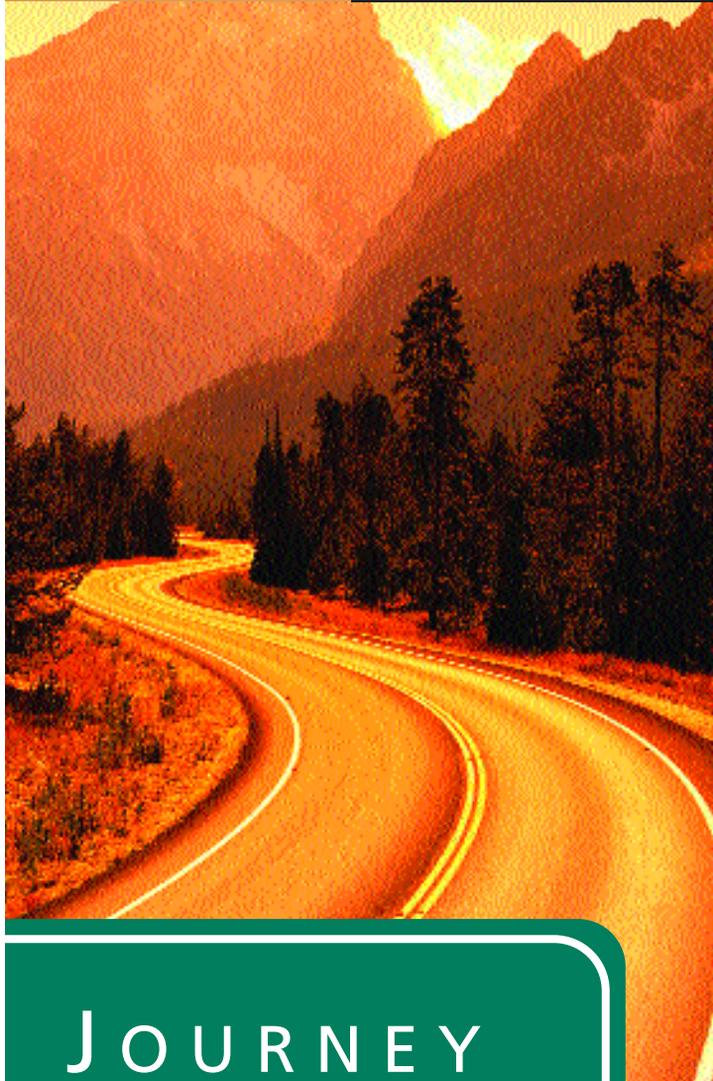


volume 6



JOURNEY  
TO FAITH

Prayer

# PRAYER: WHY BOTHER?

If you are like most people, you have prayed at some point in your life. In fact, a Barna poll revealed that four out of five people pray during the week (George Barna, “The State of the Church,” 2000). For many people, however, maybe even you, prayer is not a regular part of their lives. Even if we haven’t prayed ourselves, most of us have seen or heard others praying. You might have even memorized the prayer made famous by the *New England Primer*:

“Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep  
If I should die before I wake  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

While the nostalgic picture of a child kneeling by their bedside with their head bowed and hands folded reciting this prayer is heartwarming, for many people prayer is a strange, sometimes even mystical experience that they aren’t sure they quite understand. They may pray not because they necessarily believe that it will work, but because they are out of options and they are throwing the dice heavenward in a gamble that maybe God is really there, and if he is, maybe he will decide to help. Their prayer is akin to the agnostic’s prayer: “O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul.”

Recently there has been a great deal of debate about whether or not prayer works. In fact, many have started to experiment with prayer, using it on patients in hospitals like an

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experimental drug. Some patients are prayed for, while others are not. But, we might ask, how much do those praying for the patients really believe in prayer, and who are they actually praying to? Prayer seems to be viewed as just another form of “treatment,” like acupuncture. Little mention is made of the God people pray to, just the act of prayer itself, as if the act had some independent power of its own.

### DOES PRAYER WORK?

Others have used it “experimentally” on other topics of worldwide interest. An article entitled, “Does Prayer Work?” by Giles Wilson of the *BBC Online* (February 27, 2002), asked that very question.

Over a month had passed since the celebrated time of prayer, and the world had not become peaceful, nor had everything prayed for come to pass. It was fascinating to read the responses from different readers who had read the article. Below are a few examples.

“Looking for a response a month later, after only one day of prayer? If we want God to supernaturally act in our world, we need to show him we’re serious and pray regularly, hard, and long!”

“I don’t believe in God but I believe in the power of prayer and often ask my Mom, a Catholic, to light a candle or ‘say one’ for people I care about who are ill or having a rough time. I don’t think you have to believe in a particular higher power to benefit from praying—which is simply a form of meditation or channeling your thoughts or energies.”

“What we can never know is how much worse things might have been had we not been praying.”

“Who cares if it works or not? If it makes people feel better by praying then good luck to them. The only downside is if people think that’s all they need to do to achieve anything. World peace, or anything for that matter, can only be achieved by having a plan and then implementing that plan. Prayer would only be an optional extra.”

“I wish these people would get real. The sooner people understand that we are on our own, and that when things go badly praying to some mythical concept of a ‘creator’ isn’t going to do anything. Think for yourselves and act for yourselves. Is this the dark ages?”

“Asking ‘have prayers for peace a month ago worked?’ is not a sensible question to ask, as who can tell the time scale God works on? What is certain if you talk to those who know God is that prayers are always answered, but not always in the way we might want or expect. Answers are not always, ‘Yes,’ but also ‘No,’ and ‘Not yet, wait.’”

While there were those who saw prayer as essential, there were those who saw prayer as “simply a form of meditation or channeling your thoughts or energies.” Is prayer a waste of time, and degrading? Is it nothing more than a spiritual “optional extra” in our lives, like tinted glass, or power steering? Is being involved in prayer an excuse not to think for yourself, or merely an archaic relic of the dark ages?

Down through history there have been those who have believed strongly in prayer. There have also been those who felt it was a complete waste of time. One famous skeptic, named Robert Ingersoll, claimed that “Man must learn to rely upon himself...even patent medicines will cure more diseases than all the prayers uttered since the beginning of the world.” (Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Gods*, 1872).

There is even *The Complete Neurotic’s Notebook* author’s confession, “I often pray, though I’m not sure Anyone’s listening; and I phrase it carefully, just in case He’s literary.” (Mignon McLaughlin, *The Complete Neurotic’s Notebook*).

Part 2 of the *Humanist Manifesto* claims that “traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to live and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith.... Reasonable minds look to other means of survival.”

While prayer has its detractors, it also has many who believe strongly in the importance of and power of prayer. Lord Tennyson wrote, “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.” The famous author Leo Tolstoy wrote, “Prayer is an invisible tool which is wielded in a visible world.”

A famous Christian of the last century even boldly claimed, “It is possible to move men, through God, by prayer alone” (Hudson Taylor). It was Abraham Lincoln who once wrote, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.”

While people have differing ideas about prayer, they seem to differ almost as widely about what prayer really is. Years ago I took a junior college English class. Creative writing takes you down many interesting avenues, and we often got to talk about varied subjects. Since several students had referred to their Christian faith in a particular paper the teacher had assigned, she explained her own personal religious beliefs. While she was a Jew, she did not believe in God. Several weeks later she again shared some of her life and mentioned that she often prayed.

Wondering about the contradiction between not believing in God and actively praying, we questioned her about it. She seemed slightly confused about the question. “I pray to myself,” she replied, “it helps me to calm down and relax.” Is prayer nothing more than self-talk? Is it, as some believe, merely a form of inner meditation or “channeling” your thoughts and energies? Does prayer even have to involve a belief in God at all?

### IS ANYONE LISTENING?

If you don’t believe in God, there would obviously be little motivation for prayer, other than for those who find it a form of self-relaxation. But, ultimately, one has to question the value of such prayer. While it might have some inner benefits, it is of absolutely no use in issues of concern

outside of yourself. It wouldn’t help meet a real, tangible, physical need. Self-prayer becomes merely a mental tranquilizer that we give ourselves when we are feeling anxious.

When the Bible mentions prayer, it does not refer to self-talk or inner meditation, but a conscious conversation between the one praying and the God they believe is listening to them. Jesus believed in prayer. In fact, when prompted by his disciples, he even taught them how to pray, beginning the prayer by addressing his heavenly Father. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9).

Jesus not only believed in prayer, but he believed Someone was listening. But while he believed in prayer, he did feel the need to correct many wrong ideas about prayer, especially among some of those who were very religious. The fact that Jesus spoke often about prayer indicates it was a priority for him.

Jesus recognized that some religious Jews were using prayer as a means of pretending to be good and holy, and other non Jews who believed in many different gods had convinced themselves that reciting a certain formula prayer over and over would get their deity’s attention.

As a result, he said, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be

*Is prayer a waste of time, and degrading? Is it nothing more than a spiritual “optional extra” in our lives, like tinted glass, or power steering?*

like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:5-8).

Obviously, Jesus believed that his heavenly Father welcomed, desired, listened to and would answer prayer. We know this not only because of his teaching on prayer, but also by his own personal example. We are shown in the New Testament that Jesus often went away by himself to pray, and even spent the entire night in prayer (Matthew 14:23, Luke 6:12). Prayer was an integral part of Jesus’ life.

Because prayer was important to Jesus, he spoke about it frequently. He encouraged people to not only pray, but to believe in its power and reality. “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). He even asked his followers to be bold in prayer. “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:9, 10).

We can worry a lot about what form our prayer should take, what position we should be in, what exact wording we should use, when none of those things are important. While prayer can seem very complicated and difficult, it is really the easiest thing in the world. Prayer is not a bureaucratic process or a piece of spiritual mail, where you need to fill out exactly the right form or your request will be ignored or sent back “returned to sender.” Prayer is, in its very essence, communicating to God what is on your mind—fears, hopes, questions, concerns or requests.

Evangelist Billy Graham says “It is not the body’s posture, but the heart’s attitude that counts when we pray. It is simply a two-way conversation between you and God.” As one man describes prayer, “It does not need to be a formal prayer: the most stumbling and broken cry—a sigh, a whisper, anything that tells the heart’s loneliness and need and penitence—can find its way to him.”

Yet, prayer does require one thing—faith. Since we can’t see God, it is hard at times to believe that our prayers are being answered, especially if we don’t see any answers right away. That’s why the Bible says that “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6).

### **WHY SHOULD YOU PRAY IF NO ONE IS LISTENING?**

Obviously the Bible teaches, and Jesus affirmed, that Someone is actually listening to our prayers. If someone asks, “Why should you pray if no one is listening?” the answer is, you shouldn’t! There would be little point in the process if you had no belief in God.

But statistics tell us that over 90% of all Americans have a belief in God. Perhaps this is why so many people pray, even if it is sporadic. They do believe in God. Maybe you do, too. But as you have probably figured out, believing in God doesn’t necessarily make you an expert in prayer, especially with so many different ideas about prayer floating around.

The reason to pray is precisely because you believe Someone is listening. Jesus didn’t teach us to pray to make ourselves feel better, but to communicate to our God our deepest desires, wishes and feelings. God not only exists, but he cares about us, which is the basis upon which all prayer rests. The Bible also makes clear that prayer, removed from a belief in the one true God, is not effective. Praying to false gods or idols of wood, or stone, or an object of our own creation is strongly condemned.

It might make you feel good to pray to a portrait of Elvis Presley, but the reality is that he can’t help you, nor can he hear you. Only God can know what is in each person’s heart and mind. Only God can hear the very thoughts we think. No matter how sincerely we pray, unless those prayers are directed towards the one true

God, they will be ineffective. Why? Because the deity they were intended for can't answer.

A good parent knows who their children are and what they need. They are attentive to the needs of their children because they are in a relationship with them. The Bible teaches that God will give anyone the right to become one of his children (John 1:12) who believe in him. As children of God, we can have special access to God through prayer because we are in a relationship with him. God is not exclusive. He wants everyone to become one of his children, but the choice is up to them. He will not force himself upon them.

### **IF GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING ALREADY— WHY DO WE NEED TO PRAY?**

A common question about prayer is: "If God knows everything already, why should we bother to pray?" It seems like a logical question. After all, if God is an all-knowing deity, he already knows what we would pray about, and so there is no need to actually pray. The fact is that God knows everything about us, yet he still wants us to pray to him.

That is what Jesus reminded us, "for your Father knows what

you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). We don't pray to God simply to tell him of our troubles or desires, he is already aware of them. God wants us to pray to him because he loves us. He wants us to ask him for things because he loves to give us what we need (James 1:17). When you are in a relationship with someone, communication is how you keep the relationship strong and growing.

Can you imagine a marriage where neither spouse ever talked to the other except in cases of crisis or catastrophe? Can you imagine parents who never communicated with their children, or

*While prayer can seem very complicated and difficult, it is really the easiest thing in the world.*

never wanted to hear from them unless there was some kind of major disaster or problem? The reason God wants us to pray to him is because people in relationships talk with each other.

### **HOW DO YOU PRAY TO A GOD YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW?**

Of course, you might ask, "Well, I don't know God, so how can I pray to him?" That's a good question. It might seem very uncomfortable to try praying to a God you don't know much about, or anything about for that matter. It may seem a little like talking to a stranger. Or you may have prayed to God long ago, but it has been such a long time you wonder if he still wants to hear from you.

The answer is that you begin with the assumption that he knows you! You might feel like God is a stranger to you, but the Bible makes clear that you are no stranger to him. If God is truly all knowing, and he truly is our creator, it just stands to reason that he knows all about us. If he doesn't, can he really be God?

The Bible teaches that he knows everything about us (Hebrews 4:13). King David wrote that God knew him even before he was born:

"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.... Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sand. When I awake, I am still with you" (Psalm 139:1-4, 16-18). David was convinced that God knew everything about him intimately.

As one man said, "A prayer in its simplest definition is merely a wish turned Godward." Chances are you have prayed at least once, maybe many times. If you are honest, you might

admit that many of your prayers were in times of crisis. In fact, you might have tried everything before you finally tried praying. The reason is obvious, prayer wasn't your first choice, because your confidence in prayer was not great. This brings us to the pressing question we must face, just how effective is prayer?

### **DOES PRAYER MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

The answer is yes, prayer does make a difference. Not only does the Bible make this assertion, not only did Jesus model this truth, but there are many who have received wonderful answers to their prayers. Yet, there is another reason why prayer really does work. It works precisely because prayer is simply asking, and then giving God the prerogative to answer any way he wants. God is well aware of the sincerity and motivations behind our prayer, which is why not all our prayers will be answered the way we desire.

God knows whether the answer to our prayer would be beneficial or not. In the hilarious movie, *Bruce Almighty*, a reporter named Bruce becomes disenchanted with God when his prayers to become a TV anchorman aren't realized. In this fantasy story God appears to Bruce and allows him to be God for awhile, just to see what it is like. Eventually, the many prayer requests Bruce begins to hear drive him to distraction, causing him to simply answer "Yes" to all requests. This causes citywide rioting as thousands of people win the lottery. It's true, isn't it? Many people pray for things that would not necessarily be good for them, even though it seems like it's something they want.

The fact is that many people mock prayer precisely because they didn't get what they wanted. They decide that since they didn't receive their stated prayer request, prayer doesn't really work. Yet only God knows what is truly best for us, so it shouldn't surprise us when the answer to some of our requests is "no." Parents love their children, yet every good parent knows that at

times the child will ask for something that would not ultimately be good for them. If some children got what they wanted, they would only eat candy, ice cream and sweets for meals. This would soon make them sick. When a parent says "no," the child does not always understand, they might think their parents are mean because they are withholding what they could clearly give.

In the same way, our heavenly Father loves his children too much to give them everything they want. This is why at times the answer to a prayer is no, or not now. The prayer has been answered, it has simply been answered in the negative. As Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote, "That wisdom must sometimes refuse what ignorance may quite innocently ask seems to be self-evident."

Even in our human relationships we acknowledge that we can't and even shouldn't get everything we want. We don't know what life will be like tomorrow, or what is coming several years down the road. We can't see the future, but God can. We think we know what will make us happy, but only God really knows what would be best for us. Just think of how many times you thought getting something or achieving something would enable you to "live happily ever after." Did it? If you're honest you'll say no. God can see the consequences of giving us what we ask for, we can't. Therefore he alone knows what is best for us.

Yet, in spite of this, God still invites us to pray. There are many things we could pray for that he would love to give us. We don't have these things yet, the Bible teaches, because we have failed to ask for them. And then at times, we don't receive what we have asked for because we are asking with the wrong motives (James 4:2, 3).

Tragically, many people have thought of prayer as a way of manipulating God. Prayer is seen as some kind of magic formula that will motivate God to work for them. Since they know that God answers prayer, people see God as obligated to give them what they want. This is one

of the problems with praying for certain patients in a hospital, and not others, as if we can use God as a kind of spiritual health supplement.

Author Dorothy Sayers responded to this idea: “A logical fallacy attends all ingenious proposals to ‘test the efficacy of prayer’ by (for example) praying for the patients in Ward A of a hospital and leaving Ward B unprayed for, in order to see which set recovers. Prayer undertaken in that spirit is not prayer at all, and it requires a singular naiveté to imagine that Omniscience could be so easily bamboozled.”

Furthermore, God is not swayed by any set of “magic” or formula prayers. It is not the magical arrangement of words, or the positions of our body that matter to God. God knows what we really want, we can’t fool him. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with the desire for B. We must lay before him what *is* in us, not what *ought to be* in us.”

Sometimes we will get the very thing we prayed for because that is what God has determined will be best for us. Sometimes we will not get what we ask for—we will get something even better—and we will see God’s wisdom in not giving us what we originally desired. Sometimes we will not get what we asked for, and wonder why.

As Oswald Chambers once said, “Never make the blunder of trying to forecast the way God is going to answer your prayer.” But whatever the results of our prayer, they work. They get us in touch with the God who made us, and who loves us.

Then does prayer really make a difference? Yes, often it changes circumstances, and at other times, it changes us. Prayer has benefits beyond simply receiving the thing we prayed for.

### **DEEPENING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

Prayer is not simply a heavenly gimmick to get us talking to God so we can get what we want. It is the way God desires for us to communicate

with him. One truth about relationships is that they grow deeper and more meaningful the more you talk with someone. When you are dating someone, the more time you spend talking with them the more you get to know what they are really like. Prayer is one of the means that God uses to draw us nearer to him.

The more we pray the more we become aware of God’s presence in our lives, and in our worlds. Many of us don’t consider that when we pray, we are praying to someone, not merely for something. God does not want to be treated like a genie in a lamp that we come to whenever we have a need we can’t handle on our own.

He has called himself our heavenly Father, meaning he wants us to treat him as a loving Father intimately concerned with our every need, our every fear, our every concern. Sometimes the most powerful prayers we ever pray are when we aren’t asking for anything at all, but just talking with God and sharing our fears and concerns.

Yet, at times, the answer to a specific prayer is a specific response. We ask for something specific: help in a crisis, deliverance from a problem, provision for a tangible need, and other issues. And, in a wonderful way, God answers our prayers and gives us exactly what we asked for.

This happens more often than many people realize, because they don’t often pray in faith. They don’t really believe God is going to do anything, but resort to prayer because they have nothing left to try. When someone’s prayer is then answered, in all their joy and excitement they often forget they ever prayed.

Ironically, God answers many prayers that people have forgotten they prayed for. God in his mercy even answers prayer of those with the weakest faith. Many who prayed for physical healing of a loved one received it. Many who prayed for financial provision had their needs met in a wonderful unexpected way. Many who prayed for safety for family and friends in dan-

ger received exactly what they prayed for. There are those who prayed for children, or spouses, or jobs, or help to reach their goals and received it. Sadly, God often received no credit for answering their prayers.

Perhaps you can remember a time when you asked God to do something for you and he answered positively. Maybe at the time you didn't think much about it because you lacked faith in prayer. But if we are going to pray at all, we should pray with an attitude of expectancy, otherwise, why waste our time?

Maybe you haven't prayed in a long time. Maybe you thought you never would again. God is waiting to hear from you. Prayer is not just for when you have a problem, but for when you want to get in touch with the God who made you. Is it time you began to pray?

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

1. What is a church?
2. What does a church offer me?
3. Why do I need to go to church?
4. There are so many churches, which one is the true church?
5. How can I know which "brand" of church to attend?
6. Whose idea was the church, anyway?
7. What kind of people can I expect to find in church?
8. What is the purpose of a church?
9. What are the membership requirements of a church?
10. What are the signs of a healthy church?

These and other questions will be discussed and answered in our next volume, *Journey to Faith, Volume 7: the Body of Christ*.