

Prayer for Beginners

by Marshall Segal

How's your prayer life?

It's a simple question, but it can be tough to answer. Literally it sounds like, "How has your talking to God been lately?" Emotionally it might feel like, "Sum up your relationship with God at this point in your life." Bible reading, by comparison, is clearer and more "objective." How many pages? How far along in your plan? Which books have you been reading? What have you learned? Prayer doesn't fit into an Excel sheet quite as easily.

God means for your life — married or unmarried, student or employee, young or old — to run on the power of prayer. Prayer fuels the engine of your heart and mind. It's not coffee, or Chipotle, or social media buzz; it's prayer. You need God in and through prayer more than you need anything else. We will not do anything of any real and lasting value without God, which means we will not do anything of any real and lasting value without prayer.

And yet you probably feel as insecure about your prayer life as you feel about anything. Prayer might be, at the same time, the most pivotal and most puzzling activity in the Christian life. It is the lifeline and life-mystery for believers. We know we need to pray, but we know we don't pray enough. And we're not always sure we're even doing it right when we do pray. Should I even be asking God for this? Should I *still* be asking God for this? Do I even know what I need?

Conscious, Personal Communion

The Bible refuses to give us one small, simple picture or pattern for prayer. Jesus never intended for his model prayer (what we call "the Lord's Prayer") to be our only guide or counsel for prayer. It is a great place to start, but God's word gives us so much more material for our prayer lives.

Prayer is objectively real — a real God, real communication, real work, real answers. But it also comes in a million shapes and forms. Prayer happens in seconds — short moments in the cracks of our day — and it can happen for hours at a time, even throughout a whole night.

Prayer is conscious, personal communication with the God of the universe. A better question than "How's your prayer life?" might be, "Have you been enjoying conscious communication with God — over his word, in your daily needs, throughout your day?" Has your relationship with him been real — not a box to check, not just a hurried place for help, not a vague abstract idea hovering over your head and life? Has your faith been tying you to him in your heart? Have you been leaning on him, and not yourself?

So how is your prayer life? If you (like me) are not happy or content with your answer, here are seven ways to grow in your time alone with our God.

1. Pick a time and place.

You can pray anytime and anywhere. Jesus met a woman beside a well who thought we all had to go to a particular place to pray and worship, as God's people had prayed in the Old Testament (John 4:20). But Jesus says to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21–23). No longer in a place, but in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18).

"Prayer is the most important thing you can do for the most important people in your life."

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The freedom to pray anywhere, though, often leads to praying nowhere. We should absolutely pray spontaneously whenever and wherever prayers arise in our hearts — during a break at work, before a test, in line with our groceries. But our lives are fueled by prayer, so we shouldn't leave it up to spontaneity (we wouldn't do that with fuel for our cars). Pick a consistent time and place when you can be alone. It might be in the morning at home, or during a long commute, or over your lunch break, or at a convenient time in the evening. The times and places can be different for different people — one of the stunning blessings Jesus bought — but it should still be consistent for you. And Jesus is clear that it should be consistently alone (Matthew 6:6) — not exclusively, but consistently.

2. Listen before you speak.

For some people, setting aside time to be alone with God is intimidating. In fact, for many today, any time alone at all — no friends, no television, no phones — is unnerving. We are speaking to almighty God here. He already knows everything we need and everything we are going to say. So what can we even say?

One important thing to learn early on about prayer is that it truly is a conversation. Just as God *really* does speak to us in his word, he is also *really* listening when we pray. It may just feel like journaling out loud at times, but there is always someone on the other side of prayer. Jesus promises, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7–8). A real Giver, a real Guide, a real Host.

On any given day, God may choose to move or “speak” in some unexpected way through his Spirit — bringing something to our mind, altering some circumstance, saying something through a friend. But God has told us how he speaks, the only truly trustworthy way we hear his voice. “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16). Read something from the Bible (even just a verse) before you pray. Those words from God are “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

John Piper writes,

Oh, how precious is the Bible. It is the very word of God. In it God speaks in the twenty-first century. This is the very voice of God. By this voice, he speaks with absolute truth and personal force. By this voice, he reveals his all-surpassing beauty. By this voice, he reveals the deepest secrets of our hearts. No voice anywhere anytime can reach as deep or lift as high or carry as far as the voice of God that we hear in the Bible. (“The Morning I Heard the Voice of God”)

When you sit down to pray, let God speak first. Let him have the first word. Put his living and active words into your ears, and let them shape and inspire what you say back to him. If you learn something new about him and his ways, tell him. If the verses raise questions, ask him. Eventually, you can move on to today's burdens, but begin by worshiping him over and through his word. Enjoy the relationship. With reverence and awe, be a son or a daughter, and listen well.

3. Prioritize the spiritual over the circumstantial.

Often when people ask how they can pray for me, I immediately try to assess if I have any unusual needs right now (like, this minute). If I don't, I start to think about people close to me that do. “Pray for my co-worker

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whose dad passed away last week.” Or, “Pray for my grandmother who’s back in the hospital, again.” It’s not wrong by any means (we *should* be praying for these things, and asking others to pray, too). But if we take that mentality into prayer, we may only ever pray for physical or circumstantial needs. Physical needs are important, but they pale in comparison to our spiritual-emotional and eternal needs.

Paul says, “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Does that mean we will never have to worry about or spend time on our physical needs — food, work, cancer? Absolutely not. “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). It means life is mainly about unseen realities. At the end of each day, what matters most happens at the spiritual and emotional level, not the physical and circumstantial.

That reality should be lived out in our prayer lives. We should spend as much time praying for our souls, for the salvation of our loved ones, for the spread of the gospel, and for the establishment of God’s glory and his kingdom as we pray about anything. Those prayers shouldn’t be tacked on to the end of our “real” needs. They are our deepest and most enduring needs.

4. Don’t be afraid to stop and pray now.

Prayer should be prioritized and scheduled, but the beauty of our newfound freedom and mercy in Christ is that prayer can happen anywhere. It should start alone with God in your prayer closet, but it never needs to stay there. It must not stay there. Bring prayer into the cracks of your day. And I don’t just mean before meals. When you feel the impulse to pray, seize it. Take it as the prompting of the Spirit (Satan certainly won’t encourage you to pray).

A few years ago, I saw a friend in passing. We caught up for a few minutes. At the end, I asked him if he would pray for something I had shared with him, assuming he would just take that request home with him. To my surprise, he responded, “Sure! Can we pray right now?” It felt awkward the first time, but I learned an important lesson. One way to ensure you *do pray* for someone and their need is to pray right there in the moment. It only takes a minute or two, and more than meeting a need, it draws you both Godward in the middle of a day. It can be a brief and unexpected (and needed) meeting with the Almighty.

5. Identify your prayer circles.

When I say “prayer circles,” I’m not talking about circles of people that pray in a group, but concentric circles of people in your life. When it comes to praying for the needs around you, you will have to prioritize some people over others (at least consistently). Otherwise, you will do nothing but pray.

I pray outward in circles, beginning with my own soul, then for my wife, then for our families, then for our small group and our church, then for our nation, and lastly for the nations, especially the unreached in the world. I don’t hit every ring every time, but the circles lead me as I pray each morning.

The rings should not keep us from praying for the random stranger we met yesterday. They’re just meant to keep the consistent people in our life consistently before us in prayer. If prayer is the most important thing we can do for someone, shouldn’t we structure our schedules to do that for the most important people in our lives?

Try praying through your circles. And be willing to pray for someone or something that doesn’t quite fit.

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6. Ask whatever you wish — literally anything.

If we're honest, many of us lack courage and imagination in our prayer lives. We have a tiny little box of routine things we're willing to ask God for, and we take on everything else — our questions, our frustrations, our dreams — on our own. We assume God's not interested in or doesn't have time for the small details of our day. And we can't even imagine him conquering global crises like 27 million in slavery and millions more enslaved to sin and headed to hell. And so we settle for middle-of-the-road mediocre requests. We wait to pray about something until it becomes "serious enough" for God to care about, and we don't pray for something unless we expect him to do something in the next 24 hours. And so we deprive ourselves of his mercy and power in massive areas of our life and world.

"May God give us enough imagination to pray for the salvation of whole people groups and the end of sex-trafficking."

Do we have enough courage to pray that God would save the 136 million men and women in the Shaikh people group in Bangladesh? 0.00% Christian. Is that too big for God? "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14).

Do we have enough imagination to ask God to end sex-trafficking in India (and in Minneapolis)? We pray to a God "who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). Jesus says, "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain" — the sex-trafficking slave trade or an unreached people group of 120 million in Japan — "'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). Will we believe Jesus and pray for big things?

Do we have enough faith to think God cares about another Monday morning at work or with the kids? God cares about everything in your heart and life, down to the very smallest things. Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything" — your random conversation with that friend, your sleep tonight, this month's budget — "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). Anything and everything, every day. Don't be afraid to pray big prayers, and small ones.

7. Be willing to ask one more time.

Jesus knew we would lose heart in prayer, specifically that we would pray for things for long enough that we would start to question if God was listening or might ever answer. But he didn't want us to lose heart or give up. He wanted us to keep asking, keep pleading, keep praying. he tells his disciples a story about a widow seeking justice from a judge, "who neither feared God nor respected man." She pled and pled with him. Luke writes,

For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" (Luke 18:4–8)

"God knows what's best for you, and he's listening. Don't be afraid to pray and ask him, again."

The widow was rewarded for her persistence by an unrighteous judge. How much more will God listen to his precious sons and daughters who ask and ask and ask? If the unrighteous judge could not ignore her, how much more will our heavenly Father hear us?

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Don't think now about praying for that need or desire for decades. Just focus on today. If God has given you a burden or a desire for another day, and you really believe that burden or desire might be from him, be willing to ask him one more time — one more prayer for relief, for reconciliation, for provision, for a breakthrough, for salvation. He's still listening. Are we still believing? Jesus says,

“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)

He won't give you a stone. He won't give you a serpent. He loves you. He knows what's best for you. And he's listening. Don't be afraid to ask, again

Marshall Segal is a staff writer for DesiringGod.org

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