



KEEPING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN WITH JESUS

⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 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. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

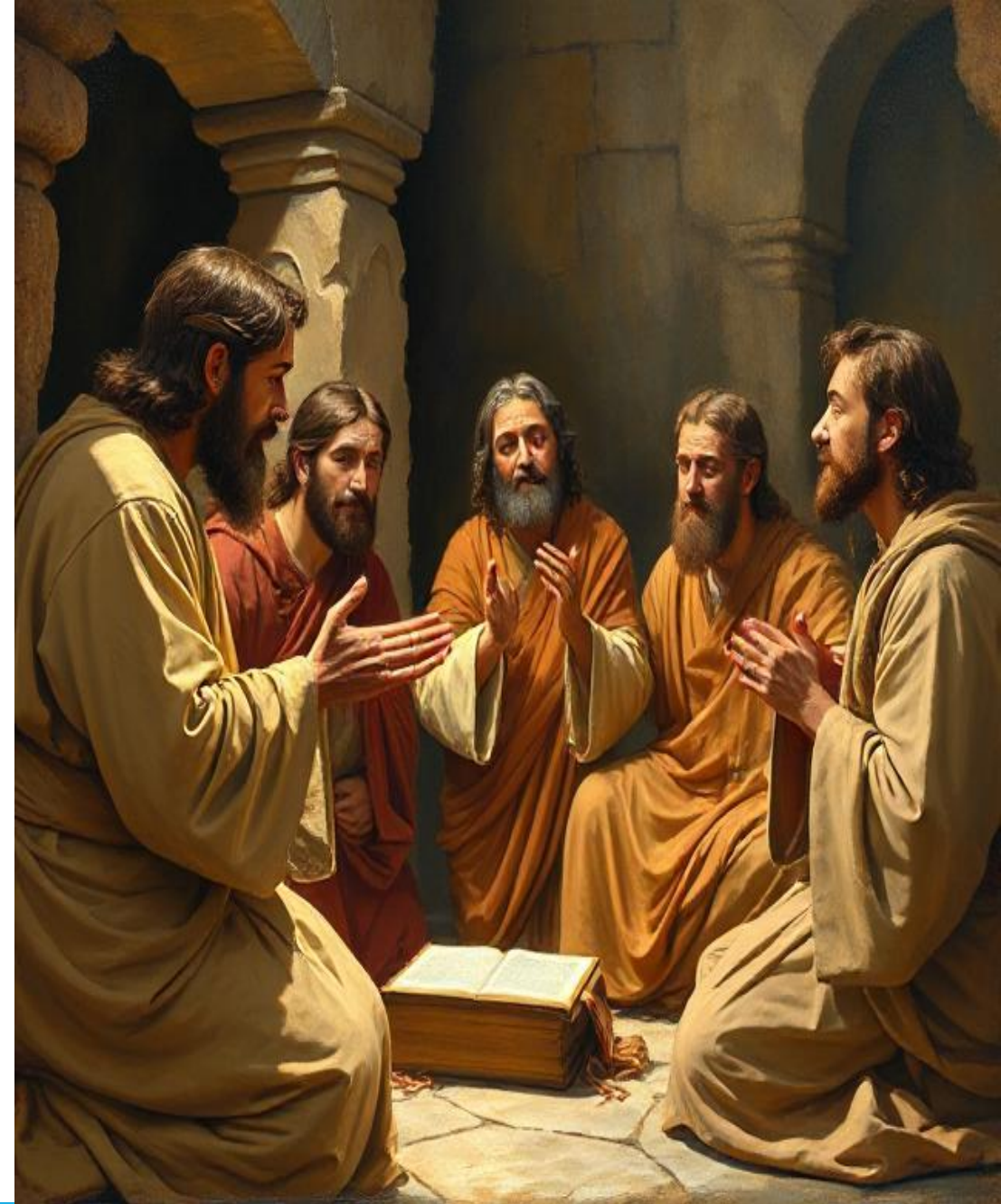
⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:5-15)



Communication is an essential component of any solid relationship, and our relationship with Jesus is no exception. Yes, God knows our thoughts and our hearts, but He still intends that we should communicate with Him personally in the form of prayer. Prayer should be more than simply Bible passages that we have memorized and habitually (even mindlessly) recite every day. Prayer is communication that should originate from a heart that fully and sincerely desires relationship with God and a spirit willing to embrace whatever God answers. Praying whole-heartedly is essential if our prayer is to have any impact in our lives, the lives of others, in the community or in the world.

Why do you suppose Jesus' apostles asked Him to teach them how to pray? Having been raised in the Jewish faith, they had with certainty been exposed to prayers in the synagogues and taught to pray by their parents. What made the prayers of Jesus different? Essentially, Jesus wasn't just teaching them the proper way to pray, He was teaching them how to properly approach God with our prayers. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells of a Pharisee who prays out of pride, thanking God for his own self-righteousness. He then tells of a tax collector who humbly confesses that he is a sinner and prays for God's forgiveness.

God examines the hearts of every man and woman, including those who come before Him in prayer. The Pharisees prayed publicly with the motivation of seeking status, admiration, and acclaim of their righteousness. When we do anything in this world (including praying or serving others) with the motivation of gaining praise, status, money, notoriety, admiration, even the gratitude of others, these things are the only reward we will receive. We gain no reward in heaven for seeking our own glory. This is the reason why Jesus tells us to pray in private, where only our Father can see and hear us.





God searches our hearts and knows our intentions. Prayer isn't a performance, neither does the mere act of praying automatically make us right with God.

Should you pray to Mary or to the Apostles of Christ? This is a subject of considerable, intensive debate among believers. Short answer: The Bible tells us that only GDO has the power to forgive sins and that we have ONE mediator before God, only ONE who can intercede for us before God, and that is Jesus Christ. Jesus did not tell the apostles to pray to anyone else but God. He did not say to pray to God AND to the saints. In Ephesians 6:18, Paul tells the church to "Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all PRAYER and making supplication for all the SAINTS, and for me." Is he saying to pray TO him and the saints? The word "supplication" is important---it means petition, prayer, plea. Paul's next word is "for" not "to". In considering the whole of the Bible's teachings, I believe that Paul is asking that we pray for him and for other believers (for the word "saint" in the Bible is used as a term for believers in Christ. If you are in doubt, please do not leave the church body over the debate of whether to pray to saints. Rather, prayerfully consider what the whole Bible teaches as our authority on God's will and do as the Spirit guides you. If you believe that praying to anyone but Jesus is a sin, then the Bible teaches that for YOU it *is* a sin (Romans 14:23). Don't do it. Neither be a stumbling block to others in their relationship with God and cause them to turn away from God and bring judgment on yourself.

Does reciting prayer absolve you of sin? Absolutely not. If reciting prayers brought salvation, then salvation comes through man's own works and not the blood of Christ and all that Christians believe is in vain. It is not the recitation of prayer that brings God's intercession, forgiveness, and mercy but rather our reaching out to him with humility, repentance, love, trust, and acknowledgment of our need for God and our dependence on His provision.



Let's be honest, God already knows what's weighing on our hearts and minds before we ever kneel before Him in prayer. God is waiting for us to turn to Him and engage in full, loving relationship with Him. God doesn't care if your prayers are eloquent and long, if they are a few simple words, or if they are nothing but groaning because you simply can't find the words (especially when you are overwhelmed). Sit in His presence and silently connect to Him through the indwelling Holy Spirit until the Spirit gives you the words to speak. As in everything about our lives, God's concern is the condition of our hearts and the motivations of our prayers, not our prayer style (or lack of style).

Remember when you pray that praise of God reflects our humility and gratitude for His love, mercy, provision, protection, and intervention in our lives and the lives of others. We should never praise God with the expectation that He must give us whatever we ask. Prosperity, health, and other abundances from God is not necessarily a sign that you are particularly favored nor is illness, affliction, hardship, or the lack of abundance a sign that God has abandoned you. When you are praying for something, no matter how earnestly or selflessly you desire the outcome, be prepared for the fact that you might not receive what you ask and trust that God loves you nevertheless and has good plans for you---even if His plans mean leaving you in your present circumstances. Paul prayed for healing for a thorn in his side, but God never removed it. God told Paul that His strength was made perfect in human weakness. Paul eventually became grateful for his affliction, for his weakness allowed the power of Christ to flow through Him and strengthen him. Whenever we know that our circumstances are more than we can bear, we have the opportunity to submit our lives to God and allow His purposes to be accomplished. Moses felt inadequate to go before Pharaoh, but God promised to be with him.

Joseph must have surely prayed to be released from prison, but God kept him there until the timing was perfect for Joseph to fulfill His plans to save Egypt from famine, Jesus was crucified in weakness so that God's power could be displayed in His resurrection.

Jesus also expects us to pray for others. Remember the Bible tells us out of love to think of others and help one another. Not sure who needs prayer? Ask the Holy Spirit to point out a person or situation during the course of your day so that you might lift it up to God in prayer. Don't limit your prayers to family or loved ones. Out of a heart transformed by the Spirit, pray for people who hurt us, use us, or speak evil against us, to pray for the lost who have not yet found relationship with God. We are to pray for the sick, for other believers, for our spiritual leaders, and for our political leaders. 1 Timothy 2:1 tells us to pray for *everyone*. Prayer shouldn't be limited to asking for God's help and healing in our own lives, we are praying for His help in healing the world of its fallen condition. When Jesus commands us to include "Thy kingdom come" in our prayers, it is a petition for the healing of the world from sinfulness and for the return of Jesus, when His Kingdom of righteousness, love, and relationship will be established.

Praying alongside other believers is not only unifying for the church body, it is an opportunity to publicly confess our faith, trust, and confidence in God and in Jesus as our Savior. This willingness to publicly receive Jesus is a requisite for salvation. The Bible tells us this in Matthew 10:32-33: ³² *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."*



“Thy will be done” is our receiving whatever God has prepared for us because we trust Him, and we understand that His plans are for our good and the good of the world. Praise God for all that He is---our Creator, our Father, our Lord, our constant Help, and our Friend. Jesus instructs us to pray for God’s will to be done because God’s ultimate will is for our salvation, for us to be in perfect fellowship with the Holy Trinity in a world that is free of wickedness, suffering, temptation, death, evil, and every form of misery which infected creation at the fall of mankind. God’s will is for the establishment of the New Kingdom (New Jerusalem) with Jesus Christ on the Davidic throne. Best of all, God’s will is that His people are made holy so that He may once again personally dwell among us, giving life and sharing in the love relationship that exists within the Holy Trinity.



What does Jesus mean when He says to pray: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”? He definitely isn’t saying we should forgive the credit card issuers because we owe them money (although this is probably part of the reason the Bible advises us not to borrow or lend money). Some translations of the Bible clarify this by saying “trespass” instead of “debt”.

“Our debts” refers to our sins, actions that have wounded others in some fashion (emotionally, physically, or otherwise). Debts of sin can only be forgiven by God through our faith in Jesus. However, forgiveness is also a component of extending love to our fellow man (not just to other believers, but to all people). Conversely, “our debtors” means those people who have caused us any kind of harm or suffering (physical, mental, emotional, or otherwise). Jesus requires us, as His disciples and *imago dei*, and members of His church body to forgive others just as God has forgiven us because of His great grace, mercy, and compassion. As Christ’s image, we are required to also be gracious, merciful, compassionate, and forgiving. If we ask forgiveness from others and do not receive it, at least we will have done right by God through the attempt. The Bible is crystal clear about this point. It’s so important that the Bible teaches us to go make peace with those we have wronged or those who have wronged us before we even approach God to offer tithes at church or before we take communion. Unforgiveness is like a tiny seed of sin within our heart. If we do not purge it, the seed can blossom into deadly sins like anger, bitterness, hatred, even violence rather than fruits of the Spirit. Our grudge against others, when left unchecked, can destroy our relationship with Jesus. Jesus understands that forgiveness is not always easy. He has placed the Holy Spirit within us to help make forgiveness possible. How many times should we forgive the same person for harming us? Seven times seventy times, says the Bible.



Please note that God does not expect you to place yourself in a position of being abused, forgiving the abuser, and being abused again. If you are in this situation, seek help from church elders and the proper local authorities.

Pray, meditate on the Word of God, seek the counsel of leadership in your church, and call on the indwelling Holy Spirit to give you the strength to release your grudges and complaints against others for the sake of your relationship with God and your salvation. If you still doubt how serious God is about forgiveness, the Bible speaks of plucking out our eye or cutting off our hand if it is the cause of our taking offense. To be clear, do NOT pluck out an eye or cut off any part of your body. What God means by this is that no earthly slight or grudge is worth the consequence of damaging our relationship with God or worse rejecting God altogether. The Bible mentions hellfire as a consequence of holding on to offenses and grudges. Take forgiveness seriously, brothers and sisters. Give it. Receive it.

Asking God to protect us from the evil in this world is also an important component of prayer. Another point of clarification: When Jesus says to pray “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil”, it does NOT mean that God ever tempts us; it is a petition for God to help us resist evil. It is the sinfulness within mankind leave us vulnerable to temptation from the things of this world and the manipulations of Satan. As we read in the Book of Job, God does on occasion allow believers to be tempted, but 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to endure. He has placed His spirit within us to give us strength to resist. Jesus was directly confronted by Satan in Matthew 4, but you will note that the Bible refers to this as being “tested”, not “tempted”. God cannot be tempted by evil because of holy and righteous nature, only put to the test. Jesus deflected the testing of Satan by quoting Scripture. This is another reason Bible study is important.





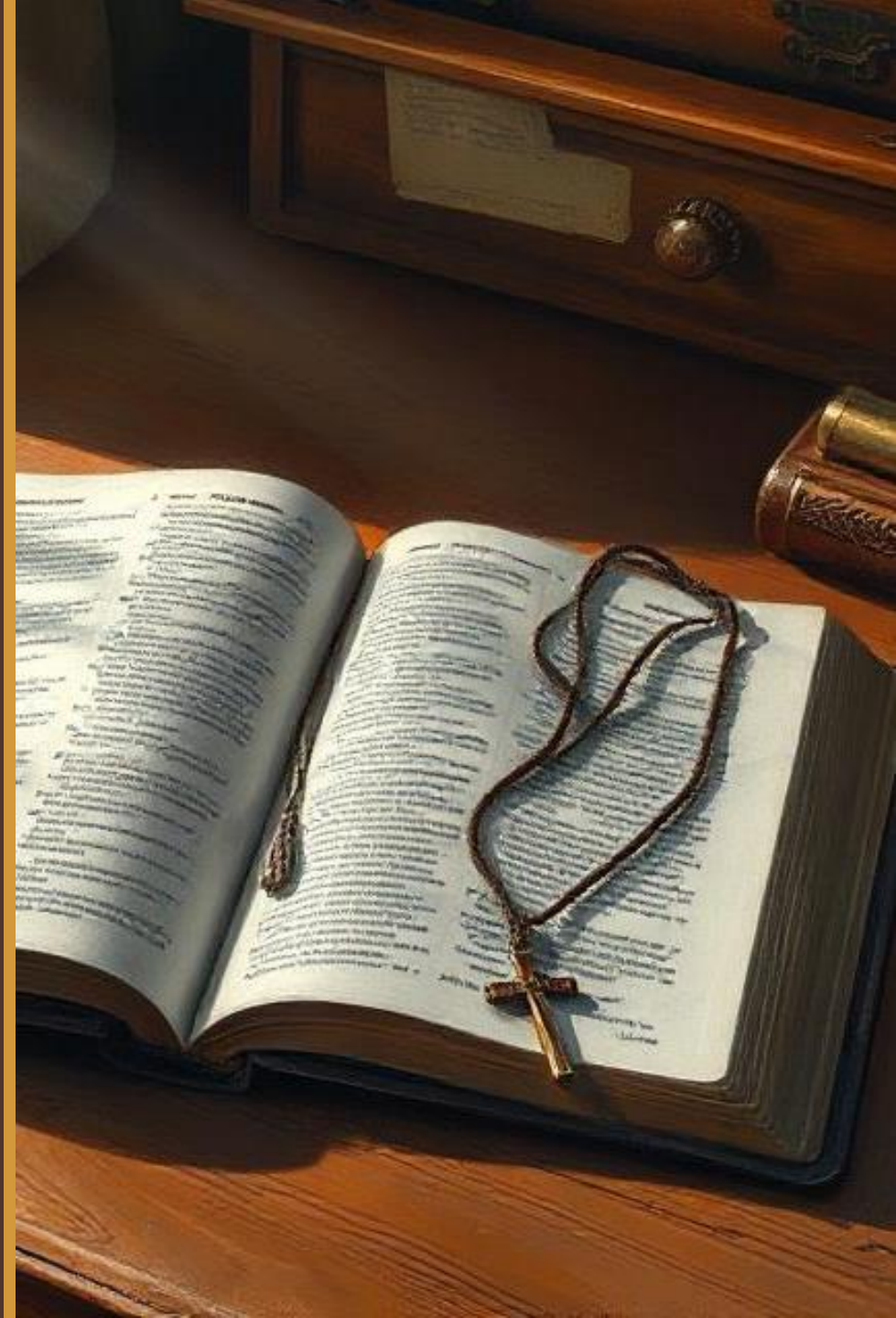
As Jesus' disciples and His *imago dei*, we must also expect to face temptations. Satan resists every plan of God's (including our redemption from Satan's grasp) and seeks to turn every image of God into an image of himself (that means us, brothers and sisters). Jesus instructs us to pray for God's divine protection and deliverance in times of temptation, testing, and spiritual warfare. Know the Word of God, remain in prayer, and lean on the Spirit that indwells us. Iron is sharpened in the fire, so too does the fire of spiritual warfare, trials, and temptation sharpen our faith in God's protection and provision. Moreover, Jesus expects us to pray for the protection of other believers enduring a season of trials, despair, testing, grief, and temptation, and perhaps to pray even more so for people who are unbelievers or in a time of spiritual apostasy and at risk of eternal separation from God.

While Jesus was being tested by Satan, He quoted Deuteronomy 6:16: "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*". This is important guidance for all aspects of our relationship with God, including our prayers. Have you ever been in a relationship where someone's affection for you was conditional? Something like "If you love me you will (insert request here)"? Did you feel like they would only love you if you kept doing for them and giving to them? I hope not, but the point is to guard our attitudes when we approach God. Jesus says to do THY will (meaning God's will) not MY will (meaning our own will) to be done. Jesus says to ask what we want of God boldly, not disrespectfully or selfishly. It's fine to ask God questions when you pray, especially if something is troubling your soul and affecting your ability to trust in God. Children ask questions of their parents. It's how they learn to become good people. However, consider your posture before the Lord, our Father. You can come at God with this attitude: "*If God is good, why does He allow children to get cancer? Why does he allow young people to die? Why doesn't he end homelessness or war?*" How does that compare to approaching God in this manner: "*God, help me understand why children become sick. God help me understand why my friend died so young. God, help me understand why there is so much suffering in the world.*" Do you see the difference?

Neither should we place conditions on our faith, demand a sign, or otherwise put God to the test. Consider whether it is better to approach God with the attitude *“if you love me/him/her, you will heal me/him/her”* or with the posture of *“God, if it is your will, please save me/him/her”*.

Always remember that the first words Jesus tells us to speak when praying is: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name*. Prayer is simply communication with our loving Father so that we may connect and commune with Him spiritually, express our hearts honestly, seek His guidance, and experience the richness and comfort of His presence. It is also our opportunity to express our gratitude and thanksgiving to God and glorify Him for all that He does in this world and in our lives every day. As Jesus instructs us, pray for God’s will to be done on earth. God’s will is that we receive Jesus and be saved. God’s will is that His people reflect His attributes (love, grace, kindness, mercy, peace, justice). God’s will is that the creation tainted by sin and wickedness shall be replaced by a New Kingdom where He will dwell among His people. God’s will is always for our good because He loves us.

The Bible presents a rich tapestry of different forms of prayer, from Jesus’ petition to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26 to the collection of King David’s psalms. Praising and thanking the Lord is perhaps the most important form and function of prayer. It reminds us to be grateful for everything that God has already done for our salvation and restoration to relationship with Him. It acknowledged all the wonderful attributes of God as our divine Father. Intercessory prayer are those prayers made on behalf of others. This demonstrates compassion, empathy, and selflessness that reflects the heart of Christ.





Prayers of confession and repentance involve honesty and humility before our holy God and gift us the opportunity to experience God's forgiveness and a deeper relationship with Him. Engaging in prayer as part of a small group emphasizes fellowship, mutual support, and gives us the chance to publicly proclaim our faith in Jesus.

Why is prayer such a vital component of Christian living? There are many benefits to developing a habit of prayer. It deepens our faith and nourishes our soul to be in communication with God. It honors God by showing that we love and value our time with Him and shows that we are grateful to be adopted into His family. It aligns our heart with God's will in directing our daily decisions, interactions, and how we serve in this world. A disciplined habit of prayer transforms our heart, developing a more Christ-like character within us. Prayer is part of faithfulness, a fruit of the Holy Spirit's work on our hearts. Prayer also helps us develop perseverance in times of testing and trust that God hears us and is near to us, carrying us through these times of spiritual despair. This is why Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray without ceasing.

Best of all, prayer helps us truly cultivate a relationship with God. Spending time with one another is vital in any serious relationship. Setting aside daily time for prayer demonstrates intentionality and discipline in seeking God's presence in our lives. How long should you pray? It is the consistent habit of praying is more important than duration or style of prayer; consistency and dedication to prayer is more impactful for developing trust and relationship with God than sporadic visits with God.

Journaling (writing down our prayers each day) is helpful in developing the habit of prayer. It allows us to reflect on past prayers and consider how God responded to these prayers. King David's prayers often took the form of songs, which are collected in the Book of Psalms. It is easy for us to read this book and observe the ways that God responded to David. This should give us confidence that God hears our prayers and responds according to His will and His timing.

What should you pray? That is a personal matter between you and the Lord. Can you pray about what you should pray about? Sure. Pay attention to the people around you and their situations, daily events and news stories, and consider any matter that is weighing on your heart. Pay attention to the Spirit's guidance with in you (in the form of emotional responses like compassion, empathy, concern) to see if perhaps it is a person, event, or other matter that the Spirit wants you to offer up to God in prayer. Think of people in your life whom you may not see every day (it could be family, friends, church members, or even strangers you pass on the street or people who work at your favorite store). Pray blessings on them. Pray about a past experience that made you feel blessed by God or an experience which is still weighing on you every day. Pray before a morning commute, a vacation, a meal, or other ordinary activities. The more we deliberately incorporate prayer into our daily life, the less it will intimidate us. It reinforces our awareness of God's presence and our dependence on Him.



We can expect profound obstacles to our prayer relationship with God, including doubt and unbelief, feelings of unworthiness, distractions, lack of understanding the nature of prayer, periods of spiritual dryness (especially if we don't perceive an answer to our prayer), and struggling with temptation. Some of these obstacles overlap. For example, doubt may come when we don't feel our prayers are being answered or don't get the outcome for which we prayed and become discouraged. We can read about King David going through such a season in Psalm 13. Every believer struggles with times of doubt, from new believers to church leaders. Don't give into such doubts; rather, look on them as opportunities to grow in our faith. Prayer (along with regular Bible study) attunes us to the indwelling Holy Spirit, who in turn cultivates discernment within us so that we become more skilled at recognizing God's hand at work for ultimate good in our lives and the lives of others. God IS listening. The process of praying can be a powerful, cathartic act of faith as we release the doubts in our hearts to God.

Unbelief is a lack of trust in God's power, goodness, promises, power to intervene in our lives, or even His very existence. It can manifest as hesitation to open ourselves to God, seeking to solve insurmountable problems by our own power, or cynicism about God Himself. Overcoming unbelief is a process of making a conscious choice to trust God and believe in His power to work in our lives. Remaining grounded in Scripture can reinforce such faith.

Distractions can derail our prayer time until we've ultimately given up on the habit. They come in every form: Needs of family and friends, demands of work, technology and social media, kin care, pet care, exercise, schoolwork, and housework to name a few. It takes intentional effort to schedule time for God in the middle of these diversions. Find a quiet secluded area (even if you must literally go into a closet as Jesus said.





Practice meditation or do breathing exercises to quiet your mind from busy thoughts and focus in on your private time with God. Even Jesus had to steal away from His followers to find time alone with the Father.

Never allow feelings of unworthiness to hamper your prayer time. I want you to *really* receive this truth: GOD IS YOUR FATHER, AND HE LOVES YOU. God has intervened in history to bring you into existence through your ancestors. He has guided history to redeem you and adopt you into His family. He has orchestrated history to make you worthy to approach Him through Christ. He is eager to spend this time with you because you are His beloved child who needs Him. Jesus' death tore the veil between man and God specifically so that we *can* approach God whether we are worth or unworthy. Jesus has made us worthy through His sacrifice. He is standing beside you as you spend time in prayer with God. The Spirit is within you as you spend time in prayer with God. The Bible tells you that nothing will pluck you from God's hand. He already knows our deepest secrets and has still sought us for relationship with Him (yes, God has chosen you as you are to be in this prayerful moment with Him).

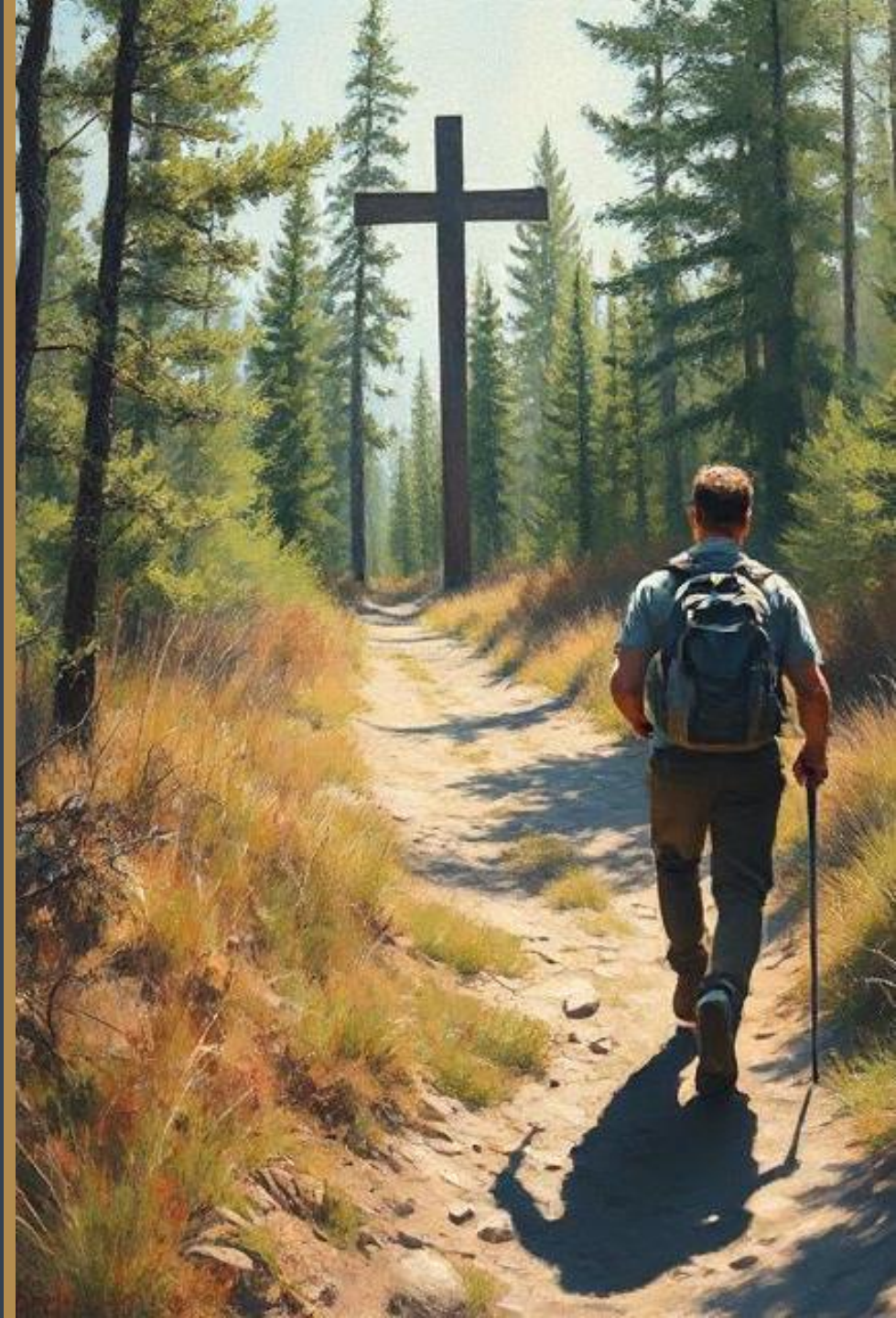
Have a realistic understanding of prayer: We should not be seeking to manipulate God into doing our bidding or fulfilling our desires. This approach to God sets us up for disappointment if we don't get our way. Prayer isn't about changing God's mind; it's about changing our hearts and our perspective to align them with God's will. We must be careful that lack of understanding and doubt doesn't lead us into "spiritual dryness", which is perceived distance from our very immanent and personal God.

It's common for believers to go through such times, but this does mean we have failed in our relationship. It's an opportunity for deeper spiritual reflection that can actually grow our confidence in God. Continue in your study of Scripture during periods and be

attuned to the Holy Spirit within so that the Spirit can help guide you back to the Lord. Actively seek reasons for faith and gratitude to God. Look for ways that He has already worked in your life for your good. At the same time, engage in activities which refresh you mentally and emotionally, such as meditation or nature walks or music or serving others. Be patient with yourself, for patience is also an attribute that God shares with mankind.

Temptation will taint all aspects of our daily lives as Christians, and our prayer life is no exception. Sin can leave us once again feeling unworthy to approach God, yet this is the time we need God the most. Again, remember that God has guided history specifically for the purpose of being able to forgive our sins and restore us to relationship with Him. Our sins don't surprise Him. He wants us to come to Him in prayer at such moments. Confessing our sins lifts them up to Jesus so that He can cleanse us. Repentance from the heart and turning away from the sin sets us back to walking on the path that leads us to God and returns us to the Holy Spirit's process of transforming us into the image of God in Christ. The enemy places stones in our path to God, but don't stop just because you stumble. You are walking towards something that is wonderful beyond our ability to fully comprehend. It's worth the journey.

The practice of remembering other people in our prayers is called *intercessory prayer*, and it's an essential to developing Christ-like character as Christians. The ministry of Jesus was the ultimate intercession on behalf of humanity. Christ's salvific act was compelled by God's limitless love for us. Out of love, Jesus practice intercessory prayer throughout His ministry, including His last prayer on the cross as He asked God not to hold the sin of His murder against humankind. The Bible tells of other believers who practiced intercessory prayer. As the mediator between God and the Israelites, Moses often interceded on his people's behalf (Exodus 32:11-14).



In Genesis 18:16-33, Abraham attempted to intercede for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, praying that the cities be spared from God's judgement for the people's rampant wickedness. Though the cities were ultimately destroyed, the narrative shows that God does hear our prayers and will listen to our prayers even if His will must ultimately prevail. Daniel was persistent in prayers during His exile in Babylon, even interceding on behalf of the nation which held him captive. The apostle Paul urged his followers to pray for one another (Colossians 4:12).

Intercessory prayer is a dynamic part of worship in the church. As the body of Christ, intercession unites us in mutual love, caring for one another, interdependence, support, and encouragement. It demonstrates our commitment to the spiritual well-being of others. Prayer should also accompany missionary outreach as believers carry the Gospel message into the community and to other nations (particularly in regions where Christians are persecuted for their faith). Intercessory prayer allows believers to become part of missionary work even if we can't physically journey with other believers into the mission field.

Intercessory prayer means that we are actively seeking God's guidance and giving priority to aligning our will with His. Again, we must have right attitudes and motives as we approach the Lord. We should always be humble and aware of our limitations in the face of God's sovereignty and authority. We can also be confident and trust that God is faithful to hear and compassionate to listen to the pleas of our hearts. We should be persistent in our prayers, as 1Thessalonians 5:16 tells us *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* Persistency proves the tenacity of your faith in God and the depths of love, mercy, compassion, and grace which motivate your prayers.





Pray for wisdom and discernment when you actively seek guidance from the Lord through prayer and be willing to accept God's answer even if it doesn't align with your personal desires. God might be using difficult circumstances to guide you towards His purpose for your life or to help you mature spiritually and grow in trust of Him. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways are different than our ways. Remember that God has the higher perspective because He exists outside time. Remember also that His will is always for the good of those who love Him and the salvation of the lost.

Follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit as you await God's response. The answer may come in the form of a movement or change of heart, a sudden supernatural inspiration, a change in the situation, or even the outright granting of your petition to God. Be aware that we are still human beings and we must be certain that we are being led by the Spirit and not seeking justification for our personal biases, doubts, desires, or fear.

How else can we "listen" for God's answers to our prayers? Scripture is God's active and living word, and it is working in the lives of believers every day. The Holy Spirit may highlight specific passages of the Bible so that we see the significance of those words for our present circumstances. Reading the Bible with an open heart and mind also helps us actively engage with our living God. When we wait for the guidance of Holy Spirit, we must be careful that we do not confuse a response from the Spirit with our personal emotions, assumptions, or suppositions about a person or situation.

It is perfectly acceptable (and a good idea) to also seek wise counsel from a trusted mentor who is rooted in faith and love and spiritually mature. A mentor can help us filter out our own emotional responses and presuppositions about the person or situation. Mentors also help us be accountable that our discernment of the Spirit's response truly aligns with God's will and teachings.

This helps us to, in turn, mature in the faith and become discerning followers of Christ. Prayerfully consider any advice that you are given and whether it aligns with the teachings of Scripture. Every believer makes mistakes in the transformative process of becoming more Christ-like in our daily living and prayer life.

Don't fear mistakes or become discouraged when you don't immediately perceive a response from God to your prayers. View this learning process with humility and self-compassion. Accept that there will always be limits to our understanding of our transcendent God. Trust that His grace will guide you because of His love for you. At the end of every day, our goal remains to grow in our relationship with God.



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