

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS ABOUT

I have had a number of people – seasoned believers and new Christians alike – remark to me over the last few months that they need to learn how to pray better. Perhaps these conversations stand out because I need this so desperately myself. I doubt that there is any Christian who, at one time or another, has not found prayer difficult. Prayer is hard, especially in our distracted (and distracting!) world.

Prayer is absolutely crucial to the Christian, however, not least because God commands us to pray (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and assumes we will be praying (Matthew 6:5). Developing a strong prayer life also fosters a sweetness in our relationship to the Father that no other discipline can produce. It is overwhelming and humbling to consider that the sovereign God, Creator of the universe, Maker and Master of all, wants to *listen to us*.

A few months ago we learned about the foundational discipline of personal Bible study, in which we learned the eternal value of God speaking. In the Scriptures, God has spoken and we must listen. But in prayer, as David Mathis writes, “the speaking God has not only spoken, but he wants to listen to us – He stops, He stoops, He wants to hear from you. He stands ready to hear your voice.”¹

I am praying for you as we learn together about the gracious discipline of personal prayer.

- Pastor Jason Hall

1 David Mathis, *Habits of Grace* (Crossway, 2016) 94.

SESSION 1: READ AND THINK

Why Do We Pray?

The Bible does not have one “key text” when it comes to prayer. We have the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6, in which Jesus gives His disciples a model to emulate, and we will work through that model next week. But even the Lord’s Prayer does not encompass the totality of biblical teaching on the subject.

Since we cannot cover everything the Bible says on prayer in only two weeks, we are going to focus on two key questions. This week, the question is, “Why do we pray?” This question speaks to motivation, and to help us answer that question we’re going to look at one of the prayers of Paul, recorded in **Ephesians 1:15-23**.

This week will actually be somewhat of a review, as Pastor David preached a sermon on this text just a few weeks ago. Before you go any further in the study, I recommend that you read **Ephesians 1:15-23** and then go to the Creek website (richlandcreek.com) or mobile app and listen to Pastor David’s sermon again.

THE FOUNDATION OF PRAYER IS THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The first word in v. 15 is, depending on your translation, “therefore” or “for this reason.” By beginning this way Paul is linking what he has just said in verses 3-14 with the thanksgiving prayer he is writing in verses 15-23. And what has he written in verses 3-14? That we are united with Christ, blessed with every blessing because of the wonderful, sovereign, powerful, eternal plan of the Father. God’s sovereignty could be defined as his loving care that guides all existence. Like the air running under and around the wings of a jumbo jet, God’s sovereignty provides the “lift” to our prayers.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.

Ephesians 1:3-4

Some may mistakenly believe that God’s sovereignty undermines prayer. “After all,” they may say, “if God knows and oversees everything, what is the point of asking Him for things?” But that statement misunderstands the basic purpose of prayer. Prayer is not fundamentally telling God about circumstances he already planned and then asking him to change those circumstances. After all, God knows what we need even before we ask (Matt. 6:8). The amazing mystery and beauty of prayer is that **when I talk to God and He listens, I am**

the one who is changed. Prayer is not asking God to do things *for* me; prayer is asking God to do something *in* me. And if God's sovereign plan undergirds prayer, then my prayer life becomes a means by which God can help me walk according to His sovereign plan.

Paul knows that the Ephesians' faith and love (highlighted in v. 15) has come about because of the blessing of God, so he can pray confidently that they will grow in their understanding. What about you? When you come to God, do you come to Him uncertain because you're not sure He'll do what you want? In other words, are you coming to God on the basis of your authority, or His? Is your fundamental prayer, "God, change the things around me," or is your prayer, "God, change me"? If it is the latter, pray with confidence that God will answer.

To review: Our prayers should be grounded in and lifted up by a firm conviction that God is God, and I am not. My primary motivation in praying should be to understand the joy of God's will, not bargain with Him to do what I think is best.

WE PRAY TO LOOK MORE LIKE JESUS

The substance of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is a series of requests, each building on the ones before such that the whole picture becomes a life lived to the glory of God, just like Jesus did. Let's begin with v. 17 and move through the prayer.

Knowledge, Revelation and Wisdom

Paul first asks that God would give his readers a "spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened." Where does knowledge of God come from? From revelation. Where do we find revelation? In God's Word, the Scriptures! Paul wants the Ephesians to know the Word of God, and he knows that understanding of the Scriptures only comes through a relationship with God in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13-16). It is appropriate for Paul to ask God for something only God can provide.

Knowledge Leads to Hope

Verse 18 continues, "...that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you..." Hope, in biblical terms, is not wishful thinking, like when we say "I sure hope it does not rain today," or "I hope the Panthers win the Super Bowl." Hope in biblical terms is certainty, a firm conviction based on God's character that everything He has said is true. We know that God has called us to live as agents of light in the midst of darkness, until Jesus comes again to set everything straight. So we pray to be firmly convinced of God's promises.

Knowledge Leads to Rejoicing

The second thing Paul prays for the Ephesians to know is “the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints.” As Pastor David so clearly pointed out in his sermon, we are the inheritance! Because of his powerful obedience unto death and glorious resurrection, Jesus has redeemed a bunch of lost sinners to himself. Prayer should strengthen our rejoicing that we belong to Jesus!

Knowledge Leads to Understanding God’s Power

Paul also prays for his readers to understand God’s great power; specifically, “the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe.” And what’s more, the following verses explain exactly what power he is talking about: The power that raised Christ from the dead and gave Him authority over all things, for all time, and gave Him a church through which to accomplish His will. We noted earlier that our prayers are “lifted” by God’s sovereignty, and now we see that they “soar” according to God’s wonderful power working in us, the same power that conquered death!

To review: We pray to know God’s Word, understanding that the Word and prayer work together to give us hope, joy and power. Doesn’t a prayer filled with hope, rejoicing and power sound more exciting (and profitable) than a daily drudgery of our own, often selfishly generated wish list?

SESSION 1: REVIEW

FILL IN THE ANSWERS BELOW AS YOU REFLECT

In your own words, explain why you think it is important to pray. If you do not agree it is important to pray, explain that as well.

Have you ever felt like your prayer life is mired in a cycle of repetitiveness, like you’re saying the same thing over and over? What do you think leads to this?

Not only in Eph. 1:15-23, but Eph. 3:14-19 also Paul prays for the Ephesians to *know* something. In your own words, what does he want them to know and why is knowledge so important?

How could praying for knowledge in the way that Paul does strengthen your own prayer life?

SESSION 2: READ AND THINK

What Do We Pray?

Last week we looked at why we pray, and saw that we pray because God is sovereign and so that we may look more like Jesus in our lives. This week, we are going to turn to the Lord's Prayer in **Matthew 6:9-13**.²

As you read the passage, note one point of review that we see from Matthew 6:8: God already knows what we need even before we pray. So we don't pray to tell God things he already knows. Rather, the content of our prayers should be God-centered, not us-centered.

"OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN"

To pray to God as Father is to pray in the name of Christ, because we only know God as Father because Jesus has redeemed us and adopted us as sons and daughters. Addressing God as Father also reminds us that we don't deserve an audience with God, but we have been given one by grace.

"HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME"

"Hallowed" is an old-school word for holy; in fact, many translations use the word holy. When we pray for God's name to be holy, we are actually praying for our own holiness. Why? Because we represent God to a watching world. How

² Much of the material in this portion of the study is adapted from Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (Penguin Books, 2014). This book is an excellent resource. You can find a list of other good resources on prayer in the appendix.

will God be regarded as holy among all people if we, the church, do not represent well His holiness before them? When we pray for God's name to be holy, and lifted high, it is a missionary prayer that we should pursue His holiness by representing Him before all nations, everywhere.

“YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE”

God is currently on the throne of the universe, and mankind's willing rejection of His rule is the cause of all our problems, be they personal, material or cultural. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are fundamentally praying for our own hearts to be transformed by His lordship. If Jesus is our Lord, and we desire His will, then our motives, emotions, desires and commitments will be determined by His agenda, not ours.

To pray for God's kingdom to come is also a plea reminiscent of John in Rev. 22:20: “Come, Lord Jesus!” When we pray we look forward to the return of our King and the restoration of His glory among all peoples.

Before we move on, let's notice that the first few petitions in this prayer focus not at all on what we want or need, but on the holiness, majesty and purposes of God. As Tim Keller notes, “We are not to let our own needs and issues dominate prayer; rather, we are to give pride of place to praising and honoring Him, to yearning to see His greatness and to see it acknowledged everywhere, and to aspiring to love and obedience.”³

“GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD”

“Daily bread” here functions as a metaphor for our material needs, not our indulgent wants. It would be rather silly for us to open our prayer acknowledging that God – His holiness, kingdom, will and power – is everything we could ever desire, and then to turn around and ask God for a bunch of worldly things that could never truly satisfy. The church father Augustine saw in this request an echo of Proverbs 30:8, “Give me neither poverty nor riches.”

We come to God asking and expecting Him to meet our physical needs, even while acknowledging that we are fully and completely satisfied in Him.

“FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS”

This petition speaks to the attitude governing our relationships, both with God and with other people. When we ask for forgiveness, we are acknowledging that we are not good and that God is good. Asking for forgiveness challenges our pride and drives us toward humility. Regular confession should increase our joy because it reminds us of our salvation.

3 Keller, *Prayer*, 113.

After we have confessed our sin, we are ready to ask God to work His grace into our hearts as we forgive others. The one who is bitter, holding grudges and seeking revenge, should see their own hypocrisy when they pray.

“LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL”

The Bible makes a distinction between being tempted, or tested, and entering into temptation. The trials that come in life, including temptations that God gives us the grace to resist, can strengthen us and are even a cause for rejoicing (James 1:2-3). However, entering into temptation, which Jesus warns us about in Matt. 26:41, means entertaining and considering the idea of giving in to sin. This happens when we dabble with temptation a bit too long, or dream about our own desires.

When we pray for God to deliver us from evil, we are praying for His protection from real spiritual forces that seek to destroy God and His people. We must be wary of the Devil’s schemes. We do not fear Satan, but we do ask God to protect us.

SESSION 2: REVIEW

FILL IN THE ANSWERS BELOW AS YOU REFLECT

As you read the Lord’s Prayer, which phrase stands out to you the most? Why?

THE ACTS ACROSTIC

When structuring their private prayers, some have found it helpful to follow a simple plan, highlighted by the letters A, C, T, and S:

ADORATION – Begin your prayer with worship of God, focusing on who He is and what He’s done as revealed in Scripture.

CONFESSION – Always take time for self-evaluation, asking God to forgive you of your sin. Remember that the payment for your sin has been made at the cross, and God is faithful to forgive (1 John 1:9).

THANKSGIVING – No matter what circumstances you find yourself in, there is cause for thanksgiving. Begin with the joy of salvation, and from there thank God for all that He has done and is doing in your life.

SUPPLICATION – While we remember that just asking God for things is not the primary purpose of prayer, we also know that God is a good Father who gives good gifts (Matt. 7:7-11). Focus on God’s will rather than telling Him what He already knows. Pray boldly, in accordance with what we know to be true of Him.

EQUIPPING PRAYER

When praying for God's name to be holy, and for God's will to be done, do you see how those prayers are *about* God's glory but *for* your good? Explain.

Do you sometimes find it difficult to forgive others? Does that lack of forgiveness sometimes translate to a lack of prayerfulness? How would the two things be connected?

Do you regularly ask God to help you fight off temptation? If you don't pray that often, why not?

Appendix 1 – Keeping a Prayer Journal

A prayer journal can be a very helpful tool for focusing your prayers, keeping them specific and memorable. It's also good because it can function as a place where you can write down prayer requests, instead of having to remember them. Don Carson notes that journaling helps us slow down in our prayers, which in turn encourages us to articulate them well and avoid “mental drift” when we pray.

Your prayer journal does not have to be fancy; a plain, simple notebook will do. Keep it in a place where you would normally go to pray, or keep it with your Bible if you pray as part of your devotion time. There are three specific things you can do with your journal:

1. Write out prayers to God. The language of these prayers does not have to be formal. In fact, Jesus warns us in Matthew 6 about prayers that are overly long and ornate, for our own self-aggrandizement. Rather, writing out prayers causes us to pause and consider the words that we are using, rather than simply repeating the same old things time and again.
2. Write down requests that God answers. When God answers a prayer that you've prayed, write that down! Not only does this acknowledge God's goodness in answering our prayers, but it also allows us to look back on these answered prayers later, when we inevitably fall into despair because of some circumstance. These written-down answers are reminders of God's faithfulness.
3. Keep a list of things you want to pray about, and that people have asked you to pray about. There are few worse feelings than telling a brother or sister you'll pray for them, only to later forget what it was they asked you to pray about! Keeping a list of requests also keeps us focused, so we don't get lost and fall prey to “mental drift.” Some folks find it handy to pray for certain things on certain days of the week: My family members on Monday, my small group friends on Tuesday, my church pastors and leaders on Wednesday, etc. This “prayer calendar” can be part of your journal as well.

However you choose to do it, a prayer journal can be an invaluable tool when focusing and prioritizing your prayer life.

Appendix 2 – Praying the Scriptures

Donald Whitney has written a little book called *Praying the Bible* that I have found remarkably helpful in my own prayer life. It is simple, straightforward and unpretentious. While Whitney is certainly not the first to write about letting Scripture shape your prayers, his book is easy to understand and put into practice.

Praying the Bible allows our prayers to be shaped by the Word of God, and it is especially helpful in avoiding repetition in our prayers. All of us can get into a prayer rut, so to speak, such that we're mindlessly praying the same things we prayed yesterday.

So how to pray the Bible? Here's what Whitney recommends:

1. Pick a psalm to pray through (you can certainly pray any passage of Scripture, but the psalms work best. They were written in response to God's grace, which is the essence of prayer).
2. As you read, pray what comes into your mind as a response to what you've read. So if you're praying through Psalm 23, and you read the line, "I shall not want," maybe you thank God that you are not going hungry. Maybe you then ask Him to provide the finances for the car repair you know you need. You can pray for a brother and sister in need, and so forth. When you've finished with all that's in your mind, move on to the next verse and do the same thing.
3. Keep moving through the psalm, praying what comes to your mind with each verse, until you run out of psalm or you run out of time. If you come across a verse that you don't understand, just move on to the next one. If you can't think of anything to pray for a particular verse, move on to the next one.

Notice there are not a lot of rules here, and that's OK. Allow room for the Holy Spirit of God to work in your heart. Whitney writes, "I have enough confidence in the Word and Spirit of God to believe that if people will pray in this way, in the long run their prayers will be far more biblical than if they just make up their own prayers."⁴

4 Donald Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Crossway, 2015), 37.

Appendix 3 – Resources on Prayer

Carson, Donald. *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 2nd Edition. Baker, 2015.

Keller, Tim. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Mathis, David. *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*. Crossway, 2016.

Whitney, Donald. *Praying the Bible*. Crossway, 2015.