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When God Prays

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WHY WOULD GOD PRAY?



WHEN JESUS HAD FINISHED SAYING ALL
THESE THINGS, HE LOOKED UP TO HEAVEN
AND SAID, "FATHER, THE TIME HAS COME.
GLORIFY YOUR SON SO HE CAN GIVE GLORY
BACK TO YOU." JOHN 17:1



Countless books have been written about prayer. Some highlight the reverent lives and disciplined prayer habits of ancient monks or bygone saints. Others delve into the prayers of the prophets and others recorded in Scripture. Still others suggest new templates for communicating with God. Several writers have sought to explain the meaning and practice of what is commonly known as "the Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9-13).[†] But what about the

[†] The prayer that Jesus gave his followers to emulate would be better named "the

true “Lord’s prayer”—the one Jesus prayed while facing his imminent death? This intimate communiqué, captured in John 17, is the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in the Bible. It wouldn’t be a stretch to call it the Mount Everest of prayer, because it scales the heights of personal interaction between two members of the Trinity.

What makes this prayer so remarkable and so deserving of both study and emulation? For one thing, Jesus himself prayed it. This intrigues me. Why, of all people, would Jesus Christ, Israel’s Messiah and our Savior, need to pray? After all, he’s God, right? But no less than nineteen times in the Gospel accounts we’re told that Jesus prayed.

Amazing!

On one occasion we’re told that Jesus spent all night in prayer (Luke 6:12). Another time he woke up before dawn to pray (Mark 1:35). After the miraculous feeding of several thousand people on the northern shores of Galilee, some who had witnessed the miracle wanted to make Jesus their king right on the spot. He responded by sending everyone away before going off by himself to pray (John 6:14-15; see also Mark 6:46). Evidently Jesus spent a considerable amount of time praying. The question remains: why? Why would God pray? I see three main reasons: to demonstrate our dependence on the Father; to introduce a new relationship between us and the Father; and to establish a new goal for his disciples.

Disciples’ Prayer,” because it was given in response to the request, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).



TO DEMONSTRATE OUR DEPENDENCE ON THE FATHER

I'm fascinated that the very One who claimed he could forgive people's sins (Matthew 9:6), the very One who insisted he had a timeless nature (John 8:58), the very One who exhibited his omniscience (Matthew 9:4; Luke 11:17) is seen engaging repeatedly in one of the most fundamental exercises of dependence—prayer.

The key to understanding the prayer life of Christ lies in the unique character of Jesus himself. Although he was fully God, the second member of the Trinity, coequal, coeternal, and coexistent with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, he was also fully human. This exceptional blend of natures in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is what theologians call the *theanthropic nature* of the Son of God. (This unusual term derives from the combination of two Greek words: one meaning God—*theos*—and the other meaning man—*anthropos*). Jesus was not only God and not only a man: he was the God-man—fully God and yet fully human.

As God, he was independent of humanity and he often demonstrated that nature as he cured diseases, forgave sins, commanded natural forces to obey him, and took authority over hostile demonic spirits.

As a man, he was dependent on his Father in heaven and he often displayed that dependence through prayer. Likewise, he never acted on his own initiative but did only those things he saw his Father doing (John 5:19). Jesus

agreed to empty himself of certain prerogatives of his position as God and humbly accepted the role of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7). In John 17, we catch a small glimpse of the communication between the Son (who was temporarily on earth) and the Father (who is eternally in heaven).

If Jesus, the unique Son of God, perfect in his sinless nature and able to pray for precisely the right things, felt the need to depend on God in heaven, where does that leave us? Are we any less dependent on God than he was? Jesus prayed openly so that we would be encouraged and inspired to rely upon God. The next time you feel reluctant to pray, ask yourself this question: "If Jesus relied on the Father through prayer, what makes me think I don't need to?"



TO INTRODUCE A NEW RELATIONSHIP

After walking with Jesus daily for three years, the disciples had become accustomed to having him around in every situation they faced. If a storm came up on the lake, he could calm it (Matthew 8:23-26). If thousands of hungry people needed lunch, he could produce it (Matthew 14:13-21). If a question arose about paying the temple tax, he knew which fish had a coin in its mouth to pay it (Matthew 17:24-27). Whatever the need, whatever the question, whatever the problem, the disciples knew they could look to Jesus for the answer.

All that was about to change, however. Jesus knew that

his earthly life was coming to a close. Although he would be resurrected and would spend a little more time teaching his disciples before his ascension to heaven, eventually he would return to his Father's presence and they would no longer see him. Throughout the celebration of the Passover, Jesus told the disciples repeatedly that he was leaving, trying to prepare them for what was to come (John 13:33-36; 14:2-3, 12, 28-29; 16:5-6, 16). But they could not grasp the magnitude of what he was saying.

After spending most of the evening trying to bolster his disciples and prepare them for the upcoming changes in their relationship with him, Jesus prayed for them. Boy, did they need it! They wouldn't be able to talk things over with him like they used to. Ministry wouldn't be a free lunch for these guys any longer. Now they would need to talk things over with their heavenly Father in prayer (John 16:24-28). When they have an issue, a problem, a concern, or a decision to make, they will need to ask God directly. Jesus assured them that the Father would not only be actively listening but also actively working on their behalf. What better way to get the point across about their future need for prayer than by demonstrating how to pray?

Jesus prayed several things for his disciples. He prayed that they would be *fortified*. "Protect them by the power of your name" (John 17:11, NIV), he said. He wanted the Father to watch over and preserve the still-impressionable disciples. He also prays that they would not be *terrified* by the upcoming attacks from his archenemy, Satan. "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe

from the evil one” (John 17:15). He knew how hard it was to be a minority voice against the incessant stream of evil in the world. And he prayed that they would be *unified*—that no dissension would fracture their vigor as a group. He asked that “they will be united just as we are” (John 17:11). Having these prayers answered would be vital if these fishermen-turned-disciples were to survive the future.

Today our relationship to God is much like that of the disciples after Jesus ascended into heaven. For one thing, “we live by believing and not by seeing” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith, not sight, determines how we relate to God. Because we don’t physically see Jesus, ours is a life of believing as we wait for his return. Until then, we need to be in contact with our heavenly Father through prayer. The life-sustaining oxygen of prayer must regularly fill our spiritual lungs so that we can survive in enemy territory.

Jesus prayed not only for the original disciples but also for the disciples he has today. He prayed for you and me! As he looked toward the future, Jesus said, “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony” (John 17:20). Think of it: Long ago, before you even existed, Jesus had you on his mind. You and I came to believe in Jesus Christ because of the testimony of his original followers.

Here’s more good news: Not only did Jesus pray for you way back when, he’s still praying for you today. That’s right! According to Paul, Jesus Christ “is sitting at the place of highest honor next to God, *pleading for us*” (Romans 8:34, emphasis added). The writer of the New Testament book

of Hebrews assures us that Jesus “always lives to make intercession” for those who come to him (Hebrews 7:25, NKJV). The death of Christ two thousand years ago was a *finished work* of salvation. But his intercession on our behalf ever since is an *unfinished work* of protecting and preserving us while we’re still on earth. How can we lose with that setup?

Several years ago, I was in Asheville, North Carolina, speaking at the Billy Graham Training Center. On the second day of the conference, Franklin Graham invited me to lunch at his parents’ home. With a mixture of excitement and intimidation, I sat in the Grahams’ living room as Dr. Graham and his lovely wife, Ruth, reminisced about childhood memories, past crusades around the world, and raising children. *This is too good to be true*, I thought. Here, across the room, was the man responsible for so many people around the world coming to know Christ—including me. He has preached the gospel to more people than any other single individual who has ever lived. Eventually, we sat down to eat our meal. Dr. Graham prayed, returning thanks for God’s many blessings, and then he prayed for me. He asked God to strengthen me for that evening’s session where I was to speak and to give me wisdom, insight, and effectiveness. I immediately thought, *Wow! Billy Graham is praying . . . for me! He’s praying for my message. How can I lose? I can’t wait to hear what I’m going to say tonight—it’s gotta be good now!* I’ve often mused since that day that if I thought Billy Graham’s prayers for me were powerful, how much more the prayers of the only begotten Son of God on my behalf!



TO ESTABLISH A NEW GOAL

If we were honest, we'd have to agree that most of our prayers have a simple focus and a simple goal—*us!* Very often we pray simply because we want something. That's nothing to be ashamed of, though, because Jesus did tell us to come to the Father and “ask” (Matthew 7:7-11; John 16:23). Although there are certain qualifications to our asking, we are nevertheless invited to do so. But mature prayer has a much higher goal in mind than merely taking care of our needs and desires. Prayer's highest aim is not to get *our* will done in heaven; rather, it's to get God's will done on earth. This is what makes Jesus' prayer so remarkable. Although he prays for himself in the first few verses, he spends the bulk of his time appealing to God on behalf of his disciples (including us). His priorities during these final earthly moments are centered on others, not on himself. Also, there is an overarching goal that permeates his prayer: bringing glory to his Father. We will discuss what this means in greater depth in the next chapter, but for now suffice it to say that Jesus' single-minded priority was that his life bring glory to his Father's name. He begins the prayer by saying, “Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you. . . . I brought glory to you here on earth by doing everything you told me to do” (John 17:1, 4).

Some people treat prayer like a fire hose in a public building: For Emergency Use Only. Or whenever life

throws them a curve and things don't flow like they think they should, they pull out the old "prayer emergency kit." You know, "When life gets tough, the tough start praying." It's true that we can talk to God whenever we're faced with an emergency—he won't kick us out or ignore us. He loves it when we come and speak to him about our concerns. But we're not to look at prayer as merely for emergency use. It's much more than that. It's for daily use. God delights in a steady flow of communication between earth and heaven.

Jesus demonstrated this free and open communication with God the Father in his own life. There were times that he set aside specifically for prayer and other times when he spontaneously voiced a request or tribute in the course of the day. Sometimes he arose early in the morning to be alone with his Father before the busy affairs of the day could impose their pace: "The next morning Jesus awoke long before daybreak and went out alone into the wilderness to pray" (Mark 1:35). Other times he sought the solitude of prayer after the noise and the bustle of the day had ceased: "One day . . . Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night" (Luke 6:12).

But Jesus didn't confine his prayers to a fixed schedule, nor did he use prayer merely as "bookends" to the events of his day. Prayer flowed freely from his lips and heart like a bubbling spring. When he stood amid the devastated mourners at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, "Jesus looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, thank you for hearing me'" (John 11: 41). After seventy of the men he was mentoring returned from a short outreach expedition around the cities

of Galilee, they were excitedly telling Jesus about all they had encountered. In the normal course of the conversation, Jesus erupted in praise: “Then Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and said, ‘O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding the truth from those who think themselves so wise and clever, and for revealing it to the childlike. Yes, Father, it pleased you to do it this way’” (Luke 10:21). And when he was attending his final Passover feast in Jerusalem, while predicting his impending death to his disciples and wrestling with the emotion of it, he said aloud, “‘Father, bring glory to your name.’ Then a voice spoke from heaven, saying, ‘I have already brought it glory, and I will do it again’” (John 12:28).

Here’s a thought I want you to keep with you as you begin this book: Our true priorities—the things that are really the most important to us—will show themselves in our prayer life. If we are only concerned about ourselves and our personal well-being, it will dominate the agenda when we talk to God. We’ll begin treating God like he’s a customer service agent or a waiter at a restaurant—as long as our demands are met in a timely fashion, we’re satisfied. But Jesus’ concern for his Father’s glory reveals the proper balance in life and the proper goal of life. Our lives are meant to revolve around God’s will, not the other way around.

A FOUNDATION FOR POWERFUL PRAYER



In this final chapter, I want to help you establish a new foundation for prayer by taking the principles we've considered and setting them as cornerstones upon which you can build your daily prayer time. It is my hope that these principles modeled by Jesus will transform your communication with God.



CORNERSTONE #1: MAKE GOD YOUR GOAL, NOT YOUR GATEWAY.

Tell God how much you appreciate his care, concern, and control. Tell him you want to magnify him and do whatever he wants.

- ✦ Learn to make God's glory your sole purpose. Filter every request through this question: "If God answers my prayer, how will it magnify *his*

reputation?” Is pleasing God the purpose of your request, or are your motives selfish?

- ✦ Refuse to complain to God about his gifts to you or of his treatment of you. It only insults God when we grumble about our lot in life, and it robs us of the joy that prayer can bring.
- ✦ Follow Jesus’ example and determine to obey God, no matter what. Make it your goal to be able to say honestly, as Jesus said, “I have glorified You on the earth” (John 17:4, NKJV).



CORNERSTONE #2: ENJOY GOD.

Practice just “being” with God. Bask in his presence. Tell him what he means to you. Sing a song to him occasionally to keep your prayer fresh. Confess your sins to him so that your access will be unrestricted.

- ✦ Don’t be quick to request—or demand—things from God. Take time to enjoy him. Remember, Jesus did not immediately request things for his disciples. First he spoke to God about his relationship with his disciples and their relationship with the Father. This is a good model. Prayer should be a deepening of our relationship with God, not an opportunity to present our demands.

- ✠ Prayer is a means of association *with* God. It isn't a means of passing on information *to* God. You are not dropping off a wish list. Prayer should be a delight, not a duty.



CORNERSTONE #3: PRAY FOR PERMEATION NOT SEGREGATION.

Ask God to keep you holy amid an unholy world. Ask for courage to face the challenge of permeating the culture with God's unique truth. Ask God to use his Word to equip you for service. Ask him daily for specific truths to practice and apply.

- ✠ True holiness is accomplished through the Scriptures. Bible study and prayer go hand in hand.
- ✠ Refuse to pray escapist prayers even though the world system may seem ominous to you.
- ✠ Recognize that spiritual warfare is going on around you. Satan wants to undermine your desire for holiness so that you'll have no viable message to share with and challenge the world.
- ✠ Refuse to isolate yourself from the world. Pray that God would open up opportunities for you to be in the world (but not of it) as a shining example of how Jesus Christ can change a person's life. Avoid isolationist excuses such as "I'm not called to evangelize"; "I'm not gifted in that area" (how *has* God gifted you?); "I don't have time."



CORNERSTONE #4: DON'T TRY TO GO IT ALONE.

Pray for the other Christian churches in your community. Repent of any divisiveness. Ask for discernment to differentiate between things that are essential and things that aren't. Ask God to use you to heal wounds between church groups.

- ✚ Don't forsake the fellowship of other believers. Pray together and "think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts of love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).
- ✚ You're not the only true Christian left. He has many others who are part of his family.
- ✚ Creating a sense of family begins with your prayers and should be seen by your peers.
- ✚ Unity and love between Christians is what will convince the world that Jesus is worth considering.
- ✚ Remember: Unity doesn't mean agreeing on everything or compromising essentials.



CORNERSTONE #5: LIVE RESPONSIBLY; THINK ETERNALLY.

Think about heaven, your final destination, and thank God that his plan of salvation includes you. Ask him to help you keep from being distracted by frivolous temporal con-

cerns. Ask for wisdom to spend your time, finances, and talent so that nothing in your life is wasted but is invested for eternity.

- ✠ We're heaven-bound pilgrims, sent by God to have an impact on the world, not fall in love with it.
- ✠ Thinking daily about your eternal future will help you deal with present hardships and tasks.
- ✠ Remember to live today so as to "store your treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:20).



MEETING WITH GOD

The principles that Jesus modeled and taught deserve more than a superficial glance. These key elements can transform your meeting time with God and bring you into a more intimate and satisfying relationship with him. To help you commit these principles of prayer more easily to memory, let me suggest the acronym M-E-E-T-S, which is what a believer does with God when he or she prays.

Magnify God: Living to glorify God is the first priority of prayer. God's glory is our goal.

Enjoyment: Being in God's presence and enjoying his fellowship is vital. Praise and adore him.

Engage in Evangelism: Ask God to make you holy in an unholy world as you permeate it.

Teamwork: Unity in the church family is essential to our earthly witness. Ask for more of it.

Sighting Eternity: Ask God for an undistracted life as you march toward the glories of heaven.

Make prayer your new priority. As you put these principles into practice, they will become a part of your daily life—and the results will be lifelong and life changing.

Let me make you a promise. If you start using these elements in your prayer life, you'll begin to notice a change. You will experience a fresh new delight in talking to God. You'll also find yourself becoming more balanced when it comes to your relationships with other Christians. I'm convinced you'll discover a new richness and depth of joy in prayer, even if you've been praying for years. Incorporate the M-E-E-T-S prayer pattern into your daily get-together with God until it becomes second nature to you.

These elements of prayer will begin to shape your decisions, thoughts, and actions until they reflect the same priorities that Jesus lived for and prayed for. You will find that talking to God is thrilling rather than boring. Moreover, you'll begin to notice a new lightness in your soul as you learn to pour out your heart before God.

Outside the RCA building on Fifth Avenue in New York City, there is a giant statue of Atlas with his muscles bulging as he strains to hold the world on his shoulders. He epitomizes how so many people live their lives. They sweat and strain to balance the enormous weight of life's problems all alone.

Not far away, just across town, is Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Out front there is also a statue, but it's a bit different. The figure is that of Christ, who stands resolutely holding the world in one hand.

Which way would you rather live? Do you want the world on your shoulders, crushing and overwhelming you? Or would you rather let Jesus hold your world in his firm and capable hand? That's what prayer does—it places the load on the right set of shoulders. It gives Christ the burden—which he is more than capable of handling—and lets you live in peace. An old, familiar hymn sums it up well:

Oh, what peace we often forfeit!
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

NOTES



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