

THE TRANSFORMED LIFE

# PRAYER

BECOMING LIKE JESUS

GETTING IN ON WHAT  
GOD IS DOING

THE WHOLE REASON WHY WE PRAY IS TO  
BE UNITED INTO THE VISION AND CONTE  
MP LATION OF GOD, TO WHOM WE PRAY.  
-JULIAN OF NORWICH

## ON PRAYER

If most of us are being honest, we likely consider prayer to be a weak point in our spiritual lives. We find it hard to make time to pray; we find it unproductive in a world obsessed with hurry and productivity; we feel guilty for not praying often enough, and yet when we finally set aside the time to do so, we find ourselves distracted or confused, not sure how to proceed. Rather than serving as a life giving connection to a redemptive, loving, and restorative God in the midst of a broken world,

prayer becomes a chore or a bore or a guilt riddled religious game. Yet all throughout the scriptures and church history, we learn that prayer is the very core of the transformed life. It is central to the joy and peace and love that we are all searching for, in the deepest parts of who we are. That's why entire books (see our Prayer resources in The Transformed Life) and entire lives (check out the life of Brother Lawrence) have been devoted to the subject and practice! That's why we hear Jesus routinely retreat to prayer Himself (Luke 5:16) and

speak about the importance of prayer for His followers (Matthew 6:5-14). How is it that so many of us find ourselves compelled by the life Jesus offers, yet so quickly deterred by a practice Jesus claimed was foundational?

This sort of discouragement often comes into our lives because we misunderstand prayer. We turn it into a selfish wish-list to a cosmic fairy godmother; we enter into it assuming that God isn't very fond of us; we posture our words carefully, as if saying the right holy thing in the right way will warrant God's favor; or perhaps we just think we are too busy and have too many important things to accomplish to spend real time in prayer. These assumptions, which we may feel all at once or separately, work together to form barriers around prayer in our lives that are difficult to penetrate in any lasting way. Yet none of these pictures fully describe Jesus' understanding of prayer, or the nature of prayer as the church has practiced for centuries, for none of these definitions account for the foundational reality at the center of Christian prayer practice: the loving, gracious relationship of God towards humanity. God's love and relationship with humanity is the foundation of the Christian story, and therefore of prayer: prayer is active participation in a relationship with a loving, gracious God, made known to us in the person of Jesus.

As we embark on a journey to better learn about prayer and allow it deeply forms us, this understanding is crucial: prayer places relationship with God at the center. This means that prayer is not only possible but necessary in a variety of different circumstances, through a variety of different emotional states. Our ability to pray, and the health of our prayer, is not dependent upon the particular feeling we reach or the particular result we obtain, but instead upon our willingness to respond in relationship with God in the midst of such varying feelings and results.

Just as any relationship is cultivated through a variety of modes of communication, so prayer is cultivated in a variety of forms. The famous monk John Cassian put it this way:

"I believe that it is impossible to grasp all the different forms of prayer without great purity of heart and soul. There are as many forms of prayer as there are states of soul. A person prays in a certain manner when cheerful and in another when weighed down by sadness or a sense of hopelessness. When one is flourishing spiritually, prayer is different from when one is oppressed by the extent of one's struggles."

In the same way that healthy earthly relationships endure and communicate through the whole realm of human emotion and experience, so prayer serves us in our most important relationship: our relationship with God. .As it turns out, the disciples of Jesus had some similar challenges and roadblocks when it came to prayer. Yet they also saw the example of Jesus, and saw the life-giving nature of His practice of prayer, and so we learn that they were curious about how they might grow in this practice themselves. That's why, in Luke 11:1, they inquire quite straightforwardly of Jesus:

"Lord, teach us to pray."

If prayer is difficult or confusing for us, take hope: we are no worse for wear than the disciples through whom Jesus transformed the world! And, just as He did for His disciples then, Jesus has given us a starting point, a sort of "springboard" into prayer that can help guide and shape our connection to God. Historically Christians have called this the Lord's Prayer; it can be found both in Jesus' response to His disciples in Luke 11 and also in the midst of His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:9-13. Each line of this prayer contains a helpful, orienting reminder of

the purpose of prayer and to whom we pray, and also Prayer and some instructions on how you might be able to build this prayer into your life and customize that are unique and indicative of our own lives and it according to your particular circumstances. We encourage you to spend a few minutes praying through this prayer today, utilizing these instructions experiences now.

Below is a walkthrough of each line in the Lord's as a guide:

## **OUR PRAYER TEMPLATE: THE LORD'S PRAYER**

**Y E R**(Important note: in each of the following prayer practices, be sure to set aside any exterior distractions, like your phone. The only thing required of you is to be present with God.)

1.

"Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name:" Start the prayer with stating these words aloud. Then posture your heart towards God as your Heavenly Father, who knows you fully and loves you deeply. Rest in God's loving presence for a few minutes, gratefully reflecting on His loving power and grace. You can do this by singing, or by listing things you are grateful for, or by simply naming parts of God's character that you adore. Use this first part of the prayer to consider all of the ways God surrounds you, sustains you, and works for good in your life, in the lives of others, and throughout the world.

2.

"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven:" Keeping in mind God's gracious love for you and the world, speak this line aloud. Then spend a few minutes here asking for God's will to be done in your own context. Be sure to pray for specifics: pray for the needs of those in your city; pray for your church; pray for your community; pray for your own life. Remember: when we pray for God's will, we are not praying for something ambiguous. Indeed, we know God's will is one of redemption and restoration; our prayers are to be praises and requests for such work to happen. This part of the prayer begins to align yourself with the character of God, and therefore can even lead you to creative implementations of the very things you are praying for! Praying this section is a way of signing up for God's revolution. 3.

"Give us today our daily bread:" Now lift up your own spiritual, emotional, and physical needs, along with such needs of those around you. God is not unconcerned with your well-being: rather, we are able to approach Him with even the smallest of details. Once again, God often uses this part of prayer to show us the ways we might be able to help others in our community with their own daily bread.

4.

"Forgive us our debts, as also have forgiven our debtors:" Spend some time here asking God to forgive you of the ways you have divided yourself from Him, harmed your neighbor, or otherwise neglected God's good creation. Remember: we know that God is always unendingly faithful to forgive when we confess (1 John 1:8-10). Sometimes it can be helpful in this section of the prayer to think of the things we need to be forgiven for in terms of categories: pride, envy, lust, greed, etc. Once you have experienced the forgiveness of God, ask God to give you strength to forgive those in your own life who have harmed you in some way (see the Forgiveness resource in The Transformed Life) for more details.

5.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:" Take this time to pray against specific types of

sins that may be commonplace or regular in your life. Pray for the Spirit of God to fill you with strength to fight against temptation.

6.

. "For Yours is the Kingdom, power, and glory forever:" Spend a few minutes remembering that it is the Spirit of God who brings truth, beauty, and life to the world. Reflect on how God has already done that in your life, and close your time with a genuine hope that you might be aligned with God's work of restoration.

Praying the Lord's Prayer in this way every day will help create a posture of gratitude and help you connect to the very heart of God in your daily prayers.

## **CENTERING PRAYER: DEEPENING AWARENES S OF THE DIVINE**

As humans, we are never people who have the "first word" in our lives. Our actions, our breath, our very lives are by definition acts of response: we did not create ourselves or the world we live in; therefore, we spend our lives in response to the initiating love and life of God. This means that, in order to enter into prayer healthily, we need to remember that we are not the initiators, but that God is, and that we enter in order to hear from God.

One prayer structure that helps us do this is the practice of centering prayer. It is a receptive method of silent prayer which focuses on the presence of God in and around us and allows us to deepen our awareness and relationship with God. You can practice centering prayer by following the steps below:

1.

Choose a sacred word that will guide your time of prayer: think of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) for some potential ideas

2.

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Then settle briefly into your seat and introduce the sacred word to indicate your consent to God's present and action in your life

3. Whenever you're engaged with your thoughts, return to the sacred word as your guide.

4.

At the end of the prayer period (we recommend starting with a timer set for 10 minutes), remain in silence with your eyes closed for a minute

There are two apps that are designed to help guide people into this practice of centering prayer. We have included them in the resources for The Transformed Life - the Centering Prayer app and the Second Breath app.

## **INTERCESSORY PRAYER : ON BEHALF OF OUR NEIG**

# H B O R S

Saint Augustine once said, "Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not." Prayer is an invitation to restore our original human purpose: to partner with God to bring flourishing and life to all things. We know when we approach God in prayer that God wills wholeness and happiness for everyone; however, God is also not coercive, and gives us as humans the freedom to accept our role alongside God in bringing such wholeness or to reject that role outright. At times, God waits for our cooperation before acting in situations.

Intercessory prayer is a way of praying that receives our role as God's partners in bringing flourishing to all things, and therefore is a cooperative effort. It is not a petition to change God's mind, or a magical incantation that can summon God's attention to a given situation; it is simply an attempt to align our hearts with God's and focus on bringing God's will of life, peace, and flourishing into the lives of those around us. Many times, in the midst of intercession, we end up somewhere we didn't start; in considering the people we pray for, we find ourselves praying well beyond what we initially spoke, and even sometimes realize that God may be moving us to become an answer to our very prayer by loving and serving the one for whom we are praying!

This sort of prayer takes terrific persistence and patience: we must be willing to lift our neighbors up in prayer on a regular basis, for their needs are legion. This means that intercession must also be attuned to the needs of others; it requires us to understand our neighbors we pray for well. In order to practice this sort of prayer, we recommend setting a consistent time, and keeping tabs on specific prayer requests as you consider them or hear of them throughout your day. Below is a sample outline of what an intercessory prayer session can look like:

1. Find a quiet place a prayer where you will not be disturbed
2. Begin by praying for major events in the world: war, poverty, oppression, whatever things have been moving in your heart recently
3. Then continue by praying for relationships you have with acquaintances: coworkers, neighbors, etc.
4. Then move on to closer relationships: good friends, family members, etc. 5. Then move on to your church community: for individual or communal needs 6. Then move on to yourself: for your own particular needs

In each situation, pray that God would bind any forces of evil, corruption, and pain that might exist in each particular situation, and that God would bring life and peace in their place. It is often helpful to imagine the faces of those for whom you pray, and--if you can--picture their particular situations. For ideas on specifics things to pray for, check out our Prayer Structures resource in *The Transformed Life*; these could guide you in your intercessory prayers.

# L I S T E N I N G P R A Y E R : S L O W I

# NOT TO HEAR FROM GOD

Oftentimes we assume that creating time to be alone and silent will lead us directly into a focused and clear mode of thinking. Yet in our noisy world, the opposite is often true: rather than our ventures into prayer being sharp and coherent, we find ourselves overwhelmed by our own inner thoughts and compulsions. As theologian Henri Nouwen puts it:

"As soon as we are alone,...inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distraction, we often find that our inner distraction manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use the outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises."

When prayer is particularly distracting in this way, it is helpful for us to spend our time simply listening in prayer. Rather than vocalizing our requests before God, we approach prayer expecting to encounter God and have God speak to us. When we do this, we become aware of the things that might be preventing us from connecting to God in prayer, and furthermore allow ourselves to prioritize God's work in our lives instead. Such an expectant posture in prayer implies that the practice is not a one-way conversation, but instead a dialogue in which the word of God can speak directly to our circumstances. This sort of silence can be intimidating at first, but once we build silence and listening as a consistent practice, we will find this to be an essential part of our prayer lives, a way to pierce through the noise of our world and the noise of our lives.

Follow the directions below to develop a rhythm of listening prayer in your life:

1. Start by finding a comfortable place to sit. Once you have settled into your chair, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Allow your lungs to fill entirely, all the way to the top of your chest, and then release the air freely.
2. Read a short piece of scripture, paying close attention to what it tells you about God. Here are some recommendations: Psalm 23:1; Romans 15:13; Matthew 11:28; Matthew 28:20; Psalm 34:8; John 6:35
3. Once you have read this verse, settle back into your chair and listen carefully. Wait in silence for God to speak. If thoughts from your day or your work come to mind, imagine you are kayaking down a river, and those thoughts are leaves that you notice and float past you. Then bring your attention back to listening for God.
4. Do this for a defined length of time (10-12 minutes is a good place to start), and then jot down some notes after your time on the things God sparked in you during the time.

# PRAYER OF EXAMEN: LOOKING FOR GOD IN THE EVERYDAY

# A Y

Socrates famously said that "the unexamined life is not worth living." While he was not speaking about prayer, the notion remains true: if our lives remain in constant motion, with no reflection on our fears, our joys, our sorrows, and our gifts, we will quickly find ourselves without meaning, simply coasting through our years moving from one surface pleasure to another. In fact, this is what much of our modern world tends to look like: obsessed with screens, consumed by consumerism, and constantly overloaded with information and movement, we hardly have time for an examined life. The state of our world therefore makes it all the more urgent to learn from the saints who have come before us: what practices might they have developed to combat our inclination to lead an unexamined life? One answer to this question is found in the Examen, a practice developed by Ignatius of Loyola back in the 16th century.

The Examen is designed to be a prayerful reflection tool, encouraging us to look back on our days and notice the hidden movements and presence of God in spaces we may have missed. Not only does this work as a reflective exercise, but it also begins to train our hearts and our minds to look for where God might be at work in the next day as well; it forms us to pursue unity with God throughout our days moving forward. There are three main parts to the Examen practice:

1. Gratitude - reflecting on and thanking God for the things you are grateful for from your day

2. Desolations - activities or moments that drew you away from God during your day

- 3.

3. Consolations - activities or moments that sparked an awareness of God's presence during your day

In order to guide you through these movements, we have provided some helpful reflection questions for each of these parts. It is helpful to practice the Examen with one or more family members or friends, as they can help provide perspective on God's movement in the world in ways that you may not have seen, and vice versa. It is also crucially important (as it is in all prayer practices) to be entirely honest. It is not helpful to have a "revisionist history" when it comes to prayer; be honest about where you did, or didn't see or experience God in your day, and this honesty will lead you to more open and genuine pursuit of His presence in the future

Gratitude Questions: What are you grateful to God for in your work? What are you grateful to God for in your home or family? What are you grateful to God for in the rest of your life?

Desolation Questions: When did you sense being drawn away from God's presence? When did you feel most dissatisfied and restricted? Was there a time when you felt guilty or lonely?

Consolation Questions: When did you feel nearest to the presence of God? What events, relationships, or thoughts drew you closer to God? What was most joyful about the day?

## PRAYING THE PSALMS:



# ANATOMY OF THE SOUL

Famous reformer John Calvin once called the book of Psalms "an anatomy of the soul." He observed that "there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions" with which humanity becomes consumed. In this sense, the book of Psalms provides us with 150 prayer templates that can speak to a multitude of our human experiences; indeed, for thousands of years followers of God have found these words to be guides to unity with God, dripping with life and vulnerability and beauty and messiness.

We, too, can learn to pray from the Psalms, this ancient hymnbook with eternally resonant words. There are a multitude of ways we can practice praying with the Psalms, listed below:

1. Allow the Psalms to guide your prayer, one per day: start with Psalm 1, and read one Psalm per day as a guide to your prayer time. In this practice, you make the words and sentiments of the Psalm your own. As 6th century theologian Augustine said, "If the psalm prays, you pray. If the psalm laments, you lament. If the psalm exalts, you rejoice. If it hopes, you hope. If it fears, you fear. Everything written here is a mirror for us." What we find in this practice is great alignment with every part of our experience, and great translatability to our own day. That is an important tool in praying the Psalms: understanding what the words might have meant to the author, how might these words speak to us--or to your personally--today? Look for the ways that God's word speaks beyond the page to our own lives.
2. Meditate on the Psalms: By meditating before we pray, we are following in the way of the psalmists themselves (Ps. 1, 19:14, 63:6, 77:12, 119, 143:5 145:5). If anything in the psalm sticks out to you: pause and ask the Spirit to shine His light on it. Then consider this notion in your own heart and mind, and what God might be speaking to you in it.
3. Memorize the Psalms: choose a Psalm per week and focus your prayer time on memorizing the words. When we memorize scripture, we allow it to form us in the deepest parts of our lives, which then enables it to arise in the midst of all our experiences. Jesus modeled this by praying the Psalms from the cross (Matthew 27:46); He provided us a template for allowing the Psalms to shape every part of our lives
4. Repeat one Psalm slowly, ensuring you are understanding and reflecting on every word: it can sometimes be easy to read through scripture as a motion without deeply reckoning with the words therein. Take the time to read and reflect on every word meaningfully as you read, and then pray along the same lines.

For a more detailed exploration of how to pray the Psalms, check out the book "Answering God," by Eugene Peterson (available in our Prayer resources in The Transformed Life).



# RECITING WRITTEN PRAYER: GUIDANCE FROM OTHERS

Sometimes, when we lack words we feel are adequate in prayer, it is helpful to learn from others. We come from a robust tradition of faithful Christ followers who, thankfully, have penned many of their own prayers that we can use to guide our own prayer efforts.

It is important, when praying pre-written prayers, not to simply recite the words for their own sake. As you read and pray, be sure to emphasize your understanding of the words and sentiments of the prayer and to add or customize where you feel led, or where makes sense in your own life.

We have a large and growing collection of pre-written prayers compiled in our Prayer Structures resource in *The Transformed Life*. Take a look at this resource for some immensely helpful prayer guides!

## LAMENT: PRAYER WHEN IT SEEMS GOD ISN'T AROUND

While all these prayer structures can be helpful, and a thriving relationship with Jesus sounds great, sometimes we can't escape a challenging but real fact of our spiritual lives: that some prayers go unanswered. How do we reckon with the fact that God seems to answer some prayers quickly, while other times God waits months to answer prayers, and even in other situations God doesn't answer them at all? This is not only an important question to ask, but also a common one: many of us have prayed for things that haven't come. What do we do with that reality? Thankfully the bible and church history help us address these challenges. The practice of lament has been a way that the church has reckoned with what often feels like silence on God's part when we pray. In fact, lament is not only attested to in the scriptures, it is actually common: over two-thirds of the Psalms are laments, and there is an entire book in the Hebrew scriptures called Lamentations. It seems that our experiences aren't unique to us - they are actually part and parcel of the whole human experience, and there is room for even our anger and grief and confusion in the midst of prayer. Here are some steps to practice prayers of lament in your own life:

1. When you arrive to pray, consider an unanswered prayer, or an area of your life or the world that you fills you with anger, confusion, disillusionment, or pain.
2. Once you have landed on that topic or topics, spend a couple of minutes in silence pondering and feeling the weight of it. Don't filter your emotions or disregard them: really, truly feel them.
3. Then, once you have adequately understood those feelings, pray unfiltered to God your particular emotions over that issue. Seriously, don't hold anything back - God knows, and God is here to hear it.

4.

Then, finally, pray for God to show up and be God in the middle of that particular topic or situation. Pray that He would bring love and peace and justice where needed, not because you requested it, but because that's who God says God is. Ask for God to be God.

In a culture that is often obsessed with superficial happiness and therapeutic spirituality, lament is often overlooked. As Soong-Chan Rah puts it in his book "Prophetic Lament:"

"The American church avoids lament. The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost. But absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder. Absence makes the heart forget. The absence of lament in the liturgy of the American church results in the loss of memory. We forget the necessity of lamenting over suffering and pain. We forget the reality of suffering and pain."

Many of us don't have a framework for processing and praying through the deepest hurts and concerns in our lives and the world. We need lament if we are to become fully honest and followers of God, faithful to the whole of the human experience. Learning to lament is essential.

## **NO ONE WAY: THE BEST WAY TO PRAY IS TO PRAY**

When it comes to prayer, it is important to remember: we never begin praying as experts. As Eugene Peterson wrote in his book on prayer, "Answering God,"

"We do not first learn how to do it, and then proceed to do it; we do it, in the doing we find out what we are doing, and then deepen and mature in it."

For all of these preceding prayer structures, please remember: the best way to pray is to pray. These structures are provided as guides, but not as end-all be-all solutions. Prayer takes discipline, courage, and patience, particularly in an increasingly hurried world. As you read through these structures, please keep in mind that this entire spiritual discipline is a constant work in progress. Thankfully, we are accompanied by the Spirit of God in the work, and the time and energy it takes is rewarded by nearness and presence to Christ, who never casts out anyone who comes to Him.