Who is God?


Who is God? Who are we praying to when we pray?

God of Power and Might

When we pray, do we think about God the way the Israelites did when Moses was up on a mountain about to receive the Ten Commandments? Is God the All-powerful God of earthquakes and thunder, smoke and clouds, fire and lightning? Is this how we think of God?

Heavenly Tyrant

Is God a great heavenly tyrant who does whatever God wants whenever God wants; sometimes being cruel and sometimes being kind; loving some people and hating (or simply ignoring others) according to God’s whims? Does God sneak around spying on us, trying to catch us doing something bad so that he can get us and punish us? Is this our view of God and if so, how will this affect how we pray?

Old Man up in the Sky

There are many people who, when they think about God, imagine God to be like a sentimental heavenly granddaddy. God is that all-loving “old man up in the sky” who wants to spoil us (to give us everything we want), to answer all our questions, solve all our problems, and protect us from the hurts and hard knocks of life. For many, God is kind of like Santa Claus. It doesn’t really matter if we’ve been “naughty or nice,” this God will never put a lump of coal in our stocking. God is like a giant genie who will grant us three wishes if we rub his lamp the right way. Like a vending machine, all we have to do is pay the money and push all the right buttons and then we’ll receive whatever we want. If this is our view of God, how does this affect how we pray?

Higher Power

But what if you think God is just an intellectual pursuit, a heavenly idea, a “Supreme Being” or “Higher Power”... completely impersonal, distant, so far above us or anything that we can comprehend, that we can’t even begin to relate to “IT”. How would this affect your prayer?

Wayward Watchmaker

Or what if you think of God as if God were some kind of wayward watchmaker. God creates the universe, winds it up—gets it ticking—and then lets it go. If you believe that God is not involved in the world at all, that God is an absentee-God, that created the world and then stepped away to let the world run on its own according to the laws of nature, then why would you pray at all? What would be the use of prayer?

Where is God?

Who God is matters. How we think about God matters. It effects how we pray. But so does where we think God is? Is God a distant God (up in heaven) or is God an ever-present God (a God who is near)?

The Transcendence of God

Is God the transcendent God we read about in scripture; the God who is above, other than, and distinct from all God has made? Does God transcend it all? And does this mean that God is no longer here but “up in heaven?” We worship the God who says “Heaven is my throne; the earth is my footstool.” (Isaiah 66:1). It was Solomon who said, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). The Psalmist writes “For you, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.” (Psalm 97:9). In Isaiah, God says “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8–9). It was Jesus who taught his disciples to pray: “Our Father, who art in heaven?” As we reflect on these images of God, isn’t it true that many of us think that the God to whom we pray is distant from us, absent from us, just a “phone call” away? For many, our relationship with God is a long-distance relationship punctuated by prayers that feel more like emails or text messages rather than one-on-one conversations with a God who is present with us.

The Immanence of God

And yet, in the scriptures we read that this transcendent God is also an immanent God—a God who is near. Is this what the Apostle Paul affirms when he says “There is one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6)? Jesus, who was called Emmanuel, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), talks about the Spirit of God who is like the wind who “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8). After his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus proclaimed to his disciples “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).
In the Psalms, we read “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” (Psalm 139:7-8). And we can’t forget Psalm 145:18 “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” All of these scriptures speak to the nearness of God. And so when we pray do we imagine that God is near or far? Is God close or is God distant? Where is God? What is prayer?

Prayer is an attitude of the heart.
The fundamental purpose of prayer is to deepen our intimacy with God and this requires entering into prayer with a proper attitude. In prayer we come before God with an attitude of humility, hopefulness, appreciation, and love. We open ourselves up to God and we turn our heart’s attention toward God. Prayer is about “showing up” with an open mind and heart, being willing and ready to grow and change. Prayer is an attitude toward life that see everything as ultimately sacred, everything as potentially life-changing, everything as revelatory of life’s meaning. It is our link between dailyness and eternity.

Prayer is communication.
Most of us understand that prayer involves speaking. But do we understand that prayer also involves listening? Prayer is both. In prayer, we pour out our heart to God and God pours God’s heart into us. Prayer involves listening with the heart. Through intimate conversation about what matters to us most, with the living God who loves us, we are drawn closer to God—-we are drawn deeper into relationship with God. As we listen in prayer, God reveals God’s deepest desires, God’s greatest truths, our darkest sin, and God’s amazing grace. Life with God is a life which the rhythms of silence and listening alternate with rhythms of sharing and service. By praying with every part of who we are, the grace that pours from the well of living water trickles through all the aspects of our being, nourishing and hydrating that which was parched and dis-eased.

Prayer is communion with God.
Prayer is how God relates to us and how we relate to God. It involves being present and attentive to God as God is present and attentive to us. Prayer is a matter of making connections with the One who stands at the center of all life... and of learning to live with those connections all the time. It is more about seeking Him than seeking help. It is more about relationship than it is about answers or outcomes. It is about living and working and breathing in tune with the alternative rhythm of God in this world. It is about becoming attuned to God and God’s way of life.

Prayer is an act of faith, hope, and love.
Prayer hopes and trusts that God cares, that God listens, that God is and will continue to be present and active in our lives and in our world. There is something mysterious about prayer. We will always have questions that are difficult to explain or answer. And we will never fully understand the outcomes or answers to our prayers, yet we still pray, we still call out, we still reach out to God in faith and hope and love, we still say to God, “Here I am.” Prayer is where we find hope for ourselves, our neighbors and our world. We pray to see life as it is, to understand it and to make it better than it was.

What is prayer?
Prayer is about God. It is being with God. It is speaking to God. It is listening for God. It is living and seeing life while recognizing and acknowledging the presence of the God.

Why do we pray?
One reason needs to be stated from the outset. We pray because God invites us to. God longs for us to turn our hearts towards Him and call out to Him in prayer. That’s one reason. The second reason is the reverse. We pray because we long to be in relationship with God. Can you imagine being in a relationship with someone you never talk to or never spend time with? We desire to know God and to be known by God. We desire to rest in God’s presence. We desire to praising God and celebrate God. We desire to share ourselves and our lives with God—both the good and the bad. We desire to listen as God speaks to us—as God whispers into our hearts and minds. And in those moments when we are sad or lonely, angry or worried or distressed, we turn to God for help because we desire God’s comfort and love, God’s presence and influence. As we look at the world around us, we beg and we plead that God will change it, that God will transform it, that God will fix it and we pledge ourselves to join in this work.

Why do we pray?
We pray because God is the source of all creation and life and love and peace and joy and goodness and wholeness—and we want to be in touch with those things. We pray because we want to experience and enjoy new life, new birth, God’s Kingdom, God’s touch in our lives. Listen to
how Mark Yaconelli and Alexx Campbell describe where prayer begins: “*Often prayer begins as a longing in the heart, a longing for love, a longing for connection, a longing to make contact with a Power greater than ourselves. Sometimes it begins as a desperate need for help, peace, strength, or comfort. Other times prayer’s beginning is a deep hope for others—an ache for suffering to stop, for the earth’s healing, for care of the poor. Sometimes prayer begins in fear. We reach out for something to save us, to protect us, to let us know that we’ll be okay. Sometimes prayer feels like a longing that’s been met, like a deep spring of peace welling up within our hearts, spilling over and filling us with gratitude and love.*”

**Jesus—A prayer filled life**

Jesus himself modeled an intimate and open relationship with God, addressing God as “Abba, Father” (a word used by young children to address their own fathers in the privacy of their homes). Throughout his ministry, Jesus sought silence and solitude to rest in God’s presence and speak to God. In moments of compassion, Jesus reached out to God in prayer with and for the benefit of others. Jesus turned to God in prayer in moments of joy, moments of frustration, times of distress, and even times of pain.

Having followed Jesus and having observed the importance of prayer in his life and ministry, the disciples made the connection between these times of communion with God and Jesus’ all-encompassing love and spiritual power. And they yearned to participate in that reality as well. So they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

**The Psalms—Models of Prayer**

When we look in the Psalms, we see that within the prayers of Ancient Israel, we find the whole range of human emotions and circumstance reflected in their prayers.

We find prayers of *confession,* prayers of *lament,* prayers of *anger and frustration,* and betrayal, prayers of *comfort* and longing, prayers of *thanksgiving,* prayers of *praise,* prayers of *confidence* and trust, and prayers of *waiting and patience.* We find pleas for *mercy,* *guidance,* *vengeance,* *justice,* *help,* *protection,* and *deliverance.* And what we learn is that we can turn to God in prayer in any circumstance. We can turn to God in prayer when we are happy or sad, worried or frustrated, confused or impatient, loving or angry. We can turn to God in prayer when we feel close to God as well as when we feel guilty or distant.

**Paul—A prayer filled life**

Paul’s entire ministry was grounded in and developed from prayer. Reading Paul’s letters, it is easy to see that Paul is constantly praying for his churches, talking about prayer, encouraging prayer.

Paul, in his Sermon on the Unknown God at the Areopagus in Athens says (Acts 17:24-28): *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’*

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul urges the church to *“pray without ceasing.”* And what he means by this is that all of life can be lived with an attitude of prayer. Throughout our days, we can remain aware of God’s presence, remain in communion with God, remain in communication with God. To pray without ceasing is to see all of life through a Godly lens, keeping our minds focused on Christ and Christ’s ways, and offering our praise and thanksgiving to God in everything that we do.

Listen to what Paul says in Philippians 4:4-9: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”*
Who is prayer for?

But who is prayer for? Is prayer for us (for our benefit) or is pray for God (for God’s benefit)? Does God “get anything” out of prayer? The answer is yes. God gets our love and affection and attention. And this pleases God. The scriptures describe our prayers as incense before God. The Psalmist says “I will call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me; give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:1-2). In Revelation we read about the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders who fell before the Lamb, “each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8). So yes, God “gets” something out of prayer.

But when you really think about it, prayer is really more for us. When we pray, we aren’t telling God anything that God doesn’t already know. When we pray were not bringing God up to date on what is going on in the world. It’s not like God has missed out on something and we are bringing God up to date on what is going on in the world. We pray because of the effect it has on us. Prayer is a tool God has given us for our own benefit. Prayer does not change God. It changes us.

Also, prayer is not a means of forcing God to do something that God otherwise would not do. Prayer is not leverage on God or a way to manipulate God. God does what God does because of who God is; because of God’s gracious nature. Prayer does not make God do anything. We don’t pray because of the effect it has on God. We pray because of the effect it has on us. Prayer is a tool God has given us for our own benefit. Prayer does not change God. It changes us.

Prayer changes us!

Imagine that you are in a boat out on a lake and you are ready to head back to shore. So you turn your boat around and drive it back to the dock. When you get close to the dock, you jump to the front of the boat, you reach out for the dock, grab hold, and pull. When you do this, are you bringing the dock closer to you? Or are you bringing yourself closer to the dock? Most of the time, the dock doesn’t move. It stays where it is. But you move. When you pull on the dock, you pull yourself closer to the dock; more in line with the dock. This is similar to what happens in prayer. In prayer we pull ourselves closer to God—we align ourselves to God and God’s ways. We attune ourselves to God and God’s rhythms. And we begin to see the world more like we should. Prayer aligns our heart with God. That’s how prayer is for us. That’s why we say prayer is more for us than it is for God.

In Philippians Paul says, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6). Prayer changes us. Being in God’s presence changes us. Contemplating who God is, celebrating the things that God has done, learning to care about the things that God cares about, all of this changes us. Looking inside ourselves, being honest about our own shortcomings and failings, sharing our deepest darkest secrets, changes us. Learning how to live life with a greater awareness of God changes us. God changes us. We might not recognize the changes right away. But continued exposure to God in prayer changes us.

It’s like the child who throws a rock into a stream. As she stares at the rock just below the surface of the water, the rock looks the same as it did before. And if she were to return an hour later, the rock might have moved a little, but most likely little has changed. But imagine if she were to take a photograph of that rock. And then imagine that she returned to that same location twenty years later; to that same rock. Would it still look the same? Not at all! She would notice that over the years, many of the rough spots have been made smooth. She would see that great change has taken place from the constant washing of water over the rock. Through persistent prayer, God has a way of smoothing out our rough spots; of grinding down our sharp edges; of washing away the dirt and the stains.

Everyone can pray

Everyone can pray. All of us know how to pray when the moment is right. Everyone who has ever suffered and has ever looked for help knows how to pray. Prayer is an amateur sport. It doesn’t take fancy language and it doesn’t take a degree in theology. In her book Thirst, Mary Oliver has a poem called “Praying.”

Praying

1
It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but a doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

In speaking to God in prayer we can be perfectly open and honest and as expressive as we need or desire. We need not be afraid. We need not hide our true thoughts or our true feelings. For we can’t. God knows. God sees. God hears. God loves. God accepts. God forgives.

In Psalm 50, God says “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” In the book of James we read: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” James 5:13–16 (NRSV).

How not to pray

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus teaches his disciples how not to pray (Matthew 6:5a, 7–8, NRSV):

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Eugene Peterson has an insightful paraphrase which says: “And when you come before God, don’t turn that into a theatrical production. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat? “Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. “The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They’re full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don’t fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.”

Martin Luther on prayer

Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the sixteenth century, gave us some clear advice on prayer. He said that prayer should be “brief, frequent and intense.” Be quick about it. Do it often. And be passionate. You don’t need to put a lot of words into it, but do it all the time and do it with all your heart. Pray simply, honestly and often or as Martin Luther says, “brief, frequent, and intense.”

What should we pray for?

The natural answer to this question is “What do you long for? What is your deepest wish or desire?”

Prayer allows us to look, see, and dream. In prayer, we can look at ourselves, our families, our friends, our neighbors, and the world around us together with God, to see them for how they really are, and to dream about how these things can be made better—more healthy, more whole,
and more life-giving. We can ask God to influence people and situations and we can dedicate ourselves to joining in that work. We can think about what we want to see change in our hearts, our lives, our families, our neighborhoods, our churches, and our world and then we can speak these needs and desires to God and invite God’s spirit to move.

As we deepen our relationship with God and as we attune ourselves to God and God’s ways, we will begin to see the world more like Christ. We will care more and more about the things that God cares about. And our prayers will change.

In teaching his disciples about prayer, Jesus told his friends what to pray for:

1. Pray for your enemies.
2. Pray for food.
3. Pray that you won’t be tempted.
4. Pray for forgiveness.
5. Pray that God’s way of life will fill the world.
6. Praise God for God’s holiness!
7. Give thanks to God for God’s unending kingdom!
8. Praise God for God’s never-ending power!
9. Give thanks to God for God’s glory which is forever!

Five Categories of Spoken Prayer

Many have found it helpful to separate our prayers into different categories or types.

Praise (Psalm 146:1-2)

Praise celebrates the qualities or attributes of God; what we like about God. In praise, we adore God for who God is. It is an open response of our love for God. These prayers focus on the person of God. Just as we love hearing that our loved ones love us, so God desires to hear why we love God.

Thanksgiving (Ephesians 5:20)

Thanksgiving celebrates the things that God has done (past), is doing (present), or will do (future). Prayers of thanksgiving reveal a heart of gratitude. They show awareness for what God has done, express appreciation for God’s works, and honor God’s actions and gifts. These prayers focus on the actions of God. Just as we appreciate hearing words of appreciation for the things that we do, God appreciates hearing words of thanksgiving for the things that God does.

Confession (1 John 1:9)

Confession is agreeing with God about the sin in our life. It removes any barriers sin might have put between us and God. Your confession shows that we agree with God that we have done wrong and that we accept the forgiveness that Jesus’ death has provided for us. The prayers focus on our failure to live as God desires us to live. Just as we need to confess to people when we have wronged them, we need to confess our failings and shortcomings to God.

Personal Petition (1 Samuel 1:26-28)

These prayers ask God to work on our behalf; to meet our needs. We pray about the situations and circumstances we find ourselves in and we ask God to do something for us. We reflect on our own needs and lift these needs up to God in prayer. Just as we can turn to others when we need help, so too, we can turn to God.

Intercession (Ephesians 6:18-19)

These prayers ask God to work on behalf of others. We recognize the needs of others and pray for them, asking God to move or to work to meet their needs. Just as we might ask others to help out a friend or neighbor, so should we turn to God and ask God to help others.

Acts of Prayer

Many have found the ACTS acrostic to be a helpful way to remember the various categories of prayer. ACTS stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

Adoration

Prayers of adoration are essentially prayers of praise. In these prayers, we express our praise for who God is. We tell God we love Him and adore Him and why.

Confession

Prayers of confession are our opportunity to come clean to God; to reveal all those areas in our lives where we have fallen short and express our remorse.

Thanksgiving

Prayers of thanksgiving are our opportunity to express our gratitude for the things God has done for us, for all of humanity, and for all of creation.

Supplication

Prayers of supplication are prayers in which we make our requests known to God. We ask God for things. We make both requests for ourselves (petitions) and for others (intercessions).
The Finger Prayer

Many people have found it helpful in prayer to use the hand as a visual reminder of the things for which we should pray. Each finger of the hand represents a different subject of prayer.

THE THUMB—(those close to us) When we put our hands together in front of us, our thumbs are the fingers that are closest to us. The thumb is also the biggest finger and so it represents those who play a big role in our lives; those closest to us. We remember to pray for our family, friends, and significant others—those close to us.

THE INDEX FINGER—(those who guide) This is the pointing finger. It reminds us to pray for people who point the way; people who help and guide us. We remember to pray for our spiritual leaders and friends, our parents, teachers, and other influential people in our life. We also remember to pray for doctors and nurses and emergency service personnel.

THE MIDDLE FINGER—(the powerful) This is the tallest finger of the hand. It reminds us to pray for those held in high esteem, for people in places of authority, for leaders of our nation, our local government, our communities. We pray for God to be at work among our celebrities and other people of wealth and power.

THE RING FINGER—(the weak) This is the weakest finger of the hand. This finger reminds us to pray for the weakest members of our society—those who are poor, sick, lonely, oppressed, homeless, voiceless, outcasts, or victims of violence. We might even pray for our children.

THE LITTLE FINGER—(ourselves) This is the last and smallest finger of the hand and it is a reminder that God calls us to be humble. In Romans 12:3, Paul says "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." And so when we look at this finger, we remember this call to humility. We remember to place others’ needs ahead of our own. We swallow our pride. And in humility, we pray for ourselves and our own concerns. And we ask God to show us where we can serve others.

The Collect

A Collect (pronounced “kah-lect”) is a very basic yet ancient form of prayer that has been used in the Western Church for many centuries. It is one of the most commonly used forms of prayer used by people who lead public or corporate prayers. It “collects” or “gathers up” all five parts of the prayer around one common theme. This theme is often taken from scripture, the liturgical season (time of the church year), or circumstance or reason for the gathering for public prayer. Collects are meant to be short and to the point with all five parts centering around a common theme. Using this shape, leaders can craft prayers that are classic in form and substance, yet relevant in nature and language. Some people creatively call this form of prayer, the “You-Who-Do-To-Through” prayer.

THE FIVE PARTS OF THE COLLECT

1. Address to God
2. Characteristic of God (forms the basis of the petition)
3. The Petition (requests something of God)
4. The Desired Result
5. The Doxological Conclusion

Consider these examples:

1. Almighty God
2. To whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:
3. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit
4. That we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name
5. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
— or —

1. Almighty God,
2. the fountain of all wisdom
3. enlighten by your Holy Spirit those who teach and those who learn,
4. that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship you and serve you from generation to generation;
5. through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
— or —

1. O God
2. You know that today I have broken your commandment of love and that I have gone to bed angry with my friend, my brother in Christ.
3. Even though I have been wronged and insulted, teach me how to forgive. Even if I was right, help me to make the first effort and to take the first step to putting things right again. Keep me from foolish pride and from nursing my foolish anger. Help me to keep my eyes focused on Jesus
4. That in Him I may see the example of how to forgive, and that in Him I may find the will and the power to forgive
5. This I ask for your love’s sake. Amen.
Part 1—The Address to God
The **YOU** part is how you choose to address and praise God. For example:
- Almighty God
- Light of the world
- Creator of all that is good
- Divine Healer
- God who sees
- Name above all names
- O God our shield
- Sovereign Lord
- Loving God
- Abba, Father
- God of peace
- God of all grace
- Holy One
- Shepherding God
- God of heaven
- God of patience and steadfast love
- Lord of life and love
- Gracious God, all-consuming fire
- O Lord God
- Compassionate God
- Living God
- God of all encouragement and hope
- You continually call your people to yourself
- You have shown us what it means to be a servant
- You are the way, the truth, and the life
- You are the source of life and strength and ministry
- In wisdom you created us and all good things

Part 2—Characteristic of God
The **WHO** part names an attribute or action of God. For example:
- Who parted the Red Sea
- Who calls us out of sin and slavery
- Who fills the world with life and love
- Who knows us better than we know ourselves
- Who healed the sick and fed the hungry
- Who promises never to leave us or forsake us
- Who sent Jesus into the world to suffer, die, and rise again for our sake
- Who is our only source of hope
- Source of all wisdom, justice, truth and love
- Who came to us long ago in the birth of Jesus
- Whose word is authority and power
- Whose way is love
- Whose Spirit brings council and comfort and peace
- Whose chosen dwelling is the hearts of the lowly
- You call us to be your faithful servants
- You call us to pray and you offer yourself to all who seek your face
- You have chosen to speak to us through prophets and wise leaders and most clearly through your Son

Part 3—The Petition
The **DO** part makes a request connected to the attribute or action of God we just named (What do we want God to do?). For example:
- Grant...
- Enable...
- Keep...
- Empower...
- Come...
- Kindle...
- Show...
- Comfort...
- Forgive...
- Help...
- Speak...
- Breathe...
- Save...
- Listen...
- Take...
- Fill...
- Dwell...
- Teach...
- Send...
- Renew...
- Bless...
- Accept...
- Cloth...
- Draw...
- Provide...
- Claim...
- Warm...
- Give...
- Make...
- Wipe...
- Strengthen...
- Create...
- Protect...
- Prepare...
- Defend...
- Cleanse...
- Quicken...
- Instill...
- Place...
- Direct...
- Inspire...
- Lead...
- Encourage...
- Quiet...
- Break...

Part 4—The Desired Result
The **TO** part explains why you are asking God for this (To what end? Or To what result?). For example:
- So that...
- That we may...
- That those who...
- That you might...
- That...

Part 5—The Doxological Conclusion
The **THROUGH** part acknowledges that Jesus invited us to pray according to his authority as he advocates for us. For example:
- Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- In Jesus’ (Christ’s) name we pray. Amen.
- We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.
- For your love’s sake. Amen.
- Accept our prayer for the sake of your Son, our Savior. Amen.
The Breath Prayer

Among the many forms of prayer is one known as the breath prayer. This prayer takes its name from the Hebrew word *ruah* רוּח which can be translated as “wind, breath, or spirit.” The *ruah* or wind of God hovered over the waters of chaos in creation (Genesis 1:2). God breathed the breath of life into the first living being (Genesis 2:7). The wind of God is called forth to raise up the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:5). And it is the Spirit of God that is breathed into the disciples when Jesus says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). And so the reason it is called the breath prayer is because it is simply a way for us to continually be aware that we are living in the breath of God at every moment—that we have received God’s breath from the moment of God’s creation. Because this way of praying reminds us that we share God’s breath, and because it comes as easily and naturally as breathing, it is known as the breath prayer.

Perhaps the best known breath prayer is the one called the Jesus Prayer:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The Jesus prayer originated in the Christian tradition of the East and can be traced back to the sixth century. At that time, monks and others who were seeking a deeper relationship with God sought a disciplined form of prayer they could pray anywhere and at anytime.

The breath prayer arises from our deepest need and gives us a way to follow the apostle Paul’s admonishment to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Just as breathing supports life and renews our physical body, unceasing prayer keeps us attentive to God’s presence and renews our spirit. The breath prayer is always a prayer of praise and petition—the praise portion of the prayer is what we call God, reflecting how we view God or understand who God is; the petition portion of the prayer is what we think or desire God to say of us… something we need the most.

Instead of using other people’s words, we each discover our own breath prayer. To discover your breath prayer, follow these simple steps:

**Step 1**
Sit comfortably and calm yourself. Close your eyes and be mindful that you are in God’s loving presence. Recall a passage from scripture that places you in a peaceful frame of mind. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) is a verse that many people find calming.

**Step 2**
With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Hear God’s asking, “(Your name), what do you want?”

**Step 3**
Answer God directly with whatever comes honestly from your heart. Your answer may be no more than a single word, such as peace or love or forgiveness. Your answer might instead be a phrase or a brief sentence, such as “I want to feel your forgiveness” or “I want to know your love.” Whatever your response, it will be at the heart of your prayer. You may “want” many things, but wants can be narrowed to your deepest yearning that is basic to your spiritual well-being. The question to be asked is What do I want that will make me feel most whole?

**Step 4**
Choose your favorite name or image for God. Choices people commonly make include God, Shepherd, Jesus, Spirit, Living Fire, Creator, Lord, Christ, Eternal Light.

**Step 5**
Combine your name for God with your answer to God’s question “What do you want?” and you have your prayer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desire</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Possible Prayer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rest</td>
<td>Shepherd</td>
<td>My Shepherd, let me rest in thee.</td>
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<tr>
<td>To be led</td>
<td>Eternal Light</td>
<td>Lead me on my way, Eternal Light.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Jesus, let me feel your love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Holy Father, forgive me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>God of Peace</td>
<td>God of Peace, help me to be still</td>
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If several ideas occur, write down the various possibilities and then eliminate and/or combine ideas until you have focused your prayer. Once you get at the heart of your yearning, search for words that give it expression. Then work with these words until you have a prayer of six to eight syllables that flows smoothly when spoken aloud or expressed silently as thoughts of the heart. Explore your breath prayer. Emphasize different words of the prayer. “FATHER, let me see your way.” “Father, LET me see your way.” “Father, let ME see your way.” etc. This helps us discover the nuances of our breath prayer.
PRAYER
Speaking to God

Prepared by the Reverend Brent Anderson

Some prayers are most rhythmic when God’s name is placed at the beginning. Others require it at the end. When your prayer seems right for you, use it again and again throughout the day. In time it will come as easily and naturally as breathing and you will be answering Scripture’s call to pray unceasingly.

Adapted from The Hunger of the Heart by Ron DelBene.

Appreciating the Attributes of God

Below you will find a list of attributes or characteristics of God. Consider choosing one of these and focusing on it for a day (or perhaps even a week) in prayer. Make it the focus of your praise and adoration. If any of these scripture passages speak to you, consider writing them down and carrying them with you to assist you in your prayers.

The Holiness of God—God is God; a cut above; perfect and pure; righteous and right. See Leviticus 11:44–45; Joshua 24:19; Jeremiah 10:12; Psalm 99:1–9; Isaiah 6:1–13; Ezekiel 39:7; Job 12:13; Amos 4:2; John 17:11; Acts 5:3–4, 32; Romans 11:33; Revelation 15:4.

The Self-existence of God—God is eternal; without beginning or end. See Exodus 3:14–15; Nehemiah 9:5b; Psalm 45:6; Psalm 90:1–4; Psalm 102:25–27; Isaiah 40:28–31; Jeremiah 31:3; John 5:26; Acts 17:22–31; Romans 1:20; Colossians 1:15–20; 1 Timothy 1:17.

The Incomprehensibility of God—We can never fully understand God. Our knowledge will always be limited, partial, falling short. See Job 38:1–41:34; Psalm 139:1–18; Isaiah 55:8–9; Romans 11:33–36; 1 Corinthians 2:6–16. Deuteronomy 29:29.

The Mercy of God—God is fully of mercy, kindness and compassion. See Deuteronomy 4:31; Lamentations 3:22; Daniel 9:9; 1 Peter 1:3–5; 2 Corinthians 5:17–19; Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:4–7.

The Sovereignty of God—God has all authority and power; God is free to do; free to rule and reign over all: see 1 Samuel 2:6–8; 2 Samuel 7:22; Psalm 71:5; Jeremiah 32:17; Job 42:2; Psalm 33:10–11; Psalm 93; Isaiah 46:9–10; Matthew 10:29–30; Romans 8:28

The Faithfulness of God—God is constant, loyal, reliable, steadfast, unwavering, devoted, true, and dependable. See Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 33:4; Psalm 89:8; Psalm 119:90; Psalm 145:13; Psalm 156:5–8; Lamentations 3:21–24; 1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 2:13; 1 John 1:9.

The Justice of God—God does what is right; gives people their due. See Genesis 18:25; Exodus 34:6–7; Nehemiah 9:32–33; Psalm 145:17; Romans 9:14–33.

The Goodness of God—God is virtuous, excellent, and upright. There is no dark side to God. See Exodus 34:6–7; Psalm 25:8–10; Psalm 100:1–5; Psalm 136:1; Mark 10:18; John 10:11; Romans 8:28–39; James 1:17; 2 Peter 1:3–4.

The Wisdom of God—God understands all things; always judges rightly; always makes the right decisions. See 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 92:5; Psalm 147:5; Isaiah 28:29; Isaiah 55:8–9; Daniel 2:20–22; Job 12:13; Jeremiah 10:12; Colossians 2:2–3; Romans 11:33; Romans 16:27

The Tri-unity of God—There is one God; God is one in essence, three in person—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. See Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 3:16–17; Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2.

The Omnipotence of God—God holds all power, authority and control over God’s creation. See Genesis 17:1; Psalm 115:3; Job 42:2; Luke 1:37; Romans 1:11; Hebrews 1:3.


John Calvin on Prayer

John Calvin calls prayer “the chief exercise of faith by which we daily receive God’s benefits.” He describes prayer as a “sort of agreement between God and us whereby we pour out before him all the desires, joys, sighs, and finally, thoughts of our hearts” (Calvin’s First Catechism). Like the Apostle Paul, Calvin urged Christians to pray “continuously” saying that we should lift our hearts to God at all times and pray without ceasing. (Institutes III, XX, 28). Yet, because of our weakness, he says it is necessary for us to set certain hours for prayer (Institutes III, XX, 50). He encourages us to
pray during these times:
- **When we awake in the morning**
- **Before we begin the day’s work**
- **Before eating**
- **After eating**
- **Before we go back to sleep at night**

Calvin believed that when we open ourselves up to God in prayer, God is “wholly present to us.” (Institutes III, XX, 2). He insisted “words indeed are not always necessary; but true prayer can never be offered without the understanding and the heart.” (Genevan Catechism) In other words, we don’t necessarily need to “say” anything; we simply need to have our heart and mind focused on God. When we do that, we can be assured that we are in prayer.

Devoting time to prayer

Following Calvin’s suggestion that we set aside certain times of the day for prayer, consider setting aside certain times for prayer for yourself.

Be Intentional
Be intentional about the times you choose for daily prayer. Choose times that are convenient for you. Set them aside as special appointments for you with God. Block them out on your daily schedule (add them to your date book; set an alarm or reminder on your phone).

Find a comfortable place
The reality is that you can pray anywhere. But having a place where you will be comfortable and where you won’t be disturbed can be helpful.

Relax and Prepare
Some people find that prayer is difficult when all our to-do lists and the cares of the world are running through our heads. Take some time to relax and clear your mind. Offer those things to God. Prepare yourself to pray by taking a few deep breathes. As you do, let those things go.

Welcome God’s presence
Remember that prayer is communion with God. Welcome God’s presence. Open your heart and your mind to God. Make room inside yourself for God.

Speak and Listen
Speak to God about those things that matter most to you. Consider using the five-finger prayer. And spend some time in silence as you listen for God to speak to you.

Prayers for use throughout the day

**DAWN (6am)** - O Lord, we thank you for this new day and for keeping us safe through the night. Keep our hearts and minds free to love you and to serve you. Amen.

**MORNING (8am)** - Loving God, guide us throughout this day. May all that we do, think, and say be pleasing in your sight.

**LATE MORNING (10am)** - Lord, help us to respond to your call in our lives and to recognize your hand at work in and around and among us. Amen.

**NOON (12pm)** - By your Spirit, O God, open our minds that we may hear your Word anew and follow it diligently. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

**AFTERNOON (3pm)** - In your mercy, O Lord, bless your Church. Strengthen its leaders, inspire its members, and guide its mission for Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**EVENING (6pm)** - Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Have mercy on us and forgive us. Amen.

**BEDTIME (9pm)** - Through the hours of this night, O Lord, grant us your peace. In Christ’s name. Amen.

White Board of Prayer

One way to incorporate more prayer into the life of a family is to dedicate a white-board (or dry-erase board) to prayer. Hang a white board in an area of your house where everyone can see it. Encourage everyone in the family to write brief notes about problems or situations for which one family member would like everyone to pray. Consider setting up one half of the white board to list circumstances and situations. Consider setting up the other half to list names of people for whom one family member would like everyone to pray.

Tips for Praying with Children

Teaching children to pray is one of the greatest responsibilities of a parent. Children often have a very natural inclination to prayer. Many children readily imagine prayer as crawling into the arms of a loving parent and telling them the things that are important to them and asking for the things they want or need. Most often, we will teach children to pray by imitation—they will watch you and listen as you pray and they will begin to imitate you. Children like to
know that their parents are praying for them. It helps them to know that they are important to you and to God. So call them by name in prayer. Teach your children that they can pray at anytime, anywhere, and under any circumstance. Model this for them. Teach them that they can say anything to God that they want to say; even when they are mad or angry, frustrated or sad. Teach them that they don’t have to use special words; there is no “magic formula” that will make a prayer “work”. God wants to hear what is important to us. And so with a sense of reverence and awe, knowing that God cares about us, loves us, and accepts us, we can turn to God in prayer whenever we want or need. Great times to pray with children include: when they wake up in the morning, before meals, before they head out to school, and before they go to sleep at night.

Prayer Reminders

Many people find it helpful to create “prayer reminders”. These usually take the form of post-it notes or small cards placed in specific locations that remind us to meet with God in prayer. The cards themselves might not say anything. They might just contain a single word or even a symbol (perhaps an “up” arrow). Whenever you come across one of your prayer reminders, you stop for a brief moment to pray. Some people put prayer reminders in their lunch box. Some people place a prayer reminder on the mirror in their bathroom. Some people place a prayer reminder on the stick shift of their car. Some people put a prayer reminder on their coat rack near the front door. Some people attach a prayer reminder on their computer screen at home or at work. Some place a prayer reminder in their refrigerator. These reminders are meant to trigger quick, brief, honest prayers of love and devotion to God—a reminder that we live in God's presence wherever we find ourselves.

Praying the News

One of the ways that we can expand our prayer life (particularly our prayers of intercession) is by praying through the news. As we watch the news on television or read the newspaper, we can pray. We can lift up those situations and the people involved in prayer. There is an excellent website called Newseum that allows you to see the front pages of newspapers from around the world. Go to www.newseum.org and click on the “Today’s Front Pages” button on the right hand column of the site and then search for a local newspaper or if you are traveling or abroad, a newspaper from your hometown.

Praying in the Morning

Many people find it helpful to spend the first few moments of their day recognizing the presence of God through prayer. As they awake and while they are still under the covers, they greet God in their own quiet way. They thank God for the protection of the night. They dedicate themselves and this new day of opportunities to God. They think through their daily schedule and they ask God to be present in each moment. They pray that God will make God’s presence known in their busy-ness. And they pray that God will be made known through them as they interact with others. Praying in the morning, while you are still in bed, is a great way to start your day.

Praying in the Evening

Another time that people find conducive to intentional and focused prayer is at the end of the day, just as they are about to get in bed and close their eyes to sleep. Many people will speak to God about the important people in their life. They will pray for family and friends, neighbors and co-workers. They might also pray for people with whom they had come into contact during the day. Some people spend time reflecting on the events of the day, thanking God for those moments when they felt blessed and confessing those times when they shut God out or failed to live rightly. Whatever you pray for during this time, consider offering yourself to God once again. Ask God to give you restful and re-energizing sleep. And pray that God will help you wake mindful of God’s presence.

Mealtime Prayers

Here are a sampling of common mealtime prayers:

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed. Amen.

Loving and gracious God, we thank you for the food before us, the friends beside us, the love between us, and your presence among us. Amen.

God is great. God is good. Let us thank God for our food. By God’s hand we all are fed. Give, O Lord, our daily bread. Amen.

The following prayer is meant to be sung to the tune of Old Hundreth; commonly known as our Doxology.

Be present at our table, Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. These mercies bless and grant that we may strengthened for thy service be. Amen.
The Goal of Spiritual Disciplines

When it comes to spiritual disciplines, we constantly need to remind ourselves of the purpose of it all. We read scripture, we pray, we fast, we keep the Sabbath because we desire to be in communion with God. It is all about the relationship. We want to know God. We want to draw ourselves closer to God. We read scripture because it reveals to us the nature of God as well as the nature of ourselves. By reading scripture, we come to know God better (as well as God’s ways and God’s desires for us). We pray in order to be in relationship with God. That is what prayer is—relationship acknowledged and lived out. In prayer we share ourselves and we expect God to share God’s self with us as well. In prayer, we bask in the presence of God.

Spiritual disciplines are meant to be life-giving exercises of faith. They are meant to deepen our relationship with God. In them we seek the new life that God desires to give to us. Unfortunately, we forget this. There are times when prayer and reading the scriptures feels like just another chore that has to be done. And so sometimes they feel like dry, routine affairs.

Some people enter into these exercises with the misconception that by doing them, they will earn God’s favor. Subconsciously they might be thinking that by doing them, they will get another gold star placed next to their name (like our teachers might have done when we were little). But that’s not it at all. Much of their value is lost when they become nothing more than a checkmark on a checklist.

Our ‘intentions’ and our ‘attention’

Like with anything, our intentions matter. What do we intend to do when we pick up our bibles to read? What is our intention when we turn to God in prayer? Somewhere deep inside of us, hopefully we are crying out “God, I want to know you more! Show me what You intend!” God’s intentions matter. Our intentions matter!

And that’s why our attention matters. What are we paying attention to when we do these things? Are we paying attention to God or are we distracted by other things? Are we merely going through the motions—following a bunch of “steps” or some particular “method”—or are we paying attention to God; seeking to learn from God; seeking to draw ourselves closer to God and God’s intentions?

In the presence of vs. ‘being with’

It’s like the difference between being in the presence of someone and being with someone. You can eat a fantastic meal in the presence of someone you love without being with them... If you’re always checking your phone to see what your friends are writing on Facebook, or if you’re worried and thinking about all the work you need to get done before the weekend, or if you are distracted by the other people you see in the restaurant or if you are worried about your finances and how you are going to pay for everything. If your mind is elsewhere, then your loved one is going to notice. You are going to feel it. And your relationship might suffer because an opportunity to share and be together has been wasted.

Think of the story in Luke chapter ten where Jesus visits Mary and Martha:

38 Now as they went on their way, (Jesus) entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” 41 But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

A listening heart that pays attention to the other makes all the difference in the world. Prayer and bible study are meant to be life-giving exercises of faith and hope and love because in them we seek to grow closer to the source of life and hope and love.

It’s very interesting what God says at the transfiguration of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. God has to interrupt Peter who is yapping away about how good it is for him to be there to witness what was happening and about how he wants to build three tents; one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. From a bright overshadowing cloud, God speaks and says:

“This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.”

Those last few words should stick with us. Listen to him! Listen not just to anything or anyone—listen to HIM! Listening is just as important in the Christian life and in prayer as speaking. We need to listen.
One clever individual noted:
“God didn’t say ‘This is my son, the beloved, keep yakking at him!’ — God said, ‘Listen to him!’”

In a similar vein, someone else commented:
“Prayer isn’t about giving marching orders. It’s about reporting for duty.”

**The tribal elder in New York**

Mark Yaconelli tells the story about a researcher from Columbia University who went up to North Dakota to study the Native Americans and their leadership.

And while he was there he became fascinated with one of the tribal elders and so he decided to have him fly back to New York to meet with his fellow researchers. This elder had never flown on a plane before.

The morning they arrived, they checked him into his hotel and then an hour later, the researcher went over to get him and escort him through central park to a series of meetings they were having at the University.

So they’re heading up Broadway walking along the sidewalk and as they’re walking, the elder stops, looks around and says, “Did you hear that?”

Looking a little puzzled, the researcher says, “Hear what? This is New York City. There are people and cars and noises everywhere.”

The elder slowly walks over to the edge of the sidewalk where there is a small patch of dirt with a tree in the middle. He reaches down and carefully picks up what looks like a cricket.

The researcher is totally amazed and he says “How did you hear that? With all these people talking, cars honking, noises everywhere… how did you hear that cricket?”

The elder thinks for a minute. Then he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a small handful of coins and throws them in the air. When they land on the ground, everyone around them stops and looks down. And the wise elder said, “It depends on what you’re listening for.”

How do we pay more attention to the movement of the Spirit in our lives and in our world?

Consider this prayer:
Tender God, You whisper words of life to us. Help us attune our ears always and everywhere to listen for them. Amen.

**Moses and the burning shrubbery**

When we talk about listening to God, I think we can’t help but remember the story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3. There’s Moses, tending the flocks of sheep of his father-in-law Jethro when all of a sudden he notices a bush that is blazing but is not consumed. Moses turns aside to check things out. And God calls to him from the bush, “Moses, Moses... remove the sandals from your feet... this is holy ground... I AM the God of your ancestors and I have something I want you to do.”

I love the way one of my favorite seminary professors, Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, puts it. She says: “When I’m honest, it irks me that God called Moses through a burning bush, and God has sent nothing of the sort in my direction as far as I can tell. How hard can it be to refuse the great I AM when you hear God in the hedges? Surely if a burning bush told me what God needed me to do, I would do it, wouldn’t I?”

She goes on to say: “We don’t know how long God has been trying to get Moses’ attention. Maybe God had been burning shrubbery for decades to no avail. Maybe God had tried more traditional means to attract a worthy candidate for the position but no one applied. Or maybe one day God just decided that the person for the job was the one who noticed Yahweh’s presence on Horeb, and so God ignited a bush for minutes or millennia until a miracle occurred: Somebody finally paid attention.”

She then says: “Brought up short by the cauterizing fire of truth, God says to each of us: ‘Remove your sandals! Leave all that (baggage) behind. I am not out to destroy you; I am out to change you. Take off those smelly shoes—this is holy ground, the place where you leave your old ways behind and start over as the person I made you to be.”

**How do we listen?**

How do we listen? How do we turn our hearts attention toward God? How do we become more and more aware of God in our surroundings? How do we become more attentive to God’s presence within us, among us, and around us? How do we pay more attention to the movement of the Spirit in our lives and in our world?
Silence and Solitude

Dallas Willard says “silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life... Think what it says about the inward emptiness of our lives if we must always turn on the (cd player) or radio to make sure something is happening around us.”

Or listen to the words of TS Elliot: “Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.”

Blaise Pascal writes “all unhappiness of (men and women) arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.” We no longer know how to be alone. We no longer know how to be quiet. We need our diversions. We need noise and busyness around us at all times. We have what Dallas Willard calls a “rabid busyness” that drives us, possesses us, plagues us. We worship the God of multi-tasking, yet we hunger for intimacy, we thirst for rest, and we’re starved for silence. But why?

Muddy Waters

When we first try to experience silence and solitude, we can’t help but notice how difficult it is. Our lives are chaotic. They’re like a jar of river water that has been shaken or disturbed; the mud and sentiment swirling around. It’s hard to see anything through cloudy water.

But if we set the jar down and it remains silent and still, the sediment will begin to settle and the water will begin to clear. This is what silence and solitude can do in our lives. Through silence and solitude, God can clear away the clutter, settle us down, and speak to us in that clear, small voice.

It might not be that God wasn’t speaking before. It might just be that we were too busy, too distracted—the noise of our lives was just too loud—and so we couldn’t hear anything. And sometimes the noise isn’t outside of us. Sometimes the noise is inside.

Frederick Buechner writes: What deadens us most to God’s presence within, I think, is the inner dialogue that we are engaged in within ourselves, the endless chatter of human thought. I suspect that there is nothing more crucial to true spiritual comfort than being able from time to time to stop that chatter, including the chatter of spoken prayer.

And so perhaps it’s time we listen to those scriptures that talk about being quiet and still.

Psalm 37:7
“Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him”

Psalm 46:10–11
Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Psalm 107:28–31
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

Psalm 131:1b–2a
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.
Isaiah 30:15
For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: In re-turning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

We desperately need to cultivate periods of silence and solitude that will help us dispel our “rabid busyness” and remind us of who we are and whose we are. We need to learn how to be alone and how to be silent with God. Silence isn’t just the absence of noise or the absence of speech. As Richard Foster says, “Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening for God, is not silence.” We seek silence and solitude so that we can listen better.

Like a Phone Call from a Friend
We know already how to get away and to listen. We do it all the time when someone we love, a friend or family members, calls us on the phone and wants to tell us something important. We move away from TV in the family room, the blender in the kitchen, and the kids playing in the Veranda. And we find a nice quiet place where we can be by ourselves and truly listen. This is the kind of thing we need to do with God as well.

Some people like to take prayer walks. Some people like to go fly fishing. Some people like to hike in the mountains. Some people like to curl up in a comfortable chair with a warm blanket and a cup of coffee. Some people like to walk along the beach or the shore of a lake. Some people like to sit on the couch in front of a warm fire. Some people make arrangements to spend the night at a monastery or they camp out at a place like Taizé. Some people sit on a dock and watch the light of the moon shine across the waters. Some sit beside a flowing stream. Some go to Starbucks with their Bose® noise-canceling headphones. Some find a nice, quiet park bench.

Jesus knew what it was like to have people constantly following him; constantly asking things of him. He knew the busyness and chaos of life all too well. And that’s why we read that Jesus, often, would get up early and sneak off to a quiet place by himself to pray.

What do we do now?
Once we have entered into the silence and the solitude, with our hearts attentive to God—seeking to listen to God and to hear God speak—what do we do then?

The best answer is probably the simplest—Nothing! We don’t need to do anything. The best thing we can do is to simply enjoy being with God; resting in God’s presence. Richard Foster says: “What we must clearly understand and underscore is that our real task (in solitude) is to create a space in our lives where God can reach us. Once that space has been created we wait quietly, expectantly. From this point on, the work belongs to God.”

The Prayer Walk
There is no magic to a prayer walk. It is really quite simple. A Prayer Walk is exactly what it sounds like. It is where you take a walk (recognizing that you are walking with God) and you pray while walking (remember that prayer can be speaking, listening or just being). You are walking and praying (speaking, listening, or simply being with God/enjoying God) at the same time. You are aware and expectant of God’s presence while you walk. It is a time for you and God.

Our intentions during a prayer walk (which begin with a desire to be in communion with God) can take several forms. Some people like to see prayer walking as a deeply contemplative exercise where you really focus on opening up yourself to God—and so you walk slowly and deliberately. Others like to see prayer walking as a way to bless the world around you and pray for the people, locations and situations you come across. For these people, a prayer walk is both discovery and spoken (mental) prayer. It is discovery because they begin to see the people and their settings differently. It is prayer because they pray that God would bless the people and places they meet. Some people use prayer walks to find solitude. Some people do prayer walks in a small group, an intercessory pilgrimage of sorts. Again, what is most important when it comes to a prayer walk is our intentions and our attention.

Centering Prayer
“Centering Prayer is a receptive, deep method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God’s presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and
facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer — verbal, mental or affective prayer — into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him... it is resting in God beyond thought, words and emotions.”

From www.contemplativeoutreach.org

Those who practice centering prayer recommend at least twenty minutes (somewhere between 20 and 30 minutes).

The Method:

1) **Choose a sacred word as a symbol** of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.

   - Pray for the Holy Spirit to provide you with a word that can be used to bring you back to your center (which is God) whenever your thoughts or feelings wander.
   - Common words are: God, Jesus, Spirit, Love, Mercy, Peace, Silence, Stillness, Faith, Trust.

2) **Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed**, settle yourself briefly and then silently introduce your sacred word.

   - You introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton

3) **When engaged with your thoughts**, return-ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

   - The word is not said repeatedly. It is to be spoken quietly within to gently turn us back toward God whenever we wander.
   - We avoid analyzing our experience or thinking about it. We simply rest in God’s presence. The goal is simply to be.

4) **At the end of the prayer time**, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

**Ignatian Awareness Examen**

Popularized by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century, the Awareness Examen is meant to help us develop a spiritual sensitivity to the special ways in which God works in our lives.

Most often the Awareness Examen is practiced at the end of the day. At its most basic level it is a simple review of the day’s events. The purpose of the review is to help one become increasingly aware of God’s presence and work in their lives (to become spiritually attuned to God), to offer up this relationship in prayer, and to resolve oneself to change one’s ways through the grace of God.

The basic form of the Examen involves five phases which, for the purposes of simplicity and memorization, have been reduced to five simple words:

**REST • RECOGNIZE • REVIEW • RESPOND • RESOLVE**

**Phase 1 — REST in God’s Presence**

To begin, simply rest in God’s presence, quieting your heart and mind and focusing on God’s desire to be with you. A simple prayer like "Here I am God, remain with me" can be a helpful way to gain focus and quiet. Ask God to help you see your life through God’s loving eyes.

**Phase 2 — RECOGNIZE Causes of Gratefulness**

As you begin to think through all of the events and experiences of your day, ask God to show you those times and places where you should be most thankful. Looking back over the day, for what are you most grateful? Ask God to show you the little things and not just the big things. In silent prayer, express your gratitude to God.

**Phase 3 — REVIEW the Good and the Bad**

Again look over the events of your day. This time ask God to show you where you were open to God’s presence and living according to God’s ways, as well as, where you were blocked to God’s presence and failed to live according to God’s ways. Ask:

   - “Where were you most aware of God?”; and
   - “Where did you most deliberately turn your back on God?”

To frame these questions in other ways, you could ask:

   - “Where were you most able to give and receive love today?” and
   - “Where were you least able to give and receive love?”

Or you could ask:

   - “When did I listen to your voice today?”
   - “When did I resist listening to your voice today?”
Reflect on these moments and ask yourself: "What do these moments indicate about my relationship with God? What do these moments say about my patterns of life? See what insights come to mind.

Phase 4 — RESPOND to God
Speak to God about what you discover. Confess those times when you have not cooperated with God or have not been responsive to God’s presence. And thank God for those times when you were open to God and God’s ways. Consider writing your response in a journal.

Phase 5 — RESOLVE to Change
Now that you’ve had a chance to reflect on your awareness of God throughout the day and the manner in which you lived in God’s presence, consider what changes you might want or need to make. Ask God to give you the strength to change those things that need to be changed and the grace to live more and more into Christ’s likeness.

Ignatian Contemplation

Ignatian Contemplation is a way of praying with the scriptures through the use of the imagination that has been around for centuries but was championed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola as part of his Spiritual Exercises. With Ignatian Contemplation, we take the familiar stories of the bible and let them flow through our imagination to see where the Lord leads us. Using our imaginations and our five senses, we enter into the story. What would we see, hear, taste, smell and feel if we were there in this story—if we were a fly on the wall, an innocent (or not so innocent) bystander, or one of the characters of the story? We can think about Ignatian Contemplation like this: If we were a filmmaker trying to make a movie, what would this scene look like? The process is simple: Read a narrative passage of scripture (a story) and then try to imagine the scene in your mind and notice what happens.

Step 1—Getting Settled
Find a quiet place where you won’t be distracted. Open your hands on your lap and ask God to open your heart and your imagination as you read scripture.

Step 2—First Reading
Then pick a story out of scripture. Read through it once slowly. Make sure that understand the story line; what happens when and where and to whom. Once you have the story in mind, put your bible down.

Step 3—Engage Your Imagination
Now begin to imagine the scene as if you were standing right there. What is around you? Who else is there? What do you hear in the scene? If you are in a house, what noises are in the house or in the street outside? What do you smell? Who is there? What conversations are taking place? What is the mood—tense? Joyful? Confused? Frightened? Angry?

Feel free to paint this picture in any way your imagination takes you. Don’t worry too much about historical accuracy. Let God take your imagination and reveal something new to you. Let God reveal the story to you in a new way.

Step 4—Reflection/Response
Having experienced this story using your imagination, what do you think God is trying to say to you through this story? In what ways does it stir you, confuse you, or challenge you? Take some quiet time to reflect on its message for you.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina means “spiritual or divine reading”. It’s a way of reading scripture that involves the heart as much as the head. It’s not so much about the amount you read. It’s about the depth.

Classical writers have compared this process to eating. In reading, you bite off a small chunk of text. Through meditation, you chew on it, extracting the nutrients and juices. In prayer, you swallow, incorporating the result of your meditation and allowing it to nourish your life. And in contemplation, you savor the good taste left in your mouth, celebrate the gift of God’s word to you, and embrace the new life you have received.

Classic descriptions of Lectio Divina list a sequence of four movements: lectio (reading), meditatio (ruminating and reflecting/meditation), oratio (responding to God/praying), and contemplatio (receiving and resting in God/to admire or think). Try remembering these four words:

READING • MEDITATION • PRAYER • CONTEMPLATION

Movement 1 – Reading
First, choose a relatively short passage of scripture and read it meditatively, prayerfully. In this phase you are a seeker, looking for the “word within the Word.” Watch for
a key phrase or word that jumps out at you or promises to have special meaning for you. Read it slowly with your own life and choices in view.

Movement 2 – Meditation
Next, mull over the text; internalize the words. Listen for the phrases that stand out for you as you read the passage. Turn them over in your mind. Reflect on why these words catch your attention, what they bring to mind, and what they mean for you today. This stage is comparable to walking around a great statue, viewing it from multiple vantage points.

Movement 3 – Prayer
Next, pray the text. You have listened; now respond. Turn your meditation from dialogue with yourself to dialogue with God. Share with God in all honesty your reflections, questions, or feelings. Offer your thanksgiving, confession, petitions, or intercessions as they arise within during your dialogue with God. Listen for God’s response and inner nudging.

Movement 4 – Contemplation
Finally, rest. Rest your mental activity and trust yourself completely to God’s love and care. Relax in God’s presence. Allow the text to work itself into you. Pick a phrase from the text to which you can return again and again as you keep your attention on God. Enjoy the rest that Jesus promised to those who come to him. Quietly, when ready, move toward the moment in which you ask God to show you how to live out what you have experienced.

The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only, but it is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul, and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart. —John Calvin

How is your relationship to the church? How is your relationship with God? Think about these things and then try to see them as you imagine God sees them. What would God want to say to you about these things? In prayer, turn to God with the details of your life and ask God to help you write a letter to yourself (from God) about your life.

Consider putting this letter in an envelope and sealing it. And then consider opening it in six months and reading it again. The key here is to be as faithful as possible to what you honestly think God would want to say to you.

Write a “Dear God” Letter
Sit down with pen and paper and consider writing a “Dear Abby” letter to God (Dear Abby was a famous advice columnist in the United States; people would write letters to her and she would respond with a letter of her own which would be printed in her newspaper column).

Think through some problem or issue that you are having and write a letter to God about it, seeking God’s advice. Explore your thoughts and feelings in some depth. Then write a letter in which God responds to your letter. Again, be as faithful as possible to what you honestly think God would say.

Conversation with Jesus
Start a conversation with God or Jesus on paper. Think of something that you want to say to God or Jesus and write it down (for example, “God, I’ve been struggling with how to show more love to my family recently.”). Then write down what you think God or Jesus might say in response (for example: “Jesus: ‘Oh really. What seems to be the problem?’”). Then continue the conversation by responding to God’s response. Let the conversation flow where it will alternating between your statements/questions and God’s responses.

Writing Exercises
Letter from God
Find a nice quiet place where you can be quiet and alone. Then sit down with pen and paper and write yourself a letter from God.

Think about your life: What you are doing? What you are thinking? What decisions do you need to make? What direction is your life heading? Who are the key people? How are those relationships? How is your spiritual life?

A Prayer from Paul — Ephesians 3
For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.