



**BIBLE
STUDIES
FOR LIFE®**

HOW TO PRAY

through

JOURNALING

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HOW TO PRAY THROUGH JOURNALING

WHAT IS PRAYER?

We find if somebody asked you to define prayer, you may actually find it difficult to answer that question. We have all heard of prayer. It is an easy thing to say, “I’ll be praying for you,” or “I’ll be praying for that,” but if we are honest, prayer is kind of a weird, abstract concept.

Through prayer, we claim to be talking to God, but we cannot see Him. For some crazy reason, when we pray, we have instant access to a one-on-one conversation with the Creator of the universe. Not only do we have instant access, but also He wants to hear about our life. He wants us to share our heart’s desires with Him and also confess our deepest, darkest sins. And even when we confess how we’ve wronged Him, He forgives us. In prayer, we get to talk with the almighty and all-powerful God as our Father and friend.

But can we just admit that prayer is a little out there and strange? Because it is. As strange as it is, it is also one of the most wonderful realities in our journey as Christ followers. Because prayer is such an ambiguous concept, we are inevitably presented with countless definitions for what it actually is. With all of these differing opinions, if we are not careful, we can misconstrue the purpose and idea of prayer.

Instead of viewing prayer as a spiritual discipline that changes our heart to become more like God’s own heart, our sinful nature can lead us to view prayer as a way to manipulate God to get our own desires—which is actually flipping the entire purpose of prayer on its head! As Paul Tripp put it, “We do tend to turn God into a delivery system. We get excited

about what he can do for us, and what he can give us. We fall into thinking of prayer as asking God to sign the bottom of our self-composed, self-oriented, individualized wish lists.”¹

Prayer is not about asking for things from God. Instead, prayer is about God transforming who we are by changing our very hearts. It is about seeking God and encountering Him. But we will only desire to seek God when He has changed our hearts. A sign of a true Christian is that we run to God for Him alone, not the things that He can give us.

As John Piper wrote in his book *Desiring God*, “Prayer is a wartime walkie talkie for spiritual warfare, not a domestic intercom to increase the comforts of the saints.”² Truth be told, many approach prayer as an intercom. We attempt to use prayer as a means to increase our own comforts.

CHRISTIAN, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

Unfortunately, for many of us, we have a prayer problem. Before you get defensive, please know that I’m including myself in that phrase. Scripture places high value on prayer and emphasizes expectations for believers. Colossians 4:2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer.” 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, “Pray constantly.” In those two verses alone, we can see that prayer should be integral to a believer’s life.

As Jonathan Edwards said, “Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.”³ Prayer should be vital to the way we live out our lives. It should be a habit that we don’t even have to think about. It should be at the root of our walk with God. Yet, if you are like me, you are convicted reading those two verses because prayer is not as integral to our lives as it should be. We all have room to grow.

In his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Don Whitney states,

“Statistical surveys and experience seem to agree that a large percentage of professing Christians spend little time in sustained prayer. While they may offer a sentence of prayer here and there throughout their day, they rarely spend more than a very few minutes—if that—alone in conversation with God.”⁴

Maybe we spend so little time in sustained prayer because our culture is used to being on the go. We are not used to slowing down. Maybe it is because our communication with others is boiled down to quick text messages, Instagram stories, and status updates. Or maybe it is simply because prayer requires us to stop and wrestle with our inner thoughts and feelings, then share those with our Creator.

No matter the reason, we must admit we have a problem. And once we admit our problem, we must look for a solution. What better place to look than to the example of Jesus?

JESUS' EXAMPLE OF PRAYER

Jesus set the bar pretty high when it comes to prayer. The Bible records Jesus praying 25 times during His earthly ministry. These examples reveal prayer as a foundational component of Jesus' life and ministry. Over and over again, we see Jesus leave the group early in the morning to pray on His own, spending time alone with God to start the day before He ministered to others. Jesus appealed to God in prayer prior to performing miracles. We also see Jesus present His needs to God through prayer, as in the garden at Gethsemane.

Jesus also modeled prayer for the disciples—so much so that the disciples realized how important it was and said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Jesus' response was walking them through the now famous Lord's Prayer.

You've probably heard and recited the Lord's Prayer many times. Even if you are not a Christian or if you are a new Christian, you're probably somewhat familiar with it. I'm not going to do a deep dive into the Lord's Prayer because other resources do a much better job than I could at unpacking its riches.

But when we read the Lord's Prayer, one thing is clear: it looks different than most of our prayers. Our prayers do not have God at the center. Instead, we place ourselves at the center. Many of us don't even realize that we are doing so. We are just praying how we have been taught to pray. But I believe the reason we are praying in this way is because we do not understand the biblical purpose of prayer.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER?

If you are reading this book and wondering when the how-to section starts, please note that we must start with a biblical view of prayer and understand its purpose. Of course, the most basic definition of prayer is "talking to God." Through Jesus Christ, Christians have access to share our emotions and feelings with God and be in fellowship with Him. That in and of itself is miraculous. As sinners, we should not have that kind of access to God. But through Jesus Christ, we have been made sons and daughters of God. We not only have access—we have unlimited access.

The purpose of our access and the purpose of our prayer aren't just conversation. Prayer is a means to build a relationship that leads to transformation. Jesus Himself reminds us of this in John 15:5 when He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (ESV) The Greek word "abide" that Jesus uses can be translated as "remain" or "stay" or "dwell." To abide means to remain with Jesus. Stay with Jesus. Dwell with Jesus. Spend time with Jesus.

What Jesus is telling His disciples (and us) is that the nutrients that we need to grow do not come from within ourselves. They come from God alone. We must be connected to the source of nutrients that produce the fruit to produce change in our life. Prayer is our way of growing closer in our relationship with God and building intimacy with Him. And when we grow closer to Him, we will be drawn deeper into His presence and desire to spend time in prayer and His Word more and more.

We must, as Jesus instructed, abide to be connected to the source of the fruit. To be connected to the source of life. And as we are connected, we begin to change. As Richard J. Foster reminds us, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.”⁵

Prayer is a two-way conversation. We speak to God, and God speaks to us as well. He reminds us of His promises, His character, and His truth. When God speaks to us, He works in our hearts and changes us from the inside out. It is in the private moments of our prayer life that our public life is transformed.

For many of us, we may read that and feel that we have not been hearing God when we pray. Instead of a two-way conversation, it feels like a one-way conversation where we are speaking to ourselves. If that is the case, let me remind you that God has already spoken to us. If we want to hear God speak, then let us open our Bibles.

Because of this, I believe Tim Keller’s definition of prayer is most helpful when he says, “Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through His Word and His grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with God.”⁶ If we want to hear God speak to us, we must start by opening our Bibles. Scriptures are like headphones we must put on to hear God speak. When we open His Word, we are exposed to God’s voice.

PRAYER TETHERED TO SCRIPTURE

Our prayer life must be tethered to God's Word and not our own imagination. I specifically use the word "tethered" because of its definition from Merriam-Webster, which says, "a line (as of rope or chain) by which an animal is fastened so as to restrict its range of movement." For us, we must fasten our prayer life to Scripture so that we are anchored to the real God, not some version that we have made up on our own.

The Bible is God's divine revelation to His creation. It is how He speaks to us. If our goal of prayer is a real, personal connection with God, then it is only by immersing ourselves in His very words that we will grow in that relationship.

We need guardrails. We need to be tethered to truth. As Tim Keller reminds us, "If left to themselves our hearts will tend to create a God who doesn't exist." ⁷ When we disconnect our prayer lives from Scripture, we will find ourselves at the center again. We will ask God for things that please our hearts rather than seeking God to transform our hearts.

So the first step of prayer is to open our Bibles and hear God speak. And when God speaks, we respond in prayer. But how do we rightly listen and respond in prayer?

PRAYING THROUGH JOURNALING

Personally, I've tried many methods of praying, but the most effective way I have found to pray is through journaling. The remainder of this short book examines how to marry the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and prayer through journaling.

My guess is you have heard of journaling. It is a popular topic these days, especially when it comes to self-care and improvement. If you Google search self-improvement, many articles will suggest some type

of journaling. These journals are focused on helping you increase your gratitude, forming healthy eating habits, or even becoming a morning person.

None of these topics are bad in and of themselves, but the type of journaling I encourage is focused on helping us spend meaningful time with God. Instead of reading Scripture and praying to check it off of our to-do lists, journaling slows us down to reflect on what we read and engage with God through prayer. Now there are many different ideas to what journaling can be, but I think Don Whitney gives us a clear explanation in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*:

“A journal is a place (tangible or digital) in which a person records information important to him or her personally for preservation or consideration. As a Christian, your journal is a place to document the works and ways of God in your life. Your journal also can include an account of daily events, a record of personal relationships, a notebook of insights into Scripture, and/or a list of prayer requests. Spontaneous devotional thoughts or lengthy theological musings can be preserved there. A journal is one of the best places for charting your progress in the other Spiritual Disciplines and for holding yourself accountable to your goals.”⁸

Hopefully, you read that description and see how journaling is not that intimidating. In fact, it is easy to get started. It doesn't have to fit any particular formula. It is simply a place for you to pray and document the works and ways of God in your life.

Journaling isn't a new concept. Many of the godliest, most influential Christians in the history of the church kept a journal. History is full of prayer journals from Jim Elliot to Augustine to King David. Have you ever thought about that? When we are reading most of the psalms, we are

reading David's prayer journal. We get to read David's honest prayers and wrestling with God.

Throughout Psalms, we see David begin his prayer by crying out in frustration toward God and then he ends by worshiping God as the Father and praising Him for His faithfulness. In the example of David's journal, we see how prayer transforms our hearts and tethers us to God.

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5 REASONS WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD JOURNAL THEIR PRAYERS

If the fact that King David journaling his prayers is not enough to convince you to give it a try, here are five reasons why you should start journaling.

1. Journaling keeps Scripture with us throughout the day. The time we spend in Scripture is not meant to only be for 15–20

minutes a day. We see over and over again that we should be storing God's Word in our heart (Psalm 119:11). In the Old Testament, God commanded the Israelites to repeat His Word to their children: in their homes, walking along the road, when lying down, and when getting up. They were to bind it as a sign on their hands and foreheads. They wrote Scripture on their doorposts and city gates. They took Scripture with them everywhere they went.

In the same way, we are called to meditate on Scripture and take it with us wherever we go. This discipline only happens when we think deeply about what we read.

2. Journaling records a testimony of God's faithfulness in our lives.

One of my favorite things about journaling is looking back and seeing God's hand working in my life, even when I didn't realize it at the time. I use an app called Day One to journal. Each day, it shares an "On This Day" notification that points me back to my journal entry from a year ago. As I read those entries, I'm reminded of how God has worked in my life in the past. It reminds me of the prayers that He answered. It reminds me how He was faithful in the unknown moments. It reminds me that even when I felt He was far away, He was incredibly near. And it reminds me that no matter how nervous and anxious I felt in the moment, He was faithful.

When we write down how God moves in our life, it allows us to look back on His faithfulness and remember that His track record is proven.

3. Journaling prompts us to think more deeply about God.

Romans 12:2 tells us to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds." This means it is not enough just to be around the things of God. We must think deeply about and meditate on the things of God.

When we do so, our hearts change.

As the old, simple adage says, “We become what we behold.” What absorbs our interests and attention shapes our thinking and trains our habits. When we think deeply about God, not only will our understanding of Him grow, but also will our habits of godliness. On top of this, we tend to feel most deeply about what we think most deeply about. So if you feel distant from God, or if you do not have a deep desire to obey Him, journaling is a great way to remedy this.

4. Journaling grows our self-understanding and evaluation.

John Calvin, in his famous book *Institutes*, wrote, “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.” These two are deeply connected, and journaling gives us the means to be able to grow in both at the same time. When we journal, it allows the Holy Spirit to grow us in self-understanding by showing us areas of sin in our life, gifts that we have been given, insight into how we are wired, understanding of our past, and so on.

Journaling is like a mirror to our soul in which we more clearly see our attitudes, thoughts, words, and actions. 2nd Corinthians 13:5 reminds us, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves.” As helpful as the tests like the Enneagram are to self-awareness, spending time with God through journaling is far more helpful because we are interacting with God Himself, not just a man-made personality test.

5. Journaling gives words to our feelings and feelings to our words.

We often feel something deeply but do not have the words to express it. Journaling allows us to process on paper what we are wrestling with internally. Romans 8:26 tells us, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too

deep for words.” (ESV)

When we journal and write our thoughts and prayers, we will find that the Spirit gives us words that we could not find on our own. This type of understanding only comes through quiet, deep reflection with God. On the flip side, there have been times when we expressed something with words and we do not understand how we feel about it. It could be that we said something hurtful to someone, and we didn't realize it came from a hidden feeling of betrayal. Journaling gives us intentional time to spend with the Lord and think deeply about both our words and feelings.

3 STEPS TO ACTUALLY START JOURNALING

One of the hardest parts of journaling is actually getting started. Let me encourage you to simply start. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be a well-written novel. It can start out as a few words. Just begin to document the works and ways of God in your life.

Even if you read about all the reasons why journaling is helpful to your relationship with God, you may still be intimidated by it. I know I was. The first time someone shared the idea of journaling with me, I had no clue where to start because it was an abstract concept for me.

The same is true anytime we attempt something we have never done before. Even when we know something is good for us, we need help getting started. Just think about working out. If we showed up to the gym without a workout plan, we would not know where to begin. On the other hand, when we come prepared with a workout plan, it gives us a clear process to follow and instructions for each exercise.

That's exactly what I want to share with you. I want to give you a plan to help you begin journaling. But even though we are going to walk

through a plan, you must remember that a habit of journaling can be whatever you want it to be. There are no rules that you must abide by. Your daily journal can be as long or as short as you want. The goal isn't to be perfect; it is to be consistent in spending meaningful time with God.

HERE ARE 3 STEPS TO HELP YOU ACTUALLY START JOURNALING.

1. Choose your journal format.

This may seem basic, but start here. If you don't know where you are going to be journaling, you are never going to start. Decide if you would like to journal using paper or technology. If you normally write everything down using pen and paper, then paper is probably the right choice for you. If you are like me and hardly ever carry a pen, it will probably be best to use technology for your journal.

For those who desire to use pen and paper, there are many options to choose from. You can use a typical spiral notebook, a Moleskine® notebook, a Baronfig notebook, or you can look into a customized journal with prompts. Do a little research and choose the option that fits you best.

For those who would rather use technology to journal digitally, there are just as many options. I have tried many apps and my favorite is the Day One journal app on my iPhone. But that might not be the best fit for you. You can use the Notes app on your phone or computer, Evernote, Penzu, Journey, and of course, the classic Microsoft Word. Once again, do your research, choose one, and stick with it.

2. Choose a template to follow.

After you choose your format, decide what you are going to write down each day. For me, the easiest way to consistently journal is to follow the same template most days. Of course, this will change

from time to time, but when I have a plan to follow, it is much easier to follow through. Here are three prompts that you can use to get started.

Write out your prayers.

Write what you normally pray. This allows you to visualize your prayers and keeps you focused. Often, when we spend time with God, we will pray the same old things in the same old ways. Writing our prayers gives us a visualization of what is taking place in our hearts. Remember, this is exactly what King David did in Psalms. So if you go this route, you are in good company.

Write out reflections from Bible reading.

As I mentioned before, it is easy to read Scripture to simply check it off our to-do list and miss out on thinking deeply about God. When we spend time writing out and reflecting on Scripture, it allows us not only to read the Word, but it also allows the Word to read us.

In order to reflect on what you read, here's a quick format to follow. Choose a word, verse, or phrase and write it down in your journal. After you write it down, answer these three questions:

What does this verse say about God?

What do I need to do in light of this verse?

What do I need to pray because of this verse?

Once again, you don't have to write long paragraphs of reflection each day. Some days you won't answer all these questions the same way either. Sometimes our time with God is simply learning more about who God is and sitting in His wonder. The point of reflecting is to interact with what you read in God's Word and allow it to impact the way you live.

Write out what happened during your day.

We often go through our day without taking time to process what actually took place. When we write the events of our day, it allows us to debrief our thoughts and feelings. It also gives us a record to look back on and see how God worked in our lives. Simply write down and record what took place during your day and how you felt about it—even if it is only a single sentence. When you look back over the months and years, you'll be amazed at God's faithfulness.

3. Choose a time and schedule it into your day.

Research shows that 90% of us will fail to reach our goals this year. That's the bad news. But the good news is we control one of the biggest factors that go into that stat: our calendar.

We all know that if we are not careful, our calendar can control us instead of us controlling our calendar. So when it comes to journaling, we need to choose a time during the day that we will dedicate to getting away and spending time with God. Then, we need to place it on our calendar and protect that time. That time can be whatever works for you, but setting aside 20–30 minutes would be a great place to start. For me, this is normally in the morning before I go to work. Of course, life happens, and that is not always the case. When that happens, I try to schedule it for later in the day. Once we begin to schedule the time and make it a habit, it will become routine to carve out the time in our day.

Journaling is not the only way you can pray. But if you struggle with maintaining a healthy discipline of prayer, and many of us do, journaling is among the most effective ways to make prayer a part of your daily life. I hope these three steps are helpful and give you a plan to start journaling.

If you want to make journaling a habit, remember that the goal isn't to be perfect. The goal is to simply spend meaningful time with God. As Tim Keller succinctly puts it, "Prayer is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God."⁹

Whether we pray through journaling, or in some other method, prayer is what leads to a deeper intimacy with God. So let us seek a deeper relationship with God and grow in our knowledge of Him by abiding with Him through prayer.

FOOTNOTES

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