

| prayer  
study

# designed to pray

Let us pray:

“Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, thy unworthy servants, do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us. We beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that we will show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, Amen.”

Huh? Anybody else get lost in that jumble?

That’s how some of us might think about prayer—that it’s like what you’d get if you combined Shakespeare with one of those TV preachers. It’s nothing but “thee’s” and “thou’s,” and doesn’t seem right unless somebody with a voice like Sean Connery or James Earl Jones is saying it.

No wonder prayer doesn’t really connect with many of us. Consider the situation here: we’re talking aloud to someone that we can’t see, using words that we don’t normally use, asking for things that we can’t control. On top of it all, many of us have guilty baggage making us feel that we do not pray often enough, in the right method, or with the right amount of positive feelings.

This might be enough to make you want to forget the whole mess.

Yet, this was never the way that God intended prayer to be. As Greg Boyd, author and Senior Pastor of Woodland Hills Church in Minnesota, says, “Prayer is just a fancy word for talking to God.” One of the fundamental truths of the Bible is that God designed people for relationship—relationship with each other as well as with him. Most of us naturally understand that communication is critical to healthy relationships, yet when it comes to communicating with God, things just get weird.

So let's start over, and drop some of the presumptions we have about what it means to talk to God. The first thing that we need to understand is that we were designed to pray. We have a natural need for relationships, a built-in longing for connection and intimacy, including a connection with God. Like any relationship, to have intimacy, you have to communicate and be in conversation.

Having a conversation with God can take many forms, but one of the most primal is our response to times when the world around us is bigger than we can understand or explain—for good or for bad. Those sunrises of breathtaking beauty that drive us to a deep sense of appreciation and gratitude (even if we might not know to whom it is directed) are moments of prayer. In the same way, those times of utter despair and tragedy when we call or out for help or ask why—they too are moments of prayer. Regardless of what belief structure we follow, we are naturally driven to pray—to seek a connection, understanding or explanation for these things that are beyond us. It is an inseparable part of who we are.

We are made to pray; everyone does it, even if they don't know to whom they are praying.

You're made to pray, but how do you do it? Like conversations we have with family and friends, prayers are not dependent on special words or particular places. Talking with Jesus can be exactly that—talking. Just ordinary, everyday conversation—no special words or beads required.

**Read 1 Peter 5:7.** Peter offers a simple, direct command, "Give all your worries and cares to God, because he cares for you." He is saying that our relationship with God enables us to have complete openness and transparency with him. It opens the door for us to share the burdens and concerns that weigh us down. Yet it doesn't have to stop there. Jesus invites us to share not just the bad, but also the whole of our lives with him, to simply talk with Him.

This is where prayer starts—an actual conversation with God.

---

If you've never prayed before, there is an easy model you can try, called the **P-R-A-Y** model.

**P:** Praise God, for the beauty in nature, fun-size Twix, your mom—whatever comes to mind.

**R:** Repent. Admit your sins (things you have done that are against God's character), and commit to turning away from them.

**A:** Ask. This is where you can ask God for requests, such as to show you more of Him, or to be with your sister who is ill. I'd recommend not asking for the Bengals to win. I don't think He wants them to.

**Y:** Yield. Spend time hearing what God has to say to you.

---

## for discussion

As we start off here, it is good to know where we stand. Take a few minutes and share with the group how you feel about prayer. Don't tell us how often you pray, what method you use or anything like that. Just share your gut-level feelings. **What is your reaction if someone says, "We're going to spend some time in prayer?"**

Tell the group about a time when you experienced an overwhelming emotion (either good or bad) that you lacked the words to express. **How did that experience make you feel then? How do you feel about it now—are you still equally overwhelmed by the thought of it?**

If all of us have moments where we have been overwhelmed by things that are much bigger than we are—moments where we are naturally driven to seek God—**then why do we struggle so much with prayer?**

**Do you agree everybody prays in some way? Why or why not?**

## challenge

Given that we are talking about prayer for the next six weeks, it should come as no surprise that our challenges will be about prayer. This week, your challenge is simple, but not easy. Take three to five minutes every day and talk to Jesus. Don't "pray,"

just talk. Tell Him what you feel, what you're worried about, what you thought about the game last night (he watched it too), or anything else. The important thing is learning to have a conversation with God.



# just listen

Last week, we reviewed that one of the basic truths about life is that we were made for relationships—both with God and with each other. As a result, we have great freedom to talk to God about anything and everything. This week, we are going to move to the other side of the relationship: listening.

Anybody have any dating horror stories? That guy who honestly thought you'd enjoy dinner at Rally's and the Terminator double feature? What about that girl who told you so much back-story that you would have thought that you were her therapist?

As anyone who has ever dated can testify, if you only talk and never listen, then your relationship will be doomed. If you've ever been in love, think back to when it first happened—conversation was king. It didn't matter how utterly ridiculous it was, you talked about everything. Whether it was passing notes, late night phone conversations, or dates that ended up at Steak-and-Shake at 2am, you couldn't talk to each other enough. More than the talking, though, was the listening. For those that have been "together" a while, it is easy to forget those early days when you craved every piece of information that the other person told you. You were absolutely fascinated by the mystery of this new person—nobody had to tell you to listen. It was just a given.

Whether we are talking about relationships between people, or between individuals and God, the fact remains that communication is the defining characteristic of relationship. In order for our relationship to be healthy and thriving, there must be both talking and listening. But it's one thing to listen to a person that's sitting across the table from us, and quite another to listen to a God that we can't see or touch, and who doesn't make a big habit of talking audibly these days.

We start by getting ourselves out of the center of the picture. Whether we realize it or not, many of us tend to approach prayer like a bad conversation—we have a list of things that we want to say, we run through them and then we're done and off to something else on our to-do list for the day. However, to have actual communication with God, we have to make the conscious effort to do so.

**Read Psalm 46:10.** “Be still and know that I am God...” Letting go of our desire to direct and control everything, and simply resting in the knowledge that God is capable of caring for what is on our minds is our starting point. This is what prayer is about: that we stop the busyness of our lives, the incessant worry of our minds and our constant greed for more—and simply recognize the constant presence of a God, who is bigger than all our joys, trials, gains and losses. We bring our lives to a halt, take ourselves out of the driver's seat and let God be God.

---

FYI: Ways God can speak:  
Bible, audible voice,  
inaudible voice,  
idea/sense/knowing,  
other people, nature,  
circumstances.

How we know it is Him:  
It's consistent with the  
Bible, consistent with his  
character, consistent with  
“fruit” of a life following  
Jesus (Galatians 5:22-  
23), it's bigger and more  
complicated than our own  
ideas (Isaiah 55:9).

---

## | for discussion |

As we start off this week, take a couple of minutes for everyone to share what it felt like to just “talk” to God. **Was it difficult? Why or why not?**

**Everyone share a time where your failure to listen caused a problem in one of your relationships.**

**What is it about familiarity in relationships that makes us less likely to listen to others?**

Our motivation and intent is a crucial aspect of this—**what steps can you take to ensure that you are listening to God rather than just sitting quietly or conjuring up good feelings in your own head?**

## | challenge |

This week, we’ve been talking at length about learning to listen to God. As you would expect, your challenge this week is to do exactly that. Take five minutes every day and “be still” before God. No planning, no talking, no thinking things over in your head—nothing. Clear your mind of all

thought and distraction, and simply be still and know that He is God. If you need to talk before you can listen, then do it—make your list, vent or whatever you need to do to clear your brain and to enable you to listen.



# what you want is not the point

It's 7:30pm, and there's still no decision. Thai or Chinese? On the river or next to the movie theater? Even normally decisive people seem to have trouble picking a restaurant amongst a group of friends. No one wants to force their will on anyone else. Without Urban Spoon, people might go hungry.

As we grow older, we realize that time spent with good friends is far more valuable than whether or not you get your way in the dinner selection. **Put simply, what we want isn't the point—it's all about the relationship.**

By now, you might be wondering what in the world this has to do with prayer—we're getting there, don't worry. Whether or not we realize it, this principle shows up in more places than just our dinner destination; it is a fundamental law of healthy relationships. In fact, you can often use this as a benchmark to see where a relationship stands. If you are more interested in what you can get from a person or what they can do for you than you are in your connection with them, the relationship probably isn't in a very healthy condition. The opposite is also true. If you are more concerned about the person than what you can gain from them, then your relationship with them is probably healthy and thriving.

The same is true in our relationship with God. **Read Luke 11:11-13.** Here, Luke says that even we who are selfish and sinful know how to care for those whom we love; how much more then would God be able to care for those he loves? And if we believe what the Bible says about God—that he is all-powerful, all-knowing and desires to care for the needs of those he loves—then it becomes pretty clear that nothing we tell him is surprising or too difficult.

In fact, if God is who he claims to be, then what we want isn't really the point of prayer at all. So, how do we go about praying without focusing on what we want? How do we make prayer about the relationship?

As with most things in life, there is no clear-cut rule for how to do this, but there are some basic principles that we can apply.

Firstly, we can look at our focus—if our focus in prayer is on God, on connecting with him and understanding his heart, then it is much less likely that we will be acting selfishly. It is a question of intent—are we seeking God so we can tell him our checklist, or are we seeking his heart and sharing our heart in the process? Is our goal to connect relationally or to get what we want?

Another way to determine our focus is to look at the way we are structuring our daily lives. We live in the midst of a world full of constant motion, activity and noise. Stillness and silence are the exception rather than the rule. In the face of this kind of societal pressure, are we intentionally leaving time and space for communication to happen between God and us?

Secondly, we can also analyze the method we are using to talk to God, whether or not we're being honest in sharing our feelings and digging deep to talk to him about the real stuff going on in our lives, and how we want his help to become more like him.

Throughout history, followers of God have isolated many different kinds of prayers pertaining to our relationship with God. These include telling God the things we've done wrong (confession), expressing our desire to change (repentance), and asking for his help to become more of the person he made us to be (transformation). While this is by no means a complete list, the common theme for all of them is how they connect us more deeply to the heart of God. This stands in direct contrast to the "me-first" demanding of the selfish prayer.

---

Take a look at Psalm 27:4—this was written by King David, who was described elsewhere as “a man after God’s own heart.” David’s focus in prayer throughout his life was never “give me this, thanks for this,” or anything like that. The consistent cry of his heart was for a more intense, intimate relationship with God. This is the idea behind prayer—it is not just to tell God what we want or are thinking, and it is ultimately not even about the conversation at all. Prayer is the means to an end—that end being a deeper connection with God that goes beyond our human understanding.

---

## for discussion

**How did the challenge go last week?** Take a few minutes and share what it felt like to just “listen” to God. Was it hard? Did you hear or sense anything specific?

**How do you talk to God differently when you pray than you would if you were sitting across the table from him at Starbucks?**

**In what ways do you see yourself indulging in selfish prayer?**

**How do you feel about telling God how you feel?**

(Yeah, it’s an odd statement, we know!)

**What does talking to God generally consist of for you?**

## challenge

As we close out this week, your challenge is an ancient one—this is something that Christ-followers have done for hundreds of years. Spend at least three minutes every day this week going through the progression that was briefly mentioned earlier—to tell God what you’ve done wrong, to express a desire to change and to ask for his help to become more like who he made you to be. This will be a simple, but not easy, exercise.

For those of you who are familiar with this practice, try going a bit deeper—rather than addressing specific actions (like I got angry because somebody cut me off), deal with motivations (I was prideful and demanded that I go before him; as a result I got mad when it didn’t happen).

In either case, be prepared next week to talk about some kind of specific transformation that God challenges you to make this week.



## that counts, too

Grab a sheet of paper and take the next two minutes to write down the process that you follow for making the people around you happy. Don't worry about being too in-depth; just write the basic steps you follow for maintaining all your relationships.

If you succeeded, congratulations, Type-A overachiever. Your friends must love how methodically you treat them.

In reality, though, relationships don't work on a three-step, one-size-fits-all kind of system. Relationships are living, dynamic things that don't fit into a nice, neat box. Think about the people closest to you. You don't interact and respond to them all in the same way. And even if you interacted with one of them a certain way six months ago, it doesn't mean you'd do the same exact thing now. Both of you are completely different people than you were then, and the relationship between you has changed and adapted over time.

Any guy who has gotten into trouble for "not being romantic" after taking his significant other to yet another movie will agree with this principle. You can't just do the same thing over and over. Eventually that action loses its connection to the relationship and becomes meaningless.

The same idea applies to our relationship with God.

We know that we can talk to God, that he talks back and that our conversations should focus on our relationship with him, rather than what we want. However, if we don't free ourselves of the idea that communication with God is dependent on just talking, then we aren't going to be any better off. None of us would claim that talking is the only way we communicate with a family member or friend and we should not limit our relationship with God in that way, either.

There are other ways that we can be in relationship with God besides just talking to him. Creativity and personality play a role here, but let's look at the Bible to see if we can get some pointers on where to start. **Grab a Bible, and read 2 Samuel 6:14. Then, read Psalm 150 and finally, 1 Kings 8:17.** We see people communicating with God through music, dance and even through building something.

If we limit our understanding of prayer to just talking, our relationship with God is eventually going to suffer for it. Prayer is walking, painting, singing, mowing, jogging, making Jello®, clogging—the action itself is not the point. You can do it while you're walking to get coffee, driving to the office, brushing your teeth and so on. Prayer is all about communion with God—the relational interaction behind the activity.

At the core, it is the constant recognition and awareness of God's presence.

## for discussion

For the next few minutes, go around the circle and **share where God challenged you last week**. Be as specific as you're comfortable with, but be sure to share how you felt about what God showed you as well as how you reacted.

Now, take a minute to think back over some of your past relationships with different people. Then go around the circle, and **everyone share a time when someone communicated something significant to them without using words**. (Keep in mind that this communication can be both good and bad.)

**Which tends to have a bigger impact for you—things that people say to you, or things that people do for you? Why?**

**How does the idea of “praying” by something other than talking make you feel?**

## challenge

Given what we have talked about today, your challenge for this week should not come as a surprise. Find a way to pray that isn't purely talking or listening—branch out

and be creative! Feel free to discuss this with your group to help get ideas, and be ready to come back next week and talk about how it went.



# God's ignoring me

**Turn to Psalm 13:1-2 and read it out loud.** Have you ever felt like this? It's like somebody flipped a switch, and every prayer just hits the ceiling and falls back down on your head, leaving you feeling defeated and ridiculous. In the end, we end up feeling like we've failed—like there is something wrong with us.

While it might feel otherwise, we should know from the start that this experience is not new or unique to us—this is the universal experience of followers of God throughout history. (Jesus himself even experienced silence from God! Matthew 27:46) In times like this, it can seem as though you're wandering through the dark, unsure of what is around you, worrying about what is ahead and wondering whether God has abandoned you.

It definitely isn't the intimate relationship and communion that you signed up for.

Unfortunately, as is the case with most things in the spiritual life (or life in general, for that matter), there is not a clear-cut answer to break through the silence. However, there are three basic actions that can often help us to understand and grow through these periods when we can't seem to hear God.

Firstly, we should examine our motives. If we are honest with ourselves, saying something like, "I just don't feel like God is listening," rolls pretty easily off the tongue. We can quickly identify with the idea of God being distant or disconnected from us. Yet, many of us never take the time to examine exactly what the "presence of God" means to us personally. Have we been seeking some kind of warm, fuzzy feeling and defining that as God's presence in our lives? It may well be that God is challenging us out of our comfort zone, past feelings we have come to know and experience, and into a deeper level of understanding and connection with him. In order for that to happen, He must first break our dependency on the ways that we have understood him in the past.

Secondly, it is important to understand that we are not in charge—we do not control God. Society has given us a life that is driven by instant gratification, a world of e-mail, text messages, and microwave ovens. We come to expect instant answers to our problems and desires. What's more, we become guilty of desiring what God can do for us rather than actually desiring God himself. As a result, "unanswered prayers" often become crises of faith for us. **Grab a Bible and turn to Hebrews 11:1.** Here Paul gives a great definition of what it is to have faith, to have this connection with God that we have been talking about. He says that faith is "confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen." Following this statement, he gives a whole list of people from the Bible that displayed this kind of trust in God, a belief that God will fulfill his promises despite circumstances that would say otherwise. What makes this really interesting is not this litany of people that believed God, but rather what he says in verse 39, that "none of them received all that God had promised." We should not be surprised when we encounter moments when God doesn't seem to be paying attention or holding up his end of the deal; this is the experience of his followers throughout history. All too often we forget that there is much more to the picture than we can see. For many of us, even our own past history demonstrates that God is worthy of our trust. This is where we often end up, raging in frustration about the silence or hardship that God is using to make us seek him.

Also, we should learn to lean on the faith of others. We were never meant to go through life alone, and just because we are experiencing silence doesn't mean that others are. Even from the very beginning, God said that it is "not good for man to be alone." Yet all too often, our independent, self-reliant tendencies cause us to be disconnected not only from God, but also from the people around us. Many who are on this journey of following God end up isolated and disconnected, wondering why God has abandoned them. Some came to know God initially because of the faith of someone else, so it shouldn't surprise us that we need the faith of others to continue this journey. If we find ourselves experiencing silence from God, one of the easiest ways to find solace is in the encouragement of others (most of whom probably have had similar experiences).

In the end, it is important to realize that these silent periods are not truly absences at all, but moments where God is challenging us to a new level of faith and trust in him. It is much like our actual first steps: A young child is challenged to walk longer and longer distances as they are taking their first steps, knowing that this challenge will enable them to enjoy a richness of life that would otherwise be impossible. In the same way, God refuses to allow us to remain stationary infants; he challenges us (by whatever means necessary) to lay aside our childish conceptions of him and our selfish demands for his intervention. Through periods of silence, He challenges us to deeper levels of maturity and relationship, and he challenges us to seek him.

---

When dealing with the issue of silence in prayer, it is important to understand that our sin can be a barrier to communication between God and us. Obviously this doesn't mean that if we sin, God never hears our prayers. If that were the case, no one would ever know him, and sending Jesus would have been absolutely useless. However, when we continue to willfully disobey Him, it should come as no surprise to us when it feels like our prayer is going nowhere. We would expect nothing less in any human relationship, so the idea that sin and disobedience would come between God and us is not a foreign concept.

---

## for discussion

Take a few minutes to share your experiences in praying without talking.

**What did you do? What was the experience like for you?**

Go around the group and share about a time when you experienced what you perceived to be silence from God. **How did that sense of silence from God make you feel? How did you respond to it? How did He bring you out of it?**

**Describe the differences between the “presence of God” and “silence from God.”**

**Would you still want to communicate with God if you knew that he wouldn’t do anything you asked him to? Why or why not?**

While silence from God is a very real experience, there are also times when he changes the “channel” or method he is using to communicate with us. If we are not aware of this, we can easily misinterpret it as silence because we aren’t paying attention to what He is doing. **How have you experienced this change of communication from God? What can we do to be aware of the various ways God communicates with us?**

## challenge

This idea of “silence” from God is a difficult one for us to process. As we close out this week, your challenge is to do two things. First, read Job 38-41. (If you really want an interesting challenge, read the whole book.) Job is a man who was blessed by God, who had his blessing taken away and who was forced to wrestle with not only the loss of everything he had, but also complete and utter silence from God as to why. After many discussions between Job and his friends as to why God has done this or isn’t answering him, God shows up and throws his hat in the ring.

While you are reading Job, the second part of your challenge is this—take note of the things that Job wasn’t noticing. There are a lot of ways that God was blessing and caring for Job that he simply didn’t see because of his frustration and hurt. Once you have noticed a few, compare them to your own tendencies—what do you miss? When it feels like God is ignoring you, see if there are ways he’s speaking that you don’t notice? Be prepared to come back next week and talk about them.



# a constant connection

We were designed for a constant, ongoing relationship with God.

Up to this point, we have described prayer in terms of an activity—as if it were simply a part of our daily to-do list. This concept would never be applied with any other close relationship and expected to flourish; a connection with God is no different. If we limit it to a momentary act we perform from time to time, then we are missing the boat on what prayer can be.

Grab a Bible and read a couple of verses: **Ephesians 6:18, Colossians 1:3, and 1 Thessalonians 5:17**. They all talk about the frequency of prayer; the last one in particular by saying “Pray always.” It’s one thing for us to be focused on prayer, or for us to avoid making prayer something on our spiritual checklist, but how in the world do we go about praying all the time?

Before you start worrying, this is not something else to make you feel guilty. Paul (the author of all these letters) actually is not giving us a task at all, but describing the way day-to-day life functions. Where our natural tendency is to see “pray always” as a divine standard that cannot be lived up to, Paul is saying that being in constant connection with God is a way of life for a Christ-follower.

Don’t miss the significance of this—prayer is not an activity in Paul’s mind, but a description of our relationship with God.

This is perfectly illustrated by the life of Brother Lawrence, a 17th century monk. He was not a teacher or a leader in any organizational sense. In fact, his job in the monastery for the majority of his life was to clean the pots in the kitchen after meals. Yet, as time went by, Lawrence eventually became well known and even sought out for his wisdom when it came to connecting with God. He described his mindset like this:

At the beginning of my duties I would say to the Lord with confidence, “My God, since you are with me, and since by your will, I must occupy myself with external things, please grant me the grace to remain with you, in your presence. Work with me, so that my work might be the very best. Receive as an offering of love both my work and all my affections.”<sup>1</sup>

He went on to describe how he simply began to practice talking to God throughout his day like he would if God were visibly standing right next to him. The talks were about big things and little things, good and bad, day after day. Over time, he said that he lost the ability to distinguish between when he was “praying” and when he wasn’t.

That is a life of prayer—the connection God made us for. It is a life of ups, downs, success, failure, sorrow and restoration. It will be messy, but it will be beautiful.

---

For some of us, the idea of continual, ongoing conversation with God is overwhelming. That voice in our head screams out, “How in the world am I supposed to manage talking to God all the time? I’ve already got more on my plate than I can handle!” But, it’s really no different than the time we spend thinking about other things during the day.

Each of us has things that rest on our mind all day long without getting in the way; they are the concerns or ideas to which our brain naturally defaults. For some of us, it may be the economy, while for others it’s family, and even for others it’s business or hobbies. While we are constantly thinking of these things, they don’t get in the way or keep us from being healthy, attentive and productive.

The challenge for us is to allow our conversations with God to come to this level—to the point where we just “default” to talking to him. As with any habit or mindset, it begins with a choice made right now. If you find yourself struggling, begin by choosing a Bible verse to ponder as a jumping-off point; Psalm 52:9 is one of many good options.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1982), 82.

## for discussion

Go around and share your thoughts on the story of Job. **Did you discover anything that you tend to ignore when it feels like God is being silent?**

### **What does it mean to pray always?**

Brother Lawrence described his way of prayer as “focusing on God being present within you.” **What does that mean to you? Have you ever thought this way?**

**Discuss ways to bring God into the ongoing conversation running through your brain.**

## challenge

The idea of constant prayer—of continually communicating with God—can be quite overwhelming for us at first. Even with the best of intentions, we often end up getting sidetracked, distracted and allowing our mind to fill with the same old worries and concerns without even realizing it. As you go throughout the next week, make a conscious effort to have God as a consistent part of the stream of thoughts going through your head.

Eventually, there will come a time when you’ll realize that you’re caught up in your worries with no thought of God in sight. When that happens, simply say to Him, “God, bring me back to you.” Allow that simple phrase to be a constant theme echoing throughout your day and constantly calling you back to a life of interaction with God.