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What Does the Bible Say About Prayer?

Prayer is not a mysterious practice reserved only for clergy and the religiously devout. Prayer is simply communicating with God—listening and talking to him. Believers can pray from the heart, freely, spontaneously, and in their own words.

If prayer is a difficult area for you, learn these basic principles of prayer and how to apply them in your life.

The Bible has a lot to say about prayer. The first mention of prayer is in Genesis 4:26: "And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then men began to call on the name of the LORD." (NKJV)

What Is the Correct Posture for Prayer?

There is no correct or certain posture for prayer. In the Bible people prayed on their knees (1 Kings 8:54), bowing (Exodus 4:31), on their faces before God (2 Chronicles 20:18; Matthew 26:39), and standing (1 Kings 8:22). You may pray with your eyes opened or closed, quietly or out loud—however you are most comfortable and least distracted.

Should I Use Eloquent Words?

Your prayers need not be wordy or impressive in speech:

"When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered only by repeating their words again and again." (Matthew 6:7, NLT)

Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:2, NIV)

Why Should I Pray?

Prayer develops our relationship with God. If we never speak to our families or never listen to anything they might have to say to us, our relationships will quickly deteriorate.

It is the same way with God. Prayer—communicating with God—helps us grow closer and more intimately connected with God.

I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure, just as gold and silver are refined and purified by fire. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'These are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.' " (Zechariah 13:9, NLT)

But if you stay joined to me and my words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! (John 15:7, NLT)

The Lord instructed us to pray. One of the simplest reasons to spend time in prayer is because the Lord taught us to pray. Obedience to God is a natural by-product of discipleship.

"Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak!" (Matthew 26:41, NLT)

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. (Luke 18:1, NIV)

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. (Ephesians 6:18, NIV)

What If I Don't Know How to Pray?

The Holy Spirit will help you in prayer when you don't know how to pray:

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. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8:26-27, NIV)

Are There Requirements for Successful Prayer?

The Bible establishes a few requirements for successful prayer:

A humble heart

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV)

Wholeheartedness

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13, NIV)

Faith

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

(Mark 11:24, NIV)

Righteousness

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. (James 5:16, NIV)

Obedience

And we will receive whatever we request because we obey him and do the things that please him. (1 John 3:22, NLT)

Does God Hear and Answer Prayer?

God hears and answers our prayers. Here are examples from the Bible.

The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. (Psalm 34:17, NIV)

He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. (Psalm 91:15, NIV)

See Also:

1 Samuel 1:27

Psalm 4:3

Psalm 18:6

Proverbs 15:29

Isaiah 58:9

Luke 11:9

Why Are Some Prayers Not Answered?

Sometimes our prayers are not answered. The Bible gives several reasons or causes for failure in prayer:

Disobedience - Deuteronomy 1:45; 1 Samuel 14:37

Secret Sin - Psalm 66:18

Indifference - Proverbs 1:28

Neglect of mercy - Proverbs 21:13

Despising the Law - Proverbs 28:9

Iniquity - Isaiah 59:2; Micah 3:4

Stubbornness - Zechariah 7:13

Instability or Doubt - James 1:6-7

Self-indulgence - James 4:3

Should I Pray Alone or with Others?

God wants us to pray together with other believers:

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. (Matthew 18:19, NIV)

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. (Luke 1:10, NIV)

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:14, NIV)

God also wants us to pray alone and in secret:

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. (Matthew 6:6, NIV)

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, NIV)

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5:15-16, NIV)

Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12, NKJV)

Journal your prayers.

But don't just journal requests. Write out questions, heartaches and struggles. Don't forget to journal praises, too. Be creative. Put your prayers into poems. Write a letter to God. Then go back and read your journal entries in a week or a month. There's a good chance you'll be reminded of how God has answered your prayers. And when you're feeling down, your past praises remind you of God's goodness and love for you.

2. Take a prayer walk.

Hike in a forest preserve and praise God for his beautiful creation. Walk around your neighborhood and pray for the family in each home you pass. Or take a "prayer walk" on the sidewalk around your school.

4. Pray Scripture.

Let's say that during your Bible reading time you come across 1 Peter 5:7: "God cares for you, so turn all your worries over to him" (CEV). Turn that verse into a prayer: "Lord, I'm going to trust you and give you all my worries. I know you will take care of me." Do this with Scriptures that express needs and also with those that praise or thank God. Hey, why not personalize the Lord's Prayer? Take each sentence or phrase from this well-known prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and write it in a way that applies directly to your life.

5. Pray about the news.

When you read or hear about a troubling issue, pray for the people involved. Pray for politicians and other national and community leaders who make the news.

6. Be quiet.

If prayer is a conversation, then you also need to listen in silence. And silence means getting away from distractions like music and TV. A quiet, little-used corner at the library could be the best place. As you listen, don't expect to hear a voice. But do expect God to tug at your heart, move your conscience, or help you realize something you need to do or change.

7. Keep a prayer on your lips.

Dozens of thoughts pass through your mind daily. You daydream. You may think bad or gossipy thoughts. Turn those daydreams and not-so-great thoughts into prayers. Ask God to help a person hurt by gossip. Ask him to forgive you for thoughts that take your mind places it shouldn't go. Turn daydreams and other passing thoughts into moments to recognize God's presence in your life. As you learn to keep a prayer on your lips, you'll come a little closer to understanding what it means to "pray continually" (NIV).

Breath Prayer: Practice

Breath prayer is a short petition, repeated in the space of one inhalation-exhalation cycle, that acknowledges the natures of both the Lord and the petitioner.

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight and close your eyes.
2. Pay attention to your breathing. Focus on breathing will probably exaggerate the intake and output a little. Wait until a comfortable rhythm has returned.
3. Ask Jesus to be present, to lead, to guide, and to protect. Invite him to draw you into the community of the Trinity.
4. Wait silently until you feel ready to begin praying.
5. When you are ready, pray in your breathing rhythm.

Inhale: Lord, Jesus Christ,

Pause: Son of God,

Exhale: have mercy on me, a sinner.

6. Use a prayer rope, touching one knot or bead for each repetition. A typical prayer rope is strung with a sequence of one large bead to every ten small ones. The small beads remind one to focus on the prayer. The large one allows for a pause. You may simply touch each of your fingers in succession. Through the first ten repetitions, you might pray aloud, considering the words of the prayer. As distractions arise, gently return your concentration to the words. (Suggestions for dealing with distractions can be found under Lectio Divina/Practice/4.)

7. When you reach the large bead on the prayer rope or your tenth finger, pause. With the first pause you might converse with the Lord about any sin that has risen to your mind. You might tell him about distractions.

8. Begin the next ten when you are ready, praying silently, attending to the flow of air and how it merges with the words. Perhaps on the second pause, a person or situation may come to mind for whom you wish to pray, "have mercy." Perhaps "on me" will shift to "on us." Maybe you will appropriate the significance of the words to a particular concern of your own, or the plea for mercy will become a praise for mercy obtained. Take time to share these with God.

9. As you begin the next ten repetitions, listen for the Lord speaking in your heart. Perhaps on the next rest, you will pause to let his words flow.

10. As the prayer repetitions begin to move from your head to your heart, you may feel a desire to still even the echo of the words and to sit quietly with the Lord in peace. When you are ready, you may begin the prayer again or move on to other disciplines of the day.

11. When the silence is gathered and before you move on to the day's tasks, write down anything that particularly stood out to you during your meditation. It may be that the prayer returns to you throughout the day with this nuance. The next time you practice the breath prayer, perhaps this will function as a starting point in your move to stillness.

12. Exercises other than breathing may also provide a physical rhythm that can fuse with the repetition of the prayer. You may wish to try an uninterrupted walk or bicycle ride in a quiet place, reciting each phrase of your prayer with every step or pedal-pump that you take.

13. Other short petitions in Scripture or some personal breath prayer may be used instead of the Jesus Prayer, for example "Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you" (2 Chr 14:1) or "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on me" (John 1:29). As you regularly practice breath prayer, it will eventually enter into other daily activities like a song you cannot get out of your head. If the repetition becomes annoying or void of meaning, return with intention to the words, retaking them as a prayer for the moment.

Liturgical Prayer: Practice

Liturgical prayer is ritual verbal praise, confession, thanksgiving, and/or petition that we offer to God, often in the company of other pray-ers.

1. Choose a liturgical prayer to practice. Two prayers from the Book of Common Prayer are printed here.¹⁴ They are known as "suffrages" or short intercessory prayers that are usually spoken in a

series. You may be aware of similar, often repeated prayers from your church. Some churches, for example, lay out Psalms at the back of their hymnals for antiphonal reading. Other collections of prayers are listed in the Study Further section below.

Evening Prayer

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.

Evening Prayer

That this evening may be holy, good, and peaceful,
We entreat you, O Lord.
That your holy angels may lead us in paths of peace and goodwill,
We entreat you, O Lord.
That we may be pardoned and forgiven for our sins and offenses,
We entreat you, O Lord.
That there may be peace to your Church and to the whole world,
We entreat you, O Lord.
That we may depart this life in your faith and fear, and not be condemned before the great judgment seat of Christ,
We entreat you, O Lord.
That we may be bound together by your Holy Spirit in the communion of all your saints, entrusting one another and all our life to Christ,
We entreat you, O Lord.

2. Read the words of the written prayer to yourself slowly. Do not skim. Especially if you are familiar with the prayer, discipline yourself to listen to it anew. Avoid “heap[ing] up empty phrases” in your mind (Matt 6:7 RSV). If you do not feel like praying or know what to pray, permit the words to speak for you. Allow yourself to own the prayer. Let the words or phrases express the yearnings of your own heart, but do not concern yourself if they seem irrelevant to your immediate needs. Hear the whole truth that you are speaking to God.

3. Mouth the prayer to yourself or whisper it softly. Listen for the words that reach beyond your own requests to the life of the community of which you are a part. Consider others on whose behalf you speak these words of praise, confession, thanksgiving, or petition.

4. Pray the prayer out loud. Keep a deliberate pace. Resist the temptation to race or to over-focus on accurate intonation and correct emphasis. Embrace your stutters and mispronunciations as part of

the music you bring before the Lord. Join your voice with those throughout the ages and around the world who have prayed this prayer.

5. Pause in silence as the ring of the prayer settles. Listen to the echoes in the room or in your mind.
6. Repeat the prayer again. This time focus on the Lord before whom you offer these words. Some people avoid such prayers because they suspect that lack of spontaneity means they are faking it before God, treating him as less than the Almighty. If you feel this way, consider your participation in the ritual of other ceremonies (baptism, communion, and weddings, for example). When you choose to adopt the forms of a ceremony as your own, you intentionally join your voice with those of the saints around you and who have gone before you. You consent to a formality that has come to signal the awesome presence of the Most High. So, too, can liturgical prayer signal the grandeur of the King to whose throne you draw near together.
7. At the “Amen,” pause again to listen.
8. Write down the aspect(s) of the prayer or the praying that spoke for you or your community today or share your insights with a spiritual friend or small group.
9. Notice the words of the prayer returning to you throughout the day or later on when a situation arises to which they pertain

Imagination Prayer: Practice

Imagination prayer is shared experience with Jesus that is based on stories of Jesus from the Gospels and that draws on our use of empathy and visualization.

1. Pick an action scene from the gospels as a foundation for your prayer. In other words, choose a story in which Jesus is doing something rather than teaching something. Some possible stories include:

Jesus Heals Two Blind Men (Matt 9:27–31)

Jesus Walks on Water (Matt 14:22–43)

Jesus Heals Jairus’ Daughter and the Bleeding Woman (Mark 5:21–43)

A Woman Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9)

Jesus’ Heals in Simon’s House (Luke 4:37–41)

Jesus Goes to the Cross (Luke 23:26–30)

Jesus Raises Lazarus (John 11:28–44)

Thomas Believes Jesus Is Alive (John 20:24–29)

2. Read the passage several times. Perhaps once you’ll read slowly as if for the first time. Another time through, maybe reading it aloud will help you get the feeling of the whole scene.
3. Invite the Lord to be present with you, to guide and protect as you seek to be with him.

4. Now quiet yourself before God. Some people use techniques like body awareness and breathing to still themselves.

5. Let your imagination work on the gospel scene. Imagine the location. In other words, are you by a lake or on a mountain? What time of day is it? See the people involved. Who is there with Jesus? City folk, farmers, shepherds, the disciples, women, Pharisees, crowds? How do your feet feel? What do you bump into, touch with your hands? What do you smell? What do you taste? What is being said by Jesus and others? What emotions might be in the hearts of various people? What actions are taken by Jesus and others?

6. Put yourself at the scene. Take the place of one of the characters and see the scene through the eyes of that person. What is he or she feeling? Thinking? Doing?

7. Now “freeze frame.” Stay with a particular picture involving yourself and Jesus. Talk to him and listen to what he says to you. Spend time in his presence. Allow your imagination to serve your faith. Jesus is not here the way you imagine him, but he most assuredly is with you, seeing you, listening to you, speaking to you.

8. Do you come away from the scene with Jesus frustrated, empty, worried, content, eager? Are these actually reflections of how you feel about your daily, non-imagined walk with Jesus or about a particular circumstance with which you want him to be involved? When you consider what happens after your scene, as recorded in Scripture, does that change how you think about your encounter?

9 Write down what you have heard, what happened, what you said, and/or what the theme seemed to be, or share this with your small group, prayer partner, or spiritual friend.

John Wesley's Teaching on Praying Continually

By [Karen Barber](#) | June 28, 2011

How do you pray continually as it says in the Bible verse in I Thessalonians 5:17? Here is very practical advice from John Wesley who was the founder of the Methodist Church.



God's command to “pray without ceasing” is founded on the necessity we have of his grace to preserve the life of God in the soul, which can no more subsist one moment without it, than the body can without air.

Whether we think of; or speak to, God, whether we act or suffer for him, all is prayer, when we have no other object than his love, and the desire of pleasing him.

All that a Christian does, even in eating and sleeping, is prayer, when it is done in simplicity, according to the order of God, without either adding to or diminishing from it by his own choice.

Prayer continues in the desire of the heart, though the understanding be employed on outward things.

In souls filled with love, the desire to please God is a continual prayer.

As the furious hate which the devil bears us is termed the roaring of a lion, so our vehement love may be termed crying after God.

God only requires of his adult children, that their hearts be truly purified, and that they offer him continually the wishes and vows that naturally spring from perfect love. For these desires, being the genuine fruits of love, are the most perfect prayers that can spring from it.

From [A Plain Account of Christian Perfection](#), as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, from the year 1725, to the year 1777.