



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

HOW TO PRAY:
TRANSFORMING
YOUR LIFE
THROUGH A HEART
FOCUSED ON GOD



MATT THIBAUT

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INTRODUCTION

Why is prayer so exciting — or rather, why should it be? Well, for starters, God actually responds to our prayers. Just sit with me in the reality that in God's infinite wisdom and sovereign plan, over and over again in the Scriptures, we're encouraged to pray because somehow...God responds to our prayers. What does the Bible say about praying is clear: it is a direct line to the Creator of the universe.

The fact that the words we speak to God somehow matter in his big plan is remarkable. Think about it: is there any other means of grace that God has given to man that can say the same? Christians are instructed by God to do many things — things like reading the Bible, intentionally investing in other people, giving of ourselves in service to him. And when we walk in obedience in any of these areas, we can experience God's blessing and sense his divine presence guiding and empowering us. But prayer is the only means of grace that he has given where he is called into action and we get to see his power on display. Understanding the purpose of prayer in the Christian life is essential because it is through this communion that we get to see God move.

But this reality makes for an even sadder one — namely, that prayer is easy to get excited about, but hard to do. Coming off the mountain of getting to see the God of the universe move, in our day-to-day lives, prayer can sometimes seem unimportant, unnecessary, and even boring. If you're like me, I can get really excited about the thought and potential of prayer, but then struggle with how to pray consistently.

In considering why prayer can be such a struggle, we can call out a few potential prayer blockers that contribute to the problem. Maybe it's due to the fast-paced way of life we live in our twenty-first-century and first-world

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country. Or perhaps it's because we don't always get the instant positive feedback from prayer that we do from other spiritual activity. Or maybe it's just due to the fact that prayer can feel like we're talking to ourselves and no one else hears. This is often when we must learn how to pray when you don't feel like it, pushing through the silence. But at the heart of the issue, in pretty much every case, where there is prayerlessness there is an underlying root of unbelief. Prayerlessness is akin to faithlessness.

So, pretty encouraging, right? Given the fact that we can agree that we can all afford to grow in prayer, the question is, "what do we do now?" The intent of this field guide is to build your faith in the God who answers prayers. Along the way I want to help bolster your prayer life by providing a few practical tips on how to pray effectively according to the Bible. Then I want to show you one of the best-kept secrets about how to develop a deeper prayer life that nobody is talking about. That's the roadmap and the desired final destination. Ready? Before we get going toward that end though, we first need to better understand what it is that God is calling us to, and what makes prayer so difficult to do.

1

THE HARDEST COMMAND TO OBEY

Prayer is exciting because God responds to our prayers, but it's also thrilling because it's the place where we meet with God. Moses used to speak to God face-to-face, and Joshua "would not depart from the tent" where he would meet with God (Ex. 33:11). In the same way for us today, we get to enter the throne room of heaven and speak with the Commander of the Lord's army. And yet, with all the thrill and weightiness that God intends for it, prayer continues to be the weakest link of the faith of so many in the church today.

So in trying to unravel the mystery of the difficulty of prayer, let's ask and answer a few questions to get to the bottom of why this is the case for so many of us.

1. What is prayer?

With all the excitement about the potential of prayer, it's important to first ask, "What is it?" To cut to the chase, prayer in its most basic sense is simply *talking with God*. As one Reformer stated, "Prayer is nothing else than the opening up of our heart before God."¹ This opening up in communication to God may involve adoration of God for who he is, thanksgiving to God for his provision and blessing in our lives, confession of sins to God for forgiveness, and the plea of supplication for God's help — whether by way of his strength or comfort. Altogether, it could easily be argued that prayer is the simplest of all the intended rhythms of grace for our lives as Christians.

Having this as a basic definition to help our understanding of how to pray, it's important to know that God's will is in fact for us to pray — and to pray often. He doesn't want us to pray on occasion every now and then, when

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we feel like it, or when we're really in a pinch. But God actually wants us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:18). He desires ongoing communication with those he has made in his image, namely us. God wants us to pray.

2. What does it mean to pray without ceasing?

Seeing that verse "pray without ceasing" is the spiritual equivalent of a cold plunge on a cool day — it's a shock to the system! But what does it mean to pray without ceasing? If you've ever attempted to pray without stopping, you have probably found yourself discouraged and ready to quit by noon. Especially while doing other things, it doesn't take long for a song to pop into your mind, a distraction to draw your thinking elsewhere, and pretty soon to disengage from any remote resemblance of prayer. Multitasking is after all, a myth (check the science, it's true!). Within the composition of how God has made us, we can really only do one thing at a time. Some may be skilled at bouncing back and forth between two things, but in all the wonderful simplicity of how we humans are made, we can do but one thing at a time. That being the case, how do we pray while having a conversation, sending an email, or focusing on another necessary task at hand? Either we're all constantly failing and the command cannot even remotely be fulfilled — or, we're misunderstanding the intent of what God said.

It can be reasoned by common sense and by studying the life of Jesus that, while one cannot be in verbal communication with God at all times, it is possible to maintain a disposition of prayer in all settings and throughout the entirety of a day. To state it in the negative, there is no time, place, or setting where prayer is not appropriate. It would seem that the command is perhaps less about the perpetual activity of prayer and more about a pervasive attitude of prayer. Simply put, to pray without ceasing is to develop a disposition and instinct of prayer.

One of the most amazing animal instincts is the migration of monarch butterflies. These tiny creatures undertake a mind-blowing journey that spans up to 3,000 miles from Canada and the U.S. to their wintering grounds in Mexico. What makes this instinct even more incredible is that this migration is not just a single generation's effort, but it often spans multiple generations. These butterflies will use a combination of

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environmental cues such as the position of the sun and the Earth's magnetic field to navigate this incredible journey. And how do they do it? Through the innate instincts the Creator has put within them.

In the same way, God wants to see us develop a regular disposition and innate instinct of prayer. This kind of instinctive, unceasing prayer looks like a constant posture of being ready and willing to pray at *any time* in *any place* about *anything*.

Any Time. While David prayed in the mornings (Ps. 5:3), Daniel prayed at each meal (Dan. 6:10). Peter and John prayed in the afternoon (Acts 3:1), the psalmist prayed at midnight (Ps. 119:62). Jesus is found praying at any time of day and in many different situations (Luke 6:12–13). The motivation for unceasing prayer is that God is always working and never clocks out from being God. What that means dear friend, is that you can pray any time! When you first wake up, or when you're in a meeting at work (like Nehemiah, Neh. 2:4–5). If you can't sleep, pray! If you feel happy, pray! If you're anxious, alone, or sad — pray! Any time, night or day, our Heavenly Father is ready to hear our prayers. This is how we begin growing in intimacy with God through prayer.

Any Place. By surveying a few biblical examples, we also find that unceasing prayer necessitates there being no set place of prayer. Yes, many prayed in the temple, and God did declare that his house shall be “a house of prayer” (Is 56:7–8). Further, the church is commanded to pray corporately, as seen in the original model of gathering for “the prayers” (Acts 2:42). But the Scriptures also record a plethora of prayers that happen out and about as well. Isaac prayed in the wilderness (Gen. 24:63). David prayed in the city (2 Sam. 2:1–7). Nehemiah prayed in the king's royal palace when presenting a controversial request before the king that could have had massive ramifications on life or death: “he prayed to God and said to the king” (Neh. 2:4–5). And let's not forget the final twenty-four hours of Jesus' earthly life where he prayed in a garden (Matt. 26:36–56) and while hanging on the cross (Luke 23:34). Personally, some of my absolute best times of prayer have been drenched in sweat while hiking a steep mountain, and leaning into prayer. Praise the Lord there's reception to reach heaven from any place!

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These verses teach more than just the reality that prayer *can* happen anywhere — they teach that prayer *should* happen everywhere. In fact, it might be said that prayer must happen everywhere if the heart of God in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 is to be carried out.

Anything. Finally, unceasing prayer means that the scope and scale of the subjects of our prayers are truly boundless. Peter tells us to cast our anxieties upon the Lord (implied: “whatever they are”) because he cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). Unceasing prayer means that there shouldn’t be a superficial distinction between sacred and secular, but that even the ordinary things of our lives can be subjects of our prayer. The Apostle John prays for a person’s physical illness (3 John 1:2). Paul prays for his travel plans and for a thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:8). Daniel prayed for Jerusalem (Dan. 9:19). Jesus prayed before the final Passover feast with his men and for much, much more! It would seem the only constraint or caveat to wide-ranging prayer is to pray in a way that doesn’t directly offend or contradict God. This is perhaps what Jesus meant when he started the exemplary prayer for the disciples: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is heaven” (Matt. 6:10). There’s even variety in how we pray for others, as seen in Paul’s exhortation to Timothy “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people” (1 Tim. 2:1). When we pray in a way that aligns with God’s Word, we are freed to pray about anything and everything under the sun.

This is how God wants us to pray. To have an attitude, a disposition, and instinct to talk with him at any time, in any place, about anything.

Gaining a clearer understanding of God’s intent for us to pray means that now there are no more excuses. We can’t hide behind the excuse that it’s too complex, that it’s too outdated, or that I’m not good enough to pray. Some of us may resonate with the words of Psalm 34:6: “This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him.” And maybe that’s how it needs to start for you. Regardless of who you are and what you’ve done, you can pray. And the good news is that while the task of pursuing a praying life seems tall, it is possible with his help, especially as we realize the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

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3. How does prayer move God?

Having gained a basic understanding that prayer is simply talking with God, and how he wants us to move toward prayer as an instinct in our lives, we now must consider the difference in the quality or effectiveness of prayers. In other words, which kinds of prayers *really work*, and *from whom*? James indicates that the prayer of a “righteous man” avails — or accomplishes — much (James 5:16). He also says that you ask and don’t get because you don’t ask in faith (James 4:3–5). Jesus said that even a little faith is enough to move mountains with God (Matt. 17:20). Yet in the same verse he questions if he’ll find faith on earth when he returns. These verses should reveal to us that there is a great difference between prayers which are apathetic, half-hearted, and selfish in nature and those that are effective and powerful. If we’re not careful, prayer can drift from its intention of being the expression of a relationship between God and man to a dead and dutiful religion. And let’s agree together right now — nobody wants more religion! If we’re not careful, prayer can drift from something centered on God’s will, God’s glory, and God’s kingdom purposes to something centered on my wants, my glory, and my purposes.

The kind of prayer that God wants from us and the kind of prayer that moves God is powerful prayer based on intimacy of relationship with God that centers on him. It’s in this same line of thought that the psalmist compels us to “seek God’s face” (Ps. 27:8). When Jesus gave the disciples the model of prayer, he told them to begin by hallowing God’s name, and then to pray for the advancement of God’s kingdom according to God’s will. The recipe for powerful prayer according to Jesus is to recognize God’s fame, to know God’s will, and to seek God’s purposes for his kingdom — all of which require a relationship with God. If God is a freight train and we’re a passenger, we want our prayers to be in line with where his powerful force is headed! Powerful prayer is prayer that joins in with God’s will and God’s work. There are many Scriptures on the power of prayer that confirm this alignment.

What we’re after is the kind of prayer that is pleasing to God! We should want our prayers to be effective in a way that shakes the heavens and moves earth — prayer that moves our hearts in powerful ways, and that

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affects the communities in which we live, a kind of prayer that is not just a prescription, but filled with power from on high.

With that vision for what prayer is and what powerful prayer looks like, I want to circle back to this question: “Why is prayer so hard?”

4. Why is prayer so hard?

Given the exciting proposition of what prayer can accomplish when aligned with God’s will, this conundrum should have us wondering: *why is prayer one of the hardest commands to obey?* The three simple words of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 aren’t even hard to understand. To make matters worse, the act of praying is so easy that my four-year-old can do it beautifully. But in everyday life, carrying out a spirit of prayer without ceasing is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to do.

And while I’m sure that every age has had claims to having it the hardest for one reason or another, there are likewise extenuating temptations that are unique to this generation in this time and place. Consider all that is working against the development of a steady rhythm of prayer. Thanks to technological advances and American capitalism that rewards hustle and hurry, the pace of life is Mach speed. Hard work, hustle, and hurry are generally rewarded with money, recognition, and further opportunity — creating a land of opportunity, but also a land of workaholics. We’ve become so addicted to work, that for many, productivity and efficiency have become the new dopamine drop that they’re chasing. Rather than slow, long-term projects, everyone is chasing something new, fast, innovative — something with instant feedback. Society is progressive and aggressive. The workplace is about resumes and credentials, both what you know and more importantly, who you know.

Now, take our cultural context and place within it the practice of slow, prolonged, contemplative, meditative prayer. Can you say: *square peg, round hole?* This is often why we face the challenge of overcoming distractions during prayer.

Yet, to consider the possibility of abandoning prayer due to our unique cultural woes — or even to merely minimize it — would be like stabbing a hole in the final rescue raft of a sinking ship. It is in the fury of a fast-paced

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culture that Christians need more times of slowing down, not less. We need more solitude and quiet, not less. We need more prayer, not less. It was Martin Luther who said, “I have so much to do today, I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” This speaks to the importance of silence and solitude in prayer.

Many wander from a close walk with Christ for lack of prayer. For some, it is because they simply don’t know how to pray, and perhaps were never taught. Others know how to pray, but they don’t have the desire to do so. Still others desire to pray, and for a season do — but then, in time, they are drawn away by competing desires. This tragic scenario, which every Christian must be careful not to fall into, may happen due to distraction, deconstruction, or even boredom with the lack of results. Perhaps this is why H. McGregor said, “I would rather train twenty men to pray than a thousand to preach, a minister’s highest mission ought to be to teach his people to pray.” It would seem that if the enemy can get Christians to neglect prayer, the rest of the deconstruction will take care of itself.

So, to help us continue to pursue greater depths and consistency in prayer, I believe these next ten tips will greatly help any Christian who wants to keep their walk with the Lord vibrant and pursue a greater life of prayer.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Take an honest assessment of your prayer life. In what ways can you grow in fostering a deeper relationship with God through prayer?
2. What are some practical ways that you can incorporate prayer into your daily life so that you are obeying God’s command to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:18)?
3. How does knowing that God uses our prayer to change things affect your motivation to pray?

2

TEN HANDLES TOWARD PERSISTENT, POWERFUL PRAYER

With the Everest-sized challenge of being called to an unceasing, instinctive kind of prayer, one can't help but feel somewhat humbled. Granted, it's a paradoxical pursuit from the start, such that to say one has "arrived" in their prayer life immediately exposes the fact that this individual is far from arriving in their prayer life! For most, though, prayer is simply humbling, and at times, defeating.

So what I want to do is move from principle to practice. What follows are ten quick "handles" that are intended to be a help to you in the actual activity of daily prayer with God.

1. Pray to get closer with God.

Pray to know God better. Talk to him about him, about the world, about your heart. Be honest and vulnerable, bring it back to simple, big truths, remembering that God knows you down to the hairs on your head (Matt. 10:30) — and he cares for you (1 Pet. 5:7). In this way, David would exhort us to "Seek God's face" (Ps. 27:8). This is the foundation of growing in intimacy with God through prayer.

E. M. Bounds, known for his prolific writing on prayer said, "Those who know God the best are the richest and most powerful in prayer. Little acquaintance with God, and strangeness and coldness to him, make prayer a rare and feeble thing."²

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So, pursue greater prayer to get closer with God, and see what he does in the aftermath.

2. *Pray to get farther from sin.*

John Bunyan said, “Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer.”³ The strategic scheme of the devil is to utilize guilt and shame to discourage the Christian from praying, only further compounding the guilt and shame and, ultimately, distancing our closeness with God. This tactic is as old as the Garden of Eden, but as relevant in our lives as probably last week. Sin keeps us from the antidote to sin, which is prayer. This is a key part of spiritual warfare prayer and protection.

God intends prayer to be partly about humbling our own hearts before him. The Lords prayer: a model for greater prayer in Matthew 6 instructs us to confess our sins and plead for God’s help in escaping temptation. The Psalms are filled with David’s cries to God in relation to his own sin, forgiveness, and walk with the Lord (Ps. 22, 32, 51). Paul was not ashamed to ask others to pray for him, realizing his own spiritual need for prayer as well (Col. 4:2–4). And perhaps in the most clear, didactic exhortation, 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you, but such is common to man. God is faithful, and with the temptation will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation, will provide the way of escape so that you can endure it.”

All this simply means that a regular part of the Christian’s prayer life should be asking God for help to stay away from the ever-present temptation to sin.

3. *Pray the Bible back to God.*

Donald Whitney writes, “When you pray, pray through a passage of Scripture, particularly a psalm.”⁴ Whitney’s method, though simple, is quite profound. Often the experience of many Christians amounts to praying the same few things over and over before wandering off in one’s own thoughts and then packing up the day’s prayer time. This is where praying the Scriptures: a practical guide becomes invaluable.

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Further, there can be discouragement in feeling uncertain about whether the prayers being offered are biblical or not and whether they're even pleasing to God. Additionally, the creeping thought of, "I just prayed this yesterday," continues to disincentivize the person praying to the point of ceasing to pray altogether. The beauty of praying the Bible back to God is that it addresses this entire downward spiral. Where there was routine and repetition before, it brings fresh and new content to pray. Where there was uncertainty about the conformity to God's will in previous prayers, there is now complete certainty. In summary, praying the Bible keeps a Christian praying, and praying well.

Whitney argues that Psalms are particularly helpful for this kind of prayer because they were designed to be prayed. "God gave the Psalms to us so that we would give the Psalms back to God," he wrote. While it is certainly profitable to pray truth back to God from epistles and narratives, there are perhaps fewer challenges when praying the Psalms.

The last thing I'll say about this has been shaped by Daniel Henderson's 6:4 Fellowship prayer ministry: the "Four-Directional Prayer." Taking any passage of Scripture, the first movement of prayer is to get vertical (upward). This involves looking in the passage for an aspect of God to praise him for. The second arrow is to come down from heaven to us (downward). This movement involves looking for the fallen-man condition, our sinfulness, something to confess. The third movement of prayer is to move to the Spirit's work in us (inward). This movement is asking God to help bring repentance and steadiness in growth. The final movement of prayer is moving outward to live on mission (outward). This movement is to pray for the mission to advance through me. Upward, downward, inward, outward; four movements of prayer from any text in the Bible. This is how you learn how to stay focused in prayer.

4. Pray for other people.

Almost all of Paul's prayers are for other people (not self) and for their souls (not material life). Pray for souls — both lost and saved. Reformer and former priest William Law, despite having many opponents and good reason to lack sentiment towards them, said, "There is nothing that makes us love a man so much as praying for him."⁵ Many people are surprised to learn that the Bible has few prayers for oneself compared to prayers for

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others. In fact, in many of the passages where praying for oneself is seen, it is realized in a corporate context (such as in the Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6: "forgive *us* of *our* sin...lead *us* not into temptation"). This implies that Christians should see the needs of others as of equal importance to their own. God wants us to pray for others.

The need for Christians to pray for other Christians is further realized when considering the examples of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Jesus often prayed earnestly for others, perhaps most poignantly in the High Priestly prayer of John 17. Likewise, the Apostle Paul prayed for recipients of his letters, from which much can be gleaned for our prayer lives today. Paul is regularly seen praying for salvation, sanctification, ultimate glorification, and much more. He is seldom vague, broad, or general in these prayers, often praying for specific aspects of their sanctification. Further, not only does he supplicate on their behalf, but he takes time to thank God for the growth that has already occurred in their lives. We would do well to spend more time thanking God for growth and fruit in other people's lives!

Now, a quick word of caution: in exhorting us to pray for others, I'm not saying to pray *toward* others. "And Lord...I just pray that you'd convict Billy here on my right about his sin. And help Sally over there to be more generous to the church." This is better described as praying *at* others, not *for* others. But to pray for others is to lift them up in a supportive, encouraging manner that motivates them and spurs them on toward God.

Specific application of prayers for others are many and vary from one person to the next. As previously noted, parents are expected to pray for their children as part of their due diligence in raising them in the ways of the Lord (Eph. 6:1–4). Pastors are expected to pray for the flock that has been allotted to their charge (1 Pet. 5:2–4). The church as a whole should be praying for their pastors and their supported missionaries as laborers of the gospel (Luke 10:2; Heb. 13:7). Christians should pray for those in their circle of relationship and influence (James 5:15, Gal. 6:2), as well as for the lost and dying world around them (Matt. 5:13–16, 2 Pet. 3:9). Over time, through diligent and disciplined time in God's Word, the Christian's conscience will become increasingly aware of the needs of others and the biblical expectation of prayers to be offered on their behalf. But if you're

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just getting started, make a short list of people and begin to pray for them. This is a great way of starting a daily prayer routine.

5. Pray for the kingdom.

Without a conviction behind what we pray, the tendency seems to drift to prayers for physical wants and needs and for primarily local, internal concerns. But the Scriptures challenge and confront us with prayers that transcend the physical to the spiritual realm, and expand from local, internal concerns to a global scope and scale. Biblical prayers with conviction are about the advancement of God's kingdom.

Leonard Ravenhill said this:

For this sin-hungry age we need a prayer-hungry Church. We need to explore again the "exceeding great and precious promises of God." In "that great day," the fire of judgment is going to test the sort, not the size, of the work we have done. That which is born in prayer will survive the test. Prayer does business with God. Prayer creates hunger for souls; hunger for souls creates prayer.⁶

It's Leonard's comment about souls that most caught my attention here: *prayer creates hunger for souls; hunger for souls creates prayer*. What we're talking about here is a heart that longs to see the advancement of God's kingdom through the Great Commission. And when a heart begins to long in that direction, it has no greater outlet and resource than to pray.

So friends, pray for God's kingdom to advance. Pray for light to shine and push back darkness. Pray for God to transform people in ways that could only be him. Pray for his kingdom to take up residence in universities and hospitals, from high rises to homeless shelters. Pray for specific groups of people in specific places. Boldly make specific requests in pursuit of bearing fruit one-hundred-fold (Matt. 13:8). Pray for his provision and protection to show up in ways only God can do that are only for God's glory. Pray for the kingdom of God to be better realized in this time and place, until Jesus comes and makes it more fully realized.

6. Pray in private.

Jonathan Edwards has been called the most brilliant mind to ever live on American soil, and he said of prayer: "There is no way that Christians, in a

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private capacity, can do so much to promote the work of God and advance the kingdom of Christ as by prayer.” In addition to praying on the go and to corporate and public prayers, a place must be made for private prayer. In addressing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who loved to pray in public, Jesus instructed, “But You, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt. 6:6). The point here is made plain enough.

This principle of praying is modeled none better than by Jesus himself. In Luke 5, not only is Jesus seen pulling away to pray in seclusion once or twice, but verse 16 says that Jesus “would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.” Considering that Christians are called to “walk as he walked” (1 John 2:6), this example has bearing upon the believer’s prayer life today as well.

This time of secluded prayer should not be taken lightly. The eventual consequence of failing to set aside secluded time of prayer in exchange for exclusively praying on the go will be devastating. Joel Beeke, sharing from reflections on the prayer life of the Puritans says,

Gradually your prayer life began to disintegrate. Even before you were aware of it, your prayers became more a matter of words than heart-to-heart communion with God. Form and coldness replaced holy necessity. Before long, you dropped your morning prayer. It no longer seemed critical to meet with God before you meet with people. Then you shortened your prayer at bedtime. Other concerns broke in on your time with God. Throughout the day, prayer all but vanished.⁷

Christians must set aside focused prayer time to pray in seclusion lest they fall into the same snare. This is the core of learning to listen to God in prayer.

7. Pray with other people.

I can’t tell you how many meetings I’ve been in where at the close, someone sheepishly looks up at me and says, “Pastor, I’m — I’m not very good at praying out loud.” With a little encouragement from me, they usually are willing to step out in faith and maybe say their first ever public prayer to God with another person. And as soon as they say “Amen,” I

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usually come out of my chair in enthusiasm and support for their first step of faith in praying a public prayer to God.

Dear friend, it is good to pray with others, and it is good to pray out loud.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that the vast majority of biblical prayers (both those recorded and exhortations to pray) are public in nature. Think about it with me: The Lord's Prayer uses plural pronouns (our, we, us); Daniel's famous prayer in Daniel 9 is corporate (Dan. 9:3–19); Nehemiah's prayer is in front of others (Neh. 2:4); Moses prayed in front of all of Israel (Deut. 9:19); and bear in mind, this was a man who was scared to speak in front of anyone due to speech impediment (Ex. 4:10). What made the early church special in Acts 2 was devotion to "the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Most believe that "the prayers" is a reference to the formal, corporate prayers that the church would say when gathering. There's enough here to say that the Lord expects us to pray out loud, with others.

So, where's the best place to start? At home. If you're married, with a spouse. If you have kids, with your family. If you're single, find a roommate. If you live alone, then set up a time to pray with someone from church. But begin to pray with others, because as you do, you will not only gain the blessing of praying with someone and probably being prayed over, but you will also grow in your prayer while simultaneously getting the privilege of praying for someone who's sitting right beside you.

8. Pray with urgency.

James 5:16 reads, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." It's perhaps because of this that William Cowper again said, "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees."⁸ Because of the effectiveness of prayer in the spiritual battle, Paul calls on all Christians everywhere to wartime prayer. In Ephesians 6:18 he exhorts saints toward "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints." Simply put: God wants us to pray like it really matters — because it does.

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From this one small passage, I want to point out what urgent, war-time prayer looks like:

- i. War-time prayer means I pray all the time (“all times”).
- ii. War-time prayer means I pray dependently (“in the Spirit”).
- iii. War-time prayer means I pray for many things (“all prayer and supplication”).
- iv. War-time prayer means I pray when I don’t want to (“with all perseverance”).
- v. War-time prayer means I pray for others (“for all the saints”).

Underlying each of these is an urgency for prayer, seen in the command to “keep alert.” By Paul giving this command, it implies that it’s possible for Christians to grow sleepy in their perspective on the world. One of the first areas where spiritual sleepiness will manifest is in our prayer life.

So Christian, take the bull by the horns. Regain the urgency of what’s at stake as the battle wages around us, and pray with a wartime mentality that results in fervent prayer. This is part of transforming your prayer life from duty to delight.

9. Pray with simplicity.

Acronyms can be helpful; they can also be overused. In this case, the acronym is just too good not to utilize in helping us think about a simple framework for how to pray. Maybe you’ve heard the acronym “A.C.T.S.” before, but this one might be even better. It’s “P.R.A.Y.”:

Praise God for who he is.

Repent of your sin.

Ask God for what you need.

Yield yourself to God to change and use as he sees fit today.

The point is that there’s no magic formula to prayer. Each of these four components are simple and easily adaptable. A four-year old can pray this way, and so can a professor.

Praying with simplicity will help it to be less academic and more relational. When I pray, I don’t try to impress God with big words. I don’t use long compound sentences. I speak to him from a place of vulnerability, rawness,

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and simplicity — not for his sake, but for mine. In quieting my soul before my Maker, there is something in simplicity that clears the clutter and gets to the point.

So, take that for what it's worth, but I recommend simple words within simple prayers for the praying Christian.

10. *Pray to align your heart with God's.*

I love what Bounds said on this:

Prayer is not simply getting things from God, that is a most initial form of prayer; prayer is getting into perfect communion with God. If the Son of God is formed in us by regeneration, he will press forward in front of our common sense and change our attitude to the things about which we pray.⁹

I'll just say it this way: Prayer is ordained by God because it's good for the soul.

Prayer is good for the soul in so many ways, first because it brings man's own will and desires into conformity with God's. In fact, this is what Jesus likely has in mind when he tells his disciples to pray, "Your will be done, your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven." This means we're concerned less with our reputation and our name, and more about God's reputation and his name. In this way, prayer is an opportunity to refocus attention upon God rather than self, upon his kingdom rather than our kingdom, and upon spiritual desires rather than material ones. An alignment of man's priorities with God's occurs not as the primary purpose of prayer, but as a byproduct of it. This process is vital for how to hear God's voice in prayer.

Prayer is not just good for the soul because of this alignment of wills, though. It is also good for the soul because it brings us into close relationship with God. Along with the Word, it is the connection point of the relationship that God desires to have with man. As Wayne Grudem puts it, "Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with God, and he loves us and delights in our fellowship with him."¹⁰

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So when you're jammed up about something, when you feel your heart getting a little off, when you feel distant from God or focused on the wrong things — pray in order to realign your heart with his.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Why is it crucial to pray in order to get close to God and further from sin? Has this been in your heart as you pray?
2. How can you incorporate more of God's word into your prayer life?
3. Do you pray like you're in a war? How can Ephesians 6:18 guide your routine of how you talk to God?

3

THE BEST-KEPT SECRET ABOUT PRAYER

Have you ever considered that perhaps what you gain from prayer is actually even more than you give to it? That perhaps prayer is actually more about God transforming your heart and shaping your life than it is a benefit or blessing to him? Having looked at the nature of prayer and a few tips to pray better, I want to end on a high note of encouragement — the best kept secret about prayer. In a well-known chapter in the Bible, we're given a secret that has power to change your life forever, and it all hinges on your prayer life. In this chapter, Paul seemingly draws us into the inner circle where we get the secret sauce of the Christian life, and it just keeps getting better and better as we discover more and more of the blessing that can be ours.

Consider these initial words in Philippians 4: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). Here, Paul addresses the all-too-common problem of anxiety. Anxiety is the mind’s and body’s response to underlying fear. Often, it’s the fear of wanting something or a certain outcome that you don’t yet have, or the fear of not wanting to lose something you do have. A person may have anxiety over an upcoming meeting, a future election, or about paying bills — each of which has its own source of fear underlying the worry. This is where dealing with spiritual dryness in prayer can feel most heavy, when the fear seems louder than God’s voice. Here though, Paul says, “don’t.”

But in God’s plan for how people change, just saying “don’t” is never sufficient. Instead, he says while we’re not to worry, we are to go to God

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in prayer. And as we go to God in prayer, we're to go to him "with thanksgiving." Friend, let me encourage you with this truth: Gratitude is a great antidote for anxiety. This is a vital step in overcoming distractions during prayer—shifting the focus from the problem to the Provider. So, the first best-kept secret about prayer is that prayerful gratitude is the attitude that curbs anxiety and pleases God.

But the initial unveiling of the best-kept secret about prayer takes new form in what comes next. In the next phrase, God makes a promise that is good seven days of the week. You can take it to the bank teller and cash it in anytime, and it can be redeemed for the same value over and over and over again. What's this promise? It's the promise of peace: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7). The Spirit of God says that if you will pray with an attitude of gratitude, God will grant you the thing that literally everyone on earth is chasing after — peace. According to this verse, it will be a peace of divine origin. It will be a peace that can't be explained and makes no sense. It will be a peace that calms the soul, calibrates the emotions, and settles the mind. It will be a peace that is found in Christ Jesus and a peace that is accessed through the simple means of prayer. This is a primary unanswered prayer: a Biblical perspective; even when the "yes" hasn't come, the peace can.

This is what God's big story has always been about anyways, hasn't it? There was peace in the Garden. The peace was disrupted and destroyed by sin. The rest of the story is the redemptive plan of God restoring peace and order so that creativity and flourishing can abound once again. He would call his capital city Jerusalem (literally, "city of peace"), and the Son of God would emerge on the scene to do what? In John 14:27, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." In the future final state, there will be peace that flows from the New Jerusalem because the resurrected Son has conquered every last enemy of peace and has brought complete intimacy with God. In the meantime, though, we get to experience a slice of heaven's peace when we seek God in prayer.

The best-kept secret about prayer is that it fights anxiety and it promotes peace in our life — and yet, that's still not the whole secret. The verses that immediately follow this section in Philippians 4 are an exhortation to

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redeem one's life, with the final exhortation at the end of verse 8 being "think about these things." This might include prayer journaling for spiritual growth, as we record what is true and lovely. Verse 9 is the quick command to practice what you preach (and think on!), with a final reiteration of the peace of God as a blessing.

But it is verses 10–13 that hold the next best blessing about prayer in what Paul himself calls a "secret." After expressing his appreciation for the Philippian church's concern for him, Paul now goes inward and shares testimony of his own internal experience amidst his journey of faith with the Lord:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:11–13)

Paul had faced times of hunger and devastating poverty, but also times of plenty and lavish abundance. Sometimes we find ourselves fasting and prayer: unlocking spiritual breakthroughs in those lean times. The "secret" he mentions here though, is the secret of being content. And this was a secret that he had to learn.

How had Paul *learned* the secret of being content? Given the context that immediately precedes this paragraph, it would seem he had learned it by practicing what he's just preached! Paul had brought his anxieties to the Lord in prayer. Paul had replaced an attitude of greed with an attitude of gratitude. Paul had received the peace of God that surpasses understanding by redeeming his mind to think about that which is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, worthy of praise. Paul had learned how to pray.

To be sure, finding true contentment that transcends circumstance is not humanly possible. This is why Paul closes the way he does: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." The strength he needed from the Lord was to settle his soul of its restlessness and instead, to be content. And the other side of the coin was equally true — Paul's own willpower, meditation, and discipline was insufficient to produce true and

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lasting contentment. He needed supernatural empowerment to be content, an empowerment that is only accessed through prayer.

Friends, the best-kept secret about prayer — real prayer — is that in it, two hidden gems nowhere else found are discovered: peace and contentment. Where there is peace and contentment, there is no fear or worry. Anxiety is thrown by the wayside and restlessness put to rest. Together, peace and contentment are deep-seated joys that can't be shaken.

The applications of this truth for us are far and wide. You can have peace and contentment amidst any storm of life you may be walking through. You could be stinking it up at your job or on the verge of losing your house. You could have family drama that's about to drive you to insanity, or have a spouse that's not walking with the Lord. You could be encountering imminent danger, threats to your family, and even death. Paul wrote these promises having walked through some pretty dire circumstances, and the promises still hold true. What God wants us to know is that everything we need to be whole is found in him and accessible through the simple means of prayer.



CONCLUSION

The last thing to leave in your mind regarding prayer is that we must pray because God answers prayers. There is a parable which particularly demonstrates the reality that prayer has actual impact on outcomes (at least from a human perspective), found in Luke 18:1–8. Here, a widow persistently approaches a judge for protection, who, after being persistently pursued, eventually gives the woman her request. Then, in verses 6–7, a less-than greater-than comparison is made between the judge (who was evil) and God (who is just and compassionate). The point that Jesus is communicating is that God is pleased with our persistent prayer, and that he will answer prayers that are according to his will. Friend, take a minute to let that simple truth encourage you: God wants you to pray, and he wants to answer your prayers.

Conceivably, even if prayer availed nothing toward actual change in this life, it would still be a worthwhile spiritual exercise because it is a pleasing act of service to God. Again, conceivably, even if prayer never caused any change “out there,” it would be worthwhile due to the personal blessing of divine peace and contentment found nowhere else. However, the fact that Scripture makes it plain that God actually responds to prayer and moves in real time because of prayer provides even greater motivation to pray.

Not only does he hear prayers, but he is sovereign enough to bring to pass whatever is well pleasing to him (Eph. 3:20). Not only is he sovereign, but he also cares for mankind intimately (Matt. 6:26). And not only is he sovereign and cares for us intimately, but he has also made a way for us to commune with him, often highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer as our helper. This trifecta of truth means that when we pray, and when that prayer is found to be in alignment with this will, there is good reason

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to hope and believe that this request will actually come to pass. Jesus encourages such bold and even audacious faith in prayer that he compares it to moving a mountain — and then says that God will do it! The point is simply this: pray, because God responds to prayer.

So friend, this is the end of our journey, but hopefully the start of a new one for you. The intent of this field guide has been to build your faith in the God who answers prayers. We have been helped by considering together what prayer is and what makes it so hard. We've seen a few practical tips on how to pray effectively according to the Bible, including the necessity of learning to listen to God in prayer rather than just speaking. We've explored how to hear God's voice in prayer through His Word and Spirit.

Then we revealed some of the best-kept secrets about prayer. If you've made it this far, I am believing by faith and through prayer, that you have been stirred and spurred toward more faith in God resulting in greater prayer. As you engage in this in real time, don't pray perfectly. Don't wait to clean up your life to pray. Whether you are starting a daily prayer routine or simply crying out in a moment of need, just begin to pray, and watch what God will do!

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How has your faith in the God who answers prayers been grown through what you've read in this field guide?
2. How do peace and contentment differ from what has motivated your prayer life in the past?
3. What is a simple step you can take to incorporate more prayer in your daily life?



ENDNOTES

- ¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Vol. 4, 353.
- ² E.M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer*.
- ³ John Bunyan, *Dying Sayings*.
- ⁴ Donald Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Crossway, 2015), 27.
- ⁵ William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.
- ⁶ Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries*.
- ⁷ Joel Beeke, *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).
- ⁸ William Cowper, *The Poetic Works of William Cowper*.
- ⁹ E.M. Bounds, *The Necessity of Prayer*.
- ¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan Academic, 1995), 377.



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