

CHAPTER 12

Prayer

KEY IDEA

I pray to God to know him, to find direction for my life and to lay my requests before him.

KEY VERSE

If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!

— Psalm 66:18 – 20

BEGIN BY RECITING THE KEY VERSE AND THE KEY IDEA TOGETHER AS A GROUP.

LESSON

INTRODUCTION:

Prayer is not a mysterious practice reserved only for pastors/clergy members. Prayer is simply communicating with God – listening and talking to him.

> Believers can pray from the heart, freely, spontaneously, and in their own words.

Those who take prayer to heart do not see it simply as a series of requests that God will change the world in the way they personally want. Rather it is an active way of participating in the working out of God's plan for the world.

> Prayer can involve words, thoughts, silence, reading, or listening.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PRAYER?

The first mention of prayer is found in Genesis.

> **Genesis 4:26** *And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then men began to call on the name of the LORD.*

WHAT IS THE CORRECT POSTURE FOR PRAYER?

There is no correct or certain posture for prayer. In the Bible people prayed on their knees (1 Kings 8:54), bowing (Exodus 4:31), on their faces before God (2 Chronicles 20:18; Matthew 26:39), and standing (1 Kings 8:22).

> Pray with your eyes opened or closed, quietly or out loud—however you are most comfortable and least distracted.

SHOULD I USE ELOQUENT WORDS? Your prayers need not be wordy or impressive in speech.

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

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

SHOULD I PRAY ALONE OR WITH OTHERS?

> God wants us to pray together with other believers.

< **Matthew 18:19** *Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

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

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

> God also wants us to pray alone and in secret.

< **Matthew 6:6** *But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

< **Mark 1:35** *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*

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

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

Our God is a personal God who desires a real relationship with us. He is not a distant, cosmic being, but a good father who longs to interact with his children. Prayer is a conversation between God and his people. We serve a God who is not threatened by our questions and doubts. We don't have to put on a false persona to please him. He permits us to be honest about our fears, our feelings of isolation and our disappointments.

The psalmist declares in no uncertain terms this truth: Prayer works.

> When we engage in the action and discipline of prayer to know God better we convey and reinforce our belief in God.

> Whether it is someone's occasional 9-1-1 prayer, or the believer's daily dialogue with God, there is a distinct element of submission in every heartfelt prayer, where we are admitting we have a need we cannot possibly meet on our own.

Psalm 66:16-20

¹⁶ *All who worship God, come here and listen; I will tell you everything God has done for me.*

¹⁷ *I prayed to the Lord, and I praised him.*

¹⁸ *If my thoughts had been sinful, he would have refused to hear me. ¹⁹ But God did listen and answered my prayer. ²⁰ Let's praise God! He listened when I prayed, and he is always kind.*

Verse 18 speaks of confession. When we recognize sin in our hearts, we must confess it and forsake it.

> If we fail to confess and forsake, the Lord can't work on our behalf. (Isaiah 59:1-2 *The LORD hasn't lost his powerful strength; he can still hear and answer prayers. ² Your sins are the roadblock between you and your God. That's why he doesn't answer your prayers or let you see his face.*)

PRAYER IS...

> Prayer is the practice of the presence of God.

- > Prayer is the place where pride is abandoned, hope is lifted, and requests are made.
- > Prayer is the place of admitting our need, of putting on humility, and claiming dependence upon God.
- > Prayer is the needed practice for every Christian.
- > Prayer is the exercise of faith and hope.
- > Prayer is the privilege of touching the heart of the Father through the Son of God, Jesus our Lord.

The Bible speaks much of prayer. But, sometimes we ignore prayer and seek to accomplish life in the strength of our own wills.

- > For those of us who may be guilty of this, we need to confess our sin, receive God's forgiveness, and seek the will of the Lord over our own.
- > God is sovereign and loving, and He knows what is best for us and others even if it doesn't always seem to make the most sense.



KEY QUESTION: How do I grow by communicating with God?

When we pray, we are having a conversation with God. (Remember any good conversation is a two way dialogue.)

A conversation with God takes many forms:

- > **Praising:** This involves putting ourselves in a place of appropriate humility in front of the God who is holy, loving and just.
- > **Thanking:** This is a way of recognizing that everything that gives value or joy to life is the gift of God, not merely good fortune.
- > **Asking:** Prayers of this kind can be personal (e.g. healing for sick friend) or immense in scale (e.g. for the end of a war).
- > **Seeking forgiveness:** This involves confession of something wrong and a recognition that God has mercy on those who regret what they have done and seek to change.
- > **Looking for guidance:** Prayer frequently asks God for direction, or seeks understanding in life's circumstances.

How do we pray in a way that will get results? Answers will come as we learn to pray in the right way.
 > Since problems oftentimes work themselves out, many people feel that they have had an answer to prayer when they really have not.

Okay, what was your reaction to this last sentence?

TWELVE POINTS OF EFFECTIVE PRAYING
 #1} *Pray sincerely to the true God.*

It is vital that you pray to God, not angels, not deceased loved ones, etc.

> In our ecumenical approach to religion, some may think that praying to anything is just the same as praying to God.

> Jesus set the example for prayer to God.

< **John 17:1** *After Jesus had finished speaking to his disciples, he looked up toward heaven and prayed: Father, the time has come for you to bring glory to your Son, in order that he may bring glory to you.*

< **Matthew 6:9** ⁹ *You should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, help us to honor your name.*

> As you pray, think about whom you are praying to and consciously worship this God who gives you life.

#2} Study the Bible

Praying involves believing what God says. The Bible is God's instruction to mankind on how they should live.

> It reveals essential knowledge that we could not get in any other way.

< It tells us who God is, what He is like and how we ought to serve him.

< It gives us instructions on how we ought to pray.

> To know God, to understand His will and to believe in His promises, you need to regularly study his Word.

< Study the teachings and examples relating to prayer. Let the Word teach you how to pray and what to ask for.

#3} Genuinely Repent Your Sin

Although at times God hears the prayers of anyone who sincerely cries out to Him in time of need, He is not bound by his Word to do this.

Isaiah 59:1-2 *The LORD hasn't lost his powerful strength; he can still hear and answer prayers. ² Your sins are the roadblock between you and your God. That's why he doesn't answer your prayers or let you see his face.*

John 9:31 ³¹ *We know that God listens only to people who love and obey him. God doesn't listen to sinners.*

After reading these two verses, how do you feel? Do you think this may answer the question some people raise as to "Where is God?" and "Why did/didn't God?"

We receive answers as we keep God's commandments.

1 John 3:22 ²¹ *Dear friends, if we feel at ease in the presence of God, we will have the courage to come near him. ²² He will give us whatever we ask, because we obey him and do what pleases him.*

²³ *God wants us to have faith in his Son Jesus Christ and to love each other. This is also what Jesus taught us to do.*

#4} Forgive Others

Another vital point to answered prayer is our willingness to truly forgive others.

> Immediately after Jesus gave the guideline to prayer, he instructed His listeners on forgiveness.

< **Matthew 6:14** ¹⁴ *If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

> A spirit of forgiveness and mercy is a key element in whether or not our prayers are effective.

Because Jesus ended what we call "The Lord's Prayer" with this admonition to forgiveness, doesn't it seem that an unforgiving spirit may block our communication with God?

#5} *God will listen to the sinner*

God does often hear even the prayers of the non-believer.

> God will hear the prayers of weak or spiritually blinded people who humbly pray to Him in a right attitude of worship and confession.

Luke 18:9-14 CEV

⁹ *Jesus told a story to some people who thought they were better than others and who looked down on everyone else:*

¹⁰ *Two men went into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

¹¹ *The Pharisee stood over by himself and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not greedy, dishonest, and unfaithful in marriage like other people. And I am really glad that I am not like that tax collector over there. ¹² I go without eating for two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all I earn."*

¹³ *The tax collector stood off at a distance and did not think he was good enough even to look up toward heaven. He was so sorry for what he had done that he pounded his chest and prayed, "God, have pity on me! I am such a sinner."*

¹⁴ *Then Jesus said, "When the two men went home, it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who was pleasing to God."*

The prayer of the tax collector showed his sorrow and attitude of repentance. The "sinner's prayer (Ps. 51:1 *You are kind, God! Please have pity on me. You are always merciful! Please wipe away my sins.*) seeks God's mercy.

#6} *Seek God's Will*

To have successful prayer is to be absolutely sure—as far as possible—you align your will and requests with God's will.

How do you seek God's will for your life?

- > You can find God’s will by studying the Bible and yielding your life to Christ.
 - < Christ’s example: Luke 22:43 -- ⁴² *“Father, if you will, please don’t make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want.”*
 - < Our Prayer Example: Matthew 6:10 -- *your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*
- > If we pray in faith that God will hear us—and in accordance with His will—we may be sure that He is listening.
 - < 1 John 5:14-15 -- ¹⁴ *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.* ¹⁵ *And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*

#7} *Have Faith in God.*

For our prayers to be effective it is essential that we have faith in God.

- > Hebrews 11:6 -- ⁶ *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*
- > James 1:6-7 -- ⁵ *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.* ⁶ *But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.* ⁷ *That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.*
- Mark 11:22-24 -- ²² *“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered.* ²³ *“Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.* ²⁴ *Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*
- > Pray and ask God to continually give you the faith you need.
- > Learn to believe that God is real – that he has perfect wisdom, perfect love and perfect power.
- > Realize that he will keep all his promises.

Do you think people today find it easier to place their faith in tangible things (e.g. people, jobs, government etc.) than in the intangible (e.g. salvation through Jesus, God’s sovereignty, etc.)? Why do you think this way?

#8} *Be Persistent*

Before God intervenes for us he wants to know that we deeply desire whatever we are asking for, and that we will respect and worship him for answering our prayer.

- > God uses our need or desire as a “vehicle” to draw us closer to him spiritually so we focus on his will and on what is really best for us and those for whom we are praying.
 - < If our requests are not important to us enough to persist, then it appears we are not all that interested in doing his will.

> Luke 18:1-8 -- The Parable of the Persistent Widow

¹ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

⁴ "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

This is a parable about a widow who desperately needed justice. She had several counts against her.

- ✓ First, she was a woman. In her culture women did not appear in court.
- ✓ Second, she was a widow and had no man to appear before the judge on her behalf.
- ✓ Third, she was poor and had nothing to use as a bribe to gain the attention of the judge.

Her persistence finally caused the judge to give her a fair decision – not because he wanted to, but because he wanted to get rid of her.

Jesus' parable had a point that he needed his disciples to see.

+ During the waiting time before he would set up his kingdom, his disciples would have to endure injustice and persecution. He encouraged them to pray and not to give up.

- In the same way we need to keep trusting and praying, even when we do not see answers immediately.

+ If the widow finally got what she deserved from an insensitive judge, how much more would Jesus' disciples receive mercy from their loving Heavenly Father.

+ Jesus' warning is for us today. When we do not see our prayers answered we should not give up praying. Believers must persevere in faithful praying until Jesus returns to earth.

> 1 Thessalonians 5:17 -- ¹⁷ *pray continually,*

> Learn to pray regularly, spending enough time in prayer to become aware of God' presence.

#9} Pray Fervently

One of the reasons we do not receive more answers to prayers is that we do not put our hearts into our prayers.

What would be your definition of "fervent prayer"?

> Hosea 7:14 -- ¹⁴ *They do not cry out to me from their hearts but wail on their beds. They slash themselves, appealing to their gods for grain and new wine, but they turn away from me.*

> Do you pray with your entire being, or do you mumble a few half-hearted requests to God just before drifting off to sleep.

> Hebrews 5:7 -- ⁷ *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*

> The truly vital issues of life are not material, they are spiritual – having to do with God and eternity.

#10} *Ask God to Fashion and Mold You.*

Seeking God's will rather than our own—giving total submission to God—is vital to our prayer life.

> We need to engage God in long, thoughtful conversation about how we can more fully yield to him, walk with him and honor him in our lives.

> We need to ask God to help us fulfill the purpose for which we were born.

NOTE: It is fine to pray for material/physical things. But the ultimate purpose of prayer is to help us focus on God.

> God wants to mold us into the likeness of Christ in order to fulfill his purposes:

< Ephesians 4:12-13 -- ¹² *to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up* ¹³ *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

> Isaiah 64:8 -- ⁸ *Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

#11} *Give Praise and Thanks to God.*

> Psalm 18:1-3-- ¹ *I love you, LORD, my strength.* ² *The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.* ³ *I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies.*

> We need to appreciate every beautiful sunrise and sunset, every moving work of music, art or literature, every beautiful human being and the talents and love they possess – and realize that they all came from God.

> We need to constantly thank and praise God for every good gift and for his help and blessing in every situation.

> 1 Thessalonians 5:18 -- ¹⁸ *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

#12} *Pray in the Name of Jesus Christ*

In ancient Israel, the high priest ALONE, and only once a year, was allowed to go into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle or temple—which represented entering into the direct presence of God.

Disobedience brought death. Mankind was cut off from direct contact with God.

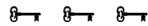
> But today, because Jesus died for our sins, true Christians have direct access to the Father.

< Instead of fearing death in coming before God, we are instructed: "*Let us therefore come BOLDLY to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need!*" (Hebrews 4:16).

< Through the office and authority of Jesus Christ—we can directly approach God in prayer and worship.

^ Jesus becomes our High Priest who intercedes for us. (Heb. 4:14).

^ Jesus also taught: " ²³ *In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*" (John 16:23-24).



In chapters 1-10 of BELIEVE we studied the beliefs of Jesus. In chapters 11-20 we are seeing how the practices of Jesus connect to the beliefs of Jesus. Christ calls us to pray as he prayed. This is how we grow by communicating with God – through prayer.

To learn how to act like Jesus in this area of prayer, we must look at the times in the Gospels when Jesus prayed.

THE MODEL PRAYER LIFE

Scripture contains many examples of men and women who demonstrated a healthy prayer life, but there is no more perfect model than Jesus. Spending time in prayer with the Father gave him the strength and guidance he needed to fulfill his purpose in coming to earth. Jesus consistently sought direction and support from his Father.

Mark 1:32-35

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Prayer was a priority to Jesus. In Mark 1 we see he went away from everyone else to be alone. No distractions; no other voices; no one but the Father and him.

> If Jesus needed to spend time alone with the Father, talking to him and listening to him, it would seem, as Christians, we should recognize this same priority.

*FROM **THINK AHEAD, BELIEVE LIKE JESUS** by Randy Frazee*

It's important not to view this dedicated time of prayer as our "God time," and then to make the rest of our day be all about us. Rather, the focused time with God sets the tone for our day, starting an ongoing dialogue that will continue throughout the ups and downs of daily life.

Luke 6:12-16

¹² One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

¹³ When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: ¹⁴ Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, ¹⁵ Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶ Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Luke is the only gospel that mentions Jesus praying before choosing the apostles.

> Praying all night underscores the importance that Jesus placed on prayer, especially before making the crucial choice of who should be his apostles.

< Jesus knows that the shortness of his ministry means he will need to select others to take his message of salvation to the ends of the earth.

FROM THE SMART GUIDE TO THE BIBLE SERIES: THE BOOK OF MARK

Jesus the Son of God had laid aside his divine ability to know all, so he acknowledged his dependence on his Father for the wisdom he needed in choosing the twelve who would become his disciples. If Jesus needed to spend time with his father seeking guidance, how much more do we need that time alone with God?

Sometime after choosing his disciples, Jesus received news that Herod had cruelly beheaded Jesus' cousin John the Baptist. Upon hearing the news and to avoid the threat of Herod, Jesus fled on a boat with his disciples to a solitary place. However, crowds of thousands of followers got ahead of the group and met them when they landed ashore. Despite the interruption to his plans, Jesus took compassion on the people and taught them about the kingdom of God. At the end of the day, when the people were hungry, the disciples tried to send them home. Jesus stopped them and miraculously turned five loaves and two fish into a meal that would feed five thousand people.

FROM Mark 6:39-46 (CEV)

³⁹ Jesus told his disciples to have the people sit down on the green grass. ⁴⁰ They sat down in groups of a hundred and groups of fifty. ⁴¹ Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish. He looked up toward heaven and blessed the food. Then he broke the bread and handed it to his disciples to give to the people. He also divided the two fish, so that everyone could have some.

Jesus looked up toward heaven and blessed the food—he depends on his heavenly Father in this miracle of multiplying food.

... ⁴⁵ Right away, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and start back across to Bethsaida. But he stayed until he had sent the crowds away. ⁴⁶ Then he told them good-bye and went up on the side of a mountain to pray.

On the heels of the emotional loss of John and a long day of ministering, Jesus retreated to a secluded place to spend time with the Father.

As Jesus approached the conclusion of his ministry, he knew it would culminate on a cross, which typically meant a slow and excruciatingly painful death. Knowing what he was about to endure, Jesus appealed to God for a way around the torture, though he remained unflinching in his resolve to accomplish his Father's will.

Matthew 26:36-44 (CEV)

³⁶ Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. When they got there, he told them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ Jesus took along Peter and the two brothers, James and John. He was very sad and troubled, ³⁸ and he said to them, "I am so sad that I feel as if I am dying. Stay here and keep awake with me."

³⁹ Jesus walked on a little way. Then he knelt with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, don't make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want."

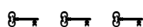
⁴⁰ He came back and found his disciples sleeping. So he said to Peter, "Can't any of you stay awake with me for just one hour?" ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray that you won't be tested. You want to do what is right, but you are weak." ⁴² Again Jesus went to pray and said, "My Father, if there is no other way, and I must suffer, I will still do what you want."

⁴³ Jesus came back and found them sleeping again. They simply could not keep their eyes open. ⁴⁴ He left them and prayed the same prayer once more.

FROM JON COURSON'S APPLICATION COMMENTARY:

You who are interested in prayer and faith, take note: The key to prayer is not so much "name it and claim it." Rather, the key to prayer is "request and rest." That's the way Jesus prayed. "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from Me. That's My request. Nevertheless, not My will, but Thy will be done. That's where I will rest."

Does the above quote bring you any peace or comfort? Does it bring you a sense of restlessness or rest? Explain.



WHY SHOULD I PRAY?

> Prayer Develops Our Relationship with God.

Communicating with God—helps us grow closer and more intimately connected with God.

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

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

> The Lord Instructed Us to Pray.

One of the simplest reasons to spend time in prayer is because the Lord instructed us to pray.

Obedience is a natural by-product of discipleship.

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

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

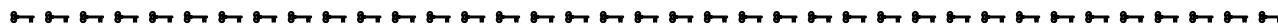
> **Ephesians 6:18** *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

> (See also - Matthew 7:7 and 1 Timothy 2:8)

> What If I Don't Know How to Pray?

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

Romans 8:26-27 *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.*



KEY IDEA: I pray to God to know him, to find direction for my life and to lay my requests before him.

A WAY TO KNOW GOD

The book of Psalms is a collection of songs and prayers to God composed by many different authors over many years. These prayers reveal that people in the times of the Bible are very much like people today: they had hopes, fears, joy and pain. What is remarkable is that these writers spilled out what was on their hearts to the powerful God of the universe. They believed God wanted to know what they were experiencing and feeling. That same God longs to hear from us today as well.

Prayer is not an eloquent performance. It's a personal conversation with the one true God who loves us and cares deeply for us.

FROM Psalm 77:1-20 (CEV)

¹ I pray to you, Lord God, and I beg you to listen. ² In days filled with trouble, I search for you. And at night I tirelessly lift my hands in prayer, refusing comfort.

³ When I think of you, I feel restless and weak. ⁴ Because of you, Lord God, I can't sleep. I am restless and can't even talk. ... ⁶ Each night my mind is flooded with questions: ⁷ "Have you rejected me forever? Won't you be kind again? ⁸ Is this the end of your love and your promises? ⁹ Have you forgotten how to have pity? Do you refuse to show mercy because of your anger?"

¹⁰ Then I said, "God Most High, what hurts me most is that you no longer help us with your mighty arm."

¹¹ Our LORD, I will remember the things you have done, your miracles of long ago. ¹² I will think about each one of your mighty deeds. ¹³ Everything you do is right, and no other god compares with you. ¹⁴ You alone work miracles ...

This psalm describes earnest prayer coming from a troubled heart. This prayer psalm is not limited to public worship; it also deals with the writer's private moments as well.

> The heartfelt questions from verses 7-9 does not offend God when his troubled people raise these types of questions with an earnest interest and understanding of the explanation.

< These questions touch on the enduring benevolence of God toward his people.

^ If God abounds in love, then it cannot cease.

^ God's promises cannot end.

^ If God is gracious, he cannot forget to continue that grace.

^ If God has compassion, he cannot fail to use it with his people.

> The key to the matter is in verse 9, God has done this in anger. God's anger is a response to unfaithfulness on the part of his people, and will only remain if they fail to repent.

< This calls the people to examine themselves and return to obedience of the covenant.

WHY ARE SOME PRAYERS NOT ANSWERED?

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

- Disobedience - Deuteronomy 1:45; 1 Samuel 14:37
- Secret Sin - Psalm 66:18
- Indifference - Proverbs 1:28
- Neglect of mercy - Proverbs 21:13
- Despising the Law - Proverbs 28:9
- Iniquity - Isaiah 59:2; Micah 3:4
- Stubbornness - Zechariah 7:13
- Instability or Doubt - James 1:6-7
- Self-indulgence - James 4:3
- Sometimes our prayers are refused. Prayer must be in accord with God's divine will. - 1 John 5:14; Deuteronomy 3:26; Ezekiel 20:3)

A WAY TO FIND THE DIRECTION WE NEED

Like a needle on a compass, prayer helps us navigate life's toughest obstacles. Heroes of the faith from the beginning to the end of the Bible used prayer to determine their actions. Often the directions they received seemed a bit odd, such as Gideon, who was asked to lead the Israelites into battle against an army that greatly outnumbered his own. God's clear directions allowed him to triumph. But before he set out, Gideon asked God to give him clarity on this overwhelming assignment. [See Judges 6:1-7:25 pgs. 194-199 BELIEVE.] This is a good practice for all of us today. When we take our concerns and questions to God, he will provide the clarity we need.

Like Gideon, shepherd-turned-king David experienced God's leading throughout his life. Psalm 25 captures David's passion for his Father God. Notice how David sought to know God personally by truthfully laying out his requests and seeking his direction. It's an example we would be wise to follow.

FROM Psalm 25:1-22 (CEV)

¹ I offer you my heart, LORD God, ² and I trust you. Don't make me ashamed or let enemies defeat me. ³ Don't disappoint any of your worshipers, but disappoint all deceitful liars.

⁴ Show me your paths and teach me to follow; ⁵ guide me by your truth and instruct me. You keep me safe, and I always trust you.

Verses 4-5 show that those who trust in the Lord seek his guidance—they want to learn how their life will please him and how his commands apply to their specific circumstances.

> God's guidance in the Bible is almost always concerned with the moral virtues he wants in his faithful people.

> The moral virtues that are established in the believer's life make their choices in the various circumstances of life.

⁶ Please, LORD, remember, you have always been patient and kind. ⁷ Forget each wrong I did when I was young. Show how truly kind you are and remember me. ⁸ You are honest and merciful, and you teach sinners how to follow your path. ⁹ You lead humble people to do what is right and to

stay on your path. ¹⁰ In everything you do, you are kind and faithful to everyone who keeps our agreement with you.

¹¹ Be true to your name, LORD, by forgiving each one of my terrible sins. ¹² You will show the right path to all who worship you. ...

So often we ask the Lord what His heart is, and then think we have the option of deciding whether or not we want to go his way.

> God is not obligated to share his secrets with us if we are not committed to obeying the directions he gives.

¹⁶ I am lonely and troubled. Show that you care and have pity on me. ¹⁷ My awful worries keep growing. Rescue me from sadness. ¹⁸ See my troubles and misery and forgive my sins. ...²⁰ Protect me, keep me safe, and don't disappoint me.

²¹ I obey you with all my heart, and I trust you, knowing that you will save me.

The psalm gathers the confident thoughts of the writer and turns them into prayer for the particular circumstances of trouble, asking for deliverance from the problem.

A WAY TO LAY OUR REQUESTS BEFORE GOD

Because we are God's most prized creation, he wants to know the desires of our hearts. Scripture encourages us to, without hesitation, lay our requests before him. The Bible includes many stories in which God's people express their needs, wants and desires to God. For example, after God issued the order to destroy the sin-filled cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Abraham's nephew Lot and his family were living, Abraham engaged in a conversation with God that displays the freedom we have to talk honestly with him. [See Genesis 18:20-33; pgs. 201-202 in BELIEVE]

In addition to Abraham, King Hezekiah also spoke honestly before the Lord. Hezekiah was one of the few good kings in Israel during the era of the divided kingdom. He laid a personal request before God, and God answered with a powerful "yes." [See 2 Kings 20:1-11; pgs. 202-203]

And our ultimate prayer model, Jesus, using tangible illustrations, encouraged his followers to be bold in their prayers.

Luke 11:1-13 (CEV)

¹ When Jesus had finished praying, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his followers to pray." ² So Jesus told them, "Pray in this way: 'Father, help us to honor your name. Come and set up your kingdom.' ³ Give us each day the food we need. ⁴ Forgive our sins, as we forgive everyone who has done wrong to us. And keep us from being tempted.'"

The disciples had seen Jesus step aside from them to spend time talking to his Father in prayer and sometimes he prayed in their presence.

> Remembering that John the Baptist had given his followers instruction in prayer, the disciples asked Jesus to give them lessons as well.

In response to their request, Jesus gave a prayer pattern that can be followed by every culture and every person.

> First, approach God as your Heavenly Father.

- < God loves you as a perfect Father who cares for you and wants to give you what is best for you.
- > Then make these requests:
 - < That God's name be honored.
 - ^ By our words and actions we need to demonstrate our desire that the name and character of God will be revered.
 - < That God's Kingdom will come.
 - ^ Live each day under Christ's kingdom rule—doing his will, obeying him, working to extend his kingdom throughout the earth.
 - < Ask for daily provision.
 - ^ Depend on your Father to provide for your everyday needs.
 - < Ask for forgiveness.
 - ^ Trust God to forgive your sins even as you keep an open heart to forgive others.
 - (Point #4 of the *Twelve Points of Effective Praying*)
 - < Ask for power to overcome temptation.
 - ^ We need to be aware of our weaknesses and ask God to keep us from yielding to them.

NOTE: God did not intend for this prayer to be recited. It was a pattern to be adapted in the words of our own heart.

> Jesus gives us permission to approach God.

⁵ Then Jesus went on to say: Suppose one of you goes to a friend in the middle of the night and says, "Let me borrow three loaves of bread. ⁶ A friend of mine has dropped in, and I don't have a thing for him to eat." ⁷ And suppose your friend answers, "Don't bother me! The door is bolted, and my children and I are in bed. I cannot get up to give you something."

⁸ He may not get up and give you the bread, just because you are his friend. But he will get up and give you as much as you need, simply because you are not ashamed to keep on asking.

⁹ So I tell you to ask and you will receive, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ Everyone who asks will receive, everyone who searches will find, and the door will be opened for everyone who knocks.

Jesus told a story to encourage his disciples to bring their needs to God in prayer.

FROM THE SMART GUIDE TO THE BIBLE SERIES: THE BOOK OF LUKE

In Bible times homes often had only one room. People slept on mats spread out on the floor. To get up in the middle of the night to answer the door meant that the father would have to step over (and probably fall on) his sleeping children to reach the door. Then he'd have to slide back the heavy bolt that kept the door shut. By this time everyone in the family would be awake—and not too happy! You can understand why he told his friend to go away and not bother him.

But his friend was desperate. Hosts in the first century were expected to welcome their guests regardless of when they arrived. Guests couldn't go to the local motel or sleep in their cars until morning. There were no coffee shops open all night long. This host was in a bind and he knew his friend could help. The host persisted without embarrassment. Finally, the friend gave in and handed over the bread—not because the host was his friend but because he was so boldly persistent.

Jesus doesn't talk about the mystery of the theology of prayer here. He takes a pragmatic approach...just do it!

> Prayer isn't something we impose on God. He welcomes us, even encouraging us to pray without interruption.

¹¹ Which one of you fathers would give your hungry child a snake if the child asked for a fish? ¹² Which one of you would give your child a scorpion if the child asked for an egg? ¹³ As bad as you are, you still know how to give good gifts to your children. But your heavenly Father is even more ready to give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks.

To reinforce the point of his story, Jesus gave more examples.

> An earthly father would never respond to his son's request for food with something hurtful.

< Jesus encourages us to count on our Father's kindness and willingness to meet our needs.

> We can come to God as our loving heavenly Father, trusting him to give us only what he knows is best for us.

The result of laying our requests before God is peace. The apostle Paul experienced this firsthand. He endured incredible hardships, including religious persecution, wrongful imprisonment and a catastrophic shipwreck. In turn, he wrote letters (the books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, etc.) to the churches he started throughout the Mediterranean, encouraging them to find peace in God through prayer.

Philippians 4:6-9 (CEV)

⁶ Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God. ⁷ Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel.

Prayers and requests are to be done with a spirit of thankfulness for that which the Lord has already blessed us both materially and spiritually.

Paul echoes Jesus' teaching, that believers are not to be anxious, but are to entrust themselves into the hands of their loving heavenly Father, whose peace will guard them because they belong to Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don't ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise. ⁹ You know the teachings I gave you, and you know what you heard me say and saw me do. So follow my example. And God, who gives peace, will be with you.

If we compare verse 8 to Psalm 19:7-9, we will see a parallel.

> The believer who fills his/her heart and mind with God's Word will have a "radar" for detecting wrong thoughts.

> Right thinking is the result of daily prayer and meditation on the Word.



FROM *THINK, ACT, BELIEVE LIKE JESUS* by Randy Frazee

KEY APPLICATION: What difference does this make in the way I live?

- We pray to align our lives with God’s will and story.
- We pray to lay our burdens before God to find peace.
- We pray to avoid making any major decision without seeking God.
- We pray for others.

If there is any subject the psalmist consistently addresses, it is that of prayer. We see humility coupled with boldness, awe joined with confidence — not in oneself, but in God. The many Scriptures in the book of Psalms inspire and challenge us to go before God and to speak to him about the deep need in our lives. Note the power and emotion captured in the words. Here are just a few examples:

- *I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.* 17:6
- *Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth.* 54:2
- *Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea.* 55:1
- *May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.* 88:2
- *I cry to you for help, Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you.* 88:13

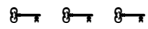
While the word *prayer* creates much religious connotation for some and intimidation for others, we must remember an amazing truth: we are being invited to speak with and listen to our Creator and Redeemer. He is not distant; he is listening. He does not keep us from going to him; he invites us to come to him.

One of the most amazing verses in all of Scripture to show us the kind of relationship God wants with us through prayer is found in Moses’ story: “*The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*” (Ex. 33:11) Prayer is a conversation with God. We lay our honest requests before God, our need for daily bread. Yet, we clarify, as Jesus did, that we want God’s will to be done over our will, trusting his way to be good and right. As we rest in the presence of God, he will speak and show us his will in his perfect timing.

Do we dare take to heart the challenge of these Scriptures on prayer and allow them to also flow out through our actions, speaking to God in reverence and worship, yet also in the deep intimacy of a relationship with a Friend we know loves us and we him?

In the Gospel accounts, we see Jesus take every key decision and event in his life to his Father. He came to accomplish the Father’s purposes, so he received his direction and strength from those intimate times of communication. The same will be true of us. We must pray as Jesus prayed. Prayer is the practice creating the vital connection between God’s heart and ours.

The writer of Hebrews points us to the joy of this practice of prayer: “*Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*” Hebrews 4:16



We should pray; and when our prayers are answered or are not answered, remember this: If we knew what the Lord knew, we wouldn't change a thing.

> It is not our job to psychoanalyze or "spiritually dissect those who have not had their prayers answered in the past. But we do need to be obedient in order to understand God's purposes.

John 9:31} ³¹ *We know that God listens only to people who love and obey him. God doesn't listen to sinners.*

1 John 3:22} ²² *He will give us whatever we ask, because we obey him and do what pleases him.*