

The Basics of Prayer

Remembering the essentials about prayer.

Introduction

Christians pray. At least we all know that Christians are *supposed* to pray. But it is not always that easy. Perhaps when we were children we were taught that God answers our prayers—that we can ask God for things and get them. A little boy prayed before going to bed at night that his dog would have puppies. The next morning when he came to breakfast, he asked his mother, “Where are the puppies?” He believed his prayer would work. But of course, the puppies were nowhere to be found!

When we become adults we may experience other difficulties. Perhaps we wonder if we have prayed for the right things. What should we pray for a terminally ill friend? A miracle? Can we pray for a salary raise or for our favorite sports team to win? Are these proper prayers to pray? If God knows what we need, why should we ask? Are our concerns God’s concerns? Our friend may or may not die; our raise might not come through; our team may win. Is this what prayer is for? We wonder.

The questions throng. They are real and important since they naturally arise within us and concern a topic the church says is very important: prayer. Besides in church, we often see examples of prayer around us in our culture—before a sports event or even in the chambers of Congress. Prayer surrounds us. Yet so do our questions.

Prayer is not so easy to practice, either. Praying out loud, in front of others, does not come easily for most of us. It can certainly make us feel self-conscious! Prayers in families, before meals or before children go to bed, is not something all families practice. Even when we try to pray by ourselves in private, we may feel awkward. What do we expect to happen then? Are the words empty? Is anyone really listening?

Perhaps stepping back and considering some basics about prayer will help. Let’s look at three building blocks that most Christian churches teach about prayer.



Do you ever feel like the prayers you send up bounce back down to you off the ceiling of the room?

Prayer Is Conversation with God

At its heart, prayer is simply a way we communicate with God. It may seem strange since it cannot be like a conversation we have with a friend. We don’t see God. Yet we trust that God not only created the heavens and earth, but this same God cares about that creation and wishes to relate to us.

Since we believe that God knows us better than we know ourselves, prayer is a place where we can be free and expressive and say what we really feel and want God to hear.

To see prayer this way frees us from thinking that prayer is something we *have* to do—a prescribed ritual we must carry out. We may believe we are *supposed* to pray at certain times, such as before we eat or before we make a decision or before we fall asleep. The prayers we offer then may be very formal or rote or memorized. But to see prayer as a vital conversation about what matters to us with the living God who loves us can give us a whole new vision!

How do we know we can talk with God in this way? The Jesus we read about in Scripture had this kind of open and intimate relationship with God. The Gospels record Jesus calling God “Father,” a term that speaks not of God’s gender but of the relationship Jesus experienced with God—within the deep bond of a family. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus’ relationship with God was marked by deep trust, devotion, and love. This is the relationship that is possible for us as Christians too. In prayer we open ourselves to the God who has shown us how

much we are loved in the person of Jesus himself. Jesus shows us how we can relate to God, and Jesus shows us that prayer as intimate conversation with God is possible.

God Answers Prayers

Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8).

Theologian Karl Barth believed the basic nature of prayer is petition (or “to ask”) for something. He pointed out that “the Lord’s Prayer, apart from the address and the doxology, consists exclusively of pure petition.”¹

Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

(Matt. 6:10-13)

The words for *prayer* in the Old Testament Hebrew and the New Testament Greek basically mean “to request” or “make a petition.” A leftover of this sense of entreating or imploring is a phrase from earlier days such as, “I pray you will do this” We are asking God for . . . whatever. The book of Psalms shows this clearly in many places. One key instance is when God is portrayed as saying, “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps. 50:15).

It seems that God wants us to be in conversation with God and to ask or petition God. And when we do pray, God will respond; God will help us.

Yet our experience with asking and seeking and knocking in prayer may be mixed. If you have asked God for particular things to occur, you may have found that sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t, and sometimes nothing seems to happen. Sometimes it appears that nothing happens, but years later things change and we see that perhaps our prayer was answered.

Jesus assures us that our prayers are not in vain. Just because we did not immediately get what we were requesting in prayer, it does not mean God did not hear or care about what we requested. Nor does it mean God did not answer us.

Jesus told a parable (Luke 18:1-8) about a persistent woman who continually sought to have her request for justice granted by an unjust judge who finally, due to her persistence, granted her petition. Jesus said that God—who is not unjust but rather just and loving—will hear and help those who cry to God day and night. So it may be a while before God’s answer is given, but it will come. In the meantime, Jesus encourages us to petition God continually with our prayers. There is a certainty our prayers will be heard; and we are to persist, even at times to struggle with God, as we continue to make our prayers. This parable is introduced with the comment: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

Sometimes we probably don’t recognize God’s answers to our prayers. They may come in ways we do not expect. There’s an old story of a man who fell off the top of a tall building. On his way down he prayed to God, “O God, help me and save me!” Sticking out from the building was a flagpole and the man caught hold of it as he was falling. Then he prayed: “Never mind, Lord; I just caught hold of this flag pole!” Did he fail to recognize God’s answer to his prayer?

In our own lives, we need always be alert to the ways God may be answering our prayers—even the unexpected ways. This is what can make the life of prayer exciting. We can be perfectly free in expressing our petitions and desires to God; we can trust that God will answer us; but we never know in what form that answer will take. Yet no matter what God’s answer is or how it comes, our prayers are offered with the faith that asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer is what God desires, and they are offered with the faith that God will answer our prayers.

In Prayer, We Seek God’s Will

If God hears and answers our prayers, does this mean we can simply pray for *anything* we might want: our sports team to win, lucky numbers for the lottery, a parking place at the mall? Sure, we *can* pray for these things. But if we do, we should ask ourselves: Can I pray this prayer as an expression of what I believe the will of God to be? Is this prayer oriented only toward myself, or is it consistent with what I believe God might want?

In the Lord’s Prayer, one of the petitions is “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). We see this most poignantly and clearly in Jesus’ own struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his crucifixion. He was in agony, knowing his death was imminent. At the edge of his life, Jesus prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 3:97.



Jesus had this kind of open and intimate relationship with God. We can too.

Finally, there is Supplication. We petition God, ask God for that which is of deepest concern to us. We offer prayers for the world, for others, for ourselves.

In this familiar outline of prayer, the first letters of each part together form ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication). This reminds us that our prayers lead to action. We pray as if everything depends on God. Then we work as if everything depends on us. Prayer and action go together.

Hindrances to Prayer. There are some things that prevent our prayers from being all they should be. One of the most crucial is an unforgiving heart. Jesus captured this clearly when he said, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). An unforgiving spirit hinders prayer. We forgive in order to be forgiven. If we do not forgive others, how can we expect God to forgive us?

Similarly, Jesus said that if “you are offering your gift at the altar” and “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24). Unreconciled relationships can hinder prayer. Are we willing to interrupt our prayers in order that our relationship with another person can be set right? Reconciliation is essential if our prayers are to be all they can be.

Times to Pray. When shall we pray? Certainly we can pray at any time. This is basic. Our prayers can be offered whenever and wherever the spirit of God moves us to pray. Sometimes these are called “flash prayers.” They are prayed spontaneously, on the spur of the moment, at unplanned times. They may be prayers of adoration and praise or confession or thanksgiving. They may be prayers for others, for a problem, for ourselves. They may be spoken aloud or they may be spoken within the silence of our hearts. There are no correct forms to follow in spontaneous prayer. Our words tumble together, but they are heard and loved by God.

We also may pray at set times in our day. In the morning, as we begin our activities, we offer the hours before us and ourselves to God in prayer. Some find it helpful to use written prayers or liturgies at this time.

We may pray before meals. This is a practice many families use. Sometimes, as we grow older, we get out of the habit of offering prayers before we eat, whether at home or dining out. Expressing gratitude to God for the food that nourishes our bodies in prayer reminds us also that God is the source of all our nourishment.

We may pray in the evening before going to sleep. Some use liturgies for evening prayer. Here we reflect on the day and our sense of the presence of God in our lives. As we go to sleep

done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus expressed his will; but most of all, he wanted God’s will to be done—at whatever cost.

In prayer, we can lay before God absolutely anything that is in our hearts. Yet our main desire should always be to submit ourselves to the will of God, and to consider that for which we pray in light of what directions we believe God’s desires are: Does my prayer lead toward justice or peace or mercy? Does it help another person? Is my prayer only for my own glory or benefit? Jesus shows us that doing God’s will is our highest purpose in life, and that in prayer we should always seek God’s will.

Practicing Prayer

Prayer is like swimming. All the theory in the world does not accomplish anything. You have to jump in the pool! So with prayer. Our theoretical questions about prayer are important. But there is no substitute for the experience of praying itself. Then, the fullness of prayer becomes real for us.

Here are some perspectives on the practice of prayer that might be helpful.

Parts of Prayer. While the basic nature of prayer is petition, Christians find their prayers embrace other dimensions too. These often move in a very natural direction for us.

Our first impulse is Adoration. We praise God. We acknowledge God as our Creator and Redeemer, the One who loves us and draws us into a loving relationship with God and with others.

Second is Confession. In light of God’s greatness and goodness, we recognize our sinfulness and the ways in which we have broken the loving relationships God calls us to have. So we confess our sin.

Third is Thanksgiving. In light of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ, we respond in total thanksgiving for the amazing love that continues to bless us.

we offer ourselves to God's care for our rest, protection, and renewal for the hours ahead.

We also pray as we worship God in church. Prayers in worship settings are often formal and set. These have their value since they utilize structure to express that which is important for the congregation to pray about as the people of God. When a worship leader is offering prayer, we should take that time to make the prayer our own as we fully enter into the spirit of prayer as the leader speaks on our behalf to God.

One more thing can be said about times to pray. It helps to pray *before* we do a thing rather than *after*. In prayer we seek the will of God. When we have a decision to make, we seek God's guidance through prayer.

Conclusion

Why pray? We haven't answered all questions. Prayer is a living experience. We have to participate in it in order to realize

what it is and what it can be. Still, we know God wants us to pray, that prayer is intimate conversation with God where we can be perfectly honest and expressive. Our prayers are heard and answered by God, though not always in the ways we desire or expect. But we have this assurance, even when it does not feel as though God is listening. Our prayers should always seek to do God's will. This is our highest joy. And this is the supreme blessing of prayer.

About the Writer

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Publisher's Note

This study may also be accessed on The Thoughtful Christian Web site under the title "Why Pray?"