladness.
 Come before him, singing with joy . . . !

For the Lord is good.
His unfailing love continues forever,
and his faithfulness continues to each generation.
—Psalm 100

It Changes Us

We are changed by the people we come to know—usually for the better. I'm a different—and mostly better—person after having lived with my wife for these 25 years. I don't lose my temper as often; I'm a much better listener; I'm more sensitive to other's needs; I even eat my vegetables now.



I don't know that experiencing God will help you like vegetables, but knowing God does have a way of changing a person at the very core—and in a number of ways.

You Understand Yourself Better

Socrates knew what he was talking about when he said, "Know yourself." All improvement in the character of our lives begins with self-knowledge. What Socrates didn't see was that you can know yourself better by knowing God.

This only makes sense. If you know the creator of something, you'll know a lot more about the things he or she has created. If you understand, for instance, that a fiction writer lost her father when she was a child, you'll understand better why in so many of her novels a father figure plays an important role.

Likewise, if you understand the being who created you, you'll better understand yourself. As the author of Genesis put it, "God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself" (Genesis 1:27).

Theologians debate (as usual) exactly what this means, though they all agree that it has nothing to do with looks. But there is something central to our nature that is very much like God's nature. The better we understand the original, then the better we'll understand the image.

Wisdom

According to the Bible, a wise person is someone with "street smarts." It's not someone who spouts off important-sounding phrases about the meaning of life, but someone who knows what to do and what to say in all sorts of situations.

What exactly do you say to your boss when he asks you to do something you think is immoral? How do you figure out which college to go to? How do you handle your neighbor who leaves his garbage cans on your lawn?

This is the stuff of life, and we need wisdom to handle such situations. Prayer can help us grow in wisdom.

This doesn't mean that God will tell us exactly how to handle each situation that puzzles us. It *does* mean that, in prayer, we'll gain insights into ourselves and the situation we face. And those insights will help us gain "life smarts."

Courage and Hope

We'll cover these topics together because they go together in real life: We're more likely to have courage if we have hope. And life has a way of assaulting us so that we need regular doses of both.

Sometimes it's the big things that knock the wind out of us: A friend is battling colon cancer; a neighbor woman finds herself alone after 19 years of marriage because her husband left her; you discover your teenager is taking drugs; you've been fired.

Then again, sometimes it's lesser things that overwhelm us: a coworker who is a constant irritant, a bad back that throbs, a dead-end job.

Optimistic self-talk, will power, and gritting one's teeth will only get you so far. (Well, actually, they usually don't get me very far at all.) We quickly run out of resources to deal with these things and, almost instinctually, turn to God for courage to see us through and to work things for the good.

Building Character

To handle life's challenges and enjoy life's blessings, we need to be better people. You're never going to be able to help others unless you learn love and self-control. You're not going to be able to handle stress unless you get some peace into your heart. You're not going to be able to fully enjoy marriage or friendship unless you learn faithfulness. And on it goes.

Many places in the Bible summarize the most essential traits human beings need to possess and the way they can grow in them. One of my favorites is found in a letter the apostle (an *apostle* is "one who is sent out," such as the apostles who were sent by Jesus to spread his message) Paul wrote to the Galatians. He not only lists the traits, but he says that these come from an intimate acquaintance with God's spirit: "When the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce his kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23).

You can't get any better than this.



From the Good Book

I prayed to the Lord and said, "O sovereign Lord, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Overlook the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin."

—Moses, Deuteronomy 9:26, 27

It Changes Other Things

It has been said, "Prayer changes things? No! Prayer changes people, and people change things."

Don't believe it—at least, not all of it.

Yeah, most of the time it's me who needs changing. If a coworker is driving me crazy because he pops into my office and wastes my time with his drivel about his pet iguana, I've got to change a few things. I may need to learn more patience. I may need to become more assertive and tell him to get back to work. I may need to learn to like iguanas.

When I pray, "Lord, help good old Pete not to come into my office so much," God may make it plain to me that *I'm* the one who needs to do something. In fact, most of the time, that's exactly what God will do.

But that's not the case all the time. Sometimes God really will change Pete. He may help Pete understand that he's being a bore, maybe by planting a thought in his head or by having someone else yell at him.

Other people say that prayer doesn't change circumstances, but only people.

Don't believe that, either. Sure, it doesn't happen everyday, but once in a while God changes circumstances regardless of people. This is called a miracle.

When I pastored a small church, we would invite people during worship to announce prayer requests before we prayed. Most weeks, people requested prayers for someone's flu or operation. Once in awhile, we'd hear really bad news, like the week that one woman mentioned that her brother had inoperable cancer.

As I did every week, I prayed that God would heal all those who were sick, recognizing in my own mind that most of the time God heals people through doctors and medicine. I didn't have a whole lot of faith or hope about this woman's brother.

About a month later, before the Sunday service was about to begin, this woman told me before the service that her brother had gone in for a check-up and that the cancer had disappeared.



Prayer Pearls

"Our prayers go all around the world, without anything definite being asked for. We do not expect anything. Many people would be greatly surprised if God did answer their prayers."

—D. L. Moody

I said, "How wonderful!" but inside I was shocked—and disappointed that I, a minister of the gospel, was shocked when God acted like God and that the prayer worked.

The fact is, many people have such stories to tell. God does, in fact, heal people miraculously—it's not an everyday thing, as some will lead you to believe. But neither should you throw in your lot with the skeptics. A reasonable person has to look at all the stories of healing and say, well, it may not happen all the time, but once in a while God does indeed change circumstances.

Does Prayer Change God's Mind?

Here's one more saying to think about: "Prayer does not change God, but changes him who prays." That's a philosopher speaking, one whom I happen to like: Søren Kierkegaard. I think he's mostly right—mostly, that is.



Prayer Pearls

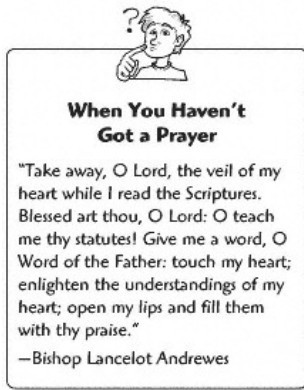
"If you pray for bread and bring no basket to carry it, you prove the doubting spirit, which may be the only hindrance to the gift you ask."

—D. L. Moody

Here's the deal according to Kierkegaard and others: God knows everything that's going to happen ahead of time. God has a perfect will. No puny human being is going to get the infinitely wise and perfect God to change his mind and do something stupid. Nor is God going to change the future he has mapped out because some poor Harry in Bismarck, South Dakota, needs some help.

But here's the deal according to Jesus (a "philosopher" with a tad bigger following than old Søren): "You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:9–11).

Jesus assumes that prayer doesn't just change only us—it also makes a difference in what God does.



If you know any classic Christian theology, you know that what I've just said borders on dumb. God is supposed to be "immutable"—that is, unchanging. That's because, as I said, he's got a perfect will that doesn't need changing. We change because we're not perfect; when a better idea comes our way, we say, "Good idea. Never thought of that." Then we abandon the old way. God, on the other hand, never says, "Good idea. I never thought of that." He already has thought of it, believe me.

But then we have this Jesus fellow—who seems to know God better than anyone—saying that if we ask God for things, it makes a difference in what he does.

Major mystery time! Here's one way to think about this ultimately unsolvable problem:

God will not change his mind about some things, no matter how hard we pray. If we ask God, "Help me to rob this bank," or "I'd like you to give me the strength to kill my boss," he's not going to do it. He's never going to change his mind about things like that.

There are other things God is going to do whether we pray or not. No need to pray, "Lord, I pray that the sun will rise tomorrow morning," or "Lord, I really hope gravity continues working all day."

But apparently there are things that God doesn't have a definite plan about, and these things he leaves open-ended. He'll do them if we pray for them; he won't do them if we don't pray. It's not so much a matter of changing his eternal, wise plan—it's actually *part* of his eternal, wise plan that we get to decide some stuff.

Here's how Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch put it: "God's ultimate will is unchanging, but the way in which he chooses to realize this will is dependent on the prayers of his children. He wants us as covenant partners, not as automons or slaves."

That's how it works with my kids and me. Some things I'll never permit, no matter what ("Dad, can we each have TVs in our rooms?"). Some things I'll do whether they ask for it or not—I'm going to pay the mortgage every month. But with some things, I'm open. For instance, I want my kids to try to play an instrument for a few years, but I really don't care which ones they play. I might direct them toward piano because I like it best—and if they don't say anything, they'll end up playing piano. But if one of them says, "Dad, I'd like to play the flute," that's fine. Otherwise, they're going to get piano lessons.

So, no, prayer doesn't change God or his perfect will. But part of his perfect will is that we learn how to use our own wills wisely. That's one of the things prayer is for. In some cases, it helps us determine God's perfect will and align our wills with his. The well-known archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, put it this way: "God is perfect love and perfect wisdom. We do not pray in order to change his will, but to bring our wills into harmony with his."



Prayer Pearls

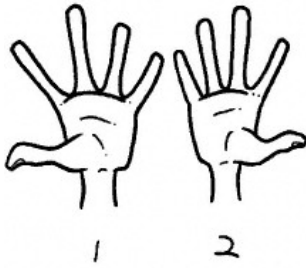
"Day by day, dear Lord,
Of thee three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
Follow thee more nearly,
Day by day."
—Richard of Chichester

In other cases, prayer gives us the wisdom and courage to shape our lives within God's larger will. One of the lifelong learning curves of prayer is to learn to distinguish when we should just accept God's will and when we should keep pleading for him to do what we think seems to be best. As one famous prayer, called the Serenity Prayer (said to be authored by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr) puts it, "Lord, grant me the serenity to change the things I can, to accept the things I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference."

The Least You Need to Know

- Prayer helps us to experience God.
- Prayer changes us.
- Prayer sometimes changes circumstances.
- Prayer helps us understand God's will for our lives.

Chapter 3— What Prayer Requires



In This Chapter

- How much faith is necessary to pray
- The importance of honesty in prayer
- Why humility is key
- Why patience is necessary

Some people make it sound as if you must have superhuman faith and the perseverance of a medieval saint to pray. Here's how E. M. Bounds, a writer famous for his books on prayer, put it:

Prayer is a rare gift, not a popular, ready gift. Prayer is not the fruit of natural talents; it is the product of faith, of holiness, of deeply spiritual character. . . . Perfection in simplicity, in humility, in faith—these form its chief ingredients. Novices in these graces are not adept in prayer. It cannot be seized upon by untrained hands. . . . Master workmen are required, for mere journeymen cannot execute the work of prayer.

Uh, not quite. Prayer *is* designed for journeymen, for amateurs, for the inept, for complete idiots. Sure, in the right hands (or knees), prayer can reach dizzying heights of spirituality, and seasoned veterans may get a lot more out of prayer than rookies. But don't be fooled by anyone who says that prayer is only for the talented or that the school of prayer has steep prerequisites. Prayer has prerequisites, all right, but they are

the type that even complete novices can fulfill. Let's look at four of these: faith, honesty, humility, and patience.

1— Faith

You certainly need faith to pray: You must believe in God, you must believe that God hears prayers, and you must believe that somehow prayer makes a difference. But you don't need a whole bunch of faith. In fact, some teachers of prayer have challenged the skeptical with this: "Pray every day for 30 days straight, *acting as if* God exists." That's pretty minimal faith, but it is surprising to hear of the number of skeptics who, for the first time in their lives, become aware of God's presence as a result of this little one-month experiment. Jesus spoke often about having faith the size of a mustard seed—which, by the way, is pretty darn small: A few thousand would fit in the palm of your hand. Nonetheless, Jesus said even this much faith could work wonders. He once told his disciples, "I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move" (Matthew 17:20).



From the Good Book

"If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.

—Judges 6:36–38

Now get this: If mustard-seed faith is mature and powerful enough faith to move mountains, then the amount of faith required to begin the life of prayer is microscopic—maybe the size of an amoeba. Maybe smaller.

No matter how small, this faith has to be focused in the right direction. We're not talking about faith in yourself: You don't have to be self-confident, assured, or floating on a cloud of high self-esteem.

We're also not talking about faith in prayer. Prayer is merely the means to a greater end, coming to know God.

And we're not talking about faith in faith. That's one of the craziest things people say: "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe." I don't think so. I don't

really have a lot of confidence in someone who really believes the earth is flat. And I don't think it's possible just to have faith. There is always an object to faith—always. You either have faith in your own abilities to solve the problem, or you have faith that someone else will solve the problem, or you have faith in fate, that some impersonal force will work things out.

So, the faith that is necessary for prayer is faith *in God*, faith that he exists, and faith that he hears and responds to prayer.

When it comes to faith, Jesus says some remarkable (although some would say ridiculous) things, like this: "Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it" (Mark 11:24).

This and other sayings like it have led to a lot of misunderstandings. Some people think that faith must be some sort of self-talk or self-hypnotism that helps us feel more confident when we approach God—like football players gathering on the sidelines before a game, arms wrapped around each other, chanting "Go, go, go, go. . ." or "Let's do it!" or whatever. They bounce up and down, work themselves into a mild frenzy of enthusiasm, and then head for the field full of faith in their ability to annihilate the opponent.

That is not what Jesus was talking about.

Some people have turned this statement into a magic formula for consumerism. They take it literally, and they encourage people to pray for a \$500,000 home, or a new Lexus, or a vacation in Hawaii. Given that Jesus was pretty down on materialism, this is probably not his take on it.

Still others think this saying means that if we don't receive answers to our prayers, it's our own fault: We didn't have enough faith.

Uh, let's think about that one. Jesus himself, the man of perfect faith, prayed that he would be spared from having to die on the cross. God didn't answer his prayer, but I don't think it has much to do with Jesus' faith or lack thereof. (More on unanswered prayers in Chapter 15, "Dealing with Doubts: No Answers.")

So what type of faith is Jesus talking about here? In this instance, it is special faith indeed, a special gift from God. Let me give an illustration. When I was in youth ministry at a church in Fresno, California, we decided that we wanted to raise some money to help alleviate hunger. We were debating about how much we should set as a goal, and we were throwing around the numbers we usually shot for—\$200, \$300, in that range. Then we decided to pray about it and see whether we could sense what God might have us do. We spent some time in prayer—and a lot of it listening in prayer. When we ended the prayer, I asked what numbers came into people's mind. For more than one of us, it was \$2,000.

Well, this was an unimaginable amount to us, but we felt confident that this was the figure planted in our minds by the Holy Spirit. We began making plans on how we were going to raise that type of money. Well, one thing led to another, and we

organized a marathon week-long softball game; we got pledges from the church and community, donations from local businesses, and players who played in 12-hour shifts, morning and night. At the end of the week, we stood proudly on the field as we had our picture taken after our triumph. Then we counted the pledges. We'd made our goal plus some.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Be thou my vision, O Lord
of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save
that thou art,
Thou my best thought, by day or
by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence
my light."
—from *Be Thou My Vision*, Irish hymn

Certainly this sort of thing can be "explained" on a number of levels, but all those who participated had a deep sense that we had been given a special gift of faith—what was for us a *large* amount of faith—to pray for and work for a large goal. It was a special moment for all of us, certainly for me.

It's not often in my life that I get a sense that if I pray for something, it will come to pass, even if it seems absurd at the time. Sometimes it turns out to be wishful thinking, not something given by God. Other times, it has proven to be a divine gift. There is no formula for knowing when something comes from God. But part of faith is trying to listen, acting on what you sense is true, and trusting God for the results. It's not so much a puzzle to be solved, but an adventure to be lived out.

But let's be clear that, most of the time, adventure requires the simple faith: God exists and he hears prayer.

2—

Honesty

You can't fool God, though a lot of us try. The good news is that we don't even have to try.

Some people imagine that they must bring their very best selves to God. Let's say that Joe is resentful of his brother, Tom, who has just made a killing in the stock market the same day Joe has lost a lot of money. Joe, trying to be a good Christian, prays, "Lord, I'm thankful that my brother made a lot of money in the stock market. Please bless him and help him use his money wisely."

This is a noble prayer, but it's a lie. What Joe is really feeling is that his brother is a jerk, that he always gets lucky, and that it's not fair that Tom, who already had a lot of money, should hit it big in the stock market when he, Joe, could really use the extra income.

But let's say Joe is reasonably honest. He might pray, "Lord, I admit I'm jealous of Tom. Help me to rid myself of this jealousy, and bless Tom and his family."

That's better, but still not exactly what Joe is feeling. Probably the most honest prayer would be, "Lord, I hate Tom right now. And to be frank, I'm not too happy with you."

Why should he get another break? And why didn't you give me a break? I'm the one who needs it. This is pretty unfair."

Now we're praying, because prayer is an honest expression of our hopes, dreams, fears, and wants to God. It isn't as if God doesn't know what we're really feeling, as if we can hide our true feelings from him. So why not just lay everything on the table?

This type of honesty is found throughout the history of prayer, and the Bible is full of expressions of it. One of my favorite is in the obscure little Old Testament book of Habakkuk, which begins like this:

"How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen! 'Violence!' I cry, but you do not come to save. Must I forever see this sin and misery all around me?" (Habakkuk 1:2–3)

Habakkuk is not a happy camper: His nation is increasingly corrupt and violent, and he has been praying about it for years. But things are only getting worse. It's only natural that he'd get ticked off. And it's only honest that he tell God what he's feeling instead of praying some pious prayer.



Prayer Pearls

"Your desires are probably not in complete harmony with God's will. Pray instead that God will lead you to want the right things. Ask for what is good and for what is best for your soul. There is no way you could want these things for yourself more than God desires you to have them."
—Evagrius Ponticus

Jeremiah is another whiner to God. At one point he says to God, "Lord, you know I am suffering for your sake. Punish my persecutors! Don't let them kill me! Be merciful to me and give them what they deserve!" (Jeremiah 15:15). Not very nice, and at some point Jeremiah had to move to higher moral ground. But the refreshing thing about him and all the biblical prayers (especially in Psalms) is their utter honesty before God. Age after age has discovered that when it comes to prayer, honesty is the best policy.

3—

Humility

Humility has gotten bad press in our day. To many, it means to grovel before others or never to say anything good about yourself. To some, it's the same as low self-esteem.

Not quite. To be humble is not to have a high or low view of yourself, but to have an *accurate* view. In terms of prayer, it means to have an accurate view of yourself in relation to God. That is, you must essentially say: God is great, good, holy, just, wise, eternal, all powerful—and I am not.

This may strike some as obvious, but it isn't so obvious in day-to-day life. I'm upset with my wife, let's say, for forgetting to be home at 6:00 to watch the kids while I go to an appointment. It's closing in on 6:30, and she's still not home. I'm furious by now, and I have a mouthful of venom to spew at her when she walks in the door—she's

always inconsiderate; this is going to ruin my meeting; how could she be so self-centered, and so on and so forth.

The entire time, though, I haven't prayed. I've acted as if I'm good, holy, just, and wise—not only toward my wife, but also toward God because I haven't thought him worth consulting in this matter. *I* know what's going on, and *I* know what needs to be said when she walks through the door.

Of course, when it turns out that, uh, I never told my wife that I needed her home at 6:00, I feel pretty humbled. Feeling stupid is not the main issue, though: It's living my life as if I didn't need the patience and wisdom that come from God.

So, humility in prayer means simply recognizing from where our strength comes and then seeking God for it. You can see why this is a prerequisite of prayer: If you're not humble enough to admit that you have any needs—not even a need for God—then you're probably not going to pray.

Humility has another dimension as well. To enter into a life of prayer means to be willing to enter into an experiment of sorts, but the experiment is unlike any other. By their nature, scientific experiments put us in control. We mix the chemicals, we perform tests, and then we analyze the results. To enter into prayer, however, is to put ourselves into another's control. It is to allow ourselves to be shaped, tested, and analyzed by another.

In this regard, the most important prayer we can pray is the one Jesus prayed the last night of his life. He was sure he was heading toward his execution. He had prayed until he sweat blood to avoid death. But in the end, he simply said, "Yet I want your will, not mine" (Mark 14:36).

As theologian Donald Bloesch put it, "There is a time to argue and complain to God, but there is also a time to submit."

The one thing we can be pretty sure of is that God is not going to ask us literally to give up our lives when we begin the life of prayer. But he is asking us to take the first step in a lifetime of giving control of our lives over to him.

For me, it's like going on a roller coaster. Whenever I sit in one, I realize I'm putting my life in the hands of a lot of other people: the designer of the roller coaster, the maintenance crew, the operators. For me, that's a scary proposition.

But it's also a heck of a lot of fun, with a number of jerks and drops along the way. Prayer is not much different a lot of the time. It doesn't require a huge amount of humility to begin—just enough to buy a ticket and stand in line at first. But that's enough to get you started on this adventure.

In his classic book *Prayer*, Ole Hallesby summed it up this way: "Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray. Your helplessness is your best prayer."

4—

Patience

Scott Peck begins his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled* with this: "Life is hard." I could have begun this book with a similar sentence: "Prayer is hard." Don't let anyone tell you different.

Okay, I admit that I just got done telling you it is different: I've said it was "fun" and an "adventure" and a bunch of other stuff to get you to consider taking prayer more seriously. I'm not saying those things are not true. I'm just about to explain to you the fine print.

Prayer is hard work a lot of times. Sometimes it's so boring that you'll fall asleep. Sometimes it feels like God isn't there. Sometimes no prayer you pray will be answered. Sometimes you will feel that God has abandoned you. You will doubt prayer and God and everything else. You'll be sure you've been hoodwinked into prayer. You'll scorn people who pray, calling them fools. You'll never want to say another prayer the rest of your life.

**Prayer Pearls**

"Do not let it be imagined that one must remain silent about one's feelings of rebellion in order to enter into dialogue with God. Quite the opposite is the truth: It is precisely when one expresses them that a dialogue of truth begins."

—Paul Tournier

And then you'll find that you really can't live without prayer. And however angry, bored, or doubting, you'll turn to God and say, "Okay, let's give this another try."

In other words, if you're going to enter into a life of prayer, you'll have to have patience. If Rome wasn't built in a day, a meaningful prayer life isn't built in a week or a month—or a lifetime. Let's just say that like any other serious endeavor, you will always feel you could know more, be doing more, or be experiencing more. It's like marriage. I've been married for 25 years now, and I love my wife more than ever. I believe I'm a better husband than ever and that our relationship is better than ever.

Are my wife and I satisfied with our relationship, though? No. Do we want it to be better? Yes. Do we feel like taking the trouble to make it better? Not all the time. Is it an adventure, fun, hard work, dreary, joyful, frustrating, or satisfying? Yes.

Such is a life of prayer with God, as long as patience is part of the picture.

With a Little Help from the Friend

A difference between prayer and all other pursuits is this: The very thing we need to embark on a life of prayer and then continue in it comes through the activity itself. When you take up golf, let's say, you know you're going to need a lot of patience to play it well. But golf itself does not grant you patience—it only *tries* your patience. Patience must come from somewhere else.

But if you need more patience in prayer, you can simply use that very means to gain the patience you need. Faith, honesty, humility, and patience are not only prerequisites of prayer, but they also are qualities that can be sought and received in prayer. And Jesus promises gifts such as these: "You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it" (Mark 11:24).



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"God, of your goodness give me yourself, for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all."
—Julian of Norwich

A story from the Gospels (Mark 9:14–29) shows this dynamic in action. Jesus was speaking with a man whose son had epilepsy. The man had brought his son to Jesus, only to have the boy fall to the ground "in violent convulsions, writhing and foaming at the mouth." Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening?"

The man replied, "Since he was very small. The evil spirit [thought to be the cause of epilepsy in that day] often makes him fall into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us. Do something if you can."

That was a weak prayer, if you ask me. Jesus seems to agree: "What do you mean, 'If I can'?" he replied. "Anything is possible if a person believes."



Prayer Pearls

"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."
—Martin Luther

The father then blurted out, "I do believe. Help my unbelief!" And Jesus then healed the boy.

Here was a man who had the minimum prerequisite of faith: He believed there was at least a small chance that Jesus could do something to help his boy. He had faith, but he needed more.

That is also the case with the other prerequisites of prayer, and we need a prayer to help us through a lifetime of prayer:

Lord, I come in faith; help my unbelief.

Lord, I come in truth; forgive my dishonesty.

Lord, I come in humility; rid me of pride.

Lord, I come with patience, but not enough. Amen.

The Least You Need To Know

- The four prerequisites of prayer are faith, honesty, humility, and patience.
- We need only minuscule portions of each to begin praying.
- We will need more of these qualities as we continue in prayer, and we will be given more as we ask for more.

PART 2— THE HEART OF PRAYER

Before we can talk more specifically about how to pray in the Christian tradition, we have to look more specifically at what prayer means in that tradition. More specifically: Who exactly is this God we're praying to? And how exactly am I supposed to approach this God?

Answering these questions will get us into the very heart of prayer. They'll help us better understand what we're doing and help us to pray more effectively. And one prayer, the "Lord's Prayer," more than any other, answers these questions. So we'll begin there.



Chapter 4— Getting Insider Information



In This Chapter

- The greatest written resource on prayer
- The greatest teacher of prayer
- The most important prayer of all

I've already said a number of things about prayer, and a careful reader (namely you) has probably asked, "Says who?" You've probably looked at the back of this book and read the introduction and noticed that I've got some credentials suggesting I may know something. But why trust me?

Well, you shouldn't. Frankly, there are a lot of crackpots out there spewing all manner of half-truths about prayer—and, as far as you know, I could be one of them. So, if you shouldn't trust me, who should you trust? Where do you go to get good, reliable, insider information on prayer?



From the Good Book

Then Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. "There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no rock like our God. Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed."

—Hannah

The Prayer Book for Christians

You can begin with the Bible. It's not an accident that it has hung around for more than 1,500 years and is still the best-selling book in America—and this in a society that is supposedly not all that interested in religion.

So what's so great about this book?

For one thing, it's got a lot going on in it, including some pretty darn good history: Moses dukes it out with Egyptian pharaohs. King David steals another man's wife and then murders the husband. Babylonian armies lay siege to Jerusalem and exile the population. Jesus, the Son of God, confronts the authorities—and loses. Paul instigates riots in Ephesus.

The Bible is also a book of sublime religious poetry. Lots of passages could be quoted here, but the most famous, Psalm 23, will do for now:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He makes me to lie down in green pastures.
 He leads me beside the still waters.
 He restores my soul;
 He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil.
 For you are with me,

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
 You anoint my head with oil;
 My cup runs over.
 Surely goodness and mercy will follow me
 All the days of my life;
 And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
 Forever.
 (New King James Version)

The Bible also contains some stories that speak to issues every culture in every age is concerned about: the creation of the world (Genesis); the meaning of unjust suffering (Job); and the goal of history (Revelation), to name a few.

On top of that, the Bible is a practical book that gives the world some of its most profound ethics. That includes not only the Ten Commandments, but also Jesus' highest commands: "Love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39).

The Bible, however, has one more dimension: For Christians, it is *the* authority in matters of faith and practice. That's why we call it the word of God. We believe that through this collection of books, God teaches us about himself and how we should live.

He also teaches us how we should pray. The Bible is not just a book of theology and ethics, but it's also a prayer book. It teaches *about* prayer and also teaches *how* to pray. This only makes sense, because one big theme in the Bible is how people can know God. As we've noticed, prayer is about getting to know God.



Prayer Pearls

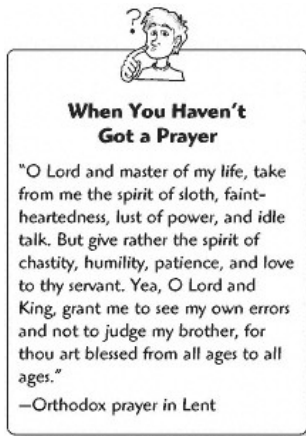
"Prayer is the key of the morning
 and the bolt of the evening."
 —Matthew Henry

The Bible doesn't have a part dedicated to discussing just prayer. Okay, maybe the Psalms—a collection of prayers/songs—could be considered that (more on that in Chapter 17, "Praying the Psalms"). But other than that, it's a snippet here, a paragraph there on prayer.

So when you open this big book, how do you decide where to start?

The Center of the Bible

Well, go to the center of the Bible. By that I don't mean the physical center, which is somewhere in Psalms. Look at the central figure of the Bible: Jesus Christ.



Jesus is central because he is the one to whom the Old Testament points. Lots of Old Testament passages speak about the great longing for justice and peace and look to the day when a messiah, or savior, would arise out of the Jewish people. Here's one:

"Out of the stump of David's family [that is, King David, the greatest Jewish king] will grow a shoot . . . and the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. . . . He will defend the poor and exploited. He will rule against the wicked and destroy them with the breath of his mouth. He will be clothed with fairness and truth." (Isaiah 11:1–4)

For Christians, the messiah foretold by this and other Old Testament passages is Jesus Christ.

Jesus is central also because the New Testament says that he will bring history to a magnificent conclusion. At the end of time, Jesus will say, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give the springs of the water of life without charge! All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children" (Revelation 21:6–7).

Furthermore, the New Testament teaches that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—especially his presence with us today—he answers our deepest questions: What is the purpose of life? Can I be forgiven? Am I loved? Is there hope?

You can't get much more central than that.

So, if you're looking for a way to make sense of the many books of the Bible and its 31,000 verses, you could do worse than by focusing on Jesus Christ.

Not surprisingly, of the many things Jesus did and taught, prayer was at the core. The fact that Jesus prayed often and at length is regularly noted in references such as this: "The next morning, Jesus awoke long before daybreak and went out alone into the wilderness to pray" (Mark 1:35).

This obsession with prayer began to rub off on the disciples, who became curious about prayer one day.

The Prayer to Start All Prayer

"Once when Jesus had been out praying," writes Luke, "one of his disciples came to him as he finished and said, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'"

Jesus replied by saying they should pray like this:

"Father, may your name be honored.
May your kingdom come soon.
Give us our food day by day.
And forgive us our sins—just as we forgive those who have sinned against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation." —Luke 11:1–4

Sound familiar? This is what is commonly called the "Lord's Prayer," that is, the prayer that the Lord, Jesus, taught his disciples. Some people call it the "Our Father," after the first two words. This version, from the Gospel of Luke (11:20–4), is only one biblical version. The Gospel of Matthew (6:9–13) is the basis of the version said by most people today:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

Note one thing: Many churches pray that line about forgiveness like this:

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

We'll look at the meaning of each of those words—*trespasses* and *debts*—in Chapter 6, "The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 2." For now, just be aware that when you're in church and the minister says, "Let's pray the prayer that Jesus taught us," you'll know what he's talking about.

Different versions aside, this little prayer is the most important thing Jesus said about prayer. It is a model prayer, one that we can pray. It also teaches nearly everything Jesus wanted to teach about prayer.



From the Good Book

"As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the rock except our God?"

—David, 2 Samuel 22:31, 32

Let's look at the take of both Protestants and Catholics: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes the early church theologian, Augustine: "Run through all the words of holy prayers [in scripture], and I do not think you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer."

The famous nineteenth-century Protestant preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, put it this way: "I used to think the Lord's Prayer was a short prayer; but as I live longer and see more of life, I begin to believe there is no such thing as getting through it. If a man, in praying that prayer, were to be stopped by every word until he had thoroughly prayed it, it would take him a lifetime."

Not bad for just a few lines. I'm not going to take a lifetime to explain it, though—just two chapters. Still, I think you'll soon see why this can aptly be called the mother of all prayers.

The Least You Need to Know

- The Bible is *the* resource on prayer.
- Jesus Christ is *the* teacher on prayer.
- The Lord's Prayer is *the* prayer to start all prayer.

Chapter 5— The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 1



In This Chapter

- More about the God we're praying to
- How prayer helps us experience community
- How prayer changes you
- What the opening of the Lord's Prayer means

There's a lot—I mean *a lot*—going on in the Lord's Prayer. It's like an army of ideas ready to overwhelm us, so we're wise to divide and conquer.

The Lord's Prayer can be divided into two parts. The opening ("Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name") helps us understand the setting of prayer. The seven phrases after that are requests, sometimes called "the seven petitions." In this chapter, we'll look at the opening and the first three petitions.

Our Father

It doesn't take long to find something meaningful in the Lord's Prayer. Take the first word: *Our*. By using this little pronoun, Jesus is trying to clear up three matters right off the bat.

1—

You Never Pray Alone

I've made a point of saying that prayer is about personal communication with God; it's an intimate relationship, one on one. But it's also about much, much more. For one thing, prayer is about being connected with other pray-ers.

**Prayer Pearls**

"After we have made our requests known to him, our language should be, 'Thy will be done.' I would a thousand times rather that God's will should be done than my own."
—D. L. Moody

Let's take an example. I like to fly fish, and when I do, I have to spend a lot of time alone. Even when I go on a trip with my son, we usually split up and take different parts of the river we're fishing. We come back in a few hours and swap stories. Even when I'm casting by myself, though, alone in front of a gentle riffle, enjoying some solitude with nature, I never feel alone. I know my son is fishing with me, even though he's not fishing *with* me.

That's how it is with the Lord's Prayer. Even though we might say it alone, it reminds us that we're *not* alone. That's the point of the words *our* and *us* that run all the way through it. Even when you pray it alone, you are reminded that you're part of a community—in particular, a group that honors Christ, that prays to him regularly, and also, from time to time, that says the prayer he taught.

2—

Prayer Is Learned Together

If I want to improve my golf game, let's say, I need to spend time on the practice tee, alone, flailing away at the ball. But if I'm serious about getting better, I find a group to play with regularly, and I take lessons from a pro. In other words, I get together with other golfers.

With this little word *our*—and the use of *us* throughout this prayer—Jesus is simply reminding us that if we really want to learn about prayer, we need to get together regularly with other pray-ers.

Jesus assumes prayer is first something done in the community of believers and by the community of believers.

This goes against conventional wisdom, of course (as does much of what Jesus has to say, by the way). For the longest time, when I heard the word *prayer*, I conjured up an image of a solitary individual, with bowed head and/or kneeling in a bedroom—alone. Of course, this *is* prayer; prayer is something people do by themselves a lot. And, certainly, prayer expresses an individual's personal relationship with God. But if that were the only thing true about prayer, Jesus would have said to pray, "*My* father."

But he didn't. And one reason is that he wanted to suggest that if we want to learn how to pray well, we need to get together with others to learn. (More on this in Part 3, "Just Doing It.")

3—

God Is Bigger Than My Ideas about God

This is really good news. A lot of times I think I've got God figured out, and I couldn't be bothered with what other people think. But then I find that I pretty quickly get bored with the God I've figured out.

**Prayer Pearls**

"Work as if everything depended upon your work, and pray as if everything depended upon your prayer."

—General William Booth

Fortunately, God is much bigger than my mind or my heart can capture, and for that reason God is a continual surprise. When I pray in the context of a larger prayer community, I can be sure that there will be times when the community teaches me how to expand my understanding of God. For example, my three children each know something about me that the others don't know. As they talk about me with one another, they sometimes discover things: how to get their way with me, what line not to cross, and so on.

God is not just "my" God, but he's also "our" Father—the God of the entire community of prayer. So, as I become a part of that community, I'm going to have my understanding of God expanded.

Our Father

This word *Father* is the most radical word in this prayer—and maybe in the history of religions. Even the most skeptical New Testament scholars—some of whom believe that hardly anything in the New Testament is original—admit that calling God "Father," as Jesus did, is a fresh idea in the history of religions. Until then it was common to call God all sorts of things: Lord, Master, Creator, King, Holy One, Majestic One, Lawgiver. But not "papa."

**When You Haven't Got a Prayer**

"So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. Lighten, if it be your will, the pressure of this world's care, and, above all, reconcile us to your will and give us a peace which the world cannot take away; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

—Thomas Chalmers

I'm not being disrespectful here. We know that Jesus, in introducing this radical word, used the Aramaic word *abba*, which is equivalent to our "dad" or even "daddy." This has profound implications for the life of prayer.

1—

We Can Have Intimacy with God

This gets back to what I was saying in Chapter 2, "What Prayer Promises": Prayer is a key means to experiencing God. And it also gets back to what I said in the Introduction: This word *Father* is not about God's maleness.

Admittedly, the Bible mostly uses masculine images for God. But it doesn't hesitate to use feminine ones as well to show the intimacy we can experience with God. One of my favorites is found in Psalm 131, where prayer is compared to a child nursing at a mother's breast:

Lord, my heart is not proud;
my eyes are not haughty.
I don't concern myself with matters too great
or awesome for me.
But I have stilled and quieted myself,
just as a small child is quiet with its mother.
Yes, like a small child is my soul within me.

So *Father* is not about fathers or mothers, or males or females. It's about the meaning of prayer: intimacy with God.

2—

We Become God's Children

Of course, If God is our Father, then we are his children. The apostle John put it this way: "See how very much the heavenly Father loves us, for he allows us to be called his children, and we really are!" (1 John 3:1). This takes some getting used to, but once you do get used to it, it's pretty incredible.

When I first got married, I thought it the strangest thing when my wife introduced me to others as her husband. I had never been a "husband," and it just sounded strange. But the more we've grown together and immersed ourselves in the mystery of being husband and wife, the more I've gotten used to the word. I've also grown to relish it, for it carries with it not only responsibility, but also a sense that I have a deep connection with my wife as no other man has.

It also has taken me a while to get used to being called a "child" or "son" of God. In fact, I never addressed God as "Father" for the longest time in my spiritual journey. And then one day I did. It's difficult to describe, but at that moment I felt immediately that I had become more intimate with God.

The apostle Paul wrote, "You should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family—calling him

"Father, dear Father." For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children" (Romans 8:15–16).

Indeed.



Prayer Pearls

"Hurry is the death of prayer."
—Samuel Chadwick

3—

We Can Come to God with Confidence

I've quoted it once in another context, but this is such an important saying of Jesus that it bears repeating:

"You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him." (Matthew 7:9–11)

This doesn't mean we can assume that everything we request of God will be granted. God loves us a little more than that. It *does* mean that every prayer is heard and that God will give us what we most need (which doesn't always correspond to what we *think* we need).

The great theologian Augustine put it this way: "Our Father: At this name love is aroused in us . . . and the confidence of obtaining what we are about to ask. . . . What would he not give to his children who ask, since he has already granted them the gift of being his children?"

Who Art in Heaven

If you haven't figured it out already, prayer is pretty hard to figure out. First it's one thing and then it's another. Here's another case in point:

If the words *our Father* teach that God is intimate, this phrase—*who art in heaven*—suggests that God is distant. This doesn't sound very good until you understand what Jesus is driving at.

He doesn't mean to say that God is physically distant; "heaven" is not a place. It is a way of being—existing in perfect love—and that way of being is so perfect that it is unlike life as we know it (which, to put it as nicely as possible, is not perfect in love).

Heaven in the Bible is usually contrasted with *earth*, as in the phrase we're about to look at: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This suggests that the one sphere, earth, has a long way to go to become like the other sphere, heaven.

The Bible usually uses the word *holy* to talk about this. *Holy* doesn't mean "perfectly good in a religious sort of way," but "set apart." In this sense, I could say my best suit is holy because it's set apart in many ways: It's the most expensive, finest tailored piece of clothing I own. And I've set it apart to wear only on the most special occasions.

In calling God holy, we're saying that he is set apart, distinct, utterly different than human beings. God is nothing like us: He is infinite, and we're finite; he is all-knowing and present everywhere, and we are not; he is pure goodness and love, and we are not. And here's the kicker for philosophical types: We participate in being, and he transcends being (let's not get into that here).

The practical point is this: The Lord's Prayer reminds us that we can never put God in a box, mold him into our image, or make him more acceptable to our sensibilities.



From the Good Book

"May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive."
—Solomon, 1 Kings 8:29, 30

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris talks about this dimension of faith:

One so often hears people say, 'I just can't handle it,' when they reject a biblical image of God as Father, as Mother, as Lord or Judge; God as lover, as angry or jealous, God on a cross. I find this choice of words revealing, however real the pain they reflect: If we seek a God we can 'handle,' that will be exactly what we get. A God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we've cut down to size.

As intimate as God becomes, he always remains himself, utterly distinct from us, someone we hold in awe, someone who continues to shape us—as well it should be if we don't want to narrowly confine the wideness of his mercy.

On to the first petition.

Hallowed Be Thy Name

To keep a name hallowed means to respect the name and what stands behind it. It's like having a great family name with a profound heritage and a long-standing reputation for honesty in business. Then along comes a son who dishonors the family name by lying to clients and embezzling funds. It's a disgrace to the family name, we say, and the family's name is tarnished.

Hallowed here, then, literally means to "keep holy," or to "honor and esteem."



Prayer Pearls

"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day."

—Abraham Lincoln

Name here is not a reference to a convenient label, like those we put on people when they are born so we don't get them confused. In the Bible especially, a name often means something, usually describing unique characteristics of the person: Jesus means "savior," Barnabas means "encourager," and so on. That's even more true when it comes to names for God: Holy, Redeemer, Creator, and the like. It's especially true for the most revealing name of God: Father. (If you skimmed the section "Our Father," you'd better go back and read it now.)

It wouldn't seem that we would have to ask God to make sure his name is never disgraced; you'd think he'd be interested in maintaining his honor as well. He is, but we're not—at least, not always. This petition is just a roundabout way of saying, "Lord, help me never to do or say anything to dishonor your name and what you stand for."

This is a tall order because it doesn't take much to do something stupid to dishonor that name. I do it everyday: being impatient with a coworker; ignoring the street person asking for a handout; not helping my wife at home; and so on. This wouldn't be so bad if I didn't wear the family name, Christian, and if I hadn't prayed the Lord's Prayer last Sunday to keep the Father's name hallowed.

Because this is hard to do, I need God's help. And so I continue to pray, "Hallowed by thy name."

Thy Kingdom Come

This is a prayer for everything to turn out right in the end. It is, of course, another "useless" prayer, like so many others in this prayer: God is going to bring history to a glorious end. What he promised long ago he will fulfill.

There will come a day, according to the book of Revelation, when: "[God] will live with them [meaning us], and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever" (Revelation 21:3–4).

The promise is sure, and it reminds us that this life isn't as good as it gets. One member of one congregation I served had lost a son in childhood. She was in her 70s by the time I knew her, and she had a great sense of humor and was not hesitant to share a smile with the rest of us. But she also carried with her a touch of sadness from this early loss, as well as from the loss of her husband a few years earlier. As much as she enjoyed her life, and as much as she contributed to the lives of others, she told me, "I'm looking forward to seeing my son and husband someday."

She understood this part of the Lord's Prayer. As good as this life can be, it's not good enough. There is something better we await and upon which we can pin our hopes and our lives.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"I adore thee and glorify thee, O everlastingly worshipped Holy Trinity, complete and One God Almighty. Veneration and honor unto thee from all living creatures. Glory to God, the Father, who preserves me by his power. Glory to God, the Son, who guides me by his grace. Glory to God, the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies me through his love. Let the whole and undivided Holy Trinity be forever hallowed! Let the sacred name of the Holy Trinity be forever adored by all angels above and all living creatures here below, now and forever. Amen."

—Paul Raday

Thy Will Be Done on Earth As It Is in Heaven

This is a deceptive little petition that seems so harmless and well-intentioned at first. Henry Ward Beecher, a nineteenth-century Protestant preacher said, "You read, 'Thy will be done,' and you say to yourself, 'O, I can pray that'; and all the time your mind goes round and round in immense circuits and far-off distances; but God is continually bringing the circuits nearer to you, till he says, 'How is it about your temper and your pride? How is it about your business and daily life?'"

To pray to do God's will, then, is no small prayer. It encompasses about everything we do. This is not a prayer to do God's will on Sundays or when we feel religious. Nor is it a prayer to do God's will as best as we can or according to our interpretation. No, the prayer is to do God's will "as it is done in heaven."

For a serious writer, heaven is *The New Yorker* magazine. If an aspiring writer were to write in such a way that someone would say, "That sounds like something from *The New Yorker*,"—well, that's about as good as it gets.

For the person of prayer, we want to live life as it's lived in heaven. Again, heaven is not a place so much as a way of being, a way of existing, and that way is described as love. To say our friends who have died are "in heaven" is to say that they exist in a state of love, loving each other and God in ways that are unimaginable to us now.

That qualification, "as it is in heaven," is what saves this prayer from becoming an oppressive burden. The temptation is to begin to catalogue all the ways we fall short of doing God's will—impatience, ungratefulness, selfishness, gluttony—and vow to do better in the future. That we should do better goes without saying. But God's will is not a list of do's and don'ts as much as it is living in love. Someone once asked Jesus what the greatest commandments were, which essentially asked what God's will ultimately is. Jesus replied that we should love God with everything in us, and we should love other people as we love ourselves.

According to the first three petitions, then, to pray is to turn our lives completely over to God so that we may be shaped and guided by his loving hands. In some respects,

this is a frightening idea; there's no getting around that. But it's also true that to give yourself to God is the most exciting (and exacting!) adventure a person can go on.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is the gymnasium of the soul."
—Samuel M. Zwemer

By this time, it should be more clear than ever that prayer is not a religious activity that we add to our lives to make them a little nicer; prayer is something that will transform our lives, inside and out.

What to Do If You Hate the Term "Father"

For people who have been verbally or physically abused by their fathers, this word causes all sorts of discomfort. Others reject the name *father* in prayer because they deeply resent the patriarchal assumptions that have oppressed women through the centuries. These powerful emotional reactions are understandable, and I agree with spiritual advisors who suggest that such people place a moratorium on using the word—if that's the thing that's keeping them from praying.

Because intimacy is such an important feature of Christian prayer, though, attempts to substitute another name for God have repeatedly failed. Some have suggested, for example, that we pray, "Our Creator." God is certainly our creator, and powerful, and the origin of all things in heaven and earth—as the title "Creator" implies—so it is good to address God as such from time to time.



From the Good Book

And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

—2 Kings 6:17

But to do so on a regular basis undermines the most interesting thing about Christian prayer: its ability to bring us closer to God. You just can't get as close to a creator as you can a father.

We have to remember that people were abused by fathers in Jesus' day, and that in his time, there were goddesses galore in the larger Roman and Greek cultures, to whom a lot of people preferred to pray. Jesus knew using the word *father* would create all sorts

of problems for some people. But he still used it because he knew, in the long run, that it would do more spiritual good than psychological harm.

It's also wise to remember that when we object to the word *father* because it reminds us of our male parents, we are getting things backward. Jesus introduces the term not because he wants us to shape our understanding of God into the image of our earthly fathers. In fact, just the opposite is true: He wants us, among other things, to shape our understanding of fatherhood—and parenting—in light of who our Heavenly Father is.

So even if we are uncomfortable using this word in prayer (as I was for a time), we should come back to it now and then, until we come to the point when we can use the name freely. Then we can begin to shape our own parenting, not by our past, but in light of our Heavenly Father who loves us in unimaginable ways.

God Is Not a Lonely Father

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, "When we pray to the Father, we adore and glorify him together with the Son and the Holy Spirit." In other words, in the Christian tradition, the Lord's Prayer assumes that God exists as a Trinity: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is not the place to discuss why this is central to Christianity, nor will we go into detail explaining how God can exist as a Trinity. Suffice it to say that the centuries-long Christian understanding is that God exists as one "essence" in three "persons," equal in power and glory. It's not a committee of three or one being with three "faces," but three in one and one in three. You can see that we've reached the limits of human language here.



Prayer Pearls

"God is not a cosmic bellboy for whom we can press a button to get things."

—Harry Emerson Fosdick

This is not a merely theoretical matter for Christians, either. It arises out of our experience of God: We experience God as the creator of the world; we experience God as he walked among us as Jesus Christ, the Son; we experience God inwardly as the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity also demonstrates for us at a deep level why love is so central to Christian faith. Not only is it commanded by God, but God himself lives in an eternal relationship of love, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because we are created in God's image, it is vital for us to be in relationships of love.

The Trinity also helps us recognize what is going on in prayer. Author and scholar C. S. Lewis put it this way in his classic *Mere Christianity*:

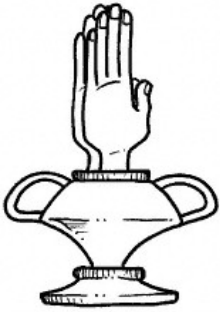
An ordinary Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real

knowledge of God comes through Christ, the man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers.

The Least You Need to Know

- We learn to pray as a family of believers with one Father—we are not alone.
- The Lord's Prayer primarily shows us that we can be intimate with God and have confidence in him.
- God as Trinity means that he is one being in three distinct persons, equal in power and glory.

Chapter 6— The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 2



In This Chapter

- Prayer's concern with the most mundane of concerns
- Prayer as the most spiritual of things
- The meaning of the last four petitions of the Lord's Prayer

If the first part of the Lord's Prayer ascended the lofty heights of heaven and spoke of grand ideas such as the will of God, the next part brings us down to earth. The entire prayer, of course, is about day-to-day life and faith, but this next part focuses on this aspect more so.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

You can't get any more basic than this: praying for your three squares a day. Praying for food, of course, makes some people nervous. It did me for a long time because it seemed, well, so pedestrian. Praying for God's will, for world peace, for serenity—that's real prayer. But praying about spaghetti and sausage doesn't seem very spiritual.

Baloney. I mean to say, the prayer is *about* baloney and pasta and hamburgers and even broccoli. Jesus is teaching that there is nothing too basic or too mundane to pray about. Every one of life's gifts is a gift from God ultimately, and it isn't as if he created courage and faith and the desire for peace, and then somehow broccoli just came along. Every gift—whether it be spiritual, moral, or physical—comes from God's hand ultimately, and Jesus is telling us that it is the Great Giver to whom we should turn about such matters.

But why? This would seem to be one area where prayer has nothing to do with it. I work for my daily bread by taking a job. And a lot of work by others goes into getting bread to my table: planting seeds, irrigating land, harvesting crops, shipping by railway, displaying in a supermarket, and so on. We can pray until the proverbial cows come home, but unless someone takes the trouble to get up at 4:00 a.m. and milk them, no one's going to have anything to put on their cereal. What does prayer have to do with all this?



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"O thou Spirit of Life, breathe upon thy graces in us, take us by the hand and lift us from earth, that we may see what glory thou hast prepared for them that love thee; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen."

—Richard Baxter

Everything. This is exactly the point of this prayer: To remind us that the journey of food from planting to dinner table is a complex process that requires the efforts, skills, and faithfulness of countless people. Every time we eat, we receive a gift that comes to us through many hands. It is not merely *our* efforts that secure our daily bread. This is not the type of thing we ought to take for granted.

Then there's this little unpleasant fact: A few too many days without bread, and we die. Christian prayer is not about ethereal spirituality; it is no mere consciousness raising into airy transcendence. Prayer is about survival. This petition is a stark reminder of how close we are to not being, of how fragile our world really is, of how little it takes (a shipper's strike, a hurricane, a cancer cell) to disrupt everything we take for granted, of how vulnerable we really are. In other words, this is a prayer about dependence, utter dependence upon God for everything.

It is also about *daily* dependence. Ongoing trust is emphasized by Jesus: "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread." It's like he's saying, "Get it?" This is not a once-in-a-lifetime admission or an annual renewal of vows. It is a day-by-day looking to God as the giver of every gift.



From the Good Book

"Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge."

—David, Psalm 51:2–4

It's also about looking to God for gifts sufficient only for the day, not anxiously praying to God to meet an entire lifetime of needs, or praying that we would have so much that we never need worry again. That's called greed, and it's not exactly the type of attitude Jesus approves of. Instead, our prayer should be, "Give us enough to sustain us today, Lord, to help us meet the challenges this day. And then tomorrow, we'll worry about tomorrow."

This doesn't mean you can't plan or pray about the future, such as for retirement. Planning and putting money aside is something we do today, and as such it is something we can do with this prayerful attitude of daily dependence. We can plan retirement with a sense of anxiety and fear, or with a thankful, dependent heart: "Lord, help me plan my future wisely, to make good decisions this day, and help me to trust in your loving care over all of my life, no matter what happens." We would be negligent if we did not notice one other aspect of this petition: "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread." Again, the community makes itself known. This is not merely a prayer about our own needs, but also the needs of others. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "It is not God's will that his creation should be despised. The disciples are told to ask for bread not only for themselves but for all men on earth."

We needn't spend much time demonstrating that a lot of people in the world today are not getting their daily bread, and not because there isn't enough food to go around. With inefficient distribution systems, unjust governments, political bureaucracies, greed, and human stupidity, a lot of people are starving as I write this. It nearly goes without saying that those who pray this little petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," are committing themselves in some way, small or large, to help answer this prayer for those who lack bread this day.



From the Good Book

"Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, 'I gave birth to him in pain.' Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.' And God granted his request."

—1 Chronicles 4:9

And Forgive Us Our Trespasses . . .

If the former petition was about physical survival, then the next three petitions are about spiritual survival.

First, let's make clear what the key word in this petition means. *Trespasses* is a legal image and refers to those acts by which we cross a boundary that God has set. In fact, a lot of commentators have talked about the Ten Commandments as a fence. We are free to do anything within these 10 boundaries, but once we commit adultery or steal or profane the Sabbath, we step outside the ordered life God intends for us. At this point we trespass into forbidden land.

In the other principle version of the Lord's Prayer, the image used here is economic: "Forgive us our *debts* as we forgive our *debtors*." Here the idea is that the moral law is like a bank account. Every time we break the law, we draw on this moral account and we owe God. It's like drawing upon the good will of a friend—let's say he gives you a ride to the airport—and then you saying, "I owe you one."



Prayer Pearls

"Only one petition in the Lord's Prayer has any condition attached to it: it is the petition for forgiveness."

—William Temple

With God, though, we find that we owe him so much that we can never quite pay him back. There is something about human nature that makes it impossible for us to pay back our moral withdrawals. We just sink deeper and deeper into debt. Anyone who is morally sensitive understands what the apostle Paul is writing about when he says, "I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong. . . . No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't" (Romans 7:15–18).

We're talking big debt here: moral bankruptcy. It's like owing the Visa people so much money that the minimum payment you can afford cannot even cover the monthly interest.



Prayer Pearls

"It is quite useless knocking at the door of heaven for earthly comfort; it's not the sort of comfort they supply there."

—C. S. Lewis

Trespasses and *debts* are metaphors for the more abstract word *sin*. To put the matter most bluntly: Without forgiveness, we can have no relationship with God. That's not because God gets petty and self-righteous and wants nothing to do with us when we do something bad. To sin is to break the very relationship we have with God. It's like adultery in marriage: This is not a petty little indiscretion; it breaks the bond between husband and wife, and if the betrayed spouse does not forgive, the relationship cannot continue.

Anyone who has thought deeply about who God is—perfect in love and goodness—recognizes that every sin is an act of unfaithfulness, that is, spiritual adultery. (In fact, one book of the Bible, Hosea, says that Israel was acting like a husband lying with a prostitute when it forsook the laws of God.) The very relationship with God is ruptured—and without God, life quickly spirals into chaos and death and eternal loneliness. Unless God forgives, that is.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Holy Spirit of God, who prefers
before all temples the upright heart
and pure, instruct us in all truth;
what is dark, illumine, what is low,
raise and support, what is shallow,
deepen; that every chapter in our
lives may witness to your power and
justify the ways of God. In the name
of Jesus, giver of all grace. Amen."

—John Milton

The point of this petition is to assure us that God *does*, in fact, offer his forgiveness. This is the *gospel* (that is, "good news") of the New Testament. That God offered forgiveness freely and fully was not completely clear until the coming of Jesus Christ. It is through Christ's death and resurrection that forgiveness—essentially, a restored relation with God and, thus, freedom from chaos and death and eternal loneliness—is given.

You can spend your life pretending as if this isn't true, either living in denial about the spiritual bankruptcy of your life or living in constant anxiety and guilt about your moral indebtedness. Or, you can claim the gift of forgiveness that Christ offers. To pray this petition is to claim that gift.

. . .As We Forgive Those Who Trespass against Us

Now comes the hard part. Forgiveness is a package deal. It's not about *me* getting *my* sins forgiven so I can feel self-righteous and holy. The phrase is "Forgive *us* *our* trespasses." This is about seeking God's forgiveness for the sins of my neighbors, too—and even the sins of my enemies.

Yes, that includes even the sins of the friend who has betrayed you, the boss who overworks you, the neighbor who slanders you—all those people who owe you big-time and who have trespassed over you.

In some ways, then, the second part of this petition—"as we forgive those who trespass against us"—is redundant. We can hardly be praying for their forgiveness unless we have already forgiven them, can we?

Well, not exactly. Resentment and bitterness have a way of planting themselves deeply within our hearts, and it is mighty difficult to uproot them. I still remember an unkind remark of a (former) friend made some 20 years ago—and I'm still bothered by it. But prayer goes a long way toward softening such resentment. Praying for one's enemies, in fact, is a tried and true method for beginning to love and forgive even enemies.

When I'm angry with someone, or when I find myself resurrecting a long-standing resentment, I start praying for the person who has offended me. "Lord, please help Steve become successful in what's he doing; keep him and his family safe from disease. . . " and so on. This has a remarkable effect on my heart.



Prayer Pearls

"If you can't pray a door open,
don't pry it open."

—Lyell Rader

Jesus put it this way, "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43–45).

The corporate nature of forgiveness is so crucial that this is the only petition of this prayer that Jesus comments on when he's done teaching it. He told his disciples, "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14–15).

This is not a *quid pro quo*, a deal God makes with us, let alone a threat. It has to do with the internal logic of prayer and forgiveness. As we noted, you can't very well pray, "Forgive *us our* trespasses" without including your neighbor and enemy in the prayer. Jesus is saying that we shouldn't pretend that this prayer is only concerned about us. Forgiveness is the plea of the community; if you think you can receive it without seeking the forgiveness of others, you just don't get it.

This doesn't mean that you have to *feel* forgiveness for others before you ever pray this prayer or that you have to be free of all resentment before you can ever hope to go before God. It does mean that when we enter into prayer, we recognize that our resentment and anger toward others needs to be a part of our prayer. In seeking to deepen our relationship with God, we are at the same time seeking to heal our relationship with others.

The promise of Jesus is that prayer is about the most effective way of doing both.



From the Good Book

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: "I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him."

—Moses and the Israelites, Exodus 15:1–2

And Lead Us Not into Temptation

You have to wonder about this petition. We've just gotten through praying for forgiveness for succumbing to temptation, and now we're told to pray that God would not lead us into temptation. As if God wanted to do that; as if he tried to make us sin.

Not quite. In fact, the Bible is pretty clear about that: "Remember, no one who wants to do wrong should ever say, 'God is tempting me.' God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else either" (James 1:13).

So if God never tempts, why should we pray that he would not lead us into temptation?

Frankly, the Bible is a little confusing at this point because it uses two terms—*trials* and *temptation*—interchangeably, though it is clear from its teaching that those are two different things.



From the Good Book

"And give my son, Solomon, the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements, and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided.' Then David said to the whole assembly, 'Praise the Lord, your God.' So they all praised the Lord, the God of their fathers; they bowed low and fell prostrate before the Lord and the king."

—David, I Chronicles 29:19

Temptation is something that comes from the Evil One (see the next petition) or from within our own dark hearts. To be tempted is to be enticed to do something contrary to God's will, to deny or work against God's love. We are tempted to lie to the government on April 15. We are tempted to act with prejudice against people of color. We are tempted to commit adultery. These are not the kinds of things God is into.

Trials, on the other hand, are ordeals we undergo that, for all their misery and hardship, can actually strengthen our faith: the loss of a job, a child going wayward, the news of cancer. Such events, if lived through with faith, become opportunities to decide what is really important in life, to learn patience and humility, and to become closer to God and others.

One of my coworkers recently got the news that she had breast cancer. Being a human being, she was not just a little anxious about the news. Over the next few days, before she could see the doctor again she researched and wondered and worried and, no doubt, cried. But she also prayed, as did all her friends. As a result, she said, she slowly regained her composure.

One day as she drove, she was listening to a song on a Christian radio station. In the song was a line about God's light shining on us, no matter how cloudy our lives seem. Just then she turned the corner, and ahead was one spectacular sunset; it seemed as if the rich colors of the light were shining down just on her. She could hardly continue driving for the tears that clouded her vision. To make a long story short, she came through her ordeal with a stronger sense of God's presence in her life and a greater courage to face whatever came her way.

This is why the Bible can be pretty upbeat about trials: "Whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything" (James 1:2).

But let's be clear about this: Trials can make us bitter and unloving and faithless. Along with every trial comes the opportunity to sin. If they didn't cut both ways, they wouldn't be real trials and they wouldn't have the possibility of doing any good. The point is not that we're supposed to figure out if we're being tempted or if we're undergoing a trial. Sometimes, from our perspective, both look pretty much the same.

The point to remember is that God can help us whenever we're assaulted. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Remember that the temptations that come into your life aren't different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Lead Us Not into Temptation—More

This phrase also means, "Save us from the time of temptation."



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his."

—John R. W. Stott

The other meaning is more literal: "God: Don't even let us be tempted." Though God helps us in times of temptation, and though trials can strengthen faith, we should never ask God to give us trials or lead us into temptation. Some Christians want to be heroes for God because they want to prove to him how strong they really are. I've done this myself. In youthful enthusiasm, I've prayed,

"Lord, send me a trial so that I can endure it and become even stronger for you." As heroic as that sounds, I've discovered that it's just a form of pride—and stupidity.

Once you've been through a few ups and downs of the spiritual life, one thing becomes perfectly clear: We are terrible judges of how strong we are, and we have no business telling God when to put trials in our lives. Those matters are best left in his hands. The wise prayer is always, "Lead us not into temptation." We'll have more than enough opportunities to deal with temptations and trials, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes in a nice bit of understatement: "Many and diverse are the temptations that beset the Christian." In other words, there's no need to go looking for trouble.

But Deliver Us from Evil

If you were to read this petition in Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, you would see that this petition literally means, "Deliver us from the Evil One." This little petition introduces us into the reality of spiritual warfare.

This is a part of the teachings of Jesus that makes us modern souls a tad uncomfortable. The recent fascination with angels is all well and good because it reminds us that there is a spiritual world of goodness and love that parallels and intersects with our own world. It is less comforting, however, to consider a spiritual world with personal beings who work against God's purposes. But this is the clear teaching of the New Testament, and especially of Jesus.

It is easy to mock such a worldview, although it's becoming harder and harder to do so. People all over the spectrum are recognizing the presence of personal, spiritual evil in the world. Scott M. Peck, a respected psychologist and author of the best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled*, wrote a sequel, *People of the Lie*, in which he describes his encounters with patients that he finally concluded were possessed by demons.

I don't want to dwell on this issue because that would be a mistake. To paraphrase English scholar C. S. Lewis, there are two mistakes made in regard to the devil: One is to naively refuse to believe in him; the other is to spend too much time thinking about him.

The point of this petition is simple: Prayer is not a way to enjoy warm, spiritual fuzzies. To pray is to step into a spiritual world where good and evil battle for supremacy. Though the outcome is never in doubt, the battle is real—and hard. There will be moments in our prayer lives when we will feel assaulted by an unknown power of such evil. It will frighten us, and we'll know at that point why we've been praying "Deliver us from evil."

And we'll also know that God will.

For Thine Is the Kingdom . . .

The phrase at the end of the Lord's Prayer—"For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."—was probably never spoken by Jesus. As some ancient scribe copied the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew, ending with "and deliver us from evil," he may have thought, "What a downer." So he composed this ending.



Prayer Pearls

"God's sovereignty does not negate our responsibility to pray, but rather makes it possible to pray with confidence."

—Jerry Bridges

This ending got copied by other scribes, and over time it became inserted into the Lord's Prayer as it was used in worship. In the nineteenth century, as more and more ancient copies of the New Testament were unearthed, scholars discovered that in the earliest copies of Matthew, this ending doesn't exist. That's why you won't find it in recent translations of the Bible.

But you'll still find it in the church's liturgy. Though it doesn't come from the lips of Jesus, it does sum up quite nicely everything that is going in the Lord's Prayer. It acknowledges that the basis of prayer is the power of God. This simply reminds us once more—just in case we've not gotten it by now—that it is not our faith or our prayers or our religiosity or our goodness that makes prayer "work."

It is God, as king, who is in charge of everything that goes on in prayer. It is God who has the power in prayer. It is God who deserves the glory for everything that comes out of prayer. And this has been and always will be true, forever and ever. Amen, as they say.

The Least You Need to Know

- Prayer is about physical and spiritual survival.
- We can pray about anything.
- Seeking God's forgiveness, for ourselves and others, is an essential aspect of prayer.
- By praying, we enter into moral and spiritual warfare that tests us to the limits.
- God will, in fact, help us in times of trial and temptation.

Chapter 7— The Greatest School of Prayer



In This Chapter

- Why church is the ideal place to pray
- What we learn by praying in church
- Objections to attending church—and why you shouldn't let them stop you

Before we dip into the real dynamics of prayer—the really practical stuff—we need to talk about the place where, more than any other place, we learn about Christian prayer. Books help. Talking with others helps. But if you really want to learn about prayer, you are wise to spend time with others who pray. And that means going to worship, or church.

This may be more than you bargained for in buying this book. You may have just wanted a little guidance on how to pray by yourself. If that's the case, you should just skip this chapter and move on to Part 4, "The Big Book on the Big Issues." But I have to warn you: Anyone *really* interested in growing in Christian prayer will need to explore what it means to worship—and in this chapter I explain why.



From the Good Book

"Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem."

—Ezra, Ezra 9:9

Why Go to Church to Pray?

In many circles these days, "going to church" is socially incorrect, something only old ladies and the feeble-hearted do. Sophisticated people don't need that sort of "crutch" to get through the week. Then again, more Americans go to church each and every weekend than watch the Superbowl. Why? Church certainly isn't as entertaining as the Superbowl—or the Superbowl commercials.

And it isn't as if anyone in the community is going to look down on them, like people used to do. No, some go to church because they want to be with friends. Others actually believe all that church stuff, or at least want to. Still others go because they really want to learn how to pray. But how exactly? Let's find out.

1—

We Learn from Others

This is something I mentioned a couple of chapters ago, so I won't spend a lot of time with it here. Simply put, if you're serious about learning anything—golf, carpentry, cooking, or whatever—you spend time with others trying to learn the same thing. You take classes, you find a mentor, you try to get around people who know what they're doing. Why should it be any different in prayer?

2—

We Get Stretched

One thing I've noticed about taking classes when I'm trying to learn something new: At some point, the teacher always pushes me to do something I didn't think I was capable of. When I took a class in creative writing, I expected to get weeks of lectures about various techniques. After we had studied all that, I figured we'd get to try our hand at putting it all together and writing a short story.

No way. We wrote stories from day one. I didn't know exactly what I was doing a lot of the time, but I was learning pretty quickly.

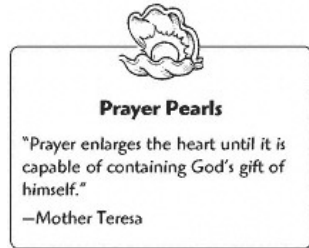
The same is true of prayer in church: It challenges us to stretch ourselves. For example, one key practice in Christian prayer is to pray for political leaders (I told you, prayer can be challenging). During my day-to-day existence, I don't give a whole lot of thought to government leaders—and when I do think about them, it's often in disgust. I end up cursing them a lot more than praying for them.

But in my church, we pray for "our president, our governor, and those in authority in communities comprising Saint Mark's parish." There are some weeks I'm pretty unhappy with the president, and yet there I am being called upon to pray for him so that he would manage the office well and make decisions that are just. Some weeks it's a stretch to really mean it—but that's one of the points of praying in the church.

3—

We Hear God in Special Ways

Prayer is a two-way conversation, and one of the best places to tune into what God is saying to you is in church. This happens to me in one of three ways.



First, there is the reading of Scripture. This is, after all, the "word of God," which means in some sense that it is God's speech to us. As common as many biblical teachings are—like "Love one another," "Do not bear false witness," and "God so loved the world"—I can never hear them enough because I always need reminders of what the world is really like.

On top of that, as I hear the Scripture read, often I hear not just a general word but a message *for me*. I don't know how to explain it (theologians call it the influence of the Holy Spirit), but sometimes when I hear a passage read—let's say it's Jesus saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself"—the image of a relative who has been irritating the bejeebers out of me will pop into my head. I know at that moment that someone is trying to tell me something.

The second way I hear God in church is through the sermon. In fact, I've *never* failed to hear some message for me in any sermon when I'm leaning forward trying to hear something for me. And I've heard some pretty lousy preachers. But even the worst preacher I've ever listened to always had at least one sentence or one phrase that caught my attention. And when it did, I would often have to stop listening to him as I considered what that little bit might mean for me.

The third way I hear God is less rational and more intuitive. God's word sneaks up on me in a service when I least expect it. One Sunday it was a sentimental song of the children's choir that helped me sense God's forgiveness. Another Sunday, I was overwhelmed with the breadth of the Christian community as I watched people— young and old, male and female, wealthy and modest, liberals and conservatives, and so on—all file forward and kneel to receive communion. Another Sunday still, it was a couple

of children whispering in the pew in front of me that caused me to reflect more deeply about God's love.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Lord, thou hast made thyself to be ours, therefore now show thyself to us in thy wisdom, goodness, and power. To walk faithfully in our Christian course we need much grace. Supply us out of thy rich store. We need wisdom to go in and out inoffensively before others; furnish us with thy Spirit. We need patience and comfort, thou that art the God of consolations bestow it upon us; for Christ's sake. Amen."

—Richard Sibbes

Just when I've gotten bored or irritated with the routine and what seems superficial in church, God will surprise me like that with another bit of grace from him. And it wouldn't have happened had I not been present.

4—

We Learn to Pray in Community

This is the heart of Christian prayer. As we noted in Chapter 5, "The Prayer to Begin All Prayer: Part 1," a key to Christian prayer is found in the pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our*. So when we gather with others to worship and pray, we are experiencing the most profound form of Christian prayer.

Certainly, we can enjoy moments of private prayer that blow us away. But it's like, excuse the analogy, the difference between cheering for the Chicago Cubs (or whomever) from your living room or rooting them on from a box seat at Wrigley Field. It's great to watch the team on TV, but there's nothing like being in the stadium with other fans.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer travels more strongly when said in unison."

—Petronius

The Bible paints a variety of pictures about what heaven will be like, but, invariably, the images all involve lots of people, enjoying new life and praising God together. One classic scene in the Book of Revelation, for instance, speaks of thousands upon thousands of people and angels standing around the throne of God: "And they fell face down before the throne and worshipped God. They said, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength belong to our God forever and forever. Amen'" (7:11–12).

Some Christian traditions (including the Eastern Orthodox) go so far as to say that when we attend worship, we are getting a glimpse of heaven. Some Sundays, I'm not so sure; other Sundays, I pretty much believe it.

Objections to Going to Church

There are lots of good reasons not to go to church. I've been going to church now for some 35 years—believe me, I've seriously considered every one of them.

The Church Is Full of Hypocrites

Agreed. Lots of them. The problem is, I can't think of an organized group that *isn't* full of hypocrites. I've known Christians who pray to a God of love on Sunday and then act like the devil on Monday. But I've also known liberal-minded professors who don't exactly act liberally toward conservatives. I've seen managers of health clubs who are overweight. And I've yelled at my children for not picking up after themselves, only to discover five minutes later that I left my coffee cup on the TV.



Prayer Pearls

"The biggest problem in prayer is
how to let go and let God."
—Glenn Clark

It seems that all sorts of institutions—educational, fitness, even the family—is full of hypocrites, and I have to count myself one. Which means to say, for me, it's always been a lame excuse not to go to church.

I Don't Need the Church: I Can Pray by Myself

Agreed again. As we've noted, prayer is about personal communion with God. Not only *can* I pray by myself, but I *should* pray by myself.

The only problem I've found is that when I skip church, I don't spend as much time in prayer. I may go off to a secluded setting, beneath a full red maple on a quiet patch of land on a local forest preserve. But it's pretty tough to worship there for an hour, and it's pretty tough to keep my focus for long.

This is a pretty common experience. When I was a pastor, people used to say to me, "I don't come to church, but I worship God on my own." At that point, I'd ask them how much time they had actually spent worshipping God on their own in the last month. Invariably, it was only a few paltry minutes.

This is not to say that the quality of prayer is determined by the quantity. That's hardly the case. But it's also silly to say that it's only quality time that matters. I've tried telling my boss that I'm going to give him 20 hours of quality time this week. He doesn't buy it. If I'm serious about prayer, then I can't be squeezing it in between the margins of a busy life. And in my experience, that means devoting some time to it.

The empirical fact is that most people don't pray as much—quantity or quality—when they depend on themselves to pray.

Church Is Boring

Indeed. Then again, when I find myself saying this regularly, I start feeling pretty juvenile. It drives me crazy when my teenagers say they're bored; they act like boredom is the ultimate existential crisis. I guess I'm hoping that I have evolved from teenagehood.

The difference between teenagers and adults is supposed to be this: As an adult, once you decide that something is important, you take the trouble to figure out why you're bored and then do something about it. You don't hang around waiting for others to entertain you.

In the case of church, I may be angry at God, or I may not really want to be there, or I may just find the minister dull. Well, I can deal with my anger, or figure out why I'm there. As a last resort, I could change churches.



From the Good Book

"Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love."

— Nehemiah, Nehemiah 13:22

The Church Is Not My Kind of Place

I hope not. If the church becomes a place where you feel pretty comfortable, you're probably no longer experiencing God. For all of the comfort, grace, hope, and other nice things God gives us, he also is in the business of helping us mature and grow. And that means he's going to make us decidedly uncomfortable at times.

When it comes to the church, an extended quote by the writer C. S. Lewis, one of the leading scholars of English literature in his day, is worth quoting. It sums up my experience, anyway:

When I first became a Christian. . . . I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my room and reading theology, and I wouldn't go to churches. . . . I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized the hymns (which *were* just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots.

Prayer is not just about feeling closer to God and feeling better about the world. It's about allowing God to transform us into the people he has created us to be. For most of us, that means learning to respect and love people who are starkly different than us. One place we meet such people is in church, which is a ragtag collection of people who have little in common but this: They've gathered to worship Jesus Christ. With all that discomfoting diversity, it's an awfully good place to be transformed by God into someone who actually can love all manner of people.

Churches Make Things Too Complicated

I'm sorry. If I haven't made it clear that prayer is a complex and mysterious event, then I've not done my job. To step into the world of prayer is the easiest of things—a simple sigh to God is enough to get you started. But if we're interested in growing in prayer, then we're going to be challenged. Granted, churches can make things more complicated than they really are. On the other hand, if they're going to be honest about prayer, the way churches pray and talk about prayer is going to sound a tad complicated sometimes.

I Don't Believe All That Church Nonsense

Yeah—me, too, a lot of days. The church is indeed a miserable little institution sometimes, but it also happens to be a place where Jesus said he promises to make himself known. And, for all its flaws, I've not found a better place, week in and week out, to learn about Christian prayer.



Prayer Pearls

"Pray to God in the storm—but keep on rowing."

—Danish Proverb

In summary: If you're convinced, you may want to look at Chapter 32, "Prayer in the Free Church Tradition," and Chapter 33, "Prayer in the Liturgical Tradition," now. Otherwise proceed. . . .

The Least You Need to Know

- Church is one of the best places to learn about Christian prayer.
- Public worship teaches us about prayer in a way that solitary prayer never can.
- It's easy to find reasons not to go to church—but you'll be glad you did.

PART 3— JUST DOING IT

Okay, enough background material. It's time to get practical:

What are the different ways to pray?

What exactly should I pray?

What type of problems will I run into?

What do I do when I run into problems?

Let's take a look at some of the specifics of prayer—and let's get started.



Chapter 8— Prayer Options



In This Chapter

- The many ways you can pray
- How to keep your prayer life exciting
- The benefits of each style of prayer

If I want to communicate with a friend, I have options galore these days. I can phone him, fax him, e-mail him, or send him something by snail mail (or two-day mail or overnight mail). I can page him or call his cell phone. Or, I can do it the old-fashioned way: I can go and see him and talk to him face to face. And then I've got all sorts of options on how to travel.

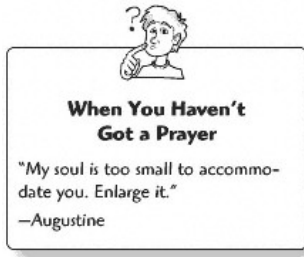
Likewise, though we tend to think that prayer consists of one or two activities, there are all sorts of ways to communicate with God.

Rational and Beyond

Let's begin with the big picture. There are two ways to break down our options.

First, there is what I call "rational" prayer. That is to say, we use our usual logical abilities, our reason, to form sentences and express thoughts to God. We use language, which has structure and meaning, to express those thoughts. This is the type of prayer we usually think of when we think of prayer, and it is the primary subject of this book. Rational prayer is, after all, something you can talk about in a book.

But there is another way to approach prayer, what I'd call "experiential prayer." Here the idea is not so much to tell God something, or even to hear God say something back. The idea is simply to allow yourself to experience God's presence.



Again the analogy of husband and wife is helpful. Most of the time, my wife and I use reason to communicate with one another. We use words—talking, whispering, shouting—to tell each other what we're thinking. Other times, though, we just want to be together.

I remember when I realized how important this aspect of our relationship had become to me. We were driving somewhere one evening, and we were both silent for a long time when my wife broke in, "Are you angry with me?"

"No," I replied, wondering what she was talking about.

"Well, you're not speaking to me," she said. "You said you wanted to spend time with me, and now you're not speaking to me."

I examined myself to see if I was angry. I was not. I just didn't feel like talking. But I also didn't want to be alone. I just wanted to be with her. That's it.

We'll look at this more in Chapter 11, "Listen Up"; for now, it is enough to know that not all prayer has to be jabbering away at God.

Shhhh

Another type of non-talking prayer is "listening prayer." Here the idea is to shut up for a while, to lean forward, to turn our ears to God, and to really listen to what God might be saying to us.

Listening can be a rational experience. Some people—not many, mind you, but some—literally hear a voice. During a high school church retreat I attended, we were asked one evening to go off by ourselves and spend some time in prayer, and to spend some of that time listening to God. For me it was the usual experience: praying for a couple of minutes, then thinking about the baseball game I was missing, then thinking about a girl, then praying for a couple of minutes. And so on.

But suddenly I heard some shouting coming from the center of camp. I rushed over, and in the excitement I finally figured out what was going on. One of the girls was saying that she had heard a distinct voice, which she was sure was from God: "You will be my missionary."

This was electrifying to a lot of the kids, though at the time I was pretty skeptical. I don't know if the girl ever became a missionary, but in the years since, I've become less skeptical about such matters. Not that I believe every report—hardly. There are a lot of confused people out there who think God has told them all sorts of strange things. But

I've read enough history now to know that, indeed, sometimes God speaks to people as in a voice.

At other times people experience God's voice as explicit thoughts. Other times still, we just "sense" what God is saying to us.



Prayer Pearls

"We can do nothing unless divine aid supports us. This divine aid is at hand for all who seek it with truly humble and devout hearts. To seek thus is to sigh for divine aid in prayer. Prayer then is the mother and origin of every upward striving of the soul."

—St. Bonaventure

As a favor to a friend, I phoned a man 2,000 miles away who was offering me a job. I was pretty happy doing what I was doing—pastoring a church—but I thought I'd at least do my friend the courtesy of phoning his boss and finding out what the job—in journalism—was all about.

It was a typical conversation about a job. We talked about qualifications, range of pay, and so on. We ended the conversation simply saying we'd take the next step: He'd send me application forms and I'd think about it.

But when I hung up the phone, I suddenly was aware of something I hadn't been aware of: I knew I was going to not only get accepted for the job, but I was going to take it. I hadn't talked to my wife. I hadn't even decided to do it yet. But I had this "sense"—some people call it a premonition—that it was all going to work out. It did. To this day I believe that "sense" came from God.

More about listening prayer comes in Chapter 11, "Listen Up."



From the Good Book

"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.'"

—Job 1:20, 21

For the Verbal

When I was taught to pray as a kid, I just assumed that if I were praying by myself, I'd *think* my prayer to God. I'd basically think sentences to God. Then one evening I walked into my cousin's room, and my idea of prayer expanded.

She was living at our home at the time, and she had recently become a Christian. That night, she was on her knees beside her bed, head bowed, and she seemed to be saying something aloud to no one in particular.

"Judy, what are you doing?" I asked. She lifted her head to look at me. "I'm praying." There was an awkward pause as I tried to take in this new idea. "Did you need me for something?" she asked.

"Uh, no." And I stumbled back to my room wondering why someone would say her prayers aloud when no one was in the room.

Since that time, of course, I've learned about how people have different learning styles: Some need things diagrammed; others learn best by listening; others by manipulating objects.

The same is true in prayer: Some people don't feel like they're praying unless they are actually using their vocal chords. And there have been times—in fact, a lot of times, for some reason, when I'm driving in the car—when I pray aloud. It's just another way to pray.

Hodge-Podge Prayer

I come out of a tradition in which linear prayer is the ideal. By linear prayer, I mean praying in a logical sequence, sticking with one topic until you move on to the next.

Growing up, we were so linear that we had prayer *lists*, which mostly contained names of people, categorized by relationship (family, extended family, friends, coworkers), to make sure that we prayed for everyone who needed to be prayed for.



Prayer Pearls

"I fancy we may sometimes be deterred from small prayers by a sense of our own dignity rather than of God's."

—C. S. Lewis

I'm not knocking linear prayer—as you'll see in Chapter 10, "ACTS Now," I suggest a linear model for guiding prayer. Linear is good because it can help us stay focused.

But linear isn't everything. In fact, most conversations are not linear, if dinner table conversation is any indication. We move from what happened in school to what's on TV to who's got a game on Thursday to who's baby-sitting on Saturday—all in about 18 seconds.

If conversation with loved ones is like that, why couldn't prayer be like that? Well, it can be. It doesn't have to have a plan of attack, an outline, or a goal. It can simply be a hodge-podge of thoughts or words directed in no particular order to God. It can be, well, like a conversation with a loved one.

Short and Sweet

And another thing: Free yourself from the stereotype that a good prayer is a long prayer.

That's no truer than saying that a good speech is a long speech. Let's never forget that the most famous and most moving speech in American history, the Gettysburg Address, is a mere 265 words.

Sometimes the best prayers are the short ones. In fact, if I waited around until I had a large block of time in which I could really get into prayer, I'd probably hardly ever pray. That's why many people make use of "arrow prayers." Here are single-subject, single-sentence prayers:

"Thank you, God, for this sunset!"

"God, give me wisdom in this meeting."

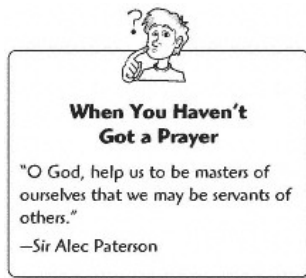
"God, help!"

Don't get me wrong. We need to have times when we spend a lot of time with God, when we pray long and hard. But our prayer lives can be enriched immeasurably if we can learn to punctuate our days with short prayers as well.

On the Fly and on the Page

You've probably guessed that I'm an advocate of extemporaneous prayer, prayer that comes from the heart and that is spoken freely at the moment.

But I'm also taken with formal, written prayers—though this was not something I appreciated for a long time.



For years and years, as I attempted to pray each morning, I fashioned my own prayers. I said what was on my mind in the best words I could think of—a lot of mornings those probably weren't the best words. In fact, I realized slowly that they were pretty mundane words and that they just didn't express what exactly I was trying to say.

For instance, I'd want to pray that I would trust God during the day for his guidance. On one day I'd pray, "God, help me to trust you today." And then the next day, "Lord, help me to be open to your guidance today and to trust it." Or, I'd pray for forgiveness: "Lord, I've sinned again. I don't know what is the matter with me. Please forgive me."

Certainly, God hears such prayers because they come from the heart. The problem was not with God—it was with me. I got tired of what I was saying, and I wasn't saying what I wanted to say.

Then I ran across the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the church's prayer book. There I found prayers for trust and guidance, like this one:

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being. We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the care and occupations of our life, we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

And I found prayers of confession, like this:

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your son, Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.

When I first read that, I said to myself, "That's what I've been trying to say!" And that's what I often say when I come across a well-crafted prayer. Using written prayers isn't for everyone, but it is another way to pray.

Journaling

Another tactic I use when my prayer life gets boring is journaling. Instead of thinking or speaking my prayers, I write them in a journal.

I can't recall where I got this idea, but it is a long-standing tradition. The *Confessions* of Augustine, one of the most remarkable books in Western Civilization, is one long prayer journal. It begins, "Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you," and God is addressed in nearly every paragraph throughout the book.



Prayer Pearls

"It is what we are when we pray our prayers that counts with God."

— James Philip

I don't know that I've ever tried to craft a formal prayer in my journal. It's more along the line of expressing my thoughts and feelings to God as they come to me. I also use it as a means to examine myself in the presence of God:

"Lord, this morning I'm anxious about my work. Part of it is the pressure of trying to get so much done in so little time. But part of it is this continual struggle I have: I want to prove myself worthy to others. I know I'm worthy. So why do I so want to please others? Is it that I don't really believe you think I'm worthy? Help me to think through this issue so that I can work with energy but without anxiety."

Writing is slower than speaking or thinking, of course, which means that I pray about fewer things. But it does help me focus in prayer, and for that reason it is one of the most meaningful ways for me to pray. It also helps me in two other ways:

1. It helps me to pray when I can't find the words to pray. For some reason, when I can't think of anything to say, if I put pen to paper, the ideas start flowing.

(By the way: When I said, "I put pen to paper," I meant it literally. I've tried to journal on the computer, but the clicking and pounding of keys, the in-your-face light from the monitor, the having to sit erect in a chair—all work against a prayerful attitude, at least for me.)

2. I can monitor my spiritual growth. Every once in a while, I read through old journal entries. I'm usually surprised. I often run across a description of a dream I was trying to understand—a dream I had completely forgotten about but that came back in full force when I read about it again. Sometimes I'm surprised by my insights; I didn't know I had been thinking those thoughts way back then—I thought this was a new insight! Sometimes I'm amazed at how long I've struggled with certain sins or concerns.



From the Good Book

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

—David, Psalm 23

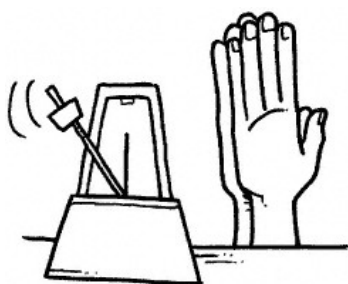
Now What?

I'm not going to go on and on about this. I think you're getting the idea that there is no one right way to pray and that I've probably not covered every option. So how should you pray? Certainly, rational prayer is the dominant style, as it is in all human relationships. But our prayer lives are richer when we open ourselves to other ways of praying. So as time and interest allows, experiment!

The Least You Need to Know

- There are many ways to communicate with God, not just one right way.
- You need to discover the ways that are most effective for you.
- Go ahead and experiment with different types of prayer.

Chapter 9— Finding Your Rhythm



In This Chapter

- The importance of establishing a prayer routine
- The key elements in a prayer routine

When I was in high school and learning how to play basketball, I would set aside an hour each afternoon to work on my game. During that hour I had a routine. I'd stretch. I'd dribble for 10 minutes: right hand, left hand, switching hands, between the legs, behind the back. I'd shoot close in, maybe 50 shots. I'd shoot 10 shots each from different spots on the perimeter. I'd shoot 50 free throws. Then I'd work on moves.

Establishing a regular routine is key to improving in anything, including prayer.

Why Regular Times for Prayer?

In some ways, it's hard to imagine that a regular routine is necessary in something as intimate, as personal, and as spontaneous as a personal relationship. But it sure helps.

That's why a lot of couples schedule times for one another. Some go to the Wednesday matinee every week. Others go out for breakfast every Saturday. Some make sure they have sex on Sunday morning. Others take a walk together every evening. Whatever. Couples have learned that a serious relationship cannot be sustained by spontaneous moments alone. There needs to be some routine.

It's no different in a relationship with God—in fact, it's probably even *more* important with God. If I don't set aside regular times for my wife, well, I'm going to keep bumping into her anyway, and at some point she's just going to grab me and make me sit and talk with her. But God tends to be more of a gentleman and will not force us to spend time with him.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is the chief exercise of faith."

—John Calvin

The result? We can go weeks without praying, our awareness of God becomes dull, and our spiritual walk slows to a halt.

The need for a routine comes and goes. Sometimes I'm resolute about it: I'm determined to find a time and a place and a routine and then stick with it. I want to grow in prayer. I want to become more spiritually aware.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"O Lord, forgive me for what I have been, sanctify what I am, and order what I shall be."

—Francis MacNutt

Other times, though, I rebel against the routine—and for good reason. Sometimes the routine itself turns into a god. I take pride in externals: Good for me—I spent time in prayer every day for a month! Big deal—since I was so anal-retentive about the whole thing, I never actually met God during the time. When I find myself in this sort of confused state, I back off from routine and let my prayer life become more spontaneous. But for most people most of the time, routine is a key element in a maturing prayer life.

What Time Is It?

Routine starts with picking a time of the day to settle into prayer. What are your options? Let's take a look at each.

Morning

This can be a great time of day, especially for the morning person who is alert and chipper and ready to tackle anything—even prayer. Morning prayer allows you to think about the day ahead and to prepare and pray accordingly.

But even the morning-impaired might want to consider early morning prayer. Let me explain.

Dorothea Brand, in her book *Becoming a Writer*, tells would-be writers to make it a habit to rise early and write whatever comes to mind. It doesn't matter what you write; just do it immediately upon waking. She argues that when we awake, we're still partially in a dream state, a state that encourages creative, intuitive thinking, which is a key process for writers.

The same principle works in prayer. As mentioned in the last chapter, there is the rational side of prayer and an intuitive side. Praying upon immediately waking is one way to experience God in a more intuitive way. Because the morning-impaired are not exactly in touch with their rational faculties, morning may be the perfect time to experience the non-rational aspects of prayer.

Assuming that you just don't fall asleep, that is! This can be a problem for the morning-impaired, which means you may want to consider other times.

Evening

The evening-impaired have the intuitive advantage at night, but falling asleep is even more of a temptation for them. For night owls, though, evening is the time when the brain is finally in gear, and prayer can become a time of keen reflection and insight.

In evening prayer, you tend to focus on how the day has gone; in that sense, it's less a time of preparation (as in morning prayer) and more of evaluation. Then again, some people use evening prayer to think about the activities of the following day.

Noon Hour

You can split the difference and pray at noon, or sometime in the middle of the day. Some people like to just start their days with a bang and stop in the middle and reflect on how things are going. I, for one, have never found this helpful. Once I start into my day, which moves often at breakneck speed, it's hard to get into a frame of mind that allows me to pray more than an arrow prayer.



Prayer Pearls

"Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer."

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

How long should you set aside for regular prayer? My advice is to take things easy at first. If you've never had a routine of prayer, 5 or 10 minutes will be seem like a lot. Once you get into it, though, it will hardly seem long enough. A few hardy souls spend up to an hour or two a day in prayer, but 15 minutes to a half-hour is probably what you can expect to work up to.

Finding a Place

Naturally, you'll want to find a place where you can be alone and undistracted, a room where you can shut the door.

The bedroom has certain advantages: For one thing, you're right there—in the morning as you awake, and in the evening as you go to bed.

But there's a serious drawback, especially if you pray in bed. The temptation is to slump lower and lower until you're on your back and the eyelids close, and you move

into that completely intuitive state called sleep. Another disadvantage if you're married and your spouse is in bed next to you: Snoring and prayer just don't seem to go together.

Some people set aside a room or a corner of a room for prayer. They'll set up a couple of candles and maybe a cross on a table next to their chair.

Speaking of chairs—pick one that is comfortable. There are few things more distracting to prayer than your leg or butt going to sleep.

Then there's the outdoors. Especially in seasonal weather, sitting in your garden or under the branches of a towering pine or maple can be a splendid setting for prayer. Few things can bring out a sense of devotion better than being surrounded by the creator's handiwork.

Some people are pretty restless and can't sit and pray—so they jog and pray. I don't get it, myself. I just can't keep focused for more than a few steps. But I have a friend in Minneapolis who jogs summer and winter—and prays as he jogs his 30 to 45 minutes a day.

Some people switch from one setting to another. Writer Kathleen Norris (*Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, *The Cloister Walk*, and *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*) says she starts her day like this: "I meditate on Scripture while I'm walking. That really stimulates my body and my mind. Then I come back, and I'll sing hymns and read some Psalms. If I don't read the Bible for a couple of days, the world just seems a lot flatter and life a lot less interesting."

Again, this is a matter of experimentation and regular reappraisal. What works for one person doesn't for another—and what works for you at one time in your life may not work at another.



From the Good Book

"I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears."

—David, Psalm 34:1–4

Posture

The tongue and brain are not the only two parts of the body used in prayer. In fact, how we position ourselves when praying can change the nature of praying.



Prayer Pearls

"It is better ... that the hearers should wish the prayer had been longer, than spend half or a considerable part of the time in wishing it was over."

—John Newton

Most people prefer sitting. They're used to it. It's comfortable. But for some it seems a bit too casual.

Some kneel. Kneeling may seem old-fashioned, but there's a reason it has been around since prayer has been around—that's a few thousand years. It does put one into a humble frame of mind, just the sort of attitude you want to have in prayer.

Other people like to stand. They feel this better honors God, just as we stand when an important person comes into the room.

Some people employ prayer gestures. The classic gesture is to bow your head and to either clasp your hands or press them together with the fingers pointing upward. These are gestures of respect and supplication; another gesture of supplication is to open your arms and turn your palms upward. A gesture of praise is to raise one or both hands high with the palm pointing outward. Though most people pray with bowed heads, some like to tilt their heads back with their eyes closed, as if God's love is pouring down upon them, and as if they are opening themselves to allow God to fill them.

As with so many other aspects of prayer, you'll have to see what works best for you. Even if none of this seems meaningful to you now, I'd encourage you to give each of these postures another try at another time. I used to feel too self-conscious to use them—I spent all my time thinking about how I looked (even though no one was looking). But now I use a number of them, depending on my mood, because they help me pray better.

Establishing a Pattern

In the next chapter, I'll discuss one method of prayer, but here I want to mention briefly how you might structure your time. Here's a routine I've followed with success.

Focus. I begin by clearing my mind of all distractions, and I try to visualize that God is present. One method I've used is, in my mind's eye, to step outside the earth's atmosphere. I imagine that I am looking down on the earth, as God might. Then I zero on North America, then Illinois, then Chicago, then the suburb of Glen Ellyn, then on my street, then my home, then the room I'm sitting in. For some reason, this can help me realize that God is thinking of me and listening to me.

Pray for guidance. This is a simple prayer asking that God would help me during this time of prayer.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Make us quick to understand the needs and feelings of others, and grant that, living in the brightness of thy presence, we may bring thy sunshine into cloudy places, like true followers of Jesus Christ, our Lord."

—Sir G. Hedges

Read. This means a reading from the Bible or from a devotional classic or from a current booklet that includes a Scripture reading, an explanation, and a prayer.

Meditate or journal. I spend time reflecting on what I've read, and sometimes I note my thoughts in my prayer journal.

Pray. Now I turn to prayer. I may follow the outline from the next chapter, or I might just pray as the Spirit moves me. I might spend some time praying and some time listening. I may use the time simply to sit in the presence of God.

Return. This may seem silly, but it's important to move out of prayer slowly, especially if the time has been meaningful. It's jarring simply to jump up and rush into my day. So to end my prayer, I might, for example, turn my mind slowly from the room I'm in to the other people in my home, or to the people I'll be meeting in the day and the tasks I'll be doing.

I've hardly begun to explore the options you can use to establish a routine. Unfortunately, using the word *routine* suggests that you'll hit on one pattern that will really "work" for you forever. Not quite. As we grow and mature in prayer, our routine will change—sometimes within days. There is value in being consistent in prayer, but not necessarily in how you go about it.

The Least You Need To Know

- You can choose different times of the day or night to pray, based on your habits and preferences.
- You can choose different locations or bodily positions for maximum comfort and atmosphere.
- You can choose a structure or pattern that helps you transition into and out of your prayer time.

Chapter 10— ACTS Now



In This Chapter

- More about one method of praying
- Understanding the key elements of prayer

After they've prayed for a minute or so, those just beginning to pray sometimes wonder, "Now what?" They're not quite sure what they should be praying about or how to go about doing it. In this chapter, we'll look at one method.

Everything we pray about falls into one of four categories. And if we give these categories the right name, we can come up with an acronym that can guide our prayers:

A = Adoration
 C = Confession
 T = Thanksgiving
 S = Supplication

Let's take a closer look at each of these actions.

Adoration

To adore God is to praise him, to honor him for his greatness. To "bless the Lord" is a biblical way of putting it.



Prayer Pearls

*"If your day is hemmed with prayer,
it is less likely to become unraveled."*

—Anonymous

There is a difference between adoration and thanksgiving. One way to think of it is like this: We praise God for who he is; we thank God for what he has done for us. Admittedly, the line can get fine: When we praise God for being our Redeemer, we're thanking him for redeeming us. Still, the emphasis in adoration is on God's greatness.

Another take on the difference can be put like this: We praise God for the big picture (creating the world, redeeming people, watching over history) and we thank him for his special gifts to us (giving us wisdom to handle a problem, keeping us in good health). Again, the emphasis in adoration is on God's greatness.

For me, this has always been the hardest part of prayer. It takes a poet's sensibilities to call forth words that can even begin to express praise and adoration. And a poet I am not.



From the Good Book

*"Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself
in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."*

—David, Psalm 37:3

But the poetry of prayer I know, and I make use of it to help me praise God. Let me give one example from each of the three sources I rely on. First, there are the Psalms, which are littered with praise. Psalm 145 begins like this:

I will praise you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
I will bless you every day,
and I will praise you forever.
Great is the Lord! He is most worthy of praise!
His greatness is beyond discovery!

And then the Psalmist goes on to praise God for his "mighty acts" and "wonderful goodness" and so on.

Another place I find great words of praise is in a hymnal. Again, let me pick something out almost at random (whose title is in the first line):

Sing praise to God who reigns above,
The God of all creation,
The God of power, the God of love,
The God of our salvation;
With healing balm my soul he fills,
And every faithless murmur stills:
To God all praise and glory.
—Johann J. Schultz

The great prayers in the Christian tradition are another source of praise. A classic example comes from Francis of Assisi.

You are holy, Lord, the only God,
and your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong.
You are great.
You are the most high.
You are almighty.
You, holy Father, are
King of heaven and earth.
You are three and one,
Lord God, all good.
You are good, all good, supreme good,
Lord God, living and true.
You are love,
You are wisdom,
You are humility,
You are endurance.

You are rest,
 You are peace.
 You are joy and gladness.
 You are justice and moderation.
 You are all our riches,
 And you suffice for us.
 You are beauty.
 You are gentleness.
 You are our protector,
 You are our guardian and defender.
 You are courage.
 You are our haven and our hope.
 You are our faith,
 Our great consolation.
 You are our eternal life,
 Great and wonderful Lord,
 God almighty,
 Merciful Savior.

Such prayers are enthusiastic with praise, overflowing with joy. This is not me—at least, not a lot of mornings. So, the question naturally arises: "Isn't it hypocritical to use such a prayer when I'm not feeling the way the Psalmist, or whoever, did?"



Prayer Pearls

"God loves to be consulted."

—Charles Bridges

Yes and no. Some prayers of praise are really not me, and so I don't use them. But I would be foolish if I waited until I *felt* like praising God before I praised him. After all, I'm a pretty self-centered individual, and it might be a few years before I got around to it. But God is worthy of praise day in and day out.

I use prayers of praise not only to praise *God* but also to help *me* praise. I want to learn how to praise. I want to feel more "praiseful." Such praise prayers help me become the person I'd like to become, a person who is more aware of God's greatness.

One preacher put it like this: "You don't learn to praise in a day, especially since you may have been complaining for years! New habits take time to develop. But you can begin today and practice tomorrow, and the next day, until it becomes a part of you."

Confession

There is a certain logic to putting confession next. After reflecting on the absolute goodness of God, we become keenly aware that we are not all that good, that we fall far short of who he has created us to be, that we've failed him and failed ourselves. It's an easy step to move into prayers of confession.

Some people wonder why we should even dwell on our shortcomings. Won't that just drag us down? Shouldn't we just focus on the positive and what we've done right to help us move forward?



From the Good Book

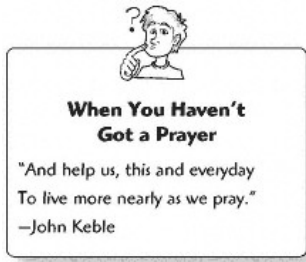
When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the Lord, "I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family."

—David, 2 Samuel 24:17

The problem is that thinking positive thoughts does not change reality, and part of reality is that we just don't live, act, or think as we ought. Another part of reality is that we feel badly about that. Yet another part of reality is that God is in the midst of reality and offers forgiveness and hope.

Besides, confession is not plaintive breast-beating, where we wallow in self-induced misery. There will be times when we are miserable, to be sure. We are capable of some terrible deeds. But when we confess to God, it is never with the question, "Will God forgive?" Instead, it is always with a sure hope: We have the courage to confess because we know we'll be accepted.

One line from the Bible puts it succinctly: "If we confess our sins . . . God is faithful and just, to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong" (1 John 1:9).



It is always good to be specific when it comes to confession. It is much better to pray, "Lord, I shouldn't have yelled at my kids yesterday," than to say, "Lord, I've not acted like I wanted to act yesterday." A vague confession will only lead to a vague sense of forgiveness.

This doesn't mean that generic prayers of confession aren't useful. I mentioned in Chapter 8, "Prayer Options," how meaningful I find one prayer of confession in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which begins like this:

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

But I use such prayers as a guide to elicit specific thoughts. I try to pause over each word or phrase and do a quick self-inventory: "...sinned against you in thought . . . word . . . and deed . . ., by what we have done . . . and by what we have left undone. . . ." And so on. This prayer, in particular, has an amazing ability to help me do an honest and full self-inventory.

As you incorporate confession into your regular prayer routine, you'll find yourself acknowledging the same shortcomings: It may be pride, lust, temper, self-centeredness, or whatever. This can get discouraging, and you may wonder if God will continue to forgive this sort of thing and whether it does any good to continue mentioning such stuff.

Yes, and yes. God's capacity to forgive is actually bigger than our capacity to sin, as hard as that is to believe some days.

And to acknowledge our habitual sins is simply a bit of housecleaning. For example, I try to keep my desk in order, but it regularly succumbs to chaos. I don't beat myself up when this happens, but I do acknowledge it. Then I set about straightening it up. I don't refuse to straighten it simply because odds are that it will become a mess again.

The same is true with confession: It's merely an acknowledgement that my soul is in a mess again and that it needs attention.

Thanksgiving

Confession, in turn, naturally moves into thanksgiving because we tend to be thankful when we recall that God sticks with us even when we don't stick with him. This then leads us to think of other things God has done for us, and that usually leads into thanksgiving.



Prayer Pearls

"God the Father understands prayers which are sighed rather than said, because he searches our hearts and can read our thoughts."
—John Stott

But that's not always the case. In fact, sometimes we get amnesia about our blessings and move right into pestering God for this and that. This easily can open us up to the spirit of ungratefulness, which is a close cousin of bitterness.

We've all met such people. They manage to find a cloud within every silver lining. Even when life grants them blessing after blessing, they manage to spend all their energy thinking about their handful of problems. They are not only a burden to themselves, but they're also annoying to others around them.

On the other hand, there are people like Ben, who used to work in the mail room at my office. Every day he was upbeat. He gave everyone a smile and a warm greeting. He never complained about his job, as menial as it could be. He not only asked about how others were doing, but he remembered what they said and followed up in later conversations. He was a grateful man—often mentioning his many blessings—and he lifted everyone around him.

I used to think it pretty corny and superficial when people would say, "Count your blessings." But when I was a pastor, I met people who had just endured some human disaster (the loss of a job, or even the loss of a spouse or child to sudden death), who pretty soon would start talking about their blessings and what they were still thankful for. They didn't deny their grief or loss, but it simply wasn't the total picture. Widows, for example, would lament their loss and then start talking about how thankful they were that they were able to have their husband as long as they did.

I discovered that "Count your blessings," is not an act of denial or a superficial response to suffering; it's a realistic appraisal of the situation. Life deals us blows, but never so many as to completely wipe out the blessing. Thanksgiving in prayer is a key discipline to remembering the blessing.

I don't want to be glib about this. Life sometimes can be truly horrific—famine, genocide, unspeakable acts of personal violence. Some people who have endured such things have found that, indeed, gratefulness is the immediate way out of despair—even many sufferers of the Holocaust have taken this approach. But others find it impossible to count their blessings because their blessings seem so paltry next to the disaster they've just endured. For them, *any* advice is probably inappropriate. Sometimes we need to honor the suffering of others by suffering with them in silence, letting God heal them how and when he would.

But aside from extraordinary circumstances, it's not bad advice to focus on those things for which we are grateful in our day-to-day life—and it's certainly better than counting your disasters.

This is one reason thanksgiving precedes petition in this and most prayer methods. So important is thanksgiving that it is often put before *and* after petition. Some would argue that gratefulness is *the* attribute of Christians: "Rejoice in the Lord always," wrote the apostle Paul—and then, to make sure his readers got it, he continued, "Again, I say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4, Revised Standard Version).



From the Good Book

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"

—The Korahites, Psalm 42:1, 2

Supplication:

Petition

Supplication is a long-winded word for asking God for help. Classically, these pleas for help fall into two categories: Requests for oneself, which are called "petitions," and requests for others, called "intercessions." Let's take them one at a time.

Let me try to clear up a noble but dumb idea that the spiritually mature don't ask God anything for themselves. Two reasons are usually given.

First, we incorrectly assume that God isn't interested in our mundane concerns. I refer you back to the Lord's Prayer and that little petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." There are few things more mundane than eating, and yet Jesus thinks it is a topic worthy of prayer.

Furthermore, the Bible is littered with comments that suggest God is, in fact, concerned about the little things. He is said to count the hairs on our heads. He is said to care for us as a shepherd cares for lost sheep. He is said to be a heavenly Father who values us as children.

Parents care about the little things. My 9-year-old worries whether she'll do well on her science test. My high school son is bored on a Friday night. My high school freshman just played badly in a basketball loss. In the cosmic sweep of things, these are indeed

petty issues, but I'm the father of these children, and I'm concerned about things they are concerned about. I can't help it.

God can't help it, either.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is weakness leaning on omnipotence."

—W. S. Bowden

Second, it's not always selfish to pray for yourself. Something can concern the self and yet not be selfish. Selfishness, on the other hand, occurs when we're inordinately concerned about ourselves. We've been created as individuals with yearnings, hopes, desires, dreams, wants, and needs—spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical. To seek these at the expense of others is selfish; to seek them, however, is not.

And to pretend that we don't have desires, or to say that we shouldn't have them, is sub-human. It is also sub-Christian. The Bible is a very human book, and it accepts people as they really are. For sure, people really are beings with desires. We want nicer homes. We want to be better people. We want attractive spouses. We want to be healthy. We want to grow spiritually. We want to be proud of our children. We want to eat well. And so on.

Jesus also speaks about this part of us nearly every time he speaks about prayer:

"Ask and you shall receive." (Matthew 7:7, RSV)

"You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it." (John 14:13)

"Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it." (Mark 11:24)

Jesus assumes that prayer will very much be concerned about asking all sorts of things from God.

This doesn't mean that God will honor every request, of course, and neither does it mean that every request is equally valid. A vacation home in the Bahamas or a new Lexus is not quite on par with wanting more patience with your children.

But that also doesn't mean that there are some restrictions about what we pray for. Prayer is a process by which we discover which of our desires are truly selfish and which are not, and it's about learning to curb those selfish desires. We pray for this or that, unsure of our motives, and wait for God's response—in prayer, in Scripture, in life, in circumstances. In this give and take of prayer, we discover what we're supposed to have—and what we're not supposed to have.

Those who are suspicious of petition are partly right: Prayer is first and foremost about aligning our wills to God's will. But the way that happens is not by denying that we have a will; it's by expressing our will to God and letting him affirm or shape that will as is necessary.



From the Good Book

"You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

—James, James 4:2, 3

Let's be clear: Selfish desires come in all sorts of disguises. The yearning for a 6,000-square-foot home may be selfish, but the prayer to be a good example to everyone around you can also be a form of selfishness. This prayer may arise out of spiritual pride: You may simply be wanting everyone to look up to you and praise you for your goodness.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Grant me grace, O merciful God, to desire ardently all that is pleasing to thee, to examine it prudently, to acknowledge it truthfully, and to accommodate it perfectly, for the praise and glory of thy name. Amen."

—St. Thomas Aquinas

The human heart is deceitful, and its motives are often difficult to fathom. But prayers of petition—telling God honestly what it is we're wanting—is about the best way to begin to discern what's really going on.

Supplication: Intercession

To intercede is to pray for others, and this is one of the most significant ways we can help others.

God has constructed reality so that there are a variety of ways to help others. For instance, let's say that my friend Tom comes down with a sore back and, after seeing the doctor, is ordered to stay in bed for a week. I'll naturally respond to this bit of news with words of encouragement. Perhaps I'll prepare some meals for Tom. Maybe I'll go to the video store to rent him some movies, or maybe I'll go to the library to check out some books. I'll take notes at a meeting he was supposed to attend. And so on.

I can also help Tom by praying for him. If he knows I'm praying for him, that will encourage him because he'll be aware at another level that I care about him. That is one of the psychological aspects of prayer. Here's another: My praying for Tom will help me reflect on how I can help Tom even more.

But prayer works at another level still. It unleashes a spiritual power that can do extraordinary things, everything from keeping Tom from frustration to actually healing his back. How exactly this all works remains a mystery, but it is the clear teaching of the Bible and the common experience of pray-ers through the centuries.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is not some mystic reasoning after the unknown; it is response to the God who speaks in Scripture, the God who personally acts in the lives of his people."

—Iain H. Murray

Some people like to systematically cover their bases when they pray. To make sure they regularly pray for everyone they're concerned about, they create a list and either pray through it every day or assign certain days for each part of the list. Here is one way to organize a prayer list:

Sunday: Immediate family

Monday: Extended family

Tuesday: Neighbors and friends

Wednesday: Coworkers

Thursday: People in groups you belong to (church, running club, online chat room)

Friday: The poor and needy

Saturday: Your community, the nation

Again, you don't want to become legalistic or get stuck in a rut. There is value, for instance, in regularly including all these parts of prayer in a certain order. Such discipline can, in the long run, help one grow deeper in prayer. But I, for one, find that I have to break out of routines every so often—change the order, eliminate parts, focus on only one aspect, etc. Then when I come back to my routine later, I come ready to appreciate its value afresh.

The Least You Need to Know

- We adore God by praising and worshipping him for how great he is.
- We need to keep our accounts up to date with God by confessing our wrong-doings.
- Each of us receives daily blessings from God, and we need to acknowledge them by giving thanks.
- Supplication is both petitioning God for our needs and interceding for the needs of others.

Chapter 11— Listen up



In This Chapter

- The importance of listening in prayer
- The difference between meditation and contemplation
- One method that will allow you to hear God

If prayer is "conversation with God," then prayer is not just about talking to God. It's also about listening to God. In our rush to unburden our hearts, this aspect of prayer is easily neglected—to our misfortune.

Silence Is Golden

Ever since owning my first car, my habit has been to start the engine and, as I put the car in gear and pull away, to find a radio station. Then one day, years into this habit and many cars later, the radio broke. Because of the nature of the problem and the state of my finances, it wasn't going to be fixed for a while, so for a few months, I found myself driving in silence.

At first, it was a pretty uncomfortable experience. I kept reaching for the radio, only to remember that it wasn't working. I didn't know quite what to do with my mind if I didn't have a song to sing along with or a talk show or news segment to listen in on. I had to live with my own thoughts (a scary proposition to be sure).

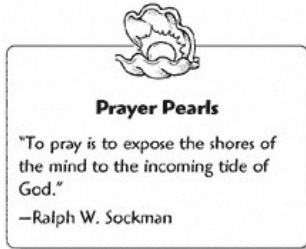
But in a few days, I found myself enjoying the experience. I realized there were few spaces in my life in which noise didn't bombard me. At home it was TV or radio or

CDs. At work it was the hum of fluorescent lights and office chatter. In stores it was Muzak. At the library, of course, there was silence, but the library was a place where I filled my head with thoughts as I looked up this book or that article. Here, in the car, was one place where I could simply be quiet, with no verbal or mental agenda.

I began to actually mull over things in a way I'd never done before. And I began to hear things—not voices, but thoughts that had never had a chance to make their way into my consciousness. Whether these were from God or not, I don't know. I do know that I began to understand my life a tad better, and I found I was better able to manage it as a result. I liked that so much that I began carving out other places for silence.

Prayer can become a habit that is filled with noise, namely the noise of my own thoughts and words. But if that is all it is, then prayer becomes mere self-talk. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard put it this way: "A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end, he realized that prayer is listening."

Prayer isn't *only* listening, but it is partly listening. And that part can have the most dramatic impact on the pray-er's life.



So how do you actually hear God? He interrupts our lives and speaks to us whenever and however he wants: through voices, visions, thoughts, experiences, and encounters with others. But this is a hit-or-miss proposition. For better results, we can actually cultivate a couple of practices to train our ears to better hear God.

Meditation

To meditate is to consciously mull over something—a passage from a book, a phrase, an object. It means to look at something from different perspectives, to understand the various parts of it, to weigh its meaning. In the context of prayer, to meditate is to do all this with one purpose: to try to discover what God might be saying to us.

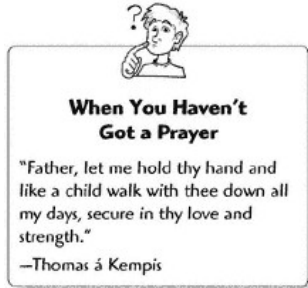
For example, let's say I were to meditate on this saying of Jesus: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). I'd begin by thinking about vines and branches, how branches grow out of the trunk of the vine, and how no fruit can grow on the branch if it isn't connected to the vine.

I'd move on to filling out the analogy: Christ is like the trunk, and I am a branch. And then I'd begin asking questions like these: What are the ways I "remain" in Christ? What more can I do to stay faithful to him? What more can I do to experience his presence in my life? What part of my spiritual life is lacking right now? Prayer? Worship? Loving others? What part needs the greatest attention?

After thinking in this vein, I might conclude that I've not been spending enough time actually reading the life and teachings of Christ, that I need to spend more time reading about the one whom I call Lord so that I can better understand how I might live my life.

Meditation may seem unspiritual because it seems so deliberate. But our thoughts, our reason, and our ability to discern insights are gifts from God, and are ways in which God speaks to us. Frankly, meditation isn't always as rational as it sounds, either. When I begin meditating, invariably my mind is forced down one path or another, and certain thoughts keep coming back to me over and over. I take this as movements of the Spirit, and I pursue such thought in my meditation.

Some days when I'm done, I have a specific "word" from the Lord. This could be something I'm more keenly aware of (that I'm forgiven, or that there is hope for a situation I face), or something I'm convinced that I'm supposed to do (phone a friend, give money to a charity, or be kind to a certain person at work).



Some days nothing specific comes to mind, and that's okay. I don't want to force these things. And some days, when I go about trying to do the thing I was so positive I was supposed to do, I find that it created more problems than it solved, or that it simply didn't work. I go back into prayer the next day and meditate on how I might have misheard or what I might do differently.

Mediation is not a formula, but an ongoing process, and learning to hear God—*really* hear—is a lifelong pursuit. It's something you never quite master (as if we could master God!), but it's something that we can get better at over time.

Contemplation

Many people use the terms *meditate* and *contemplate* as synonyms. In terms of prayer, however, it is helpful to think about each separately. These concepts teach us about two key ways to listen. If we employ our wills in meditation, then in contemplation, we try to let go. Meditation is like the counselor who asks questions and probes to discover what another is really saying. To contemplate, on the other hand, is simply to listen without conscious probing; it is to let the phrase or object have its way with us.

When I meditate on the saying of Jesus in my previous example, I ask questions of it and of myself, and I try to figure out what God is saying to me. To contemplate that passage, I do my best to put aside the rational and simply try to experience the passage. That may mean, for instance, allowing myself to become a part of the metaphor and letting my imagination go.

For example, I once did this with a story in the gospels during a time when I was struggling with the idea of grace. I had become a very busy person for God, chairing committees at church, teaching Sunday school, writing articles on spirituality, attending all my kids' sporting events, helping them with their homework, trying to spend time with my wife, working overtime at the office—and on and on. I felt that God had given me many opportunities to serve him and others, and I just kept piling them on until I found myself weary and discouraged.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is the pulse of the renewed soul; and the constancy of its beat is the test and measure of the spiritual life."

—Octavius Winslow

I spoke about this with my spiritual director, and she suggested that I contemplate the following story and see what happened:

"One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them, but the disciples told them not to bother him. But when Jesus saw what was happening, he was very displeased with his disciples. He said to them, 'Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, anyone who doesn't have their kind of faith will never get into the kingdom of God.' Then he took the children into his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them." (Mark 10:13–16)

I tried to become a part of this story by entering it as one of the children, as my spiritual director had suggested. And this is how the scene unfolded: Jesus lifted me upon his lap. We talked for a bit, and then he put me down and said, "Now go play."



Prayer Pearls

"In prayer it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart."

—John Bunyan

I was so surprised by this that I was startled out of the contemplation. This was the last thing I had expected Jesus to say to me. "Now get back to work," yes. But not "Go play." This seemed so irresponsible of Jesus. Play was, well, such a waste of time.

And yet as I ruminated on this and spoke about it with my spiritual director, it became clear that this was a word of grace from God. It wasn't good works or duty or responsibility that God was calling me to—he was calling me to joy, the type of joy a child experiences when he plays. Of course, I was called to serve God and others. But this isn't what he wanted of me most. First and foremost, I was accepted for who I was, a child of God; as a child, what God wanted for me more than anything was that I would enjoy life, just as a child enjoys play.

We can also contemplate a painting or a symbol or a sunset or a garden. Usually the voice of God is not a specific message, but just a larger sense of God's presence in the world or a more profound sense of God's presence in you.

In practice, meditation and contemplation often merge in prayer. Sometimes I begin by probing a passage only to find that after a few minutes, it is probing me! Sometimes I begin by contemplating a vista, but then I find myself analyzing it for meaning. Still, it is helpful, I think, to recognize the two means of listening to God.



From the Good Book

"Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled. O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come."

—David, Psalm 65:1, 2

Dreams

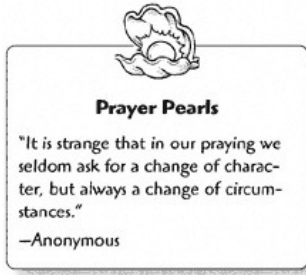
I'm not going to spend a lot of time with this topic, partly because it has never been a meaningful part of my prayer life, and partly because I know little about it. But I do know this: To some people, God reveals his will in dreams.

Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus, was such a man. The Gospel of Matthew says that it was by means of a dream that Joseph was told to flee from Herod and to take his wife and infant son to Egypt. In another dream, Joseph was told to return to Israel. The Bible, Old and New Testaments, have many such stories about other people influenced by dreams directly from God.

That also happens in life today. Some people fall asleep wondering about which college to attend or which job to take, and they have a dream. When they awake, they are sure what their decision should be.

Psychology chalks this up to the work of the subconscious, that in a dream state, certain parts of our minds can work more freely to solve problems. This strikes me as a reasonable explanation, though hardly complete. Many people awake with a sense not just that they've been talking to themselves, but that another has entered into their minds and spoken to them with words or images. Is it possible that it is not either/or—either psychology or spirituality—but both?

Dreams, of course, can be pretty wacky, and many are clearly the work of the subconscious: If I dream of having an affair with a neighbor, it's not likely that this is a voice from God. Other dreams are stories with amazing plot twists or striking symbolism. As such, they can be mighty difficult to interpret.



No matter: Whenever you have a dream in which you feel God may be speaking to you, you are wise to take advantage of your connection to the larger prayer community. In other words, get a second opinion. Talk with another who is seeking to know God better, and ask if what you "heard" really makes sense. It isn't a bad idea to check dreams against the plain teaching of Jesus, either.

Lectio Divina: A Method to Listen

Let me conclude this section by offering one specific model of meditative/contemplative prayer. It's a practice that goes back to the early centuries of the church and was made popular by Benedict of Nursia, the founder of the Benedictine monastic order. This method has three stages, each with its own Latin name. Let's look at each stage in greater detail.

1— Lectio

You begin by reading a passage from the Bible or some other spiritual book, preferably one that you are already familiar with. This is not an exercise in reading something for the first time as much as exploring at a deeper level something you've read. Read until you come to a sentence or a phrase that strikes you in some way. It may seem odd, or you may see something in it that you've never noticed before. It may fill you with a sense of peace or joy. When you come to that sentence or phrase, stop.

2— Meditatio

Though called "meditation," it is really closer to contemplation, as I've spoken of it already (see what I mean about these two terms melding?). Read the phrase aloud, over and over, putting emphasis on different words. Read parts of the phrase with varying emphasis, almost chanting some parts.

Let's take this saying of Jesus: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). So you might say: "*Come* to me, all who are weary. Come *to me* all who are weary. Come to me *all* who are weary. Come to me all who are *weary*. Weary. Weary. Weary. Burdened. Burden."

And so on. The goal is not to grasp the line rationally, but to let the words soak into you.

3—

Oratio

Keep repeating words and phrases until you are ready to stop in silence and simply dwell on them in prayer. Then begin to probe their meaning, especially their meaning *for you*. "Lord, what burdens am I needlessly carrying? In what areas of my life are you ready to lift a burden from me, if I would only let you?" And so on. Pray a question or two, and then wait in silence for any thoughts. Then ask more questions, and wait for more answers.


**When You Haven't
Got a Prayer**

"Dear Lord, never let me be afraid
to pray for the impossible."

—Dorothy Shellenberger

End the time by simply sitting in silence, basking in the presence of God.

The Least You Need To Know

- An important part of prayer is listening because God speaks to us in a variety of ways.
- In meditation, we use our minds and wills to look closely at a truth of God from different perspectives.
- In contemplation, we give our entire selves over to God and his truth and allow ourselves to fully experience his presence.

Chapter 12— Sensual Prayer



In This Chapter

- Why employing all the senses in prayer can help deepen prayer
- How to use objects that have traditionally helped employ the senses in prayer

We've already talked about the difference posture and setting can make in prayer. In addition, many people of prayer have discovered that when they employ all their senses in praying, the act of prayer can be a richer experience.

How It Works

It seems only natural that when you want to pray with some seriousness, you find a quiet place and shut your eyes—that is, you try to disengage the two most active senses of sight and sound to focus on God. There are many pray-ers who find this the most meaningful way to pray.

Yet another approach has a long history as well. In this one, pray-ers go to some quiet place to get away from the usual sights and sounds that bombard them, but only to re-engage the senses in a new task and redirect them to a new focus.

God has created us as both as spiritual and as physical beings, and he has created a physical place in which we live. He also has given us five means to navigate his creation: sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. When someone is not able to use one of these senses, we say he is "handicapped"—or "impaired" or "challenged." Some pray-ers may be handicapping themselves because they are unaware of or deliberately avoid engaging all their senses in prayer.

To put it more positively, many pray-ers have found that when they engage all their senses in prayers, their prayer lives take on new meaning. Over the centuries, the use of certain objects in prayer has helped them engage their senses.



Prayer Pearls

"If there is anything in our lives that cannot be prayed about, we may be quite sure that thing has no business to be there at all."

—Guy King

Crucifix/Cross

The cross has been a symbol in many religions. Egyptians thought the *tau* cross (which looks like a capital "T") represented life. For the ancient Greeks, the four points of the cross represented earth, air, water, and fire—what they believed were the four eternal elements.

But today in the West, the cross is associated with Christianity, and it is its most popular symbol, by far. This is surprising when you think about it. The cross was an instrument of torture and death in the Roman Empire, the equivalent to our electric chair. Perhaps if Jesus would have been executed in an electric chair, Christians would display electric chairs in churches and hang them around their necks.



From the Good Book

"Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

—David, Psalm 103:1–5

Though the gruesomeness of crucifixion is nearly forgotten, the fact of Christ's death has not been. For Christians, that death has multiple meanings.

It shows God's love: "God so loved the world," says one biblical writer, "that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

It shows grace: "While we were utterly helpless, sinners, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners" (Romans 5:6).

It shows God's paradoxical wisdom and power. The apostle Paul once explained it this way: "When we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. This 'foolish' plan of God is far wiser than the wisest human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:23–25).

When it comes to the cross, on it goes, ad infinitum. It might be fair to say that every book written about the Christian faith has, in some sense, been an attempt to understand the meaning of the cross. This cross transcends human understanding, and thus it has become a key symbol of prayer.

You'll find crosses in two basic forms. The crucifix is a cross with Jesus hanging on it, designed to remind us of the sufferings of Christ on our behalf. The empty cross, though also acknowledging Christ's death, is said to recall his conquering death through his resurrection.

On top of that, you'll see a variety of patterns. Entire books are devoted to showing that variety, but here let me simply look at three:

The Latin Cross: Simple and elegant, it is the cross in its most basic form. This is the cross you'll see more than any other.

The Celtic Cross: Today Presbyterians think of this as their cross, but it was first used by Celtic Christians in Ireland, starting in the A.D. 500s to 600s. The circle in the middle is said to represent the earth, with Christ having authority over the whole world. It also represents the sun, as a circle of light, and therefore Christ as the light of the world. As a circle, a figure without beginning or end, it also signifies eternity.



Prayer Pearls

"Never make the blunder of trying
to forecast the way God is going to
answer your prayer."

—Oswald Chambers

The Jerusalem Cross: Like most symbols, the four crosses within a cross can represent a variety of things: the four corners of the earth and Jesus' sacrifice for the whole world; the four Gospels; and so on.

And on it goes. Some books contain outlines of as many as 60 different styles of crosses, each with its own history and symbolism.

Candles

Candles have been a regular part of prayer in many religions for many centuries. The practice may have begun merely as a means to bring light to a darkened sanctuary, but it soon became a powerful symbol of hope. Though we have incandescent bulbs to

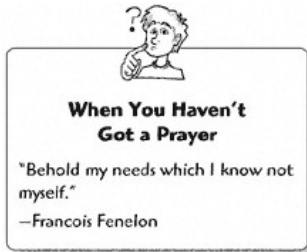
light our way these days, candles remain an important element in worship and prayer—the gentle flickering, the shape and color of the flame, and the soft light all lend themselves to a prayerful mood.

In Christian circles, candles represent Christ as the light of the world, the one who brings light into our spiritual darkness. Candles are also lit as a prayer, especially before shrines or in memory of someone who has died: The idea is that, though our words and body may cease praying, the candle continues to burn as a kind of ongoing prayer. In another sense, the candle continues to burn until it burns out as a symbol of our desire to give ourselves fully to Christ until we die.

Many people set up candles where they pray each day. Sometimes it's a single candle, sometimes two, or three, or seven. Nearly every number has some sort of symbolism, though in practice the numeric symbol seems to be less important than the power of the light itself.

Incense

So far we've been talking about objects that affect sight: This is one that affects the sense of smell as well. The burning of incense has been a feature of religious ceremonies since ancient times. It is mentioned as early as 1530 B.C. on an inscribed tablet near the Sphinx at Giza, Egypt, and it was used in early Jewish religion and later by the Romans, in both religious and civic ceremonies. In Christian circles, incense is widely used in Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox churches.



Some people burn incense in their homes as they pray. The rising smoke is a symbol of prayers going up to God, and the unique aroma tangibly sets a person in the context of prayer. In fact, the sense of smell is one of the most powerful at getting us to associate one thing with another. When I smell motor oil, for instance, my mind immediately conjures up images of working on my car. When I smell turkey cooking, I'm instantly transported to one of the many Thanksgiving Day get-togethers I've enjoyed. After you've experienced the use of incense in worship or prayer, you begin to become more prayerful when you inhale its aroma.

Icons

Though all manner of paintings, sculptures, woodcuts, and the like can be used to aid prayer, I'll mention here the type of image most associated with prayer: icons.

Icons are the special contribution of the Eastern Orthodox churches. The Orthodox believe that icons are not just human pictures or visual aids to contemplation and prayer. Icons are sometimes called "windows to heaven," or "witnesses of the presence

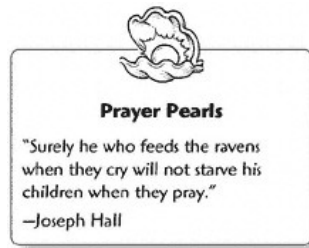
of the kingdom of God to us, and so of our own presence to the kingdom of God in the church." That is, icons may help us see the reality of God more clearly in the here and now.

In terms of content, icons are depictions of biblical and church saints and angels. They are not meant to be realistic depictions of natural features but spiritual depictions that seek to illuminate the transcendent qualities of the subject. There are strict rules about creating icons (for example, they cannot be 3D because that might tempt the viewer to think of icons as an attempt at physical realism, or as mere paintings).

Though icons are not just aids to prayer, they are at least that. It's not that people pray *to* them, but *through* them. By focusing on the saint and his or her spiritual qualities, we can be transported to that which lies beyond the saint—namely, God.

Prayer and Fasting

Fasting is not an object, but it does involve the senses and thus deserves attention here. Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food to dedicate yourself to a particular end. As a temporary denial of the senses, it paradoxically accents those senses and thus helps us enter into prayer more deeply.



Fasting serves a variety of purposes: It's a form of self-denial. It reminds us of the suffering of others and of Christ. It helps us appreciate not only food, but all of God's gifts. In and of itself, however, fasting has also helped many people experience more intimacy with God.

Skeptics chalk this up to delusion brought on by lack of sustenance, but those who have actually had the experience know otherwise. I remember one prayer time in particular that came after a day-long fast. As I went into prayer, I felt God's presence as tangibly as I feel the chair I'm sitting on now. I've fasted enough to know the difference between hunger that toys with my emotional state and the presence of something beyond emotion.

There are all manner of fasts, from skipping one meal to not eating for a week. Usually when people fast, it is for one day. That usually means three meals in a 24-hour period: That can mean eating dinner one night, but not breakfast or lunch the next day, and only having dinner after 24 hours is up. Or, it can mean simply skipping breakfast, lunch, and dinner one day and not eating until the next. Some fast by only eschewing solid food: They feel free to drink fruit juices during the day to keep up their energy.

There are no hard and fast (excuse the pun) rules here. The point is to put yourself in a state of self-denial so that at various times of the day, your body reminds you what you're doing. Every time you feel hungry, it is an opportunity to pray, as is the time you would normally spend eating.



From the Good Book

"I call with all my heart; answer me, O Lord, and I will obey your decrees. I call out to you; save me and I will keep your statutes. I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises."

—David, Psalm 119:145–148

Odds and Ends

The above are the most common and traditional aids to Christian prayer, but they hardly limit what can be done. In one worship service, we each received a nail, and we used that during prayer to remind us of Christ's crucifixion. Certainly music can help deepen prayer. We are limited only by our fortitude: To remind themselves of Christ's death and their own mortality, many medieval saints meditated on skulls!

Then again, you may not be a tactile person, and the whole idea of using anything physical to pursue the spiritual just seems like a big distraction. You have a strong tradition behind you. But so do those who feel that they have to employ as many senses as possible to fully enter into prayer.

The Least You Need to Know

- The spiritual symbolism behind physical objects allows (some of) us to enter more deeply into God's presence.
- Because we are both physical and spiritual beings, we can engage our senses as we seek God.
- By denying the senses in fasting, we can also enter God's presence by not allowing our bodily appetite to get in the way.

Chapter 13— Healing Prayer



In This Chapter

- The healing power of prayer
- Real-life stories about the results of healing prayer
- Clearing up some misconceptions about healing prayer

In many churches (from Presbyterian to Pentecostal), just before the morning prayer, people are asked to mention concerns they would like the rest of the church to pray for. What you'll find is that most prayer requests are for healing, sometimes emotional healing but mostly physical healing. Everything from colds to cancer are mentioned.

It doesn't matter their tradition, or even lack of tradition—people care about their physical and emotional well-being, and healing naturally becomes a topic of prayer. Yet a lot of misconceptions circulate about healing prayer, and we are wise to clarify some matters before we enter into this type of prayer.

Healing Happens

Let's deal with the doubters first, those who wonder whether prayers of healing are a waste of time.

Because we live in a rationalistic age, in which science and medicine do "miracles," it is tempting to think that healing prayer is now pointless. In other ages, when people had no other recourse, they prayed to God for healing. Today, the argument goes, we shouldn't pray to God for healing; we should see a specialist.

Well, it doesn't have to be an either/or situation. We can pray for healing *and* go see a doctor. Yes, most of the time God heals through natural means, through the work of able physicians and through the body's healing capacity. But sometimes God goes beyond natural means to bring healing, even today.



Prayer Pearls

"When I pray, coincidences happen,
and when I do not, they don't."

—William Temple

Another common doubt is this: Sometimes we're tempted to think that prayers for healing are nothing more than a form of positive thinking, of visualizing. In other words, we might think that prayer is psychologically useful, but not necessarily spiritually powerful.

Again, it's not a matter of either/or. Of course, prayer *is* psychologically powerful. After all, God has created us in such a way that almost anything we do has a psychological affect on us. But in prayer, more than psychology is at work—God is at work, too.

How can we "prove" this? Well, healing prayer is not subject to proof in a scientific sense. In fact, the most important things of life can't be "proved." For example, my wife loves me. Though there are lots of indications that this is true, none of them is absolute proof: She could be lying to me and putting on an act for some ulterior motive. Then again, I *know* she loves me, and I know that as surely as I know that I'm typing at a computer now.

Healing prayer works like that. You can't prove it, yet you know it's real. The only way to talk about it sensibly is through stories. Let me tell you about the experiences of two people, one who was healed physically and one who was healed emotionally. I picked them not because they are unusual, but because they are so typical. You'll find such stories in many Christian books and periodicals, including *Guideposts* (the source of the second story) and *Christian Reader* (the source of the first).



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"I am your servant! Everything I have
is yours. But even as I say that, I
know you are serving me more than
I am serving you. At your command,
all of the resources of heaven and
earth are at my disposal, and ever
the angels help me."

—Thomas à Kempis

Physical Healing

As he sat in his Phoenix, Arizona, home in late November 1996 (the Tuesday before Thanksgiving), Rich Payton began shivering unexpectedly. Chills ran through his body so hard that his teeth rattled. Rich, an administrator of the Boys and Girls Clubs, thought to himself, "This is the worst possible time for me to be coming down with the flu."

It became increasingly clear, however, that the problem wasn't the flu: Rich didn't eat or sleep much for the next three days, and he began feeling pain in his right arm and

left leg. When his right arm swelled and became hot and sensitive to touch, his wife, Heidi, rushed him to the emergency room.

After running tests, the doctor announced to Heidi that Rich had a rare disease, a group A strep bacteria called *necrotising fascitis*, also known as "flesh-eating" bacteria. This bacteria had already entered his bloodstream, and it was killing off muscle and heading toward his vital organs. If it reached them, he had no chance of survival. At it was, the mortality rate was 70 percent, despite aggressive treatment. In any event, his leg and arm would have to be amputated.

Doctors rushed him to the operating room and tried to clean out or "debride" the affected tissues. They stalled on the amputation as they became increasingly convinced that Rich's chances of survival were nil. They told Heidi to contact Rich's parents and to prepare for the worst.

For Heidi, preparing meant prayer—not only her prayers, but those of friends and church members. For the next two weeks, she sat with her husband—who was so drugged on morphine to kill the pain that he remembers little of that time—and tried to encourage him. "Sleep sound in Jesus," she whispered, quoting a line from their daughter's favorite lullaby. Heidi struggled with grief, but her shock and mourning slowly turned to peace as she became assured that God was in control.

And then things began to turn for Rich, so much so that by the middle of December, the doctors announced that somehow the bacteria had disappeared from his body. They said they had no idea why it was gone, but it *was* gone. They said that Rich was a walking miracle.

Doctors don't completely understand how this bacteria works normally, and there's no question that the medical procedures helped. But those involved directly in the event seem to agree with Heidi, who says, "I knew that heaven had been bombarded with prayer and had retaliated with volleys of peace, strength, and healing."

Psychological Healing

This is an older story, but one of my favorites. You'll see that it parallels so many stories of addiction that we hear about these days. Harold Hughes was a man who would go on to become governor and then a senator from Iowa, but in his early years he was addicted to alcohol, and drinking was ruining his life. Harold drank on the job (he ran a small association of truck drivers), and on top of that he was in the habit of verbally abusing his wife and children at home. He promised his family dozens of times—after each binge of drinking and abusive behavior—that he would quit drinking, but he never managed to break his addiction.

One night, when his wife had scheduled them to attend a dinner party, Harold stopped into a bar on the way home to have "just one drink." When 11:00 rolled around, he was drunk and depressed. He came home to an empty house and lay down on the couch, his head pounding with nausea—and guilt. The years of abuse and lack

of control suddenly assaulted him. A sense of shame and self-loathing sank deeper into him as he lay there.

"What was the point of living?" he thought. "I've failed everyone who has ever meant anything to me; I'm a disgrace to my town. I'm a hypocrite. I can't do anything right. I am an evil, rotten drunk, a liar. And what should happen to evil men? They deserve to die."

He got up and went to the closet where he kept his shotgun. He slid three shells into the magazine and pumped one into the chamber. With tears streaming down his face, he lay down again and put the shotgun on his chest and the muzzle into his mouth. He then got up and moved to the bathroom because, as he remembered thinking, it would be easier to clean up.



From the Good Book

"I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

—Moses, Numbers 11:14–15

An even more terrible sadness now filled him, and the thought came to him that he should explain all this to God, who could then at least forgive him for this final sin. He knelt and prayed, "Oh God, I'm a failure, a drunk, a liar, and a cheat. I'm lost and hopeless and want to die. Forgive me for doing this," and then he broke into sobs. "Please take care of Eve and the girls. Please help them forget me. . . ." He slid to the floor, convulsing and sobbing. He was totally exhausted, and he lay drained and still.

He didn't know for how long, but in the quiet, something happened: "A warm peace seemed to settle deep within me, filling the terrible emptiness, driving out the self-hate and condemnation." Harold felt that God was reaching down to him, and joy suddenly filled him.

He looked back at that as the moment when the healing of his alcoholism had begun. He still had to regain the trust of his wife and children. He had to change his patterns of behavior. He had to learn not to run from but to deal with his crises. He began attending Alcoholics Anonymous and reading his Bible. And he began praying.



From the Good Book

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

—David, Psalm 139:23, 24

Two Misconceptions

Such stories are sometimes criticized for their predictable plot and for their superficial treatment of the human condition. I'm not suggesting that such things happen all the time, or that they'll happen to everyone who prays. But if we accept them for what they are—simple testimonies of people who have been remarkably changed by healing prayer—then they speak volumes.

Many people have tried to determine the key to healing. They want to figure out what they have to do to guarantee, or at least improve the chances of, their healing. This has led to two misconceptions about healing prayer that I would like to clear up. As is the case with so many things, there is some truth in each, but there's also a lot of misunderstanding.

I—

You Have to Have Enough Faith

It is clear that faith is a key to healing. Jesus himself told people he had healed, "Your faith has made you well." But many people take this insight a step too far: They think they are responsible for manufacturing this faith, that they must work up some sort of supreme inner confidence in God. Furthermore, such teaching implies that if they are not healed, the fault lies with them: They simply didn't manufacture enough faith.

This is patently false. There was no person with more faith and confidence in God than Jesus Christ. And he prayed to God that he would not have to be crucified, but God didn't answer his prayer. We can hardly chalk up that "failure" to Jesus' lack of faith.

The type of faith that leads to healing is not a form of positive thinking that we work up, but it's the receiving of a gift that comes from God. Sometimes when people face a personal crisis, immediately a sense of peace overtakes them. They are confident from that moment on that everything will work out. This is not faith working up to peace, but a gift of peace that brings faith.

2—

You Have to Pray in the Right Way

That means praying "in Jesus' name" and/or anointing with oil and/or the practice of laying on of hands and/or whatever. In this case, a prayer *help* has become a prayer *requirement*, almost a magical formula.

**Prayer Pearls**

"Today any successful and competent businessman will employ the latest and best-tested methods in production, distribution, and administration, and many are discovering that one of the greatest of all efficiency methods is prayer power."

—Norman Vincent Peale

Let's be clear: All these practices can certainly help. To pray "in Jesus' name" simply means to pray by his power and in his will. The laying on of hands in prayer is an ancient practice, in which people place their hands on your head, shoulders, or arms and pray for you. Anointing with oil (a symbol of abundance and blessing) is also an ancient practice: One person wets his thumb with oil and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person who is being prayed for.

Such practices speak to us in inexplicable ways, deep into our souls and psyches. This is why God has ordained their use. But healing prayer is not a magic formula. Healing does not *depend* on such practices. Healing is a gift that can come through prayer, but as a gift it is not something we control.

**From the Good Book**

"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

—Peter and John, Acts 4:29–31

Instead, healing is something we can open ourselves up to. That means always being open to the possibility of miraculous healing, and even praying for it. It might also mean arguing with God when he doesn't heal. It means, as you might have guessed, entering into a conversation with God about even those parts of your life that need healing, looking for his blessings, thanking him when it comes, and still trusting him when it doesn't.

Trusting God when there is no answer, of course, is not always easy. People who do not get healed wonder if God really exists. Other begin to doubt that he cares about them. Still others become bitter at him. You'll find these and other reactions all through the Bible, and you'll discover some fuller explanations for unanswered prayer in Chapter 15, "Dealing with Doubts: No Answers." For now, suffice it to say that when God denies a request, even a request in which life hangs in the balance, it does not mean he no longer cares or does not exist. The one who felt utterly abandoned—Jesus at Gethsemane, the night before his crucifixion, when he prayed to be delivered from death—was still God's "beloved Son." It is a mystery this business of suffering (including unanswered prayer), but it is a mystery finally bathed in love.

The Least You Need to Know

- There are unexplainable cases of healing that go beyond science into the realm of supernatural miracle.
- We can't work up our own faith in God to be healed, and we can't achieve healing with a specific formula.

Chapter 14— Handling the Seven Distractions



In This Chapter

- The main distractions people experience in prayer
- Strategies for handling these distractions

If it's easy to get started in prayer, then it's also easy to get distracted during prayer. This is true of any new habit we're seeking to form, but it is especially true of prayer. We're trying to engage in an activity that can transcend normal human experience, and yet human nature keeps getting in the way. Here are seven common distractions of prayer and how to deal with them.

"My Mind Wanders"

The most common distraction is the wandering mind. You start to pray, let's say, about your 10-year-old who just started school, and as you do, you remember how hard it was when you started fifth grade when your family moved to Chicago. But you also remember that your dad took you to a Cubs game in late September that year, and you liked the Cubs right away, and you wish Ron Santo were still playing because he was a better player than he is a radio announcer. That reminds you that the car radio needs to be taken in to be repaired, but you think you're going to try someone else this time, because the last time. . . .

And then you remember that you're supposed to be praying, but by this time you can't remember where you were.

In one way, it's surprising that our minds so easily wander. Prayer is conversation with God, after all. You'd think there would be nothing more interesting than talking with the creator of heaven and earth. And yet, though we can stay riveted on a cheap novel for hours, we can't give more than a minute to spiritual things without our minds wandering.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Lord, thy will be done in father, mother, child, in everything and everywhere; without a reserve, without a but, an if, a limit."

—St. Francis de Sales

When we're distracted repeatedly during the same prayer time, and when this happens day after day, we're tempted to give up. But if we can put this in perspective, we won't get so easily discouraged.

First, when it comes to any activity that demands a lot of the mind, we get easily distracted. I try to stitch into my reading routine a "blast from the past" once in a while, anything from Plato's *Republic* to Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*. Invariably, there are passages where the mind just doesn't want to stay focused. That's because it's being challenged; just like a muscle resists when first being asked to lift a weight, so the mind resists when it faces a new challenge.

Second, the wandering mind is a problem for beginners and experienced pray-ers alike. John Bunyan, who wrote the spiritual classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, articulated this frustration as well as anyone: "None knows how many by-ways the heart hath and back lanes to slip away from the presence of God." The biography of every spiritual giant contains lines like these.



Prayer Pearls

"God communicates or talks to us through the Bible, the circumstances of life, and the inward persuasion of his Holy Spirit. But we can communicate with him through the single means of prayer. There is no other medium by which men can converse with God."

—Harold Lindsell

Third, the wandering mind is a problem intrinsic to prayer. We are required to engage our entire humanity—heart, mind, soul, and strength—in prayer. We are told to bring to God all our cares and concerns, all our thoughts and questions. When we're in his presence—especially if we feel comfortable in God's presence—we are going to tend to wander over landscape that is important to us. Prayer is not a rigid routine we practice in the presence of a bureaucratic God who wishes that our prayers would be more orderly. It is a conversation—and a messy one, at that—with someone we love and who loves us.

It is this insight that can give us a practical way to deal with the wandering mind. Our temptation after a bit of wandering is to abruptly halt, mentally chastise ourselves, and get back to "real" prayer. Instead, we might simply admit that our minds have wandered into an area that, in fact, really interests us—that's where the mind usually goes, after all. As such, instead of casting it out of our prayer, we can incorporate that

wandering, and even use it to take us back to what we began praying about in the first place. Taking the example above, I might do this:

"...that reminds me, I need to take in the car radio to be repaired, but I need to take it to someone else, because last time that jerk at Robinson's Car Stereo... Oops! Where was I, Lord? Okay, I pray for my attitude toward that guy; it's obvious that I'm still angry with him. Forgive me, and help me to forgive him. I do love the simple pleasure of listening to the radio while I drive, and I thank you for such good gifts—like the game of baseball, which is really a silly sport in a lot of ways, but for some reason it brings me great pleasure. Thank you for that. And that first year in Chicago—well, it was difficult, though my dad really helped me get through it. Help me to be a good father to my daughter when I get home this evening, especially because this is her first day at a new school."

This is where complete honesty in prayer is vital. We may put ourselves into a pious mood and try to pray about others and about spiritual things, but when our minds keep wandering back to our own concerns and "petty" things, there's no sense in trying to fool God. Our mind wanders to those things that really are important to us. We might as well admit that and make them a part of our prayer. We may wish that we weren't so selfish and petty, but the fact is, we are sometimes. And that frustration, too, can become a topic of prayer.



From the Good Book

"...He will swallow up death forever. The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.'"

—Isaiah, Isaiah 25:8, 9

"I'm Bored"

There are many reasons we might find ourselves bored in or with prayer, and the first thing to do when bored is to try to find the source of our boredom.

We may simply be stuck in the rut of routine—same thing, same way, every day. The solution for this, of course, is simple: Do something different. This may include one of the following ideas:

Pray during a different time of the day.

Change locations.

Try different postures.

Change the order of your routine.

Change the book you're reading.

Try different styles of prayer.

Then again, boredom may not be so simple. Sometimes we're bored precisely because the book we're reading or the prayer routine we're trying is challenging us to go deeper. Let's say I've just added praise and adoration to my prayer routine, but I find praising and adoring God pretty boring. It may be that I'm bored because, well, I'm ungrateful. I just don't care about God's greatness as much as my day-to-day life.

The solution here is two-fold. First, I must admit to God my lousy attitude. Second, I must continue my routine right through the boredom until some of my ungratefulness is cured.

Finally, boredom may be the product of sheer selfishness. I may be seeking some experience in prayer, or I may be demanding that prayer do something for me; when it doesn't do that immediately, I become bored. I may be approaching prayer as I do a television show: If it doesn't hook me in a couple of minutes, I flip channels.

When this is the case, I find it helpful to remind myself that prayer is not about me. Though I'm going through a time when prayer seems to be doing nothing for me, I can still be praying for others. And there isn't a time when those I love don't need prayer: Right now, I have teenage children who are trying to figure out adolescence, a wife who is trying to fulfill the demands of both work and home, a friend who is struggling to figure out what he's supposed to do with his life, another who has cancer—and on it goes. To deny them my prayers because I'm bored—well, I may be selfish, but I hope I'm not that selfish (all right—sometimes I am).

While we're on the subject, let's examine this business about prayer not seeming to do anything for us. We do well to remind ourselves that many experiences in life don't *appear* to be doing anything for us when they are actually changing us profoundly. School is just such an experience. It was a rare day growing up when I'd come from school and feel as if I'd learned something new. It all seemed so routine and boring; so much of it was stuff I already knew—or so I thought.

And yet, by the time I finished sixth grade, I knew a heck of a lot more than I did when I entered kindergarten. When exactly that happened is hard to say. But all the time I thought school wasn't doing anything for me, it was doing a whole lot. The school of prayer is very much like that.

"I Feel Restless"

I get into moods when prayer seems like such a waste of time. I'd rather be getting something done: write another chapter, fix the drip in the kitchen sink, wax my car, prepare a flower bed. I'm a person who likes to stay busy, and I get a great deal of satisfaction from accomplishing things. When I am overtaken with this spirit, I find it very difficult to sit down to pray because a lot of the time prayer doesn't feel very "useful."



Prayer Pearls

"A person who reads a book on prayer but does not put its suggestions into practice may possibly find the book interesting, but he will not find the great spiritual adventure which prayer can give him."

—Donald J. Campbell

In such moods, I probably need to pray more than ever. Work has a way of filling the time allotted to it. There is always more to be done, and if I let my to-do list run my life, it will run my life right into the ground. If man does not live by bread alone, neither does he live by work alone.

This is why God created the Sabbath—one day a week in which work is discouraged and worship and play and relationships are encouraged. This is not just a divine suggestion, but one of the Ten Commandments: "Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." That was written for accomplishment junkies like me.

The reasoning behind the commandment is probably the most interesting part of it: "Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the seventh day is a day of rest, dedicated to the Lord, your God. . . . For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; then he rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 20:11). If it's good enough for the Lord, it ought to be good enough for me.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Fill up that which our lives have left behind. Undo that which we have done amiss. Repair the places we have wasted, bind the hearts we have wounded. Dry the eyes which we have flooded. Make the evil we have done work for good so that we ourselves would not know it."

—Prayer for the past

Prayer is a mini-Sabbath stuck into our daily routines. It's a time to step back from activity, thank God for the goodness of life, pray for others, and put our own lives in perspective. If I don't have time for that, I'm way too busy.

"I Don't Know What to Pray For"

Writers get writer's block. Pray-ers get pray-er's block. Some days I bow my head and my mind goes completely blank. I just can't think of anything to pray.

Fortunately, the problem is easily cured. One of four methods works for me:

1. Pray about it. I start praying about the fact that I don't know what to pray for, about my frustration, boredom, and so on.

2. Start reading. I stop praying and pick up my Bible or devotional material and just start reading. This gets my mind focused on things spiritual, and soon it starts me thinking about areas in my own life that need attention; it may also get me thinking about others' needs as well.

3. Journal. When my mind goes blank, I put my pen to work. I start entering my thoughts into my journal, even if I have to begin with: "Lord, I don't know what to pray for. I don't know why I go through periods like this. . . ."

4. Create a prayer list. Here's one adapted from Chapter 10, "ACTS Now":

Immediate family

Extended family

Neighbors and friends

Coworkers

People in groups you belong to (church, running club, online chat room)

The poor and needy

Your community, the nation

"I'm in a Bad Mood"

Sometimes I come to prayer irritated. I'm feeling rushed or angry or just out of sorts—I'm certainly not in any mood to pray. Two courses of action present themselves immediately:

1. Don't pray. Sometimes I just need time to settle down. I walk into the house some evenings pretty grumpy. I'd like to be able to talk with my wife and children, but if I do, I just start snapping at them. It's better if they just leave me alone for a few minutes until my equilibrium is restored.

In terms of prayer, sometimes it's wise to simply sit for a few moments, have a cup of coffee, remind myself why I pray, and figure out what's bugging me before I enter into prayer.

2. Make the bad mood part of your prayer. You probably guessed this one, because by now you've seen that it is a pretty standard way I attack problems in prayer. I just cannot emphasize too strongly that prayer is not about getting into some pious state of mind or having some euphoric spiritual experience. It's about an honest conversation with God. It's about getting in touch with who we are at any given moment—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and expressing that to God.

"I Disagree with What I'm Reading"

Good. It means you're reading material that doesn't merely reinforce your current thinking. Prayer is meant to stretch us, and the material we choose to read should do the same. The Bible is notorious for busting our myths about the way life works, which is one reason reading it is standard issue in a prayer routine.



Prayer Pearls

"Tis God's will I would do, my own
will I would rein;
Would give to God his due, from my
own due refrain;
God's path I would pursue, my own
path would disdain."
—The Scottish Highlanders

When I find myself disagreeing, I ask myself some questions to discover the source:

Do I disagree because I'm being asked to change some behavior I enjoy? Should I change?

Do I disagree because I can't buy into this concept of God? If so, why not?

Do I disagree because life doesn't work that way in my experience? Should I broaden my understanding?

Do I disagree because it doesn't agree with what the Bible teaches? Or, does it at a deeper level?

You get the idea. I don't feel right simply dismissing the passage, because one purpose of prayer is to expand my heart and mind. That usually involves the uncomfortable process of confronting opinions and ideas that don't seem right to me. As you can imagine, a lot of the "dumb" ideas of others turn out to be pretty wise.

Wisdom and common sense is called for here, of course. You shouldn't blindly trust every prayer you read and every devotional book you study—not even this one. If you do find yourself uncomfortable with a passage or idea, you should first see how it stacks up against the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the other biblical teachers. Yes, a lot of times the most uncomfortable ideas come from these very biblical writers. ("Love your enemies"!?) Then again, a lot of spiritual advice is plainly unbiblical (for example, "If you give money to God, you'll get more in return!"), and it should simply be ignored.

"I Just Can't Pray Certain Prayers or Use Certain Expressions"

Then don't. Pray in a way that allows you to be sincere.

Then again, I sometimes wonder if I should continue to pray those uncomfortable prayers. If prayer is about stretching the spiritual self, maybe I should practice calling

God "Father" or using a prayer that says I'm a "miserable sinner." Perhaps expressions such as these—precisely because they irk me—speak about areas in my life where I most need to grow.



From the Good Book

"Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness."

—Isaiah, Isaiah 26:8

Or, perhaps I should explore the prayer or the expression that troubles me, asking the same sort of questions I'd ask of a passage that I disagree with.

Or—you guessed it—perhaps I should make this stumbling block a part of my prayer. "Lord, this prayer I just prayed says, 'To you all angels . . . cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise.' The phrase means absolutely nothing to me, and I don't even know if I believe in angels. Lord, are there angels? And if there are, what is their purpose? Help me to understand what I'm to understand by this phrase."

Remember that prayer is a conversation with God about the real things going on inside us. That includes the myriad of concerns and problems that distract us from prayer. Co-opt your distractions, and put them to good use: Pray about them and pray through them.

The Least You Need To Know

- We can use obstacles—distractions, moods, or questions—as part of our prayer process and thus work through them.
- We should be honest with God about our struggles and not put on false piety.

Chapter 15— Dealing with Doubts: No Answers



In This Chapter

- The contradiction of biblical prayer
- Why God may not be answering your prayers
- What God may be teaching you by not answering your prayers

If the life of prayer is made difficult by distractions, it can be completely destroyed by doubts. Doubts begin pestering us early on in prayer, and they come to us in a variety of ways. When we get to the heart of doubt, though, there are really only two questions we're asking. The first is: "Why doesn't God answer many of our prayers?"

The Contradiction

On the one hand, the Bible is full of great promises about prayer, most of them coming from the lips of Jesus himself:

"Keep on asking and you will be given what you ask for" (Matthew 7:7). "If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you" (Matthew 18:19). "Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it" (Mark 11:24).

The apostle James, though, put it most bluntly: "The reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it" (James 4:2).

And then you have all those wonderful examples of answered prayer: Moses prays for deliverance from Egypt, and it's done. King David prays for victory over his enemies, and it happens. Jesus prays that Lazarus will rise from the dead, and here comes Lazarus out of his tomb. And so on.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is ... a treasure undiminished, a mine never exhausted, a sky unobstructed by clouds, a haven unruffled by storm. It is the root, the fountain, and the mother of a thousand blessings."

—St. John Chrysostom

If that were the end of the story, however, the Bible would not be a very interesting book. The Bible never gives a promise without at the same time being brutally honest about the way life works. And the way life works sometimes is this: Prayers are not always answered.

"Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer" (Psalm 22:2). "I cry to you, O God, but you don't answer me. I stand before you, and you don't bother to look" (Job 20:30). "How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen!" (Habakkuk 1:2)

And then you have these depressing examples: Paul prays that a "thorn in his flesh" will be taken away, but it never is. Jesus prays that he will not have to face the cross, but he ends up there anyway. And so on.

This is the contradictory nature of our experience in prayer. There are times when prayer almost seems magical: We ask and we receive. But there are other times when every one of our requests is met with heavenly silence. When that happens, it can easily discourage us and tempt us to abandon prayer.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Flood the path with light, we beseech thee; turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; turn our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to thy honor and glory."

—Augustine

Rather than give up, however, we are wise to think about what this divine silence might mean. In exploring that, we may end up with a richer prayer life.

The Answer Would Cause More Problems Than It Would Solve

The poet Longfellow once said, "What discord we should bring into the universe if our prayers were all answered! Then we should govern the world and not God."

I'll admit there are times I imagine I could run the universe better than God—it does appear to be mismanaged at times. Then again, I know what a mess I've made of my life.

One petty example will suffice: I'm anxious to have a friend over for dinner—so anxious that I pick the first available opening in his and my schedule. That means a dinner that starts at 8:00 on Thursday night. Not a problem, except that I have to get up at 3:00 on Friday morning. So not only does the dinner feel rushed, but the next day I'm exhausted. And I won't even tell you about some of the biggest life decisions I've blown.

Rather than me running the universe, then, I'm wise to let God decide which prayers to answer. Sometimes it's clear in retrospect that it's better they weren't answered. I remember interviewing for a church in San Pedro, a suburb of Los Angeles. I liked the senior pastor, and the church and setting sounded great. I prayed to get the job, but I didn't even make it past the initial interview. Naturally I was disappointed—until another job offer came my way to serve in a church in Mexico City. Speaking from a purely selfish point of view (what the job did for me), it was a much better fit and a much better experience. I'm glad my prayer wasn't answered regarding the church in San Pedro.

It's Not the Right Time

Sometimes silence means "Wait." My daughter recently asked me if she could watch a certain television show. I thought about my 10-year old, and I thought about the show (decidedly adult in nature), and said no. What I really meant was "Wait. In a few years, you'll be old enough to handle such a show. Until then, you'll have to watch something else."



Prayer Pearls

"God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man—several times."

—Ruth Bell Graham

In the same way, some of our prayers are not answered because we're not ready for them to be answered. This can be a great comfort when you're really anxious.

When I was in college, I recall feeling a great amount of pressure about some matter (which says something about how ultimately important it was—today I can't remember exactly the reason!). I became so upset about it that one evening at dinner, I found myself getting irritated with a friend, snapping at him, and bolting up from the table in disgust.

I went to my room and opened my Bible to see if I could find some guidance in the matter. What my Bible opened to was this: "Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

I felt as though God was speaking to me personally, and the tension inside me released. I realized that it wasn't the right time for the issue to be resolved; instead I was required to wait.

We're Getting in the Way

Sometimes we don't hear from the Lord because we've created so much spiritual noise within us that we can't hear God speaking to us. The Bible calls this "sin" and recognizes that it is a common problem when it comes to prayer.



Prayer Pearls

"No measure of faith is preserved
without prayer."

—St. Jerome

The Psalmist put it this way: "If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, my Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18). It's not that God won't listen to us if we don't confess every sin. That's impossible, because we're not even aware of all the ways we fail before God. Nor is it true that God turns away from us in disgust until we say we're sorry. God is a little bigger than that.

But there is a dynamic at work that must be respected if we want to have functioning prayer lives. I can't go before God harboring some sin—cheating on taxes, or carrying on an affair, or refusing to forgive a friend, or whatever—and expect that I can have a healthy relationship with God. It ain't gonna happen, as they say. I have to allow God to cleanse my heart and my life before I'm going to have a meaningful prayer life again.

Sometimes sin has a much more direct effect on prayer. The apostle James said, "Even when you do ask [in prayer], you don't get it because your whole motive is wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure." If we treat God as Santa Claus, we can expect to hear a lot of silence.

This does not mean that we cannot ask God for anything that would give us pleasure. We can pray to enjoy a fine meal, good sex, a sunny day, a good book—and so on. But the motive cannot be a greedy grabbing for hedonistic pleasure; it must be a simple desire to enjoy God's good gifts. What's more, it must always be in the context of God's will so that when the answer is no, we don't pout, but simply move on to what God would have us do next.



From the Good Book

"Then he continued, 'Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.'"

—Angel of the Lord

Prayer Is Only Part of the Answer

Sometimes no answer means that God's part is only part of the answer. The other part of the answer must be supplied by us.

Prayer is not a substitute for action. Let's say I pray that a friend, who just lost her husband, might be comforted in her grief. But maybe part of that answer requires my doing some jobs that her husband normally did: mowing the lawn, changing the oil in the car, and so on.

Along the same lines, my son prays that he might do well on the SAT. The answer to that prayer, however, has a great deal to do with the amount of time he studies.

You get the idea. But some get the wrong idea: They think that prayer is useless and what really matters is their own action. A lot of people who don't pray do well on the SAT, after all.



Prayer Pearls

"Never give up prayer; and should you find dryness and difficulty, persevere in it for this very reason. God often desires to see what love your soul has, and love is not tried by ease and satisfaction."

—St. John of the Cross

Yes, and a lot of people go through life alone, but that doesn't mean it's the best way to do it. God may not miraculously give my son answers when he takes the SAT, but to know that as he takes the test God is present, and to know that God is working in and through my son's experience, wisdom, and knowledge, through his body and mind—it lifts the whole experience to a different dimension. This is what prayer is meant to do: to help us see that our mundane lives are not so mundane, that we do, in fact, live in a different dimension than our five senses reveal.

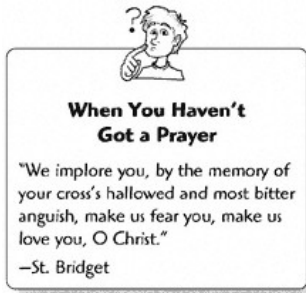
Prayer is not a substitute for action, but neither is action a substitute for prayer. As the old saying goes, "Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you."

The Real Answer Lies Deeper

Sometimes no answer means that a better answer is on its way or has already arrived.

When I became pastor of my own church, I had visions of glory for the church—and for myself. I was going to make that little church (150 members) a growing, dynamic congregation that impacted the city (Sacramento) for Christ. I had dreams of a large Sunday school program, an active youth program, ministries to families, outreach to the poor, and so on. And I prayed that God might make it so.

He didn't. At the end of six years of ministry, we still had a congregation of 150, and we still "muddled along." I can take a lot of the "blame" for that—I simply didn't have the gifts to lead the church as my dreams dictated.



On the other hand, I learned that our little congregation was, in fact, impacting the city of Sacramento. Our members were bringing the love and grace of Christ to neighbors and friends simply by being good neighbors and caring friends. And we were ministering to many families who found life in a small church much more to their liking. What I learned was that it wasn't size or programs that made a church, but people who loved God and cared for one another. And that was a much better answer to my prayer than if the church had tripled in size.

There is no better way to sum up this idea than to quote the famous prayer of an unknown Confederate soldier:

I asked for strength, that I might achieve;
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health, that I might do greater things;
 I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need for God. I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I had asked for, but everything that I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

The Least You Need to Know

- We don't always get what we ask for, but God runs things better than we do and knows what is best.
- When we pray, we still have to do our part to cooperate with God as he provides the answer.
- Sometimes God answers our prayers in unusual and better ways than we had anticipated.

Chapter 16— Dealing with Doubts: No God



In This Chapter

- Why people experience God's absence
- How to pray during such times

Doubts about God's willingness or ability to answer prayer are one thing; doubts about the very presence of God in prayer is another. Experienced pray-ers know there are times when God's absence is about the only thing they experience in prayer. And thus we come to the second great question we ask: "Where is God when I pray?"

"Dark Night of the Soul"

This is one of the strange aspects of prayer: Although prayer is designed to help us experience God, one experience of it is the experience of God's absence. In fact, the longer we pray and the more spiritually mature we become, the more likely it is that we will experience not just days, but even weeks and months when we feel that God is more absent than he is present.

This has been the experience of the great pray-ers of history. Look at the writings of any one of them—Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Madam Guyon, John Bunyan—and you'll find passages in which they describe "long periods of privation" where they find themselves locked out by God and "insensible to his mercies." It was even experienced by Jesus himself, whose intimacy with his heavenly Father can hardly be questioned: On the cross he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The sense of God's absence is accompanied by other negative feelings: despair, hopelessness, discouragement, listlessness, and so on. This is such a common experience, and such an integral part of the prayer life, that many prayer books devote an entire chapter to it. One writer, John of the Cross, wrote a whole book about it, which became a spiritual classic; its title has become the name by which many people call the experience: *The Dark Night of the Soul*.



Prayer Pearls

"Praying is dangerous business.
Results do come."

—Anonymous

Why do pray-ers—who, after all, are giving themselves to God sacrificially—have to endure such an experience? It can mean a number of things, but we'll cover the three most common.



From the Good Book

"From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God. He said: 'In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'"

—Jonah, Jonah 2:1–4

1—

Too Tired to Feel Anything

Let's start with the most common, the most overlooked, and the most easily solved cause: fatigue.

We recognize early in life that fatigue has detrimental effects on us. Irritability is the first sign that I've been pushing myself too hard and haven't been getting enough sleep. I'm impatient in grocery checkout lines; I drive hurriedly (and carelessly); I snap at my children; I yell at the dog; I scold myself for the simplest mistakes (such as forgetting my lunch or leaving the lights on).

Sometimes I can ride through the irritation and even get it under control, only to then be attacked by a low-grade depression. I lose energy. I don't have a lot of optimism about projects I'm working on. I just feel like vegging all day.

I used to spend a lot of time analyzing why exactly I was irritable or depressed. I'd write in my journal, explore my past, examine my current situation, pray for healing, and so on. I'd bludgeon myself for not being a good father and husband, for being slothful, for not living up to my beliefs.

Then one day I discovered that the problem wasn't always spiritual or emotional or moral. Sometimes it was physical: I was tired. I needed to get more sleep. I can pray until I'm blue in the knees, but it won't make a dent in irritation or depression until I get eight hours of sleep a night. The dark night of the soul is often brought on by too many late nights for the body.

2—

Secret Sins

Another cause of the dark night of the soul is darkness within the soul. We cannot very well expect to have an ongoing experience of God while we're angry or resentful, or participating in some destructive habit, or harboring some sin. We cannot experience God if we're living in a way that is "un-Godly." You cannot enjoy the game of basketball, for instance, if you're trying to play it with a football. It just won't work.

It's not that God doesn't want to have anything to do with us unless we're perfect. Far from it. But we cannot simply wallow in anger and sin and try to pretend it doesn't matter—which usually means not even mentioning it in prayer. We don't have to wait until we're morally unstuck before we can experience God in prayer. We simply have to acknowledge in prayer what a mess we've made of things.

3—

Affliction

Simone Weil, a twentieth-century writer and mystic, put it this way: "Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love."

It doesn't take much to get us spiritually off-center. A project at work fails. A friend moves far away. An argument erupts with your spouse. At such times we realize afresh how we depend on an orderly and good life to bolster our spiritual feelings. When things go wrong, we just don't feel spiritual.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is the peace of our spirit, the stillness of our thoughts, the evenness of our recollection, the sea of our meditation, the rest of our cares, and the calm of our tempest."

—Jeremy Taylor

And when we're dealt a major blow—unemployment, death, disease, severe depression—we can really sink into profound spiritual discouragement. Though some people feel God's presence more than ever during a crisis, others feel completely abandoned and ask, "Why, God, have you abandoned me?"

So What's Going On?

In truth, God cannot abandon us any more than we can be abandoned by the air around us. But the experience of pray-ers suggests that he does at times withdraw a sense of his presence—which, from our point of view, is devastating enough. Yes, I'm saying that although we bring this upon ourselves sometimes (through fatigue and sin), there are times when God allows—and perhaps even arranges—this experience.

So why would God, who has designed prayer so that we might become intimate with him, sometimes withdraw himself from us as we pray?

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard had this take on the experience: "He who dreams must be awakened, and the deeper the man is who slumbers, or the deeper he slumbers, the more important it is that he be awakened, and the more powerfully must he be awakened." In other words, our lives fall into easy patterns, and this is also true of prayer. Sometimes the only way to deepen our intimacy with God is to experience the distance of God. Again, let's listen to Kierkegaard in his *Christian Discourses*, who was very wise on this point:

"Then comes affliction to awaken the dreamer, affliction which like a storm tears off the blossoms, affliction which nevertheless does not bereave of hope, but recruits hope. Affliction is able to drown out every earthly voice, that is precisely what it is to do, but the voice of eternity within a man it cannot drown. . . . When by the aid of affliction all irrelevant voices are brought to silence, it can be heard, this voice within."

Sometimes the experience of God can be so pleasurable that we imagine that the joy we experience is God himself. When that happens, God withdraws himself to show that he is more than the emotion we experience, and that he is to be loved beyond and behind the emotion. Evelyn Underhill called this the "great negation," and said it was "the great sorting house of the spiritual life."



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Grant us, O Lord God, the knowledge of your divine words, and fill us with the understanding of your holy gospel and the riches of your divine gifts and the indwelling of your Holy Spirit, and help us with joy to keep your commandments and accomplish them and fulfill your will, and to be accounted worthy of the blessings and the mercies that are from now and at all times."

—Syrian prayer

The Way Back

So what is to be done when God seems absent and the idea of loving God or pursuing the life of prayer is about the last thing you feel like doing?

The advice of the great men and women of prayer seems to be this: Keep loving, keep praying. This is not cheap advice as much as it is spiritual survival.

In terms of love, Simone Weil, in her book *Waiting for God*, said it best:

"What is terrible is that if, in this darkness, where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it. . . . But if the soul stops loving, it falls, even in this life, into something almost equivalent to hell."

Sometimes this means persevering in praise and adoration, as strange as that may seem as such times. Joni Eareckson Tada was paralyzed in a swimming accident in her teens. She's a woman who knows affliction and the absence of God, and in her book *Secret Strength for Those Who Search* she writes eloquently on the need to persevere at such times:

"We will be compelled to voice our words of praise firmly and precisely, even as our logic screams that God has no idea what he's doing. Most of the verses written about praise in God's word were penned by men and women who faced crushing heartaches, injustice, treachery, slander, and scores of other intolerable situations."

This loving of God during affliction will take some unusual forms. It doesn't necessarily mean a quiet and humble acceptance of anything that comes your way. This is certainly not the way the Psalmist went through such a period:

O Lord, I cry out to you.
I will keep on pleading day by day.
O Lord, why do you reject me?
Why do you turn your face away from me?
I have been sickly and close to death since my youth.
I stand helpless and desperate before your terrors.
—Psalm 88:13–15

There is an Old Testament story about Jacob wrestling all night with God (see 32:24–31). In the same way, sometimes we are called upon to wrestle with God to "force" him to bless us.

Of course, we can never actually force God to do anything. He's all powerful and we're not. Nor do we have to overpower him in order to get him to love us. But just as a human father sometimes asks a child to do more work before rewarding her, so God sometimes asks us to dig deeper into our souls and emotions—requiring more fervent prayer—before he will reveal his love to us. The difference is this: many human fathers make their children *earn* their reward; our heavenly Father is merely helping us

identify those issues that really are important for us—those we really wrestle with inside and with him. He also wants us to recognize how utterly gracious his love is—not something one can take for granted nor order up with a snap of the fingers.

Hanging On

Through all this, we will discover more of God and more of ourselves. When we come to the other side, our intimacy with God will be that much deeper.

A trivial example from everyday life can illustrate this. I love to dabble in computer programming, at least at a modest level. I'll write little routines that allow me to do repetitive functions with a key stroke. For instance, at work I have a program that allows me to instantly call up addresses. The process used to take 10–15 key strokes; now it takes three.

But just when I'm feeling pretty confident about my abilities and feeling pretty good about computers, I'll mess up. I'll write the program incorrectly, and the routine simply will not run. I'll go through all the usual checks to see what's going on, but nothing will fix the problem. This is the dark night of the computer programmer—it's very frustrating and discouraging.



Prayer Pearls

"Time spent on the knees in prayer
will do more to remedy heart strain
and nerve worry than anything else."
—George David Stewart

What it forces me to do, though, is to go deeper. I have to take out a manual and read more closely and carefully than ever about what certain commands do and in what order they need to be written. Invariably, I learn more about programming and gain an even deeper appreciation of my computer.

Prayer is a tad more complex and rich than computer programming, and lessons learned from a dark night of the soul sometimes are not so easily discerned. But the same fundamental dynamic is at work: Frustration and loneliness are often the paths of deeper peace and joy. Perseverance and love—the continued pursuit of God—are not the happiest of paths to have to trod sometimes, but they are the most trustworthy.



From the Good Book

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God, my Savior. The sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights."

—Habakkuk, Habakkuk 3:17–19

The Least You Need to Know

- Negative feelings accompany God's perceived absence, but he only wants to draw us to a new level of closeness to him.
- As we hang on in the midst of discomfort, we learn more about God and ourselves and find the path to peace and joy.

PART 4— THE BIG BOOK ON THE BIG ISSUES

Through the centuries, people of prayer have discovered that man does not live by extemporaneous prayer alone. They have also discovered that certain books and practices do wonders for one's prayer life. In this section, we'll take a look at the most important and enduring resources in the prayer book for Christians: the Bible. We'll look at how to pray two of the most important types of literature in the Bible, and we'll look at some of the most important prayers of the Bible, which happen to be about the most important issues facing human beings.



Chapter 17— Praying the Psalms



In This Chapter

- The origin and purpose of the Psalms
- How to read a Psalm intelligently
- How to pray the Psalms

You wouldn't imagine that prayers and songs written 2,000 years ago could have relevance today. They were written by men (literally) living in a pre-industrial, agriculturally based, authoritarian monarchy (often militaristic and vengeful) and, naturally, who had no comprehension of life in a fast-paced, technological, egalitarian, democratic, and relativistic age. Yet people continue to discover—as they have discovered in each century—that the Psalms are by far the most meaningful and relevant prayer resource we have.

Jesus often quoted or referred to Psalms; for instance, at his temptation (Matthew 4:6), in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:7, 35, 7:23), and at the crucifixion (Luke 23:34; Matthew 27:46). It is likely that the first Christian congregations used selections from the book in their public services. Skip to the fifth century, and we hear the theologian Augustine calling the book the "language of devotion." Jump to the 1500s, and we find Martin Luther calling the Psalms "a Bible in miniature." In the 1990s, poet Kathleen Norris "fell in love" with the Psalms because it became clear to her "that the world they depict is not really so different from our own."

What Are These Things?

The Psalms are universal literature, which means, among other things, that you can simply open your Bible and begin reading and gain something—quite a bit, actually. If you're like me, that's probably what you'll do at first. I've never been very patient when it comes to background and introductory stuff. If that's your tendency, you may want to spend some time reading, pondering, and praying the Psalms until you've run into enough questions to motivate you to discover more. That's what this chapter is about: getting a little deeper into the Psalms so that they can be read and prayed at even more meaningful levels.



Prayer Pearls

"I don't know of a single foreign product that enters this country untaxed except the answer to prayer."

—Mark Twain

First things first: What exactly are Psalms? Psalms are simply songs, and "The Psalms" is a collection of 150 songs, many of which were used in public worship in ancient Israel. In Hebrew they are called *Tehillim*, meaning "praises" or "songs of praise." This gives some indication of the main theme of the Psalms.

Though many people think of them as all coming from the hand of King David, only about half claim to be written by him. Others were written by temple musicians (with names such as Asaph and Ethan), and a few by David's son (the famous King Solomon); one is attributed to Moses (Psalm 90). In spite of the fact that they were written mostly by the elite, these Psalms speak to people of all stations of life.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

Spirit, grant us by the same spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort."

—St. Gregory

They also speak to people in all situations. Some were written during the most glorious era of Israel's history (the reigns of David and Solomon, 1003 B.C.–930 B.C.). But many were written after Israel had been conquered—first by the Assyrians (722 B.C.) and then by the Babylonians (587 B.C.)—deported, and scattered over the Middle East. This event, called the exile, devastated the faith of Israel. Yet, the people continued to pray, and one way they did so was by writing the Psalms.

Getting Around

You'll notice as you begin reading the Psalms that they are divided into five books, and each book ends with a Psalm of praise (also called a "doxology"). As far as we can tell, here is how the books came together:

Book 1: Psalms 1–41; Compiled during the reign of King David

Book 2: Psalms 42–72; Compiled and added during the reign of King Solomon

Book 3: Psalms 73–89; Compiled and added during the exile

Book 4: Psalms 90–106; Compiled and added during the exile

Book 5: Psalms 107–150 Compiled and added after the return from exile

This doesn't mean that the themes of the Psalms arise out of the period when they were added. For example, one of the most eloquent expressions of exiled Israel (Psalm 137) is in the after-the-exile section. Likewise, prayers by David (including Psalm 86) are found in the part compiled during the exile.

Yet, knowing when a Psalm was added sometimes can help us see new layers of meaning. For example, after realizing the devastating effects of exile, we can appreciate the sentiments of Psalm 126:

"When the Lord restored his exiles to Jerusalem,
it was like a dream!
We were filled with laughter,
and we sang for joy."

A Psalm like this, then, can be used in prayer to express thanks today to God for delivering us from a crisis, or it can be used as a prayer of hope as we remember that God is a God who rescues.

Psalms can also be organized thematically:

History: These Psalms (such as 14, 44, and 46–48) rehearse the key moments in Israel's history and recount God's intervention.

Appeals: These Psalms (including 54, 55, 58, and 59) usually ask for vindication against one's own or God's enemies.

Hope: Psalms such as 2, 8, 110, and 132 express hope for a coming deliverer or messiah.

Confession: These Psalms (such as 32 and 51) express sorrow for sin and wish for reconciliation.

Praise: Psalms such as 33, 103, and 139 extol God's goodness.

How to Read a Psalm

If we can understand the nature of Hebrew poetry, we'll get more out of reading and praying the Psalms. The Psalms do not rhyme, and they do not employ the intense metaphors of modern poetry. Instead, they rely on parallelism to express ideas.

Parallelism is merely repeating or furthering the same idea in new form. For example, Psalm 95 begins like this:



Prayer Pearls

"If Christians spent as much time
praying as they do grumbling, they
would soon have nothing to
grumble about."

—Anonymous

"Come, let us sing to the Lord!
Let us give a joyous shout to the rock of our salvation!"

"Sing" is parallel with "give a joyous shout," and "the Lord" is parallel (that is, similar in thought) with "the rock of our salvation." The Psalmist here is merely repeating an idea.

Sometimes the parallelism is a matter of contrast. Again in Psalm 95 we read:

"He [God] owns the depths of the earth,
and even the mightiest mountains are his."

Here "He owns" and "are his" are parallel, but "depths of the sea" and "the mightiest mountains" are in contrast. The larger point, however, is the same: There ain't nothin' that isn't God's.

Sometimes the parallelism furthers the original thought. In Psalm 103, we read this:

"The Lord is merciful and gracious;
He is slow to get angry and full of unfailing love."

"He is slow to get angry and full of unfailing love" fills out the meaning of "The Lord is merciful and gracious."

Then there are larger patterns, where entire sections can be parallel or the structure of the Psalm itself might follow an A-B-A-B pattern or an A-B-B-A pattern.

The point here is not to become a literary critic of the Psalms. If you understand parallelism as a poetic tool, though, you won't be tempted to try to find profound meaning in each phrase. Instead, we should let the parallels roll over us like ocean waves, each powerful in its own way; each washing over us the grace of God, but each fundamentally the same.



From the Good Book

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

—Jesus

Devotional Themes

One way to pray the Psalms is to pick and choose, depending on your mood, needs, and desires. Many topical guides to the Psalms exist, including this one, which I modified from the *Revell Bible Dictionary*:

Anger: 4, 17, 28, 36, 109

Anxiety/fear: 3, 11, 27, 46, 49, 91, 121, 139, 146

Direction: 13, 25, 37, 89, 119, 146

Disappointment: 16, 92, 102, 130

Discouragement: 12, 42, 55, 86, 107, 142

Injustice: 7, 9, 10, 17, 35, 52, 56, 94, 109

Insignificance: 8, 23, 86, 121, 139

Joy: 33, 47, 63, 84, 96, 97, 98, 100, 148

Knowing God: 8, 19, 29, 65, 89, 103, 111, 136, 145, 147

Loneliness: 3, 13, 17, 25, 27, 69, 91

Patience: 4, 5, 37, 89, 123

Reassurance: 1, 15, 18, 23, 26, 112, 121, 128

Safety, security: 34, 84, 91

Sickness: 22, 23, 41, 116

Sorrows, grief: 6, 31, 71, 77, 94, 123

Thankfulness: 30, 33, 34, 40, 66, 89, 96, 113, 136

Trouble: 10, 86, 90, 94, 126, 138, 142

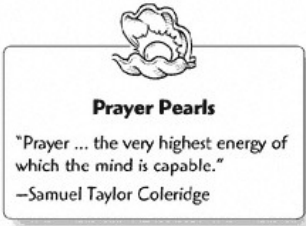
Weakness: 4, 23, 62, 70, 102, 138

The advantage of a topical approach is obvious: We can go directly to a Psalm that can speak to our situation, or one that helps us express to God more closely what we're feeling. On the other hand, we limit the ability of the Psalms to transform us if we pick at them as we would a box of chocolates. The Psalms are a full-course meal, and some of them we have to develop a taste for—and that takes practice.

Week by Week

That brings us to another way to pray the Psalms: reading them through in some orderly fashion, day by day. Many monastic orders do this sort of thing—and have for centuries—reading through all 150 every few weeks or months.

Some people simply read the Psalms all the way through in order, reading maybe five per day (which will get you through the Psalms in a month). Others read by a plan that sorts the Psalms according to the day of the week or season of the church year (see Chapter 33, "Prayer in the Liturgical Tradition"). The *Book of Common Prayer* (which we'll look at in the next chapter) has suggested Psalm readings that move through the Psalms in seven weeks.



Here is a pattern suggested in the Lutheran *Book of Worship* (1978) for week-by-week reading. (It also offers a different schedule for the church seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.)

	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
<i>Week 1</i>							
Morning	150	145	146	147:1–12	147:13–21	148	149
	103	5	42	89:1–18	97	51	104
Evening	117	82	102	1	16	142	138
	139	29	133	33	62	65	98
<i>Week 2</i>							
Morning	150	145	146	147:1–12	147:13–21	148	149
	19	135	123	15	36	130	56
Evening	81	97	30	48	80	32	138
	113	112	86	4	27	139	98

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	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
Week 3							
Morning	150	145	146	147:1–12	147:13–21	148	149
	67	57	54	65	143	88	122
Evening	46	85	28	125	81	6	100
	93	47	99	91	116	20	63
Week 4							
Morning	150	145	146	147:1–12	147:13–21	148	149
	108	62	12	96	116	84	63
Evening	66	73	36	132	26	25	125
	23	9	7	134	130	40	90

Psalms 145–150 are sometimes called the *laudate* ("praise") Psalms, and thus it is appropriate to pray one of them each morning of the week.

Mechanics

There are a number of ways to "pray" the Psalms. Here are three suggestions:

1. Read and meditate. You simply read a Psalm a time or two (or three) and reflect on its meaning. For example, I might read Psalm 27, which begins like this:

"The Lord is my light and salvation
—so why should I be afraid?
The Lord protects me from danger
—so why should I tremble?"

I would reflect on the areas of my life in which I am afraid and then ask God to help me trust in his protection.

2. Adopt the Psalm as your own prayer. Try to say it as if you are the one praising God, seeking help, or arguing with God.

This is pretty easy when you happen to be in the mood that the Psalm expresses. When I'm in despair, Psalm 88 is the ticket: "O Lord, why do you reject me? Why do you turn your face away from me?" Or, when I'm especially thankful for a return of good health, Psalm 30 expresses my feelings well: "O Lord my God, I cried out to you for help, and you restored my health."

And sometimes when I pray the Psalm as if it were *my* prayer, it can help me feel something I'd like to feel. This is especially true of praise. A lot of days, I simply don't feel all that thankful to God, and yet the logical part of me knows that I'm

basking in too many blessings to count. Sometimes praying a Psalm of praise can help me feel the way I'm thinking:

"Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, I tell myself.
I will praise the Lord as long as I live.
I will sing praises to my God even with my dying breath."
—Psalm 146:1–2

3. Bask in the poetry of the Psalm. Here the idea is not to understand or use the Psalm for our own ends, but to let it do some work on us. At a minimum, the Psalms are sublime poetry; at their highest, they are the word of God. As such, they have a power to evoke in us thoughts and feelings we were not aware of.

So sometimes I just try to read the Psalm and let its words wash over me. I simply read it aloud over and over, trying to put the analytical part of my mind to rest, trying simply to experience the beauty of the poetry and the wonder of the words.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"May our souls be lamps of yours,
kindled and illuminated by you.
May they shine and burn with the
truth, and never go out in darkness
and ashes. May the gloom of sins be
cleared away, and the light of
perpetual faith abide within us."

—Mozarabic liturgy

Whatever method we use, we are wise not to force ourselves into some sublime state of mind, or to beat ourselves up when praying the Psalms "just doesn't work." Some days it will "work" and other days it won't. There will be days when no matter how you prepare yourself, the Psalms will just sit on the page and remain abstract and meaningless. Let it be for that day. The Psalm is still doing its work on you, just as a meal you don't particularly enjoy is still sustaining your body. To be sure, there will be other days when you pray the Psalms and you feel you are in the very presence of heaven.

The Difficult Psalms

This is all well and good when reading the glorious Psalms of praise or the Psalms of deep insight. But what do you do when you run across verses like this?

"Let my enemies be destroyed
by the very evil they have planned for me.
Let burning coals fall down on their heads,

or throw them into the fire,
or into deep pits from which they cannot escape."
—Psalm 140:9–10

Or, worse:

"O Babylon, you will be destroyed.
Happy is the one who pays you back
for what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who takes your babies
and smashes them against the rocks."
—Psalm 137:8–9

These are hardly moods we want aroused in us—and yet it is not difficult to find such angry and vengeful passages in the Psalms. How are we to pray these?

We pray them as honest expressions of the human heart. I may pretend that I never feel such hatred or ever wish violence on others, but the fact is, there are times when I do. If I'm angry at a coworker, I may not want burning coals to fall upon him, but I have imagined him getting humiliated in front of our publisher or losing his job. And, I have to admit, when I'm really angry, there are moments when flashes of violence pop into my head.

If I'm seriously angry, I may use such a Psalm as a personal expression of how I'm really feeling. If the anger is but a distant memory, I'll use the Psalm as a way of recalling that, yes, sometimes I am like this.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is a sincere, sensible,
affectionate pouring out of the soul
to God, through Christ in the
strength and assistance of the Spirit,
for such things as God promised."
—John Bunyan

Passages such as these keep the Psalms from becoming one more bit of pious literature. Instead, they are honest prayers of real people experiencing the myriad of emotions life arouses in us. If you're interested in merely becoming religious, avoid the Psalms. If you're interested in becoming more deeply human as well as more honestly and vitally connected to God, praying the Psalms will help.

The Least You Need to Know

- The Psalms can be considered poems, prayers, and songs—because they are all three in one.
- The Psalms contain themes that express the major needs, struggles, and joys within human experience.
- There are Psalms to match all our major moods, and we can genuinely express our emotions of the moment to God.

Chapter 18— Praying the Gospels



In This Chapter

- The unique aspects of the four Gospels
- How reading the Gospels can benefit your prayer life
- How to use the stories in the Gospels as guides for prayer

It's not much of a leap to read a Psalm, which is already a prayer, and then adapt it and use it to pray today. It's a little harder to imagine using stories as resources for prayer. Yet, biblical stories, especially those found in the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—offer some of the richest material for prayer. The key is learning how to use them as material for prayer.

Before we can use these beneficially in prayer, though, we need to understand the nature of the material called "Gospel." Again, if you're not much interested in background material, skip right to the section "Big Themes."



From the Good Book

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

—Jesus

So, What's a "Gospel"?

In older Bible versions, the first verse of the Gospel of Mark reads, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"—as if the word *gospel* was the technical name of the work that was about to follow. Well, it wasn't, but it now is.

Behind the word *gospel* stands a Greek word (the four Gospels were first written in Greek) that means "good news." What Mark was really saying, and what most modern translations say, is "Here begins the good news about Jesus, the messiah, the son of God."

Nonetheless, *Gospel* has stuck and refers not just to Mark's work about Jesus—it also refers to that of Matthew, Luke, and John. These are ancient biographies, all written in the first century, that attempt to inform readers about the life, words, and meaning of Jesus. Though other "gospels" were written, none were considered reliable accounts. Since the earliest days, Christians have used these four to recall the story of Jesus.

I've called these "biographies"—and they are—but you'll run into roadblocks right off if you think they are like modern biographies. If you understand how the Gospels differ from modern biographies, you'll be able to benefit from them more.

Modern biographies are anxious to explore the subject's childhood and youth to discover early influences, decisions, and turning points that determined the course of a person's life. Our age has very much been influenced by Sigmund Freud and others, and we're fascinated with childhood.

Ancient biographies are not. The ancients believed that personality and character were given at birth and merely were manifested in life. If the Gospels focus on an early incident, they do so simply to reveal character. For example, the only childhood story of Jesus recorded in the Bible shows a 12-year-old Jesus instructing religious teachers, who are impressed with the child's wisdom (Luke 2:41–52).

Modern biographies are also strictly chronological. For the most part, they record the key events in the subject's life in the order in which they happen.



Prayer Pearls

"He prays well who is so absorbed with God that he does not know what he is praying."

—St. Francis de Sales

Ancient biographies are not all that interested in the order of events. Naturally, they have to acknowledge the order of the large events—for Jesus' biographers, that means they recognized that his birth must come before his ministry, and that his ministry must come before his death. But ancient writers were more interested in grouping their material thematically to show the essential character traits of their subject.

When you read the four Gospels, then, you're going to find that each writer orders material differently. This is not because some were good historians and others weren't, but simply because each ordered his material to reveal something unique about Jesus.

For example, the Gospel of Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching into five parts and scatters these five blocks of teaching throughout the Gospel. Matthew is trying to show that Jesus is the new Moses, the new lawgiver. He's imitating the pattern found in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, which in Judaism are together called the "Law of Moses."

Each Gospel writer collects his material—incidents, parables, and teachings—in this way. When we read the Gospels, we are wise not to begin with modern assumptions (trying to figure out decisive moments, or seeking to outline a strict order of events), but instead, let each Gospel writer tell the story in his own way.

To Each His Own

So what exactly is the emphasis of each writer? I'd like to look at this briefly not because I want to turn you into a New Testament scholar, but to help you appreciate more deeply each Gospel as you read and pray it. Let's begin by looking at the first three Gospels, which are very similar in style and content. They likely all used a similar source in writing their accounts, and they supplemented that account with their own research.

Tradition says that Matthew was one of the original disciples, and many think he's the same guy as Levi the tax collector (Matthew 10:2–4 and Mark 2:13–14). A second-century writer named Papias said that Matthew "wrote down the oracles [sayings of Jesus] in the Hebrew language." If this tradition is accurate, we're today reading a version edited and passed on by some of Matthew's disciples, because this Gospel seems to have been written about 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

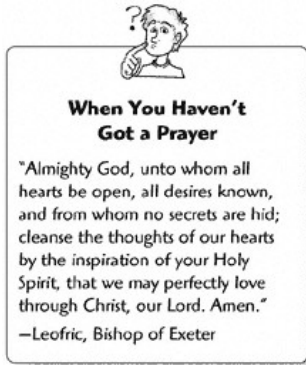
Papias was certainly right about one thing: the Hebrew, or Jewish, nature of the material. Matthew, more than the others, seems to be written for early Jewish

Christians and tries to show that Jesus is the Jewish messiah and that he is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

A typical example occurs early on. When the wise men come to visit the infant Jesus, they quote an Old Testament prophecy:

"O Bethlehem of Judah,
you are not just a lowly village in Judah,
For a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel."
—Matthew 2:6

The Gospel of Mark is said to be written by a man named John Mark, who was an early companion of the apostle Paul and, later, of the apostle Peter. Papias calls Mark "the interpreter of Peter," who wrote down Peter's recollections about Jesus.



Mark's audience seems to have been Roman—that is, non-Jewish—and is designed to show that Jesus is the Son of God, a person of swift action and supreme power. He doesn't include nearly the amount of teaching as does Matthew, and his Gospel is fast-paced and takes about a half-hour to read straight through.

Luke was a physician and an early convert who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys. He also painstakingly interviewed many eyewitnesses of Jesus' life in preparing his work ("Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning. . .", as he put it).

Like Mark, Luke writes for a non-Jewish, Greco-Roman audience. He's interested in Jesus not just in his divine nature, but especially as humanity in perfection. At the same time, Luke's is the most personal Gospel, in which we get a glimpse into Jesus' intimate relationships, especially with women and children. Luke likes to highlight the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus, and he records more of Jesus' teachings on prayer than the other Gospels.

Now for Something Completely Different

The Gospel of John is in a league of its own. You get this sense after reading but a few verses. Where Matthew, Mark, and Luke try to set Jesus into his times as soon as possible, John begins like this:

"In the beginning the Word [Jesus] already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."



Prayer Pearls

"We ought to act with God in the greatest simplicity, speaking to him frankly and plainly, and imploring his assistance in our affairs, just as they happen."

—Brother Lawrence

Tradition claims that John was not only one of the 12 disciples, but the "beloved disciple," one with whom Jesus was especially intimate. But his Gospel seems less interested in intimate details than giving a more cosmic view of Christ. Mark begins his work by recording Jesus' baptism, Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth—and John begins at the beginning of the universe: "in the beginning."

John's Gospel was probably written late in the first century, much later than the other Gospels, so it's not likely that we have his original words, but his words transcribed and edited by a group of his disciples.

Jesus is "the Word," the "water of life" (John 4:4–26), the "resurrection and life" (John 5:19–47), the "bread of life" (John 6:26–59), the "light of the world" (John 8:12), and so on. Thus, John is more interested in the spiritual truth of Jesus, not the mere recording of chronological detail (though there are many passages that, in terms of history, are more detailed than the other Gospels). And thus John's Gospel is rich with symbolism and strong contrasts (light and dark, truth and falsehood, love and hate), and belief plays a large role in the book.

Again, this emphasis, as with the other three Gospels, is not just significant literarily but especially in terms of prayer. If you read through a Gospel prayerfully (more of that in a bit), you'll want to have some idea of the overall theme of the Gospel you're praying through.

Big Themes

No matter which Gospel you pray through, you're going to find certain themes that arise time and again. If these are the type of issues you'd like to explore, praying through the Gospels is a practice to take up. Here are seven of the more prominent themes:

1. Jesus. The Gospels are first and foremost about the person of Jesus, as seen most clearly in the opening of the Gospel of Mark: "Here begins the good news about Jesus. . . ." The Gospels are primarily concerned to reveal who he is, what he taught, and his continuing significance for every age.

2. The kingdom of God. This is the overarching theme of Jesus' teaching. He begins his ministry with the message, "At last the time has come. The kingdom of God is near! Turn from your sins and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

Jesus is referring to the reign of God, which has a present and a future dimension. In terms of this life, Jesus' teaching about the kingdom highlights the truth that we're in good hands: God is in charge of all that goes on, even when his good purposes remain mysterious. This also implies that a new way of life and a new set of morals must characterize the citizens of the kingdom.

The kingdom also refers to the future reign of God, when history will come to a perfect conclusion, when all sin and death, crying, and pain will be eliminated.

3. Commitment to Jesus. Because Jesus is the Lord of this kingdom, the Gospels naturally spend a lot of time emphasizing the need for commitment to his ways and to his person.

4. Service to others. It's not a religious life that the Gospels emphasize, but a life lived in the world for the world. So don't start praying through the Gospels unless you're willing to spend time meditating on your need to reach out to others.

5. Money. The Gospels spend a lot of words recording Jesus' teachings about money. It appears that Jesus thinks how we spend it says a great deal about our commitments—an uncomfortable but necessary subject of prayer.



Prayer Pearls

"God grant me the serenity to
accept things I cannot change,
courage to change things I can, and
wisdom to know the difference."
—Reinhold Niebuhr

6. Prayer. If many parts of the Bible help us pray, then the Gospels, more than many others, teach us *how* to pray. Many passages talk about the role of faith and perseverance in prayer.

7. Love. If the summary of Jesus' teaching is to love God and to love your neighbor, this is also the summary of the Gospels. If you want to grow in love, then the Gospels are the place where you'll see how better to do this.

Reading the Gospels Prayerfully

There are two ways to use the Gospels to enrich your prayer life. In the first, the left side of the brain (the rational part) plays a larger role.

This method I've called meditation. It's a matter of trying to understand a passage as a literary work in which the author is trying to make a point. To read meditatively is

simply to try to discern the author's point and then to ask appropriate questions about one's own life in self-examination. (See Chapter 11, "Listen Up," for more on this.)



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"We bring before you, O Lord, the troubles and perils of people and nations, the sighing of prisoners and captives, the sorrows of the bereaved, the necessities of strangers, the helplessness of the weak, the despondency of the weary, the failing powers of the aged. O Lord, draw near to each; for the sake of Jesus Christ, our lord."

—St. Anselm

Let's say I'm reading Mark 4:35–41: Jesus and his disciples are in a boat when a "fierce storm" arises, in which "high waves began to break into the boat." All the while, Mark notes, Jesus was sleeping in the back of the boat—until the frantic disciples wake him: "Teacher, don't you even care that we are going to drown?"

Mark continues, "When he woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the water, 'Quiet down!' Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. And he asked them, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still not have faith in me?' And they were filled with awe and said among themselves, 'Who is this man, that even the wind and waters obey him?'"

I would begin by analyzing the various purposes of the passage: to show the power of Christ, and to teach the importance of trust in the midst of fear. I would pick one of the themes—let's say, trust—and ask myself in what areas of my life I remain afraid, and in what ways I find it difficult to trust Christ. Let's say that I was worried about my finances, that they were in a mess and that I simply found it hard to trust that Christ was present and caring about this situation. I would then pray for Christ's help: to be aware of his presence, to trust him to watch over me even when a financial storm was pelting me.

Praying the Gospels

There is another way to deal with stories. Rather than stand apart from the passage—analyzing it, dissecting it, figuring it out—I could enter into the passage and experience it, and let it figure me out.

Taking the same passage used previously, I might imagine myself as one of the disciples. I would try to put myself in the boat, to watch the storm clouds approaching, feel the wind whip over the surface of the lake, watch whitecaps form, feel the spray and then a full wave, feel the boat rock. I'd try to feel the fear, and then I'd try to imagine what I'd most fear losing in life.

Then I'd hear the strong words of Christ, feel the wind die suddenly, note the waves calm—and feel the wonder and peace of God's power.

I can't say what exactly I'd "learn" from this because the associations would move freely back and forth from the present to the past and back to the present. The image of losing my job might rise in my mind while I'm on the boat, or maybe the feeling I had when I lost a friend to drowning. In any case, this method has a way of bringing up all sorts of odd and wonderful connections that can then become a part of more rational prayer.

I might, for example, become aware of how much I still am affected by my friends' drowning, along with residual guilt that I never paid him proper respects. I'd include whatever thoughts and emotions and recollections that arose in my prayer.

There are many more ways to pray the Gospels (see Chapter 11 and the last section on "Lectio Divina" for another suggestion). Nor will every passage elicit equally "useful" prayer material. But the Gospels have endured as prayer resources precisely because they are able to speak to the human soul at a depth that transcends every age and culture.

The Least You Need to Know

- The Gospels are the four stories of the life of Christ and represent "the good news" of what he has done for us.
- As you pray through the Gospels, you need to know that the good news of the kingdom will also make some demands on you.
- As we pray, we begin by analyzing its purposes and personally entering into the reality of the stories.

Chapter 19— Shaping the Future



In This Chapter

- One of the most instructive and humorous stories—and a great example of prayer—in the Bible
- God's subtle appearances
- How in prayer we can become co-creators of history
- The limits of "Thy will be done"

It's time to get more specific now. Instead of looking at entire sections of the Bible to see how they can enhance prayer, for the next few chapters, we'll focus on some of the most well-known prayers of the Bible. This will help us see how dynamic and varied prayer can be, and it will teach us better how to pray through a variety of issues that most concern us.

We begin with one of the most common human concerns and one of the earliest biblical prayers. This concern has to do with the shape of the future: Is God's will set in stone? What role do we play in shaping our future? Do we simply submit to God's plan, or do we help shape it? This is something that a man named Abraham had to figure out. His encounter with God as recorded in Genesis 18 is one of the most humorous and instructive encounters in the Bible.

Subtle Arrival

The story begins innocently enough: "One day about noon, as Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent, he suddenly noticed three men standing nearby."



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is not eloquence, but earnestness; not the definition of helplessness, but the feeling of it; not figures of speech, but earnestness of soul."

—Hannah More

Abraham greeted his visitors and, with impeccable Middle Eastern manners, offered them hospitality: "Rest in the shade of this tree while my servants get some water to wash your feet," he said. "Let me prepare some food to refresh you. Please stay a while before continuing on your journey."

What Abraham didn't know at that moment was that he was entertaining the Lord. We readers are let in on the secret right away, though. The writer helps us understand right off that "the Lord appeared again to Abraham while he was camped near the oak grove belonging to Mamre" (about 17 miles south of Jerusalem). As the story unfolds, though, it becomes clearer to Abraham: "The men said" and "the Lord said" are used interchangeably, and we are given to understand that in some mysterious way, God appeared to Abraham through these Bedouin visitors.

This is a key point in prayer. Prayer is an encounter with God, and as such, it is not confined to those private moments when we are bowed in prayer. God will come to meet us at the oddest times—in the middle of the day while we're daydreaming outside our tents—and in the most mundane forms, such as through other people.



From the Good Book

"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

—Jesus, Matthew 21:22

Early in college, I believed I had received a "call" to become a minister, so to get myself ready for ministry, I volunteered to help lead a variety of activities in my church—becoming a sponsor for the junior high program, helping lead the college group, and so on. As the demands of the activities increased, and as my personal resources became depleted, I sank into discouragement. In anger and despair one day, I resigned all my church responsibilities and determined to do nothing more until I had clear direction from God.

A few months later, I was approached by some Christian friends at college, and out of the blue they asked if I would lead a Bible study held on campus. This came as a shock because I had only begun attending this Bible study and had made it a point to not get more involved than that. The timing, the request, and some inner sense convinced me then—as it does today—that God came to me in these friends and spoke to me.

The encounter, naturally, was ambiguous. No halos floated above my friends' heads, and their voices didn't boom majestically. But it was clear to me as I reflected—and prayed—about their request that this was nothing less than the voice of God to me. I tell this story not to say that I'm special, but only because it is so typical of many people's encounters with God. God does meet us outside of our prayer time, so all of life becomes material for prayer.

God's Chosen = Us!

Let's take up our story of Abraham again.

Then the men got up from their meal and started on toward Sodom. Abraham went with them part of the way.

"Should I hide my plan from Abraham?" the Lord asked. "For Abraham will become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. I have singled him out so that he will direct his sons and their families to keep the way of the Lord and do what is right and just."

First, note again the identification of these men with "the Lord." Second, note the special relationship of Abraham and God: Abraham is specially chosen of God to be a "blessing" to others, to be an instrument of God's love and grace.

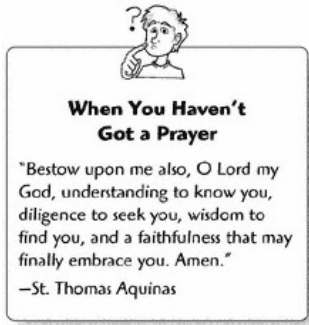
"Why Abraham?" is the question that naturally arises, and a host of others soon follow. Rather than step into that theological minefield, let's take the long view: God's choosing Abraham was only the first step in his choosing all humankind, which according to Christian teachings, is what happened when Christ lived and died for us. For us today, the issue is not why Abraham was chosen, but why we are chosen to carry God's blessing to others.

Actually, even that is not the question: We're chosen because God is gracious. We certainly haven't done anything to deserve such a role in history. And yet, here we are.

This is, to say the least, a helpful perspective to enter into prayer with. We are not outsiders who must plead for an audience, but people who already have a special place in God's heart. We are sons and daughters, not strangers.

From time to time, children come knocking at my door, selling things such as peanut brittle or tickets to a pancake breakfast to raise money for Boy Scouts, Little League, or whatever. They usually make their pitch hesitantly, cautiously, without a lot of confidence that I'll buy from them.

When my youngest daughter approaches me about buying Girl Scout cookies, however, she's not only confident, but she almost demands that I buy them. The difference, of course, is that she is my daughter and has a special relationship with me. She feels free, therefore, to be more bold with me.



This is not unlike our relationship with God. We come as his children, and so we can be bold.

When God debated whether to let Abraham in on his divine plans, this isn't just telling of his particular relationship with Abraham. This is a literary device to show that God had the option of not letting Abraham—or us—in on the deal. But biblical history shows that time and again he *has* let us in.

This is an illustration of the biblical belief that we can shape the future through our prayers—which is what we come to next.

At a Board Meeting with God

The story continues:

So the Lord told Abraham, "I have heard that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are extremely evil, and that everything they do is wicked. I am going down to see whether or not these reports are true."

The upshot, the writer suggests, is that God planned to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah—and every last person in them. Abraham was horrified, and the ensuing dialogue has always struck me as one of the more humorous passages of the Bible.

Abraham reproached him and said, "Will you destroy both innocent and guilty alike? Suppose you find 50 innocent people there within the city—will you still destroy it, and not spare it for their sakes? Surely you wouldn't do such a thing, destroying the innocent with the guilty exactly the same. Surely you wouldn't do that! Should the judge of all the earth do what is right?"

And the Lord replied, "If I find 50 innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake."

Then Abraham spoke again. "Since I have begun, let me go on and speak further to my Lord, even though I am but dust and ashes. Suppose there are only 45? Will you destroy the city for lack of five?"

And the Lord said, "I will not destroy it if I find 45."

Then Abraham pressed his request further. "Suppose there are only 40?"

And the Lord replied, "I will not destroy it if there are 40."

"Please don't be angry, my Lord," Abraham pleaded. "Let me speak—suppose only 30 are found?"

And the Lord replied, "I will not destroy it if there are 30."

Then Abraham said, "Since I have dared to speak to the Lord, let me continue—suppose there are only 20?"

And the Lord said, "Then I will not destroy it for the sake of the 20."

Finally, Abraham said, "Lord, please do not get angry; I will speak but once more! Suppose only 10 are found there?"

And the Lord said, "For the sake of the 10, I will not destroy it."

Then the Lord went on his way when he had finished his conversation with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his tent.

This story illustrates God's "flexibility" regarding his will for the planet. (In fact, according to Genesis, God could not even find 10 faithful, so Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.) Maybe we cannot alter God's plans completely, but like Abraham, we can influence it in significant ways. This means our own future—what happens at our jobs, in our families, in our neighborhood, and even what happens in our nation.



Prayer Pearls

"Beware in your prayer, above everything, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what he can do."

—Andrew Murray

One big difference between Abraham's story and ours is this: We often don't have a vivid conversation in which we see the future and its paths before us. Nor can we easily tell what exact difference our prayers make. It's like asking what would have happened if Ronald Reagan had not been elected president. We know what history was like with him as president, but we can only guess what it would have been like if Walter Mondale had been elected. At one level, we know that our one little vote didn't make a difference. At another level, every little vote for Ronald Reagan did.

At an even more profound level, my little prayer doesn't seem to make a difference, and yet it does. The biblical teaching is that it alters the future, though we cannot say exactly how the future would have been without our prayers. This is a rather sobering idea: God is not merely in the business of running the planet, but he invites us to help him run it. As such, he lets us in on his larger plan and then—as we'll see in a moment—allows us to help shape that plan.

This naturally changes the setting of prayer. Honest prayer will always be about my world and my personal concerns. But here we see that it is much larger than that. We are not only coming before a loving father with our personal needs in prayer, but we are also sitting in a board meeting in which our future—and even the future of the planet—is being discussed.

Thy Will Be Done—My Way

This dialogue also illustrates another point: "Thy will be done" is the last prayer we pray, not the first. Ultimately, we're concerned about aligning our wills with God's, and when God seems intent on letting things take a certain course, we should submit as gracefully as we can. But in the meantime, we're free to argue, gripe, complain, wrestle, and fight with God. That is prayer at its most dynamic.

As we have noted again and again, prayer is conversation with God, the means of conducting a dynamic relationship—and an honest relationship. Abraham questions the great Judge's very sense of justice and keeps pursuing him until he gets a satisfactory answer.

In his book *Daring to Draw Near: People in Prayer*, writer John White says this: "You cannot have a relationship with God without standing, at one time or another, precisely where Abraham stood." He goes on to explain his own dismay at various biblical incidents: one where God is said to have killed a man for simply touching the chest that held the Ten Commandments (2 Samuel 6:6).

"I remember kneeling on the boards of an old church hall, begging God to show me that he was not the God of 2 Samuel 6. How could I preach his saving mercy if he were in fact a petulant tyrant?"

"I was frightened both by what I seemed to be seeing and by my own temerity in daring to judge the judge of the universe. Lord, how could you *be* like that? And his answer has always been to show me more of himself than I had seen before, so that my tears and perplexity gave way to awe and to worship."

True submission to God comes not by blindly and naively accepting whatever happens, but by working through your thoughts and emotions honestly and persistently with the one you both question and want to submit to.

At any rate, these are but some of the riches this dynamic prayer yields. It is well worth many a morning's meditation.



From the Good Book

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

—Jesus, Matthew 26:39

The Least You Need to Know

- If we are God's children, we play a role of helping to shape the future through our prayers.
- We cannot know how the future would be affected if we didn't pray, but we do know that our prayer has an effect on the outcome.
- We are free to wrestle with God and express our disagreement and displeasure with the way things are.

Chapter 20— Handling Fear



In This Chapter

- One of Moses' most well-known prayers
- How God deals with our fears
- How fear can be handled through prayer

Fear is a constant. We fear losing our jobs. We fear failing. We fear losing loved ones. We fear not having enough money in retirement. We fear dying. And on it goes.

For some of us, these fears lie beneath the surface of our lives and erupt, volcano-like, only periodically—but when they do erupt, they can paralyze us. For others of us, every morning we wake with a sense of dread of what might go wrong.

This is why fear is such a big theme in the Bible and why it is such a common topic of prayer. Moses' encounter with God early in his life (in Exodus 3 and 4) has much to teach us about how to pray through our fears.

Holy Ground

Before Moses became a powerful political and military leader, he was a shepherd. One day as he was tending his sheep near the wilderness of Sinai, he saw something strange: a bush that was engulfed in flames and yet was not consumed. This naturally aroused his curiosity, so he drew nearer. When he did, he heard a voice: "Moses! Moses!"

Stunned no doubt, he replied, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," the voice said. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground."



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer makes visible the right and reveals what is hampering and false. In its radiance, we behold the worth of our efforts, the range of our hopes, and the meaning of our deeds. Envy and fear, despair and resentment, anguish and grief, which lie heavily upon the heart, are dispelled like shadows by its light."

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

The reader, of course, is tipped off at the beginning about what is going on. It is "an angel of the Lord" who is appearing to Moses in the burning bush, and the voice is that of the Lord. For our purposes, the story illustrates again the varied ways in which God chooses to meet us.

With Abraham, God came to him through a chance encounter with passing travelers. With Moses, he came through creation. Again, we need to be ready to pray, to dialogue with God, at any moment—not just in our living rooms, not just in church, not just with people—but also when no one's around and we're in the middle of nowhere. Wherever we meet God, it is "holy ground"—a special place where extraordinary things may happen.

There is usually something appropriate about the way God chooses to meet us. Abraham was approached through human agents, as if to accent that it was flesh-and-blood humanity who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah and that real people were under the threat of punishment. We might wonder if Abraham's concern for those cities was heightened by the fact that he had encountered God in human form.

Moses met God in nature, where God's incomparable power and beauty are found. It's as if God was trying to accent his ability to conquer Moses' fears. Too bad it never really worked.

God's Family History

The voice finally identified itself to Moses: "I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

In other words, "I have a history with you and your family." God had met, comforted, guided, inspired, and sustained Moses' extended "family," the Israelites. Thus Moses stood in a tradition that had a special relationship with God.

So it wasn't as if Moses was encountering a stranger. Because he knew his people's history, he knew something about the history of this God. He knew that God was just, gracious, and powerful. He knew that God was *God*, which is why the Exodus writer notes, "When Moses heard this, he hid his face in his hands because he was afraid to look at God."

This is a key aspect of prayer that we've touched on only briefly. Our history-impaired age is fascinated with the latest craze, and most things—like fashions or computers—a year old are considered ancient and not worth bothering about. This is a disastrous attitude to take into prayer, in which we would hanker after novel spiritual experiences or practices; this addiction to the new and different robs us of much wisdom and strength that prayer can impart.

Instead, we can pray to a God who has met, comforted, guided, inspired, and sustained people for centuries. We can read their stories and pray their prayers and find rich resources for our lives today. We aren't the first generation that is attacked by fears that threaten to overwhelm us. And the God who helped our forefathers, is the God who meets us today.

God Knows Our Suffering

The story continues: "Then the Lord told him, 'You can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering.'"

This is one of the most profound truths of prayer, and yet it is one of the hardest to believe sometimes. God does indeed care about our suffering, but when we are forced to endure pain for months or years without relief, we doubt that God cares. We even doubt that God exists.

This is why the Bible never tires of reminding of this—the "good news about Jesus Christ" is that he is the definitive expression of God's care for us. The New Testament author of the Book of Hebrews put it this way:



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"God, of your goodness, give me
yourself; for you are sufficient for
me. I cannot properly ask anything
less to be worthy of you. If I were to
ask less, I should always be in want.
In you alone do I have all."

—Julian of Norwich

We have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin. So, let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.

Though this might be clearer to us today, it was not all that clear to Moses.

Telling God Like It Is

After the Lord told Moses of his concern for his people, he added this: "I have come to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt to their own good and spacious land."

All well and good, thought Moses, until the Lord continued: "Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

At this, Moses panicked. "But who am I to appear before Pharaoh? How can you expect me to lead the Israelites out of Egypt?"



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer for the Christian ... is not something added to our lives, something extra we do, but rather it is as fundamental to our lives as the act of breathing. It is through prayer that we are caught up in the rhythm and the energy of the kingdom that is amongst us and learn to see in a new way."

—James C. Fenhagen

A natural enough reaction, we might think, except for a few facts. Moses had been raised in the house of Pharaoh, so he knew something about the halls of power and how to manage himself in that world. He had already committed murder in defending an Israelite who was being brutalized, so he obviously had courage to act boldly. And he clearly had some innate leadership gifts because, in fact, he did become Israel's greatest leader.

At this point, though, Moses was not aware of those experiences and gifts. He was instead overwhelmed with fear. He was acting very much as we do when faced with a new situation.

What exactly was he afraid of? It's hard to say, but three things come to mind immediately:

- 1. Responsibility.** Responsibility is a burden. It's the thing that gets you in the office early and makes you stay late. It keeps you up at night with worry. It makes you cautious because the success—and possible failure—of others depends on you. And when you're responsible for others, it makes you care—and hurt—more than is comfortable. Tending a few sheep in a wilderness far removed from the politics of Egypt is about all the responsibility Moses wanted.
- 2. Failure.** Closely related is the fear of failure. We like to think of ourselves as competent individuals, people who can do what's asked of us and do it well. When given an opportunity to do something grand, most of us panic because we're afraid we'll fail. This is Moses.
- 3. Making a fool of yourself.** This covers a lot of ground; we spend lots of time and money making sure we won't appear foolish. We buy the right clothes and drive the right car and learn to say the right things so that we will fit in.

This is why the fear of public speaking (which we'll soon see is one theme in this story) is the greatest fear, rated higher by Americans than even death. If we die,

we don't have to face the scrutiny of others. If we goof up speaking in front of others, we still have to step down from the podium and walk among those who may be snickering at us.

The point is this: Fear comes in many forms and plagues us in a variety of ways. Moses refused to put on a pious act ("Yes, Lord, if you want me to lead the people, I will") but instead blurted out exactly how he was feeling: "How can you expect me to lead the Israelites out of Egypt?"



From the Good Book

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."

—Mark 1:35

Meeting God at Every Excuse

Here's where the prayer—Moses' dialogue with God—gets interesting because Moses refused to be comforted. He was so overwhelmed with fear that he simply would not let God help him deal with his fears.

To Moses' initial objection, God replied, "I will be with you."

To this Moses said, "If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they won't believe me. They will ask, 'Which god are you talking about? What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?"

To which God replied, "I Am the One Who Always Is. Just tell them 'I Am has sent me to you.'"

Moses protested again: "Look, they won't believe me! They won't do what I tell them. They'll just say, 'The Lord never appeared to you.'"

Seeing that Moses doubted his own abilities, God decided to do something miraculous—as if speaking out of a burning bush wasn't enough. But God had to do more, so he helped Moses himself perform a couple of miracles.

First he ordered Moses to throw his shepherd's staff to the ground. The writer of Exodus records, "So Moses threw it to the ground, and it became a snake!"

Moses' reaction? "Moses was terrified, so he turned and ran away." God brought Moses back and convinced him to grab the snake, whereupon he found himself holding his staff again.

Knowing that selling Moses on leadership would be tough, the Lord got Moses to perform another miracle still: Moses was able to make his hand become leprous and then clean.



Prayer Pearls

"When you pray, you open yourself to the influence of the power which has revealed itself as love. The power gives you freedom and independence. Once touched by this power, you are no longer swayed back and forth by the countless opinions, ideas, and feelings which flow through you. You have found a center for your life that gives you a creative distance so that everything you see, hear, and feel can be tested against the source."

—Henri J. M. Nouwen

And as if this were not enough, God told Moses that if he took water from the Nile River and poured it on the ground, the water would turn into blood.

At this point, Moses was nearly checkmated. He knew that if he were to do these sorts of things in front of the Israelites or Pharaoh, they'd be inclined to believe his claims. But fear still ruled the heart of Moses, and he made one last desperate attempt to squirm out of his new job: "O Lord, I'm just not a good speaker. I never have been and I'm not now, even after you have spoken to me. I'm clumsy with words."

The writer of Exodus suggests that at this point, God becomes a bit impatient: "Who makes mouths? Who makes people so they can speak or not speak, hear or not hear, see or not see? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and do as I have told you. I will help you speak well, and I will tell you what to say."

That should have settled it. God does seem capable of doing that sort of thing. But a frightened Moses would have none of it: "Lord, please! Send someone else."

The story concludes, "Then the Lord became angry with Moses. 'All right,' he said. 'What about your brother Aaron, the Levite? He is a good speaker. . . . You talk to him, giving him the words to say. I will help both of you to speak clearly, and I will tell you what to do.'"

Checkmate. Moses could think of nothing more to say.

God's Failure

Moses failed the interview with flying colors. He had the opportunity to become a pious man of great faith. Instead, he was forced to slink away a defeated and reluctant leader.

If Moses failed his test, so did God. He brought to bear as much power and wonder as would seem necessary to convince a mortal, but Moses refused to be convinced. It is fear that wins the day, not God.

Then again. . . .

God has a funny way of appearing defeated only to come out the victor in the end—Jesus on the cross is but the supreme instance. In this case, when we take the long view, we see something different than the failure of Moses. What we read as we continue is a story of Moses' remarkable leadership, his great courage, his keen insight, and his heroic sacrifice. He becomes, in short, not merely an extraordinary leader of the people of Israel, but one of the greatest men in human history.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"O Lord Jesus Christ, who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we pray you not to let us stray from you, who are the Way, nor to distrust you, who are the Truth, nor to rest in any other thing than you, who are the Life. Teach us by your Holy Spirit what to believe, what to do, and wherein to take our rest. For your own name's sake we ask it. Amen."

—Desiderius Erasmus

The lesson in prayer is simple: Our fears are not to be shoved down in the name of faith or piety. Our fears should be expressed frankly, persistently, and honestly to God. He is so gracious that he will respond to each and every objection, changing his very will to accommodate our petty concerns. In the end, you see, he is working with us to develop us, to help us blossom into the people he has created us to be, fulfilling the life purposes he wants us to fulfill.

The path to those ends, though, is through honest—and, yes, fearless—prayer before God. If he can transform a coward like Moses, surely he can work with us.

The Least You Need to Know

- Through the encounter with Moses, we know that God sees and cares about our suffering.
- Like Moses, we are fearful and make excuses when we realize what God expects of us.
- God is capable of using our fears and failures to work on his own behalf in achieving his will.

Chapter 21— Mending Relationships



In This Chapter

- Jesus' most personal prayer
- The importance of praying for relationships
- How to pray for relationships that are broken

We joke about relationship movies being "chick flicks," but they are really "people pictures" because all of us are deeply concerned about relationships. We want to be close to others, but that is a difficult thing to achieve. Relationships, we soon discover, are fragile things; they tear apart with the slightest tug—and sometimes they tear in such a way that we cannot imagine ever putting them back together.

When relationships are torn, so are our hearts. The joy we experience in whole relationships is matched by the pain we feel when they are broken. It is no wonder that relationships—not only our own relationships, but other people's relationships with one another—occupy so much of our minds and hearts. As such, it is an appropriate topic of prayer.

A Last Prayer for Friends

Jesus spent three intense years developing relationships with 12 men. He was training them to follow in his footsteps, which is why we call these men "disciples." He was teaching them to go out and spread his message as well, which is why they are also

called "apostles." But despite these purposes, Jesus gathered them so that they might become his friends.



Prayer Pearls

"When you are sad, tired, lonely,
and full of suffering, take refuge in
the sanctuary of your soul and there
you will find your brother, your
friend, Jesus, who will console you,
support you, and strengthen you."
—Charles de Foucauld

It is interesting to look back on the moment when Jesus first gathered these 12 men. In the Gospel of Mark we read, "He appointed 12, whom he also named apostles, to be with him. . . ." (3:14, New Revised Standard Version). Mark adds a number of jobs Jesus intended the 12 to fulfill, but he lists being with Jesus and with one another first.

This helps us appreciate something Jesus did at the end of his life. When he kneels to pray his final prayer (recorded in John 17) the night before he is to die, his main concern is these 12 friends. Let us now turn to that prayer to discover how to better pray about relationships.

Those Given to Us

Toward the beginning of this prayer (v. 9), Jesus says, "My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me. . . ." This comes as somewhat of a surprise for those raised on the notion that Jesus died "for the world." He did, indeed, but Jesus was not abstract in his love. It was directed to real people, not to generalizations such as "the world" or "humanity."

The old joke goes, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand." Well, Jesus wasn't as interested in humanity as he was in people, especially those closest to him. In fact, he had a special understanding of these people: He said these were people God had given him, people God wanted him to be especially concerned about, and individuals with whom he was to play a unique and indispensable role.

This is the context in which we are to pray for our own relationships. It is good and right to pray for the world—for hunger, injustice, oppression. If such topics are not a part of our prayers, we have some serious restructuring of our prayer life to do. But the relationships we have—with *our* family, *our* friends, and *our* neighbors—are given to us by God. In them we play a unique and indispensable role, and it is right that they are a high priority in our prayers.

This also means that as we pray for others, we might pray for ourselves, especially to understand the role we are to play in these people's lives and to be faithful in doing what we're called to do with them.

If a new couple moves in next door, this is not an accident. In God's providence, they have now entered my life—and I have entered theirs. Therefore, they are people I can be praying for—for their marriage, for their infant, that they might settle into the community. But I'm also supposed to play some special role in their life. It may be as

simple as inviting them to my church, or having them over for desert to help them feel more welcomed. It may mean putting up a fence together. It may mean becoming lifelong friends. Who knows? But this much I do know: These people have entered my life for some purpose, however small, and I have a role to play in their lives, however small.

Letting Go

Jesus finishes that thought with this: "My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, *because they belong to you*" (v. 9). This is the second context in which prayer for others takes place. It's mighty easy to forget this and to begin praying and living as if our loved ones belong to us.

Almost any relationship will do as an example, but take that of husband and wife. Let me speak for myself: In 24 years of marriage, there have been a few times when I have tried to fashion my wife in my own image. I've wanted her to be more interested in theology. I've wanted her to be more interested in sex. I've wanted her to be more organized. I've wanted her to be, well, more like me (let's not go too far with that thought—I recognize the absurdity). And there have been a few times when I've nagged, cajoled, bribed, and manipulated her to be different.

All this is to no avail, of course. It only makes things worse—more tension, more arguments, more dissatisfaction. Only when I can let go of her can I have a healthy relationship with her again. That means I need to recognize that Barbara does not belong to me but to God, that God has made her unique and special, for unique and special ends that may or may not coincide with my plans.



Prayer Pearls

"The more difficult things are to grant, the more we must ask for them, believing that God loves us passionately. But we must ask with faith, constantly, instantly, willingly, and with great love. We may be sure that if we ask thus and with enough persistence, we shall be answered and be given the grace we ask or something even better."

—Charles de Foucauld

The temptation in prayer is to try to "fix" people; we're pretty good at seeing how people need to be fixed. But we are wiser to let God figure out what ought to be fixed and how the fixing ought to be done—if it needs to be done at all. When we begin praying for others, we should recognize right off that they belong to God and that he has a wonderful plan for their lives—much better than ours.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't pray specifically for others, especially when the need is obvious: "Lord, heal Frank of alcoholism." "God, help Ruth to not be so bitter." But it also means to say all such prayers while trusting in God to answer the prayer in the time and in the way he will.

The Mother of All Requests

Now we'll jump to the heart of Jesus' last prayer: "I am praying not only for these disciples, but also for all who will ever believe in me. . . . My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one" (vv. 20, 21).

Jesus is praying for all his later followers (that is, the people we now call "Christians"), and his request is pretty simple: that there will be no divisions among them.

Uh, what happened? Christians have become one of the most divided people on earth. As of last count, there were more than 20,000 denominations worldwide.

A number of things need to be said about Jesus' request and its dubious result—first, two things that have nothing to do with the theme of this chapter but that reinforce things said elsewhere in the book.

1. This goes to show that the lack of an answer to prayer has nothing to do with the pray-er's lack of faith (as some suggest). No one has had more faith than Jesus, and yet his prayer has not been answered—yet.
2. This also suggests that it is appropriate to pray for some things that won't see fruition for some time. I have no doubt that Christians—in fact, the whole world—will someday be one. God's kingdom *will* come. And if Jesus thought it was worth his time praying for such "long-distance requests," it's probably worth my time as well. If nothing else, it keeps the hope alive that God's rule will, in fact, eventually prevail.

Then let's look at a couple of things related to the business of relationships.

1. Jesus knew that the greatest problem his followers would face would be division. After all, broken relationships are *the* problem of humanity. This is the problem that most concerns Jesus, and it's not surprising that it is the problem that most concerns us.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Have mercy upon our impatience,
O merciful Father, and print in our
hearts the image of your Son. Grant
us grace to follow his footsteps;
expel out of us all fear or worldly
accusations and false judgments....
Let your love increase and grow in
us, and whatever is in us that strives
against or resists your holy will, let
the same become extinct and die."
—Miles Coverdale

2. Though Jesus prays specifically for the Christian church ("all who will ever believe in me"), it doesn't take a German theologian to see that the prayer for unity is the fundamental prayer for all people, for all relationships. Jesus did, in fact, die for the whole world, that each person could be reconciled to God and to others.

To put it simply, there is no more important prayer we can pray than that broken relationships be healed—the

relationship of God and the individual, and the relationships of people with one another. To say such prayers is to participate with Christ in his mission of reconciling the world to himself and people to one another.

So What?

Practically speaking this means a couple of things:

1. We can't simply pray for people as isolated individuals. People are already in relationships, and everything an individual does affects those relationships. When we pray for Frank's alcoholism, we are wise to pray for all those affected by Frank's alcoholism. When we pray for Susan to do well on an exam, we are wise to pray for friends and family to be supportive. When we pray for Tom's bitterness toward Mary, we are wise to pray for Mary as well, that she might not become bitter in return. You get the picture.

2. We must mend our own relationships—even when the break is not our fault. It goes without saying that if we have done something to cause a tear in a relationship, we should seek forgiveness and reconciliation. But healed relationships are so important to Jesus, he asks us to go a step further. Note what he says in a passage from his "Sermon on the Mount":

"So if you are standing before the altar in the temple, offering sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God" (Matthew 5:23–24).

Note that it is not the worshipper who has something against the other, but the other who has something against the worshipper.



Prayer Pearls

"In prayer we have the courage, perhaps even the presumption and the arrogance or the audacity, to claim that God's love can be operative in the very specific situations of human need that we encounter."

—John E. Biendorf

In the real world, of course, it is not always possible to seek reconciliation with people angry with us. We often don't know when someone has a grudge against us. Sometimes people die while still angry with us. Sometimes they live too far away for us to attempt to heal the break. But this is not a new legalism that Jesus is weighing us down with; it is a recognition that relationships are so important that, as people of prayer (and as people who seek a closer relationship with God), we should do everything possible to heal our broken relationships with others.

Perhaps you can see why, from another perspective, Jesus tells us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, *as* we forgive our debtor." Prayer ultimately is about one thing: unity. That means oneness—and healed relationships. We can't compartmentalize, hoping to get right with God and not try to get right with others. It's not so much that it is wrong—it's just doesn't make sense.

God by the Back Door

There is one more practical result from praying for and seeking reconciliation. Jesus notes it toward the end of his prayer. Speaking of his disciples, he says, "I have given them the glory [that is, the power and honor] you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are—I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one. Then the world will know that you sent me and will understand that you love them as much as you love me" (vv. 22, 23).

One thing that people of prayer begin to enjoy more and more is a loving relationship with God. They experience love as they've never known it. Naturally, they want others to enjoy this experience, but just telling others about it often makes little impact. Outsiders tend to think of Christians as people who just happen to be "into religion"; they have no clue that what we experience is something they can experience as well.

Jesus assumes that the godly love we experience in prayer is the same love that reconciled people experience. If people become one—and especially if people become one with God as they become one with one another—this is what will impress others. This is what will help others glimpse the larger reality of the love that surrounds them.

A treasurer in a church in northern Illinois recently embezzled over \$100,000 from the church's building fund. When the church board discovered it, many members were furious. But taking the Bible as his cue, the pastor tried to combine justice with mercy, insisting that the man pay the church back while encouraging reconciliation between him and angry members. A few weeks after the discovery, after a plan of repayment had begun, the pastor held a service in which the man publicly asked for forgiveness. Afterwards, many of the people who had been angry with him came up and embraced him. Tears flowed freely. For members and visitors alike, it was very moving service, demonstrating the healing power of the gospel of love.

Mending relationships—it's hard to imagine that there's anything more vital to pray about.



From the Good Book

"In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, 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."

—Jesus, John 16:23, 24

The Least You Need to Know

- We need to avoid trying to "fix" people when we pray, to try to make them in our image rather than God's.
- Because Jesus prayed for unity in the church, we must pray for reconciliation with others, even if it's not our fault.
- If we experience a growing love relationship with God in prayer, we will want to have stronger relationships with others.

Chapter 22— Suffering: Three Approaches



In This Chapter

- Three prayers of biblical sufferers
- Three ways to pray while suffering

To live is to suffer, and to suffer is to pray. It is almost a reflex action when we're facing one of life's storms. My wife announces that she's going into the doctor the next day to have him look at what she thinks is a lump on her breast. My first thought is "O God, no!"

But aside from the sudden and desperate cry, how should we pray? What exactly should we pray for? For immediate delivery? For patience to bear the trial? Or, should we complain about the injustice of it all?

If suffering is one of life's mysteries, how exactly to respond to it—more specifically, how exactly to pray through it—can also be a puzzle.

Prayer from the Belly of a (Big) Fish

The Bible has its share of prayers that were said in the midst of suffering, but three prayers stand out. Every serious pray-er should know the prayers and the context in which they were said, for they have a lot to teach us. We begin with a prayer found in the well-known parable of Jonah.

Though some take the story as history, I do not. But whether history or parable, the story is divinely inspired to teach us about many things, including prayer.



Prayer Pearls

"Christian prayer is always a response to a presence already felt. The awareness of a desire to pray again is already prayer. As the desert fathers so often said, 'If you want to pray, you are already praying.'"

—Edward J. Farrell

The plot is well known: Jonah is asked by God to go to the city of Ninevah and preach God's coming judgment. Jonah wants none of it and boards the first ship heading in the opposite direction, thinking he can escape God.

Soon a storm arises, and even the seasoned sailors fear for their lives. They learn of Jonah's story and figure out that his disobedience to God has caused the storm. Jonah volunteers to be thrown overboard to save the ship, and after trying to manage the ship a bit longer, the crew finally obliges. This part of the story concludes, "Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17).

We do not need vivid imaginations to figure out that life in the belly of a big fish is no pleasure cruise. Any consciousness one might experience would be completely dominated by despair: It's only a matter of minutes before death. Time to get the soul in order, if nothing else.

Jonah, however, takes a surprising approach. We best hear his "last" prayer in his own words, in full:

"I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the world of the dead, and Lord, you heard me! You threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves. Then I said, 'O Lord you have driven me from your presence. How will I ever again see your holy temple?'

"I sank beneath the waves, and death was very near. The waters closed in around me, and seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was locked out of life and imprisoned in the land of the dead. But you, O Lord my God, have snatched me from the yawning jaws of death!

"When I had lost all hope, I turned my thoughts once more to the Lord. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy temple. Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2:2–9).

Faith at the Bottom

The prayer shows signs of having been composed in a completely different setting than in the belly of a big fish. Though it makes use of imagery of the sea, it was more likely written on dry land and to be said in the Jerusalem Temple. But it was a nice literary move to place it in the mouth of Jonah at this point in the story. It was done to make a number of points, one of which is about prayer.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my whole will. All that I am, all that I have, you have given me and I will give it back again to you to be disposed of according to your good pleasure. Give me only your love and your grace; with you I am rich enough, nor do I ask for aught besides. Amen."

—St. Ignatius of Loyola

We're not completely aware of the full context of this prayer until we read the first sentence that follows the prayer: "Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit up Jonah on the beach, and it did" (Jonah 2:10).

What's remarkable about the prayer is this: Jonah thanks God, praising him for his deliverance *before* it happens.

While in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays, "I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the world of the dead, and Lord, you heard me!"

While sinking deeper and deeper into the ocean depths, Jonah cries out, "I was locked out of life and imprisoned in the land of the dead. But you, O Lord my God, have snatched me from the yawning jaws of death!"



Prayer Pearls

"We tend to turn to prayer in extreme moments: great joy, 'O how good God is!' When all human sources have failed, 'O, God help me.' Anguish, guilt, fear send us to God when no aid is near or, if near, would not understand. But prayer may be so much more: a way of life, a resource, a comfort, a continuing communion."

—Elizabeth Yates

When only seconds of life could possibly remain, Jonah says, "But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the Lord."

Jonah shows a type of faith in the midst of suffering that is rare but real. This may be a parable, but the reaction to suffering is genuine. Some people, when they see death staring at them in the face, simply smile and say, "Praise the Lord." They are confident that God will rescue them—and if not, what does it matter? They'll be with the Lord in a few minutes anyway.

This remarkable sort of faith doesn't seem to be given to everyone. It is not something to aspire to—it is a gift. If you are suddenly given such hope in the midst of suffering, don't necessarily chalk it up as a "psychological defense mechanism" or "denial." It could very well be a gift of the Holy Spirit, and you should pray just as your soul soars.

Tragic Job

Though we might be tempted to think that this is *the* right way to pray, it apparently is not. The Bible records other instances of saintly people praying in utterly different ways. At the other end of the spectrum from Jonah stands the tragic figure of Job. Again, we're dealing with a parable, but this is one of the most profound that has ever been told.

The plot line unfolds pretty quickly in the first two chapters. Job is described as a "blameless man, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil" (Job 1:1). Furthermore, Job was a pious man who never neglected his religious duties.

Job was also a blessed man: He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned thousands of sheep and camels, and hundreds of oxen and donkeys, and he employed many servants. "He was, in fact," the story says, "the richest man in the entire area" (Job 1:3).

At this point, Satan, God's great adversary, asked permission to test Job. Satan believed that Job was devout and righteous simply because he had been so richly blessed. "Take away everything he has," Satan concluded, "and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 1:11).

God granted the permission, and the game was on. In short order, Job lost his herds to marauding bands and to fire; his home collapsed in a storm that killed all of his children, who were inside at the time. Finally, he was struck down with a case of boils that completely covered his body. The writer sadly concludes, "Then Job scraped his skin with a piece of broken pottery as he sat among the ashes" (Job 2:8).

At the end of this string of tragedy, his wife came up to him and told him, "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

But Job replied, "You talk like a godless woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (Job 2:10)

The writer notes, "So in all this, Job said nothing wrong" (Job 2:10).

God's Critic

Job may not have cursed God, and he may not have said anything wrong, but that didn't keep him from speaking his mind honestly. After sitting with three friends for seven days in silence, he finally blurted out:

"Cursed be the day of my birth, and cursed be the night when I was conceived. Let that day be turned to darkness. Let it be lost even to God on high, and let it be shrouded in darkness. . . . Curse it for its failure to shut my mother's womb, for letting me be born to all this trouble.

"Why didn't I die at birth as I came from the womb? Why did my mother let me live? Why did she nurse me at her breasts? For if I had died at birth, I would be at peace now, asleep and at rest" (Job 3:3, 4, 11–13).

He may not curse God, but Job does complain:

"If my sadness could be weighed and my troubles be put on the scales, they would be heavier than all the sands of the sea. . . . For the Almighty has struck me down with his arrows. He has sent his poisoned arrows deep within my spirit. All God's terrors are arrayed against me. Don't I have a right to complain?" (Job 6:2–5)

And the more Job thinks about it, the more anguished become his prayers:

"I cannot keep from speaking. I must express my anguish. I must complain in my bitterness. Am I a sea monster that you place a guard on me?

"What are mere mortals, that you should make so much of us? For you examine us every morning and test us every moment. Why won't you leave me alone—even for a moment? Have I sinned? What have I done to you, O watcher of all humanity? Why have you made me your target? Am I a burden to you?" (7:11, 17–20)

Here we have not only some of the most moving poetry ever written, but an eloquent example of prayer in the midst of suffering. It is difficult to believe that God would honor this sort of thing, but at the end of the story of Job, God does exactly that.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer in its highest form requires more than conscious effort. It also requires the surrender of our innermost selves to Jesus, giving him permission to make our lives a continually flowing fountain of unceasing prayer. When we have learned how to do that, we will have discovered the secret of the prayer of the heart."

—Robert V. Dodd

God came in a whirlwind and, yes, chastised Job for becoming "God's critic." Job, in turn, humbly submitted himself to God's power and wisdom: "I was talking about things I did not understand, things far too wonderful for me. . . . I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance" (Job 42:2, 5).

In the end, though, God rewarded Job by returning his lost fortunes, giving him twice as much as before. Job may have spoken ignorantly and

arrogantly when he questioned God and complained against him, but it was not an unforgivable sin. The unforgivable sin is to reject God in such circumstances, to harden our hearts and have nothing to do with him again. That is unforgivable because we put ourselves in a stance toward God that will not allow him to forgive, let alone allow ourselves to repent.

Job was angry, and for good reason. But he never forsook God. He simply wanted to have an argument with him. He lost the argument, yes, but he did not lose his God.

Looking for a Way Out

A third approach to prayer in suffering is modeled by Jesus, and it looks at suffering a completely different way—probably the way most of us pray in painful circumstances.

Jesus had known his fate for weeks, if not months, and it came crashing down on him the night before he was to die. Jesus had just finished eating his last meal with his disciples, his friends. Weighed down with grief, he decided to go off with his closest friends and pray. Gospel writer Mark is sparse with the words he uses to describe the scene, but the effect is potent:

And they came to an olive grove called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, "Sit here while I go and pray." He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be filled with horror and deep distress. He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me."

He went on a little farther and fell face down on the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine" (Mark 14:32–36).



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Govern all by your wisdom, O Lord,
so that my soul may always be
serving you as you desire, and not as
I may choose. Do not punish me, I
beg you, by granting that which I
wish or ask, if it offends your love,
which would always live in me. Let
me die to myself, that so I may serve
you; let me live to you, who ... are
true life."

—St. Teresa of Avila

The prayer has two dimensions. The first is an honest expression of what Jesus feels he wants: He wants to live. He tells God so, and he pleads that he might be spared the cruel death of being nailed to a cross.

We don't know how long Jesus prayed this way, for Mark has greatly shortened the scene. It may have been an hour; it may have been all night. He may have been praying this prayer every night for months. But this night it is said with such anguish, that we sense the pain even 2,000 years removed.

This is the prayer most of us pray when facing pain and distress. We don't want our loved ones to have cancer.

We want to be spared bankruptcy. We don't want to live with unrelenting back pain for decades.

Sometimes, as we noted in early chapters, God honors the request. The cancer is healed, the business comes in, the vertebrae is restored. And like Jonah, we exult in God's goodness—though *after* the fact.

And sometimes, for reasons known only to God alone, we hear silence in return. This is what Jesus heard, so much silence over the next few hours that as he hung on the cross, he shouted, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Yet Jesus had the courage to go through the mockery of a trial and the brutality of a whipping and the cruelty of crucifixion because of something he said that night: "Yet I want your will, not mine" (Mark 14:36).

The very words that sound as if we're giving up are, in fact, the most powerful words we can utter in our despair. For to say, "Thy will be done" is to put ourselves completely into the hands of God, whose love, strength, and grace can sustain us through any storm or as we hang upon the cruelest of crosses.



Prayer Pearls

"Much of the time, we struggle between prayer and disturbing thoughts. Our emotions get in the way of our prayers. Keep trying. If we knock on the door hard enough it will be opened."

—Evagrius Ponticus

The Key to Prayer in Suffering

How *should* we pray in suffering? I have no idea. I do know there is hardly a wrong way. The point is to do whatever needs to be done to stay connected with God—whether that means trusting God to save, like Jonah, or fighting for understanding, like Job, or submitting to God's will, like Jesus.

So what is the key?

Just do it.

The Least You Need To Know

- A prayer of faith is to thank God for his deliverance, as Jonah did, even in the midst of our suffering.
- Sometimes we are angry for good reason, and, like Job, we can express it to God with the hope of an answer in the end.
- Jesus is our model for prayer in suffering: making an honest request but also saying, "Thy will be done."

Chapter 23— Cleansing Prayer



In This Chapter

- How to approach God in prayer when you feel you've done something terrible—or when you feel as if you don't deserve his love
- One of the most meaningful prayers of confession ever recorded
- How to cleanse your whole being in prayer

Compared with King David, President Clinton is a minor league sinner. I don't mean to minimize his affair and perjury, but it just doesn't stand up to the biblical David's full-blown adultery with Bathsheba, followed by the premeditated "murder" of her husband, Uriah. (David ordered Uriah to the front lines and instructed his commander not to support Uriah's division in battle.)

If David's sin was great, so was his confession—in fact, it is one of the most moving and meaningful prayers ever written. From it we can learn a great deal about how to approach God when we are weighed down with guilt—a not uncommon experience for any of us. The one thing we want more than anything else is forgiveness, an understanding that we really are cleansed and that we can enjoy a new start. And there have been few prayers written in history that have the power to do that as well as the one recorded in Psalm 51.

Lasting Confession

You can read all the tantalizing details of David's escapades in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. This is a study rich in psychological insight and will pay dividends as an object of devotional study.

Even if we don't commit such "big" sins, though, we each know moments when we realize that we've done something despicable. It may be the betrayal of a confidence, a racist remark, or the neglect of a beggar. Whatever the cause, we feel guilty, lonely, disgusted, and frightened. We want to say something to God, but no words we manufacture can express our tangled emotions.



Prayer Pearls

"Every Christian needs a half-hour of prayer each day, except when he is busy—then he needs an hour."

—St. Francis de Sales

Psalms 51 has remained a perennial resource for praying about such matters, both for confessing the petty sins of daily life and especially the extraordinary sins that weigh us down (which we'll focus on in this chapter). This Psalm is so rich and holds together so well that we should take it in fully before looking at some of its parts:

"Have mercy on me, O God,
because of your unfailing love.
Because of your compassion,
blot out the stain of my sins.
Wash me clean from my guilt.
Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my shameful deeds—
they haunt me day and night.
Against you, and you alone, have I sinned;
I have done what is evil in your sight.
You will be proved right in what you say,
and your judgment against me is just. For I was born a sinner—
yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.
But you desire honesty from the heart,
so you can teach me to be wise in my inmost being.
Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Oh, give me back my joy again;
 you have broken me—
 now let me rejoice.
 Don't keep looking at my sins.
 Remove the stain of my guilt.
 Create in me a clean heart, O God.
 Renew a right spirit within me.
 Do not banish me from your presence,
 and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.
 Restore to me again the joy of your salvation,
 and make me willing to obey you. Then I will teach your ways to sinners,
 and they will return to you.
 Forgive me for shedding blood, O God who saves;
 then I will joyfully sing of your forgiveness.
 Unseal my lips, O Lord,
 that I may praise you. You would not be pleased with sacrifices,
 or I would bring them.
 If I brought you a burnt offering,
 you would not accept it.
 The sacrifice you want is a broken spirit,
 A broken and repentant heart, O God,
 you will not despise."

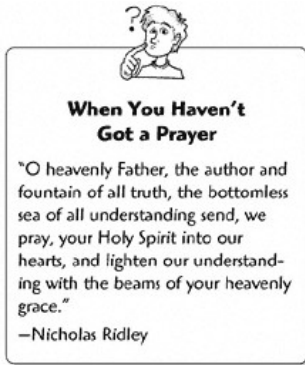
Key Assumptions

There is no way even to begin to exhaust the lessons for cleansing prayer from this particular prayer, so I'll limit myself to a few highlights.

To begin, we should note the assumption that David makes entering into prayer: God is a God of "unfailing love" and "great compassion." This is not an easy assumption to make, because after a grave sin, we feel as if God will not listen to us, as if he has, in fact, already rejected us.

That's because that's how we tend to act when someone has seriously betrayed us. I know if my son were to become a pimp and a drug-pusher, let's say, I would be horrified, angry, and confused. I would have a difficult time speaking with him, let alone inviting him into my home. If he took up such a life, he would be rejecting all I had taught him and all that I stood for.

David's prayer, however, will have none of this and starts off with a surprising assumption. God is just, yes. God abhors sin, yes. God has the perfect right to punish sin, yes. But this is not God's essence. Love and mercy are. We approach him with sorrow, yes, but not in fear—that is, not the type of fear that wonders what our relationship is with him. We don't have to wonder. We can begin with the assumption that God is there to receive us in all our messiness.



David makes another assumption: He can be purified from his wrongdoing. This is also startling, considering the gravity of his sins. You'd think he could never be "purified" from them.

To be purified, or cleansed, of sin doesn't mean that we don't continue to suffer regret, though. I still shake my head at sins I committed in adolescence! What David rightly assumes is that God has the power and grace to not let our sin stand in the way of a deep relationship with him.

Again, even this is difficult for us to imagine. If my friend betrays me—let's say, lies to a vice president in the company so that he can advance at my expense—it's difficult to imagine how that could *not* stand in the way of our relationship. Even if I formally forgave him, I would have a tough time trusting him for the rest of my life.

But this is precisely why biblical literature is called a "revelation." This business of mercy and spiritual purity is not something we would think up on our own. It is a truth about God that had to be revealed by God—and in this Psalm, it is revealed as clearly as anywhere in the Bible.

A Spade Is a Spade Is a . . .

David's clear view of God's compassion is matched by the crystal clear view of his own sin. In this, he models the three key elements of a confessional prayer.

1. He takes ownership of his actions. "I recognize my shameful deeds." No excuses. No rationalizations. Human beings are natural rationalizers, and we can

manufacture excuses in less time than it takes to say, "I'm sorry."

Took too much time for lunch and still left the office early? "Well, I've put in plenty of overtime in my days here—and besides, I do more work in six hours than most people do in eight."



Prayer Pearls

"He who prays as he ought will
endeavor to live as he prays."

—John Owen

Spent a little too much time fantasizing about that woman (or man) at the video store? "Aw, they're harmless thoughts. Besides, I don't do it all that often."

Yelled at your daughter for not cleaning up the living room even though it wasn't her job? "I'd had a tough day—and besides, she doesn't do enough work around here."

But David doesn't fall for this human failing (as in, "The pressures of government were overwhelming; my wife and concubines weren't satisfying me; and besides, her husband died in battle—what more glorious end would a soldier want?"). David doesn't need to make excuses, of course, because he knows that he's in the presence of "unfailing love" and "compassion." There's no need to cover his you-know-what.

2. He recognizes who he has wronged, really. "Against you, and you alone, have I sinned." It looks as if David has committed a sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, his own wives, and himself—and he has. After all, these are the people most directly hurt by the whole affair. But David also knows the ultimate source of his remorse, the ultimate being to whom he is responsible for his actions.

David knows what we usually learn only from experience: We can apologize to others and try to make it up to them for the rest of our lives, but unless we also deal with God, we'll find no satisfactory cleansing. He's the one who created the moral universe in which we live. He's the one with whom we've ultimately broken faith.

3. He admits that his behavior is part of a pattern. "For I was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me." This may strike us as unhealthy self-abasement, but it's really an honest admission of the way things are.

To say, "I'm a sinner and have been so since my birth" is not a statement about who I am at my core. No, I'm a child of God, created in his image. But let's face it, since childhood I have sinned—I've done and said things that get in the way of my relationship with God and that spoil my relationships with others.

David is simply saying that his adultery and murder are part of a larger pattern. He's not going to blather on about how this was so uncharacteristic of him, that he must have been temporarily insane, or that he ate too many Twinkies, or whatever. No, he admits that he's the type of person who could commit adultery—and who could commit adultery again.



From the Good Book

"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers— or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

—Jesus, Luke 18:11–13

This is probably the crux of the whole prayer. The sin we confess needs to be confessed, but it is simply a symptom of a larger problem. Unless we own up to the larger problem, we're not going to be cleansed and we're not going to make any progress in the spiritual life.

That's the great paradox of confession: If we admit we're stuck with our sinful tendencies, we have a much better chance of getting unstuck. But the moment we think we can get ourselves unstuck by trying just a tad harder, we're doomed to getting stuck.



From the Good Book

"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

—Paul, Romans 8:15

Cleanliness Is Next to Joyfulness

Along the same lines, that's the point of the next section of this prayer: Only God has the power to heal and cleanse our hearts. "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

The temptation, of course, is to apologize, to vow to do better, and then to reach down to those proverbial boot straps and start tugging. We'll never experience cleansing under these circumstances, though: first, because we can't improve ourselves by our own strength; and second, because we'll fall into self-defeating behavior.

If my wife has "sinned" against me—let's say she made fun of me at a party and hurts my feelings. She apologizes and says, "I'll make it up to you." She makes me a special dinner. She gives me a massage. She buys me tickets to a Chicago Bulls game. She compliments me in front of friends at the next party.

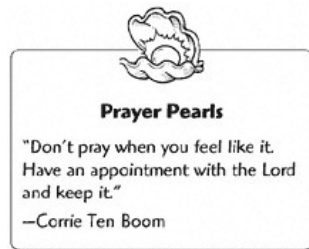
But whatever she does has nothing to do with what she has already done. It doesn't "settle the score." It doesn't erase what has been done. It can't take away the experience of embarrassment and shame—and she knows it. She'll never feel comfortable in our relationship, no matter what she does, until I forgive her. And for that forgiveness to be healing forgiveness it cannot hinge on her future good behavior. It's a gift, or it's nothing.

In the same way, we must allow God to heal and cleanse us. Instead of a flurry of vows and promises about how we'll never do that again, we are wiser simply to say, "You, Lord, create in me a clean heart. You, Lord, renew a right spirit in me. And help me not get in the way."

Of course, you'll want to change the behavior or situations that brought about the sin in the first place, but not as a way to make it up to God. Do this simply because you don't want to make the same mistake twice. In the meantime, we pray for God to change us from the inside so that we won't even be tempted the next time.

Getting the Word Out

This is probably the most unnerving part of the confessional process, but if experience is any guide, it is an essential step in the process of cleansing. We need to tell our story, from sinful beginning to confessional end, to someone else: "Restore to me again the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. Then I will teach your ways to sinners" (Psalm 51:12, 13).



By "sinners" David just means "other sinners like me"—or, more simply, other people. And by "teaching your ways," he means explaining what God's way has been with him. If this

seems a stretch of an interpretation, simply look at the Psalm itself: It is David announcing his story to others.

We needn't be as public as David. Sharing our story with one or two close friends, a pastor, or a spiritual adviser is sufficient. But as many recovery groups, including Alcoholics Anonymous, have discovered, there is no complete healing until we tell our story. Why this is so, it's hard to say. That it *is* so is the experience of thousands upon thousands of people. God completes his cleansing process in and through other people—as we talk, as they listen, as we share intimately with another human being.

Humility, not Piety

At the end of his prayer, David says one more thing that seems troubling but is crucial: "If I brought you a burnt offering, you would not accept it. The sacrifice you want is a broken spirit, a broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:16, 17).

When we hear that someone's "spirit has been broken," we think of someone having lost all hope and self-respect. This is *not* what David has in mind, though. A spirit of haughtiness, pride, stubbornness—this is the sort of thing that needs to be broken.

But here's the interesting thing: If you start to get religious about this whole business, you may end up with even more haughtiness and pride than ever. And this is why David puts these two ideas—religiosity and humility—side by side. Let me explain.

To begin, I'm not against religion as such. As you'll see in Part 6, "Praying with Others," I will encourage you to become part of a worshipping community if you want to really develop your prayer life.

But church is no nirvana. For all its strengths, it has the odd tendency to nurture pride and arrogance. The inner dialogue, which is usually very subtle and which takes months to develop, goes something like this:

"I've sinned indeed. I need to get some help in this. I think I'll start attending worship. . . ." Then a few months go by. "This is really making a difference. I'm much more in control of myself these days. I wish I knew about this sooner. My friends at work could sure use this stuff. . . ." A few more months go by. "If my friends would just get their acts together, like I did, and start coming to church, they wouldn't be in such a mess. I'm a much better person than I've ever been."



Prayer Pearls

"Every day we plead in the Lord's
Prayer, 'Thy will be done!' Yet when
his will is done we grumble and are
not pleased with it."

—Meister Eckhart

You get the idea: a slow and steady accumulation of spiritual pride. In some churches, the pastor will periodically remind people of this temptation, but the temptation is a constant one for the religious.

David wants to clarify at the end of his prayer that, as important as religion is (he himself was an extremely devout Jew), it's not at the heart of cleansing prayer. Humility is.

Just in case you didn't get it, at the heart of humility is a realistic appraisal of who God is (unfailing love), who we are (habitual sinners), and where our help lies (in God).

Needless to say, this prayer deserves repeated visits for meditation and prayer.

The Least You Need to Know

- To be cleansed of our guilt in prayer, we need to take ownership of our actions and recognize who we have wronged: God.
- Only God, through his power, can accomplish lasting cleansing and healing of our soul.
- The outcome of cleansing prayer is humility: recognizing who we are and how much we need God.

Chapter 24— Seeking the Best for Others



In This Chapter

- How to best pray for others
- One of the prayers of the apostle Paul
- How to incorporate key biblical phrases into your prayers for others

One thing I discovered early on in prayer is how quickly I become bored praying for others. I mean, after I've said, "Bless my brother-in-law," for two weeks running, what then? This gets pretty monotonous pretty quickly. How exactly should I pray for him? How do I determine what he most needs without butting into his personal life?

Well, I find a classic prayer and use it as a guide, like those found in the letters of the apostle Paul. When I figured out how to use such a prayer, it recharged my interest in praying for others. Perhaps it will do the same for you.

Beyond Daily Bread

Paul was the most influential Christian in the early years of the church. He founded churches throughout Asia Minor (what today we call Turkey) and in Greece, and he had relationships all over the Mediterranean world.

In his letters to his friends, Paul usually told them how exactly he was praying for them—and in some letters he actually prayed for them. These prayers can teach us a lot about how to pray for others more fully.



From the Good Book

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

—Paul, Romans 8:23

Our natural tendency is to begin with the concrete, such as praying for health and for success in endeavors: "Lord, help John get over his flu rapidly, and help him do a good job at his presentation tomorrow." That sort of thing. We might add requests for peace or freedom from worry.

Paul's prayers take us to a new level: He is concerned mostly for the spiritual welfare of his friends, and all his prayers are directed to that end. You'll never hear Paul tell his friends that he's praying for their health.

This isn't because Paul despised such prayers. Having been raised in a Jewish environment, there's little doubt that very concrete prayers for concrete blessings were a normal element of his prayers. But in his letters, he wants his readers to realize that he is also praying for them on a different level: for their spiritual needs.

That's all well and good for a spiritual giant like Paul, but can we do the same? To some people, this is presumptuous: "What gives us the right to tell someone else how to run their spiritual lives? That's an individual decision and a matter of privacy."

I won't get into that here other than to say: No, we shouldn't try to tell people how to run their spiritual lives—though I think it's okay to ask God to do that. Furthermore, a person's spiritual life may be private, but that doesn't mean that it's not our business. My brother-in-law's finances, for example, are none of my business, but I still want him to use his money wisely and to stay solvent.

Such is the nature of praying for others' spiritual lives: We're not trying to make them become like us, or whomever. We just want what's best for them in God's mind—which is why we're asking him in the first place.

In particular, let's look at one of Paul's prayers for the people of Ephesus (on the west coast of modern Turkey), a group he lived with for a time. In this prayer (Ephesians 1:15–23), we see four key themes that can become a part of our prayer for others.

Thankfulness

Paul starts on a characteristic note: "I have never stopped thanking God for you. . . ." Paul was one thankful person, and one of the things he is most thankful for is his friends.

To friends in Philippi, he wrote, "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God" (Philippians 1:3). To friends in Colosse, he says, "We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God . . ." (Colossians 1:3). Even to new acquaintances in Thessalonica (whom he had known for only two weeks), he says, "We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly" (1 Thessalonians 1:2).



Prayer Pearls

"God will either give you what you ask, or something far better."

—Robert Murray McCheyne

This is not how we usually think of our friends. Friends are people to worry about, or to fix, or to use, or to help. But here we see a whole new approach: We can thank God for friends—and not just at Thanksgiving.

For me, probably the biggest temptation in prayer is to try to "fix" my loved ones. I see a problem—she worries too much; he needs more patience; she needs to be more sensitive; whatever—and I pray for that, hoping that God will fix the person in that way.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"O blessed Savior, draw us by the cords of your love; by the sense of your goodness...by the unspotted purity and beauty of your example; by the merit of your precious death and by the power of your Holy Spirit; good Lord, and we shall run after you; for your name's sake."

—Isaac Barrow

I don't doubt that people need fixing, and it's certainly appropriate to pray such prayers. But before we start trying to make people better, we are wise to thank God for people as they already are. This prevents us from making friends into projects, or from being perpetually dissatisfied with them—a special temptation of spouses and parents, as I can attest.

This habit—beginning with thanks—will, more than anything else, transform your prayers for others. Even when you have no idea how to pray for them, you can certainly thank God for them. And many days, that's enough.

Knowledge

When Paul moves from thanksgiving into requests, his first request is this: He wants God, he tells his friends, "to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you might grow in your knowledge of God" (Ephesians 1:17).

If we need wisdom, so do our friends—in both the big decisions (school, marriage, moves, and jobs) and in the daily ones (how we use our time day by day). But Paul is thinking a bit more than this: He prays for "*spiritual* wisdom and understanding." He wants his friends not just to be healthy, wise, and successful, but also to grow in their knowledge of God.

Is there any more important prayer than this? And yet, if you're like me, it's a request I rarely make. I, too, readily assume that either loved ones are pursuing that already or that they really don't care about spiritual things, so why bother? But no matter their current spiritual state: They will have more joyful and meaningful lives if they get to know God better.

Hope

Another surprising request of Paul's is the next one: "I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so you can understand the wonderful future. . . . I want you to realize what a rich and glorious inheritance he has given to his people" (Ephesians 1:18).

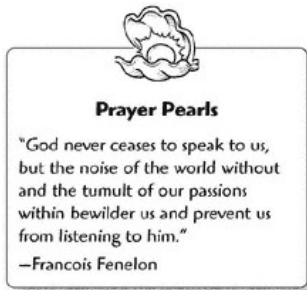
Paul isn't talking about a promotion at work or a new political administration. He's talking about ultimate things: the hope of heaven.

Here again, I find my prayers shortsighted. I'm constantly aiming for the here and now. But life is so fragile that we all need to have our hope pinned on something beyond this world, on something even more real than this present existence. To pray that friends will experience such hope, that they'll have confidence in God in their most frightening and despairing moments, ranks right up there in importance with Paul's first request.

Power

Lest this whole business remain in the spiritual stratosphere, Paul adds one more request: "I pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe in him" (Ephesians 1:19).

First, let's get a handle on this power: It is the power that created the world. It's the power that redeemed Israel from Egypt. It's the power that raised Christ from the dead. We're talking *power*.



Second, let's note that Paul assumes that something of this power is available to people like us—and to our friends.

Third, let's note that without this power being available to us, everything Jesus taught and Paul reiterated—including all this stuff about prayer—would be a big lie. It is not a new way of looking at things, not a new state

of mind, not some helpful tips to make life easier: The radical promise of the Christian message is that people can be given a power, a strength, and an ability to actually move forward and upward in life. And this is nothing less than God's power working within us.

This amazing fact—God in us—is something we can pray about. The implication is that if we don't pray about it, the power will not be as available to us. If we do pray about it, for us and for our friends, we will experience it more and more.

One area in my life in which I've discerned God's power is my temper. In my younger days, it didn't take much to make me angry: misplacing my glasses, walking into a messy kitchen, arriving late. Over the years I've prayed about this, as have friends for me.

I'd say I'm now better at controlling my outbursts when I'm angry, but I chalk that up mostly to my own will power. Where I think God has changed me is in getting angry in the first place. Over time, I have found myself unperturbed by situations that would have formerly incited an internal riot.

I remember one day sitting in a traffic jam—at one time a surefire rage producer—and feeling pretty much at peace. I was surprised at my reaction, but also pleased. I couldn't take much credit for it because I simply hadn't actually tried to *feel* calm. I knew I didn't have the power to do that. Instead, it was a gift, I believe from God—his power was working in my warped personality!

How Exactly to Use This Stuff

I am not able to pray Paul's prayer as I do the Psalms. For one thing, it's not as poetic. For another, Paul tends to like run-on sentences, which make me gasp for air by the end.

Nor do I find it helpful each day to pray all four requests as modeled here. Frankly, the ideas are too rich to be expressed sincerely all at once.

Instead, I'd suggest that you take one of these ideas and run with it for a day or a week (depending on how you go about praying for others). For example, I might go down my prayer list like this:

"Lord, I pray for John, that he might grow in spiritual wisdom and in knowledge of you. I pray for Elizabeth, that she might grow in spiritual wisdom and in knowledge of you." And so on. When I repeat the same words in the same way for each person, I find that the words sink deeper into me, and then I can pray them ever more sincerely.

When such a routine threatens to become monotonous, I'll pray for groups of people, whole families, before I repeat the phrase: "Lord, I pray for John and Elizabeth, and their children Joanna, Michael, and Stephen, that they might grow in spiritual wisdom. . . ."

As I mention each name, I try to picture the person, and I also try to picture God doing something for them that will make *them* happy. This checks my tendency to pray only that people will be fixed according to my desires, but instead that they will be blessed by God in a way that will truly make them happy.



From the Good Book

"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

—Paul, Romans 8:23

Other Gold Mines of Prayer

If this is a practice you find you enjoy, you're not limited to the language and ideas of this prayer. You might want to meditate on some of Paul's other prayers, including these:

Ephesians 3:14–21

Philippians 1:3–11

Colossians 1:3–14

Or, you might simply pick a phrase from one of Paul's letters, or even a saying of Jesus', and use that as the key phrase by which you pray for others. Here are some phrases that immediately come to mind:



Prayer Pearls

"Do not let us fail one another in interest, care, and practical help; but supremely we must not fail one another in prayer."

—Michael Baughen

"Lord, help Steven to become purer in heart, that he might see more and more of you." Based on Matthew 5:8, though you could do this with any of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–10).

"Lord, help Kathryn to love you with her whole mind, her whole heart, her entire soul, and with all her strength." Based on Luke 10:27.

"Lord, help Monica know that only faith, hope, and love endure, and that the greatest of these is love." Based on 1 Corinthians 13:13.

You get the idea. It's another reason the Bible is *the* book of prayer: Its resources are nearly infinite.

The Least You Need to Know

- Like Paul, we should realize when we pray that spiritual blessings are of greater importance than material or physical benefits.
- As we pray for the spiritual growth of others, we can benefit from Paul's understanding of thankfulness, knowledge, hope, and power.
- We can take Paul's prayers for the churches and insert the names of our loved ones to receive the same blessings.

PART 5— THE GREATEST RESOURCES OF ALL TIME

As has been noted a number of times, the Christian tradition is rich with prayer resources. Christians have been at this prayer stuff for nearly 2,000 years, and along the way they've learned a few things that have stood the test of time.

In this section, we're going to look at some of the best prayer stuff Christians have come up with. And some is the operative word. Here are those I've found most helpful or most interesting.



Chapter 25— Let's Get Mystical



In This Chapter

- Mystical prayer in the Christian tradition
- The greatest mystics
- The five stages of mystical prayer
- How to begin following this way of prayer, including finding a spiritual director

Perhaps the most intriguing prayer tradition is that of mysticism. This is the aspect of much New Age spirituality that, I believe, makes it so attractive. Yet the mystical tradition is also one of the most misunderstood. At first glance, it seems like the Advanced School of Prayer, and in some ways it is. We are wise, though, to understand it as simply another way of prayer that has its own gifts to impart.

There's Mysticism—and Then There's Mysticism

Mystical prayer is prayer in which the pray-er seeks to experience God, or ultimate reality, in an immediate, direct, intuitive way—that is, you experience God more immediately than the chair you're sitting in. This is a broad definition, so many people who do not consider themselves mystics have had mystical experiences. For such people, including myself, the occasional experience (once or twice in a lifetime) is enjoyed but not sought after, remembered but not dwelt upon.

For the person pursuing the mystical way, more such experiences are sought, with the ultimate goal of ongoing or complete union with God. No one has understood mysticism better than Evelyn Underhill, an early twentieth-century Anglican writer who said this about a true mystic: "The central fact, it seems to me, is an overwhelming consciousness of God and his own soul: A consciousness which absorbs and eclipses all other centers of interest."



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Praise God, from whom all blessings
flow,
Praise him all creatures here below,
Praise him above, angelic host,
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."
—Thomas Ken

As such, mysticism can be found in every religion: in the Hindu metaphysical system known as the Vedanta, and in the philosophy of Yoga, which offers a rigorous discipline to encourage mystical experiences. Taoism, especially as expounded by its traditional founder, the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, has a strong mystical emphasis. The Muslim Sufi sect also practices a form of mysticism that closely resembles that of the Vedanta.

Some forms of Christian mysticism sound very similar to Eastern and Muslim mysticism. But in the best Christian mysticism (that is, the type that seeks to shape itself according to traditional Christian teaching), there are some important differences.



Prayer Pearls

"Whether we like it or not, asking is
the rule of the kingdom."
—Charles Spurgeon

1. Though nature can be a vehicle for experiencing God, nature never becomes God in Christian mysticism. For all their profound wonder at nature, Christian mystics always understand that there is a difference between creation and the creator.
2. Mystics tend to be impatient with language that limits God—including the language of the Bible, in which God is understood in metaphors: Father, Redeemer, Rock, Lord, King, and so on. Mystics are fond of abstract language, which they believe more readily frees us from thinking about God in our "man-made" categories and allows us to experience God more truly. When they talk about God, they'll use words and phrases like these: Being, the Unknowable, Bare Pure One, Perfect Beauty, Love That Gives All Things Form, Reality, and so on.

Even many Christian mystics move in this direction. "God may well be loved but not thought," wrote the author of the mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But in Christian teaching, the biblical metaphors for God—especially Father,

Lord, and King—have been given to us by God himself. They are not intended to say everything there is to say about God, but what they do say should not be lightly set aside.

Furthermore, the democracy of history has determined that more people find God and have come to know him better by praying to "Our Father" rather than "The Ground of All Being."

3. In some forms of mysticism, mystics become increasingly passive and isolated from society. In the Christian tradition, though, mysticism naturally leads to vigorous action in the world. In Christian history, you find mystics running monastic orders (Teresa of Avila), arguing politics with popes and kings (Catherine of Siena), and starting movements that electrify continents (Francis of Assisi).

4. In non-Christian mysticism, often the goal is for the individual to be absorbed into the divine essence, to have his or her individual personality "obliterated" and united with the All-in-All. This is decidedly not the Christian goal, which is a relationship with God and demands that there will forever remain a distinction between God and us. If a Christian mystic speaks about "obliterating the self," it's usually hyperbole for getting under control those parts of the self that stand in the way of a relationship with God.

A Brief History of Mysticism

Let's go through the following history so that you can see some of the names associated with this form of prayer. This will give you an idea of the breadth and pedigree of the tradition. As a person who likes to know where things have come from, I need this sort of thing before I dip into something new. If you're not into history, though, just move along to the next section.

We start at the very beginning of Christianity: The apostle Paul was the first great Christian mystic. Though he didn't use the terminology or theology of later mysticism, he had his share of mystical experiences: He said he was once "caught up in the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2–3), whatever that means.

Mysticism as we now know it today was first articulated in the early Middle Ages, in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, a.k.a. Pseudo-Dionysius (because many scholars think someone else wrote this stuff and just attached Dionysius's name to it). He combined Christian theology with Neo-Platonist philosophy (which is where a lot of the abstract language of mysticism comes from).



From the Good Book

"I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

—Paul, Ephesians 1:16–19

In the Middle Ages, the most celebrated mystics were found among the monks of both the Eastern church and the Western church, particularly the "Hesychasts" of Mount Athos, Greece, and, in Western Europe; Bernard of Clairvaux; Hildegard of Bingen; Francis of Assisi; Theresa of Avila; and John of the Cross. Gerhard Groote, a Dutch mystic, founded the monastic order known as the Brothers of the Common Life, which Thomas à Kempis later joined and in which he produced his famous *The Imitation of Christ*, a prayer classic (see the next chapter).

Johannes Eckhart, a.k.a. Meister Eckhart, was the foremost mystic of Germany. Some of his followers, members of a group called the Friends of God, wrote works that influenced the reformer Martin Luther.

Mysticism with an English touch, at least in the 1300s and 1400s, is exemplified by Margery Kempe, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, another classic work on mystical prayer.

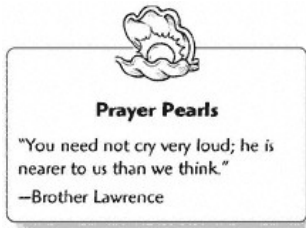
Post-Reformation Catholic works include *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola; *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence; and the works of seventeenth-century French quietist, Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon, or usually Madam Guyon. On the Protestant side, there's Jakob Boehme's *Mysterium Magnum* (The Great Mystery) and William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

In the twentieth century, the strongest mystical voices have been Austrian Roman Catholic Friedrich von Hügel, British Anglican Evelyn Underhill, American Quaker Rufus Jones, French philosophers Simone Weil and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and American Trappist monk Thomas Merton.

If any of these names have intrigued you in the past, their writings might be a place to begin your own exploration of mysticism.

The Five Stages

Depending on whose material you read, there are as few as three and as many as seven (and sometimes more) stages in the mystical way. Though writers differ on the number, most seem to agree on the characteristic phases that people go through when they try to take up the mystical tradition.



"Stages" and "characteristic phases" are loose terms. These are stages in the same way that there are "stages" in grief. We each experience denial, bargaining, acceptance, and so on, but each stage has a way of returning again—in some ways, all stages are present in each one. Still, we recognize the stages as different types of experiences we have after a loved one has died. The same is true of stages in the mystical way.

Here we examine the classification of Evelyn Underhill as outlined in her now-classic *Mysticism*.

Awakening. The person is first awakened to the reality of spiritual things and to the presence and love of God. This can happen suddenly, in an instant conversion, or it can take place over months or years: The person becomes aware of God's love as never before, and the experience comes with feelings of joy and even exaltation.

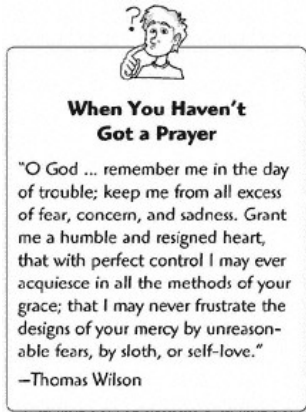
Purification, also called *purgation*. Having experienced the love and holiness of God, the person before long recognizes how out of sync with God he is. Thus begins a period of mortification, the killing off of desires, habits, and states of mind that get in the way of God. Often serious disciplines are taken up—longer prayer, fasting, self-examination retreats, sexual chastity, relinquishing possessions—to conquer spiritual sloth and pride. The period is characterized by moral effort and spiritual pain.

Illumination. Now more morally and spiritually honed, the person becomes joyfully aware of God at a new level. The knowing in the "awakening" phase is like enjoying the light of a full moon on a cloudless night; this is like basking in the noontime sun on a summer day.

These first three stages together are often called "the first mystic life," and this is about as far as most mystics travel along the way. As we'll soon see, it is not a perfect and ongoing experience of God, but one in which purgation is still necessary. Still, it is an experience far richer than awakening and is characterized by ongoing peace and joy.

Dark night of the soul. This most terrible experience of the mystical way is sometimes experienced at various points in each stage, and sometimes as an

extended period of its own. It is sometimes called "mystic death," for it entails the final and complete purification of the self. It takes its name from a book by this title, written by John of the Cross, in which John describes the new experience.



The chief characteristic is absolute loss of God, a sense that the sun has been completely obliterated. Desolation and despair are the usual emotions the seeker experiences. It isn't that God literally withdraws—the omni-present God cannot do that—but he does withdraw every emotional benefit the seeker has so far derived from faith. The seeker continues through the spiritual loneliness knowing that this "spiritual crucifixion" is necessary: One must learn to seek God for God's sake, not for the sake of the happiness God brings.

Union. In this stage, the seeker enjoys God not as in illumination, in which God shines down upon him: Here he becomes one with God. Again, this is not one in the sense that the seeker is destroyed, but one in the sense that husband and wife become one in sex. I'm not being disrespectful here: In fact, sexual imagery is common in mystical teaching, and this stage is often called "mystical marriage."

Books to Get You Started

This is only the briefest of overviews. Underhill's classic is more than 500 pages and is only one book of many on the subject. But if this approach intrigues you still, you might look for others.

For starters, read one of Underhill's books (*Mysticism* or *The Essentials of Mysticism*), or a more modern treatment such as Father Benedict Groeschel's *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (Crossroad, 1990). Whereas Underhill's book describes all of mysticism, Groeschel's book concentrates on discussing the stages (he has three)—how they are experienced psychologically and spiritually, as well as some of their dangers and opportunities.

You may also want to read a classic in mystical writing: Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle*, or John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

Getting "Professional" Help

If you're going to embark on this way, you also are wise to find a spiritual director—all the great mystics had them. These are people skilled in the art of discerning the spiritual life. You meet with them as you would a counselor (though not at the cost!), and you discuss your spiritual life. Some are more directive, giving assignments each week (or month—however often you meet); others are non-directive, asking questions to help the seeker to understand better how God is speaking.



Prayer Pearls

"He causes his prayers to be of more avail to himself, who offers them also for others."

—Pope Gregory I

Spiritual directors are not listed in the phone book as such, but many monasteries have people who specialize in spiritual direction. You might also contact a local Roman Catholic or Episcopal priest, who may know other places in your area where you can find a spiritual director.

You are better off not using your own pastor or priest because the relationship with the spiritual director is more intimate than most people feel is appropriate with their clergy person. In fact, I believe that it's best to not know your spiritual director in any other setting. Let this person's one job be as your spiritual director—not pastor, teacher, friend, or whatever. This way he can focus on you in just this one capacity.

Furthermore, you are probably wise to select a spiritual director of your own gender. First, there's the matter of intimacy; you don't want to start becoming confused about your feelings for your spiritual director. Enough said.

Second, the spiritual life is a gendered life. How we experience God is in many ways shaped by our gender and how we relate to people of the same and opposite sex. In most circumstances, these aspects of spirituality are best discerned by someone of your own gender.

Finally, you may want first to visit a few individuals to discuss their philosophy and approach before settling in on the one person who is going to help guide your spiritual life. And there is no law that says you can't change your spiritual director if you're not being helped.

In any event, having a guide is crucial—and even if you're not going to embark on the more strenuous mystical way, it can be a big help. Climbers of Mt. Everest don't go without a guide, for sure. But even those who simply want to take a nature walk through Yosemite Valley find that a ranger's company can make the experience more meaningful.

The Least You Need to Know

- There are some key differences between Christian and non-Christian mysticism, especially related to who God is and how we relate to him.
- There are five stages common to much mystical experience, from first being aware of spiritual reality to experiencing final union with God.
- If we get involved in the complex world of mysticism, we should find an experienced spiritual director.

Chapter 26— The Imitation of Christ



In This Chapter

- Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, one of the greatest devotional works of all time
- A study of one of the meditations of *The Imitation*

Sir Thomas More, England's famous Lord Chancellor under Henry VIII (and the subject of the film *A Man for All Seasons*) said it was one of the three books that everybody ought to own. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, read a chapter a day from it and regularly gave it as a gift. Methodist founder John Wesley said it was the best summary of the Christian life he had ever read, and he translated it for his followers. Thomas Merton, America's best-known writer on the spiritual life, said it was one of the first works to begin his conversion.

The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis, has been translated into more than 50 languages, in editions too numerous for scholars to keep track of. (By 1779, there were already 1,800 editions.) Not counting the Bible, it has been the most popular of Christian classics.

If you're going to get serious about prayer, this is one book you'll want to become familiar with.

A Book for Spiritual Novices

"When you read the opening lines of *The Imitation of Christ*, a clear voice reaches you with a promise that is as compelling today as it was in the fifteenth century." So writes

Sally Cunneen in her preface to a recent edition of *The Imitation of Christ*.



Prayer Pearls

"Pray as you can and do not pray as you can't."

—John Chapman

That voice has been heard clearly by people of all stations and callings of life, but it was originally written for a select audience: men who desired to become monks. It was written as a guide to help them mature spiritually. But it wasn't long after its author's death that a larger audience was invited to consider its contents, for it quickly became apparent that the book made a whole lot of sense to anyone seeking to grow spiritually.

The book was written by Thomas à Kempis (1379–1471), a German monk who spent most of his life in a Dutch monastery with a group called The Brethren of the Common Life. When he became the prior's assistant, à Kempis was charged with instructing novices in the spiritual life. In that capacity, he wrote four booklets that were later collected and named after the title of the first booklet.

À Kempis wanted to help his readers become more like Christ—that is, more virtuous, with a fuller interior life and with a closer relationship with God. He does not teach by way of reason (though what he says makes a lot of sense); instead, he attempts to speak to our hearts and our yearning to be like Christ. It's not intellectual insight but spiritual strength and encouragement that he tries to impart.

The power of *The Imitation of Christ* comes from at least three sources. First, it is an encyclopedia of spiritual wisdom of the ages. It is the fruit of à Kempis' lifelong pursuit of spiritual perfection and his deep reading of the Bible, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and other great spiritual writers. The book is littered with quotes and paraphrases from rich spiritual resources.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Help me, Lord, to remember that religion is not to be confined to the church or closet, not exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in your presence. So may my every word and action have a moral content."

—Susanna Wesley

Second, à Kempis expresses his thoughts in language that is unusually simple and to the point. Many writers easily fall into vague language and abstract terminology if they attempt to capture the essence of the spiritual life. Not this one. À Kempis speaks in a language that is accessible to a novice and yet that contains wisdom that the most spiritually advanced can learn from.

Third, à Kempis has a profound understanding of human nature. Some are surprised that one who spent his whole life confined to a monastery could understand

the dynamics of human behavior so well. But we forget that monks live in an intense form of human community—with all its joys, sorrows, sins, virtues, daily irritations, and profound wonder. And à Kempis happened to have been better than most at expressing the complexities of the human heart.

The Essence of Imitation

A quick overview of the contents may help you decide where you want to dip in first. *The Imitation of Christ* should not be read like a novel, in which you race through many chapters at a sitting. Instead, it should be read as we read the Bible devotionally, one chapter at a time at most. After that you'll want to meditate patiently on what you've read until the words enlarge you in some way.

Book One is entitled "Helpful Counsels for the Spiritual Life." À Kempis advises us to renounce superficial pursuits and pleasures and to give ourselves to humility as we pursue the interior life.

"If you knew the entire Bible inside and out and all the maxims of the philosophers," he writes, "what good would it do you if you were, at the same time, without God's love and grace? . . . This is the highest wisdom: To despise the world and seek the kingdom of God." (More on this business of "despising" the world in a bit.)

In Book Two, entitled "Directives for the Interior Life," à Kempis develops the themes introduced in Book One. Because the kingdom of God is within, he argues, it cannot be perceived with the senses:

Why look about you? This place is not the place of your rest. Your dwelling place is to be in heaven, and you should view all earthly things as passing shadows. Everything is transitory and so are you. So do not cling to ephemeral things, otherwise you will get caught in their webs and perish.

Or, more positively:

He who sees all things as they really are, and not as they are said to be or thought to be, is truly wise, for God is his teacher and not man. He who knows how to walk with the light from within and makes little of outward things needs no special place nor definite time to perform religious exercises.

Throughout the book, we are told to listen attentively to God's call, and that to do so we need humility, inner peace, pure intentions, a good conscience, and constant attentiveness. À Kempis also spends much ink on what it means to be a friend of Jesus: "Love Jesus and keep him as your friend. When all others forsake you, he will not leave you nor will he allow you to perish on the last day."

Book Three, the longest of the four books, is entitled "On Interior Consolation" and treats the book's themes afresh, just as a composer does with the themes of his

symphony. This book is cast in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and the disciple, and it concentrates on the disciple's desire to reach new spiritual heights.



Prayer Pearls

"In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender."

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

Jesus: My son, you must give all for all and keep nothing back for yourself. Realize that there is nothing more harmful to you in this world than self-love. . . .

If your love be pure, simple, and properly ordered, then nothing can ever hold you captive. Neither desire what you should not have, nor possess anything that could hinder you or rob you of your interior freedom. . . .

Disciple: Uphold me, Lord, with the grace of your Holy Spirit. Give strength to my inner self and empty my heart of all useless cares and concerns.

Finally, Book Four is a guide to preparing for and taking holy communion, and it emphasizes the healing powers of the sacrament.



From the Good Book

"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

—Paul

On Not Despising Thomas

Before we consider a sample chapter, I should address a couple of matters that will probably concern modern readers. Some, for example, may find à Kempis' exclusive use of male pronouns a problem. Then again, à Kempis meant them literally: He was writing to monks. Besides, plenty of female saints, including Theresa of Lisieux, have been able to translate the material so that it has become meaningful for them.

Then there is à Kempis' stark dualism between this world and the kingdom of God, with the repeated instruction to "despise" the world or one's self, to forsake human friendship, and so on. Before we reject such extreme counsel too quickly, we might first consider Thomas's reason for speaking so forcefully and look for the grain of truth. It may be that à Kempis has taken things a bit far—after all, we are commanded in the

Bible to love ourselves, to thank God for his creation, and to seek the solace of friends. Then again, we may be clinging to creation so tightly that we may be unable to experience the creator.

Finally, there is à Kempis' economy of expression. He often says things that demand elaboration—and then he doesn't bother to elaborate. He acts as if we know exactly what he was talking about.

For example, in Chapter 13, "How to Resist Temptation," he says, "Many attempt to flee temptation, but they only sink more deeply into them. Conflicts are not won by running away; rather it is by humbly and patiently standing up to them that we gain strength against all our enemies."

This is a profound thought, but it leaves a number of questions unanswered: What exactly does it mean to "flee" temptation? How is "standing up" to it different? How can we "gain strength" from standing up to temptation if we don't feel we have the strength to stand up to it in the first place? And so on.

Thomas speaks so tersely and leaves so many questions unanswered that we will be tempted to toss the book aside as the idealistic ramblings of a medieval mystic.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is naught but a rising desire of the heart into God by withdrawing of the heart from all earthly thoughts."

—Walter Hilton

But we mustn't read à Kempis, or any deep writer, as we would a modern how-to book (like this one!). How-to books are intended to explain. Books of spiritual devotion are intended to prod, probe, and force us to pray more deeply. The best ones will sometimes leave us wondering, pondering, and even a little irritated that we can't quite get a handle on things. That tension is precisely the thing that makes us want to give up—or that allows us to go deeper than we could have imagined.

Love of the Alone

To give you a flavor of *The Imitation of Christ*, let's look more closely at one of the chapters, "The Love of Silence and Solitude" (Chapter 20, in Book One). This chapter directly concerns the theme of this book, and I'd like to work through it as I would a prayer journal. This will give you one example of how to use *The Imitation of Christ* in your prayer life. Thomas's words (the really good stuff) are indented; my reflections are in *italic*.

Set aside an opportune time for deep personal reflection and think often about God's many benefits to you. Give up all light and frivolous matters, and read what inspires you to repentance of soul and not what just entertains the mind.

Lord, on the one hand, I'm not very good at thinking about the "many benefits" you bestow on me. On the other hand, I'm pretty good at reading what inspires "repentance." But I'm tired of doing things that way. It's so self-punishing. I'm not doubting that there's a lot to repent of, and to repent of time and again (greed, lust, sloth, selfishness, and so on). It's just that it's a vicious cycle. Perhaps if I focused more on the many blessings you grant me, I'd be more joyful and have more energy to deal with repentance issues.

If you abstain from unnecessary conversation and useless visiting, as well as from listening to idle news and gossip, you will find sufficient and suitable times for your meditations. The great saints avoided the company of men as much as they could, because they wanted to live for God in silence.

Lord, there is wisdom here, but I'm confused how to put it into practice. I am indeed weary of "useless visiting" and "listening to idle news and gossip," but it does seem to be what many people want to talk about. If I refuse to participate in such conversations, I'll seem aloof, won't I? People won't think I really want to talk with them because I think they are superficial. But isn't one of the gifts of life to enjoy "useless" conversation with friends? Does everything I do and say have to be "useful"?

Then again, there is enough truth here to move forward. I admit to spending too much time in useless and unnecessary activities, and they do take time away from you. Help me to be better disciplined with my time.

If you aim at a fervent spiritual life, then you too must turn your back on the crowds as Jesus did. The only man who can safely appear in public is the one who wishes he were at home. He alone can safely speak who prefers to be silent. Only he can safely govern who prefers to live in submission, and only he can safely command who prefers to obey.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Draw on my soul, by the gentle influences of your gracious spirit, every trace and every feature that your eye, O heavenly father, may survey with pleasure, and that you may acknowledge as your own image. I ask and hope it through him of whose fullness we have all received."

—Philip Doddridge

Lord, at first I balked at the sentence about Jesus. For it seemed to me that this—turning his back on the crowds—is precisely what Jesus did not do. And then I remembered that there were definite moments when he got off by himself, away from the crowds and even away from the disciples. And then he just prayed—all through the night, no less.

I tend to think of Jesus as a man of the people and a man of action. But I forget that he was a man of prayer first. I keep seeing the world in dichotomies that don't exist—as if one could not be a person of prayer and a person of action. It's not either/or, but both/and.

I go through periods where I yearn to be one or the other. Sometimes I want to become a monk and pray the rest of my life. Other times, prayer seems like such a waste of time compared to writing or building a bookcase. Maybe if I could get some balance in my life—with an ongoing and steady diet of both prayer and action—I wouldn't swing back and forth as I do.

Recommended Editions

You get the idea: À Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* is a wise book that can provoke you into deeper thought and prayer.

As I mentioned, there are many editions and many translations of *The Imitation of Christ*. You'll probably find more than one edition at your local library alone, not to mention your local bookstore.



Prayer Pearls

"He who has learned to pray has learned the greatest secret of a holy and happy life."

—William Law

Read through a chapter or two before you choose an edition. Read also the introductory material, and notice the type of footnotes or end notes the edition has. Make sure they are at the level (some are more scholarly, some more devotional, some are nonexistent!) that you desire.

There is no one right edition, of course, but I've enjoyed (and used in preparing this chapter) the one published by Vintage, in the Vintage Spiritual Classic series. This *Imitation* was edited and translated by Joseph N. Tylanda, S.J., and includes a splendid preface by Sally Cunneen; it was most recently published in 1998.

The Least You Need to Know

- *The Imitation of Christ* is a perennial spiritual classic filled with the wisdom of the ages and a profound understanding of human nature.
- Devotional books are not how-to books, but rather are intended to motivate us to draw closer to God.
- Thomas à Kempis emphasizes the need to be alone with God in silence so that we may learn how to better please him.

Chapter 27— The Jesus Prayer



In This Chapter

- The history and meaning of the Jesus prayer
- How to use this ancient practice in your own prayer life

The Power of a Name

It seemed like the most unimaginable idea for a national commemoration: a rectangular granite block with a bunch of names chiseled into it. But it has turned out to be our nation's most moving monument. I'm referring, of course, to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

If you've been there, you know what I mean. It's a typical experience: Someone walks along the wall searching. He stops, runs his finger over the letters of a name, and begins to weep. Such is the power of a name.

We tend to think of names as mere labels. We call the skinny thing we use to write "pen"; we call the thing we sit in "chair"; and we call our newborn "Luke." But it's not quite the same because as "Luke" grows and interacts with us and others, he creates relationships and memories. It doesn't take long before "Luke" is a history of relationships and memories, and when we say "Luke," something happens inside us, however subtle, so that all this comes back to us, mostly unconsciously.



From the Good Book

"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 your minds in Christ Jesus."

—Paul, Philippians 4:6

This is especially true when a certain young woman meets Luke and creates her own history with him. She begins to find herself thinking of Luke often. And there comes a time that whenever "Luke" is mentioned, she is very conscious of what is happening: She is stabbed with that most delirious of feelings that we call being in love.



Prayer Pearls

"Our Lord's first public act was prayer. 'As he prayed the heavens were opened.' The last act of the crucified before giving up his life in atonement for the world's sin was prayer."

—Oswald C. J. Hoffman

Names are not labels, at least not with people we know and love. And the mere mention of a loved one's name is enough to remember our love and even to make it grow deeper.

This is the idea behind one of the most venerable prayer practices in the Christian tradition, called the Jesus prayer.

The Way of a Pilgrim

As told in the Russian spiritual classic *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the story goes that a poor, lame Russian peasant was traveling all over Russia and Siberia, with a knapsack that contained only dried bread, a Bible, and a heart that yearned to discover what the apostle Paul meant when he advised, "Pray without ceasing."

One day this pilgrim met a *starets*, a spiritual father, who taught him the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." The spiritual father told him to pray it 3,000 times a day. After the pilgrim obliged, the spiritual father told him to do it 6,000 times a day—then 12,000.

What happened eventually was this: The pilgrim stopped counting because the prayer had become a part of him, and he prayed it with every breath. Finally, he spoke no words; as he put it, "The lips stopped moving, and the only thing left to do was to listen to the heart speak."

The pilgrim continued on his way, and he met many others—peasants, civil servants, landowners—who shared his desire for a life of ceaseless prayer. On his journeys, he often faced hunger, thirst, cold, and hostile people. At such times, he said, the prayer saved him:

"When the bitter cold cuts through me, I repeat my prayer with even more fervor, and I feel warmed up. When hunger begins to torture me, I invoke the name of Jesus Christ more often, and I forget that I want to eat. . . . If someone hurts me, I just think, 'How sweet is the Jesus prayer,' and the offense and the resentment fly away and are forgotten."

He then summed up his experience with the Jesus prayer:

"I have nearly lost all feeling; I have no cares; I have no desires; nothing attracts me. The only thing that I desire is to pray, pray without ceasing, and when I pray, I am filled with joy."



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Take the full possession of my heart, raise there your throne, and command there as you do in heaven. Being created by you, let me live to you. Being created for you, let me ever act for your glory. Being redeemed by you, let me render unto you what is yours, and let my spirit ever cleave to you alone."

—John Wesley

It is debated whether this story is fiction or fact, but in either case, it was written to inspire others to learn to pray without ceasing and to introduce them to the centuries-old practice, especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, of invoking the name of Jesus in prayer.

The History of Jesus' Name

The idea of praying in or with Jesus' name goes back to Jesus himself, who told his disciples, "You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13). Early Christians would often chant, "Kyrie eleison," which means "Lord, have mercy." Over the centuries this developed into the practice of what are called "ejaculatory prayers," short prayers said many times during the day, and finally into a prayer we know as the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me."

The prayer has always been flexible. Some, like the Russian pilgrim, make it more confessional, adding "a sinner" at the end. Some make it more communal, praying, "have mercy on us." But the basic idea is the same: a repeated invocation of the name of Jesus.

Exploring the Prayer

This prayer is not a magical formula, as if the more times you say it, the more holy you become. But it is like the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that sums up so much of what we long to say. It is also a prayer that, because it invokes the name of Jesus, begins to do something to us without our being aware of it.

The idea here is similar to invoking the name of a loved one now dead. To invoke the name "Ruby" at a Galli family gathering is to invoke memories of my mother—and smiles and laughter as we remember her passion, her flair, her dramatics, her energy.

To invoke the name of Jesus is to invoke the memory of the God-man who walked among us, whose story we recall in the Gospels, stories of compassion, wisdom, authority, mercy, and love. But there's one big difference: Jesus is not dead. So to invoke the name of Jesus is also to make us aware of his ongoing presence in our lives. To make the Jesus prayer an integral part of our day is to make the living reality of Jesus an integral part of our day.

This prayer covers a lot of ground.

Adoration. To begin, we praise Jesus for being "Lord," the one in control of history, who is driving all the apparent chaos of life to a glorious end. In calling him the "Son of God," we imply a prayer to the Father, and thus, to the Holy Spirit, and inadvertently we recognize the mystery of the Trinity. In seeking his mercy, we imply that he is merciful.

Confession. To seek mercy—and especially if we add at the end, "... a sinner"—is to go before Christ penitent, weak, helpless, in need of his healing touch.



Prayer Pearls

"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God."

—Brother Lawrence

Thanksgiving. To pray this prayer is to acknowledge that not only can Jesus heal our hearts but that he will do so. As such, this is a prayer of thanksgiving for all the healing he has accomplished in our lives and all the healing he will bring to us in the future.

Intercession. Some people try to pray the Jesus prayer silently whenever they meet another during the day, some changing it to "... have mercy on us." In this way, it becomes a prayer that reaches out to others and pulls us closer to others.

Doing It

There are two principle ways of using this prayer: prayer of the heart and prayer of daily life.

Prayer of the heart has been emphasized by those of the "hesychast" tradition, the mystical tradition within the Eastern Orthodox Church. In this method, the person sits alone, with head bowed and mind focused on the stomach or chest (that is, the "center" of one's being). He empties his mind of all rational thoughts and eliminates every picture or image. Then "without thought of imagination," but with concentration, he repeats the Jesus prayer silently. (The Greek *hesychia* means "silence.")

This method, if practiced faithfully and in the context of participation in the larger life of the church, is said to unite the pray-er with God so that she experiences the "uncreated divine Light" and "unspeakable joy of the soul."

Everything I've read on the Jesus prayer firmly states that this practice should never be undertaken without a spiritual director. As Father Thomas Hopko, a leading Orthodox theologian, put it, "To use this method without guidance or humble wisdom is to court spiritual disaster." (For that matter, anyone whose prayer life transports them into more mystical dimensions should seek out a spiritual director. The spiritual is a powerful dimension and can become destructive if not guided by someone with experience and wisdom.)

In the *prayer of daily life*, the Jesus prayer is said in the normal course of one's prayer and life. You might pray it verbally or silently for a few minutes at the beginning and/or the end of your daily prayer. You might repeat it a few times at lunch or before you retire for the night (saying the Jesus prayer instead of counting sheep!). You can say it silently whenever you meet someone during the day or as you pick up the phone as a way of praying for the person you are about to speak with.

The key in this method, as with any prayer repeated over and over, is to avoid what Jesus himself called "vain repetitions." To pray it unthinkingly, as if it were a good luck charm, is to misuse the prayer. But you can repeat it, over and over, rolling it around in your mind, savoring every part of it, concentrating on one word and then another—"enjoying" it as one would a glass of fine wine. That's not "vain repetition," but meaningful immersion in the prayer.

**From the Good Book**

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains."

—Paul

Getting the Most Out of It

One more thing that has already been mentioned but is worth highlighting: This prayer is not the property of the individual. It belongs to the entire church. It arose out of the church's history and will become most meaningful if prayed in the context of the church. That means participating in the worship and life of a local congregation, with people who regularly worship the "Lord Jesus Christ" as the "Son of God," and who together experience his "mercy."

Of course you *can* pray it by yourself. There's no law against it. But the experience of those who have been most transformed by this prayer suggests that it needs to be balanced with corporate prayer. More of this will be discussed in Part 6, "Praying with Others."

The Least You Need to Know

- Praying with the name of Jesus goes back to when he told his apostles to ask for anything in his name.
- The purpose of the Jesus prayer is to unite us in a close relationship with Christ on an ongoing basis.
- You should not repeat this prayer without thinking, but you should consider the rich meaning of it as you pray.

Chapter 28— An Uncommon Prayer Book



In This Chapter

- How the Episcopal *The Book of Common Prayer* can be a rich resource for your personal prayer life
- A study of one service in that book, Morning Prayer
- Some of the finest prayers in *The Book of Common Prayer*

The works of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and *The Book of Common Prayer* were all written within decades of one another (in the late 1500s and early 1600s), and each was destined to become a classic of the English language.

Most people know the lasting influence of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, but not as many know that *The Book of Common Prayer*, the official prayer book of Anglican and Episcopal churches, continues to be used by millions of people to guide their individual and corporate prayer.

Even non-Anglicans have found it a treasure—I certainly have.

Prayer for the Ages

I first began using *The Book of Common Prayer* (BCP, from now on) when I was a Presbyterian. In that tradition, which was strongly colored by my early experiences in the evangelical community, prayer is the spontaneous expression of one's thoughts to God. I discovered, though, that after years of daily praying, my spontaneous expressions were trite, boring, and predictable. I was ready to give up prayer when I discovered the BCP.

It's not that I gave up spontaneous prayer—which to me still must be the staple of one's prayer life—but the BCP did help me move out of my boredom and triteness and taught me to pray better.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer is the service of the heart."
—Talmud

Long History

The first full edition of the BCP was composed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1552 for use in the new Church of England. The English church had just broken away from Roman Catholicism, and the English wanted to worship in, well, English, not Latin. Cranmer condensed five huge Latin volumes that guided Roman Catholic worship into one. The BCP has been revised in minor ways a couple of times since.

In 1979, the Episcopal Church in the United States updated the Elizabethan English (though still keeping an Elizabethan version of some prayers and services, which are usually referred to as "rite I"). In large measure, the BCP we use today is the BCP of Cranmer's day. For the rest of this chapter, it is this American version to which I am referring.

Because the BCP is the official prayer book of the Episcopal Church, it includes the order for all sorts of services—not only Sunday morning worship, but also baptisms, weddings, funerals, ordinations, and so on. For the individual pray-er, it's not those sections that are most helpful, but the services called Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline.

As its name suggests, Morning Prayer is to be said in the morning and can be used for Sunday worship. Evening Prayer is designed for early evening, and Compline is ideal for the very end of the day. I'll let you explore Evening Prayer and Compline on your own. For this chapter, let me take you through Morning Prayer (specifically, Morning Prayer II, which is the rite that uses contemporary English).



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Grant, O Lord, that we may carefully watch over our tempers and every unholy feeling; remove whatever in us may be a stumbling block in another's way; that, by conforming to your will in small things, we may hope by your protection and help to pass safely through the greater dangers and trials to which we may be expected."
—Christina Rossetti

Though Morning Prayer is designed for group worship, many people use it to guide their personal morning prayer. Some change every "we" and "us" to "I" and "me," but I prefer to keep the first-person plurals to remind me that others worldwide are using this to guide their prayers. This helps me experience in some small way my essential connection with these pray-ers.

This more formal approach to daily prayer may not be for you, or not for you at this time in your prayer life. If so, just skip the rest of this chapter and move on to the next section of the book.

If you're sticking with me, you'll be reading many quotes from Morning Prayer because you can't really get a feel for it otherwise.

To Begin

Morning Prayer begins with an opening sentence, a number of which are printed at the beginning under the headings of church seasons (see Chapter 33, "Prayer in the Liturgical Tradition," for more on church seasons) or "At any time." These are brief affirmations from scripture that set the tone for worship, such as these:



Prayer Pearls

"I have not the courage to search through books for beautiful prayers.... Unable either to say them all or choose between them, I do as a child would do who cannot read—I just say what I want to say to God, quite simply, and he never fails to understand."

—St. Therese of Lisieux

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1).

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer"
(Psalm 19:14).

Then follows a confession of sin, which is a fuller way to prepare oneself:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. . . .

I'll stop here because I've quoted this prayer in full already. As I said earlier, I try to pause after each phrase, however briefly, to allow my mind to let one specific sin come to mine. Then follows the pardon:

Almighty God, have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins, through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.
Amen.

Psalm Prep

Next comes the morning Psalm, which is introduced with these lines:

Lord, open our lips.
And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

This frame follows:

Glory be to the father, and to the son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Next comes another short theme sentence called an "antiphon," followed by a special psalm called "Venite" or another called "Jubilate." Don't let the Latin terms intimidate you; they are merely the first words of each Psalm in Latin. You can read either Psalm, but I like Venite best. The first stanza goes like this:

Come let us sing to the Lord,
let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving
and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.

Again, all this is designed to shape one's heart and mind to prepare for the hearing of Scripture, which is the heart of this service.

In the back of the BCP, you'll find suggested Scripture readings for each day, including a suggested Psalm, which is to be read next. After the Psalm is read, the "frame" is completed, as above, with: "Glory be to the father, and to the son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen."



From the Good Book

"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

—Paul, Silas, and Timothy, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 3

Prayer Central

The next part, called "The Lessons," is comprised of three readings, one each from the Old Testament, New Testament epistles, and the Gospels. Here is the climax of Morning Prayer. The idea is that through Scripture God speaks to us, thus completing the dialogue of prayer. This is why the service spends a great deal of time preparing for this part: We want to be mentally and spiritually alert when God speaks.

Again, the specific readings for the day are found at the back of the BCP. Daily readings are divided into two years, so if you were to follow this guide, you would read nearly the entire Bible in two years.

After each reading, it is appropriate to say, "The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God," and then wait in silence, for sometimes in the silence of meditation, a feeling or a thought comes that makes the passage just read speak to your personal situation—this is indeed a word from the Lord that is to be listened to closely. But even when no specific word comes as such, the simple act of meditating on Scripture reveals general truths that can enrich us.

After each reading and meditation, (or for me, after all three readings), a "Canticle" is said. A canticle is merely a passage of the Bible that is song-like (in fact, when Morning Prayer is said in church, these canticles are often sung). One of my favorites is Canticle 15, "The Song of Mary," also called the *Magnificat*, which was the prayer of Mary after hearing the news that she was pregnant with Jesus. Yet her words transcend that setting. The first lines go like this:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed,
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

There are 21 canticles to choose from, so it is easy to say one after each reading and not become repetitive.

This section ends with a reciting of the Apostles' Creed, which is one of the oldest summaries of Christian teaching. This is a concise and poetic way to rehearse the main story line of the entire Bible, from creation to ultimate redemption:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

There is a certain amount of jargon here, and not every part is equally comprehended, even by the best of theological minds. It is not critical that you understand everything, but as you say it, you affirm that this, in fact, is the teaching of scripture and that in saying it, you desire to "grow into" the creed over time.

The Prayers

"The Prayers" is the prosaic title of the last part of Morning Prayer, which opens with the Lord's Prayer followed by one of two "suffrages" or petitionary prayers set in responsive form. One person or group says the first line up to the semi-colon, another person or group responds to the end of the sentence. For private prayer, though, Suffrage A would be said simply, like this:



Prayer Pearls

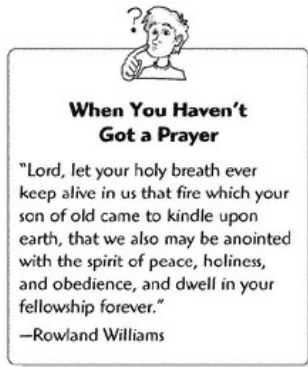
"A good prayer, though often used,
is still fresh and fair in the eyes and
ears of heaven."

—Thomas Fuller

Show us your mercy, O Lord;
And grant us your salvation.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
Let your people sing with joy.
Give peace, O Lord, in all the world;
For only in you can we live in safety.
Lord, keep this nation under your care;
And guide us in the way of justice and truth.
Let your way be known upon earth;
Your saving health among all nations.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
 Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
 Create in us clean hearts, O God;
 And sustain us with your Holy Spirit.

As you can see, this prayer includes petitions for the church (both ministers and people), for the nation, for the world, for the poor, and for hope. I find this an elegant way to pray for these larger issues.



This is followed by the daily "collect," a prayer that sums up a theme for the day. Some of these are listed by the day of the week and others by theme. One of my favorites is the Collect for Guidance:

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ, our lord. Amen.

Grand Finale

Near the end of Morning Prayer comes one of the finest prayers in the entire BCP, "The General Thanksgiving":

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
 we, your unworthy servants, give you humble thanks
 for all your goodness and loving kindness
 to us and to all whom you have made.
 We bless you for your creation, preservation,
 and all the blessings of this life;
 but above all for your immeasurable love
 in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
 for the means of grace and the hope of glory.
 And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies,

that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,
 not only with our lips, but in our lives,
 by giving up our selves to your service,
 and by walking before you
 in holiness and righteousness all our days;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
 be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.

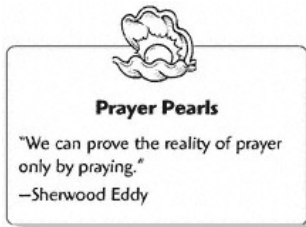
This is packed; each phrase has a wealth of meaning that can take a lifetime to uncover. You may want to commit this to memory. I've found no better full and yet concise expression of my thankfulness to God.

The service then concludes with one of three final sentences of Scripture, like this one: "May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen" (Romans 15:13).

In case you're wondering: Morning prayer takes anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes, or longer, to pray, depending on how much meditation you do after each Scripture reading and how many canticles and the like you include.

Rich Resource

The BCP has more prayer resources still. In addition to Evening Prayer and Compline (which are not as full as Morning Prayer), there is a section of "Prayers and Thanksgivings" useful for all sorts of occasions. There are collects for each week of the year, and then some. All 150 Psalms, in a very readable translation, are included. And, as I mentioned, there are guides to Scripture reading, both daily and weekly, that will get you through the Bible in an orderly way.



Perhaps you can see why the BCP is not merely the official prayer book of Episcopalians but is also a resource for anyone interested in deepening his prayer life. Most major bookstores carry a copy in their "Religion" or "Spirituality" or "Prayer" sections, or you can order it through Amazon.com or some other online book dealer. (It is published by Oxford University Press, and its full title is *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church*—but I've never heard anyone call it that!) Also, your local Episcopal church may have copies it might be willing to give or sell you.

The Least You Need to Know

- *The Book of Common Prayer* can guide our personal prayers.
- The BCP was composed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to be used in worship in the new Church of England.
- The BCP includes Psalms, Bible readings, prayers, and thanksgivings.

Chapter 29— Singing Prayer



In This Chapter

- The major types of songs available in the Christian tradition
- A handful of "the greatest hymns of all time"
- Why *singing* is so important to the life of prayer

If you want to throw a church into chaos, get people furious with one another, or even cause a church split, then change the worship music. There are few topics more volatile in churches. It's not that Christians are petty—well, no more petty than the rest of the world—it's just that music is more than music for them: It is the most meaningful form of prayer. When you tamper with music, you're tampering with how people relate to God.

Church fights aside, we need to look at how music—especially singing—is one of the most profound forms of prayer available to us.



From the Good Book

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

—Paul, 2 Timothy 2:1–4

The Types of Songs Available

If you talk to people who are really into church music, the categories of songs multiply like rabbits. For now, let's look at the major categories.

First, there's the *Gregorian Chant*. Just when this type of song had been relegated to the dustbin of history, along come the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, who recorded the best-selling *Chant*. The huge fad has passed, of course, but Gregorian chant will never pass away. It will always express something that no other musical form can.



From the Good Book

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

—Paul, Ephesians 5:19–20

A musical chant is a *cappella* singing that closely resembles the spoken word. Chants have been used in religious ceremonies since ancient times. To create their own chants, early Christians borrowed from Hebrew melodies and used the words of the Psalms.

Gregorian chants are named after Pope Gregory I, who compiled chants for the Roman Catholic liturgy and helped to disseminate them in churches all over Europe in the late 500s. You'll find them mostly used in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.

Having arisen in medieval Europe, these chants are usually sung in Latin and rely on phrases from the Psalms and other biblical books for their words. Often the entire song is an elaboration on a single phrase. Some titles and their English translations are listed here:

"Venite, exsultemus Domino" ("Come, let us sing to the Lord")

"Veni Sancte Spiritus" ("Come Holy Ghost")

"Benedictus Dominus, Dues Israel" ("Blessed be the Lord God of Israel")

Then there are *spirituals*. Though the term can refer to religious folk music found in both white and black traditions, it usually refers to the musical genre first created by African-American slaves. Some spirituals were used as work songs, and others contained coded information for slaves to communicate secretly to one another, but those that have survived in churches are prayers.

Some of the more famous include "Jericho," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "When All the Saints Come Marching In." One of the most moving, which you'll hear sung during communion services is this one:



Prayer Pearls

"Greater than prayer is the spirit in
which it is uttered."

—Glenn Clark

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Praise choruses are a modern version of Gregorian chant, in some respects. Like Gregorian Chant, praise choruses usually rely directly on the Bible verses and phrases for their texts, but the melodies are usually folk or soft rock.

Hymns are older songs that address God or that speak about him and his ways. The first hymns in the Judeo-Christian tradition are the Psalms, and the earliest Christians sang hymns, some of which are found in the New Testament. All through their history, Christians have composed and sung hymns. The first book published in America, *The Psalm Bay Book*, was a hymnbook.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"O Lord ... may we learn to love you
whom we have not seen, by loving
our brothers and sisters whom we
have seen. Teach us, O heavenly
Father, the love by which you have
loved us; fashion us, O blessed Lord,
after your own example of love;
shed abroad, O Holy Spirit of love,
the love of God ... in our hearts."
—Henry Alford

Many, many hymns have stood the test of time—we still sing versions of hymns from all periods of Christian history. Probably the best way to introduce you to this incredible heritage is simply to show rather quickly the feelings and attitudes hymns can help you express.

Poetry of Prayer

The church's hymns function like great poetry: They help us articulate what's going on deep inside us, and they do so succinctly, accurately, and beautifully.

For starters, some hymns express praise and adoration. Praise of God is probably one of the most difficult things to articulate. "God, you're great!" has the advantage of being simple and to the point; however, it doesn't quite express everything I want to say a lot of the time. Reading the Psalms can help here, but reading or singing hymns can also help.

For example, some hymns can help express praise for the simple pleasures of life:

For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.
For the wonder of each hour,

Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon, and stars of light,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

The hymn goes on to praise God for the gifts of sight and hearing, for family and friends, and for the church. Other hymns express praise for God's steadiness, power, and eternity:

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.
Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

Hymns also can express hope: More than once in a while, life deals us a left hook. One minute we're standing proud and tall and feeling invincible; the next, we're flat on our back wondering how we're going to start breathing again, let alone get up. "O God, help!" is another simple prayer, but sometimes you just want to express something deeper—like this:



Prayer Pearls

"The Christian who prays recollects himself, that is to say he discovers himself, gathers himself together, frees himself from all useless masters, from all unknown hands, from all fast-holding desires which tear him to pieces and so prevent him from being himself."

—Pierre Charles

If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
And hope in him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days;
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that nought can move.

As Michael de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*, put it, "He who sings frightens away his ills."

Like praise, joy is a hard thing to express with much detail. "Hooray, God!" just doesn't cut it for me, but a hymn like this does:

The strife is o'er, the battle done;
The victory of life is won;
The song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia!
The powers of death have done their worst,
But Christ their legions hath dispersed:
Let shouts of holy joy outburst.
Alleluia!

Of course, there also are dedication hymns. Once in a while I snap out of my ongoing daze and decide that it's time, once more, to get serious about this God stuff. So I want to tell God I'm going to try to start acting like a follower of Jesus. When I get tired of repeating "God, I'm going to do better," I'll turn to a hymn like this:

O Master let me walk with thee
In lowly paths of service free;
Tell me thy secret; help me bear
The strain of toil, the fret of care.

Or another, like this:

Take thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray;
Give us the mind of Christ each passing day;
Teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
Grant us in all our thoughts to honor thee.

The next verse begins "Take thou our hearts. . ." and the one after that, "Take thou our wills . . ."—which pretty much covers the waterfront of how a person can dedicate himself to God.

Hymns have been around so long that there is hardly a topic that someone hasn't written a hymn about. One of my favorite hymnals, the 1955 Presbyterian

The Hymnbook, classifies hymns in more than 50 headings. Under "Life in Christ" alone, you'll find a number of hymns on each of these topics:

The Call of Christ
 Repentance and Forgiveness
 Discipleship and Service
 Dedication and Consecration
 Stewardship
 Hope and Aspiration
 Pilgrimage and Guidance
 Loyalty and Courage
 Trial and Conflict
 Faith and Assurance
 Prayer and Intercession
 Love
 Joy
 Peace
 The Life Everlasting

In other words, hymns are an astoundingly rich resource of prayer. Certainly, some are pretty schmaltsy, others terrible poetry, and others still nearly indecipherable today ("Here I raise my Ebenezer, Hither by thy help I'm come . . ."). But there are enough hymns left to pray through a lifetime.



From the Good Book

"For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."

—Paul, 1 Timothy 4:4, 5

The Prayer of Music

"Next to theology, I give music the highest place and honor," wrote Martin Luther. "Music is the art of the prophets, the only art that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful presents God has given us."



Prayer Pearls

"The wish to pray is a prayer in itself."

—Georges Bernanos

Music not only helps us express our innermost thoughts and feelings to God, but it can also do something else. There is the story of a little French girl hearing music for the first time, who cries out, "It's God speaking to us!"

If prayer is communication with God, then music is certainly one way to do that.

The Least You Need to Know

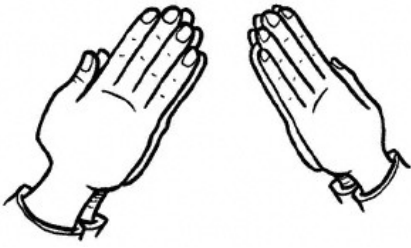
- Chants and spirituals precede the more contemporary praise songs and hymns, which all comprise prayer in song.
- Hymns can also double as great poetry, reaching the heights of adoration and dedication as a form of prayer.
- Music is an added dimension to prayer that allows us to express our worship in a deeper way.

PART 6— PRAYING WITH OTHERS

I hope you didn't pick up this book hoping that with this book as your constant companion, you could learn everything you needed to learn about prayer on your own. Thanks for the compliment, but a book can take you only so far. And as important as praying by yourself is, it also can take you only so far. We're getting to that part of the book where you need to start thinking about long-term learning, and one key to learning Christian prayer more deeply and for the long haul is learning to pray with others. In this section, we'll look at the various ways to do that.



Chapter 30— Going One-on-One



In This Chapter

- How to pray with your children
- How to pray with your spouse
- Finding a prayer partner

I've played basketball since high school, and I've enjoyed the many ways the game can be played. Full-court, five-on-five is what it's all about of course, but three-on-three half-court can be a lot of fun. And then there's one-on-one, in which you pit your skills against another's. No excuses now: You can't blame your teammates if you lose—it's just your skills against your opponent's skills.

Prayer has a one-on-one dimension, too: Lots of people get a great deal out of sitting down with a friend or a spouse or whomever and praying together. Then again, you may not be quite up to this. If this is way over the top for you, just turn to the next chapter and come back to this when you're ready.

Let's begin with a look at what can be gained by praying with others one-on-one.

Out of the Mouths of Babes

Let's start with the easy one: praying with your kids. Even if you are shy about praying with other adults, you may not be shy about praying with your own children. This is good, because praying with your kids is not only a great way to introduce them to prayer, but it's a great way for adults to learn more about prayer and about God.

Praying with children usually begins with saying rote prayers with the child. The classic is this one:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Some adults are freaked out by this prayer—all this talk of dying before they get up the next morning. But many children are more matter-of-fact about such matters. In this regard, they are wiser than adults who spend a great deal of energy denying death. If all of us prayed—and lived—as if this were our last day, I dare say this would be a better planet. In this respect, this is a profound prayer indeed.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Almighty God, we earnestly ask you to look upon this household. Grant that every member of it may be taught and guided of you. Bless the relations and friends of each of us. You know their several necessities. Prosper ... every effort at home and abroad to advance your kingdom; through Jesus Christ, our Lord."
—Archibald Campbell Tait

Be that as it may, some children are indeed frightened by such a prayer, and so it should not be used indiscriminately.

Of course, another prayer that can be said with children is the Lord's Prayer. You'll find other samples in the Appendices, which offer some suggested prayers for particular times.

You can also pray conversationally with your child. My wife and I have done that with all three of our children when they were younger. We began by asking them the type of things they would like to pray for. They were often stumped, so we'd make suggestions, perhaps rotating the people we would pray for (immediate family one night, relatives the next, friends the next, and so on).



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer for many is like a foreign land. When we go there, we go as tourists. Like most tourists, we feel uncomfortable and out of place. Like most tourists, we therefore move on before too long and go somewhere else."
—Robert McAfee Brown

Then parent and child each took a turn saying a prayer. On the adult side, this often amounted to two to three sentences, in very simple language—you don't want to overwhelm your child. For example: "Dear God, we thank you for this day, that Luke was able to play soccer with his friends. Thank you for giving him the skills to play such a fun game. We pray tonight for his friend, Zach, and for Zach's family, since their mother is in the hospital. Heal her, and help Zach and his family know of your presence in their lives. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Praying with a child teaches you that the simplest language and requests will have to do—that's all a child is capable of. And if God accepts those prayers, then he'll accept any prayers. I don't know how many nights I've prayed for sick guinea pigs or what present should be bought for somebody's birthday.

Praying with children is a form of theological education. There are a number of issues we do a very good job of avoiding day by day, but as you talk with your child before praying, you'll often be confronted with these:

"Dad, will my parakeet go to heaven when it dies?"

"Mom, why did God create people with so many different colors of skin? Wouldn't it have been simpler to create just one color?"

"Dad, what is heaven like?"

"Mom, you're always saying how God creates us. How exactly did God create me?"

I've heard of more than one parent having to consult the local minister to figure out how to answer a question the child has asked.



From the Good Book

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

—Hebrews 4:16

The Family That Prays Together . . .

Family prayer is not quite "one-on-one," but while we're on the subject of praying with children, we ought to look at it.

Many families not only pray with children at bedtime, but they also have a family prayer time during the week, especially during special seasons of the year. Our family, for instance, tries to pull this off during Advent (the four weeks leading up to Christmas) and Lent (the six weeks leading up to Easter).

We aim to do something every night just as we're sitting down to eat. So, with the food steaming before us and smaller children squirming away, we're inclined to keep it short. We've also done it after dinner, giving ourselves more time to go in depth (the disadvantage here is that everyone is now anxious to get on with their evening plans).



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Bless our children with healthful bodies, with good understandings, with the graces and gifts of your spirit, with sweet dispositions and holy habits; and sanctify them throughout in their bodies, souls, and spirits, and keep them unblamable to the coming of our Lord Jesus."

—Jeremy Taylor

The structure is simple: A Bible passage and/or a devotional story is read, songs are sung, and prayers are said. For example, during Advent, we might read a Bible passage that speaks about the coming of Christ: "Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. . . . He will defend the poor and the exploited. . . . He will be clothed with fairness and truth" (Isaiah 11:1–4).

Then we'll talk about how new branches grow out of old stumps and how that is like Christ coming. Or, we'll try to figure out what it means to have a "Spirit of wisdom and understanding." And so on. We're not left on our own, of course. There are family devotional guides available in most religious bookstores that will either guide such a discussion or that contain a reading that will explain the biblical reading.



Prayer Pearls

"Each prayer has its own proper meaning, and it is therefore the specific key to a door in the divine palace, but a broken heart is an axe which opens all the gates."

—Rabbi Israel Shem-Tov

Then we might sing a hymn about Christ's coming, something like, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Or, we might pray together, either reciting a prayer found in the devotional guide, or praying extemporaneously with one leader, or going around the circle and each saying a sentence or two.

Sometimes, such as during Advent, we light a candle during the service, and this can be a highlight for the smaller child who gets to do that—although, having a fight erupt over whose turn it is to light the candle can put a damper on the devotional mood!

You can slice and dice family prayer in all sorts of ways. The key is to find a routine that isn't routine, that involves the children, and that stays on the short side. Our devotional times before dinner are maybe five minutes at most. But even a short dip

into family prayer, even if for just two seasons of the year, can set a tone, create memories, and help everyone focus themselves a little more deliberately on larger themes. It sure beats hearing about how boring school was that day.

More Intimate Than Sex

If you think you're intimate when you're having sex with your spouse, wait until you pray with him or her. Joint prayer can allow a couple to share a spiritual intimacy that sex cannot touch. That's why many couples make it a practice to pray with each other once a day, or at least a few times a week.

This doesn't work for every couple, though—or, it doesn't work all the time. There have been a few times in our marriage when my wife and I have prayed together. But, to be frank, the practice has not been particularly helpful for us, so we've not stuck with it. We tend to be individualists when it comes to prayer, so we never can quite agree on a time or method. Still, there have been occasions when we've prayed together when it has been a significant time for us.

Prayer Partners

In some Christian circles, you'll find that people have "prayer partners." This can mean one of two things.

At a minimum, you have someone you check in with every few days or every week. You each discuss the type of challenges you'll face in the coming week, things you are especially thankful for, and areas in your spiritual lives that need attention. Then you promise to pray for one another.



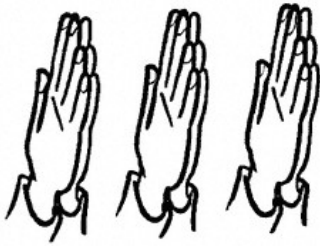
Many prayer partners take it to the next level: They actually meet (sometimes just over the phone) and pray with and for one another.

As you can see, this also can be a scary proposition, but it does have a few salutary effects. It helps you develop deeper friendships; the bond you develop with people you pray with is a unique one. It also helps you be accountable for your prayer life. It's like having a spiritual director, except that each of you is acting as a spiritual director to one another.

The Least You Need to Know

- In praying with your children, you'll get a theological education.
- There are many opportunities within the family for joint prayer, including meals, bedtime, and special church observances.
- Prayer partners can encourage and hold each other accountable and can create spiritual bonds and deep friendships.

Chapter 31— Small Groups



In This Chapter

- What a "small group" is and why these have become so popular
- Three different methods of small group prayer

"During that time, I grew spiritually more than I ever have before—or since."

"I really bonded with the group, and I have a sense of closeness with them, even years later, that I have with few others."

These are comments of friends of mine, and they are talking about a prayer experience that falls somewhere between the intimacy of one-on-one and the formality of public worship: small groups. Group prayer has been for many people the most meaningful prayer experience of their lives. This chapter explores why that might be true and covers how to participate in such a group.

How Small Is Small?

A "small group" has become almost a technical term in Christian circles: A small group is composed of usually 6–12 people who gather regularly (usually weekly), usually in a home, to discuss the Bible or a spiritual book and then pray together. Sometimes they do less, and sometimes more (sing, do a service project together, have a potluck dinner).

This is a simple idea with profound consequences. It has become such a meaningful spiritual experience for people that "small group ministry" has become a specialization of ministers. Seminaries offer classes in it; national conferences promote it; dozens of

books are published on it annually—some teach how to organize and lead groups; others are discussion guides for groups. Some churches promote small groups heavily and don't feel that they've done their job until everyone in the church is involved in a small group.



Prayer Pearls

"Two went to pray? O rather say
One went to brag, the other to
pray."

—Richard Crashaw

So what's all the excitement about?

Best of Two Worlds

Like so much of life, small groups aren't for everyone. But they are for more people than many imagine. That's because, when done well, they offer the best of two worlds.

As important as public worship is, it doesn't allow for intimacy. Praying by oneself, on the other hand, can lead to intimacy with God, but it can also lead to loneliness. Small groups offer a compromise: intimate prayer in the fellowship of others.

"You've got to be kidding," I can hear someone say. "What would make me want to get together with a bunch of strangers, let alone pray with them?"

Well, first, rarely do people get together with a bunch of strangers. You're usually invited by a friend who is either starting a group or who is already part of a group, or perhaps you've become a part of a church that is starting up a small group. Second, you don't just join a group and plunge right into prayer. It takes a few weeks to develop trust. Third, each group develops levels of trust appropriate for that group. Some groups eventually feel free to talk about the intimate details of their private lives; others are happy to leave certain matters well enough alone.

But a key to a successful small group is that people grow together spiritually, sharing more and more of themselves, as is appropriate.



From the Good Book

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

—Hebrews 5:7–9

A psychologist, no doubt, could give dozens of reasons why small groups are so attractive to so many, and why people find them one of the most meaningful of spiritual experiences. But let's just look at three:

1. We're not alone. It's easy to begin imagining that no one else out there is much interested in prayer. At work and in the community, the subject is rarely raised in casual conversation, and everyone seems so busy and satisfied with their lives. Even in church, it can seem as if everyone is just going through the motions, not really interested in more intimate spiritual growth.

This is simply not true, as the popularity of small groups attests. Lots of people are anxious to grow in prayer, and they want to talk with other people about it. This is true of people when it comes to most any interest.



From the Good Book

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

—Jesus, Matthew 18:19–20

I just took up a new hobby: woodworking. I've been reading books and checking out Internet sites, but there's nothing like bumping into someone and discovering that he does woodworking, too. Conversation immediately moves into high gear, especially when it comes to talking about what power tools each has and which tool is highest on the wish list.

2. We like support. Let me continue the woodworking comparison. Let's say that now you're the one tackling a big project, such as making a bookcase or cabinet. You're bound to run into problems, and you're not quite sure the best way to tackle them. Books and TV shows can take you only so far: Often your woodworking problem is unique to you and your project. You'll find it beneficial to take a class or to have someone to turn to get some advice.

Small groups are simply a formal and regular means for people to get together and talk about the spiritual challenges they face and to share with one another solutions that have worked for them.

3. God is there. Jesus taught that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). This didn't make much sense to me for the longest time, except to say that in some historical sense (because we were meeting "in Jesus' name"—that is, in his memory) he was with us, just as Shakespeare is with us when we read one of his plays. Certainly, Christ is with us spiritually, I thought, but not any more specially than when we're alone.



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer doesn't consist of thinking a great deal, but of loving a great deal."

—St. Teresa of Avila

And then I became friends with Doug, a recovering alcoholic who was in a small group with me. We had long talks about the spiritual life. I'd often talk to him about theology and the importance of reading the Bible and of prayer. He never disagreed with me, but neither did he seem enthusiastic about my suggestions. One day he told me why: "Mark, I'll tell you when I feel God's presence the most: when I'm with other people. That's when I grow spiritually the most."

That's when I realized that was often true of me as well. I just hadn't put my finger on it, and it helped me see that Jesus was not merely speaking metaphorically about being present with those who gather in his name.

Conversational Prayer

I'll skip describing the various things a small group can do together and move right into prayer. Groups can pray together in many ways, but let me talk about three that have been most meaningful to me.

First, there is "conversational prayer." Here the idea is to pray to God as we talk to one another: conversationally. In conversation, we don't begin and end formally, nor is our language stilted. For another thing, people don't take turns talking in this way.

An absurd example will show how divorced much prayer is from conversation. Let's say my wife and I are entertaining a couple of friends. If we were to conduct a conversation as we do prayer, it might go something like this:

"Dear Barbara, good wife and most excellent mother to my children," I say. "I must thank you for the bountiful meal you've set before us tonight. Your grace and mercy to us are marvelous. Amen."

"Barbara, most excellent cook and gracious host," chimes in one friend, "let me add my abundant thanksgiving and petition you, in your mercy, to reveal to me the recipe for the lasagna, which was a most splendid dish indeed. Amen."

To which Barbara replies: "O most blessed friends and husband, cherished companions in the journey of life: Knock it off."

I wonder if God, after hearing our formal prayers, sometimes says, "Knock it off."



Conversational prayer takes a more informal, intimate approach to prayer. It's not quite as casual as conversation—we are speaking to the Creator of heaven and earth, after all—but neither does it fall into "thees" and "thous."

Usually the leader begins by introducing topics in prayer, and then individuals add comments until the topic runs itself out. At this point, someone else opens a subject, and individuals add a sentence or two on that topic. And on it goes. An example would be this:

Person 1: Lord, thank you for the time together, and we pray for Mary, who wasn't able to be here with us tonight. Keep her safe on her trip to Atlanta.

Person 2: Help her, Lord, too, with her son Eric. She's been struggling to understand how to communicate with him. We know that can be tough with teen-agers. Give her wisdom.

Person 3: Lord, I pray for John, who mentioned tonight that he'll be looking for a new job. Give him wisdom in going about this, and guide him to the right position for him.

Person 2: And help him be patient in the process, and to trust your guidance throughout.

And so on. Sometimes each person will add "Amen" to his prayer to signal he's done, but sometimes silence is the signal that someone else can pray.

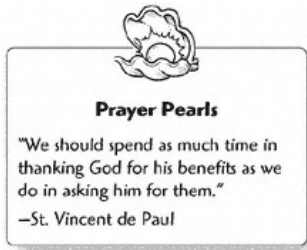
It sounds simple, and it is. But it is one of the most revolutionary and meaningful ways to pray with others.

One-Word Prayers

Some groups are uncomfortable plunging into conversational prayer. In such instances, I've introduced the idea of conversational prayer by encouraging people to pray one-word prayers.

I introduce a topic, and then people are encouraged to offer one- or two-word prayers—no more—on this topic.

As we go into prayer, after thanking God for the time together and the opportunity to pray, I might say, "Lord, we begin by praising and thanking you for your goodness."



At which point, one person might say, "For health," another might say, "For this group," and another still might say, "For my children."

Then I might say, "Lord, we pray for Mary."

At which point, various individuals would chime in. One might say, "Safety;" another, "Healing;" another still, "Wisdom."

This can be a very powerful form of prayer. It gets right to the heart of issues, without people feeling pressured into saying something holy or eloquent.

Silence Can Be Golden

Another method of group prayer is to pray together in silence. Often this type of prayer is preceded with an introductory prayer and/or concluded with a final prayer. In the meantime, people sit in silence for anywhere from 5 minutes to 20 minutes and commune with God or try to listen to God together.

The first time you do this, five minutes will seem like an eternity. When you've done it for a while, and have learned how to use the time, 20 minutes will seem too short.

How do you use the time well? You simply observe what goes on in your mind and emotions as you sit there. Sometimes it helps to have a Bible reading in front of you to guide your meditation. Sometimes you want to keep returning your mind to the main topic of the prayer, if there is one. For example, sometimes a church governing body will sit in prayer for many minutes before making a major decision (such as whether to invite a certain minister to become their pastor). One way to keep focused in this instance would be to keep the person in question focused in your mind, and then observe the thoughts, images, and feelings that come to you.

Afterward, it's important for the group to talk together about their impressions. This is no full-proof way to discern the voice of God, but it is often surprising to see how many thoughts and images people have in common during such times. Often, after talking things through, the group has a much clearer idea of what God wants.



From the Good Book

"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. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."

—James, James 1:5

Where to Find a Group

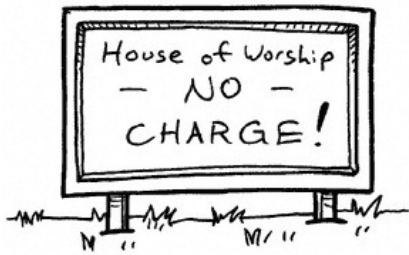
Small groups aren't heaven on earth. Sometimes one person begins to dominate the group. Groups can be plagued by disagreements and pettiness. They often have a life span that must be respected: To carry the group on longer than it was meant to grow only makes everyone uncomfortable.

That being said, small groups are a wonderful way to experience prayer. Unfortunately, I can't tell you simply to look up "Small Groups" in the phone book and find one. You'll either have to know someone who is already in one, or you'll have to start attending a church in which small groups are a regular feature of its life. Don't hesitate to visit a group in which you know no one. You're not marrying the group, and they will not kidnap you into some cult. Go a week or two, and if you feel comfortable with the group, continue. Otherwise, search elsewhere.

The Least You Need to Know

- Small groups remind us that there are others who are in the same spiritual journey, ready to share the common experience of God in their midst.
- Short prayers, conversational prayers, and silence all work in a group setting that is diverse and that needs order.
- Small groups contain different types of individuals, and you need to beware of disagreements or domination by certain personalities.

Chapter 32— Prayer in the Free Church Tradition



In This Chapter

- How to worship in the free church tradition
- What the different parts of the service are designed to do
- How free church worship can enhance your prayer life

If we're going to learn prayer from other Christian pray-ers, we're wise to go to church. (See Chapter 7, "The Greatest School of Prayer," for more details.) But which one? There are more denominations than cable stations.

When it comes to prayer, however, it's not the denomination that's critical but the type of worship the church practices. That simplifies things immensely because there are basically two traditions: liturgical and free church. Let's first look at the free church tradition, which is the most popular in Protestant circles.

Free From What?

The "free church tradition" simply refers to those churches that have declared themselves free from having to use a formal liturgy. (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, and some Methodist and Presbyterian churches use mostly liturgical worship.)

It's a funny thing, though: No church is free from liturgy. For all practical purposes, *liturgy*, which comes from the Greek word for "public service," means "order of

service." Every church has an order of service it follows week after week, unless a special occasion preempts it. But the free church tradition relies less on prayer books, favors extemporaneous prayers, requires fewer responses from the congregation, and devotes more of the service to the sermon, thus de-emphasizing Communion. Simplicity is its goal.



Prayer Pearls

"Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?"

—Corrie Ten Boom

As some examples, you'll find free church worship in many Baptist, Nazarene, Evangelical Free, Church of God in Christ, Covenant, and Assembly of God services, though many Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodist churches participate in the free church tradition as well. So do nearly all the independent, non-denominational churches across the United States.

What Happens When and Why

A typical order of service is . . . uh, well that's one thing about the free church worship; it can go in all sorts of directions. But there does seem to be a general pattern. At its core, the service looks like this. (But again, not all free church services have all these parts, nor do they all put them in the same order.)



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"Take from me all that hinders and teach me to accept in its place all that you accept: the ceaseless demands, needs, conflicts, pressures, misunderstandings even of those who love you best."

—Evelyn Underhill

Songs and prayers

Bible reading

Sermon

The service moves toward the sermon, the climax both in placement and in proportion; it can be as long as 40 minutes in a one-hour service. (That's not as bad as the old Puritan sermons, which could sometimes go on for four or five hours; count your blessings when the sermon starts creeping over 30 minutes.) The sermon is an exposition, or commentary, on the Bible, so the free church service is structured primarily to help people hear God's word as it comes through the preacher.

Abraham Lincoln said, "I don't like to hear cut-and-dried sermons. When I hear a man preach, I like to see him act as if he were fighting bees." Well, whether the preacher fights bees or not, the sermon does have an uncanny way of communicating God to us. As the apostle Paul put it: "How can they call on him [Christ] to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?" (Romans 10:14)

Aside from the sermon, here are the other parts in a typical free church service:

Call to worship / invocation. A *call to worship* is usually taken from scripture and "calls" the congregation to worship, something like, "Come, let us sing to the Lord, come into his presence with thanksgiving . . .," which is from the Psalms.

An *invocation* is a prayer that "invokes" God's presence and aid in worship. Sometimes the call to worship/invocation does not happen until after the opening song.

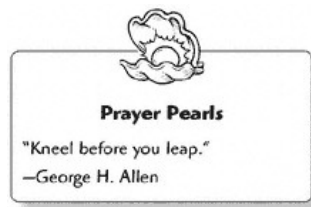
Hymn of praise or opening song. This is the opening song or hymn. A *hymn* is technically a song of praise or thanksgiving to God, but it commonly refers to older songs of praise, those written before the 1960s. This song gives God praise or thanks him for his goodness. Because God is so incredibly good, this seems like a good note to start on.

Some churches have expanded this part of the service and string three or four songs together so that they move gracefully one into another. These are often called "praise choruses," songs with only a verse or two, much of which comes straight out of the Bible.

Prayer of confession. After noticing once again the glory and goodness of God (as expressed in the opening hymn or songs), we are made aware of how far we fall short of God, which, to not put too fine a point on it, is pretty far. Thus we need to confess our sins.

This confession is sometimes said by a worship leader, sometimes is read together, and sometimes is done silently—or a combination thereof. Afterward, a passage is read from the Bible announcing that our sins are forgiven, and this is followed by a song of praise. In Presbyterian circles, for example, the "Doxology" is sung:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise him all creatures here below,
Praise him above, ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.



Offering. For the longest time, I thought the offering was the most offensive part of worship. The sight of ushers passing plates down the aisles for people to put in money was just a tad too mercenary for me. My feeling was, "We're here to worship God, so what does money have to do with it?"

Unfortunately, I found out it has everything to do with it. The old saying that you can tell a person's priorities by scanning the entries in their checkbook is still true—though we'd probably want to look at their Visa statement as well. I've been telling you that prayer is not about some ethereal religious experience, but about real life. If in prayer we're dedicating our entire selves to God ("thy will be done . . ."), we cannot hope to avoid dedicating our possessions to him.

The offering is a moment when we do that. Okay, it's also a convenient way for the church to collect money. But it's a time when I'm reminded that all my life, including my finances—*especially* my finances—belong to God.

Does that mean I give something every week? No—though I do drop a larger check in the plate about once a quarter.

This part of the service is sometimes called "tithes and offerings." *Tithes* means "one-tenth" and refers to the long-standing practice of giving 10 percent of one's income back to God, through the church or other charities. Not all Christians tithe, but many do. It is simply a concrete way to say thanks to God for all his blessings, to help other people, and to be reminded that God, in fact, is in charge of everything in our lives.

Benediction. After the sermon, and maybe after another prayer or song, comes the benediction. *Benediction* merely means "blessing," in which the pastor either prays or quotes a Bible verse that is intended to sum up the service or send us on our way back into the world.

Some people pay little attention to the benediction—they're already thinking about who they need to talk with at coffee hour or whether they're going to get home in time to see the opening kickoff. But sometimes it's worth listening to, as I was embarrassed to learn one Sunday.

I was a guest preacher at a church in British Columbia, and I was anxious to impress my friends, who were members there. I prepared well, but the sermon apparently didn't cut it. After the service, I asked one of my friends how it went. She is known for her frankness, and she didn't disappoint: She said, "I didn't get much out of the sermon, but one phrase from your benediction really got me thinking."

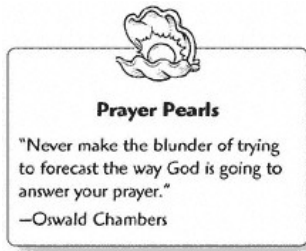
Oh well.

Communion

In the free church tradition, Communion (also called the Eucharist, from the Greek for "thanksgiving," or the Lord's Supper) is celebrated usually once a month, usually the first Sunday of the month. Some churches celebrate it only once a quarter. Depending

on the tradition of the church, it is seen either as a memorial meal, in which people are merely reminded about what Christ did, or a moment in which Christ becomes present in some special form.

Communion is patterned after the final supper Jesus had with his disciples. During that meal, he passed around bread and said that it signified his body "which is given for you." Then he passed around wine, saying it signified his blood "shed for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus was foreshadowing his crucifixion, of course, and after his death and resurrection this meal came to represent for Christians his death, the supreme act of love and sacrifice that made our forgiveness possible.



History, however, has bumped into the church and made one change, at least in many churches in this tradition. Wine has been replaced by grape juice. This is the result, among other things, of the temperance movement, when drinking alcohol under any circumstances was viewed as a sin. Today, long after temperance, and even after many members of these churches enjoy wine with their family dinners, the grape juice tradition continues in some churches.

Table Manners

If you haven't been to church in a while—or if you've never been to church—you'll want a few tips so as not to embarrass yourself at your first Communion. The bread will be passed around on little plates, usually broken in small pieces or as discs of unleavened bread. Simply take a piece when the plate comes your way; if it's a loaf of bread, simply pull off a small piece. Now comes the awkward part: What are you supposed to do?

Sometimes the minister is good enough to say ahead of time, "Partake individually," which means eat it when you want, or "We'll partake together," which means to hold on to the bread until the minister tells you to eat it. In either case, as the plates continue to be passed, this is a time of meditation and for making your own prayers of thanksgiving or dedication.

The same goes for the wine or grape juice, which will come around in trays with little cups. After drinking, look for a mini-shelf, with holes the size of the base of the cups, on the back of the pew in front of you. That's where the empty cup goes. If the church doesn't have those, just watch what everyone else does with theirs.

No matter the logistics, Communion is a most intimate moment with Christ. We by no means have to be in a perfect state of holiness when we partake, but before we come to worship (or as the service leads up to Communion) we are wise to prepare heart and mind to receive not just the bread and juice, but even Christ himself. Communion is prayer—with a capital *P*.

Dancing in Church?

There are not as many bodily motions in a free church service as in the more liturgical service, but there are a few you should understand.

During praise choruses especially, you'll notice some people raising their hands. Some raise them only waist high with palms up—this is an act of offering themselves to God. Others will lift their hands high above their heads with palms facing out—this is a bodily way of directing praise and honor to God.

Others might sway left and right, or up and back, as they sing—and so on. You don't have to do any of this if people around you start up. Nor do you have to feel uncomfortable if other people do it. They're not going to go weird on you; they are just "getting into it." Think of it as a form of dance in which people are letting their bodies participate in worship.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"O heavenly Father, I praise and thank you for the peace of the night, I praise and thank you for this new day. I praise and thank you for all your goodness and faithfulness throughout my life. You have granted me many blessings: Now let me accept tribulation from your hand. You will not lay on me more than I can bear. You make all things work together for good for your children."

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

During prayers, most people will shut their eyes. This is considered more reverent and can help with concentration. But an old custom of Christian worship is keeping eyes open during prayer—God is present among us, after all; why not look around to see what he's up to? So, it's your call on that, no matter what people do around you.

Can you clap in worship? Some churches encourage it; others frown upon it. I'd play "follow the leader" on this one.

In most black churches, the tongue becomes a very important part of worship, especially during the sermon. The sermon is a dialogue, with the pastor preaching and the people responding with words of encouragement: "Amen," "Yes, Lord," "Oh, yes," and the like. Again, there is no law that says you have to join in, nor one that says newcomers can't join in.

Should You Attend a Seeker-Sensitive Church?

Seeker-sensitive churches arose because a lot of people find traditional worship services boring, irrelevant, and incomprehensible—and that's on the good Sundays. Some pastors decided to start services that were "user-friendly," especially to people outside the faith who are seeking to know God better but who are unfamiliar with church culture.

Seeker-sensitive services are popping up all over the place. They are usually found in independent churches (those not affiliated with a denomination), and the most

famous—the granddaddy of them all, Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago—attracts about 14,000 people each weekend. Not bad. As a result of such success, a lot of denominational churches are starting to create seeker-sensitive services as well.

What's the difference? Instead of an organ and/or piano, they use guitar, bass, drums, and other "contemporary" instruments to lead singing. They reject hymns in favor of songs that have a contemporary feel, everything from folk to jazz and light rock. People dress casually, many arriving in shorts in the summer. Reverent silence is the exception, not the rule, and clapping can erupt at many times in the service. There is no pulpit, and if there is one, it's made of transparent Plexiglas—and often the preacher wanders away from it freely. Christian jargon is cut to a minimum—for example, the sermon is often called the "morning message."

The goal is to help "seekers" break through the clutter of church culture to hear the essential message of Christ in a way that makes sense to them. The upside is that it is really easy to become acquainted with praying again. The downside is that, over the long haul, because such churches downplay so much of the church's rich tradition, they often are unable to take people more deeply into worship or prayer. I write, however, as one who worships in the liturgical tradition, so I may be biased here.

It Sounds Like Gibberish to Me

One more thing you should be aware of: In some churches, people may start "speaking in tongues" during prayer, and the place will sound like a buzz of gibberish. So what is happening here?

To speak in tongues is to speak in a "heavenly language." This language is given to believers as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is as if the Spirit is praying through the person as the person is praying to God, and this allows the person to express things that are too deep for words. (Remember that stuff about the mystery of prayer and the Trinity?) Though this is something the church has experienced in every age, speaking in tongues has been a special feature of twentieth-century Christianity.



Prayer Pearls

"Many a person is praying for rain
with his tub the wrong side up."

—Sam Jones

The gift is expressed in a number of ways. Many simply use this prayer language in their private prayers at home. Others use it with other Christians, and afterward, someone who is said to have the "gift of interpretation" interprets what the prayer said. Tongues are also used in public worship, with everyone speaking (or even singing) in tongues at the same time.

You'll find tongues used in Pentecostal churches (*Pentecostal* refers back to the Day of Pentecost, a Jewish holiday when early Christians first experienced the gift of tongues)

and in "Charismatic" circles (*Charismatic* comes from the Greek word *charas*, which means "gift" and refers to the gifts given by the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of tongues). Many mainline churches—Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, and the like—have Charismatic fellowships within them, who meet to pray together in tongues and for healing.

Is speaking in tongues a prayer practice you should experience? Some Pentecostals will tell you that you *must* speak in tongues to be an obedient Christian. Others will invite you to speak in tongues as a way of experiencing God more fully. Others still will say that if you desire the gift, you can pray for it and receive it; otherwise, don't worry about it. This last option happens to be my take on it: If you are interested in a full prayer life, you should be open to it. I have prayed for this gift, but have not received it.

Talk to your local Pentecostal or Charismatic church for more information.



From the Good Book

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

—James, James 5:16

The Least You Need to Know

- Participating in the free church tradition is one way to enhance your prayer life.
- Some of the most important parts of a free church service include the hymns, confessions, sermon, offering, and Communion.
- Some aspects of free church worship allow us to be more involved by raising our hands, clapping, or even dancing to express our love and gratitude to God.

Chapter 33— Prayer in the Liturgical Tradition



In This Chapter

- What is unique about liturgical worship
- How a liturgical service flows
- The various ways liturgical worship enhances the life of prayer

As noted in the last chapter, all churches have a liturgy, an order of service they follow week after week. But some churches—Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Orthodox (and sometimes Presbyterian and Methodist)—*really* have a liturgy. In contrast to the free church tradition, the liturgical tradition relies more on prayer books, favors written over extemporaneous prayers, requires more responses from the congregation, and puts a lesser emphasis on the sermon and a much higher emphasis on Communion.

Now for the details.

Prayer Book Religion

Liturgical churches each have a prayer book; for Roman Catholics it's called the missal (from a Latin word meaning "of the Mass," which is what Catholics call their worship service). For Episcopalians it's called the *Book of Common Prayer*, or BCP for short. And so on. These prayer books not only guide the order of worship, but they also include the prayers and Scripture readings for each Sunday.

That doesn't mean there isn't some flexibility in the service. Some services are decidedly "low church," meaning that the service is stripped to its bare essentials. "High church" worship comes with all the bells and whistles, or, as we say in the liturgical tradition, "bells and smells"—a reference to the ringing of bells during various parts of the service and the use of incense. (More on that later.)



Prayer Pearls

"Prayer does not change God, but changes him who prays."

—Soren Kierkegaard

The more strict adherence to a set order of worship and the use of formal, written prayers strikes some Christians as odd. They wonder how, if prayer is about an intimate relationship with God, you can foster that in what seems to be such a rigid and formal service. The answer lies in the purpose of the service. If the free church tradition's service is designed to appear as spontaneous (albeit guided) thanksgiving, then in the liturgical tradition, worship is more a well-thought-out offering made to God. It sacrifices informality to present to God something that is beautiful and worthy of God's greatness.



Prayer Pearls

"Written forms of prayer are not only useful and proper, but indispensably necessary."

—Hannah More

The written prayers have been crafted and fine-tuned through the centuries so that many of them express succinctly and movingly the very personal thoughts and feelings of the worshippers. Just as a sonnet of William Shakespeare is often the most profound and intimate way to express one's love to another, so liturgical prayers help people express their deepest thoughts to God.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"May we bring this eternal life to the poor, deprived as they are of all comfort, of material possessions; may they come to know you, love you, possess you, share in your life, you who are the God and father of men and of my Lord Jesus Christ, source of all truth and goodness and happiness."

—Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Let's not get too idealistic about this: Liturgical worship can be dreary, thoughtless, routine, and boring as hell. (Excuse the expression, but I think I mean it.) Then again, free church services can be dreary, thoughtless, routine, and—you get it. It's not the tradition as much as those enacting the tradition that makes the difference.

The Word of God

Let me take you through a typical Episcopal service. This is very similar to services in other liturgical traditions, using many of the same prayers, in fact. It is also one I'm familiar with. If you know Episcopal worship, you can probably fake it most anywhere.

There are two parts to a liturgical service. The first part is called "The Word of God." The focus of this part is the reading of the Bible and the preaching of the sermon.

The Episcopal service begins with reciting various Scripture verses and prayers, with some said in unison, some responsively (the worship leader reads one line, the congregation the next), and some by the worship leader (called "the celebrant" in the BCP) alone. The prayer book is usually clear about who does what, so you simply have to follow the book. (Once in a while, however, the liturgy is unclear; when I was new to this tradition, I'd just hang back and wait for a phrase or two before deciding whether I was supposed to join in or not.)

All this leads up to the "Collect of the Day," which is a short prayer that "collects" or sums up the theme of the service of that Sunday. For example, on Christmas Day, the collect reads:

"O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

Every Sunday has a theme that is summarized by the collect and highlighted in the Scripture readings. There are usually four Bible readings, one each from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the epistles (which can come from any book of the New Testament except the Gospels or Acts of the Apostles), and the Gospels.

Then comes the sermon, which tends to be considerably shorter than in most free church services, usually lasting 10–15 minutes (versus 25–40 minutes).

After the sermon, everyone stands and reads together the Nicene Creed, a brief summary of Christian belief that goes back to the year 381. Though a statement of faith, it is prayer-like in its cadences and sums up the story and message of Christian faith:



Prayer Pearls

"A good prayer, though often used,
is still fresh and fair in the eyes and
ears of heaven."

—Thomas Fuller

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,

begotten, not made,
 of one Being with the Father.
 Through him all things were made.
 For us and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven:
 By the power of the Holy Spirit
 he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
 and was made man.
 For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate:
 He suffered death and was buried.
 On the third day he rose again
 in accordance with the Scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again to judge the living and the dead,
 and his kingdom will have no end.
 We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
 With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
 He has spoken through the prophets.
 We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
 We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
 and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This is followed by the "Prayers of the People," which usually includes a prayer of confession. Again, let me quote from the BCP, because you really can't appreciate the power of this tradition without reading some of the prayers (I'd encourage you to read them aloud, in fact). There are two or three prayers of confession in the BCP, but the most common one used is this:

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent,
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.

This has always struck me as a succinct and yet complete inventory of my life, and it never ceases to amaze me how well it expresses what I'm feeling. That is liturgical prayer at its best.



From the Good Book

"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."

—John, 1 John 5:14

Holy Communion

The second half of the service focuses on Communion, which the BCP calls the Holy Eucharist (from the Greek word for "thanksgiving").

Communion begins with the eucharistic prayer, or "The Great Thanksgiving." It's called "great" because it's important and, well, it's long. If you understand what's going on in the prayer, you'll get a lot out of it.



Prayer Pearls

"We must suppose that the presence of the angels who watch over us and minister to God comes together with someone who prays, so that the angels may be united with him in what he asks in prayer."

—Origen

Communion begins with a responsive greeting between the priest and the people and then moves into the prayer proper. There are three parts: In the first, God is praised for his glory and for his creation of the world. In the second, Christ is thanked for coming to the world, for "offering himself . . . a perfect sacrifice for the whole world," and for rising from the grave. In the third part, the Holy Spirit is the center of attention, especially his power to sustain our faith. So you see, the prayer is trinitarian.

Then to sum up this prayer, and all the prayers of the service so far, everyone prays the Lord's Prayer.

Then the elements are received, usually with people going forward row by row, kneeling at the altar and receiving the bread and the wine. Churches have different customs in how exactly the elements are received, so I just follow what others do and then I do the same.

Then comes another prayer, a hymn, and the benediction.

Bells and Smells

One of the things I like about the liturgical tradition is that it tries to engage all the senses in worship:

Hearing: Listening to Scriptures, prayers, sermon, song, organ, bells

Sight: Stained-glass windows, priestly dress, colorful banners, religious art around the sanctuary

Touch (that is, bodily movement): Kneeling, standing, sitting, crossing yourself, walking, bowing

Taste: Bread and wine

Smell: The aroma of burning incense

Jesus commands us to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Well, liturgical churches try to worship God with the same holistic devotion.

The Church Year

In addition to engaging all of our bodies, the liturgical tradition wants us to rethink our concept of time. The church, in fact, keeps its own calendar with its own seasons, and they only loosely correspond to winter, spring, summer, and fall. Each season has a theme that addresses major events in biblical history and our own life in Christ. This aspect of liturgical worship can really enhance the life of prayer.

Advent begins in late November or early December and lasts for four Sundays. The focus of the readings and the prayers is the first coming of Christ and his eventual second coming.

Christmas begins on December 25 (duh) and lasts two Sundays. The focus is, of course, the incarnation ("becoming flesh") of Christ.

Epiphany begins on January 6, or "Three Kings Day," and lasts between 8 and 11 weeks. The services highlight Jesus as the light of the whole world and the church's mission to reach out in love to all.

Lent lasts 40 days (not counting Sundays), beginning with Ash Wednesday, continuing through Good Friday, and ending on Holy Saturday (the day before Easter). The theme is Christ's suffering and death and our need for self-examination, confession, and repentance.



When You Haven't Got a Prayer

"God, I pray, light these idle sticks of
my life and may I burn for you.
Consume my life, my God, for it is
yours. I seek not a long life, but a
full one, like you, Lord Jesus."

—Jim Elliot

Easter begins on, you got it, Easter Sunday and goes for eight weeks. The focus is the resurrection of Christ and the new life we have in him.

Pentecost begins usually in late May or early June and lasts until Advent. It celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit and our dependence on his power to sustain us in the Christian walk.

In the midst of these seasons, other themes are celebrated: the baptism of Christ, the Trinity, the death of a saint. The nice thing about all this for prayer is that it gives structure and rhythm to prayer life, both in worship and at home.

Worship for Those Who Haven't Worshipped in a While

If you haven't been to church in a while (or ever), it can be pretty intimidating to start going again. Here are a few tips to ease you into your first few Sundays.

1. Go with a friend who already attends church. There's nothing like having someone show you the ropes. Or, you can phone the minister during the week before you visit and ask him or her to find a member to sit with you. This sounds like an inconvenience for the church, but, believe me, it's not. I don't know of any church that would not welcome you in this way.
2. On the other hand, if you just want to blend in with the stained glass windows, pick a large church. It's easy to get lost in a crowd, and people may not bother you for weeks—until you're ready to get to know them.
3. Sit as far to the front as possible, but make sure there are a good number of people still sitting in front of you. You want to sit toward the front because you'll hear and see better and can get a lot more out of the service. But you want people in front of you so that you know when to stand or kneel or whatever. Just follow their lead.
4. Get there early and read over the bulletin, or program, the usher will hand you. Scope out the service; you may even want to mark the hymns in the hymnbook ahead of time.
5. During the service, be alert to the rhythm of worship. Christian worship, like prayer, is a dialogue. As such, it has a certain rhythm; if you understand that, you can get a whole lot more out of it. It's a two-step: God speaks; we respond. God speaks to us, as I've mentioned, in the Scripture and sermon especially, but also in various parts of the service. We respond with prayers, songs, and offering. These two aspects go back and forth in different ways, depending on the worship tradition, but every Christian service has them. If you are aware of them, you'll get a lot more out of the service.
6. If you can't find the hymn or prayer that everyone else is saying, just listen. You're not going to get kicked out if you don't join in. Besides, better to listen to the words being sung or said than to be thumbing through the book, cursing yourself because you can't find the right page.
7. Be patient. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "As long as you notice and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God."

This won't happen overnight, but it will happen. Hang in there.

The Least You Need to Know

- The liturgical tradition relies more on written prayers and centers on Communion more than the sermon.
- The liturgical tradition is one that can be considered a sensual experience with "smells and bells," sacraments, and pageantry.
- It takes time and practice to worship well in the liturgical tradition.

APPENDICES

Appendix A— Prayers for Various Occasions and People Taken from the Book of Common Prayer

For the Mission of the Church

O God, who hast made of one blood all the peoples of the earth and who didst send thy blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after thee and find thee, bring the nations into thy fold, pour out thy spirit upon all flesh, and hasten the coming of thy kingdom; through the same thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

For the Nation

Lord God almighty, who hast made all peoples of the earth for thy glory, to serve thee in freedom and peace: Grant to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with thy gracious will; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

At Baptism

Almighty God, who by our baptism into the death and resurrection of thy Son, Jesus Christ, dost turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through the same thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

At Confirmation

Grant, almighty God, that we who have been redeemed from the old life of sin by our baptism into the death and resurrection of thy Son, Jesus Christ, may be renewed in thy Holy Spirit and live in righteousness and true holiness; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

For the Departed

O eternal Lord God, who holdest all souls in life: Give, we beseech thee, to thy whole church in paradise and on earth thy light and thy peace; and grant that we, following the good examples of those who have served thee here and are now at rest, may at the last enter with them into thine unending joy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Of the Holy Eucharist

God our Father, whose Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in a wonderful sacrament hath left unto us a memorial of his passion: Grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of his body and blood, that we may ever perceive within ourselves the fruit of his redemption; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Thanksgiving Day

Almighty and gracious Father, we give thee thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. Make us, we beseech thee, faithful stewards of thy great bounty, for the provision of our necessities and the relief of all who are in need, to the glory of thy name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Independence Day (July 4)

Lord God almighty, in whose name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn: Grant, we beseech thee, that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain these liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Easter Sunday

O God, who for our redemption didst give thine only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection hast delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through the same thy Son, Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Holy Thursday

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, did institute the sacrament of his body and blood: Mercifully grant that we may thankfully receive the same in remembrance of him who in these holy mysteries giveth us a pledge of life eternal, the same thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord; who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.

Good Friday

Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord, Jesus Christ, was contented to be betrayed and given up into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. Amen.

**The Nativity of Our Lord:
Christmas Day (December 25)**

O God, who makest us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of thy only Son, Jesus Christ: Grant that as we joyfully receive him for our Redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come to be our judge; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

For Social Justice

Almighty God, who hast created us in thine image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of thy holy name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

For Education

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom: Enlighten by thy Holy Spirit those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of thy truth, they may worship thee and serve thee from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

For the Sick

Heavenly Father, giver of life and health: Comfort and relieve thy sick servants, and give thy power of healing to those who minister to their needs, that those (or name or names) for whom our prayers are offered may be strengthened in their weakness and have confidence in thy loving care; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

For Labor Day

Almighty God, who hast so linked our lives one with another that all we do affecteth, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

For Our Country

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage: We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the President of the United States and All in Civil Authority

O Lord, our governor, whose glory is in all the world: We commend this nation to thy merciful care, that, being guided by thy providence, we may dwell secure in thy peace. Grant to the President of the United States, the governor of this state (or commonwealth), and to all in authority wisdom and strength to know and to do thy will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness, and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve this people in thy fear; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

For Congress or a State Legislature

O God, the fountain of wisdom, whose will is good and gracious, and whose law is truth: We beseech thee so to guide and bless our senators and representatives in Congress assembled (or in the legislature of this state or commonwealth), that they may enact such laws as shall please thee, to the glory of thy name and the welfare of this people; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Courts of Justice

Almighty God, who sittest in the throne judging right: We humbly beseech thee to bless the courts of justice and the magistrates in all this land; and give unto them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that they may discern the truth and impartially administer the law in the fear of thee alone; through him who shall come to be our judge, thy Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For Local Government

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, send down upon those who hold office in this state (commonwealth, city, county, town, _____) the spirit of wisdom, charity, and justice, that with steadfast purpose they may faithfully serve in their offices to promote the well-being of all people; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For an Election

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States (or of this community) in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Those in the Armed Forces of Our Country

Almighty God, we commend to your gracious care and keeping all the men and women of our armed forces at home and abroad. Defend them day by day with your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptations; give them courage to face the perils which beset them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Those Who Suffer for the Sake of Conscience

God, our Father, whose Son forgave his enemies while he was suffering shame and death: Strengthen those who suffer for the sake of conscience; when they are accused, save them from speaking in hate; when they are rejected, save them from bitterness; when they are imprisoned, save them from despair; and to us your servants, give grace to respect their witness and to discern the truth, that our society may be cleansed and strengthened. This we ask for the sake of Jesus Christ, our merciful and righteous judge. Amen.

For Social Justice

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving spirit may so move every human heart (and especially the hearts of the people of this land), that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Unemployed

Heavenly Father, we remember before you those who suffer want and anxiety from lack of work. Guide the people of this land so to use our public and private wealth that all may find suitable and fulfilling employment and receive just payment for their labor; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Schools and Colleges

O eternal God, bless all schools, colleges, and universities (and especially _____), that they may be lively centers for sound learning, new discovery, and the pursuit of wisdom; and grant that those who teach and those who learn may find you to be the source of all truth; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Good Use of Leisure

O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that

our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Poor and the Neglected

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Oppressed

Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For Prisons and Correctional Institutions

Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal: Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment. Remember all prisoners, and bring the guilty to repentance and amendment of life according to your will, and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release; forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice. Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate; and save them from becoming brutal or callous. And since what we do for those in prison, O Lord, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask for your mercy's sake. Amen.

For Families

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who settlest the solitary in families: We commend to thy continual care the homes in which thy people dwell. Put far from them, we beseech thee, every root of bitterness, the desire of vainglory, and the pride of life. Fill them with faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness. Knit together in constant affection those who, in holy wedlock, have been made one flesh. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents; and so enkindle fervent charity among us all, that we may evermore be kindly affectioned one to another; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Care of Children

Almighty God, heavenly Father, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children: Give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For Young Persons

God, our Father, you see your children growing up in an unsteady and confusing world: Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help them to take failure not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you and to keep alive their joy in your creation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Aged

Look with mercy, O God our Father, on all whose increasing years bring them weakness, distress, or isolation. Provide for them homes of dignity and peace; give them understanding helpers and the willingness to accept help; and, as their strength diminishes, increase their faith and their assurance of your love. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For a Birthday

O God, our times are in your hands: Look with favor, we pray, on your servant _____ as he begins another year. Grant that he may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen his trust in your goodness all the days of his life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Those We Love

Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to thy never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that thou art doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Guidance

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment and light riseth up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldst have us to do, that the spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Quiet Confidence

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For Protection

Assist us mercifully, O Lord, in these our supplications and prayers, and dispose the way of thy servants toward the attainment of everlasting salvation; that, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, they may ever be defended by thy gracious and ready help; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly and utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

In the Evening

O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in thy mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.

Before Worship

O almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and of supplication: Deliver us, when we draw near to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections we may worship thee in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the Answering of Prayer

Almighty God, who hast promised to hear the petitions of those who ask in thy Son's name: We beseech thee mercifully to incline thine ear to us who have now made our prayers and supplications unto thee; and grant that those things which we have faithfully asked according to thy will may effectually be obtained to the relief of our necessity and to the setting forth of thy glory; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

On Sunday

O God, our King, by the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, on the first day of the week, you conquered sin, put death to flight, and gave us the hope of everlasting life: Redeem all our days by this victory; forgive our sins, banish our fears, make us bold to praise you and to do your will; and steel us to wait for the consummation of your kingdom on the last great day; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Grace at Meals

Blessed are you, O Lord God, King of the universe, for you give us food to sustain our lives and make our hearts glad; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Appendix B— Daily Prayers

Morning Prayers from *Devotional Prayers* by Henry Thornton

Edited for today's reader by James S. Bell, Jr.

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Day 1— Morning Prayer

Lord God almighty, the Creator and Ruler of the world, who has abundantly provided for the various wants of your creatures, who has ordered the day and the night to succeed each other, and who refreshes man with sleep and then requires him to pursue his work until the evening, we thank you that, while you have placed our lot in this life, you have not left us without hope in the world that is to come. We adore you for the gift of Jesus Christ, your Son, by whose gospel life and immortality are brought to light. We bless you for the pardon of sin through faith in a redeemer, for the guidance of your providence, and for the consolations of your spirit. We thank you for corporate worship, for your written word, and for all the other means of grace that you have entrusted to us.

Grant that we may this day pursue, with faithfulness and diligence, that work that you have assigned to us; and that we may, at the same time, be spiritually and heavenly minded. In the midst of life we are in death. Let us remember this awful truth, and let us live this day as we shall wish that we had done, if it should indeed prove to be our last. Save us from the sins to which we are most prone. Do not leave us to the natural

bent of our own minds, which are ever inclining us to evil, but put your spirit within us, and teach us to cultivate every Christian temper and to abound in every good work.

Strengthen our faith in the glorious promises of the gospel, and fill us with that joy and peace in believing, which shall be more than a compensation for all the temporal sacrifices to which we may be called. Help us to bear affliction with a patient and quiet mind; or, if you should continue to give us prosperity, help us to be ever watchful over ourselves and moderate in our enjoyments. And let us impart freely to others the good gifts that you shower down upon us.

Inspire us with zeal in the fulfillment of our relative duties, with integrity in our dealings, and with the spirit of kindness to all men. Let us continually examine ourselves and advance our self-knowledge so that we may prevail over our infirmities and trials. Let us grow in grace, and in all goodness, and in meekness for your heavenly kingdom.

We pray for your blessing on all our friends and relations. May they also be filled with the knowledge of your will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. May we and they be of one heart and one mind, loving each other as brethren in Christ and uniting our efforts to promote both the good of all men and your glory.

Have mercy on the poor and the afflicted, strengthen the weak, help the tempted, and guide the ignorant into the way of knowledge.

Bless the rising generation; save them from the dangers of this evil world and sanctify to them the events that they shall encounter. May they become instruments in your hand for the advancement of the interests of your church on earth, and may they become members of your blessed family in heaven.

We offer these humble and imperfect prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Day 2—

Morning Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, our Creator and Preserver and Continual Benefactor, we desire to begin this day with the acknowledgment of your power and goodness, and of our obligation to love and serve you. We beseech you to grant us grace to pass the day in your fear and in the fulfillment of your commandments.

You have given to each of us our work in life; Lord, enable us diligently to perform our respective duties. Let us not waste our time in unprofitableness or idleness, and let us not be unfaithful to any trust committed to us. Let us not put on the mere appearance of goodness, nor try in any way to deceive those around us. But let us remember that your eye is upon us, and let us have the testimony of our consciences, that in simplicity and godly sincerity we have our conversation in the world. Let truth be ever on our lips. Let us be examples of all integrity and uprightness.

Help us also to perform in a kind and Christian manner toward those who may come

under our influence. May we labor to do them service, and may we continually deny ourselves, that we may more effectively and abundantly minister to the various wants of others. May we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, and may we be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another.

We also beseech you to give us patience to bear the several trials and tribulations of life with a sound and contented mind. Let us not be perplexed with the cares of this world or overwhelmed with unnecessary fears, but let us ever trust your gracious providence and hope in your goodness and mercy.

Give to us, when we are in prosperity, a spirit of moderation and generosity. Save us from pride and from self-indulgence. Deliver us from the too-great love of earthly things, and teach us to remember that it is you who gives us all things richly to enjoy.

Bless the difficult circumstances through which we may pass. May we see your hand in all your various dispensations and adore you for the various events of your providence, knowing that if we truly love and serve you, all things shall work together for our good.

We submit to your kind and fatherly care all our friends and relations. Direct their steps in life, and bless them with all spiritual blessings in Jesus Christ. Give to them the pardon of their sins and the blessed hope of eternal life.

We pray for the rising generation. May they remember their Creator in the days of their youth; may they find you to be their refuge in all the events through which they pass.

Have mercy on all who are in any sorrow or trouble. We ask you to provide for them through the riches of your mercy and send special help in their hour of need.

Be favorable to this nation. Bless the president of the United States and all who are in authority. Direct his advisers. Give wisdom to our Congress. Inspire our courts with integrity and our clergy with the spirit of true religion. Deliver us from the hands of all our enemies, and give us peace among ourselves.

We offer up our imperfect prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Day 3— Morning Prayer

O Lord, our heavenly Father, most gracious and merciful God who has preserved us through all the stages of our past lives, who has blessed us with unnumbered benefits, and who never grows weary of doing us good, we humbly and heartily thank you for all your loving kindness shown to us. Let us renew the solemn dedication of ourselves unto you.

We confess before you the sins of our lives, which are more than we can number or express. We lament the evil that, day by day, in thought, word, and deed we have committed against you. And we adore the riches of your mercy, which forgives all our

sins, heals all our iniquities, and still abounds even to us, who have so grievously rebelled against you.

We also pray that while we rejoice in the thought of that exceeding goodness that is reveled in the gospel to us sinners, we may be in all respects transformed by the various doctrines of your word. Thus may we bring forth all those fruits of righteousness that bring, in Jesus Christ, praise and glory to your name.

We pray that we may this day walk worthy of the Lord and that we may honor you by our patience under every trial, by our meekness under personal attack, and by our unwearied zeal in doing good. We pray that we may surrender our wills to your most holy will in all things, readily accommodating ourselves to every new circumstance that you, in your providence, send.

Grant that through the daily contemplation of the doctrines of your gospel, every good disposition may be formed in us. May the faith of Christ be effective to bring down our pride, to subdue our selfishness, to improve our temper, to direct and restrain our tongues, to motivate us with the purest zeal, and to fill us with charity toward our neighbor. May it also sanctify our daily work, providing the motivation to do it, increasing our diligence in it, and teaching us to look to you, Lord, for our great and final reward. O God, bless us this day—and not this day only, but to the end of our lives. Defend us in all our future dangers; help us in all our sorrows and adversities; lead us through every difficulty and trial.

If it pleases you to send us prosperity, enable us to devote the good things that you give us to your service. As you extend your mercies, enlarge also the thankfulness of our hearts. Or, if it be your righteous will either to try us with temptations or to give us strong afflictions, may we learn to bow meekly to your gracious providence in all things. May we still trust your unchanging mercy to us amidst all your various dispensations.

O God, who has been our support from infancy, the help of our youth, and the guide of our advancing years, we commit ourselves to you for the days that are to come. Your providence has ordained our lot in life and has ordered all things concerning us. Unto you, the same gracious God, we now resign all our affairs; to you we commend our bodies and souls, our temporal as well as our eternal interests. Especially, we ask you to save us from sin, as well as from those fears that our past transgressions might justly bring upon us.

We offer up these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Day 4— Morning Prayer

Almighty Lord, our God, whose eyes are in every place, who sees the evil and the good, and who sees not only our outward actions but all our most secret thoughts, we ask you to maintain in us this day a constant sense of your presence and to preserve us from sinning against you. We are exposed to dangers by night and by day; our lives are

in your hands, and unto you we look for preservation from every evil. Lord, teach us to be ever mindful of you. When we go out and come in, and when we are alone and in company, may we bear in mind that you are continually with us and that you take account of all we think and speak and do.

We ask you, merciful Father, to pardon our past sins, for Jesus Christ's sake. When we reflect how strict and holy is your law and how often we have yielded to anger and passion, to pride and vanity, or to the desire of some forbidden thing, we are filled with shame and guilt. But we desire to bless your holy name, that you have not left us without hope; for you have revealed yourself to us, as pardoning iniquity, transgression, and sin, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. We therefore ask you now to receive us into your favor and to make us draw close to you through Jesus Christ.

We know that we draw near unto you by trusting in Christ's name, and not in our own righteousness. We ask you, for his sake, to strengthen our weakness and to enable us this day to fulfill every duty to which we are called. May we be kind and affectionate one to another, sincere and upright in all our dealings, and diligent in our proper work. May we rejoice in every opportunity for doing good, and may we have grace to deny ourselves, that we may the more abundantly minister to the wants of others. Put into us a spirit of compassion for the poor, as well as of thankfulness to you, who has amply provided for us. Teach us to forgive those who have injured us, since we ourselves have so many sins for which we hope to be forgiven. Raise us up to be instruments in your hand for the good of many. May we rejoice in the sense both of your pardoning mercy and your constant and special protection.

We ask you, Lord, to look down in compassion on all our dear friends and relations. Bestow upon them all things that you know to be needful for them. Sustain and comfort them in this life—but, especially, give to them the blessings of the life to come.

Bless our president. Direct the public councils of the nation. Give success to every effort to relieve the oppressed and to establish righteousness and peace on the earth.

Have mercy on the young. Grant that they may be trained in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and may thus learn to do your will and to walk in your fear all the days of their lives. Help them to hand down your truth to the next generation.

O Lord, we beseech you to bring us all, by the great number of your mercies, through this world of many temptations and trials to that place of everlasting rest and peace that you have prepared for those who love you.

We offer up these our humble supplications in the name of and through the mediation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Day 5—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord, God almighty, we ask that you enable us to call upon you with humble and devout hearts. Let us not mix any worldly or wandering thoughts with the

supplications that we offer up to you, but let us remember that we are now in your presence. Let us worship you in spirit and in truth.

We thank you, O God, for your mercy to us during the past night. We bless you for our renewed health and strength, and for the various comforts that surround us. And we desire now to dedicate again to you all the faculties of our bodies and of our minds and to spend the day that is before us to your glory.

Deliver us from all the temptations of the day. Help us to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. Let us not be drawn aside to anything that is contrary to our Christian duty, either by the tendency to sin that is within us, or by the evil example of those around us. Instead, let us watch and strive continually, that all our ways may be pleasing in your sight. We confess that we are weak and helpless and filled with iniquity. For our merciful Savior's sake, have compassion on our infirmities and give us grace sufficient for us in every hour of our need. O Lord, grant that we may thus be preserved from sin and, by putting our trust in you, that we may not be disappointed.

Give us faith in all the truths of your word; may we be daily warned by the terrors of the Lord and encouraged by your mercy. May we meditate on the awful punishments denounced against the wicked and call to mind the reward that you have promised to those who please you through patient and continual good deeds. And thus may we be prepared to make every sacrifice to which you may call us. May we cut off our right hand and pluck out our right eye when you require us to do it. And may we consider all our interests in this life to be of no value compared with the eternal welfare of our souls. May we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, trusting that all things needful for the body shall be added unto us.

Pardon, O Lord, all our sins in times past. We pray for mercy, in the name of Jesus Christ, and we bless you for this great Mediator, in whom we can place all our confidence and hope.

We ask every blessing in the name of the same Lord and Savior. Amen.

Day 6— Morning Prayer

O Lord, God almighty, you are infinite in power, in goodness, and in mercy. Help us now to worship you with reverence and humility. Before you the angels veil their faces. May we, therefore, approach you with a deep sense of awesome majesty and of your spotless purity and holiness. And may we so address you that you may hear our prayers and pour down your blessing upon us.

We ask you, O Lord, to grant us this day your holy spirit, that we may be strengthened to fulfill our several duties and to resist the temptations that may come upon us. We call upon you, in the name of Jesus Christ, through whom you give strength to the weak and supply all the spiritual wants of the soul. Have compassion upon us, for our Savior's sake, and give us grace to do whatever you require of us. O cleanse us, for his sake, from the stain of every sin, from pride and envy, from malice, selfishness, and

uncharitableness. Make us meek, lowly, gentle, kind, and forgiving. Let us not live to please ourselves or indulge any evil inclinations of our own hearts, but let us aim to glorify you, our God, and to do good in our generation.

You have appointed unto each of us our work in life. We pray that we may have grace to fulfill the duties of our stations with integrity and fidelity. May we remember that this day your eye is continually upon us. As we think of you, may we put our cheerful trust in you and commit all our ways unto you and be found in the fear of you, Lord, all the day long.

We desire to acknowledge your various mercies to us. We bless you, that you cover our table with plenty, that you allow us to abound with the good things of this life, and that you cause us to go out and come in surrounded by safety. O Lord, help us to use with moderation the gifts that you bestow and to maintain continual thankfulness of heart as we enjoy them.

We especially bless you for your mercies in Jesus, by whom we obtain pardon of sin and the blessed hope of eternal life. We beseech you, for his sake, to give us a right understanding in all things, that we may know how to walk so as to please you and how to avoid all that is hateful in your sight. Guide us in all difficulties, and strengthen us under all temptations, and supply our spiritual as well as temporal wants. All this we pray for your great mercy's sake in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Day 7—

Morning Prayer

O Lord, God almighty, who has safely brought us to the beginning of another day, we ask you to conduct us through this day in peace. Enable us also to pass all the time of our pilgrimage on earth in such a way that, when we pass from this world, we may be prepared to meet you in your heavenly kingdom.

When we think of this life and its various temptations, when we look around and see the wickedness of the world, and when we then contemplate also the weakness and corruption of our nature, we might well fear the difficulties with which we have to struggle and tremble lest we should fall under the power of our many temptations. But we bless you, O Lord, for that abundant grace that is treasured up for us in Jesus Christ. We thank you for all the motives, promises, and encouragements afforded us in your gospel, and we would daily rejoice in it as the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. We bless you, that your Son has died as a sacrifice for sin and that the spirit of Christ is sent to sanctify us. Therefore, we now pray that the Holy Spirit will fill us, that we may go forth to our daily occupations and trials, having the Lord for our righteousness and our strength.

Prepare us, we ask you, for every duty of this day; arm us for every trial that may come upon us. Sanctify us, O Lord, in body, soul, and spirit. May we now seriously devote ourselves to you, and may we be found walking in your fear all the day long, each of us fulfilling our proper work with Christian humility and simplicity. Deliver us from a careless and unbelieving life, from a life of idleness and unprofitableness, and from a

life of wickedness and vice. Save us from the sins that in times past may have most easily beset us and from those temptations to which we may now, through our age and circumstances, be most exposed.

May our hearts be filled with love toward you, and may all our abilities be so employed in doing good that no place may be given for those temptations that continually overcome those who do not know the gospel of salvation.

May your grace increase in us, and may our corruptions be weakened day by day. At the same time, as we forget the things that are behind and look forward to those things before us, may we continue to press toward the mark of the prize of our high calling in Christ Jesus.

We also beseech you to deliver us from every prejudice and error by which we may be in danger of being deceived. Save us from a blinded conscience and a false and misguided zeal. Help us that the way of truth should never be spoken evil of because of us, and make us cautious not to hinder the gospel of Christ.

O Lord, help us also this day to remember how short and uncertain the time of our journeying here on earth is, so that whatever our hands find to do, we may do it with all our might. May we fulfill zealously the duties of our stations in life; at the same time, may we maintain a spiritual and heavenly mind. May we often think of that blessed region where Christ sits at the right hand of God. Whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, may we do all to your glory.

We offer up these humble and imperfect prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Day 8—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord, God almighty, we ask you now to deliver us from all wandering thoughts. Help us to remember in whose presence we are, and let us worship you in spirit and in truth.

O Lord, our heavenly Father, you are the Preserver of our lives and the Giver of all the good things that we enjoy. We thank you for the mercies of the past night. We bless your name, that we are meeting together in so much health and comfort and that we have the prospect of passing another day in the enjoyment of the bounties of your providence. We also set before us the blessed hope of everlasting life.

We ask you to give us grace this day to serve you in our several stations and to walk according to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Save us from the temptations of the day; strengthen us for the fulfillment of our duties; direct us in all our difficulties; and comfort us under any trouble or adversity into which we may this day come. Grant that when we lie down at night, we may be able to look back on the hours that shall have passed with a humble confidence that you accept our services and will pardon our infirmities, for Jesus Christ's sake.

We ask you to deliver us from all evil passions, from pride and envy, from hatred and ill will, from fault-finding and uncharitableness, and especially from the want of Christian kindness toward those who dwell with us in the same family. Instead, we would ask to worship you as partakers of the same faith. Preserve us also from those secret transgressions that your eye alone can discern in us. Deliver each of us from the sins that most easily beset us. O Lord, grant that your good spirit may this day abide within us and dispose us to every good work.

Help us also to remembrance often the great love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who came down from heaven to die for us so that we, being delivered from the dread of your wrath and rejoicing in the hope of your mercy, might serve you day by day in newness of life. O Lord, strengthen our faith in him who has suffered on the cross for us. Teach us to walk according to his example. May we, like him, be kind and compassionate, forbearing and forgiving, undefiled and separate from sinners.

And bless us, not this day only, but to the end of our lives. We pray that as long as we remain in this world of trial, you would strengthen us by your holy spirit and comfort us and continually direct us. Help us to not depart at any time from you, who are our Father and our God, through any allurements of the world, or any temptations of the flesh or of the devil. Rather, make us ever steadfast in your truth, faithful to your cause, and devoted to your service.

We offer up these imperfect prayers in the name and through the mediation of our only Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Day 9—
Morning Prayer**

O God, you have commanded us in your word to call upon your name, and you have declared that you hear and answer the prayers of those who make their supplications to you. We desire now to offer up our petitions to your manifold and great mercies.

We bless you for your preservation of us during the past night, and we desire to acknowledge again our dependence upon you and our sincere obligations toward you. We thank you for having poured down upon us so many blessings of this life. We thank you for our health and strength, for our food and clothes, and for all the comforts and conveniences that we enjoy. But, above all, we praise you for the inestimable privilege of being born in a land of religious freedom. For these and for all your various and great mercies, we would render to you a grateful heart. We also would attempt to show our gratitude, not with our lips only but also with our lives by giving up ourselves to your service and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days on earth.

We now ask you to enable us by your grace to pass the whole of this day in honor of you. May we employ ourselves in doing those things that fit our station and circumstances; may we mortify all our corrupt affections; may we diligently attempt to maintain a conscience void of offense toward you and toward all men; may we rise superior to our temptations; and, by your grace, may we prevail over our many infirmities.

We ask you, O Lord, to stimulate our minds by those glorious hopes set before us in your Word so that if we have any present sacrifices to make, they may seem small to us in comparison with that inward satisfaction and joy that the gospel gives in the midst of worldly disappointments. At the same time, deliver us from every false hope. May we examine well our title to heaven until we know that our foundation is sure and shall never fail us. We confess that we are daily surrounded with infirmity, but we pray that every evil habit may be weakened in us, that every temptation may be overcome, and that every terror may finally be done away. May we thus be brought into the true liberty of the children of God and serve you without fear, in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives.

Hear, O Lord, our prayers, and supply both our temporal and spiritual wants for the sake of Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior. Amen.

**Day 10—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty and everlasting God, we kneel down to thank you for your merciful care and protection during the past night. We ask you now to let your blessing rest upon us. Help us to begin the day with the solemn dedication of ourselves to your service and then to go to the duties of our several stations with an earnest desire to do everything with a view to your glory.

We ask you, O Lord, to establish us in the great doctrines of your gospel. May we be grounded in the faith of Christ crucified for us; may the history that we read in your holy word, of our Savior coming down from heaven to live as our example and to die as the atonement for our sins, affect us deeply and have its full influence upon us. May it excite our warmest gratitude to him who died for us; may it inspire us with hatred against sin; may it help us to rise above the fear of wicked men; and may we learn to identify with our suffering and despised Lord. May that zeal to save us, which he showed, awaken in each of us a concern for our own salvation, and may it be the chief desire of our hearts to be made partakers of all the benefits both of his death and of his glorious resurrection.

But since we are by nature so prone to evil and so little disposed to spiritual things, we ask you, O God, to purify our minds from all sinful and vain desires by the powerful working of your grace. O Lord, grant unto us the power of your Holy Spirit. May he dwell within us as a spirit of purity and holiness, a spirit of truth and of wisdom, a spirit of peace and love, and a spirit of holy joy and consolation. May we pass this day in the thankful remembrance of your mercies and in the diligent performance of your commandments. May no evil thoughts, no angry tempers, no distressing doubts or fears disturb us. May we serve you, our God, and live peaceably with all men. May we be kind and humble, patient and thankful, and sober-minded, and temperate in all things. May we fulfill the duties of the day, and may we lie down at night praising you again for all your goodness and committing ourselves with holy confidence to your mercy.

We ask these blessings in the name of Jesus Christ, our only Mediator. Amen.

**Day 11—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty and everlasting God, on whom all your creatures everywhere depend for life and breath and all things, and in whose favor all their true happiness consists, we kneel down to acknowledge the author of our being. We, your creatures whom your hand has made and whom your bounty has supported, kneel to pray for your blessing upon us.

We are sorry that we are by nature so prone to evil and that, amidst the many gifts given to us, we so seldom lift up our thoughts to him who is the giver. Every night you again refresh us with sleep. Every morning you renew your various mercies to us, giving us health, strength, and talents for your service and providing us fresh opportunities for our usefulness in the world.

We pray that as our days pass away we may be improving the time that is allotted to us. May we gather wisdom from your sacred word. May we diligently attend to the means of grace, and may each of us labor as your faithful servants in our various callings.

We ask you to impress upon us a deep sense of the importance of eternity. May we be looking continually to the end of our course. Remembering how soon all in which we here delight shall pass away forever, may we prepare to give our account of all things done in the body. Day by day may we have our conversation in heaven, moderating our affections toward the things of this world and living here below a life of faith in the Son of God.

And now, O Lord, whatever the employment that you have allotted to us, may we fulfill it as in your fear and with a view to your glory. Wherever we are this day, be present with us to bless us. May your spirit enlighten, strengthen, and direct us. May we fall into no sin or run into any kind of danger. We pray, especially, for grace to conquer those sins that most easily beset us. You know, O Lord, our many infirmities. Give us grace to be careful and circumspect. Let us avoid every approach to our former temptations, and let us renew our repentance with true sorrow and contrition of heart.

Hear us, we now beseech you, in these our imperfect supplications. Forgive us all our past transgressions, and grant us grace for the time to come. We ask all this for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Day 12—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty God, by whose will we were created and by whose providence we have been sustained, give to us your blessing this day. By your mercy we have been called to the knowledge of our Redeemer, and by your grace we have thought or done whatever has been acceptable to you. Now by that grace strengthen us for the performance of the duties before us. Since you have ordained labor to be the lot of man, and since you know the wants and necessities of all your creatures, bless our many activities and employments.

Give us, this day, our daily bread. Feed us with food convenient for us. If it be your pleasure that we abound with the good things of this life, give us a compassionate spirit, that we may be ready to relieve the wants of others. But let neither riches nor poverty estrange our hearts from you or cause us to become negligent of those treasures in heaven that can never be taken from us. Into whatever circumstances of life we may be brought, teach us to be cheerful and content. In our affliction, let us remember how often we have been comforted; in our prosperity, may we acknowledge from whose hand our blessings are received.

We ask you to help us remember our sins, that we may be brought to true repentance, to sincere sorrow, and to contrition of soul. Strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord, and grant that through the gracious help of your Holy Spirit we may obtain that peace that the world cannot give. Enable us to pass the remainder of our lives in humble resignation and willing obedience.

We acknowledge, O God, that every day is your gift and ought to be used according to your command. Life and death are in your hands, by your mercy we are spared. Help us so to improve our time, that we may every day become more holy in your sight. And when it shall please you to call us from this mortal state, may we resign our souls into your hands with confidence and hope.

We commend to your fatherly goodness all our relations and friends, especially those who are the most closely united to us. We ask you to look mercifully upon them and to grant them whatever may most promote their present and eternal joy.

Bless the president of these United States and all in authority. Extend your goodness to our whole native land. Pity the sorrows and relieve the necessities of all mankind. And let your kingdom come and your will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

O Lord, hear our prayers, for Jesus Christ's sake, to whom—with you and the Holy Ghost—be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

Day 13—

Morning Prayer

Most gracious and merciful God, who has protected us through the night and refreshed us with sleep, we offer our sincere thanks and praise for your various and great mercies. We confess that we are unworthy to come into your presence, before whom the angels veil their faces and in whose sight the heavens are not clean. Our lives have been unholy, and our sins have been many and great. If, therefore, you should mark iniquity, O Lord, who shall stand?

But we rejoice that there is with you forgiveness and full redemption, through Jesus Christ, your Son. Pleading his sacrifice, and trusting in his intercession, we approach the throne of your grace and say, "God be merciful to us sinners, for Jesus Christ's sake." O Lord, grant to us true repentance and a lively faith.

Convince us of our guilt. Show us everything (either in our hearts or lives) that has been displeasing to you.

We pray that we may obtain peace in our consciences through faith in the blood of your Son. Through the blessed hope that is set before us, may we also be raised above the various troubles, disappointments, and temptations of this present evil world.

We pray also that through the knowledge of your truth and the help of your spirit we may be disposed to fulfill every precept of your word. May we do unto all men as we would have them do unto us, and may we forgive one another even as we hope to be forgiven. May we be clothed with humility, and denying all ungodliness and worldly lusts, may we live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. May we be content with such things as we have, each of us fulfilling our proper duties. May we watch against anger, malice, hatred, envy, and all other evil tempers, which are ready to rise up within us. And thus doing your will and walking in your ways and improving every talent committed to us, may we wait for the second coming of our Lord.

We also most humbly beseech you, O Father of mercies, to look down with an eye of favor on all our friends and relations.

Bring home to your flock all those who are wandering in the ways of sin. Strengthen and confirm those who love your name, that they may rejoice in your salvation.

Be gracious unto all whom you have disposed to be kind to us; sanctify them to yourself and shower down your best blessings upon them. Pity those who are afflicted, tempted, persecuted, enslaved, or oppressed, and in your good time give them deliverance.

Give success to the labors of the ministers of your gospel. Bless and purify your church. Have compassion on our native land, and though many sins testify against us, take not away your grace so long afforded us.

Bless the president of these United States and all in authority; direct the public measures to our best interests and to your glory, and teach all people to serve their generation according to your will. Grant that all the changes in the kingdoms of the world may further your glory and your gospel.

These and all other things needful for us we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our lord. Amen.

Day 14—

Morning Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, the giver of all good things, we as your creatures desire to offer our deep thanks for all your temporal as well as spiritual mercies. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, but above all for your inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord, Jesus Christ. We thank you that the knowledge of this salvation has been extended to us and that we have been instructed in the will of God and in the blessed doctrines of your gospel. We praise you for that good providence that has directed our steps in life. We thank you for the times you have enlightened our minds to understand truths and to know the things that make for our everlasting peace.

We now most humbly ask you, O Lord, that we may not walk in darkness; but as he who has called us is holy, may we also be holy in all manner of conversation. Give us grace to overcome our sinful appetites and passions, and to be sober and temperate in all things. Assist us also by your Holy Spirit to subdue the corrupt affections of the mind: all anger, malice, envy, pride, and covetousness. Make us patient and contented, kind and charitable, humble and spiritually minded. We pray you also to make us diligent and useful in that world in which you have placed us. May we not misspend our time or neglect any opportunity of doing good, but may we be willing daily to deny ourselves, that we may more abundantly minister to the various wants of others.

We ask you, O Lord, to give unto each of us grace to know the several duties to which we are called and to be both faithful and zealous in the performance of them.

May those in authority in this house remember that they are only the stewards of the good things that you entrust to them, and that they must give account hereafter to their Master, who is in heaven. Give to the children of this family grace to be obedient in all things, to learn to walk in the fear of God, and to exercise brotherly kindness toward each other. May others in this house remember that your eye is upon them and that the gospel, which they have been taught, requires them not only to approve themselves to their authorities in the flesh, but also to please God, who tries the heart.

May we all live together in Christian peace, harmony, and love. May we seek to minister to each other's comfort, to bear each other's burdens, and to promote each other's temporal as well as spiritual good. Teach us also to abound in charity toward all those with whom we may this day have any contact. We ask you pardon, for Christ's sake, the large number of our past negligences and sins, and help us to awake to righteousness and to be diligent in every good work. When we shall lie down tonight, may we have the testimony of our consciences, that we have been serving you according to our best opportunities and abilities, with humility and integrity of heart.

We pray for your blessing on our president and country, on our friends and relations, and on all who are afflicted in mind, body, or circumstances. Have pity on those who are walking in the way of their own hearts, and bring them home, O Lord, to your flock.

Pardon the coldness and imperfection of these prayers, and accept them for the sake of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 15—

Morning Prayer

O great and eternal being, God of all power and might, giver of every good and perfect gift, and author of all our mercies, we kneel down and implore you to bestow your protection and blessing on this family. Through the bountiful goodness of our heavenly Father, we have been favored with innumerable mercies, and we would humbly thank you for them. But we ask you to add to all our other blessings the forgiveness of our sins through faith in that Savior whom you have revealed to us in the gospel.

In addition, we ask you to impress deeply on our minds, through the power of your Holy Spirit, the great doctrines of your word. Give us a clear perception of the evil of sin, a deep conviction of our own guilt, a solemn belief in heaven and hell, and a true sense of our obligations to the Lord who bought us. We who bear the name Christian and know the truths of the gospel should not live in the same manner as unbelievers; therefore, enable us, by applying those heart-affecting doctrines that we have learned, to become distinguished as the disciples of Jesus Christ, our Lord. May we indeed cleave to you with full purpose of heart, being pure in our most secret thoughts and imaginations. We desire to suppress those high and self-exalting thoughts that are so apt to rise up within us. Remind us of how we owe everything that we have or hope for to your bountiful goodness and to your mercies in Christ Jesus.

Being supported by your grace and grounded in the faith of Christ crucified for us, we pray that we may be enabled to practice every good work. May we be just and true in all our dealings, doing unto others as we wish that they would do unto us. May we be humble, thankful, and contented; may we do honor to your gospel by the manifestation of every Christian grace.

Give us grace to maintain a constant battle with all evil. May we ourselves avoid every approach to it, and may we attempt, according to our opportunities and ability, to persuade all those over whom we have any influence to keep at the greatest distance from temptation. O Lord, enable us to show that we are Christians not only in general profession, but in all sincerity and seriousness. May we be strict and self-denying, yet kind and liberal to others, honest and charitable, compassionate and courteous. Teach us to understand your abounding grace in the gospel, that we may ourselves abound in every work of charity. Enable us to find favor in the sight of those around us—and especially of those who are dearest to us—so that we may improve our influence for their benefit in this life and for the furtherance of their everlasting salvation.

Bless us, O Lord, in these Christian purposes, for from you alone comes the strength to serve you, and to you we would continually look up. Hear us, we ask you, in these our supplications; grant to us the help of your Holy Spirit, that we may live this day according to these prayers and that all the fruits of holiness may abound in us.

We ask every blessing in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 16— Morning Prayer

O Lord God almighty, who has made the world and all things in it, in whose favor is life, and in whose displeasure is misery, we kneel down and ask you to strengthen our faith in all the promises and threatenings of your word. May we live as those who know themselves to be frail and dying creatures on the brink of an awesome eternity.

We bless you for having brought life and immortality to light by the gospel. We thank you that your Son has died and risen again, has broken the bonds of death, and has opened to us the gates of everlasting life. We thank you for the glorious hopes held out

to each believer in his name; at the same time, we would rejoice with trembling, remembering the condemnation that belongs to the despisers of his gospel and to all who receive this grace of God in vain.

Lord, grant unto us faith in that eternal world to which we are hastening. May we realize these unseen things; may we turn from the love of this vain world; may we perceive the sin that dwells in us and the evil that lies around us, and may we be looking forward to that blessed time when we shall put away the body of this death and dwell forever with the Lord.

Give us grace to follow the faith and patience of your saints, who turned from sin to follow God and who endured even to the end, whose hearts were estranged from things below, and whose affections were set on things above. They went through trials, persecutions, and a great number of afflictions because they believed that Christ was worthy of all obedience and was able to finally save and deliver them. May we, who have the example of their faith, be willing to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ rather than living an idle, careless life while we call ourselves the followers of those who now inherit the promises. May we daily mortify the body of sin and daily renew the conflict with our spiritual enemies. May we be looking continually to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross and now is seated at the right hand of God.

May we be so enlivened by our Christian faith that we are willing cheerfully to endure the evils of life and to submit to all your righteous will concerning us. If there be any of us who are still strangers to you, teach us to remember how short and uncertain all our days on earth are. Or, if there be any of us who are indolent and materialistic or too much occupied with this present world, raise our thoughts to those things that are above, that we may be fellow citizens with your saints and with the household of God. May we all diligently make our calling and election sure: May we all repent and forsake our sins and believe in Christ; may we all die daily to the things of time and rise to newness of life; may we all pass through things temporal so that we do not lose the things eternal.

We ask every blessing in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Day 17—

Morning Prayer

O Lord almighty, who is merciful and gracious, patient, and of great goodness, we approach you as the God of mercy, imploring you to hear these prayers and to pardon the multitude of our sins, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Day after day, we add to the number of our transgressions: Every night we have the sins of the preceding day to repent of, and every morning we have reason to fear that we should again yield to temptation and return to our former iniquities. We pray, therefore, for your preserving and protecting grace. O Lord, put your spirit into all our hearts, that we are made pure and holy in our secret thoughts and may not fail to perform all that is good and acceptable in your sight.

Dispose each of us this day to employ regularly our many talents in your service. While we pursue the various duties of our calling, may we have a single eye to your glory, and may we undertake no employment on which we cannot hope for your blessing. Give us such a portion of your grace, O Lord, that we may desire to do not only that which is in some degree beneficial, but that which is most excellent and most completely useful. May no spirit of self-indulgence, no love of ease, no dread of opposition, and no fear of shame prevent us from placing our lives heartily in your service. Make us willing in all respects to deny ourselves, that we may live in you. Teach us to enter into the spirit of those Christians and apostles of old, who counted not their lives dear to themselves so that they might finish their course with joy, and who rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ. Living in unity and godly love, they were seen striving together for the faith of the gospel, not terrified in any way by their adversaries.

Grant unto every member of this family your peace and all your heavenly consolations. Make us of one heart and one mind, praising you for your mercies, praying to you for your grace, and uniting in the confession of our daily sins before you.

Establish us in your faith, fear, and love; enlighten us, that we may understand your whole will concerning us. Where we have erred, have pity on our mistakes; if we have wandered from the right way, we implore you in mercy bring us back. Lead us, O Lord, into the paths of righteousness and peace. And, if we have in any measure attained the knowledge of your truth, may we bring our faith into active exercise. May we watch our hearts, bridle our tongues, and govern our tempers. May we be ready to forgive, even as we hope to be forgiven. May we be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor shall not be in vain in the Lord.

We now commit ourselves to you for this day. Help us to live according to these prayers, and may we be prepared for your heavenly kingdom. We ask this for our Savior's sake. Amen.

Day 18— Morning Prayer

Most merciful and gracious God, we kneel down to thank you for your protection and care during the past night. We now lift up our voice unto you in the morning, imploring you this day to bless us by watching over us by your merciful providence and delivering us from all evil.

We are prone, O Lord, to fall into sin. Many incidents arise every day that draw forth our natural corruptions. Therefore, we ask you, who knows our frame and foresees the trials that come upon us, to prepare us for them. Enable us amidst the various difficulties, temptations, and sorrows of life to walk as the patient followers of Christ and as the faithful servants of the most high God.

We bless you, O God, for all your goodness to us in times past, for every trial you have lightened, for every difficulty and snare you have taken out of our way, and for every affliction that you have either sanctified or removed.

We thank you that we are here meeting together in so much peace and comfort to offer up our praises to you. We thank you for all your unnumbered mercies; for our health and strength, and all our worldly goods; for our friends and kind benefactors. We pray that each of us in our stations may be instruments in your hand for the benefit of our fellow creatures. At the same time, we desire to be faithful witnesses in the world of the truth and excellency of your gospel.

O Lord, grant that this day we may walk in a manner worthy of our great obligations to you and of our high and heavenly calling. May we remember both your spiritual and temporal mercies, and may we be occupied in acts of grateful obedience to you. We also ask you to impress upon us more deeply those truths of your gospel to prepare us for every good and beneficent work. May we think of the Savior who died on the cross for us, who endured all the extremities of misery that we might be saved, and who is now at your right hand making intercession for us. May we remember our Christian profession, living as believers in this crucified Lord, deeply affected with the remembrance of his death and his glorious resurrection. May we all die to sin and live to righteousness; as he who has called us is holy, may we also be holy in all manner of conversation.

We pray, O Lord, for your protection this day. May we faithfully follow him whose name we bear; may we have hope in his mercy; and may we finally enter into his glory. Amen.

**Day 19—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord, God almighty, our Creator, Preserver, and Benefactor, we desire to thank you for all your past mercies. At the same time, we asking you to give us your continual grace and to pour down your blessing upon us.

We ask you to conduct us by your merciful providence in our passage through this life. Defend us amidst our many dangers, deliver us from every trial, and order all the circumstances that affect us so that we may not be overpowered with difficulties or overwhelmed with temptations that may come upon us when we are unprepared.

Preserve us, O Lord, from day to day and from year to year. Give us grace to hate sin and to avoid those societies and employments that would lead our hearts away from you. May our eyes be opened to see the wickedness around us, and may we carefully abstain from all conformity to the sinful customs of this evil world. But we are led to trust in you even when we reflect on the many hindrances to our leading a Christian life, when we contemplate temptations both from within and from without, when we look back to the past instances of our weakness, and when we look forward to the yet untried scenes of danger and of difficulty. Therefore, to you alone we lift up our daily prayer for grace to preserve us in the paths of righteousness so that we may end our days in peace.

O Lord, grant unto us this day your Holy Spirit. Keep alive in our souls the sense of spiritual things. Impress us with a recollection of the great truths that we have been

taught. Fill us with a knowledge of those doctrines of your gospel, which you have appointed as the means of delivering man from sin and of preserving him in the ways of holiness in the midst of an ungodly world.

Enable us to walk worthy of the Lord throughout the day that is now before us. May we be obedient to your will, submissive to your providence, and ever thankful for your mercies.

Hear, O Lord, and answer these prayers. Forgive also our numberless transgressions, and accept our imperfect services, for your mercies' sake in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Day 20—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord, God almighty, whose creatures we are, to whom our prayers are constantly addressed, and whom we daily profess to serve, make available your grace so that we may offer up to you our hearts and place our delight in acts of obedience to you.

We ask you to strengthen our faith and to inspire our hearts with your continual love so that we may triumph over those temptations to which we are exposed. Give us your Holy Spirit; turn us from the love of sin, if we are in any way inclining to it. Put into us such an ardent desire to please you that we may be always using our time and talents in your service. We desire to acknowledge your right over us; we are bound to honor you by all we do.

We thank you, O Lord, that besides our obligations as creatures to the great author of our existence, you have added the most loving motives to win us to obedience. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. Your Son has died to save us. He has suffered on the cross, that we might be free. He has given his life as ransom for us, that he might draw us by the greatness of his love to yield our powers to him. Therefore, being daily mindful of what our Savior has done for us, may we show that we are aware of our obligations by the regular readiness of our minds to do and suffer all things that you shall appoint for us or in any way require of us.

Enable us, O Lord, this day to deny ourselves, that we may live unto you. As the redeemed of the Lord, may we abstain from sin and flee from every snare. May we be holy in all manner of conversation, respectfully impressed with a sense of your holiness and knowing that we are called to become pure in heart, if we hope to see God. And help us to contend with the iniquity of the world around us. Let us not yield to its influence and example, but let us see ourselves as passing on to a better country so that we make every effort to escape the snares that now surround us. May each of us be sure of our own salvation and do good with the talents committed to us. Thus may we pass the day now before us; when the hour of our death shall come, may we then have abundant proof that we have walked by faith and not by sight, and that we shall be numbered with your chosen people in glory everlasting.

We present these imperfect supplications in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

**Day 21—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty and everlasting God, we acknowledge ourselves bound by innumerable obligations to praise, adore, love, and serve you. From you we have received our being. You are our constant Preserver and bountiful Benefactor, the source of every present enjoyment and the source of all hopes. In your infinite forbearance, you have been pleased to look down with pity on our fallen race and freely to offer salvation to us through Jesus Christ.

We adore you for the promises of your mercy and grace and for the joyful prospect of eternal life, so clearly revealed in your holy word. Impress our minds, O Lord, with that deep sense of the important truths made known to us, which shall regulate all our thoughts, words, and actions.

But while we celebrate your goodness to us, we have cause to be ashamed of our conduct. We have great reason, O Lord, to be humbled before you, on account of the coldness and ignorance of our hearts, the disorder and lack of commitment in our loves, and the prevalence of worldly affections within us. Too often we have indulged the tempers that we ought to have subdued and have left our duty unperformed. O Lord, be merciful to us for your son Jesus Christ's sake. Produce in us deep repentance and a lively faith in that Savior who has died for our sins and has risen again for our justification.

And may your pardoning mercy accompany the sanctifying influence of your spirit, that we may no more sin against you but may live from here on as becomes the redeemed of the Lord and those qualified for a blissful immortality. Put your fear into our hearts, that we may never more depart from you. Fix our affections on those things that are eternal. Convince us more effectively of the vanity of this world and its insufficiency to make us happy, of the evil of sin and its tendency to make us miserable, of the value of our souls and the terrors of that everlasting state on the borders of which we stand.

We also desire to thank you for the watchful care of your providence during the past night. We have lain down to sleep and, blessed be your name, have arisen in safety. May the lives that you have prolonged be devoted to your service. O Lord, continue to give us your favor and protection on this day. Save us from sin and from all evil. Enable us faithfully to perform every relative duty. May we as a family dwell together in peace. May we subdue every angry passion; loving you with a supreme affection, may we fervently love each other with pure hearts.

Preserve us from those temptations to which we are daily exposed. Make us aware of our weakness so that our hearts may be often raised to you in humble and fervent supplications for your grace. When we are in company, may it be our desire to do and to receive good. When we are alone, may we remember that our heavenly Father is with us.

Bless the president of the United States and all who are in authority. Be favorable to this nation. Visit all mankind with the light of your gospel, and let its influence increase in this land.

In tender mercy, regard all who are in affliction. Grant to our dear friends and relations every blessing that is needful for them. May they and we experience your favor in this life and in the world to come, in life everlasting.

We offer up these imperfect prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Day 22—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord God, our heavenly Father, to whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hidden, we ask you to look down on us your servants, who desire now with true humility of soul to offer up to you our prayers and supplications. We thank you for your merciful protection during the past night, and we adore that goodness that has so far supplied our wants and lightened our troubles. Your goodness has preserved our lives in the midst of dangers and has caused us to lie down and rise up in peace and safety.

Now we ask you to preserve us this day from evil. Save us from all things that afflict the body, and especially from whatsoever can hurt the soul. May we go forth in your strength to contend against the world, the flesh, and the devil and to fulfill the various duties of our Christian calling. Save us from the sins that most easily beset us. Preserve us from idleness and negligence, as well as from presumptuous transgressions. Deliver us from that dullness of conscience that might lead us to justify ourselves though living a careless and unprofitable life. Grant to us such knowledge of you that we may love you above all things and earnestly desire to obey every precept of your holy word. Teach us to redeem the time, to be watchful and alert, and to abstain from all appearance of evil. Teach us to be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, and to be never weary of doing good. Let us take continual care, lest through some liberty in which we indulge ourselves we should draw others into sin or should cause the gospel that we profess to be spoken of in evil.

O Lord, help us also to consider seriously the shortness of life and the nearness of death and of eternity, that whatever our hands find to do, we may do it with all our might. Let us have our loins girded and our lamps burning, and let us be as servants waiting for their Lord. Let us not say in our hearts that the Lord delays his coming, but let us remember that the day of our death may overtake us suddenly and that blessed is that servant who is found watching.

Grant, O most merciful God, that when finally we shall be called before your majestic throne to give account to him who is the judge of the living and dead, we may hear that joyful sentence proclaimed in our ears: "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." May our portion then be with the children of God, and our inheritance among the saints.

We ask you to bless all our friends and relations. Pardon their sins, supply their temporal as well as spiritual wants, and conduct them safely through all the temptations and dangers of this evil world to the same land of everlasting rest and peace.

Have mercy on all for whom we are bound to pray. Aid the tempted, comfort the dejected, sustain those who are bowed down with age or with infirmity, and comfort those who are drawing near to death. Have pity on all your afflicted servants, and enable them to believe that the Lord chastens those he loves and that, through much tribulation, they shall enter into the kingdom of God. And give to each of us grace to feel compassion for the various wants of others and to minister liberally to their relief.

We offer up these humble and imperfect prayers in the name of our only Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 23—

Morning Prayer

Blessed God, who has caused the holy scriptures to be written for our learning, we ask that you grant to us such faith in the truth of your holy word that we may be made partakers of your everlasting promises, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Dispose our minds to receive with meekness every doctrine that you have revealed, and save us from that spiritual blindness and ignorance that naturally fill our minds. Teach us to know you, our God, to adore you for your greatness, and to admire you for your holiness.

Open our eyes, that we may perceive ourselves to be sinners in your sight, partakers of a fallen nature as well as actual transgressors against you. Make us to feel that we stand in continual need of both your pardoning mercy and your quickening grace. And while we trust in the merits of his death and in the efficacy of his intercession, let us also acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Savior, whom we are bound unreservedly to obey.

Give us grace also to believe the fearful threatenings of your word. You have declared to us that the day is coming when all who are in their graves shall come forth, they who have done good to the resurrection of life and they who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation. Help us to preserve in our minds the remembrance of this approaching judgment, that we may not dare sin against you but may abound in all those fruits of holiness that you will approve in the great day of Jesus Christ.

We ask you, O Lord, to dispose our minds to receive with the true obedience of faith every part of your holy word. May it be made profitable to us for doctrine, for correction, for reproof, and for instruction in righteousness, that we may be thoroughly furnished for every good work. May we be prepared by it, not only for this our daily activity of prayer and praise and thanksgiving, but for all the duties of our Christian calling. May we keep continually in our minds those things that we have learned. Then, as we put on the whole armor of God, may we be able to stand fast in every evil day and to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil.

We most humbly ask you, O Lord, to defend us from all evil. Save us from the sins that easily besiege us. Let us control our tempers and restrain our tongues. Let us add virtue to our faith, and knowledge to virtue, and temperance to knowledge, and patience to

temperance, and brotherly kindness to patience, and love to brotherly kindness. Let us be rich in good works, to the praise and glory of your name. And while we are receiving your truths into honest hearts and are attempting by your grace to walk according to the precepts of your written word, may your providence direct our steps in life and watch over us for good. Defend us, we ask you, to the end of our lives. Let your good spirit abide within us, that we may not faint in our Christian walk or become weary of doing good.

We pray for your blessing on all our friends and relations. May they walk by the light of the same blessed gospel. May both they and we possess knowledge of your truth in this world, and life everlasting in the world to come.

We offer up these and all our supplications in the name of Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Redeemer. Amen.

**Day 24—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord, our heavenly Father, through whose providential goodness we are now permitted to see the light of another day, grant unto us grace to devote the lives that you lengthen to your service.

Assist us in all the duties to which we shall be called this day, and direct us to the employment that shall best fit us. You have appointed unto every man his work in life. Help us to be faithful and diligent in our calling; to be, at the same time, cheerful and contented with our lot; and, in all our earthly activities, to be mindful of a better world. Deliver us from all those anxieties and cares by which we are overly distracted.

We desire to remember that our lives are but shadows that soon pass away and that the difficulties and trials we must meet with here will soon cease forever. Teach us also moderation in our temporal enjoyments. May we chiefly desire those spiritual blessings that bring comfort to the soul. Grant unto us pardon of our sins and a true faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Enable us to lay hold of the promises of your gospel and to delight ourselves with the sense of your favor here and with the hope of eternal life hereafter. And make all things work together for our good. Be pleased to so order the events of our lives that we may see continual reason to praise you for your blessings toward us. Thus, being guided by your providence and sanctified by your spirit, may we attain finally the salvation of our souls.

We pray also for all our dear friends and relations. Pardon, O Lord, their trespasses and sins, and make them partakers of the promises of Christ in his gospel. Lead them through their various temptations and trials; make them happy in themselves, and provide blessings to us and to all around them.

Have pity on the sons and daughters of affliction. Sanctify to them their troubles in this life, and teach them to rejoice in the Lord amidst all their worldly tribulation. Bless the rising generation, and may there be never wanting in this land a seed to serve you.

We pray especially that the children of this family may be brought up in your fear. May the Lord save them from this evil world. May the Lord strengthen, establish, and settle them and, after a life full of good works, give them an entry into his heavenly kingdom.

We present these imperfect prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our ever-blessed Redeemer. Amen.

**Day 25—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty and ever-blessed God, you are Father of all the families of the earth and the ever-present help of those who put their trust in you. Amid the weakness of infancy you have sustained us; in youth you have guided us; and during our advancing years you have preserved us.

By your providence we are united in one household, for you have supplied our wants and have abundantly provided as well for our bodies as for our souls. You, O great God, have delivered us from some of the scenes of temptation and of sorrow, to which we see others exposed. You now have permitted us to lie down and rise up in peace and safety. Thus we are meeting together to thank you for the mercies of the past night and to acknowledge that it is by your power and goodness alone that we are preserved from day to day.

O Lord, protect us this day from evil. Go forth with us to the several duties of our callings, and enable us to do all things in honor of you and for your glory.

We beseech you to pour your spirit into our hearts, that we may not depart from you or forget any of your commandments. May we serve you with humble, patient, and quiet minds, and may our love abound both toward you and toward all men. Deliver us from those angry tempers to which our natures are so prone and from all those sins that war against the soul. May we grow in grace and prevail over the temptations by which we have formerly been overcome. May we lay aside every weight and the sins that have easily beset us, ever looking to him who is the author and finisher of our faith and pressing toward the mark of the prize of our high calling in Christ Jesus. May we remember that, in due time, we shall reap everlasting life, and may we be steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord. May we be faithful, even unto death, knowing that our labor shall not be in vain in the Lord.

We pray for your special blessing on the employments in which we shall this day engage. May we undertake nothing that is contrary to your will, and may our good works be crowned by you with success. We would remember that without you we can do nothing. Indeed, remind us that without the agreement of your providence, we can fulfill no purpose of our minds and that we can do nothing spiritually good without the aid of your grace. Unto you, therefore, let our eyes be continually lifted up.

Bless, O Lord, every member of this family. Grant unto the children a spirit of obedience, and may none of us forget you, our God, or be indifferent to the great and

glorious hope that you have set before us. Grant that in all our works—begun, continued, and ended in you—we may each glorify your holy name.

Have mercy on all our friends and relations. Pity the poor and the afflicted. Give peace to those who are troubled in mind, and supply the various necessities of all your creatures.

We ask every blessing in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Day 26—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty and most merciful God, we ask you to pour down your blessing upon us, your servants, who are now assembled to worship your holy name.

You are infinitely great and glorious! Before you the angels veil their faces, and the heavens are not pure in your sight. We are weak and helpless, sinful and corrupt, exposed to dangers on every side, and in continual need of your gracious assistance. O Lord, preserve us through this day. We ask that you guard both our bodies and our souls from every kind of evil.

We are now beginning the duties of our various callings. Enable each of us to be faithful and diligent in them, as those who must hereafter give an account of all things done in the body to him who is the judge of the living and dead.

We pray that all our most secret ways may be pleasing to you, O searcher of hearts. Let us not attempt to deceive either ourselves or those around us by the mere appearance of goodness, but may we have the witness of our consciences, that in simplicity and godly sincerity we have our dealings with the world.

Give us grace to overcome our sinful appetites and passions, to mortify our pride, and to bring every member of our bodies and every faculty of our souls into captivity to the law of Christ. May we put away all hatred and division, all anger and strife, all malice and evil speaking. May this day be a day of peace and harmony for every member of this family.

We ask you to bless the events that shall come to us on this day. You, O Lord, order all things for us, and we do not know what a day may bring forth. Sanctify to us our prosperity and our adversity, our health and our sickness, our daily comforts and our enjoyments, as well as our anxieties and our disappointments.

We desire also to give you our grateful thanks for your past mercies. You have sustained us in infancy, guided us in youth, and preserved us during our advancing years. You have often raised us when we have been brought low: You have comforted us in trouble and have delivered us in sickness. While others have fallen, we have been kept alive. Day after day, we remain the models of your mercy, and comforts surround us on every side. O Lord, we bless your name for what is past, and we pray that the remembrance of your goodness may lead us to repentance and may make us careful to walk according to your will in the days that are yet to come.

We further ask you to bestow your blessing on our dear friends and relations. You have encouraged and commanded us to intercede for one another; we therefore desire most earnestly to commend to your fatherly care all those whom it is our duty to remember in our prayers. We ask you to be merciful to those who have at any time shown us mercy, to pity the poor and the afflicted, to strengthen the weak, and to comfort the despondent mind.

Have mercy on the rising generation. Save them from the follies and ignorances of their youth, and raise them up to be a seed to serve you when we shall be gathered to our fathers in death.

Hear us, O Lord, in these our prayers and intercessions, for the sake of our only Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 27—

Morning Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, you are the Author of our being, the Preserver of our lives, and the Giver of every blessing that we enjoy. Unto you we now direct our prayer, asking you this day to supply our wants and necessities.

Grant unto us all things needful both for the body and the soul, and especially give to us pardon of our sins, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

We confess that we are unworthy of your favor, for we have continually trespassed against you. But you are good and gracious to those who freely acknowledge their transgressions and cast themselves on your mercy. O Lord, we pray that as we are delivered from the fear of your wrath through a lively faith in Jesus Christ, your Son, we may serve you with cheerful and quiet minds. We desire to partake in all the consolations of your spirit and walk in the way of your commandments.

We pray for integrity and diligence in our various callings. May we remember today that your eye is upon us. May we carefully avoid hypocrisy and deceit and every hint of dishonesty and unfaithfulness. May we also guard against pride and vanity, against envy and hatred, against selfishness and covetousness, and against whatever sin may most easily beset us. May we each fulfill our proper work with humility of mind and serve not only those around us but also you, God, who searches the heart.

Likewise, may we exercise fervent love toward all men. Teach us to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to minister to the utmost of our fellow creatures. In this way may we follow the example of our Lord and Savior, who has taught us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Grant to us grace in every respect to display by our lives the holy gospel that we profess.

We ask you also to guide our future steps. Be our constant helper and defender, ordaining for us that condition in life that shall be most conducive to our eternal welfare. If you send trouble, impart to us strength to bear it, and save us from those temptations that might provoke our fall into sin. If prosperity be our lot, give us grace to be thankful for it and to use with moderation our many enjoyments. May we remember that

the time is short—that our affliction is but for a moment that our earthly pleasures also will soon be past, that all the glory of man is but as the flower of the grass, and that the ways of this world pass away.

We would furthermore intercede with you on behalf of all our friends and relations. Bless them in their personal lives, in their families, and in all their undertakings. Grant them the comforts of your grace here, and make them partakers of glory everlasting.

We implore you to bestow special favor on the rising generation. Save them from the corruption of this vain and evil world. Watch over them during the weakness and inexperience of their youth, and prepare them for the duties to which your providence shall call them.

We give over to your fatherly care the poor and destitute, the prisoners, the sick, and the afflicted. Send help from above to those who are under severe temptations: strengthen the feeble knees, and raise up those who have fallen. Teach us all to exercise patience, forbearance, and kindness toward each other.

We offer these imperfect prayers in the name of our only Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Day 28—
Morning Prayer**

O Lord God, our heavenly Father, you are the giver of all good things. We desire to thank you for your mercies during the past night and for all the numberless blessings we enjoy. We would begin this day with your solemn worship, acknowledging your hand in the fullness of your providence and expressing our gratitude and obedience to you.

We would also praise you for the gift of Jesus Christ, your Son, by whom we obtain pardon for sin and all things necessary for our everlasting salvation. We adore your name that you have not left us in ignorance of you but have given us your holy word; you have made us rich with the means of grace. We would daily remember your spiritual gifts, and we would now resolve to spend this day in a manner worthy of our Christian profession.

Assist us, O Lord, by your Holy Spirit, to bring our prayers to fruition. Strengthen us against our temptations. Direct us in every difficulty, comfort us in all our sorrows and adversities, and enable us to fulfill every part of our Christian duty in which we have been instructed.

May we love our neighbor as ourselves and do unto all men as we would have them do unto us. May we honor and obey civil authority. May we submit ourselves to all our governors and teachers. May we hurt no one by word or deed. May we be true and just in all our dealings and bear no ill will or hatred in our hearts. May we keep our hands from stealing and our tongues from speaking evil, lying, and slandering. May we preserve our bodies in temperance, soberness, and chastity. May we not covet other men's goods, but learn and labor truly to earn our living and to do our duty in that state of life to which you have called us.

Pardon all our negligence in time past, and give us grace continually to examine ourselves and to conform our lives according to your holy word.

We desire to add our humble supplications for all those whom it is our duty to remember in our prayers. Have compassion on the poor and the afflicted. Send them help, O Lord, in their hour of need; sustain them with your heavenly blessings when all human aid shall fail. We pray for the young and the ignorant. May they be instructed in the way in which they ought to live, and may they become instruments to extend the knowledge of you and of your Son, Jesus Christ, to distant generations.

Hear us, O Lord, in these imperfect prayers, which we humbly present to you in the name of our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 29—

Morning Prayer

Almighty and ever-blessed God, you are the King eternal, immortal and invisible. You sit in the highest heavens and are exalted above all blessing and praise; before you the angels veil their faces, and the heavens are not pure in your sight. You created all things, you uphold all things, you sustain the lives of the creatures whom you have made. You govern all events by your unceasing providence.

We bless you that, out of your great goodness, you have sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem forever from death and hell our immortal souls. We bless you, too, that you have given us an assurance of our own resurrection by raising him from the dead on the third day.

We praise you for corporate worship, on which we maintain an ongoing remembrance of this victory of our once-crucified and now-ascended lord. Grant, we ask you, that we may this day read your sacred word with reverence and holy fear, with serious and deep attention, and with all humility and thankfulness. Enable us to pray with devout and contrite hearts, and bless our private meditations, that we may be made partakers of your everlasting promises in Christ Jesus and that we may advance in all holiness.

O Lord, strengthen our faith by means of those spiritual disciplines in which we shall engage. Give us an increasing sense of our unworthiness and a clearer knowledge of those sins that most easily beset us, that we may more fully comprehend the riches of your grace in Christ and may better know how to reform the evil within us.

Do not allow any of us to continue to be self-deceived. Let not death overtake us unprepared; instead, by your Holy Spirit, give such power to the preaching of your Word and to all other means of grace that we may heartily repent and sincerely believe. Help us to bring forth abundant fruits of true repentance, to the praise and glory of your name.

Let your blessing everywhere accompany the preaching of your gospel this Sunday. May the God of grace pour forth the abundance of his spirit on the ministers and on the hearers. May they who have lived in sin be awakened to a sense of their danger. May the unbelievers be convinced, the thoughtless be alarmed, and the weak be

strengthened. May the young be guided in the right way and the afflicted soul be comforted. May the foundation of your universal church be enlarged, and may believers be built up in faith, hope, and love and learn to understand the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.

Extend your special blessing on those who are laboring to bring to foreign lands the knowledge of a crucified Redeemer. Assist them by your providence and grace, that they may contend successfully against idolatry and superstition. Strengthen them by your Holy Spirit; in the midst of all their difficulties and trials, impart to them the fullness of your comfort. Open the hearts of many to receive your gospel and love it wholeheartedly. Let the light spring up to those who have long sat in darkness. And let the days come when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, when wars shall cease, and when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Hear us, O Lord, in these prayers and intercessions, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Redeemer. Amen.

**Day 30—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty and everlasting God, you did make man in your own image, and when he had fallen from his first estate, you did send your Son from heaven to save him. We ask you to give us grace this day to study your holy word.

We would begin our duties humbly asking you to impress our minds to earnestly desire those things that concern our salvation. Deliver us from the love of this world and from the many anxieties and cares to which we are continually prone, through the sinfulness and frailty of our nature. Elevate our thoughts to things above. Convince us of the shortness of time and of the value of eternity, of the uncertainty of our mortal state, and of the near approach of that day when we shall give account of all things done in the body. O Lord, what is our life? It is as a watch in the night; it is as a vapor that vanishes away; it is as the grass of the field, which in the evening is cut down and withers. But though we know that we must shortly die and that here all is vanity and stress of spirit, we desire to bless your holy name. However few and evil may be the days of our pilgrimage, you have provided us with many great and glorious hopes.

O grant us grace to lay hold on those promises that are set before us and to give all diligence, that we may make our calling and election sure. Thus may that world in which we dwell become the door of entrance to a better state, the passage to a heavenly Canaan, the blessed means of bringing us to you, our Father, and to Jesus Christ, our Savior.

May we examine ourselves, repent of our sins, and renew our vows of obedience to you. May we shake off our indolence and self-indulgence and learn to walk in the Spirit and to mortify the whole body of sin. While we thus strive to purify our souls through the love of the truth, may your word come to us with increasing power, with demonstration of the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance. May we grow in the knowledge of you and of your son, Jesus Christ, and may we abound in faith, hope, and love.

O Lord, go forth with us this day as we worship you, and pour down upon us your Holy Spirit. Hold back our vain, fleshly desires. Encourage our minds to prayer, praise, and fervent gratitude for your temporal as well as spiritual mercies. Help us to remember your redeeming love and to renew our exercise of faith in him who died for our sins and who rose again for our justification.

We ask you, O Lord, to send forth your light to every part of our dark world and to shower down, especially on this nation, the abundance of your grace through the diligent and faithful ministry of your word among us. Purify every part of your professing church. Unite us in the bonds of a common faith, and teach us all to love one another.

Give success to every attempt to enlighten the ignorant, to relieve the poor, to comfort the afflicted, to deliver the oppressed from the oppressor, and to promote peace and good will among men. Pour into the hearts of all who know your truth a spirit of enlarged charity, and raise up many who shall go forth in your strength, both to multiply their deeds of goodness and to carry your gospel into all lands.

We offer these humble and earnest supplications in the name of Jesus Christ, our blessed and only Savior. Amen.

**Day 31—
Morning Prayer**

Almighty Lord, our God, you are the Creator of all things, the Judge of all men, and the merciful Father of all your creatures. We adore you for your great goodness in providing not only for our temporal necessities but also for the spiritual wants of our souls.

We thank you for your holy word, by which we are instructed in your will and are made aware of our salvation. We thank you for all the means of grace that you have appointed for our edification. We ask you to call our thoughts away from the activities of this present life to the consideration of those things that are eternal.

Grant, O Lord, that we may not neglect those great religious advantages that we possess in America. May we on Sunday attend reverently to the truths that we can hear and worship you with truly humble and contrite hearts. Prepare our minds to receive the seed, and do not allow us to give way to wandering thoughts and to an apathetic and worldly spirit. On Sunday may we remember that we are in the house of God, in whose service we are engaged, and it is your word that we hear.

And on those days when your gospel is preached and whenever we read your word, may we be so awed by the terrors of the Lord and so affected by the sense of your mercy, that we may take to heart those truths so that none of us may receive this grace of God in vain. And when we return from your house, dispose us all to consider our ways. Let us turn our thoughts to whatever has been improper within us during the past week, let us implore your mercy in our secret prayers, and let us read with care your holy scriptures.

O Lord, help us to consider how few are our days on earth and how soon we may be called to give an account of the privileges that we have enjoyed and of the talents committed to us. We have only a short and uncertain life between us and eternal happiness or misery. Let us now redeem the time, before the day of our death shall come and our sentence be sealed forever. Let us make haste to obey your voice. Let us be diligent in attempting to know your will and to understand the doctrines of your gospel.

To this end may your spirit enlighten and direct us. Guide us into all truth; save us from all ignorance, blindness, and hardness of heart; and preserve us from those delusions that are fatal to the soul. Let us not speak peace to ourselves when there is no peace, nor hope that we have an interest in Christ when we have not repented of our sins and have no true faith in his name. O Lord, produce in us sincere repentance. If we are still living in sin, we ask you to show us our danger. Make us to understand both our own sinfulness and your mercy, and lead us to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Bless, we implore you, the ministers of your gospel. Give great success in their labors. By the word that they shall deliver, may they awaken those who are yet dead in their sins. May they convince the wavering, establish the weak, comfort the feeble-minded, and raise up those who are fallen.

Hear us, O most merciful Lord, in our humble supplications for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

INDEX

A

Abraham, 166-167

absence from church, 64, 288

activities as prayer, 3-4

adoration, 88-91, 236

Advent, 287

aged, 298

anger, 151

anointing with oil, 118

answers to prayers, 130-134, 300

antiphons, 242

anxiety/fear, 151

apostles, 181

Apostles' Creed, 243

armed forces prayer, 296

awakening in mysticism, 221

B

BCP, *see* Book of Common Prayer, The

before worship prayer, 299

belief in God, 24-25

benediction, 276

Bernard of Clairvaux, 220

Bible

- contradictions, 129-130
- disagreement with, 127
- ethics, 37
- history, 36-37
- passages, 38
- story of creation, 37

birthdays, 298

Book of Common Prayer, The (BCP), 281

- aged, 298
- answers to prayers, 300
- armed forces, 296
- Baptism, 291
- before worship, 299
- birthdays, 298
- childcare, 298
- Christmas Day (December 25), 293
- civil service, 295
- Collect of the Day, 245
- colleges/schools, 296
- Compline, 240
- confession, 284-285
- confidence, 299
- Confirmation, 292
- Congress, 295
- courts/magistrates, 295
- deceased/departed, 292
- Easter Sunday, 293
- education, 294
- elections, 295
- epistles, 242
- evening prayer, 240, 299
- families, 297
- General Thanksgiving, The, 245-246
- Good Friday, 293
- Gospels, 242
- grace before meals, 300
- guidance, 298
- history of, 240
- Holy Eucharist, 285, 292
- Holy Thursday, 293
- Independence Day (July 4), 292
- Labor Day, 294
- leisure time, 296-297
- Lessons, The, 242-243
- local government, 295
- loved ones, 298
- Mission of the Church, 291
- morning prayer, 240-241
- Nation prayer, 291
- oppressed people, 297
- poor and neglected, 297
- Prayers, The, 244-245
- President of the United States, 295
- protection, 299
- Psalms, 241-242
- self-dedication, 299
- sick and infirmed, 294
- social justice, 293, 296
- St. Francis, 299
- state legislature, 295
- suffering for conscience, 296
- Sunday, 300
- Thanksgiving Day, 292
- unemployment, 296
- United States, 294
- young persons, 298
- see also* Episcopalian services

boredom while praying, 67-68, 123-124

C

calendars, 287

call to worship, 275

candles, 109-110

canticles, 243

Catholicism

- Lord's Prayer, 40
- missals, 281
- mysticism, 220
- Trinity, 50-51

Celtic Cross, 109

changes

- circumstances, 18-19
- God's will, 19-21
- self-knowledge, 16
- wisdom, 16-17

character/personality traits, 17

charismatic fellowships, 280

children

- caring prayer, 298
- praying with, 259-261

Christianity, 218-220

Christmas Day (December 25), 287, 293

church

- attendance, 64, 68-69
- calendars, 287
- community, 65-66
- hypocrites, 67

circumstances, changes, 18-19

civil service prayer, 295

clapping, 278

cleansing prayer, *see* confession

Collect of the Day (BCP), 245, 283

colleges/schools prayer, 296

Colossians 1:3-14, 212

commitment to Jesus, 162

Communion, 292

- Episcopalian, 285-286
- free church tradition services, 276-277
- Imitation of Christ, The, 228

community in prayer, 42, 65-66

Compline, 240

confession, 91-92

- Episcopalian, 284-285
- free church tradition services, 275
- humility, 204-205
- Jesus Prayer, 236
- original sin, 201-202
- ownership of actions, 200-201
- renewal, 203
- sharing, 203-204
- sins, 132, 198-199

confidence prayer, 299

Confirmation, 292

conscience, suffering for, 296

contemplation, 101-103

conversational prayers, 268-269

 children, 260

 talking with God, 5, 7, 12

courage/hope, 17, 210

courts/magistrates, 295

Cranmer, Thomas (Archbishop), 240

crucifix/cross, 108-109

D

daily prayer, 53-55

dancing, 278

dark night of the soul, 137-138, 221-222

deceased/departed, 292

deliverance, 61

denominations, *see* specific denominations

Dionysius the Areopagite, 220

disagreement with Bible passages, 127

disappointment, 151

discouragement, 139, 151

distractions while praying, 121-123

division in relationships, 184-185

doubt, 137-138, 177

dreams, 103-104

E

Easter, 287, 293

Eastern Orthodox Church, 237

editions of The Imitation of Christ, 231

education prayer, 294

ejaculatory prayer, 235

election prayer, 295

encounters with God, 166-167

Ephesians 3:14-21, 212

Epiphany, 287

Episcopalian services

 Collect of the Day, 283

 Great Thanksgiving, The, 286

 Holy Eucharist, 285-286

 Prayers of the People, 284

 services, 282-285

 Word of God, The, 283

see also Book of Common Prayer, The (BCP),

epistles, 242

ethics, 37

evening prayer, 83, 240, 299

experiencing God (transcendence), 13-14

F

failure, 176

faith, 23

 amount, 24, 26, 30

 God, 25

 healing, 117

 Jesus, 24-25

 materialism, 25

 suffering, 190-192

family prayer, 261-263, 297

fasting, 111

fatigue, 138-139

fear/anxiety, 173-174

 doubt, 137-138, 177

 failure, 176

 making of fool of oneself, 176, 177

 psalms, 151

 responsibility, 176

 self-knowledge, 179

focus while praying, 85, 121-123

food, 53-55

forgiveness, 14-15, 57-58, 186, 197

formality in prayer, 5-7

Francis of Assisi, 220

free church tradition services, 273-274, 282

 benediction, 276

 call to worship, 275

 clapping, 278

 Communion, 276-277

 dancing, 278

 hymn of praise, 275

 invocation, 275

 offering, 275-276

 prayer of confession, 275

 seeker-sensitive churches, 278-279

 sermons, 274

 speaking in tongues, 279-280

friends, 182-183

G

General Thanksgiving, The (BCP), 245-246

God

 absence of, 140-142

 belief in, 24-25

 building relationships, 8-9, 11-12, 43, 186

 conversing with, 5-7

 doubting, 137-138

 encounters, 166-167

 experiencing, 13-14, 151

 as Father, 43

 flexibility, 168-169

 immutability, 19-21

 kingdom, 162

 listening to, 5-6, 65-66, 74-75, 99-100

 submission, 165, 170

 trusting, 119

 will of, 19-21, 28, 48-49, 195

Good Friday prayer, 293

gospels, 160

 biographies, 158-159

 Lord's Prayer, 39

 prayer, 162-164

 reading, 162-163

 themes, 161-162

government offices, 295

grace before meals, 300

gratitude, *see* thanksgiving

Great Thanksgiving, The, 286

Gregorian Chant, 250-251

Groeschel, Benedict (Father), 222

group prayer, 265-267

 conversational prayer, 268

 locating, 271

 one-word prayers, 269-270

 silent prayer, 270

guidance/direction, 86, 151, 298

guilt, 14-15

H

hallowed name, 46-47

healing, 113

 anointing with oil, 118

 faith, 117

 laying on of hands, 118

 physical, 114-115

 psychological, 115-116

hearing, 107

Heaven, 45-46

Hebrew scriptures, 159

help for others, 162

Hesychasts, 220

high church, 282

Hildegard of Bingen, 220

Hilton, Walter, 220

Holy Eucharist, *see* Communion

Holy Spirit, 50-51

Holy Thursday prayer, 293

honesty, 26-27

hope/courage, 17, 210

humility

 confession, 204-205

 self-knowledge, 27-28

hymns, 252-255, 275

hypocrites in church, 67

I

icons, 110-111

illumination, 221

Imitation of Christ, The, 225

 Communion, 228

 editions, 231

 instructional value, 226-227

 interpretation, 228-229

 materialism, 227

 silence/solitude, 99-100, 229-231

incense, 110

Independence Day (July 4) prayer, 292

injustice, 151

insignificance, 151

intercession

 Jesus prayer, 236

 supplication, 96-97

interpretation of The Imitation of Christ, 228-229

intimacy of prayer, 263

invocation, 275

irritation while praying, 126-127

J

Jerusalem Cross, 109

Jesus Christ

 belief, 24-25

 commitment, 162

 gospels, 158-161

 Jesus prayer, 234-238

 Old and New Testaments, 38

 suffering, 194-195

 Trinity, 50-51

Job, 192-194

John of the Cross, 220, 222

Jonah, 189-190

journals, 78-79

joy, 151

Julian of Norwich, 220

Julilate, 242

K–L

Kempe, Margery, 220

Kempis, Thomas à, 225-227

kingdom of God, 47-48, 162

knowledge/wisdom, 209-210

Labor Day prayer, 294

Latin Cross, 109

Law of Moses, 159

laying on of hands, 118

Lectio Divina, 104-105

leisure time prayer, 296-297

Lent, 287

Lessons, The (BCP), 242-243

listening prayer, 5-6, 65-66, 74-75, 99-100

liturgical services, 273-274, 281-282

 calendars, 287

 returning after absence, 288

local government prayer, 295

locations for praying, 83-84

loneliness, 151

Lord's Prayer (Our Father)

 Catholicism, 40

 community, 42

 conclusion, 62

 deliverance, 61

 forgiveness, 57-58

 God the Father, 43

 gospels, 39

 hallowed name, 46-47

 Heaven, 45-46

 kingdom of God, 47-48

 Protestantism, 40

 survival, 53-55

 temptation/trials, 59-61

 trepasses, 56-57

love, 15-16, 162

loved ones prayer, 298

low church, 282

M

materialism/money, 25, 162, 227

meditation, 86, 100-101, 153

miracles, 18-19, 177-178

Missal prayer book, 281

Mission of the Church, 291

morning prayer, 82-83, 240-241

Moses, 173, 174

 Law of Moses, 159

 miracles, 177-178

 suffering, 175

music, 249, 256

 Gregorian Chant, 250-251

 hymns, 252-255

 praise choruses, 252

 spirituals, 251-252

mysticism, 217-218

 awakening, 221

 Catholicism, 220

 Christianity, 218-220

 dark night of the soul, 137-138, 221-222

 history of, 219-220

 illumination, 221

 Protestantism, 220

 purification/purgation, 221

 spiritual directors, 223

 Taoism, 218

 union, 222

N–O

Nation prayer, 291

New Testament

 Book of Common Prayer, The (BCP), 242

 Jesus Christ, 38

Nicene Creed, 283-284

noon hour prayer, 83

offerings

 free church tradition services, 275-276

 of oneself, 5

oil, anointing with, 118

Old Testament

 Book of Common Prayer, The (BCP), 242

 Jesus Christ, 38

one-word prayers, 269-270

oppressed people prayer, 297

original sin, 201-202

Our Father, *see* Lord's Prayer

P

patience, 29-30, 131-132, 151

Paul the Apostle, 220

Pentecost, 287

Pentecostal, 279

personality traits/character, 17

petition, supplication, 94-96

Philippians 1:3-11, 212

physical healing, 114-115

poor/neglected prayer, 297

posture, 85

power/strength, 210-211

praise choruses, 252

prayers

 answers, 130-134, 300

 boredom, 67-68, 123-124

 daily life/heart, 237

 distractions, 121-123

 irritation, 126-127

 lists, 76, 125-126

 for others, 207-208

 partners, 263

 Prayers, The, 244-245

 Prayers of the People, 284

 restlessness, 125

 scheduling, 81-82

President of the United States, 295

protection prayer, 299

Protestantism

 Lord's Prayer, 40

 mysticism, 220

Psalm Bay Book, The, 252

psalms, 7-8, 13-16, 36-37, 198-199

 Book of Common Prayer, The (BCP), 241-242

 honesty of, 154-155

 meditation, 86, 100-101, 153

 origin, 147-149

 praying, 153-154

 reading, 149-150

 themes, 149

- topics, 151-152

- weekly, 152-153

psychological healing, 115-116

purification/purgation, 221

R

rational prayer, 73-74

reassurance, 151

relationships, 44

- division, 184-185

- forgiveness, 14-15, 57-58, 186

- friends, 182-183

- with God, 8-9, 11-12, 151, 186

- reconciliation, 181-185

- relatives, 182-183

- spouses, 183

renewal after confession, 203

repetition in prayer, 211

responsibility, fear of, 176

restlessness while praying, 125

returning to church, 288

Rolle, Richard, 220

S

safety/security, 151

scheduling prayer, 81-82

schools/colleges prayer, 296

seeker-sensitive churches, 278-279

self-dedication prayer, 299

self-knowledge, 16

- fear, 179

- help, 4

- honesty, 26-27

- humility, 27-28

senses in worship, 286

- engaging, 107-108

- fasting, 111

- sight, 109-111

- smell, 110

- touch, 107-109

Serenity Prayer, 21

sermons, 274

services

- Episcopalian, 282-285

- free church tradition, 273-274, 282

- benediction, 276

- call to worship, 275

- clapping, 278

- Communion, 276-277

- dancing, 278

- hymn of praise, 275

- invocation, 275

- offering, 275-276

- prayer of confession, 275

- seeker-sensitive churches, 278-279

- sermons, 274

- speaking in tongues, 279-280

- high church, 282

- liturgical, 273-274, 281-282

- low church, 282

- music, 249, 256

- Gregorian Chant, 250-251

- hymns, 252-255

- praise choruses, 252

- spirituals, 251-252

sharing confession, 203-204

short prayer, 77

sick and infirmed/sickness, 151, 294

sight, 107, 109-111

silence/solitude, 67, 99-100, 229-231, 270

singing prayer

- Gregorian Chant, 250-251

- hymns, 252-255

- music, 249, 256

- praise choruses, 252

- spirituals, 251-252

sins, 197

- acknowledging, 132, 139

- confession, 198-199

- humility, 204-205

- original sin, 201-202

- ownership of actions, 200-201

- renewal, 203

- sharing, 203-204

- temptation/trials, 59-61

- trespasses, 56-57

small groups, 265-267

- conversational prayer, 268-269

- locating, 271

- one-word prayers, 269-270

- silent prayer, 270

smell, 107, 110

social justice prayer, 293, 296

sorrow/grief, 151

speaking in tongues, 279-280

spiritual directors, 223

spirituals, 251-252

spouses

- praying with, 263

- relationships, 183

St. Francis, 299

state legislature prayer, 295

strength/power, 210-211

suffering, 189-190

- in Bible, 37

- faith, 190-192

- Jesus, 194-195

- Job, 192-194

- Moses, 175

suffrages, 244

Sunday prayer, 300

supplication, 94-97

T

Taoism, 218

taste, 107

temptation/trials, 59-61

thanksgiving, 12-13, 93-94, 151, 209, 236, 292

therapeutic prayer, 4

Theresa of Avila, 220, 222

tithes, *see* offerings

touch, 107-109

trespasses, 56-57

Trinity, 50-51

trouble, 152

trusting God, 119

U

Underhill, Evelyn, 222

unemployment, 296

union with God, 222

United States, 294-295

V–Z

venite, 242

verbal prayer, 75-76

Way of the Pilgrim, The, 234-235

weakness, 152

will of God, 19, 28, 195

- changes, 20-21

- flexibility, 168-169

- submitting to, 48-49, 165, 170

wisdom/knowledge, 16-17, 209-210

wishes, 4

Word of God, The, 283

work as prayer, 3-4

worship

- five senses, 286

- returning after an absence, 288

young persons prayer, 298

The Complete Idiot's Reference Card

Prayers

1. Give me, most gracious Lord, singleness of heart, that in every word, thought, and deed I may put you first, and in all humility and earnestness seek to serve you, and you only.
2. Send me, O Lord, I humbly ask, good success this day. Teach me when to speak and when to be silent; when to act and when to refrain from action; and in all the details of daily life, to do your will on earth as it is done in heaven.
3. Calm me, O God, when my spirit is feverish and hot. Place your cool hand upon my head; breathe the spirit of your calm through my heart. May I know that around my restlessness, you are rest.
4. Lord God Almighty, look on those to whom the world is dark; send a ray of light to gladden the lonely and sad-hearted, the forsaken and forgotten, the sinful and miserable; and teach me how to comfort them with the comfort you have given me.
5. Gracious God, let me behold the rainbow of hope on the dark stormclouds that brood over my life; and may I rest confidently on that covenant, ordered and sure, which was sealed by the precious blood of Christ.
6. Heavenly Father, I know that all things are working together for my good; but help me to wait patiently and work diligently, though the waiting be long and the toil hard.
7. Heavenly Father, I thank you for the trials and pains that are ever working for my good and that are making me a partaker of your holiness. May I receive the abundance of your grace and reign in life here and hereafter.
8. Heavenly Father, make me like Jesus, who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor, that many through his poverty might be made rich. Help me to deny myself, so as to give joy and comfort to those less favored than I am; and

Prayers (continued)

may I learn how much more blessed it is to give than to receive.

9. Withdraw my soul, I pray, from the absorbing delight of this world, with its petty aims and ideals, and open my eyes to the high joys of my inheritance in Christ.

10. Lord Jesus, teach me to see the good even in bad things; to discern the silver edge of lowering clouds; and to believe in your love, which is conducting me safely and by a right way to my home.

11. Most gracious God, I thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, pure as dew, cleansing as fire, tender and refreshing as the breath of spring. O blessed Trinity, ever engaged in giving your choice things to us, your unworthy children, accept my gratitude.

12. Make me, O Lord, to know the hope of your calling, the riches of the glory of your inheritance in the saints, and the exceeding greatness of your power toward those who believe. Above all,

grant me the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of yourself.

13. Heavenly Father! Forgive my many sins, ignorances, and failures and cleanse me from all sin for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Accept me graciously, and love me freely. May I hate sin as you do, and may your grace sink deeper into my heart, purifying the springs of thought and action.

14. Keep me, Heavenly Father, as the apple of your eye; defend me by your mighty power; hide me secretly in your pavilion from the fiery darts of the wicked one; and may the Holy Spirit so fill me with Christ my Lord that there may be no room for anything inconsistent with love.

15. You are light, and in you is no darkness at all. I thank you for eyes to see, a heart to love, and a nature to enjoy your good and perfect gifts. I worship you, O Father of lights, in whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning. Enlighten my darkness, I pray!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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