



Getting (Re)Started with Prayer

Introduction: Prayer Basics

This booklet encourages us to pray to our loving Heavenly Father. This booklet also helps us to get started with prayer, because we're new to prayer or because we want to get back to praying. Whatever the reason that you have this booklet in front of you now, by reading this, we hope you are encouraged to get started or get started again toward developing a robust prayer life with God.

So, let's start with the basics.

What Is Prayer?

At its heart, prayer is simply spending time with God. It's a kind of communication, very often, though just sitting silently with God counts as prayer, too. Most people who pray do it in words, either out loud or silently, in their heads. Other people may sing their prayers, or they may write, or type them. Some people who are artistically inclined pray through drawing and painting. Some use imagination and images, if that comes naturally to them.

What should you do? If you're just learning to pray, you can try different things and see what feels comfortable to you. God has made people in many different ways. Find out what works for you! You don't have to pray exactly the same way your friend or neighbor prays. Even better, ask the Lord to teach you how to pray. He is your best teacher, because He made you and knows you better than anyone.

Prayer can be individual or communal—for instance, when a group of people pray together at worship or in a Bible study. This booklet is going to focus on private individual prayer and how you can get started.

Why Pray at All?

It's a good question! We pray because, through Jesus, God made us to be His own people, His own family. Because of that, we are already in a relationship with Him—and it would be very odd to never communicate with someone you're related to! Relationships grow closer when people communicate with each other. God created us, redeemed us, and intends to spend all eternity with us—because He loves us and wants to be with us. If that's what we have to look forward to, it makes sense for us to talk to Him and spend time with Him now! As we grow in prayer, we come to know God better and to love Him more—and to know the amazing love He has for us, His children.

Who Do We Pray To?

As Christians, we pray to the Triune God, who is Father, Son (that is, Jesus), and Holy Spirit. We do not pray to saints or angels—why do that when you can go straight to the most high God who loves you dearly? It isn't necessary, and we have no guarantees that anybody *but* God Himself can actually hear our prayers. So it makes sense to stick with what the Bible shows us.

How do you address God, then? What do you call Him? Some people stick with “Lord” or “God,” which is perfectly fine. Others tend to pray to one member of the Trinity—Jesus, for example, routinely prayed to His “Father,” and taught us to do so too in the Lord’s Prayer (see Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). St. Stephen, the first adult to lose his life for the sake of Christ, prayed to Jesus in his final moments of life (see Acts 7:59). And the church through the ages has many prayers and hymns addressed to the Holy Spirit.

Don’t be concerned about which Person of the Triune God you address. He isn’t going to get upset with you for whatever choice you make because He deeply wants to be in close communication with you.

Practical Suggestions for Getting Started

Here’s a simple guide to getting started if you have never prayed before, or if it’s been a long time.

1. First of all, find a quiet place where you can be private without having anyone interrupt you or distract you. Some people use their bedroom or even a bathroom for this. Others go for walks outside the house, or sit in their car at work during a break. You are looking for a spot where you can concentrate and not have to worry about people overhearing you.
2. Find a good time to pray—a time when you’re not sleepy or in a hurry, and when you can reasonably expect to have a little time not interrupted by other responsibilities. This can be hard during certain times of life, such as when you have a newborn. In those cases, improvise! It’s perfectly possible to pray while walking the baby around the house at night, or while nursing.
3. Consider setting an alarm if you’re afraid you might lose track of time. It’s better to set an alarm and forget about it than to be constantly losing your train of thought because you have to check the clock to see if it’s time to pick the kids up!
4. Get into a comfortable position (*not* one that will put you asleep!) and say to the Lord, “Lord, I’m here.” Then sit in silence for a while, if you like. You don’t need to be always talking. If there’s something you want to say to Him, say it, and don’t worry about your language! God is not criticizing you or judging you on your vocabulary. It’s okay to pray like a five-year-old, or even more childishly.
5. Ask the Lord to teach you how to pray. He is the best teacher, because He knows exactly how He made you and what will be best for you.
6. Some people choose to say a prayer that is already written for them, such as the Lord’s Prayer (more about this later). If you do this, it has the advantage of helping you get started, as well as reminding you of things you want to pray for and might otherwise forget. When you finish, you can carry on praying in your own words if you like, about whatever concerns you have that you want to talk to God about. Or you can simply be done. There’s no right or wrong way to do this.
7. If you wish, use a journal, calendar, or computer file to write down concerns you don’t want to forget. Then, when it’s time to pray, you can pull out your list and remember you wanted to pray for Aunt P’s cancer or your friend J’s new baby.
8. Most people end their prayers with the words “Amen” or “In Jesus’ Name I pray, Amen.” You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to—there are plenty of Bible prayers that have no special ending at all. But if you do want to, you can. Praying “in Jesus’ Name” reminds us that God has promised to hear our prayers on account of Jesus, our Savior, who died and rose for us, and who has made us God’s children. This is not a magical formula that has to be on the end of every prayer, but it is a comforting reminder of God’s goodness to us in Jesus.

What we’ve just outlined is a very simple way to get started with prayer. Remember that God Himself is your best teacher, and that He is eager to have you come to Him—to spend time with you. You are someone He loves deeply, and so this time together is time you spend in love. You have His attention, His kindness, and His joy when you turn to Him to pray.

What Should We Pray About? (aka, How to Pray Different Kinds of Prayer)

In short, everything! We should pray about anything and everything that is in our hearts, that catches our attention or weighs down our spirits—because God cares about us, and so He cares about what we care about. There is nothing so tiny or so silly that you cannot bring it to God in prayer.

People pray for several different reasons, including petition (asking for something), thanksgiving, confession of sins, and simply enjoying God. Let's take these one by one.

Petitionary Prayer

A lot of people feel shy or embarrassed to bring their wants to God. They think it is not “spiritual” or “mature” to do that because it feels selfish. But Jesus Himself encourages us to pray for what we want and need—it's right in the Lord's Prayer, when He teaches us to pray, “Give us each day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3). Luther explains what this means: “Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like” (*Small Catechism*, “Explanation of the Fourth Petition”).

We can pray for anything, even if it seems tiny or silly or even rude—for example, help with constipation! God is our Maker, and He is glad when we turn to Him with all our needs, just as a beloved child turns to his dear father. Similarly, it is not wrong to pray for a parking spot when you're late to an appointment. God has all power and can listen to the whole world pray at once—so if you pray for help finding your lost keys, that won't hurt anyone else who has a more “serious” prayer about world peace. God can care for you both.

It's important to remember that God hasn't promised to give us exactly what we ask for every time in exactly the way we want it. (Sometimes we *are* being selfish!) Jesus set us a good example when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42b). In this case, Jesus was asking to be rescued from death, and God said no for good reason. So, we see that even the most perfect person who ever lived had God say “No” to Him sometimes. We, too, may sometimes have to deal with God's “no.” When we aren't sure about the intention of our prayer, it's good to pray, “Your will be done,” because we know that God's wisdom is greater than ours, and He might know a very good reason why what we're asking for shouldn't happen. By saying, “Nevertheless, not my will but Yours be done,” we are trusting God to make the final decision. We are treating Him as the God who loves us and wants what is best for us—not as a push-button machine that gives us whatever we want.

Thanksgiving

He may also say “Yes,” of course, and then we'll want to remember to thank Him! Thanksgiving is another kind of prayer, and it's one that most of us would benefit from praying a lot more often. Take a few minutes and think through your life. How many good things has God given you, maybe things you take for granted? What about your body, your family, your home, your food, your work, your friends and neighbors? What about that squirrel you saw run past you in the park that made you smile? All of these are great things to thank God for—even if it's just a super quick, “Thanks, Lord”—and then you go on with your day.

Thanksgiving has a way of multiplying. At first you see just a few things to be thankful for—but soon you begin to see more and more, until you're overwhelmed by the gifts God gives you, big and small. And this leads to many good outcomes, including contentment and a stronger love for God.

Confession

Another good way to pray is to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. We know that we are sinners, broken people who fall in some way every day of our lives. Sometimes it's something major. More often it's something minor but hurtful—the time you snapped at the children, or the half-lie you told at work when you forgot to do an assignment. Sin hurts us and it hurts others, and so God calls us to bring it to Him and let Him make us clean of it, to heal the hurt it causes. First John 1:8-9 tells us, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

As Christians, we know that God forgives us willingly, even eagerly, because of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection from the dead for our sake (see John 3:16-18; 1 John 1:7). We don't need to hide from God when we're feeling guilty. We can come straight to Him, like children who've fallen into a mud puddle, and say, “I'm sorry. Please make me clean again.” And He will. He will never refuse us. The God who became a human being, our Savior Jesus, loves us dearly and will gladly forgive us again and again and again—as many times as it takes. And the Holy Spirit will keep working in our hearts to make us more and more into the image of Christ.

Enjoying God

A fourth reason we can pray is very simply to enjoy God. This may sound strange to you at first, but don't you have friends or family with whom you spend time, simply because you like to? You go for coffee together; you have a meal or a walk together; you make phone calls. So also with God. As we grow in relationship to Him, we come to enjoy spending time with Him. And part of that enjoyment comes in prayer.

If you have ever read the book of Psalms in the Bible, you see how many of these prayers to God involve praising Him. The writers tell God again and again how wonderful He is. They say things like this:

“Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord my God, You are very great!
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to Him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.” (Psalm 104:1, 33-34)

Why do people praise the Lord? Is it because God *needs* us to tell Him how great He is? Is it because He is conceited and arrogant? Is it because we *have* to flatter Him to get what we want?

No, of course not! The fact is praise is one of the main ways we enjoy anything in our lives. Did you see a good movie? The next time you talk to a friend, you'll praise it to them. Did you enjoy your dinner? You'll praise the cook and the recipe. Are you in love? No doubt you are driving your friends and relatives crazy as you describe all the ways your new love is the most wonderful person on the face of the earth. Praise is the natural way human beings enjoy something; and that holds true for God as well.

Praise is the language of a person in love. As redeemed human beings, we are made to enjoy God; and the more we get to know Him and love Him, the more we will automatically praise Him, just as we praise anything else we enjoy. As you grow in your prayer life, you will also grow in your love for God and your enjoyment of Him.

There are other modes of enjoying God, of course. Some people sing songs or hymns to Him. Some even dance. For some people, sitting in silent adoration is how they like to spend time enjoying God's presence. For some, they like to ask God to go along with them when running errands around town and want some company. Hey, it's fair! Because Jesus has promised, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20b). Keeping Him in mind as we go about our day makes us (and Him) happy, and it's also a way of doing what Paul recommended when he said, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Help for Getting Past Common Barriers to Prayer

It's silly to pretend that prayer is always easy and pleasurable. We can face several different problems in prayer, and a lot of them tend to be emotional.

"I Don't Wanna"

The first is childish—"I don't wanna pray right now"—but it's a real problem sometimes, isn't it? That's okay. There are times we don't want to brush our teeth either; but we do it because we know it's a good thing to do. So it is with prayer. If it's your usual time to pray and you "don't wanna," well, then, you can go to the Lord and say, "I'm sorry, but I'm just not in the mood to pray right now." Why not? He knows it anyway!

And then just go ahead and pray, at least a little—because our choice is what matters, not the emotions we have no control over. We can pray simply because it's the right thing to do right now, for us and for the people we pray for. And, we can also ask the Lord to change our mood so it's easier next time.

"I Don't Feel Fit to Come Before the Good and Holy God"

This is a harder one. It can happen when we've committed a major sin, and we shrink back from being in God's pure presence; but of course that's when we need Him most of all. But it can also happen when we carry no real guilt at all, but we've had something terrible happen to us—something that makes us feel dirty and unclean. It can happen if we're suffering from depression or anxiety, or severe irritability, or even grief. It can happen when the devil whispers to us, "Who are you that God should care about you at all? You're just lying to yourself."

In all these cases the best thing we can possibly do is march ourselves straight to a private place and tell God exactly how we're feeling. But we don't have to do it alone. The Bible tells us, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27). We have the Holy Spirit to help us when we just don't know what to say, or can't bring ourselves to say it; and we have Jesus to help us, too: "Consequently, [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Jesus speaks to God the Father on our behalf, as our own High Priest; and when we can't speak for ourselves, it's a comfort to know that both God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are speaking for us.

We can also ask for the prayers of fellow Christians, if we feel up to it. Their prayers and loving concern can be a great comfort in hard times.

"I Keep Getting Distracted"

Distraction is a common problem in prayer. This is why it's important to find yourself a place and time to pray where you have as few distractions as possible, either from outside (people, noises) or from inside (intrusive thoughts). Some people find it easier to pray when there's a low roar of noise nearby—the sound of an air purifier, a highway with cars on it. For those people complete and utter quiet is fertile ground for all sorts of stray thoughts that distract from prayer.

What you really *don't* want to do is to try to crush the stray thoughts by sheer force. That won't work, they'll just come back again and again and again till you give up. It's usually better to handle them this way: First, have a pen and paper handy, so that if something truly important occurs to you in the middle of prayer (for example, the fact that you need to call your child's doctor this afternoon), you can write it down, so you don't forget it. Once it's on the paper, it will usually stop distracting you, because there's no more danger of forgetting something truly important.

The second thing you do with distracting thoughts is to simply let them drift on by—and as soon as they've done that, you go right back to praying where you left off. No need to make a big deal about them. Treat them like birds flying past, or like falling leaves.

If they continue to annoy you, try the third option: Turn them into a reason to pray. For example, if you keep being distracted by thoughts of a problem at your job, look straight at that problem and say, “Lord, I need to talk to You about this.” And then pray about the problem. It may be that the reason it keeps bugging you is because you ought to be praying about it. And after that it will very often go away.

“I’m Bored”

Let’s be honest ... prayer *can* be boring! This is usually because we are just at the beginning of our relationship with God, and we’re still practicing the basics—the ABCs of how we live with Him and talk to Him. So here’s a great way to combat the “blahs” of prayer: change it up! If you usually pray sitting in a chair, go for a walk. If you pray silently, write out your prayer in a journal; or turn your computer screen off and type it on your keyboard. As always, just be honest with God; tell the Lord straightforwardly that you’re having a problem with boredom and ask for His help. You might be surprised at what He comes up with!

If the problem is specifically with a long, long list of people you’ve promised to pray for—Uncle John with a stroke, your neighbor with her marriage problems, and so forth—well, you can change that up, too.

- For example, pray for some people on certain days of the week and others on other days.
- Try thanksgiving rather than just petitionary prayer—“Lord, I thank You for Mrs. X next door and the beautiful garden she keeps up. I love to look at it every day.”
- Make it even more personal: “Thank You for the way Gina listens to me when I need to talk. Thank You for giving her such patience.”
- You might even pray (occasionally) for everybody en masse: “Oh Lord, I’m sorry to be in a hurry today, but would You please bless and look after all the people I usually pray for? Thank You.”

“I Don’t Know What to Pray For”

As you grow in prayer, you may begin to wonder if you’re missing things (people, issues, needs, etc.) you feel like you should be praying about. Or you feel the desire to go beyond the obvious and immediate needs of today that force themselves on your attention. What else could you be praying about?

Jesus gave us the “Lord’s Prayer” for just this reason, so we could learn from it what to pray and how. Here is the Lord’s Prayer in the version from Matthew 6:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be Your Name.
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 lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.” (Matthew 6:9b-13)

We call the different parts of the “Lord’s Prayer” the “petitions.”

Notice that we start by asking for things that have to do with our relationship to God—we call Him Father, for that is what He is, now that we have come to trust in His Son Jesus who saved us.

Then, especially in a world full of darkness and evil, we pray for God’s kingdom to come to us; and we ask for God’s will to be done, God’s good and perfect will right here and now “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Then we move on to asking our Provider for our daily needs. We ask God to supply us with everything we need on a daily basis for body and soul.

We ask God to forgive our sins, and we tell Him we are forgiving those who sin against us—because God cares about that; He will not forgive a person who insists on carrying a grudge against another person. (Note: this does not mean that you are damned if you are trying to forgive someone and having trouble; that is a different situation).

Finally, we ask God to protect us from times of temptation and trial, because we know we are weak and can fall so easily; and we beg Him to save us from evil.

And we end by remembering the glorious truth that the God to whom we are praying can do all these things for us, because the Kingdom, the power, and the glory belong to Him forever. We are safe forever in His care.

One beautiful thing about this prayer is that you can expand it to any amount you need to. For example, suppose you are having serious financial problems right now in your life; when you get to the petition about daily bread, stop and talk to God very specifically about what you're facing—a job hunt? Too many bills? The need for wisdom as you figure out what to do next?

Similarly, if you are worried about politics in your country, you might spend extra time with the petition “Your kingdom come.” God’s kingdom is always perfect and good; what would it mean for God’s kingdom to come to us, now, in our world? What are we asking Him to do for us, and maybe even through us, in the place where we live?

The Lord’s Prayer is not the only model prayer that helps us to pray when we don’t know what to pray or when we want to go deeper than the immediate needs of the day. Christians throughout the ages have done the same with the prayers in the book of Psalms in the Bible. Are you happy? There’s a psalm that expresses those feelings, and you can pray it. Are you worried and afraid? There’s a psalm about that. Do you have enemies? Are you facing death? Somewhere in the book of Psalms, you’re likely to find what you need—and you can expand it with your own thoughts, too, just as we did with the Lord’s Prayer earlier.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” Matthew 7:7

Answers to Common Questions About Prayer

Can I Mess It Up?

Occasionally people get themselves into knots worrying whether it’s possible to pray and accidentally bring about some evil result. This is something you *never* have to worry about! We have a good and loving God, and He would never turn our prayers to evil—never give us a curse when we asked for a blessing. Jesus Himself tells us so: “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:9-11)

We could take this one step further: If someone actually prayed for an evil thing by mistake, God would refuse to give it to him. In Jesus’ example, it would be like a child asking his father for a venomous snake. The father won’t give it to him no matter how much the child begs; He will give him something better instead. And so God behaves with us. He knows we are like little children and barely know what we need or what to ask for; in His love and wisdom He will always overrule us when we ask wrongly.

Why Does God Allow Evil?

Have you ever found yourself asking God, “Why?” about something evil that He has allowed to happen to you or someone you care about? If this sounds familiar, it’s no surprise. Christians have been wrestling with the problem of evil and why God allows it for a long, long time, all the way back to the book of Job in the Bible.

So, is it okay to question Him? Is it okay to say “Why me?” and “Why them?” and get upset with God, or even angry? Yes. It is far, far better for us to bring *all our trouble* to God—including our upset and anger—than for us to turn away from Him, or even lose our faith. **God can handle our feelings.** He understands them—after all, it was God-as-a-human-being, Jesus Christ Himself, who cried out from the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34b) Jesus will not blame you for having the same feelings and turmoil He had.

So, will God answer you? Maybe not the way you want Him to. Oh, He may encourage you to trust Him more, or He may simply listen to you in love. But you're not likely to get a fully-worked-out theological explanation for why someone dear to you died a painful death last week. And in the long run, that's okay. We trust in God, not because He gives us all the answers we want, but because we know Him and what kind of God He is. We know that He is trustworthy and reliable, and that He loves us enough to give His life for us, even to the point of crucifixion; and we know that He is good and hates evil.

In the end, when we're faced with the problem of evil and why God allows it, the surest thing we can do is hold on to what we know for certain through Jesus Christ—that God really does care about us and about the devastation of evil, He is stronger than all evil, and that He loves us enough to die and rise for us. Some day we may know more. But for now, we can pray even in hard times, knowing He loves us more than we can even imagine—and trusting that He will work things out for good in the end (see Romans 8:28).

Did I “Hear God”?

It occasionally happens that, while you're praying, you have a strong sense that God has just communicated something to you. It could be in words, or it could be some sort of image or vision. If that happens, how do you know if it's really from God? This is what the Bible calls “discernment”—telling the difference between what is of God and what is purely human, or even from the devil (because of course the devil will try to interfere with your prayers! He doesn't want you praying!).

Here is a concise answer to a very substantial and wonderful process. The first and most important thing to keep in mind is that God will never contradict Himself. That means that if you “hear” anything that goes against the Bible, you should throw it out immediately. God will never tell you that you're allowed to steal this one time only, or commit adultery, or do any of a thousand other things that the Bible clearly forbids us to do. If it doesn't match up with what you read in the Bible, throw it overboard immediately and worry no more about it.

But what if it doesn't contradict the Bible, and you're still not sure you heard from God? For example, you think God is calling you into the pastoral ministry, or to get married or some decision like that ...? This is the time to pray more about it, consult with your pastor and some trusted mature Christian friends. The Holy Spirit lives in the people of the church, the body of Christ. That means you can seek His help through fellow Christians when you are trying to discern whether something comes from God or not.

Conclusion

In the end, prayer is a beautiful and gracious gift God gives us so that we can be with Him, enjoy Him, and grow in our relationship with Him—even now, here on earth, before we see Him face to face. The Lord is your best teacher when it comes to prayer, so ask Him for help. You'll be glad you did.

Other Resources on Prayer for You:

- **Project Connect** booklet on Forgiveness
- Bible study *Nurturing Your Faith: Prayer*
- **LHM Learn** course *Crying Out to God*
- **LHM Learn** course *5 Ways to Pray with Your Child*
- Children's booklet *Learning to Pray*, and also available in Spanish, *Aprendiendo a orar*
- Adult booklet *Helping Your Child Have a Relationship with God*



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