

Practicing Prayer

A Field Guide

BY DAVID ALEXANDER

Introduction

In 2015, YouGov did a survey of beliefs of people living in Britain and found that 25% of those who described themselves as “non-religious: said that they “take part in some spiritual activity each month - typically prayer.”

Abraham Lincoln, who described himself as a religious man who nevertheless struggled with his own beliefs and doubts, once wrote,

“I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.”¹

You may not have considered this before, but to be human is to pray. We all share a desire to find meaning, significance and value in our lives. We each have hopes and dreams, fears and anxiety. Prayer is an expression of the universal longing of the soul. It is a normal impulse of the human

¹ First attributed to Abraham Lincoln by Noah Brooks, writing in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 36, 226 published in July 1865.

heart. This resource has been produced with one practical goal in mind.

To empower you to develop and deepen in the daily habit of prayer.

For some, prayer may already be a regular practice. For others, you may rate yourself as a beginner. If so, I hope you will be encouraged to hear that even people who pray on a regular basis naturally desire a deeper life of prayer.

“Lord, teach us to pray.”

In the Gospels, the best example of that might be the request the disciples share with Jesus at the beginning of Luke chapter 11. In verse 1 we read,

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray...”

We can reasonably assume that these disciples, who had been hand-picked by

Jesus, had prayed before. This wasn't some brand new teaching. Yet, like all of us, they longed for more.

Seeing Jesus pray, they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

Of equal significance, Jesus did not respond by saying, "You really should have figured this out by now!" Instead, Jesus teaches them because **Jesus desires to teach us to pray.**

"What Do I Say?"

If you have a question about prayer, I promise you are not the first person to ask it. Often, those questions revolve around the mechanics of praying.

Do I need to bow my head?

What should I do with my hands?

How do I stay focused?

Is it necessary to kneel?

Should I close my eyes?

But the most common question of them all is, “*What do I say?*”

This is what makes the response Jesus offers to his disciples so fascinating.

In verse 2, we read, *He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.”*

In other words, Jesus says, “*Say this.*”

In pursuing our goal, this is where we want to begin. One of the most underappreciated aspects of deepening your prayer life is that you don’t have to use your words.

You can use others’ words.

Throughout Christian history, there is a rich tradition of prayers passed down from generation to generation. If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Psalms

to find the prayer book that Jesus used throughout his own life. At the back of this little booklet, you can find a selection of other well known prayers, including the prayer Jesus offers his disciples in Luke 11 and Matthew 6, which we commonly refer to as The Lord's Prayer.

A Place to Start

Believing that God honors small beginnings and that there is incredible power in sharing practices together, here is a great place to start..

On whatever device is most convenient, take a minute right now to set an alarm for noon every day. As a first step, wherever you are, whoever you are with, in whatever circumstance you may find yourself at that time, when that alarm goes off, pause for a moment to say the Lord's Prayer.

Just as a child learns to speak by hearing others speak to them, we can learn to pray

by using words others have given to us, with the best of those being these words from Jesus.

A Next Step

After providing a prayer for the disciples, Jesus then tells a story of an individual who goes to their neighbor in the middle of the night to ask for food for an unexpected guest (Luke 11:5-13).

“Don’t bother me,” the neighbor says, but the one in need of food refuses to give up and his persistence pays off. Because of his “shameless audacity,” Jesus says, the neighbor gives the man what he needs. Jesus finishes this short parable before then adding,

“So I say to you: 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; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luke 11:9-13

How Much More?

At first glance, we might wonder how this connects to the disciples’ original request. What else is Jesus teaching us here about prayer?

It’s easy to miss because what begins as a story about two neighbors quickly moves to a teaching about God.

“If this is how you behave... how much more would God do?”

It’s a window into the character of God and a reminder that an essential step in learning to pray is knowing the heart of the

One who hears our prayers.

Unlike the weary neighbor, we have a Father who longs to hear from us. Our longing for a deeper relationship with God is met by God's longing for a deeper relationship with us.

Out of his deep love for you and because Jesus likes you, Jesus desires a deeper relationship with you, and prayer is one of the primary ways God builds relationship.

From Others' Words to Our Words

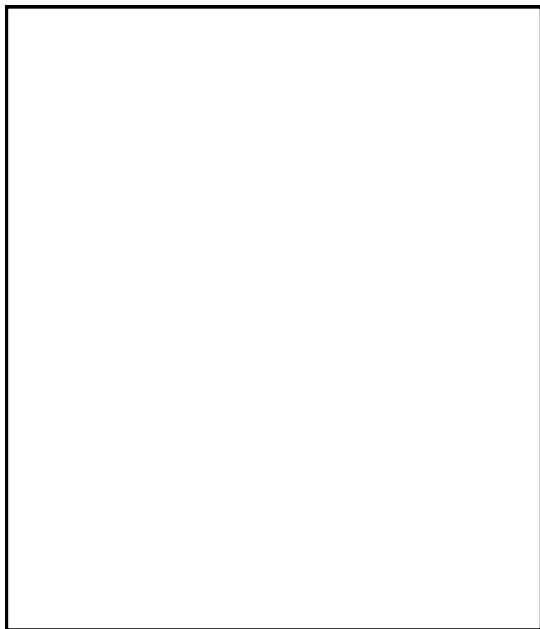
As powerful as praying others' words can be, we all want to know how to begin to speak our own prayers. Here are three things you should consider sharing with God in prayer.

1. Talk about what is good.

Talking about what is good is a way of saying "thank you" to God. Even if you are

in the middle of a challenging circumstance, when you think about what is good, you might be surprised how much you have to say.

Take a moment right now to write some of those good things down.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for writing the 'good things' mentioned in the text above.

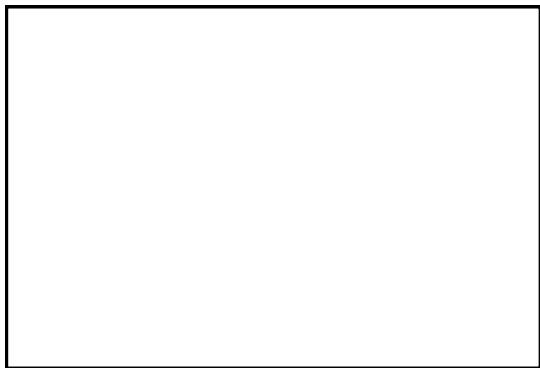
2. Talk about what hurts.

The Apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:7,
“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

Imagine a young child falling and skinning their knee, and a parent rushing to their aid. Like that young child, our natural instinct is to cover our wound, and like every good parent in that circumstance, God’s response is always, “Let me see.”

God wants to hear our hurts.

What are some of the hurts you need to share with God right now?

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3. Talk about where you need help.

We all need help. None of us has it all figured out. Humility gives us the courage to acknowledge our needs. Whether it be large or small, a personal concern or the help another person needs, God invites us to ask for help in whatever need we have.

Where do you need help right now?

The Best Advice

In his book, *How to Pray*, Pete Greig shares three instructions he describes as the best advice he ever received on how to pray.

1. Keep it Simple.

We often think that everyone else just instinctively knows how to pray, but there really are no magic words that must be spoken in a particular way. If you took the time to write a few things in the boxes above, what you will find is your simple prayer for today.

2. Keep it Real.

A good friend recently texted me his six year old's dinner prayer on Veterans Day. She said,

Dear God, I hope you have a great day on the cross. Thank you for all the veterans who fought for our sins. AMEN.

We obviously hope that as my friend's daughter grows, she will gain a better

understanding of some of the core tenets of the Christian faith. The tomb is empty and so is the cross! Jesus is the one who died for our sins, but is it possible that God experienced the same laughter and delight of that six year old's parents?

I'm convinced that it's OK to not be OK and that every emotion is welcomed by God in prayer.

He is as ready to hear our hurts as our hallelujahs.

3. Keep it up.

We all know relationships are hard. They require constant attention, ongoing investment, and in every relationship, we experience highs and lows. The same is true in our relationship with God. Like the individual knocking on his neighbor's door in the middle of the night, God welcomes and honors our persistence.

A “Two Way” Street

If the most common question asked about prayer is, “*What do I say?*” then the other side of that question is, “*How do I hear?*” It’s a question we spend a lot less time considering because of how significantly we wrestle with the first one, but it’s no less important to the goal of developing and deepening in the daily habit of prayer.

Like others, you might assume extensive training is required and only a limited number of people have the necessary qualifications to hear from God, but what if we begin with a different set of assumptions?

God is speaking.

Christians believe that when we give our lives to Jesus, Jesus gives himself to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as our “advocate” and promises that “*when he comes, he will guide you into*

all truth.” (John 16:13). The New Testament also describes the work of the Holy Spirit as “*testifying to our spirit*” (Romans 8:16). While we may sometimes struggle to hear or understand what God might be saying to us, that doesn’t mean God is unaware of our needs or uninterested in our prayers.

We can hear God.

It is often difficult to specifically discern what God may be speaking into our lives. At the same time, it’s not nearly as complicated as we make it out to be. At the moment one gives their life to Jesus, all the necessary “tools” are available.

Growth will happen over time. Over the course of 25 years of marriage, my wife and I both speak and hear one another better than we did when we first said, “I do.” Others may have matured more in the practice of hearing God in their life, but that doesn’t mean that a brand-new Christian is not equipped to hear from God.

A good place to begin reflecting on how we can better hear God is to look at the different ways we observe God speaking to God's people in the Bible.

Scripture

In his own prayer life and teaching, Jesus consistently references the history of Israel, shared the poetry of the Psalms and the writings of the Prophets who spoke of his coming into the world.

Hebrews 4:12 says that the Word of God is both “*living and active.*” 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says,

“All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

The scriptures are both a collection of what God has said as well as a means by which God speaks into our lives and our circumstances today.

Circumstances

In Romans 8:28, the Apostle Paul writes, *“In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

Notice that Paul is not claiming that God causes circumstances in order to speak into our lives. Rather, the promise shared here is that, “in all things,” God will never stop working for good in our lives.

Perhaps you have already experienced hearing God more clearly in exceedingly difficult, challenging and painful seasons of your life. Others might point to moments when they intentionally stepped outside their comfort zones as times when they were especially attuned to God’s leading.

Solitude & Reflection

In Luke 5:16, we read that, *“Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray.”*

One of the common practices of Jesus was to remove himself from others in order to spend time with his heavenly Father.

While Jesus would often do this very early in the morning, spending time in solitude and reflection is something we can do at any point during the day.

In our fast-paced world, this can be challenging. We struggle to pause and find focus. One practice that can help quiet our racing thoughts is using a breath prayer, which is a short phrase you slowly repeat to help you find stillness before God.

One example would be to pray, “Speak Lord” as you breathe in and “your servant is listening” as you breathe out.

I’ve included several other examples of breath prayers in the appendix.

Counsel of Others

God speaks directly to us through the counsel of others. This requires us to cultivate relationships with other Christians whose wisdom we trust and have matured in their own attentiveness to God speaking into their own lives.

Hearing another's perspective is a great way for us to test our understanding of how God is leading us and enable us to receive fresh insight on what we are experiencing along the way.

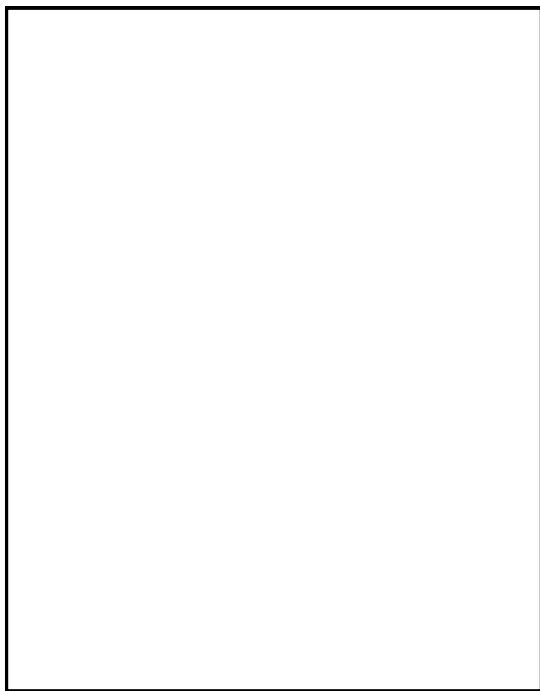
Obedience

We always want God to show us the whole map, but God rarely reveals the final destination. When we take a first step in faith, God is faithful in leading us in what comes next.

God honors obedience. There will be missteps along the way, but we can trust that the God who walks with us will graciously redirect us when those occur.

God will continue to speak as we move in the direction we sense he is leading us to go.

In which of these ways have you experienced hearing God?

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Is That You?

When I speak with a close friend on the phone, I know who I'm talking to because I recognize their voice. If they were sick and their voice sounded different, I might ask, "Is that you?"

Jesus even says in John 10:27, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*

But, how does one learn to recognize God's voice? How can you trust that what you are hearing is what God is saying?

Those are questions worth asking because of our capacity for self-deception. It's essential to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of our own fears or desires.

Here are two principles we can use in our discernment:

1. God always speaks according to God's character and God's will.

To test what we are hearing, we might ask ourselves the questions,

Does this sound like Jesus?

Is this in harmony with God's heart and God's character?

Let me give you one example. I believe guilt is one of the primary weapons of the adversary. Shame is a tool Satan consistently uses to undermine the work that God is doing in our lives.

God does confront us in our sin, but God also invites us to repent and receive the fullness of his grace rather than the paralysis of shame. When God's Spirit convicts me of my sin, receiving the grace that empowers me to live in a new way is always the goal. Shame is the voice of the adversary. Grace is the voice of God.

To illustrate what I mean by testing whether what I'm hearing is in line with God's will, I've learned in my marriage that I never need to ask my wife if she wants me to empty the dishwasher. I know her will in that particular area of the management of our household. I never have to question what her will is because I know that she does not enjoy emptying the dishwasher.

So when we feel the nudge to say "I'm sorry," or to simply offer our help and support to another person, we can trust that nudge.

If God puts the name of a person on your heart and you find yourself thinking, "I wonder if God is nudging me to pray for them or reach out to them," assume the answer is yes.

2. God develops a relationship with you that is personal to you.

Psalm 139 is a beautiful declaration of how deeply God knows us.

We are each unique in the way we speak and in the way we hear. Part of the blessing of deep Christian friendship is that we know what another person hears and how they need to hear it. To say that someone “speaks my language” is another way of expressing that they know me and understand me.

In the same way we learn to communicate with our closest friends according to the uniqueness of who they are, God does the exact same thing with us.

We should expect that God is going to speak into your life in a way that is particular to you and in another’s life in a way that is particular to them.

We do ourselves and God a great disservice when we doubt God's voice because our experience may be quite different from another person's experience.

But What About God's Will?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, the Apostle Paul writes,

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

In just a few words, Paul addresses another key question people ask about the practice of prayer.

What is God's will for my life?

Hearing that God has a purpose for our lives, it's natural for us to think, "I want to be about that purpose. I want to live in the center of his will for me." Having surrendered our lives, it's appropriate for us to ask, "God, what's your will for my life?"

At times, finding an answer to that question can seem so overwhelming.

Paul says God's will is for you to,
Rejoice always,
Pray continually,
Give thanks in all circumstances.

In our longing for something more specific, this seems too simple. Remember, we want to see the whole map, but consider what is so powerful about Paul's instructions.

Everything good in our life really does flow from one of these three practices.

To commit oneself to rejoice always, to pray continually, to give thanks in all circumstances is to place oneself again in the pathway of God's will.

A Final Word of Warning

I have found that in any discussion about deepening and developing the habits of the spiritual life, guilt always lingers in the corner. As I said earlier, I believe guilt is the primary weapon of the adversary.

The one I typically refer to as the adversary goes by several different names in the scripture - the Devil, Satan, the evil one.

What's important is the recognition that he is real and constantly seeking to undermine and oppose the work of God's Spirit.

We can trust that,

*Where the Spirit of the Lord speaks
freedom, the adversary speaks bondage.*

*Where the Spirit of the Lord speaks grace,
the adversary speaks condemnation.*

*Where the Spirit speaks hope, the adversary
speaks despair.*

*Where the Spirit speaks love, the adversary
speaks doubt.*

Remember, prayer is about building relationship with God, and relationships are never easy. The most important thing we can do is to keep showing up. As you seek to deepen and develop in the daily habit of prayer, here are two things I can guarantee.

1. The Spirit will be working in a powerful way in each step you will take.

Remember, because Jesus likes you, Jesus desires a deeper relationship with you.

2. The adversary will work to thwart your effort, doubt your progress and undermine your confidence in God's desire to hear your prayers.

A great mentor of mine said, "The only way to fail is to quit."

I believe that with all my heart.

So keep showing up.
Ask God to protect you from
discouragement.

Press on through the days when you
struggle.
Savor the days when God feels near.
Trust that you are doing better than you
think you are.
And cling to our shared conviction that
God will be faithful.

***May he strengthen and empower you as
you seek to deepen and develop in the
daily habit of sharing life with God.***

AMEN.

Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

*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 the evil one.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the
glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

The Serenity Prayer

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to
peace; Talking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;*

*That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next. Amen.*

The Wesley Covenant Prayer

*I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with
whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee
or laid aside for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things,
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made
on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.*

Breath Prayers

These are short prayers you are invited to pray repeatedly in order to pause and recenter your focus on God. (Referenced on page 19.)

“Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

“Jesus, I belong to you”

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”

“Lord you know my heart”

Endnotes

Additional Resources

How to Pray - A Simple Guide for Normal People, by Pete Greig

Celebration of Discipline - The Path to Spiritual Growth, by Richard Foster

The Workbook of Living Prayer, by Maxie Dunnam

Soul Feast - An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, by Marjorie J. Thompson

Reaching Out - The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, by Henri Nouwen

Hearing God, by Dallas Willard

Lectio 365

Lectio 365 is a resource produced by 24/7 Prayer (www.24-7prayer.com), which provides guided prayers and reflections three times a day. (Morning, Midday and Evening).

You can download this app for your mobile device by using the QR code below.



Biography

David Alexander has served as a Pastor in the Mansfield community since 2005. After serving in various leadership roles, he was named as the Senior Pastor of First Methodist Mansfield in January of 2015.

David is also the author of the book *The Deep End*, which focuses on the deep questions of the Christian faith; a book he describes as being for anyone who has ever felt like “the process of finding faith sometimes feels like you are losing faith.”

David is married to Stephanie. They have one daughter, Anna, and a son, Jack.

Notes

Notes

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