

## The Habit of Prayer

God invites us into conversation because God invites us into relationship. God speaks to us primarily through his Word. We respond in prayer, and prayer, like any form of communication, takes practice. When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1), he didn't just tell them to do what comes naturally. He answered their request and taught them.



There is not only one way to pray, and the various Christian traditions offer a rich variety of practices. However, if prayer is indeed a conversation with God, a conversation in which we first listen before we speak, it makes sense that scripture, God's Word, would greatly inform our prayers. In 1<sup>st</sup> John 5:14 we are reminded, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Is this not our goal, to learn to pray according to God's will? So how do we know God's will? Jesus himself clarifies things when he declares in John 15:7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." As we spend time in God's Word, allowing it to remain in us, we will be guided in our prayers.

Jesus himself practiced this, sometimes literally. From the cross, in his greatest hour of need, two of Jesus' prayers were not only informed by scripture, but were scripture themselves. When he prays, "My God, my God, why have you forsake me.", Jesus is praying the words of Psalm 22:1. And when he prays, "Into your hands I commit my spirit.", Jesus is praying the words of Psalm 31:4. Following Jesus' example, we want to allow God's Word to inform and shape our prayers.

**Praying the Psalms.** It's been argued (convincingly!) that the Psalms are our school of prayer. The Psalms were the prayer book not only for ancient Israel, but for Jesus himself. They have been passed down to the church for a similar purpose. These 150 prayers cover the full range of human emotion: joy, sadness, anger, doubt, hope, confession, just to name a few. In other words, no matter what your circumstances or place in life and faith, the Psalms have language to help you speak from that place to God.

These are not just poems to be read for inspiration, but prayers meant to be prayed. Ben Patterson, in his excellent book on praying the Psalms called *God's Prayer Book*, says, "There is no better place in all of scripture than the Psalms to learn to be with God and to see with the eyes of faith the face of the One who longs to form us fully in his image...The Psalms are God's prayer book, and they teach us to talk to God in his own language."<sup>1</sup>

Patterson employs the image of a Christmas tree to help us learn to pray the Psalms, an image which has been very helpful for many of us here at Faith. Imagine each Psalm as a bare Christmas tree, each verse a branch waiting to be decorated. Go slowly through each verse and "decorate" them one at a time with your own words, expanding on what you find there. For example, if you're praying through Psalm 23, the first branch is,

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 1.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” Instead of moving on immediately to verse 2, pause there and expand that prayer from your own place in life. That might mean praising the Lord for all the ways he has guided you and provided for you. On the other hand, you might be led to protest to the Lord that you have felt lost and not able to sense his guidance. Talk about the wants that you have, or the ways he has satisfied those wants. Then move on to the next verse, slowly working your way through the Psalm. Make the prayer your prayer, and learn God’s language of prayer as you do. This may not be easy at first. Again, prayer is a practice, meaning it takes practice! Not really all that different from learning a language.

**The 3 R’s.** Here is another way to make sure prayer is our part of a conversation with God which begins with us listening before we respond. Take time to pray after you spend time in God’s Word each day and, when you do so, connect your prayers to what you have just heard the Lord say to you in scripture. After you have read the scripture, let these three questions guide your prayers of response:

- **Rejoice:** What do I find here that gives me cause to rejoice, to give praise and thanks?
- **Repent:** What do I read here that brings to light sin in my life which I need to confess?
- **Request:** What do I hear from the Lord here which informs ways I can seek God’s help for myself and others?<sup>2</sup>

This is a practice you can use with any scripture. As you do, you will begin to learn what it is like to make scripture and prayer a conversation, always listening before you speak.

**The Lord’s Prayer.** Finally, perhaps the best guide for prayer we have ever been given is the guide Jesus gave his disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray. It’s no wonder that the Lord’s Prayer has become central to the prayer life of countless believers in nearly every Christian tradition since it was first given. Here at Faith we regularly pray the Lord’s Prayer together in corporate worship. We encourage you to also use this prayer regularly in your private prayers, not only as a script to pray though quickly, but as categories of prayer, and an order for those categories. As you pray, remember that every pronoun in the prayer is plural, meaning we are to include others in our prayers. This isn’t about just you and God.

The image of decorating a Christmas tree can be helpful here as well. Imagine each phrase of the Lord’s prayer as an empty branch which you decorate as you go along. You might think about the “branches” this way:

*Our Father in Heaven:* Consider your relationship to God. Approach him as a beloved son or daughter. Offer prayers of adoration and praise to the one who is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all. Spend time simply enjoying God’s presence.

*Hallowed be Thy name:* This is a prayer request, and the first one Jesus teaches us to pray. Pray for God to reveal himself, to make his name revered in all the world, beginning with us. Pray that every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Pray for those you know who do not yet know the love of Christ in a personal way.

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<sup>2</sup> Patterson, 20.

*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven:* Pray for Jesus to come back and set things right in our world. Pray that the range of God's effective will would extend to every part of creation. Pray for parts of our world (the list is endless!) where this is not yet happening. Ask God to help us submit to his will in our own lives, and then use us to help establish his kingdom on earth.

*Give us this day our daily bread:* Ask God for what you and others need for today. This includes literal bread, yes, but also a host of other needs. Focus on today and let the Lord worry about tomorrow.

*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us:* Be specific about ways you have failed to love God and love others, telling the truth about your sin to a Father in Heaven you know is ready to forgive you. Also, pray for those who have not loved you. As you receive God's grace, extend God's grace to others.

*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one:* Ask for protection from temptations which often trip you up. Ask for protection from spiritual attack. Pray that the Lord would not allow you to be overwhelmed by these things. As you pray for yourself, pray for others.

*For you are the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever:* End where you began, in praise and adoration.

**Keep at it without regret.** Never let your struggles with this habit of prayer be a source of guilt or shame. Just like all spiritual practices, the practice of prayer is a discipline which will require effort, energy and endurance. Let's be as gracious with ourselves as we learn this practice as God is with us. But let's also not give up our efforts. The great Scottish evangelist, Oswald Chambers, once reminded us, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work." Let us all allow Jesus to teach us how to do this greater work.

**Resources.** There are many wonderful books on prayer. Here are a few we recommend because they have proved helpful for many in our congregation.

- *God's Prayer Book: The Power and Pleasure of Praying the Psalms*, by Ben Patterson - Wonderful guide for learning how to let the Psalms be our 'school of prayer'. Patterson models this with many of the Psalms.
- *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, by Timothy Keller – Very practical and biblical guidance on how to pray in all sorts of circumstances.
- *Seeking God's Face: Praying the Bible Through the Year* – A daily guide for praying through the scriptures which follows the church year.
- *The Divine Hours*, by Phillis Tickle – A contemporary way to pray 'fixed-hour' prayers, as has long been a part of the monastic tradition.