Prayer Basics


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If you conducted a random street survey on the question, “Prayer—what’s it all about?” most people, whether Christian or not, probably would respond with something like, “Prayer is talking to God.” It’s an acceptable answer. However, if the matter were probed a bit deeper by asking, “Why is prayer important?” or “What does prayer accomplish?” there likely would be a broad range of responses, even among Christians.

Regrettably, the assumption that all followers of Christ understand prayer, know how to pray, and pray regularly is not well founded. While prayer is a fundamentally simple exercise, it is often neither understood nor practiced to the extent that it should be. There is so much more to the power and possibilities of prayer than many
of us realize; and since the outworking of so much of God’s purpose in this world depends on prayer, great need exists for basic, practical instruction on the process, purpose, and practice of prayer. That’s why this course is devoted to exploring six very basic questions about prayer. While each question has a fairly succinct answer, we’ll take an in-depth look at each from a biblical, practical, and experiential point of view.

First, however, in this introductory session, we’ll look more broadly at prayer and explore some characteristics and dynamics that pertain to this important practice. Hopefully it will lead you to a better understanding of what prayer is all about and why it is so vital to you personally and to the Church corporately.

Prayer Is about Communication

Our Communication Model

Part of our challenge with prayer is in understanding its communication dynamics. Our particular struggle often is that prayer runs counter to the communication model we practice daily. In simple terms, the model we’re used to is “message sent—message received.” In between message sent and received are other factors, such as the method of communication, its content, and verbal and nonverbal cues. In most cases, when we send a message in person or through another means of communication, we have some assurance that the message is being received based on cues from the recipient.

Our difficulty in prayer usually isn’t with message sent, but with message received. How do we know our prayer has reached God? Without any kind of audible response or a visible indication that He hears, we wonder whether our prayers are being received at all.

When portable cassette recorders became popular in the 1970s, many people began sending audio letters. This allowed friends and family to hear their voices rather than just read a letter. While at the time it served as a creative approach toward more interactive communication, it could be awkward trying to be conversational with someone while watching a reel of tape slowly turn in the recorder. With no one present to provide verbal or nonverbal response to the message, the “conversation” would be one-sided. On the recipient’s side, immediate response to the conversation couldn’t be offered. It might be days or weeks before a reply could be sent. The bottom
God's Communication Model

Understanding how the message sent, message received process of prayer works is helped by exploring how we’re “wired” as God’s creations. Scripture records that God created man in His image. Part of that process involved imparting to humankind a spiritual nature, or a soul (see Genesis 2:7). Possessing a soul distinguishes us from the animal kingdom and is the spiritual “component” that enables us to connect with God.

God’s original design was to have ongoing, personal, intimate communion with His crowning creation; to communicate openly, as He did with Adam and Eve each evening in the Garden of Eden. However, when humanity willfully sinned, things changed dramatically. Sin separated us from intimate, direct communication and fellowship with God. A barrier was created between us and God.

In response, God provided a means whereby our sins could be atoned for, which eventually led to Jesus Christ becoming the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice. Through Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection bringing salvation, relationship with God could be restored. The level of communication, however, would not be quite the same as originally designed. Yet the ability to commune with God was not lost. Ongoing communication with God and the ability to hear from Him remain powerful realities because of how we’re wired as His crowning creation.

In a sense, the spiritual component placed in us by our Creator is like the receiver in a cell phone or radio. The receiver picks up electromagnetic signals and converts them to sound. Similarly, our spiritual nature is the component within each of us that responds to God, that orients us to divine reality. Paul wrote in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” It is because we are God’s children that we can call out to Him, “Abba, Father” (verse 15), a term of endearment between a
child and father. This communication link implanted in us enables us to call out to our Heavenly Father and know He hears us just as a loving earthly father hears and responds to his children.

Think about major crises that have erupted nationally or globally. During these events, many people turned to prayer, to the church, and to God for comfort, solace, and hope. Doing so in times of critical need is almost a reflex action. In the heat of crisis we look to the divine for help. Even nonbelievers will call out to God in prayer. The spiritual component is alive and active, whether or not it is recognized or acknowledged.

**The closer our relationship is with God, the clearer our communication with Him will be.**

While each of us is wired to communicate with God, sending to and receiving communication from Him are dynamically linked to relationship. The closer our relationship is with God, the clearer our communication with Him will be. However, if we wander away from God, we start losing the signal.

With a cell phone, signal strength is maximized by proximity to the tower. The farther away the receiver moves from a transmitting tower, the weaker the signal gets. So it is in our ability to commune with God. If we distance ourselves from Him spiritually (and we’re always the ones who move), the signal weakens; if we move too far, we can’t receive a signal at all. When people complain about not sensing God’s presence, too much distance from Him generally is the reason. Only by praying on a regular basis and paying close attention to His Word, can we attain the closeness we need to be in communion with Him. When we’re close to God, our sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit is greatly enhanced. The signal is picked up and there is a sense of Spirit bearing witness with spirit as the communication channel is open and the signals come through.

**Can you relate to the feeling that prayer sometimes seems one-sided? Explain.**

**How would your prayer life change if you could always know for certain God is listening?**

**Describe a time when you have clearly sensed the Spirit of God connecting with your inner spirit.**
worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (verse 42). Mary had chosen to take time to be in His presence, to sit at His feet and hear from Him; the stuff of life could wait.

Practicing God’s Presence

Of course, we must attend to the demands of life. We cannot cloister ourselves away and spend every waking moment in prayer. However, we can be in continual communion with God throughout the day by remaining attuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit and aware always of God’s presence. This is enhanced by mentally or verbally expressing praise and adoration to God as we go about our daily tasks, giving thanks to the Lord for His presence, His love, His provision, His guidance, and a multitude of other things for which we can express thanks.

Learning to practice God’s presence in this way is revolutionary and revitalizing. When we take time to express praise and adoration to God, three things are accomplished. First, we gain victory in the battleground of our minds. Disparaging, negative, or evil thoughts
cannot gain a foothold when our hearts and minds are continually in an attitude of praise and worship. Satan is exceedingly effective in attacking our thought life, his deadliest tactic. Continual communion with God is a powerful antidote against the poison the enemy seeks to inject. Second, we become keenly attuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit. When that is true, the Spirit will effectively lead and direct our lives and keep us continually aligned with God’s will and purpose. He will help us respond to needs in people’s lives and empower us to pray effectively for them. He will help us gain victory over the attacks of Satan and his forces. Third, we become effective witnesses to the world around us. As we practice God’s presence and are filled with the Holy Spirit, our desire will be greatly enhanced to help others know Christ and experience the joy, peace, and hope we possess.

**We are carriers of God’s presence wherever we go.**

One of the great pitfalls in Christian living is our tendency to compartmentalize our spirituality. We have our prayer time, our Bible reading time, our church time, and so on. We must realize, however, that our spirituality is not expressed only when we are kneeling in prayer, reading the Bible, or attending church. Instead, we are spiritual persons in our homes, in the marketplace, while driving the car, and in all other venues of life. We are carriers of God’s presence wherever we go. Being continually in an attitude of prayerful praise and adoration to God and remaining sensitive to the Spirit’s voice make us powerful, living epistles “known and read of all men” (2 Corinthians 3:2, KJV).

*Where does intentional time with God and His Word fit on your calendar?*

*What is some “stuff” that you could eliminate or bypass that would allow more time for you to spend with God?*

*How does taking a few moments to express praise and adoration to God make a difference in your day?*

*What are some steps you can take to help make spirituality flow through your day-to-day life?*
Prayer Is about Alignment

*With God’s Righteousness*

As we learn to practice God’s presence through continual devotion to prayer and to His Word, we become aligned with His character which is righteous and holy. The Psalmist wrote, “The eyes of the \textit{LORD} are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry” (Psalm 34:15). Right standing with God always is dependent upon repentance and turning away from sin. David underscored the importance of righteousness to receiving God’s answers to prayer by declaring, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer” (Psalm 66:18,19).

Proverbs 1:20-33 makes it clear that those who refuse to follow after godly wisdom and counsel will not receive God’s answers to their prayers. “They shall call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me” (verse 28, KJV). Thankfully we have the assurance that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Jesus instructed His followers who were concerned about daily provision to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). The more intentional we are about cultivating God’s presence in our lives, the more fully His character and image will be perfected in us.

*Right standing with God always is dependent upon repentance and turning away from sin.*

*With God’s Truth*

Prayer and the study of God’s Word are inseparable disciplines. A key role of the Holy Spirit is to “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). When we prayerfully approach the Word of God, we receive direction and counsel that helps us deal with issues that need to change in our lives as well as more fully understand Scriptural truths and principles. Psalm 145:18 states, “The \textit{LORD} is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” As we align our lives with the truth of God’s Word, He is pleased to respond to our prayers.
Prayer—What’s It All About?

With God’s Will

Praying, studying God’s Word, and practicing God’s presence all contribute to aligning our lives with God’s will and purpose. When we are attuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we will not wander from the right path. Also, when we are in line with God’s will, our prayers are more likely to receive God’s response. We avoid the pitfall of asking with wrong motives, as James warned, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

Instead, we are assured of the promise conveyed in 1 John 5:14,15: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.” While God cannot be manipulated, He does promise to fulfill His will and purpose for our lives. Thus, when we pray according to His will, He does hear and answer.

Are there areas in your life where you feel you need to align more closely with God’s righteousness? Explain.

How does prayer affect your Bible reading and vice versa?

Think about the prayers you’ve prayed recently. How much have those prayers related to aligning with God’s will versus meeting personal wants or interests?

What has been the result as you have endeavored to pray according to God’s will?

With this understanding of prayer as our backdrop, we will now move, in the following sessions, to explore the who, what, when, where, why, and how of prayer.

John Maempa is director of the National Prayer Center, General Council of the Assemblies of God, Springfield, Missouri.
The pastor of a growing church has just called for prayer partners as the congregation begins a new building program. Ushers hand out commitment cards as members ponder what blocks of time they can commit to this vital need. While everyone is excited about what God is doing in the church, some struggle to fill out their cards. They know prayer is important, yet the thought of spending long periods of time praying makes them feel uneasy, inadequate, or even afraid.

You’ve probably been in services like these. You might even be one of those who struggles with putting prayer into practice. If so, you’re not alone. While most Christians recognize the value of prayer, consistently devoting time to it can be a challenge. This battle is reflected in statements like these:
“I just don’t have time to pray.”

“I really struggle to stay focused during prayer times.”

“I get bored and tired when I pray for very long.”

As these struggles mount, some might be tempted to conclude that a consistent personal prayer life just isn’t for them. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Every child of God is called to a lifestyle of prayer.

Prayer Is Our Responsibility—and Our Privilege

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matthew 6:5-13, He made an interesting distinction. Verse 8 quotes Him as saying, “When you pray....” Jesus didn’t segment His audience when it came to prayer. He didn’t suggest that some would be the “pray-ers” while others would not. His choice of words reveals an expectation that each of His followers will make prayer a part of his or her life. It’s not a responsibility that can be relegated to others.

Spending time in prayer requires a sustained commitment and produces real challenges. Some ideas for meeting those challenges are found on the following pages. Yet one fact remains: When we ask the question, “Who should pray?” the Bible provides a clear answer: Everyone!

It’s also important to avoid viewing prayer as merely a responsibility to be met. Jesus invited us to hold conversation with God. There can be no higher privilege than entering into His presence.

Every child of God is called to a lifestyle of prayer.

In light of Christ’s invitation, we’re wise to regularly examine our attitudes when we pray. Can we say with the Psalmist, “You will fill me with joy in your presence” (Psalm 16:11)?

What does the Psalmist mean in that verse? After all, sometimes prayer seems anything but joyful, as a need, problem, or crisis overwhelms our thoughts. Yet the joy comes in knowing our Lord invites us to voice those concerns. Prayer isn’t empty, one-sided conversation. It’s a vital and personal interaction with God.

God Is Waiting to Hear from You

We live in a hectic, noisy world. People rush from one commitment to another, often trying to
squeezed even more responsibilities along the way. Sadly, our frantic scheduling and multitasking even impacts our relationships, which can cause some people in our lives to feel neglected or insignificant.

It’s a far different picture, however, when we look at the relationship God wants to have with His people. Psalm 34:15-18 reveals His intense desire to hear from us. Because He is “attentive to [our] cry” (verse 15), we can be assured that our prayers don’t just bounce off the ceiling. God listens because He cares. And this compassion leads to powerful acts on our behalf when we seek Him in prayer.

A great example of this can be seen in a story told by missionary Willis Long. He and his son were travelling across India on a particularly hot day when they stopped at a roadside shack for something cold to drink. But as Willis began to swallow, he immediately knew something was wrong. The beverage contained broken glass and had severely lacerated his throat. He needed medical help immediately.

But as they sped down the road toward the nearest doctor, Willis’s pain became more and more intense. By the time he and his son reached the Ganges river, a serious fever had developed. To make matters worse, they’d missed the last ferry of the day and would have to wait until morning to continue. During the night, as the infection spread, Willis slipped into unconsciousness. Death seemed imminent.

Yet, amazingly, the next morning Willis awoke in perfect health. The fever had broken. By noon he and his son arrived home, and he held no ill-effects from the swallowed glass. God had miraculously intervened.

However, that isn’t the end of the story. Two years later, while home on furlough, Willis was preaching at a Bible camp. One evening a woman approached him with an incredible story. A couple of years earlier she had received a vision of him lying on the bank of a river. Although she’d never met him, God spoke his name to her and urged her to intercede. She responded by praying until the assurance came that Willis’ need had been met.

Willis asked her when she had this vision. As she recited the day and hour, he realized that she had been praying during the very time he lay dying on the bank of the Ganges.

God called an anonymous stranger to pray for a missionary halfway around the globe who needed a miracle. She wasn’t a prominent expert
Who Should Pray?

on prayer, or even a close friend or relative of the man in need. She could have said, “I don’t even know who this person is, Lord. Who am I to pray?” But instead, she chose to obey the Lord’s voice.

Likewise, there will be times when God places individuals on our hearts to pray for needs we may not even know or understand. How will we respond? We must be ready to answer the call when it comes.

We also need to be prepared to seek God when struggles come into our own lives. Jesus himself declared that “in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Hard times are a part of life. But this reality need not leave us feeling hopeless. We’re not alone. No matter how dark the valley, God is right there, waiting to hear from us.

Overcome the Barriers to Personal Prayer

Have you ever felt like there was a barrier preventing you from experiencing the kind of prayer life you know God wants you to have? A variety of issues and concerns threaten to force prayer from the top of our priority list. Yet these obstacles can be overcome if we’re willing to invest the time and energy. Here are a few examples.

I struggle to stay focused when I pray for a long time.

Many of us struggle with tiredness, focus, or even boredom during prayer. We set out with the best of intentions, only to find our minds wandering or our eyes drooping after a few minutes. A number of practical steps can help to overcome this barrier. Here are some questions to ask and ideas to consider as you make your prayer time more focused.

• Do I devote a specific time each day to prayer? Prayer will be more consistent when we make it a regular, daily activity. Set your prayer time at an hour when you’ll feel refreshed and focused. It’s true that the Psalmist said, “In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice” (Psalm 5:3). Yet many of us aren’t very awake at dawn, and the evening will work far better. Taking time for prayer is what’s important; when that time occurs is secondary.

• Do I have a plan when I set out to pray? It’s hard to stay focused when our minds are constantly searching for things to pray about. Assemble a prayer list, including requests from yourself, your family, your
church, missionaries you support, etc. But don’t limit your prayer time to requests. Also list specific reasons to praise God as He blesses you and answers your needs. There are many resources available from which to collect requests, from your own church to trusted ministry Internet sites (such as the National Prayer Center at www.prayer.ag.org). And be sure your plan includes ample time to meditate and listen for God’s voice. Prayer is communication—a conversation. A big part of prayer involves hearing His voice.

*Just as eating, sleeping, and breathing are normal and essential to physical life, prayer is normal and essential to spiritual life.*

• **Have I removed distractions from my prayer time?** Prayer times will be much more effective and meaningful when we’re fully focused on God. Simple acts like turning off the cell phone, the television, and the iPod can make a big difference. It also helps to find a place where we know we’ll be undisturbed for an extended period of time. Guard those minutes of prayer as your time alone with God.

**I’m too busy to pray.**

The “busy-ness” of life is probably the most common reason prayer is neglected. And life does include many responsibilities: Get yourself (and perhaps your kids) ready in the morning. Fight traffic. Put in a hard day at work or school. Fight traffic again. Then try to get some things done at home before going to bed and starting the cycle all over again. Priority must also be given to spending time with family, friends, and at church activities. Time is indeed a precious commodity. And, too often, prayer is left off the schedule.

The key to overcoming this barrier might be found in our perspective. Prayer is best seen not as a task to be accomplished but as a natural activity of our walk with God. Just as eating, sleeping, and breathing are normal and essential to physical life, prayer is normal and essential to spiritual life.

This comes into view more clearly as we examine how God views prayer. Colossians 4:2 states, “Be devoted to prayer.” A good
prayer life, then, is an act of obedience to God. That doesn’t mean we pray out of mere duty. Rather, our devotion is a result of relationship. We make prayer a priority because we want our relationship with Him to grow and become stronger.

Still, prayer can be a challenge in a society that judges success and value by things that can be seen. A neatly completed stack of paperwork or a well-marked “to do” list signals a productive day. But prayer doesn’t always bring tangible results right away, leading to the flawed notion that we have “better things to do.” We might conclude that tasks yielding immediate, visible results are a better use of time. But God’s Word tells a different story.

Hebrews 6:1,2 lists intercession (“laying on of hands”) as basic to Christian life. Prayer, then, is a spiritual discipline that must be valued and practiced if we want to move on to greater maturity. A solid prayer life will serve as a foundation for effectiveness in other areas of ministry.

Quiet minutes of prayer may seem unimportant among the urgent events of life. Yet to our souls, it’s vital nourishment. That’s why time devoted to prayer is always time well spent.

I don’t have a special calling to prayer.

What kinds of prayer ministries exist in your church? Maybe a group gathers early Sunday morning to pray for the services. Many churches have prayer teams interceding for needs in the congregation, the community, and around the world. It’s also quite common to see prayer chains that receive, pray over, and share needs by phone or e-mail. While these specialized prayer ministries are important, we must be careful not to conclude that only some Christians are called to pray.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus defined prayer in simple, relational terms: sharing needs and offering praise to God while surrendering to His will. It’s true that some have a stronger burden for the ministry of prayer, such as leading intercessory groups or prayer chains. Yet the basic discipline of prayer Jesus described ought not be confined to certain individuals, such as pastors or other spiritual leaders. In the apostle Paul’s teachings on ministry gifts (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; Ephesians 4:11-13), he never mentioned prayer as a unique role in ministry. Indeed, prayer isn’t a gift intended only for a select
few. No special, supernatural enablement is required to pray. It doesn’t take a specific call of God to seek Him. Prayer is universal; we all can do it. We all *must* do it.

Do you ever struggle with the notion that an active prayer life just isn’t for you? Think about why you’ve come to that conclusion. Whether it’s the tendency to let others take on the responsibility of prayer, or simply a misunderstanding of what prayer is meant to be, it’s wise to remember the words of Proverbs 15:29: “The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.” Prayer is the trademark of those who genuinely follow the Lord, the by-product of a close walk with Him. What a tragic error to assume that it’s the duty or privilege of a select few.

*I’m not “good enough” for God to listen to me.*

Some Christians struggle with the idea that they’re not good enough, or spiritual enough, to be prayer warriors. They look at struggles they’re facing today, or issues they’ve experienced in the past, and conclude that God would rather listen to someone else.

This barrier reflects a misconception about prayer. God’s desire to hear from us isn’t based on some merit we’ve earned, like an accomplished artist or businessman would earn access to a president or a king. Instead, God wants to hear from us because we’re His children. Once again, the privilege of prayer is based on relationship founded in love. Therefore all believers have equal access.

*Prayer is the trademark of those who genuinely follow the Lord, the by-product of a close walk with Him.*

In Luke 18:15-17, when Jesus talked about our interaction with Him, He didn’t point to any qualifications that had to be met. Instead He declared that “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (verse 17). Imagine the disciples’ amazement when they heard these words. They too often sought stature and status as a means of approaching the Lord. But childlike qualities such as sincerity, humility, and simple trust—which often overlooked—are exactly what He’s looking for. In short, the Lord hears us when our hearts are right.
This is affirmed throughout Scripture. God honors the faith of the impoverished (Mark 10:46-52) as assuredly as He hears the voice of kings (Psalm 6:9). In the same way, He readily and lovingly responds to the heartfelt cries of all who want to draw near to Him (Acts 16:25-34).

Have feelings of unworthiness or inferiority ever caused you to miss out on the blessings of consistent communication with God? Rest in the promises of His Word. No matter who you are or where you've been, He wants to hear from you. So approach Him with a sincere, humble heart. He’s listening.

**Prepare Yourself for Effective Prayer**

How vital is prayer? It’s no overstatement to say that our spiritual well-being and the outworking of God’s kingdom purposes depend on it. But what if we still have “a ways to go” when it comes to consistent, personal prayer?

**Recognize the urgency of personal prayer.**

First Peter 4:7 offers an important reminder. It’s easy to get so caught up in the urgency of our daily activities that we lose our perspective when it comes to eternal things. Yet in this verse we observe an important exhortation that moves us toward prayer.

Verse 7 declares, “The end of all things is near.” Christ’s return is imminent. And as that time draws closer, several facts come to the forefront: 1) Life will become increasingly hard for Christians as they face mounting persecution; 2) People desperately need Jesus; 3) Many things in this world can distract us from spiritual priorities. We need to be people of prayer, now more than ever—for our own sake as well as for the sake of others. This responsibility must not be neglected or simply left to the assumption that others will do it. May God give us a heartfelt urgency to personally seek Him in these last days.

**Refocus your attention on God’s kingdom.**

One of the biggest challenges we face in prioritizing prayer is that it deals largely with the unseen, spiritual realm. Prayer directs our focus outside the five physical senses and into God’s kingdom. It’s no wonder Peter exhorted us to be clear minded and self-controlled. Daily issues and problems continually seek to divert our attention. We need prayer to keep our minds fixed on Christ.
Put Prayer into Action

The “Who?” of prayer is you! Prayer isn’t just something you study about in Sunday School or participate in during a church service. God wants you to put prayer into action—personally. Below are some thought-provoking questions and activities to help enhance your prayer life.

Why do you think many Christians struggle to make prayer a consistent part of their personal walk with God?

What are some things a person can do to overcome distractions or feelings of boredom during prayer?

As Christians, we sometimes encounter friends who struggle in the area of prayer. How would you respond in the following situations:

• A friend has just confided that he doesn’t see himself as a prayer warrior. He believes only certain Christians have a gift for prayer.

• You’re helping to disciple a new believer in your church who feels unworthy to have personal prayers heard by God. She struggles to believe God would take her seriously, considering all the mistakes of her past.
I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.

Psalm 116:1

What do you pray about? Does a major crisis drive you to your knees? How about the every-day choices and challenges of life? Do they find their way into your time with God? Perhaps a better question is, “Is there anything—a situation, problem, or issue—that you hesitate to take to the Lord?” God’s Word says…

In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Philippians 4:6).

The invitation is clear. God wants us to tell Him about our deepest concerns. He’s moved by the desperate cries of our hearts. Yet His ear is also tuned to our everyday needs.

However, when prayer time comes, we often struggle to understand what God wants us
Struggles like these are very real. We may wonder if God actually wants to hear the details of our lives. Or, doubts and fears might cause us to neglect prayer. Yet as we search the Scriptures, we find important promises that will energize our prayer lives, helping us realize that we really can take everything to the Lord.

God Cares about What We’re Facing

All of our prayer requests must be rooted in the confidence that God is compassionate and willing to act on our behalf. He isn’t put off by our feelings of desperation, and doesn’t grow weary at the sound of our voices. Thus we can boldly share our deepest thoughts and concerns. Such tender sensitivity is seen in how Christ responded to people throughout His earthly ministry. Numerous passages describe His compassion when approached by those in need. (See, for example, Matthew 9:35,36; 14:13,14; 20:29–34.)

The Lord’s pure love for us can dissolve any insecurity we might feel about the needs we place at His feet. All arguments against His sincere concern are quickly dismissed through promises found in His Word.

to pray about. We might even neglect to bring certain things to Him. Consider these examples:

• Meg wants to serve God with her whole heart but she struggles to let go of a habit from her past. While she knows she needs God’s help, she hesitates to pray, knowing His answer will require her to make some hard changes.

• Seth feels like his situation is hopeless. He’s been looking for a job that matches his college degree for 6 months—something that can become a career. But he’s still stuck doing temp work. Seth isn’t even sure he wants to pray about it anymore, feeling that the “letdown” will be too painful if the answer doesn’t come.

• Sharon wants to talk to God about some minor health issues she’s dealing with. But she wonders if God would really want to concern himself with the “little” matters of her life. “Maybe I should save my prayers for the really big needs,” she concludes.
What Should We Pray About?

Nothing is too big for God.

Few Scriptures invigorate our faith in prayer more than Hebrews 11:1. This lead-in to the “faith chapter” reminds us that hope for answered prayer must be focused on unchanging promises: God is good. God is powerful. Nothing is too big for Him to handle. Such assurances divert our attention from the need so we can focus on the solution—God.

This change of perspective is vital. Sometimes our needs extend far beyond our capacity to understand, much less solve them. Yet faith, exercised through prayer, reminds us of who God is. As we focus on Him, the size of the problem becomes irrelevant. God is greater than any crisis.

That’s not to say our needs become unimportant. We still experience very real burdens and concerns. But we’re able to find relief in knowing we’re not alone. God is fighting the battle for us.

Sadly, some Christians are quick to acknowledge God’s great power, yet struggle with the idea that He will apply His power to their lives. For them, Ephesians 3:20,21 offers real comfort. Yes, God can do “immeasurably more” than we imagine. And He does so “according to His power.” But don’t miss the end of verse 20. That power is at work “within us”!

We need not limit the scope of our prayers to what we understand. Nothing we ask is ever so great that it overwhelms His ability to respond effectively. Are we willing to embrace that kind of faith? God wants us to experience the power of prayer beyond our imagination.

Think back on some of the hardest tests or crises you’ve faced. Do you ever wish you had known then what you know now about those situations? How reassuring it would have been to see that things really would be okay, and that you might even reap some rewards from the experience. Yet you never could have envisioned these things during the hard days.

God knows the future. He sees the whole picture and controls every circumstance. Perhaps the need seems so big, so difficult, that you have no idea where the answer lies. God does. And you can take any and every need to Him, knowing He wants to accomplish things beyond your comprehension.

God cares, no matter the situation.

Sometimes a need hits us so unexpectedly that we feel as if the breath has been knocked from
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our lungs. Times like these can leave us paralyzed with fear. The Psalmist had some powerful words of hope for such dark hours: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:7). The answer, found in verses 8-14, encompasses every emotion and fear we might experience during a trial. When we feel all alone, God is there. When the valley seems as black as night, God’s presence lights our way.

**God doesn’t reject us because of our inadequacies. We can freely approach Him with any need.**

Why can we be assured of this great security during life’s harshest hours? Because we know that God lovingly created us. He’s been there from the beginning. His compassion for every detail of our lives will never cease.

Imagine how our prayers will be impacted as we fully realize this promise. No matter our situation, our problem, or even our emotional state, God is there. He isn’t put off by our desperation. He doesn’t reject us because of our inadequacies. We can freely approach Him with any need.

Consider the example of the leper in Luke 8. It’s hard to picture a more dire, lonely situation. Leprosy wasn’t just a skin disease in Bible times. It carried a stigma. Lepers were expelled from society and forced to live in isolated colonies. In fact, if they happened to approach another person on the road, they were required to yell, “Unclean! Unclean!” Imagine the misery of such an existence.

Yet Jesus didn’t hesitate to approach the leper, to touch him, to minister compassion to his soul and healing to his body. His love trumped every stigma and overcame every barrier.

We may sometimes feel a little like that leper—alone, hurting, and without hope. During these times it’s vital to remember that Jesus is near. He cares. And no matter who we are or where we’re at in life, He listens to our needs.

**We Can Take Even “Small” Needs to Him**

We know God has the power to meet any request. We recognize His compassion for the trials and crises we encounter. Yet there are times we still might hesitate to take every need to Him. Perhaps we struggle with the concept of a
great big God being interested in our problems. This feeling can grow stronger when we see the desperate, life-threatening crises confronting so many in our world.

Yet God is concerned with our daily needs, no matter how big or small they might seem in comparison to what others face. He wants us to share these burdens with Him. And He responds—sometimes in ways we can’t imagine. Consider this story, as told by missionary Alice Horne:

In the summer of 1992, while ministering in Laos, we traveled to Vientiane to meet our daughter, Lori, at the airport. While in the city, a missionary friend graciously allowed us to take his new Land Rover to the airport.

Filled with anticipation at the thought of seeing our daughter after three years, my husband Gerald whipped into a gas station to fuel, then we quickly headed to the marketplace for a snack. There, Gerald left the motor running to keep me cool as he ducked into a canvas stall.

That’s when the engine started to sputter, cough, and finally die. We knew immediately what had happened. He had put regular gasoline in the diesel Land Rover. The excitement of the day quickly turned to nausea in the pits of our stomachs. Overwhelming emotions bombarded us—Mike’s expensive new vehicle, Lori’s plane arrival, language limitations. “Oh God, what can we do now?” Our prayer was short, sincere, and desperate.

Gerald tried to get some help from young men on the sidewalk. No one spoke any English. So he sent me off on public transportation to meet Lori while he continued the desperate search for help.

Just after I left, a Laotian gentleman walked up and, in perfect English, asked, “What seems to be the problem?” Gerald explained the situation. Taking command, the man examined the vehicle, then sent Gerald to collect plastic containers for the gasoline. Once enough containers had been found, the man located the right valve, emptied the tank, and gave the gas to the young men on the street. Gerald quickly went to retrieve some diesel.

“Start it up!” the man declared after adding the diesel. Gerald hesitated. He could just see our friend’s new vehicle completely ruined. But instead, without a single sputter or cough, it started and ran perfectly. Gerald tried to pay
the man, but he refused, and disappeared into the crowd.

Soon after that, Lori and I arrived back from the airport via public transportation. What had just happened? we wondered. So many improbable things had taken place at once. A Laotian man speaking perfect English came along at just the right moment. He knew exactly how to fix the new Land Rover. He refused payment and gave the gas away. The vehicle came through completely unharmed.

Yet as we praised God for answered prayer, we became convinced the stranger was an angel sent by the Lord. Our mistake could have turned a happy day into a terrible—even frightening—ordeal. But God took control. He saw us in need and responded in ways we never could have imagined. To this day we thank Him for His compassionate response to our prayers.

All needs take high priority in God’s eyes.

Jesus said, in Matthew 21:22, that if we believe we will receive whatever we ask for in prayer. Missionary Horne experienced this truth at a difficult moment, and we can, too—if we’re willing to surrender such moments to Him.

It’s important to remember that this verse doesn’t intend to define prayer as some formula for getting anything we want. After all, Scripture also tells us to pray with His will in view (1 John 5:14). Instead, it’s a wonderful reminder of the power available to each of us when we pray. We won’t find ourselves at the bottom of His priority list just because the world is full of needs that seem more dramatic or visible. Every need, every challenge, and every concern matters equally to Him, and is in sight of His miraculous provision. That truth applies whether we’re a soldier fighting in a war zone or we’re dealing with a personal crisis known only to ourselves.

Prayer offers the cure for everyday anxieties.

Despite God’s promises, however, it’s not uncommon to feel anxious about our most basic needs. “My bills must be paid”; “I feel like I’m getting sicker”; “My relationship with my parents is still a real struggle.” How can we overcome feelings like these?

Make no mistake. It isn’t always easy to pray our way through hard situations. Consider the words of
Philippians 4:6. There, we’re invited to lay aside all anxiety and rest in the Lord by giving our needs to Him. But the passage doesn’t end there. Notice how verse 7 describes His peace as “transcend[ing] all understanding.” That’s because some situations leave us feeling as though peace would be impossible: Those crisis moments. The private fears of our hearts. The times we wonder if God really does care enough to act. Yet we can rest assured that, without favoritism, without prejudice, and without limitation, He’s concerned about the needs we face.

Seek God No Matter What the Need May Be

Let the Lord’s Prayer be your guide.

When Jesus gave us His model for prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, a wide variety of needs were represented, from physical provision to spiritual guidance. A phrase-by-phrase look at His words will help us understand even better how this prayer can direct our own prayer lives.

Our Father in heaven...

The prayer begins tenderly, calling us to address God as “Father.” While there is a place for formality in prayer, ultimately it’s intended to be a personal conversation between Father and child. Some people, however, struggle to see God in this way. For them, this portion of the prayer serves as a call to seek God for a greater understanding of His role as Father in their lives.

...hallowed be your name...

This phrase serves as a powerful complement to the words preceding it. God is both our tender Father and our holy, almighty Lord. The Creator of the universe is intimately concerned about each of our lives. What a marvelous promise to bolster our prayer lives. This particular portion of the prayer calls us to worship God, recognize His holiness, and seek Him for courage and discipline to reject sin and reflect His holiness in our lives.

...your kingdom come...

These words call us to hold an eternal perspective when we pray. Although we’re pressed by the needs and issues of this temporal world, our greater concern must be the advance of God’s kingdom priorities. This includes praying for Christ’s return, for the Spirit’s power to be at work in the Church, and that Satan’s
deceptive schemes will be defeated. (See Ephesians 6:11,12; 2 Peter 3:1-13; Revelation 22:20.)

...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...

This is, in a sense, the “real-life” application of the last phrase in today’s world. As God’s kingdom comes, His will and purposes are accomplished. This part of the prayer has a twofold meaning: We pray that God’s commands will be honored and obeyed, and we pray that His plans for the world, salvation, and eternity are accomplished.

From our own perspective, this can profoundly impact on our prayers. It isn’t always easy to pray for God’s will to be done; sometimes His will conflicts with our own. We need to ask God if any of our priorities don’t align with His, seek His guidance in our decisions, and plead His help to follow His will.

...give us today our daily bread...

Jesus went on to encourage us to pray for our needs, inviting us to trust His ability and willingness to provide. However, it’s important to remember that these are “needs, not greeds.” This passage calls us to reflect on those basic things required to live day by day. We are surrendering ourselves to God’s care, not looking for a more comfortable lifestyle through our relationship with Him. There’s great comfort in knowing that when we find ourselves—or others—in need, we can trust our loving God for answers and provision.

...forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors...

Here Jesus moved into the area of our relationships with God and with others. Note that the two are related. The term “debts” refers to sins. When we’ve disobeyed God’s commands, violating His will for our lives, our first response must be to confess the wrong and seek forgiveness. However, we also need to ask God if we’re withholding forgiveness from others who’ve wronged us, then respond by forgiving them. Note that moments after Jesus uttered this phrase, He stated that we won’t be forgiven by God if we refuse to forgive the sins of others against us (Matthew 6:14,15). Forgiveness for sins is one of the great fruits of prayer; we must not let anything stand in the way of our receiving God’s perfect mercy.
...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one...

The Christian life involves very real spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-18). Satan is working to derail our spiritual lives and hinder the work of God’s kingdom. From our perspective, prayer serves a fundamental role in the success of this battle. The word “temptation” in this passage refers to the testing of our faith, as God will not tempt us toward sin (James 1:13). In such spiritual tests, we are powerless to succeed in ourselves; we need God’s help. So, in essence, what is seen here is a prayer that God would spare us from harsh tests because we are weak in ourselves, while also recognizing that God’s power is necessary, and available, to see us through the tests successfully. There’s a sincere humility in this prayer. It involves recognizing our need for God in winning our spiritual battles, while also calling on Him to provide the power and strength we need to be victorious.

As we break down the various elements of the Lord’s model prayer, we see it provides us with two guiding principles for our own prayer lives: 1. God is glorious, and His kingdom is worthy of our seeking; 2. God is gracious and caring, and He wants us to call out to Him from the deepest reaches of our hearts.

Accept the Lord’s invitation to prayer.

The invitation is clear: Seek God for whatever need you’re facing. Below are just a few specific examples, along with God’s assurance through Scripture that He can meet such a request.

- **Do you need healing?** James 5:14-16 provides a simple answer. Get together with spiritual leaders and seek God for a miracle. This provision is rooted in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Matthew 8:16,17). There’s no need to hesitate. Take your sicknesses to the Lord.

- **Do you need financial help?** Finances are a common need. Even the apostle Paul faced such a dilemma (Philippians 4:14-19). And we can have the same assurance he had, that God holds unlimited resources for meeting these needs. He lovingly shares with us from His divine supply of riches.

- **Do you need help in a relationship?** Few things stress us out more than strained relationships. Whether
the struggle takes place at work, in a friendship, or through a family situation, it’s good to know God is near (Psalm 34:18). He will intervene and help bring things back to normal. Sometimes this presents a real challenge, especially when harsh words and cold attitudes have been the norm for a while. But He also offers strength for us to forgive and make life changes if necessary. (See Luke 6:27-31.)

- **Do you need direction?** It’s not unusual to feel lost when we face an important decision. In fact, God expects us to rely on His help in times like these (Jeremiah 29:11-13). Whether it’s a career choice, a job change, a major purchase, or even something less dramatic, we’re invited to seek divine wisdom through prayer (James 1:5).

**Put Prayer into Action**

*Evaluate your prayer focus.*

Chances are you’ve been in a prayer service, or even in your own devotional time, and wondered, *What should I pray about?* The list of possibilities is endless. So don’t be intimidated by a need that seems impossible. Likewise, reject the notion that God isn’t concerned with the deepest, most hidden concerns of your heart. Here are some questions to consider as you develop greater focus in your prayer life.

*What are some specific needs or struggles you might hesitate to bring to the Lord? Why?*

*How would you respond to a friend who said she didn’t want to pray about a particular issue because she was afraid of what the answer might be?*

*Have you ever hesitated to pray about a particular problem or concern? Why did you hesitate?*

*What should you do if you encounter a crisis so serious that you’re afraid to take it to the Lord in prayer?*

*Why can you feel assured that God cares about the simplest or most personal needs in your life, even if others might see these needs as “trivial”?*

*Look to the Bible for guidance.*

There’s no greater source of practical answers on what to pray about than the Bible itself. Take a minute to read each biblical prayer below. Think
about what the person praying about was going through, as well as what feelings, concerns, fears, or joys might have prompted the prayers. Then ponder how you might pray in the same situations. Keep in mind that crises aren’t the only times we’re drawn to prayer. Like these believers from long ago, our hearts can, and ought to, cry out for God at every opportunity.

- Exodus 32:9-14
- 1 Kings 19:1-18
- Nehemiah 1:1-11
- Job 1:1-22
- Psalm 51:1-12
- Psalm 54:1-7
- Psalm 119:10-24
- Psalm 139:1-24
- Acts 1:15-25

This small sampling demonstrates the diversity of prayer and prayer topics in the Bible. One man feels despondent and alone, while another humbly repents for the sins of himself and his nation. There’s an individual devastated by the loss of family and possessions, while another praises God for His care and compassion. One mourns a personal downfall while another quietly meditates on God’s commands.

Do any of these situations sound familiar? The fact is, every Christian finds himself or herself in such settings at one time or another. Prayer, after all, isn’t just for special occasions. Prayer belongs in every occasion.

Expand your focus through prayer guides.

When we pray, we must guard against becoming too preoccupied with our own needs. While personal needs are important, God intends for us to also seek Him on behalf of family, neighbors, friends, coworkers, church leaders, missionaries, strangers we meet on the street...the list is almost endless.

It can be challenging, however, to keep all these needs in focus. There’s a tendency settle on needs that matter most to us personally. While this is certainly important, it’s also healthy to maintain a wider focus, seeking God on behalf of individuals, ministries, and nations that we’ve never before touched with our intercession. This wider perspective will help keep our prayer
lives fresh, and ensure that we maintain a vision for the array of needs facing our churches, our neighborhoods, and our world.

A good resource to help expand your prayer life is found in the use of prayer guides. These brief, topically driven prayer lists help intercessors better understand the needs and issues facing a given ministry, project, or missionary endeavor. A wide array of prayer guides are available free of charge through the National Prayer Center website (www.prayer.ag.org).

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In case of fire, break glass.
If chemical comes in contact with eyes, flush with water immediately.
In the event of a water landing, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device.

Do any of these warnings sound familiar? We see or hear emergency instructions like these every day. However, for the most part we scarcely give them a second thought. They’re only for catastrophes we hope to never face.

Sadly, Christians occasionally fall into the trap of viewing prayer a little like those instructions—neglecting to give it much attention until the next crisis. If this mind-set is allowed to grow, prayer will eventually be relegated to Sunday services and, perhaps, meal time on special occasions.
But God has a far different intention for prayer. He wants us to make it an ongoing priority in our lives. Jesus reinforced this with His disciples in Matthew 6:6. It wasn't a matter of “if” they would pray, but “when” they prayed. Prayer was depicted as an ongoing activity that would touch every aspect of life—from basic, daily needs to the deepest spiritual pursuits. That principle still rings true for Christ’s followers today. We, like the first disciples, are called to a lifestyle of prayer.

Yet such a lifestyle isn’t easily maintained. Good times, hard times, and even the boredom of everyday life can challenge our commitment to prayer. Overcoming such challenges requires a new mindset. Talking to God—and listening to His voice—ought not be reserved for special occasions. When it comes to prayer, it’s always the right time.

Seek God During the Hard Times

Avoid the trap of bitterness.

Clarence had lived a hard life, and it showed in his face. Hurts and injustices from the past left him angry and bitter. So his response was typical when Scott, a young Christian, tried to tell him about Jesus. “Don’t bother,” he shot back before Scott could get more than a few words out. “I tried religion when I was young, but where did it get me? Forty years ago, some guy decided to run a red light and broadside my car. I’ve been walking with this cane ever since. Why would God let me go through something like that?”

“You just wait and see, Scott,” Clarence grumbled, “Life is hard. You’re better off just taking care of things on your own.”

Clarence’s story is a sad one, but it illustrates an important point. We have two choices when hard times strike: We can allow bitterness to draw us away from God. Or we can call out to God for help, and trust Him to work out the challenges we face in His way and according to His timetable.

Don’t let fear overwhelm you.

The struggles of life often leave us feeling helpless and out of control: Bills mount up without enough income to cover them. A serious illness lingers while doctors search for a cure. A troubled teenage daughter seems to be growing more and more distant from the family. Circumstances like these can easily lead to fear and anxiety, emotions that poison our faith. But by recognizing such dangers, we’re better equipped to conquer them before they overwhelm us.
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Jesus’ disciples faced the terrifying prospect of drowning during a sudden storm at sea, in Mark 4:35-41. Their first response was to focus on their fears rather than their faith. They even questioned Christ’s compassion, crying out, “Don’t You care if we drown?” This wasn’t a prayer request. It’s likely they were simply calling on Him to help bail water from the boat. That’s why Jesus responded with such a strong rebuke—as well as why they were so amazed at the miracle that followed.

And Jesus did perform a miracle, as the storm calmed at His command (verse 39). Here the word “calm” refers to more than just water and waves. A supernatural peace settled on them. The disciples’ attitudes as well as their circumstances changed dramatically when they heard the Savior’s voice.

**How will we respond to trials?**

**Will bitterness and doubt get the best of us? Or will we cry out to God in faith?**

That same divine sense of security is available to us when we ask Jesus for help in a crisis.

But it requires faith on our part—faith that’s demonstrated through prayer. Struggles and trials are inevitable, a normal part of life. Some are small and pass quickly, like an unexpected financial need. But others can last for years, such as a loved one who decides to alienate himself from friends and family. How will we respond? Will bitterness and doubt get the best of us? Or will we cry out to God in faith?

**Focus on God’s promises.**

In John 14:1-4, Jesus prepared His disciples for the biggest challenge of faith they would ever face, as He called them to place their trust in God’s eternal purposes. Jesus was about to be arrested, tried, and executed. Everything they believed about Him would be put to the test. The future never looked more grim. Like never before, those disciples needed to trust God’s sovereignty over every situation. They needed to cling to the confident assurance that we still hold today: God’s promises, fulfilled through Christ, will stand forever.

Today, hard times still hold the potential of derailing our faith. The enemy of our souls tempts us to question God’s love, if not His very existence.
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But prayer is the antidote. Jesus calls us to seek Him, confident in His promise to protect, preserve, provide, and ultimately present us with eternal life.

Are you enduring a hard struggle today? Cling to God’s promises in your prayers. Spend time in worship, focusing on your eternal hope. Yes, the problems and hurts of this world are very real, and God understands the cries of your heart. But He also promises to walk with you, provide for your needs, and give you life in eternity that will outshine anything you’re facing here on earth.

Praise God in the Good Times

If you do an Internet search of the phrase “How to achieve success” you’ll be presented with countless formulas and opportunities promising to make your greatest wishes come true. And the vast majority will have one thing in common: They assert that the ultimate source of success lies within you—your money, your time, your effort. The fact is, it’s human nature to rely on ourselves to achieve a good life. Consequently, we also tend to congratulate ourselves when those good times finally arrive.

Sadly, this self-centered perspective can creep into the way Christians define and celebrate success. But the Bible presents a far different picture.

All the good things we enjoy in life find their source in God. Recognizing such a reality will not only change how we respond to good times. It will also revolutionize the way we pray.

Give thanks when you succeed.

First Thessalonians 5:18 is one of the most common Scriptures cited during rough times. And, indeed, God does want us to maintain our thankfulness to Him through those hard circumstances. But this verse is just as relevant when life is good.

Success can actually distract us from God by luring us into a trap of self-reliance. When things go well, it’s easy to point toward our efforts, our sacrifices, and even our talents. Such an attitude, however, has its roots in one of the most destructive enemies of our faith: ingratitude. It’s no coincidence that the Bible uses some of its strongest language when condemning a lack of gratitude to God for His blessings. (See Romans 1:18-23.) Ingratitude insults the Creator of the universe by assuming that we are somehow responsible for the blessings of His creation.

In contrast, God wants our lives to be characterized by thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6,7). In Paul’s writings, thankfulness and prayer are
necessities like food, clothing, and shelter—things that often don’t get a second thought. And God supplies them faithfully.

It’s these “little” areas where we must be careful not to forget about God. After all, they’re basic to life, a strong reminder that it’s God who sustains us. Without Him we wouldn’t have even what it takes to live. Such provision calls us to pause every day and say a humble prayer of thanksgiving.

Celebrate God’s goodness.

Nehemiah 12 records one of the biggest celebrations in the Bible. Decades before, God had judged the people for their sinfulness by allowing the Babylonians and Persians to conquer them and remove them from their land. But now He had forgiven them, restored their relationship, and made the way for them to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah recorded the end of that return, as they rebuilt the walls of the city.

Notice how they celebrated the good that God had done for them. People travelled far for the event. There were choirs of thanksgiving, elaborately arranged to march on the wall. The people purified themselves spiritually. This

Don’t take the “little things” for granted.

Have you ever felt like you were being taken for granted? Maybe you volunteered your time or resources to a project for so long that everyone just assumed you’d take care of it without even offering to help. Or you went out of your way to help someone and didn’t receive so much as a thank you. It isn’t as if you do those things for the recognition; you’d just like to know that you’re appreciated.

Nobody likes to feel taken for granted. So we can only imagine what it says to God when we fail to express our gratitude for His blessings, both big and small. Matthew 7:7-11 offers a good reminder of just how involved He is with even the “little things” in our lives.

The request in this passage doesn’t involve supernatural provision. Instead, it’s basic

closely related (Philippians 4:6), and it’s not hard to understand why. Prayer draws the focus away from ourselves and places it on God. This can be especially challenging when we just earned a great promotion or graduated at the top of our class. No matter what we may accomplish, however, we must remember that God deserves the credit—and the praise.

The request in this passage doesn’t involve supernatural provision. Instead, it’s basic
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something I need to deal with that isn’t pleasing to Him. Why do I feel this way?

Phil’s story illustrates an important point. It’s not only the highs and lows of life that challenge our faith. Sometimes just the daily routine of living can wear us down. That’s why we’re all susceptible to spiritually dry periods—those times when it’s hard to do even the things basic to Christianity. And it can be especially hard to pray.

Recognize your need for prayer.

“Pray continually.” This simple instruction from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 can seem a little intimidating at first. Many times we struggle to stay focused in prayer for more than a few minutes. How can we possibly keep praying nonstop?

That’s why we must keep an important principle in mind when looking at this verse. Notice that it comes between two other commands, to “be joyful always,” and “give thanks in all circumstances.” The reality is that none of these three will always come easily. Sometimes joy seems far away. Other times it’s hard to give thanks. And, similarly, there are times when prayer can genuinely be difficult.

Focus on God at All Times

Phil felt as if his spiritual life was in a real rut. He struggled to stay focused during the services at church. And his daily devotional time seemed as dry as dust. I just don’t understand it, he thought. My life is going pretty good; there’s nothing really weighing on me and getting me down. I’ve asked God to show me if there’s

celebration became so loud that it could be heard in the surrounding areas.

While these events took place over 2,500 years ago, they offer a vivid picture of how we can—and should—give thanks to God when life is good today. It’s perhaps no coincidence that Nehemiah was one of the greatest examples of a praying leader in the Old Testament, with over a dozen references to his prayers. Genuine thanksgiving always includes prayer, whether it be worship, praise, meditation, or simple words of gratitude voiced from a sincere heart.

Take a minute to think about all the good things God has brought into your life. Are you making those blessings a matter of prayer, letting God know just how much you appreciate His compassion? Don’t forget to praise Him in the best of times.
So when we see verse 17 in context, we realize that it is defining a concept—an attitude—that ought to characterize the people of God. This “prayer mind-set” must stay in focus even when we aren’t actually bowing our heads and voicing a literal prayer.

Thus, 1 Thessalonians 5:17 doesn’t mean that we must be intentionally conversing with God every hour of the day, any more than we have to consciously tell ourselves, “I will be joyful now,” at every moment. It instead teaches that prayer is, in a sense, a disposition of the soul. We fulfill this command by living with a constant recognition of our need for prayer, as well as our ever-present opportunity to talk to God through worship, praise, and petition no matter the circumstances of the moment.

**Don’t become complacent.**

There are certain situations that naturally call us to prayer: a family crisis, a serious illness, a major life transition such as college graduation or a change of jobs. In those times prayer comes quite easily.

But what about the day-to-day grind between the highs and lows? Oddly, those are the times we’re most susceptible to becoming apathetic or complacent about prayer. Perhaps it’s because the need for prayer isn’t always immediately obvious, but whatever the reason, maintaining a priority of prayer can be a daily challenge.

As we emphasized in chapter 1, setting and maintaining regular times of prayer is a vital part of every believer’s walk with God. It’s always good to enter into that time with a plan, to recognize specific reasons why that prayer time will be an indispensable part of the day. There are the obvious issues, like, “What do I need?” and “What do my loved ones need?” But we must dig more deeply than that. “Why might I require the Lord’s wisdom today? What kind of guidance could be necessary to get through the day successfully?” At the same time, we do well to probe ourselves with questions like, “When did I find myself needing direction from the Lord yesterday? What might He want to tell me today?”

It’s also easier to stay focused on our need for prayer when we remember that our Christianity is an ongoing relationship, a walk with God that progresses every day. Imagine what would happen if we removed communication from any vital relationship in our lives. It would quickly become
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weak and strained. That’s why we stay in touch with those we love, even when life gets mundane or tedious.

The same is true with our Christian commitment. We can’t let the peaks and valleys of life disrupt our communication with the Lord. Remember, in order for prayer to develop into a consistent practice, it must become part of your lifestyle, your walk of faith. God doesn’t want your prayer life limited to crisis situations and special occasions. As your loving Father, He enjoys hearing from you every day.

In order for prayer to develop into a consistent practice, it must become part of your lifestyle, your walk of faith.

Put Prayer into Action

Think about when you pray—and when you don’t.

Self-analysis can be challenging, and even painful, especially when it comes to our spiritual lives. But as we go forward in our relationship with God, it’s a good idea to reflect on where we are. We need to ask ourselves, “What areas of my Christian life are strong, and where do I need to grow and change?” Prayer is a good example. Ask yourself the following questions to help evaluate where your prayer life is strong and where improvement might be in order. Then think about practical steps you can take to see those improvements become reality.

Do hard times ever cause me to struggle in my relationship with God? How so? In what ways will prayer help me deal with those situations more effectively?

Do I give God the credit and praise He deserves for the good things in my life? Why or why not?

How is my perspective on life usually affected when I’ve spent a lot of time praising and worshiping God?

What is the biggest benefit of having a consistent prayer life, other than receiving help with needs and problems?

What’s the biggest barrier I face in my efforts to pray regularly? How can I best overcome this barrier?
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**Develop a plan.**

Establishing and maintaining a consistent prayer time each day can be difficult. There will always be distractions and disruptions. Sometimes it’s easy to focus on prayer, while other times prayer will seem to be the furthest thing from your mind. Below are a few questions you can consider as you decide when and where to spend personal time conversing with God.

- **What time of the day am I most likely to stay focused as I pray?** (For example, some people are more alert in the morning while others find evening to be a better time.)

- **Where can I go—a specific room or other setting—that will offer the most privacy and least distractions to my prayer time?** (Consider choosing a place that you can access every day.)

- **What are some distractions I often face as I’m trying to focus on prayer? How can I minimize these distractions?**

- **What are the most common “excuses” I struggle with when it comes to having a consistent prayer life? How can I answer these excuses and stay focused on my prayer commitment?**

Using your responses to these questions, develop a strategy for making consistent, personal prayer a part of your lifestyle. Then ask God to strengthen your resolve, put aside the challenges and distractions, and look forward to spending time with God every day.

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Imagine seeing a person dressed in colorful, perhaps garish, attire, standing on a busy street corner with arms upraised and praying loudly as people passed by. In today’s society such a person would be viewed as eccentric, perhaps dangerous, and, at the very least, annoying. In Jesus’ day, however, it was not uncommon to see members of the elite religious sect, the Pharisees, making an open display of their piety by praying loudly and at great length in the synagogues and on the street corners. In the Jewish culture of that day, Pharisees carried significant religious and political clout with powerful political, social, and, presumably, spiritual connections.

While some were impressed by such displays, Jesus was not. He knew the Pharisees’ actions
were rooted in pride. They wanted to be seen and heard more than to give honor and praise to God. Jesus’ curt response, “They have received their reward” (Matthew 6:5), implies they already had received all they would get (earthly recognition); there would be no further reward awaiting them in eternity. They had been paid in full.

Responding to this scene, Jesus announced the polar opposite of making a public show of prayer, saying, “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” (Matthew 6:6).

**Praying in Private**

Go into your room, close the door, and pray in secret? Is this the one and only pattern for prayer? No, it isn’t.

Though it is noteworthy that Jesus was alone during many of His prayer times recorded in the Bible, He did pray in public settings, as did His followers: Jesus prayed publicly for children who were brought to Him (Matthew 19:13-15). He also offered thanks for the bread at the Passover meal with His disciples (Matthew 26:26). Furthermore, Jesus’ disciples prayed in a meeting of other believers and apostles prior to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 4:1-31). Several other instances in Scripture indicate Jesus’ followers prayed in homes, on ships, and in prison, among other places.

But why did Jesus so strongly emphasize praying in secret? No doubt His statement was more than a reaction to the Pharisees’ display of piety.

Praying in solitude allows time for special communion with God the Father, to be alone with Him—to be, as an old chorus states, “Shut in with God in a secret place.” In those times of solitude, God can speak to our spiritual nature that is attuned to Him. Often during those times the Holy Spirit shines the searchlight of truth into our spirits and exposes things that need to be confronted.

**Praying in solitude allows time for special communion with God the Father, to be alone with Him.**

In our quiet place God often can provide special insight and direction when we face decisions and challenges. He is able to drop
thoughts into our hearts that give us just the right step to take. Sometimes we might not even realize it was during our prayer time that something became crystal clear, and suddenly we knew what to do.

In times of solitude we also can deal with issues and concerns that cannot be voiced openly to family, friends, or to other believers, particularly if those people happen to be the subject of the prayers. Some things must be kept between us and God. In those moments He can give assurance and direction as the Holy Spirit ministers to our spirits in prayer. We all need a quiet place.

**Do you have a quiet place you can go to pray? Where is it, and what makes it a good place to pray?**

**What time of day would work best for you to spend consistent time in prayer?**

**What kinds of things would you talk to God about if you knew it was just between Him and you?**

**Strength in Numbers**

While praying in private is important and necessary, the old saying “there is strength in numbers” is no more relevant than with the subject of prayer. Jesus said, “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. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:19,20).

**Something dynamic happens when we pray with others because there is power in agreement.**

Something dynamic happens when we pray with others because there is power in agreement. In the verses just quoted, Jesus promised His presence in corporate settings. This doesn't mean He isn’t present when we pray alone; He is always with us when we pray in faith and sincerity. However, when we combine our faith with that of others in corporate prayer to address a need or concern, there comes a sense of community that strengthens faith. When we hear others voice praise and petition, our faith is stirred and we are encouraged to press in and seek God more intently.
When Peter was imprisoned by Herod, who was intent on persecuting the early Christians, a number of believers gathered to intercede on Peter’s behalf (Acts 12:1-17). The result was Peter’s miraculous deliverance from prison by an angel. Their agreement in prayer made a difference.

Leaders in the Early Church gathered to fast and pray before Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey. After praying and fasting, they laid their hands upon Paul and Barnabas and sent them off (Acts 13:3). In the years that followed many people would come to Christ and many churches would be established.

We need each other in the body of Christ. While we can accomplish a great deal in our private times of prayer, joining our hearts and faith with others can bring about powerful results in the outworking of God’s kingdom purposes.

*When and where do you have opportunity for prayer with others?*

*What might be some challenges to praying with groups of people?*

*What do you appreciate most about praying with others?*

*What kind of breakthroughs or answers to prayer have happened as a result of your praying with others?*

**Divine Appointments**

God often puts His people in the right place at the right time to minister to others through prayer. The setting might be the grocery store, an airplane or bus, or over the backyard fence—wherever there is opportunity to interact with other people. As conversation begins, there may come an opening to offer to pray for the other person.

On one occasion, while going through the grocery checkout, my wife, Jan, noticed that the girl at the register was not feeling well. When Jan inquired, the young lady confirmed that she was struggling, after which Jan asked, “Could I have a word of prayer with you?” The young lady agreed and Jan reached across the counter, took her hand, and prayed a brief prayer. Upon completing the prayer, a tear coursed down the young lady’s cheek as she expressed gratefulness for the prayer.

Jan and I also try to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit when we are served by waiters at
Where Should We Pray?

Where are opportunities to share your faith and pray for others most likely to happen?

What is the most challenging and/or rewarding thing for you when divine appointments occur?

God Is Everywhere

The bottom line is that the “where” of prayer is everywhere since God is everywhere. Regardless of whether we pray in a private room, in a group setting, or with someone we have just met, God is there. There is no place in the world we can go that will remove us from His presence.

When David wrote in Psalm 139:5, “You hem me in—behind and before,” he painted a word picture of a city under military siege. Laying siege was a common tactic in David’s day. An enemy force would completely surround a city and place it under round-the-clock surveillance. Every gate, doorway, window, and any other port of access or exit was watched. No one could leave or enter the city without notice. David was saying that God has us “under siege.” He sees every move we make; He knows exactly where we are at any time of the day or night.
David also said, “If I go up to the heavens, you are there” (verse 8). Although these words were penned many centuries before space travel became a reality, when some astronauts have gone into space they have testified of feeling a powerful sense of God’s presence. Astronaut Frank Borman stated, “I had an enormous feeling that there had to be a power greater than any of us; that there was a God, that there was indeed a beginning.” Astronaut James Irwin declared, “I felt the power of God as I’d never felt it before.” Other space travelers since have made similar testimonies. Thousands of miles above the earth, God’s presence was powerfully felt.

*God knows exactly where we are at any time of the day or night.*

David further declared, “If I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (verse 8)—something one Old Testament prophet could identify with very well.

Long before submarines, the prophet Jonah experienced the ocean’s depths firsthand as he tried to distance himself from God and the divine assignment given to him. After Jonah was cast into the sea, “The Lord provided a large fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: ‘In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry’” (Jonah 1:17; 2:1,2).

Though Jonah thought he had been banished from God’s sight, he declared, “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple” (2:7). Even in the depths of the sea in the belly of a fish, Jonah knew that God was there and that He would hear his prayers.

Various other Bible characters prayed and trusted in God in some unusual settings, and with wonderful results. While Scripture does not specifically mention prayer, we know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted God when they were thrown into Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace (Daniel 3). God spared them from even the slightest injury. Daniel likely called out to God for protection when he was cast into a den of lions (Daniel 6), and was not harmed in any way. Peter prayed on a rooftop (Acts 10:9) and received an
important vision from God. Paul and Silas prayed in a prison with their feet fastened in stocks (Acts 16:24,25) and God miraculously released them.

**In reality, the “where” of our prayers is not that important; the important thing is realizing that God knows where we are.**

Regardless of where we are on planet Earth or even if we are engulfed in absolute darkness physically or spiritually, Psalm 139:9-12 assures us that God knows where we are and He is with us. This truth gives powerful assurance that no matter where we are, God’s presence is there and He can hear our cry.

In reality, the “where” of our prayers is not that vital; the important thing is realizing that God knows where we are, and He is ready to hear our prayers wherever we are when we pray.

**In what setting or settings do you sense God’s presence most powerfully?**

In what setting or settings have you found it most difficult to sense His presence?

What kind of assurance does knowing God is everywhere give you?

How should knowing God is present everywhere impact your spiritual journey?

**Where Are You?**

Perhaps your struggle isn’t with God being able to hear you pray on the other side of the world, or in a submarine or a spaceship. But you do struggle to believe God can hear you where you are right now in your present circumstances. Be assured that He can hear you regardless of your “location,” emotionally or spiritually.

The prophet Elijah ran for his life in fear of retribution from Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19). Emotionally and physically exhausted, and convinced that he was alone in serving God, he asked God to take his life. After Elijah fell asleep God sent an angel to minister to him and assured Elijah that he was not alone.

A thief on a cross next to Jesus had lived a life of crime and now was being crucified for his actions. Realizing the One who hung beside him
was indeed the Son of God, the thief cried out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus promised the thief entrance into His kingdom (Luke 23:39-43).

Peter denied Jesus three times before His crucifixion. Not surprisingly, Peter’s anguish and feelings of failure afterward were unimaginable. Yet following Jesus’ resurrection, He lovingly restored Peter to His service (Matthew 26:69-75; John 21:15-19).

Fear, rebellion, lawlessness, disobedience, and failure are all hard places to be, but they do not put us out of God’s reach. First John 1:9 declares that if we are willing to admit our mistakes and confess our sins, God is “faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

So wherever you are physically, emotionally, or spiritually, God is able to reach you there. He will hear the cry of your heart and respond with His love and help.

_What kinds of situations or problems cause you to feel separated from or even abandoned by God?_

_How has God made himself especially real to you in a time of loneliness or depression?_
Life poses a lot of “why” questions, not all of which have simple answers. These are questions like: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”; “Why is there so much suffering in the world?”; “Why do we sometimes have to wait a long time for answers to prayer?”; “Why are some prayers never answered?”

Some questions simply can’t be answered with our finite understanding. One question, however, that can be answered with certainty is, “Why should we pray?” Let’s examine the “why” of prayer from a biblical and experiential perspective.

God Commands Us to Pray

If that answer was on your tongue, you’re off to a great start. God’s Word makes it very clear that He desires us to be people of prayer.
First Chronicles 16:11 issues this command: “Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.” The same command is paralleled in Psalm 104:5. Through the prophet Isaiah, God instructed, “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near” (55:6). The prophet Amos put God’s command in direct terms, declaring, “Seek me and live...Seek the Lord and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire” (5:4, 6).

In the New Testament, Jesus told His disciples that “they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). Paul, in Ephesians 6:18, writes, “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.” In Colossians 4:2, he writes, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” And in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, he simply states, “Pray continually.”

Jesus himself modeled a life of prayer, regularly setting aside time to pray, often in solitude (see chapter 5). He commanded His followers to “watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41). Knowing man’s fallen nature, Jesus emphasized the need to pray regularly for spiritual strength.

The mandate from Scripture is clear—we must pray!

What are some of the greatest hindrances to prayer in your life?

Do you personally feel the need to pray? Why or why not? What do you think would increase your sense of urgency to engage in prayer?

Prayer Links Us with God

In the opening chapter we established that every human being has a “receiver”—the spiritual component within that responds to God. Since prayer is our communication link with God, that alone is a compelling reason to pray. Without prayer, there simply is no link, no open line.

Since prayer is our communication link with God, that alone is a compelling reason to pray.

This special link has been live since the beginning of God’s dealings with humanity. In Old Testament times, patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets, priests, and kings regularly called out to
God and saw His hand move in powerful ways. Divine direction was given, battles were won, and supernatural intervention took place in the spiritual and natural realms in response to prayer.

A review of the prayers of many Old Testament figures reveals that prayer was a normal, everyday experience and often characterized by open dialogue with God. Sometimes the communication was quite direct, even casual and conversational at times. God’s people cried out to Him about special needs or crises and He answered them. They talked things over with God and God gave very specific direction on how to respond to circumstances they or others were facing.

In Exodus 33:11-15, we find an example of this kind of open and frank exchange between Moses and the Lord. Verse 11 states, “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” This is exemplified in verses 12-15:

“Moses said to the LORD, ‘You have been telling me, “Lead these people,” but you have not let me know whom you will send with me…. Remember that this nation is your people.’”

“The LORD replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’”

“Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.’”

Here, and in many other instances, Moses and other Old Testament figures openly conferred with God. Their candor and intimacy in communication was remarkably open and transparent.

As we move into the New Testament, which begins with the advent of God coming to earth in human form, we see a level of communion paralleling God’s original intent. Jesus literally was the presence and person of God among humanity. He walked with His disciples, ate with them, taught them, met with sinners, and fed the multitudes. Since the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden, humankind had not engaged in such intimate, face-to-face interaction with God.

It boggles the mind to consider what it must have been like to be with Jesus when He walked the earth; astoundingly, however, even though He performed signs and wonders and taught with wisdom and authority, most people did not recognize or acknowledge Him as God the Son. Would it be any different today?
Upon completing His earthly ministry, giving His life on the cross and rising from the tomb, Jesus returned to heaven. Yet before He left He promised to send the Holy Spirit to dwell among us and empower us for service—and to help us pray. Thus God’s presence shifted from God with us, demonstrated by Jesus’ life on earth, to God in us through the advent of Pentecost bringing the empowering presence and power of His Spirit.

A unique role of the 
Holy Spirit is that He enables us to maintain intimate communion with God.

A unique role of the Holy Spirit is that He enables us to maintain intimate communion with God and to pray with great power and authority. As Paul wrote, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit 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” (Romans 8:26,27).

The bottom line is that every person has access to God’s presence and power through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who helps us pray in line with God’s will even when we don’t know how to pray. That being true, we should pray all the more, knowing that through prayer we can effect God’s plans and purposes in our lives, the lives of others, and our entire world. Additionally, through the gifts of the Spirit, particularly the utterance gifts of tongues and interpretation, prophecy, word of wisdom, and word of knowledge, God is able to speak audibly to us through human channels. The communication channel of the Holy Spirit is a powerful means of hearing from God today.

How might you cultivate a greater sense of intimate communication with God?

If you could talk face-to-face with God, what are some things you would express to Him?

How has your experience with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit impacted your prayer life?

Prayer Moves God’s Hand

Through prayer we can move the hand of God in powerful and amazing ways to accomplish His
Why Should We Pray?

Why Should We Pray?

kingdom purposes. This is not manipulation, as we cannot force God to do anything against His will. Instead, prayer is collaboration with God in line with His will.

In 1 Kings 18, the prophet Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to see whether the god Baal or the One True God could cause fire to fall from heaven and consume the sacrifice on the altar. And, in the end, Elijah’s prayer of faith was vindicated. After several failed attempts by the false prophets to summon Baal, God sent fire, just as Elijah had prayed. The fire completely consumed the sacrifice and everything around it. God’s hand moved in response to Elijah’s prayer.

James 5:17,18 refers to another prayer encounter by Elijah, this time in judgment against King Ahab for provoking the Lord to anger. “He [Elijah] prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.” Elijah could not have accomplished this in his own power, but through prayer God’s hand moved to withhold rain for a period of time. Then He permitted rain to fall once again.

Likewise, in 2 Kings 6:16-18, when the prophet Elisha’s servant was struck by fear at the sight of a massive army surrounding the city, Elisha prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see” (verse 17). When the Lord opened the servant’s eyes he could see the hills full of horses, and chariots of fire all around Elisha. Then Elisha also prayed that the Lord would strike the enemy with blindness, and God did just as Elisha asked.

In the Gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes, Jesus said a prayer of thanks before breaking the loaves and fish. Through God’s power, the loaves and fish were multiplied enough to feed thousands of people. (See Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; John 6:11.)

Paul and Silas, locked in prison, began to pray and sing at the midnight hour. Acts 16:26 records that a violent earthquake suddenly shook the foundations of the prison. Immediately all the prison doors flew open and everybody’s chains came loose. In response to prayer, God removed prison chains.

When the Church leaders in Jerusalem learned that the gospel had been received in Samaria, they sent Peter and John there. After arriving they prayed that the Samaritans would receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:17 records that Peter and John placed their
hands on them in prayer and they received the Holy Spirit.

In modern times God’s hand has been moved through prayer to bring about revival and renewal to cities and nations. Political and religious strongholds have been brought down by prayer that opened the way for the gospel to be shared in lands formerly closed to Christianity. Disease, famine, and even storms have been averted in response to prayer. Spiritual strongholds have been challenged through warfare prayer and great victories have been won against the powers of darkness. God’s hand moves in response to prayer.

In modern times God’s hand has been moved through prayer to bring about revival and renewal to cities and nations.

Through intercessory prayer God’s hand can be moved in awesome ways as well. Intercessory prayer is praying on someone else’s behalf or on behalf of a particular circumstance that requires divine intervention. In some cases the recipient of the prayer might not even be aware of issues or dangers they are facing.

A young man traveled to Alaska to work on a fishing boat through the summer to earn money for college. On a particular day he went out to sea alone and laid out his nets in hopes of making a good catch. Moments after the arduous task of setting out the nets, he began to feel a strange urge to move his boat. He tried to ignore the urge, reasoning that the weather conditions and all else appeared to be fine; yet the urge to move only grew stronger. Finally, going against what seemed common sense, he pulled in the heavy nets and moved to another location. No sooner had he done so than a glacier near his previous location calved, sending a massive wall of ice into the sea. The waves created by the plunging ice would have swamped his boat.

Months later the young man learned that on that very day his grandmother, some 3,000 miles away, had been stirred from her sleep with a strong urgency to intercede for him. Obediently, she went to prayer and remained in prayer until the burden lifted. When they compared the day and time, the events coincided precisely with the near catastrophe on the Alaskan waters.

Prayer moves the hand of God to intervene in lives and circumstances.
In what ways have you seen God’s hand move in response to prayer?

What kinds have changes have you witnessed in the world around you that were the result of concerted prayer?

Describe a way in which you have personally received help in response to someone else’s prayers.

Prayer Brings Guidance

Since prayer is our communication link with God, it is the avenue through which we can seek guidance, whether for ourselves or for others. David prayed in Psalm 143:1, “O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy.” Then in verse 8 he added, “Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.” David had learned long before, often through hard experiences, that divine direction comes through prayer.

Nehemiah chapters 1 and 2 relate a powerful example of seeking God’s guidance in the midst of distress. Nehemiah, a servant to King Artaxerxes, was distraught over the plight of Jerusalem following Judah’s exile into captivity. Hearing about Jerusalem from one of his brothers, Nehemiah learned the city was in shambles and in disgrace. Greatly grieved, Nehemiah wept over his homeland and turned to God for help and guidance, fasting and praying for days, interceding for his city and seeking God’s help and guidance on what to do.

Upon seeing Nehemiah’s distress afterward, the king inquired as to what was troubling him. Not wanting to jeopardize his position or his life by displeasing the king with sadness, Nehemiah shared the reason for his feelings. When Artaxerxes asked, “What is it you want?” (2:4), Nehemiah knew this was his God-given opportunity to secure aid for Jerusalem. Verses 4 and 5 relate, “Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king.” In an almost split-second moment, Nehemiah shot a prayer heavenward, then made his requests known to the king. In response, God moved King Artaxerxes to grant Nehemiah favor and answer his requests.

Paul regularly sought God’s guidance through prayer. In Ephesians 6:19, he asked his fellow believers, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.” He wrote also in Colossians 4:3, “Pray for us...that God may open a door for our message.” Time and again
God shows us His perfect plan, opens doors, closes others, and keeps us on track with His will and purpose as we live in faithfulness to Him and seek His help through prayer.

James wrote in 1:5 that “if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” Wisdom to meet life’s challenges is available through prayer.

What is your first response when faced with an important decision or crisis?

Describe a time when you have keenly sensed God’s guidance following prayer.

Describe a time when you have prayed an “emergency” prayer for God’s help and guidance.

Prayer Furthers God’s Purposes

Scripture also makes it clear that prayer moves God’s kingdom purposes forward. Again, we must remember that God chooses to work through human instruments like you and me. Thus, the more we pray, the more God can accomplish in our lives and in our world.

Prayer impacts spiritual healing and restoration.

A great “if-then” statement issued by God is found in 2 Chronicles 7:14,15: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (emphasis added).

While an important focus here is upon conditions that must be met in order for God to answer prayer, namely humility and righteousness, it is clear that our prayers are necessary in order for God to bring about healing and restoration. Although God certainly has the power to affect any kind of change He wishes at any time He wishes, He chooses to work out His purposes in partnership with His people. When we pray in line with God’s will and in righteousness, His hand moves. If we don’t, His hand cannot move and change cannot come. As John Wesley, the great 18th-century evangelist declared, “God does nothing except in answer to prayer.” So, in order for healing and restoration to come, sincere, righteous prayer must be offered.
Prayer impacts world evangelism.

Standing at the edge of a wheat field on the vast plains of Kansas is like viewing an ocean of grain stretching as far as the eye can see. The task of bringing in such a harvest is huge, a daunting task for one farmer alone. That is why multiple combines work together to reap hundreds of acres of wheat in a fraction of the time it would require one farmer to bring it in.

The same is true of the spiritual harvest. Billions still need to know about Jesus. Thankfully, there are thousands of missionaries around the world declaring the gospel. Yet the task is massive and time is running out. That is why Jesus declared, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38, KJV). While we are to be witnesses in our spheres of influence, we also must pray that others will share the message of hope and salvation at home and abroad.

Prayer impacts fulfillment of God’s will on earth.

In Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 6, He revealed that we are to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom and for His will to be accomplished, “on earth as it is in heaven” (verse 10). As we do so, we help bring about the fulfillment of God’s will on earth. This is no idle task. When we pray this way, God’s presence and kingdom are revealed on earth and God is able to counter the works of Satan, save the lost, heal the sick, help believers live righteous lives, and pour out the Holy Spirit upon us. All of this, which encompasses much of God’s divine purposes for this world, is accomplished as we pray. The task is huge and God depends on our prayers to bring these things about. They simply won’t happen without prayer.

Prayer impacts forgiveness of sins.

A foundational purpose of God sending His Son Jesus to earth was to provide forgiveness for sins through His death on the cross. Though we can receive salvation and forgiveness by accepting this sacrifice on our behalf, we don’t instantly become perfect. Therefore, we’re subject to failure. When we fall short by sinning, we must pray for forgiveness. As we do so, we can rely on the wonderful promise that, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
Why Should We Pray?

Prayer impacts our purpose in life.

Prayer helps us fulfill God’s purpose for our lives personally, as well as the lives of those we pray for. In 2 Thessalonians 1:11, Paul told his readers that he was praying for them constantly, asking “that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” Paul prayed further that Jesus would be glorified in them. God’s purposes are moved forward in our lives when others pray for us and when we pray for them.

How has prayer affected your personal destiny?

Based on this study and personal experience, how would you answer someone who says prayer makes no difference in a person’s life?

Since so much depends upon prayer, what steps will you take to strengthen this vital discipline in your life?

What kinds of prayer initiatives would you like to see developed in your family and in your church? How can you help them come about?

No doubt you could think of many other reasons why we should pray. Hopefully, however, this chapter has helped point out some key motivators. Ultimately, prayer gives us the awesome opportunity to partner with God in working out His purposes on earth. Prayer is an equal-opportunity ministry in which everyone can participate regardless of age, gender, race, or ethnicity. It is also an awesome privilege and responsibility. Since so much depends upon prayer, we must pray all the more!

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“At whatever point the other elements of the Christian’s armor are in use, so too should be prayer. Paul is saying that the shield and the breastplate and the helmet and the shoes are just standing there like an empty suit of armor in a museum unless the animating presence of prayer brings them to life. Without prayer we cannot accomplish the work of the Lord.”

Dr. George O. Wood
Core Values: Serving Christ’s Cause with Effectiveness and Excellence

Why leave the “how” of prayer until the last chapter? Because it conveniently completes the list of who, what, when, where, and why? Appropriately, this chapter presents the culmination of all that’s been presented to this point. Now that it’s clear everyone should pray about everything whenever they can and wherever they are, and that the outworking of God’s plan for our lives and this world depends so much on prayer, it logically follows to focus on how to pray. So, here are some key elements to consider.

The Importance of Humility

Before moving into issues of praying with confidence, persistence, and power, another
important matter must be addressed up front: the quality of humility in our prayers. While Hebrews 4:16 says we can confidently approach God’s throne, it’s important to remember whose presence we are entering as we pray.

Before rushing to our requests and focusing on the “what” of our prayers, we must first acknowledge God's position as our Creator.

Jesus opened His model prayer with, “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name’” (Matthew 6:9). Before rushing to our requests and focusing on the “what” of our prayers (as is often our tendency to do) we must first acknowledge God’s position as our Creator. He is the all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere present sovereign of the universe. He alone deserves all of our glory, honor, praise, and adoration. He is the One who declares, “I am the LORD, and there is no other…. There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me” (Isaiah 45:18, 21).

Because of this, we hallow God’s name, giving Him the honor due Him before presenting our requests. Hallowing God means worshiping Him, and it is important because God deserves our glory. Worship also helps us avoid becoming presumptuous in our approach to Him. While God is our Father, He also is altogether righteous, holy, and just. Our approach to Him always should include an attitude of humility.

As Father, God is intimately concerned with everything that happens to us. And because He is God, He is supremely able to meet every need. Psalm 103:13 declares, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.”

God is indeed our wise and powerful Father. He knows what is best for us and will respond to our prayers and petitions accordingly. Our part is to trust Him to do what’s best and know that He is working things out for our good in His way and in His time. We can be confident that He will do just that.

How do you typically begin your prayer time?

Why do people tend to jump right into asking for things when they pray?
How will taking time to reverence and worship God affect your prayer experience?

Pray with Confidence and Faith

The story is told of a young boy who went door to door in his neighborhood selling magazine subscriptions, but with little success. His opening line with each prospective customer was, “You wouldn’t want to buy a magazine from me would you?” Consistently the neighbors replied, “No, thanks,” and closed the door. Discouraged, the boy was about to give up when a neighbor offered some helpful advice.

“Instead of saying ‘You wouldn’t want to buy a magazine would you?’ tell your customers that you have a really great magazine that you’re sure they would enjoy reading, and show them a copy,” the neighbor advised. He bought a subscription and sent the boy on his way. When the boy applied the neighbor’s advice, he began to sell subscriptions and his confidence soared.

Sometimes our approach to God is similar to this story. We pray, “Dear God, You wouldn’t want to hear my prayer, would You?” We’re not sure He’s even listening or that He cares about what we have to say. So, we quit trying to pray, thinking there is no use. Scripture assures us, however, that we can go to God with confidence, knowing that He is vitally interested in our circumstances.

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Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses and fully understands every temptation we could possibly experience. That is why we can “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). When we are sincere in our approach to God, coming to Him with a reverent spirit, He is pleased to hear our prayers and provide the help we need. Ephesians 3:12 says, “In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

Confidence, trust, and faith must be closely interwoven in our prayer lives. Confidence says, “God, I know You can do anything, even the impossible.” Trust says, “God, I know I can
leave everything in Your hands.” Faith combines confidence and trust and moves us a step further, saying, “God, even though I don’t know how You will work things out, it doesn’t make any difference because I know You can work things out. And I trust You to do what is best for me according to Your will and purpose, in Your own time and in Your own way.”

Humility, sincerity, and faith are key to receiving answers to prayers. We ought not approach God assuming He will answer us simply because we have uttered mere words in the form of a prayer. A humble and sincere, faith-filled prayer will bring God’s favor and blessing.

Hebrews 11:1 teaches us that we must not limit our faith in God only to things that we can see and understand: “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” We can confidently believe God is working to bring the answer even though we do not see the answer yet. Events that take place in the unseen spiritual world are just as real as things happening in the physical realm.

Humanly, however, we tend to look for some way to measure, quantify, or document that something is taking place. We want something tangible to hold onto. Even though Isaiah 65:24 declares, “Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear,” we don’t always recognize the tangible things happening in response to prayer. We might think that certain events are coincidental, when, in reality, they are direct answers to prayer.

Sometimes we might not realize an event as an answer to prayer because God has worked things out in a different way than we expected. Even seeming non-answers can be God’s way of responding to our prayers. It’s not that He doesn’t hear; but in His wisdom and sovereignty He knows how to work things out in our best interests. The key ingredient on our part always is faith.

**What are your expectations when you approach God in prayer?**

**Describe a specific time when you know God heard your prayers. What gave you the assurance that He heard you?**

**Why is it so important for us to be able to measure or quantify the results of prayer?**

**What are some examples of God’s answers to prayer that came in unexpected ways in your life?**
Pray with Persistence

While we might not struggle with confidence in God’s ability to answer our prayers, this confidence can still be tempered by God’s seeming inattention. Days, weeks, months, or even years can pass before an answer comes, which inclines us to ask, “If God knows what we need even before we ask (Matthew 6:32), why do we have to keep on asking for some things?”

*We often do find ourselves in God’s waiting room having to persist in prayer.*

While a long delay might be attributed to God working out a higher purpose that we don’t understand, there is something else God often wants us to do: persevere in prayer. This is not a popular option in our instant-gratification world. Yet Scripture provides clear teaching on the importance of such persistence. Whether a delay serves to achieve a higher purpose, determines how serious we are, makes us more patient, or engages us in ongoing spiritual warfare, we may never know; however, we often do find ourselves in God’s waiting room having to persist in prayer.

In Luke 11:5-10, Jesus conveyed an interesting and even humorous parable about a friend who comes knocking at his friend’s door at midnight to ask for some bread to feed a guest. The friend makes it quite clear that he doesn’t want to be disturbed. He and his family are already in bed for the night. In Luke’s day it was not uncommon for the poor to live in one-room houses where the family might have slept on a raised part of the floor with animals sleeping on the lower part. Getting up and stumbling around in the dark would create a major disruption.

Jesus’ statement in verse 8 is noteworthy: “I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” Friendship alone wasn’t sufficient reason for the man to get up. But because of his friend’s persistence, he was willing not only to get up, but he would give his friend as much as he needed.

As this passage illustrates, sometimes God chooses to test our determination and resolve in order to see how serious we are about the request we are making. That is when persistence and perseverance make all the difference.
God is not at our beck and call. He is not obligated to answer simply because we have asked. We always must pray with a sincere and righteous heart and not with presumption; and in some cases we must continually seek God in prayer before He will answer.

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Jesus followed His parable about the two friends with this teaching: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7,8). In these verses, the call to ask, seek, and knock refers to continued action. In other words, we are to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. Each verb indicates a strong level of persistence.

Jesus emphasized the power of persistence in Luke 18:1-8 with a parable about a persistent widow. Jesus’ concern was that His disciples not lose heart and give up on praying. In the parable Jesus described a widow who approaches an unfeeling judge who has no regard for God or humanity. The woman, seeking justice against an adversary, presents her case again and again to the judge. Though the judge tries to ignore her pleas, because of her continued, annoying persistence, he gives in and grants the justice sought.

Jesus’ purpose was to point out that if an unjust judge would grant justice to this persistent widow, how much more so would God listen to the prayers of His children. The key again is persistence, not giving up till the answer comes—crying out day and night if need be.

Paul regularly taught persistence in prayer as indicated by the following passages:

- “Be…faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:12).
- “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” (Ephesians 6:18).
- “Devote yourselves to prayer” (Colossians 4:2).
- “Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
Persistence and perseverance in prayer are often necessary in cases where family or friends do not have a relationship with Christ. Chronic physical needs can also call us to persist on behalf of ourselves or others. However, despite the waiting, we can be assured that God does not lose sight of our circumstances. As the Psalmist expressed, “The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry” (Psalm 34:15). As we persevere in prayer, and approach our Father with sincerity, humility, and a righteous heart, He is pleased to hear and answer.

*Describe a circumstance or need in your life about which you have persisted or are persisting in prayer.*

*Why is persistence in prayer so difficult?*

*What rewards have you experienced from persistent prayer?*

*What purposes has God worked out in your life as a result of persisting in prayer?*

**Pray with Power**

There is no greater dynamic in effective prayer than the power of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:26,27, Paul declared that the Holy Spirit helps us pray. He empowers us in our weakness. When we do not even know how to pray, the Spirit, who knows what must be carried to the Father, “intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (verse 26). While the word translated “groans” is not clearly defined in this passage, it is likely that it pertains to an intense, heartfelt expression of concern that is voiced inwardly as we seek God on behalf of a need.

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In this process of intercession the Holy Spirit presents our cause to the Father. The awesome promise is that when the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, we can be certain that what He prays is in line with God’s will, for the Spirit knows the mind of the Father (verse 27). When prayer is offered in alignment with God’s will, He is pleased to respond.

The Holy Spirit also enables us to pray with power amid the spiritual battles we face. Paul’s discussion of the “full armor of God” in
Ephesians 6:10-18, emphasizes that believers are in a continuous conflict with evil. Doing battle in spiritual warfare requires that we clothe ourselves with the armor and wield the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. However, we must never overlook Paul’s admonition following the description of the armor: “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” (verse 18).

Spirit-led prayer is not a component of armor, but empowerment for battle. Dr. George O. Wood, in Core Values: Serving Christ’s Cause with Effectiveness and Excellence, states, “At whatever point the other elements of the Christian’s armor are in use, so too should be prayer. Paul is saying that the shield and the breastplate and the helmet and the shoes are just standing there like an empty suit of armor in a museum unless the animating presence of prayer brings them to life. Without prayer we cannot accomplish the work of the Lord.” Nor can we be victorious in battle. Prayer, and particularly prayer in the Spirit, is essential to victory.

An early experience personally with the Spirit’s intervention in prayer came during my college years. At one point in the midst of my program, I hit a low point. I was taking a full load of classes and working part-time. I was a newlywed with all the adjustments that marriage brings. I was also teaching Sunday School and leading the youth group at the church we attended. And, like many college students, our finances were always very tight.

On one particular day it seemed the weight of it all converged in a single moment. I slumped into a chair at the small table in our 24- by 8-foot mobile home with a sense of heaviness I had never felt before. Though young and healthy, I was exhausted and discouraged. I didn’t know...
what to do. I knew I should pray, but I had no idea where to begin. All I could manage was to repeat the name of Jesus over and over again. As I continued to pray His name, an awesome sense of the Holy Spirit filled that little mobile home and for a half hour or so I was bathed in the warmth of His presence, praying in the Spirit. Afterward, though the problems and challenges were still there, somehow I had a completely different perspective. I had been strengthened and refreshed in my spirit by the Holy Spirit in my time of prayer. I was able to go on from that moment knowing I had access to a wonderful reserve of power that would help me through even the most difficult times. That has proven to be true many times over in the years since.

As we pray with confidence, faith, and perseverance together, enabled by the grace and gifts of the Holy Spirit, we can pray with power and effectiveness and see God’s hand move in awesome ways. To God be the glory!

Describe a time when you were especially aware of the Holy Spirit’s enablement as you prayed.

How has the baptism in the Holy Spirit affected your prayer life?
... pray continually ...

1 Thessalonians 5:17