

# 31 DAYS OF PRAYER

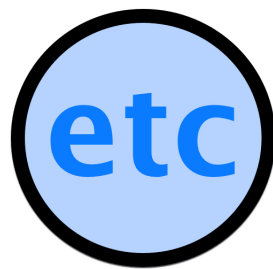


**GEOFF ROBSON**



# 31 Days of Prayer

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## **Praise for *31 Days of Prayer***

“Extraordinary. I couldn’t put it down. Mostly because I never picked it up.” *Tem Killer*

“This book may very well change your life. Then again, it may very well not.” *A.D.D. Carson*

“This free ebook is worth every penny.” *Kevin deOld*

“*31 Days of Prayer* will do for your prayer life what Jamie Oliver’s *15 Minute Meals* did for your golf swing.” *John Peeper*

“I heartily endorse this event or product.” *I.J. Packer*

## **Introduction**

***Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful in it and thankful.  
(Colossians 4:2)***

If I could choose one thing to be great at, or even one thing to be better at, it would be prayer.

Maybe that's a reflection of how important I believe prayer to be in the Christian life. But if I'm honest, it also reflects my disappointment at my own lack of prayerfulness – my well-meaning plans that so often fail to produce action. And I'm not exactly going out on a limb here, but I doubt I'm the only one who wishes he was a better, more faithful pray-er.

With that in mind, I'd like to invite you to join me for '31 Days Of Prayer'.

This is a series of 31 short reflections and prayers (most somewhere around 500 words; sometimes more, sometimes less) on the topic of prayer: a Bible verse or two relating to prayer, some comments on those verses, a quote or two on prayer, and a really short prayer that you can use as your own.

As I wrote these reflections, my hope and prayer was that God would use them to not only grow my understanding of what the Bible says about prayer, but also that he will take that knowledge and use it to make me more prayerful. My prayer now is also that he might do the same for you, and for many others. If you've got the whole praying thing nailed (!), it can't hurt to spend a little more time reflecting on prayer, and you might like to share this booklet with others to encourage their prayerfulness.

Any attempt to reflect on the place of prayer in your life probably requires a high degree of bravery. After all, if you're anything like me, you know what it's like to live with the frustration and guilt of good intentions that go nowhere. Maybe it's easier to just not think about praying. But don't allow fear or guilt to stop you from even trying. If anything is worth some effort, surely it's prayer. After all, **“Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the Kingdom. If you may have everything by asking in his name, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is.”** (Charles Spurgeon)

### **A Prayer**

*Loving Heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of prayer. Please grow me in my knowledge of what your word teaches about prayer, and please grow my prayerfulness in all things. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **Day One: The Power of God**

***Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. (Jeremiah 32:17)***

Our understanding of prayer will never be bigger than our understanding of God.

I know it's a cliché, but the place to begin reflecting on prayer is by focusing again on the character of God. In particular, we'll start by focusing on God's power. We pray to a God who is able to do all things.

If we believe God is just like us, only a bit bigger and a bit stronger, the thought of prayer won't put much fire in our bellies. If we believe God can do some things but not really all things, the scope of my prayers will be severely limited.

But the Bible's consistent picture is that God is utterly without limits. There is literally nothing that is too hard for him. Spend some time meditating on Psalms like Psalm 93, 96, 97, 98 and 99, where God is described again and again as King – 'the Lord of all the earth' (97:5).

Notice what is said in Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." Even the most powerful people on earth are comfortably within God's control.

Ponder Paul's majestic description of God in Ephesians 3:20: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine..." Not just a bit more, but immeasurably more! And not just more than we ask, but more than we can even imagine! God's power knows no limits.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the scale of events going on around the world – think Iraq and Syria, or Israel-Palestine, just to mention two recent examples. But I don't need to look that far away – the chaotic events of my own small life can be enough to leave me feeling swamped. But nothing – not one thing – is too hard for God. He controls the events of my life and the events of geo-politics with equal ease. “Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.” (Isaiah 40:15)

God can do anything and everything. It makes sense to ask for his help.

**Prayer is the open admission that without Christ we can do nothing. And prayer is the turning away from ourselves to God in the confidence that he will provide the help we need. Prayer humbles us as needy, and exalts God as wealthy.” (Tozer)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, I thank and praise you, for you are the sovereign King and Ruler of the whole earth. Thank you that nothing is too hard for you. Please help me to see your power and authority more clearly, so that I would be motivated to commit everything to you in prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.*



## **Day Two: God is willing**

***If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:11)***

In Mark 9, Jesus meets the father of a boy possessed by an ‘impure spirit’. The man desperately wants his son healed, but is unsure of Jesus’ ability to help: “*If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us,*” he begs. Jesus replies “*“If you can?”*” Jesus then heals the boy with a simple word – he is more than able to meet the father’s request. “*All things are possible with God.*” (Mark 10:27)

It’s fascinating, then, that earlier in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has been met with a different question – not a question of his ability, but a question of his willingness. ‘A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*” Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “*I am willing,*” he said. “*Be clean!*” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.’ (Mark 1:40-42)

If God were able to do all things but unwilling to hear us, prayer would nothing more than a last resort – a desperate, fearful attempt to twist the arm of a capricious, distant deity. But for the Christian, approaching the all-powerful God in prayer is also approaching a loving, willing heavenly Father – one who desires to give good gifts to those who ask.

That’s why Jesus uses the image of a human father in Matthew 7: “*Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in*

heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.” (Matt 7:9-11)

I’m a pretty good Dad, overall, and I want to give good things to my three beautiful kids. But not always. Sometimes I’m busy with other things, or I’m tired and just want to be left alone for five minutes. At other times, I want to help, but it’s not in power to give them what they want. And there are plenty of times where I just don’t know what they need.

But not God. God is never too busy. He never gets tired. And because all things are possible with him, it’s always within his power to give good gifts. If only we will ask!

God is always willing to hear. He is always willing to give good gifts to his children. That’s why Jesus says we should keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. (Matt 7:7-8) **Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of God’s willingness. (Martin Luther)**

### **A prayer**

*Thank you, God, that you are my perfectly good Father in heaven. Thank you that you want to hear my prayers, and that you desire to give me good gifts. Please help me to keep asking, to keep seeking, to keep knocking, and to trust your willingness to answer my prayers. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## Day Three: God on speed-dial

*Since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. (Hebrews 10:19-22)*

God is infinitely powerful, able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Day 1). And he is the perfectly loving Father, willing to give good gifts to those who ask (Day 2). But surely there's still a problem – our sin. How can sinners like us approach the perfect, holy God with the temerity to ask for *anything*? As the Bible says, “If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3)

That's why the cross of Christ is a critical step in thinking about prayer. On our own merits, human beings would have no reason to think we could approach God in prayer. We are stained by sin, separated from God.

But now, incredibly, because of Jesus and his blood shed for us, we have free and unfettered access to the God of the universe. We can draw near with confidence, with assurance. As the classic hymn put it, ‘Bold I approach the eternal throne’ (*And Can It Be* by Charles Wesley).

What an absolutely extraordinary thought. What a mind-blowing, life-changing reality. We can approach the holy God who made us and made the world – the God of infinite power and love – not with timidity or fear, but with confidence and boldness!

Ever met someone with a famous person's phone number? (Just before

the Sydney Olympics, I was in Bible study with a girl who had Ian Thorpe's number – SO exciting!) Why does it interest us? Partly because we're so besotted with fame that any brush with it gives us a thrill. But it's also because our friend has *access*. They have permission to approach someone important or interesting. "You know Ian Thorpe?! You mean, if I push this button here, I'll be talking to Thorpe?! Maybe he can get me tickets to the Games!"

Thanks to what Jesus has done for me, I have God on 'speed dial'. Unfettered, 24/7 access to the one who holds the future in the palm of his hand. He will never be too busy to take my call. I will never get his voicemail. No offence, Thorpe, but suddenly your number doesn't seem so exciting. **"Next to the wonder of seeing my Savior will be, I think, the wonder that I made so little use of the power of prayer."** (D.L. Moody)

### **A Prayer**

*Gracious Father, thank you for the Lord Jesus. Thank you that he shed his blood for me and for the forgiveness of my sins. Thank you that, because of him, I can approach you with confidence, assurance, and boldness. Please help me to better appreciate the privilege of prayer, and to make best use of every opportunity to pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **Day Four: Why prayer without work is presumption**

*“We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.” (Nehemiah 4:9)*

Is it possible to value prayer too highly? No. Is it possible to pray too much? No. But what if our focus on prayer somehow leads us to neglect other kinds of action through which God might work?

The book of Nehemiah records God’s people embarking on their efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in 445 BC (after their return from exile). As governor of the people, Nehemiah bore a special responsibility for leading the work.

It was hard work, not least because of the opposition the Jews faced from nearby enemies. As chapter 4 opens, Sanballat the Horonite (possibly governor of Samaria) and Tobiah the Ammonite are ‘angry’ and ‘greatly enraged’ at the progress being made (4:1), so plot together to fight against Jerusalem (4:8). Nehemiah has already marked himself out as a man of prayer (1:4-6, 2:4), but his response to the crisis in chapter 4 is massively important: “We prayed to our God AND posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (emphasis added).

A friend once shared with me the old adage: “**Prayer without work is presumption; work without prayer is atheism.**” That seems to be the biblical pattern. Prayerful dependence on God is absolutely vital – but this is not the only thing God expects from us. For example, it’s the pattern of Paul’s ministry – he knew he was utterly dependent on God answering prayer for his life and ministry to bear any fruit (as we’ll see in a future reflection), but that didn’t stop him from doing everything in his power to work for the growth of the gospel. Prayer goes hand-in-hand

with other kinds of action.

There will be times in life where all we can do is pray – maybe we’re too far removed from a situation to take other practical steps, or maybe ill health keeps us down. At times like that, remember that prayer is the single greatest action any of us can take. I’m convinced that the ‘little old ladies’ of the world – aka the ‘prayer warriors’ – are the driving force of more churches and ministries than we will ever know, this side of the new heavens and the new earth. Prayer *is* action, not a pious alternative to action.

At the same time, as we have opportunity, let’s join our prayers together with other kinds of action. It may be that our actions, feeble as they may be, are the answers to someone else’s prayers. **“Prayer is never an acceptable substitute for obedience. The sovereign Lord accepts no offering from His creatures that is not accompanied by obedience. To pray for revival while ignoring or actually flouting the plain precept laid down in the Scriptures is to waste a lot of words and get nothing for our trouble.” (A.W. Tozer)**

### **A Prayer**

*Gracious Father, thank you that you choose to hear my prayers, and that you work through the actions of sinful human beings like me. Please help me to be diligent in prayer for all things, but help me never to neglect the other kinds of actions that you would have me undertake. Help me to walk in obedience and faithfulness, and help me to toil and struggle with all your energy that you so powerfully work in me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## **Day Five: Why prayer is not powerful**

***But there was no voice, and no one answered. (1 Kings 18:26)***

Come back with me to Mount Carmel, to a critical moment in Israel's history. The people of God have succumbed to leaders who encourage them to abandon God's commandments and follow the false god, Baal. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah the prophet confronts the people with a clear choice: "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." To help them make their choice, Elijah proposes a contest between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Baal. The contest seems to be completely stacked against Yahweh and Elijah – Baal has 450 prophets; Yahweh has one. What's more, Baal was often seen as the god of fire, and this contest is going to be all about fire.

Elijah's proposal is that both 'sides' will build an altar, then lay a bull (cut into pieces) on the altar. "And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, 'It is well spoken.'" (1 Kings 18:24)

The prophets of Baal go first. For several hours, they cry out 'Oh Baal, answer us!' They whip themselves into a frenzy, cutting themselves with swords, 'limping' around the altar, 'raving on' – all to no avail. The writer's simple summary is powerful: "But there was no voice, and no one answered." (18:26) In the midst of it all, Elijah mocks: 'Keep going', he laughs. 'Maybe Baal's thinking, or on a journey, or busy, or asleep!'

Next, it's Elijah's turn. And in case the odds weren't stacked against him enough already, he asks for twelve jars of water to be poured over his

altar. Then, after all that, he offer this simple prayer: ““Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, Yahweh, answer me, that this people may know that you, Yahweh, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” (18:36-37) Immediately, the fire of Yahweh consumes the bull, the wood, the stones, and the leftover water lapping around the side of the altar. Game over. Yahweh wins.

We often speak about ‘the power of prayer’ – and rightly so, as long as we understand what is meant. For the power doesn’t actually lie with prayer itself. The power lies with God. If ‘the power of prayer’ really made all the difference, Baal would have won that contest, hands down. Hundreds of people in a frenzy of prayer for hours, versus one man praying for a few brief seconds? Elijah’s prayer was powerful because of the God to whom he prayed.

By all means, let’s keep speaking about the power of prayer – as long as we remember that it’s really just shorthand for speaking about the power of God. God is infinitely powerful; prayer is our way of humbly asking God to use his power. **“The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God’s hand, but a humble acknowledgment of helplessness and dependence.” (J.I. Packer)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for your infinite power. Thank you that you showed that power clearly in the time of Elijah, and that I can call on you in prayer, just as he did. Please help me to remember that I cannot force your hand in prayer. Please help me to humbly rely on you and depend on you for all things. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*



## **Day Six: Jesus' most shocking commandment**

***Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.  
(Matthew 5:44)***

During his earthly ministry, Jesus said some shocking things. Perhaps none is more shocking than this part of 'the Sermon on the Mount': "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:43-48)

Christopher Hitchens (died 2008), one of the most famous and boisterous atheists of recent years, saw the offensiveness of these words. Here's how he responded when asked about the idea that someone could be commanded to love:

"Perhaps the most immoral injunction of all is the injunction to love your enemies. That, I will not do. I know who my enemies are. At the moment, most of them are homicidal Islamist theocrats. I'm not going to love them. You go and love them, if you want to. But don't love them on my behalf. I'll get on with killing them, destroying them, erasing them. But the idea that you ought to love them is not a moral idea at all – it's a wicked idea, and I hope it doesn't take hold. What a disgusting order."

Hitchens, of course, is right – if there is no God.

Unfortunately for him, there is a God – but not just any God. The God who is there is a God who blesses the good and the evil. He shows perfect love to the unlovely. And Jesus knows what he's talking about. He was the

one who faced the agony of God’s wrath for our salvation. He was the one who prayed for his killers: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). Jesus calls us to do something radical, shocking – even offensive. He calls us to love those who hate us. When we do this, we are acting as God’s ‘sons’ – bearing the family likeness, being like him. And what greater act of love is there than to bring our enemies before our heavenly Father in prayer?

This has to be one of the most radical ideas in the history of the world. It’s almost unthinkable. I mean, I manage to pray for my wife and children every day; I work hard to pray for close friends and the people in my ministry. But does my pile of prayer cards include a category for ‘enemies’? I thank God for people who support my ministry, but do I pray for people who oppose what I’m doing? I’m praying for the persecuted Christians in Iraq and Syria, but do I pray for ISIS?

Before going any farther in thinking about prayer, let’s try and get our minds around this offensive idea. Prayer is not just a cosy way to uplift the people closest to us. If we really share God’s heart, we will love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. **“All of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.” (D.A. Carson)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, I praise you that you are holy and perfect. Thank you that you loved me, even when I was your enemy. Thank you that you bless the just and the unjust. Thank you for the perfect example of the Lord Jesus. Please help me to be like you, and to love my enemies and pray for those who oppose or persecute me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## Day Seven: Pray like Jesus

*Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. (Mark 6:45-46)*

Down through the ages, Christians have (unsurprisingly) looked to Jesus' practice of prayer for guidance on how we ought to pray. Just a couple of months ago, Mark Dever (one of my favourite Christian authors and preachers) published a brief, insightful essay over at *The Briefing*, looking at prayer in the life of Jesus. It's well worth reading the whole essay, but as a brief summary, Mark walks us through Jesus' prayer in Mark 6, showing not only what it teaches us about our own prayers, but also what it teaches us about Jesus himself:

**Where We Pray:** Jesus showed that where we pray can be important by removing himself from distractions. But more than this, by going up on a mountainside (just as he did at other key times in his ministry, and just as Moses and Elijah had done before him), Jesus hinted at his relationship with God and showed that the Law and the Prophets bore witness to his identity.

**With Whom He Prayed:** Jesus prayed alone – not exclusively, but this is certainly the emphasis in Mark's Gospel. "Prayer alone is no less real than prayer with others.... Private prayer in that sense saves us from insincerity and hypocrisy, because there's no human to impress." But again, this says more about Jesus than about us. By praying alone, Jesus showed that he was dependent on no one but God, and directed by no one but God. It showed the disciples 'who Jesus was working for'.

**When He Prayed:** Mark's Gospel records Jesus praying at three critical times: the beginning of his ministry (1:35), the middle of his ministry (Mark 6:45-46), and the end of his ministry (14:32-39). Mark Dever highlights the significance of this for us:

Jesus is a model for us in this, too: we should pray at crucial times. Like Jesus, we should be defined by *God's* call. Prayer reminds us of who we are—God's adopted children in Christ. It also reminds us of what we're about—doing God's will, as we serve him and serve others. I don't think it's possible to emphasize enough the importance of being defined by your relationship with God more than by any other characteristic. Prayer reminds us of this relationship, and encourages us to keep defining ourselves by this relationship.

What about its significance for Jesus? By praying at crucial times, Jesus showed that he (of all people!) was utterly dependent on God, and that his life continued to be defined by God's will.

If even Jesus, the God-man, prayed constantly, surely we can agree with the words of **Martin Luther: "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus' example in prayer. Thank you that his choices about prayer show us much about our own practices, and that they show us more of his identity and glory. Help me to model my own prayer life after my Lord's, and to come to you in complete dependence on Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **Day Eight: The simplest reason to pray**

***Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.***

***(Romans 12:12)***

Through the first week of '31 Days of Prayer', I've managed to avoid maybe the most basic reason why Christians ought to pray: God says so.

It might seem the most natural, obvious thing in the world – habitually asking our all-powerful heavenly Father to act in our lives and in the world should be a no-brainer. But just because something is good for us doesn't mean we naturally want to do it. Do children (and not a few adults) need to be told to eat their vegetables? Do sinful human beings need to be told to pray?

We'll come back to some of these verses in later reflections throughout the month, but take a look at these biblical commands to pray:

- “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” (Psalm 50:15)
- “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:12)
- “Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” (Eph 6:17-18)
- “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” (Col 4:2)
- “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thess 5:16-18)
- “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy

hands without anger or quarreling.” (1 Tim 2:8)

We live in an age of fleeting pleasures. To expand on the famous book title, we are amusing and distracting ourselves to death. Heck, while writing this brief reflection, I somehow ended up looking at IMDB’s page on Steve Guttenberg. Now *that’s* what I call distracted! How hard it is to make prayer a priority when we live in that world. John Piper nails many of us with these words: **“One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.”**

Most of us reading this booklet also live in a world of affluence. That brings its own temptation: the illusion that we’re self-sufficient, that we don’t need God. Why would I pray for my daily bread when there’s a week’s worth of food in the pantry?

On top of that, there’s our indwelling sin. We naturally forget God and push him to the margins of life. We think we can do it alone, or we doubt his goodness. We doubt his power to answer our prayers, or we doubt his willingness.

How gracious of our heavenly Father – the one who knows us perfectly, far better than we know ourselves – to address us simply and directly: ‘Pray! Don’t give up on prayer! Keep praying! Pray all the time!’

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, forgive me for those many times when I have neglected prayer. By your Spirit, please help me to heed your gracious commands to be constant in prayer. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## **Day Nine: Our passions or our prayers**

***You do not have, because you do not ask. (James 4:2)***

“I sometimes wonder whether all pleasures are not substitutes for Joy.” So said C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy* 1955. Over the last six decades, surely our world has become more filled with trinkets and tools that offer us more instant gratification (pleasure, as Lewis put it), but dissuade us from the pursuit of real, lasting joy – the kind of joy that God offers us in the gospel.

The book of James has a particular concern for showing that a driving desire for the pleasures of this world can be fatal for our prayer lives.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (James 4:1-3)

James addresses Christians who have enthroned personal pleasure as the driving goal of their lives – so much so that they will wage war against one another in the pursuit of this goal. “Of all that have tried the selfish experiment, let one come forth, and say that he has succeeded. He that has made gold his idol, has it satisfied him? He that has toiled in the fields of ambition, has he been repaid? ... Can any answer in the affirmative? Not one!” (Samuel Johnson)

Having destroyed their ability to relate to one another, the pursuit of pleasure destroys their ability to relate to God in prayer. In the first instance, they simply stop asking. “You do not have, because you do not

ask.” (4:2) Kent Hughes puts it this way: “The pleasure-mad Christian, who has some spiritual sensitivity, realizes his prayers are inappropriate.... So he asks for nothing. In fact, he doesn’t pray much at all because few of the things he wants are high on the divine priority list.”

Second, the prayers of this person become so self-centred that there is no hope of God answering in the affirmative: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” Prayer is not the genie-in-the-bottle approach to having our petty desires fulfilled.

As many have pointed out, there is nothing wrong with seeking pleasure (rightly defined). But when our definition of pleasure becomes focused on the things of this world – when we have so embraced ‘friendship with the world’ (4:4) that we long for the things it offers more than the things God offers – our desires are deeply distorted. And what follows is a deeply distorted prayer life. What’s the way forward? We’ll look at that tomorrow... **“Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin, or sin will choke prayer.” (J.C. Ryle)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, forgive me for the times that I prefer friendship with the world to seeking the joy that you offer in Jesus. Help me to see where there are passions at war within me, and to repent of these things. Please help me not to ask wrongly, to indulge my own passions. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*



## Day Ten: Delighting in the Lord

***Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires. (Psalm 37:4)***

Yesterday, we looked at how pursuing the pleasures of this world as our driving desire can be fatal to our prayer lives. 'You do not have, because you do not ask,' is James' blunt way of putting it. (Sorry for making you think of James Blunt just then.)

Isaiah puts it equally bluntly: Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (Isa 59:1-2) The Psalmist raises a similar idea in Psalm 66: "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer."

Yes, we have access to God in prayer solely because of the work of Jesus on our behalf. But at the same time, it's right to ask the questions: Am I cherishing sin (not just sinning as all people do, but *cherishing* sin)? Am I pursuing friendship with the world (James 4:4)? If our answer to either question is yes, it's a safe bet our prayers are being seriously hindered.

What's the alternative? David puts it beautifully in Psalm 37: "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires." (37:4)

Great, God will give me my heart's desires! Well, not so fast. This passage isn't a promise that God is going to give us whatever we want. And if you think, 'Bummer, I thought I was about to cash in,' you can be sure you're not taking delight in the Lord.

That phrase is key to understanding what this verse does (and does not) promise. If I take delight in the Lord, I won't be seeking friendship with the world. I won't be asking for things so I can spend them on my passions (James 4:3). Instead, I'll be asking for the things that are really important – the things that matter most to God.

What matters most to God? We'll look at that, and how it should shape our prayers, in a bit more detail in future reflections. But for now, let's just notice this relatively simple idea. Cherishing sin, pursuing friendship with the world, leaves us with no grounds for confidence that God will hear and answer our prayers. But if our trust is in Jesus and our delight is in the Lord, we can come before God with confidence and hope; we can share the closing words of Psalm 66: "Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!"

**“The unvarnished truth is that what we most frequently give thanks for betrays what we most highly value.” (D.A. Carson)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, I am regularly tempted to seek friendship with the world, rather than taking delight in you. Please forgive me. Please change my heart and mind so these words from Psalm 73 will be true of me: "Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is nothing on earth I desire besides you; my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."*

## Day Eleven: Praying with the Nazarenes

*What a privilege – and what a responsibility – to pray for persecuted Christians around the world! Today, instead of reflecting on prayer, here’s a prayer you can use to pray for persecuted Christians in northern Iraq. (I’ve used ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ throughout most of this prayer to give some sense of the way we can stand together in prayer for those in desperate need. Though this situation may have passed by the time you read this, I hope it will serve as a useful model of prayer.)*

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of prayer, and for the way in which it allows us to uphold and care for our brothers and sisters around the world. Thank you that we can pray for persecuted Christians around the world in their time of need.

We pray for all persecuted Christians around the world today, but especially for those believers in Iraq suffering at the hands of ISIS. Please protect them. Please watch over them and keep them safe. Please provide them with whatever they need during this hour of need – including food, water, medical care, blankets and mattresses, and safe refuge. We pray that no more lives will be lost, especially among innocent children.

In their time of desperate need, please draw near to your people and remind them of your sovereignty and your love. Please strengthen them with courage so that they will continue to confess the name of Jesus. Please look kindly and mercifully on any who deny Jesus under this intense pressure. Please restore and forgive them, just as you did for the apostle Peter.

Thank you that your word warns us of the reality of persecution. Thank

you that some people are even ‘counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name’ of the risen Jesus (Acts 5:41), and please help persecuted Christians to remember this. Please help all your people to remember the words of Jesus: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” (John 15:20) Please fill the hearts and minds of persecuted Christians with the incredible promise that Jesus gave: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...” (Matt 5:11-12) Please help them to remember that the victory is yours, so they can endure (Rev 13:10).

Father, thank you that Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. We pray for the members of ISIS. Please restrain them, and take away their opportunity to do evil. Please bring them to justice, and raise up authorities who will act to stop them. We also pray for the individual members of this group. Please show your mercy and grace to many of them, and save them. Please convict them of the terrible evil that they are doing. Please open their eyes and challenge them through the unwavering witness of your people. Please soften their hearts, bring them to trust in the Lord Jesus, and forgive them – just as you did for the apostle Paul even when he was persecuting your people.

We pray that you will work through the Iraqi government, and that they will act to protect needy people within their country. We pray that they will govern in such a way that your people may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1 Tim 2:2). We thank you that this issue has been raised in the international community, and we pray that there will be action from those entrusted with power and opportunity to help. I pray that my own nation will do whatever it can to help those who are

most vulnerable.

Father, please forgive me for the times when I am ashamed of the name of the Lord Jesus. Please strengthen me to be more courageous in standing up for Jesus. Please help me to learn from the witness of my brothers and sisters who are suffering so much. As well as praying, please help me to see what else I can do to help and support them.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your promise: “Yes, I am coming soon.” (Rev 22:20) Come, Lord Jesus!

## Day Twelve: Approaching God as Father

***This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven...’  
(Matthew 6:9)***

If you’ve been a Christian for a while, starting your prayers with the words ‘heavenly Father’ (or some similar variation) may have become so customary that you don’t think about it much. If you’re not a Christian, the idea of referring to the Creator as ‘Father’ may seem bizarre, even wrong. And if you’re a new Christian, maybe you haven’t got your head around this name for God and you’re still defaulting to safer options like ‘Lord’ or just ‘God’.

I guess that covers just about everyone. Calling God ‘Father’ when we pray has the potential to be a strange, confusing, or empty Christian habit. But it should never be any of those things. Instead, we should pause daily and reflect on the mind-blowing idea that we can call the God of the Universe ‘Father’.

This is an idea with massive, far-reaching implications. We’ll spend the next few days teasing out some of these ideas. For starters, I love the way Tim Chester starts his new book on prayer, *You Can Pray* (IVP, 2014).

“So many books and talks on prayer make prayer a discipline that we need to work on, so we can become good pray-ers. Prayer then becomes something we achieve. But it’s not. Prayer is a child asking her father for help – *nothing more, nothing less*.

“The disciples ask their question because they see Jesus praying. Jesus has a relationship of intimacy. He is the true Son of God, as Adam and Israel were intended to be. Moreover, he is the eternal Son of God. He has

always been in an intimate, loving relationship with his Father. He is the one and only Son, eternally begotten of the Father. He speaks only what he hears from his Father and does only what is his Father's will. He honours the Father, and the Father honours him.

“All of that is way beyond our experience of God – except that Jesus now invites us to share that relationship. By faith, we're united to Christ. We're 'in' him. His relationship with God becomes our relationship with God. His intimacy with the Father becomes our intimacy with the Father. *The Father will no more reject our prayers than he will reject the prayers of his own Son, Jesus. Amazing.*”

“When you pray, you may hear a voice accusing you, saying. ‘That's not a good prayer. You need to try harder. You need to do better.’ *This is the voice of Satan.* Satan is like the grumpy onlooker who remains resolutely unimpressed by the first words of a small child. The difference though is that Satan's intent is far more malign. He never wants you to talk to your Father. Don't listen to Satan. Rather, listen to your heavenly Father who applauds even your faltering, jumbled attempts.

“God gave his own Son for this very reason, so that you can call him ‘Father’, so that you can pray. Prayer is a gift and an opportunity we're given through Christ. It's nothing more and nothing less than a child asking her father for help.” (*You Can Pray*, pages 15-17)

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of calling on you as my Father. Please help me to depend on you utterly for everything. Thank you for the gift of being able to simply and humbly bring all my requests to you. Help me to listen to your voice and trust your promises. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Day 13: Approaching with Confidence

***This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven...’  
(Matthew 6:9)***

Yesterday, thanks to Tim Chester’s new book on prayer, we began looking at what it means for us to pray to God as Father. We focused on the simplicity that comes from knowing we can approach God in this way: “Prayer is a child asking her father for help – *nothing more, nothing less*” (*You Can Pray*, p. 16).

Today, I want us to think about the sense of intimacy and boldness that calling on God as Father allows us to have.

I’m the father of three small children. And like most parents of little ones, it’s not uncommon for our night’s sleep to be interrupted with a tap on the shoulder, a few tears, or a persistent whisper in the ear of ‘Dad, Dad!’ Maybe they’ve had a bad dream, or they’ve been woken up by a bump in the night and can’t get back to sleep.

When our little visitors arrive and say, “I can’t sleep, can I have a cuddle?” sometimes my wife and I try to usher them back to their own beds; sometimes we give up and let them clamber in between us. Maybe it’s payback for years of doing the same thing to my parents!

But here’s the point: they’re free to ask. They’re free to approach, boldly and unashamedly, and ask for help. It fits perfectly within our relationship. We’re not going to turn them away.

Are you someone who has trouble sleeping? If you are, I’m really sorry. I know how unpleasant that can be. But can I suggest something: coming into my house in the middle of the night, walking into my bedroom,



tapping me on the shoulder, waking me up and asking for a cuddle is probably not the best solution. You just don't have the right to approach me in that way. You're not my child, and I'm not your father.

When we approach God in prayer, he is not looking at us thinking, "What do you think you're doing asking me that? You don't have the right! Back off!" Calling on God as Father means we have the right to approach boldly, confidently, intimately. "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Heb 4:16) God's perfect love for us drives out our fear.

Go ahead – ask boldly. Tap God on the shoulder. He'll never turn away his child. **“Effective prayer is the fruit of a relationship with God, not a technique for acquiring blessings.” (Don Carson)**

### **A Prayer**

*Gracious God, thank you for giving me then incredible right to approach you as my Father. Thank you that you're unlike any earthly father, and that you are perfectly good. Thank you that you desire to give me good things. Please help me to approach you with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that my faith brings. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Day 14: Why doesn't God answer my prayers?

***Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'our Father in heaven...'***  
***(Matthew 6:8-9)***

One of the most confusing – and sometimes the most painful – aspects of prayer can be the reality of our 'unanswered prayers'.

Put together some of the pieces that we've seen already in this series of brief reflections:

- God is all-powerful – he can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Nothing is too hard for him.
- God is perfectly loving, and he welcomes the prayers of his children. Through Jesus' death for us, we have access to God and a relationship with him as Father, so we can approach with boldness and confidence.
- God is not just like a good earthly father. He is *the* perfect Father, and he delights to give good things to his children when they ask.

Why, then, do some of our prayer requests go unanswered? There is so much about prayer that can be understood simply by plumbing the depths of the fact that Jesus taught us to address God as 'our Father'. And it helps us enormously with this question.

Let me explain what I mean: when I take my kids shopping, we often walk past a particular ice cream shop. Almost every time we walk past this shop, at least one of the kids will look up at me and ask, 'Dad, can we have an ice cream?' Almost every time, I say no. Is this because I don't love them? Is it because I don't want to give them good things? Is it because it's outside my ability to give what they want? No. I say no

because I decide that an ice cream is not in their best interests at that moment.

The time will soon come when they can make that decision on their own – when their wisdom and insight about the world surpasses or matches mine. But for now, part of being their dad means knowing a bit more about what’s best for them than they do. They’re free to ask. But they also need to understand that, for all their asking, sometimes the loving answer will be ‘no’. Sometimes it will be ‘not right now’ or ‘later’. And yes, sometimes, they’ll get exactly what they ask for.

But of course, none of this means that their request for an ice cream went unanswered. It doesn’t mean they lacked the necessary ‘faith’ (if they thought I couldn’t do it, they probably wouldn’t have asked). It’s just that the answer was ‘no’.

A lot of what we call ‘unanswered prayer’ is nothing of the kind. Yes, there may be other reasons that our prayers are not answered. As we saw in an earlier reflection, cherishing sin in our hearts (Psalm 66:18) or asking with wrong motives so we can spend on our passions (James 4:3) dramatically hinder our prayers. But that’s not the whole story. It’s possible for us to make reasonable, godly requests of our heavenly Father – trusting his willingness and ability to provide – and still not receive what we asked for.

This helps relieve some (if not all) of the confusion and burden of what we normally call ‘unanswered prayer’. “Does God not care? Is it beyond his control? Or maybe it’s my fault – maybe I don’t have enough faith after all. Maybe I’m like Toni Colette’s character in *The Sixth Sense* when she said, ‘I’ve been praying, but I must not be praying right. I guess we’re just gonna have to answer each other’s prayers.’”

We can never pray perfectly. But thanks to the death of Jesus and the work of God's Spirit in us, we can pray genuinely. When we do that, our prayers never go unanswered. Just as my kids need to trust my judgement over their own for their nutritional needs, learning to trust our heavenly Father will sometimes means accepting that he lovingly says 'no – but good on you for asking'. I like the way Tim Keller puts it: "God will answer your prayers as though you had asked for what you would have asked for, had you known what he knows."

Or, as Robert Murray M'Cheyne says, **"God will either give you what you asked for, or something far better."**

### **A Prayer**

*Gracious God, thank you that you are my perfect Father in heaven. Thank you that you know all things, and you truly know what's best for me. Thank you that I can bring all my requests to you, and help me to keep doing this with humility and trust. Please help me to remember that you know what is best for me, and that you have a complete, eternal perspective on all things. Please strengthen my trust in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Day 15: Stop telling people not to pray

***When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.***

***(Matthew 6:7)***

Over the years, whenever I've heard a prayer meeting of any kind being advertised, it's usually introduced with this kind of caveat: "By the way, you don't have to pray out loud or anything – just saying 'Amen' at the end of other people's prayers is fine."

'You don't have to pray out loud.' Why do we say this?

I'm sure there are good intentions behind it. We genuinely want people to come to our prayer meetings, and we know some won't if they're expected to lead others in prayer. We don't want to pressure people into praying. For new Christians, praying out loud can be intimidating. There might be good reasons for a person's hesitancy – my kids sometimes struggle to pray because they're aware of God's majesty, and that's a good thing. And yes, saying a heartfelt 'Amen' to someone else's prayer is a wonderful thing.

But let's consider Jesus' words in Matthew 6, and the idea (one we've been considering over the last few days) that prayer is about a dependent child talking to a heavenly Father. "When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven...'" (Matt 6:7-9)

The Lord's Prayer is packed with rich theology and Old Testament

allusions, but the prayer itself is stunning and deliberate in its simplicity – a grand total of 57 words (in Greek, as recorded by Matthew), taught specifically to counteract the idea that prayer is about using special words or eloquent, long-winded phrases to catch God’s attention.

Here’s how Tim Chester puts it: “Think about how earthly fathers react when their children first speak. They don’t go, ‘What did you say? “Dada”? It’s not “Dada”. It’s “Father”. How can you be so ignorant? Don’t talk to me until you’ve learnt how to speak properly.’ No, in my experience, earthly fathers tend to say, ‘Did you hear that? She said, “Daddy”. She’s so amazing.’ (And all the while, I’m thinking, ‘It just sounded like a gurgle to me!’) Most fathers love it when their children talk to them. It may be garbled and inarticulate, but they’re thrilled to hear their child speak, especially when they call their name.” (*You Can Pray*, p. 18)

What might we be inadvertently saying – or what might we be heard to say – when we tell people, ‘You don’t need to pray out loud or anything’? I think a lot of people hear it as something like, “Listen, praying out loud takes quite a bit of experience. You might not be up to it just yet. You wouldn’t want to embarrass yourself or use the wrong words or anything. You might not be articulate enough to pray – but you can probably manage to say ‘Amen’ without messing it up.”

I’m not suggesting asking the brand new Christian to lead prayers at church on Sunday, and I’m not saying that giving permission not to pray out loud is always bad – there are often good, kind reasons to put people at ease. But we need to be careful in the way we speak about corporate prayer. I’d like to see it put more like this: “You don’t have to pray out loud if you don’t want to – but really, if you’re a Christian, there

shouldn't be any reason why you can't pray out loud when you're gathered with a group of other Christians. God loves to hear from us, and we have so much to pray for. It doesn't matter if you're not articulate or you struggle to know what to say. That's alright. Just pray in whatever way you're able, and we'll say 'Amen' when you're done."

I've sat through waaaay too many awkward silences at prayer meetings, and I wonder if it's because of the way in which people turn 'praying out loud' into something it's not. It shouldn't be scary. It shouldn't require brilliantly chosen words or careful preparation. Praying after Bible study or praying at the prayer meeting should be just like all prayer – simple, genuine faith, expressed in whatever words we can find, to a great and powerful heavenly Father. **“Fear not because your prayer is stammering, your words feeble, and your language poor. Jesus can understand you.” (J.C. Ryle)**

### **A Prayer**

*Dear heavenly Father, thank you for the things Jesus taught about prayer. Please help me to remember that you don't hear me because of my many words, or because I use the right words, but because of Jesus. Please help me to worry less about the words I use, and more about praying to you in trust. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Day 16: A best-selling guide on how not to pray

It may seem a bit mean-spirited and curmudgeonly to talk about prayer by being negative. After all, there are so many positive things to say. But sometimes, talking about the negative – refuting popular but unbiblical (mis)understandings of prayer – can help us to understand more of the truth about prayer.

In the last 15 years, one book on prayer has been more influential in mainstream Christian circles than any other: *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson.

The book was released in 2000, so its moment has passed. But its influence remains, and it continues to sell around the world (it's now passed 10 million copies).

What's it about? You might be surprised to know that *The Prayer of Jabez* is based entirely around two small verses in 1 Chronicles – yep, the same 1 Chronicles that Christians always use when they need a go-to reference to talk about the supposed obscurity of the Old Testament. *“Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, ‘I gave birth to him in pain.’ Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, ‘Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.’ And God granted his request.”* (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

How has Wilkinson built an industry on this prayer? “I challenge you to make the Jabez prayer for blessing part of the daily fabric of your life,” he writes. “To do that, I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next thirty days. By the end of that time, you’ll be noticing significant changes in your life, and the prayer will be on its way to becoming a treasured, lifelong habit. Dear Reader [he lost me at ‘Dear



Reader’], I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief – only one sentence with four parts – and tucked away in the Bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God.”

It sounds nice, and might make you feel warm, fuzzy, and excited. But the problems with this view of prayer are many. For example:

- It encourages us to presume upon God (“a daring prayer that God always answers”?), rather than acknowledging that God remains sovereign, and sometimes says no to our requests. There is a big difference between approaching with confidence and approaching with presumption.
- It turns prayer into a formula by which God can be manipulated – almost ‘hypnotised’, as one review puts it – into answering, directly contradicting Jesus’ own teaching on prayer in Matthew 6. Formula and manipulation might be what some world religions mean by ‘prayer’, but it’s not what the Bible means.
- It rips the actual prayer of Jabez – which, in itself, is a good and commendable prayer – completely out of context, and so teaches Christians exactly the wrong way to read the Bible (pick a random verse for some moral guidance or a dose of inspiration). “[Wilkinson] writes as if he has unearthed some long lost secret amulet from the caves of the Old Testament that will unlock God’s vault of blessing for us.”
- Should we really expect ever-increasing happiness and unending prosperity in our ministry? What would the apostle Paul’s testimony and experience tell us? Would it all have looked very different if he’d prayed Jabez’s prayer every day? What about Jesus’ experience?

Don't let the privileges of prayer lead you into confusion, or into abusing this incredible privilege. Make your prayers genuinely biblical – not a superficial, self-help misuse of the Bible. **“Prayer is not like a good recipe: simply follow a set of mechanical directions and everything turns out right in the end.” (D.A. Carson)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of prayer. Please help me to never abuse this privilege, or to think I can manipulate you into giving what I want. Please help to pray with humility, with a real trust in you, and with my heart focused on your desires and priorities, not my own. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Day 17: Why praying beats voting

***I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people — for kings and all those in authority... (1 Timothy 2:1-2)***

Here in New Zealand, as I write, we're just a couple of weeks away from our latest national election (September 20, 2014). It's a strange thing – I'm not exactly excited about the election, but I should be. How many people in the world would give anything – how many people down through the years *have given* everything – for the right to vote as freely as I can? (That's if I can be bothered, in a land of non-compulsory voting.) I've written elsewhere about how and why Christians should be involved in the political process, about why we should care enough to vote, and about why we should put serious thought into our decision at the ballot box. But as important as our vote is, Christians make an even more important contribution to the political process. It's our prayer.

There's really not that many things we're specifically told to pray about. So when it does happen, we should pay particular attention. So 1 Timothy 2 is an important passage on prayer: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim 2:1-4) There's at least two crucial ideas here:

(1) Most obviously, we must pray for our political leaders. That's true for those living in western democracies (most of you), but it's also true for leaders in all political systems everywhere. And it makes sense that we

commit them to God in prayer, since – despite outward appearances – their power is not their own. God entrusts people with political leadership to fulfill his good purposes (Romans 13), and he controls and directs the hearts of even the most powerful world leaders (Proverbs 21:1). So pray for your leaders.

(2) The role of secular government is *not* to promote the gospel itself. But we should long for governments to lead their nations in such a way that God's people can get on with their core business, unhindered: to live lives of peace and godliness, and to proclaim the news of God our Saviour, so that people are saved. So, knowing God's desire for governments, we are to *pray* that this comes about. This is probably the most distinctive Christian contribution to the political process. Yes, praise God, most of us can vote. Most of us can act in other ways, we can speak out, and we can protest in much the same way as our non-Christian neighbours. But we can do something they can never do: Pray to the God of the universe. Your most important contribution to the political process happens not when you step into the ballot box, or when you write a letter to your MP, or when you take part in a peaceful protest march. It happens on your knees.

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the governing authorities you've placed over me. Please enable them to govern in ways that are pleasing to you, and which uphold the values and ideas taught in the Bible. In particular, please work through my government so that your people can live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Day 18: Prayer and anxiety

***Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)***

I find there's something strangely comforting about getting anxious. When I start to worry about the pressures of life that are weighing on me – relationships, money, workload, health, whether the Rabbitohs will win the Grand Final – retreating into the safe space of personal anxiety is a cosy little coping mechanism.

But you know what I don't like to admit but I've realised is true? Anxiety isn't just a coping mechanism or a safe place. Anxiety is sin. Anxiety is sin because anxiety is the opposite of actively trusting in God.

Let me be clear right up front. I'm not talking about people who suffer 'anxiety disorders' or specific things of that nature. That's well beyond my areas of expertise, but it seems to be something of a different order. What I'm talking about is the ordinary, everyday tendency to feel anxious and worried by the day-to-day pressures of life.

In Matthew 6, Jesus tells his followers not to worry about their lives, 'what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear' (Matt 6:25). Let's face it, these are people who had lots more right to feel anxious about those things that most of us ever will – but Jesus still tells them not to worry. He offers a number of alternatives to anxiety:

- It achieves absolutely nothing anyway (6:27, 34)
- Look at nature – the birds, the flowers – and see God's sustaining hand at work. Remember you're more valuable than birds and flowers, so

trust God that God will provide for you, too (6:26, 28-30)

- There's something more important, more worth seeking, than your food and clothing: God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Pursue these as your highest priorities, and trust that God will provide for your physical needs as well.

The sum total of Jesus' message is this: becoming anxious about our daily needs demonstrates a lack of trust in our heavenly Father. It shows that we are still people of 'little faith' (6:30).

The best antidote to anxiety, then, is prayer. For it's in prayer that we express our trust in God. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:6-7)

When I'm feeling anxious, I face a number of traps. Curl up into a semi-comforting ball of worries as a coping mechanism, while I grit my teeth and face the big, scary world. Fool myself into thinking I can (or must) handle my worries all on my own. Lash out at the people around me. Become paralysed by fear.

What terrible alternatives – especially when something infinitely better is offered to me. I am freely invited – maybe even commanded – to bring all my anxieties to God in prayer. I can ask the all-powerful, all-loving God of the universe, my heavenly Father, to intervene in the situations that are worrying me. "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Such simple words, but such a life-changing message!

If anxiety is a sinful lack of trust in God, then prayer is the opposite. It's hard to beat the words of the old hymn *What A Friend We Have In Jesus*:

What a Friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer!

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

**A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you that you care for me. Forgive me for the many ways I fail to trust you as I should. Please help me not to become anxious, but instead to present all my requests to you in every situation. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **Day 19: If God is sovereign, why do I pray?**

*The Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Exodus 32:14)*

If you're going to think about prayer, and if you're reading your Bible carefully, sooner or later there's an important question that might rub up against you: Does prayer really make a difference to a sovereign God?

It's hard to read your Bible and come to any conclusion other than God is totally and utterly sovereign. He is in control of all things, everywhere. Moreover, his plan for salvation has been in place since 'before the foundation of the world' (Ephesians 1:4). He's not sitting up in heaven, nervously wondering if things will turn out okay. Everything proceeds just as he planned. God is not a human being, that he should change his mind (1 Samuel 15:29).

And yet, repeatedly throughout the Bible, God's people's are told to pray. We're told to present our requests in all situations. But why? If God is totally sovereign – if he is working out his plans and purposes in the world, and if nothing and no one can derail those plans – why bother with prayer?

We can't deal with this massive topic in one short reflection, so let's deal with this over a couple of days.

To begin with, what solutions to this supposed 'dilemma' have been proposed? I guess one obvious response is to stop praying. If that's your response, well, please go back and read your Bible. Go back and read the rest of this series on prayer. Pray that God would help you to pray! At the end of all that, if you still think responding to God's sovereignty by not



praying is a right, biblical response, something is seriously missing. Prayer is commended and commanded over and over and over again in the Bible. Using God's sovereignty as a reason for abandoning prayer is probably just the lazy man's excuse. God knows what we need before we ask, yet Jesus still tells us to pray (Matthew 6:8).

Alternately, some attempt to dismiss the other side of the equation, claiming that God is not really sovereign. We can't go into this in detail now – this is a short post on prayer, not a massively long post on 'predestination'. But to put it bluntly, this option is just as unbiblical as the first. The truth of God's complete sovereignty comes up again and again in the Bible. It's just everywhere, in big and small ways. As a tiny sample, I'd suggest reading Proverbs 16:9, Proverbs 21:1, Matthew 10:29-31, Romans 9:6-24, Ephesians 2:1-10, Acts 13:48 and Ephesians 1:3-6. God is in charge.

Perhaps the most common solution to the question, 'Why pray if God is sovereign?' is to tweak the purpose of prayer. The argument usually goes something like this: "Yes, prayer changes things – but what it really changes is not God, but us! When we pray, our minds and our wills are transformed and changed so that they align properly with God's will. That's the real change – that's why we pray."

It sounds pious, and there's certainly some truth in it. But it's far from the whole story. In fact, when put in the kind of stark terms I used above (as it often is), it becomes decidedly unhelpful. Does prayer change us? Yes. But does it change other things, as well? Absolutely!

We'll continue looking at this idea tomorrow, but for now, here's how A.W. Pink puts it: **"Prayer is the way and means God has appointed for the communication of the blessings of His**

**goodness to His people.”**

**A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, I thank you and praise you, because you are completely sovereign. And I rejoice that you delight to hear and answer my prayers. Please help me to understand how prayer coexists with your sovereignty, and help me to pray to you more as a result. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **Day 20: Does God change his mind?**

*The Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Exodus 32:14)*

Yesterday, we began to wrestle with a key question around the Bible's teaching on prayer: 'If God is completely sovereign, why should I pray?' The question comes from the existence of two unavoidable biblical truths: God is in complete control of all things, and is working out his plans and purposes in deliberate fashion; yet prayer is not just encouraged throughout the Bible – it is commanded.

Moreover, the Bible's writers didn't believe prayer just changes our wills so they mesh more comfortably with God's. The Bible consistently portrays prayer as actually changing things.

So how do we begin to think through these issues?

Today, let's focus on maybe the clearest and best-known example of prayer changing things: Moses' intercessory prayer for the people of Israel, recorded in Exodus 32. God's people have been rescued from slavery (Exodus 1-19), they have heard God speak from Mount Sinai (20:22), and they've agreed to keep the covenant with the Lord (24:3, 7). But with Moses taking a long time up on the mountain, they brazenly break the covenant by making an idol and worshipping it with offerings and a feast. God is rightly angry, and says these stunning words to Moses: "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (32:10)

The Lord will start again with Moses, but the people must be destroyed because of their open rebellion against their Saviour and God.

However, in the very next verse, we read that, “Moses interceded with [some translations say he ‘implored’] the Lord his God” (v. 11). He appeals to the importance of God’s reputation among the Gentiles, and to God’s earlier promises to Abraham. He pleads with God, “*Turn* from your burning anger and *relent* from this disaster against your people” (v. 12, emphasis added).

And then, in one of the most breathtaking moments in the Bible, “the Lord *relented* from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people” (v. 14).

What’s going on here? How does this work?

To begin with, it seems clear that prayer is making a difference. That’s good, right? We have some clear biblical evidence that prayer actually changes things. But how? Does God, in fact, change?

A small but vital detail in the passage comes in verse 7. God tells Moses: ‘Go down’. “Go to your people. Go down at once, because your people have sinned, and they need you.” Why would God send Moses to the people if he intended to destroy them? Verse 7 gives us a clue that God intended to save them, *through the intercession of their appointed mediator*. God draws Moses along to intercede for the people – by telling him to go to them, and by describing their sin in detail. When he says, “leave me alone ... that I may destroy them,” it’s almost like he’s saying, “*If* you leave me alone, *then* I will destroy them – but you need to intercede for these people.”

David Platt sums it up like this: “Moses is not changing the plan that God had offered. He is fulfilling the plan that God had ordained.”

There’s so much more to say, so let’s come back to this again tomorrow...

For now, here's a short quote from D.A Carson to sum up a biblical perspective: **“Prayer is God’s appointed means for appropriating the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus.”**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for hearing the prayers of Moses, and for responding. Thank you for relenting from sending your wrath on your people in the Old Testament. Thank you for relenting from sending your wrath on me, even when I deserve it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## **Day 21: Your prayers and God's predestined plans**

*And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. (Revelation 8:3-4)*

Over the last couple of days, we've been thinking through the question of how prayer relates to the complete sovereignty of God. If God is really in charge, why pray? Do our prayers really change anything (other than us and our wills)? We introduced the question on Day 19, and yesterday we looked at the example of Moses praying to God in Exodus 32.

Today, we'll try to bring some more clarity to this question by looking at Revelation 8 (yep, you read that right – clarity by looking at the book of Revelation!). Three times in Revelation, as the culminating moments in God's eternal plans and purposes symbolically unfold, we read about 'the prayers of the saints' (Rev 5:8; 8:3; 8:4) rising before God together with a fragrant offering of incense. They're strange passages, but remember, this is Revelation – using startling, mind-boggling imagery to lift our horizons and to make its point.

In these chapters, God's plans and promises reach fulfillment – the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is praised and glorified, and the people he has saved are finally vindicated. We're reading about climactic moments in all of history. But there, at the heart of it all, rising up to God as a pleasing offering, are the prayers of his people.

Clearly, nothing was ever going to stop this moment from being fulfilled. This is what God has planned all along. And yet the prayers of God's

people are mentioned here as a key element in the fulfilment of these plans. They rise before God as a pleasing offering, and as a key part of history reaching its climax.

Here's what I think it means: in Revelation, **God brings about the fulfillment of his eternal plans and purposes in response to the prayers of his people.**

Could he have done it without the prayers of his people? Of course. But does he do it apart from the prayer of his people? No. **In God's sovereignty, and because he is a personal, relational God – our Father in heaven, no less – he graciously chooses to respond to the prayers of his people, and even to include them as part of his ultimate plans.**

This, I think, is about the best we can do in capturing the Bible's emphasis here. How does God's sovereignty coexist with the reality that prayer actually changes things? Because God, in his sovereignty, chooses to unfold his plans in response to the prayers of his people.

Some have likened this to the way God works through the preaching of the gospel. God could have chosen any way (or hundreds of different ways) to save people. But in his providence, he's chosen to save people through the gospel about Jesus being proclaimed by human messengers. Ordinary people like you and me get to be involved in God's plans to save other people! Mind-blowing!!

Isn't our heavenly Father gracious? Isn't he good? He doesn't just save us; he also invites us, encourages us, and even commands us to play a part in the spread of the gospel throughout the world. He calls us to pray. And he promises to hear, and to answer. So let's get on with praying!

**“It is God’s will through His wonderful grace, that the prayers of His saints should be one of the great principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ’s kingdom in the world. When God has something very great to accomplish for His church, it is His will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of His people.” (Jonathan Edwards)**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, forgive me for the times when I don’t pray as I should. Please help me to pray for the growth of the gospel in the world. Thank you that you so graciously include me, a sinner, in your kingdom. Thank you that you also invite me to pray for the spread of the gospel. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*



## Day 22: Is prayer the gaping hole in our lives?

*You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. (2 Corinthians 1:11)*

There's a beautiful line I heard some years ago. I've never verified its accuracy because, frankly, if it's not true, I don't want to know. But it fits with the life and character of the man who supposedly said it – a Bishop in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, a wonderful man who died some years ago now. This Bishop is supposed to have told his ministers: **“If you spend two hours every morning praying for your church and praying for your people, you can have the rest of the day off.”**

Superb. That's my kind of pastoral advice!

What was he saying? Clearly, he's not encouraging laziness or presumptuous inaction among pastoral workers. He was sending a very clear message to his leaders: *Your most important contribution to the growth of the gospel in people's lives is your prayers. That's the measure of your ministry. Prayer is your work.*

In recent years, many have spoken of a 'resurgence' in reformed theology in some circles (especially among young leaders in the United States). In other circles, robust reformed theology has already held sway for a number of years. But as vital as good theology is to the growth of the gospel, what about prayer? Is prayer seen as equally important? **John Piper** was recently quoted as saying, **“Prayer is a huge hole in the canvas of the reformed resurgence.”**

It's worth looking at the example of the apostle Paul – the greatest theologian in the history of the church, and Jesus' handpicked apostle to take the gospel to the nations. Yet despite all his gifts and his unique divine appointment, Paul knew he was utterly reliant on the prayers of God's people for the success of his ministry. Look at these examples:

- “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to *strive together with me in your prayers* to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.” (Romans 15:30-31)
- “You also *must help us by prayer*, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us *through the prayers of many*.” (2 Cor 1:11)
- “Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that *through your prayers* and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.” (Phil 1:18-9)
- “At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that *through your prayers* I will be graciously given to you.” (Philemon 22)

Paul didn't think that stuff just happened. He didn't expect the gospel to bear fruit 'just like that'. It all happened as God's people prayed.

Likewise, in the book of Acts, prayer is vital to the spread of the gospel, and to the life and ministry of all the apostles (eg: Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:31; 6:4; 12:5, among others).

For all of us – but especially those that have the privilege and responsibility of leading and pastoring God's people – do we presume that God will bless our ministry because of our robust reformed theology, our brilliant preaching, our strategic planning, or our insightful insights into culture, if all the while we fail to pray? Do we think it will just happen? Or

do we think it will happen *through our prayers*, and *through the prayers of many*?

Pray for your church, your ministry, your people, and for the growth of the gospel. **Charles Spurgeon**, the ‘Prince of Preachers’, is reported to have said, **“I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach.”** He also said, **“We shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians.”**

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, please forgive me for the times when I neglect prayer. Please convict me of absolute importance of prayer, so that I may be like Paul in my reliance on prayer. Please make me, my family and my church more prayerful. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## Day 23: ‘Relenting Wrath’ and the Sovereign God

*Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. (Philippians 1:18-9)*

We’ve spent the last several days circling around a big topic related to prayer: How does the importance of prayer coexist with the sovereignty of God? As we’ve put the pieces together, my hope and prayer for you is that the sovereignty of God won’t undermine your determination to pray. Rather, I’m praying that it will be just the opposite: because God is in complete control, and in his sovereignty he graciously chooses to act in response to the prayers of his people, we should be moved to give prayer a far greater place in our lives, both individually and corporately.

However, given how briefly we’ve addressed this topic, no doubt there are plenty of questions unanswered. Today, as a way of helping you answer some of those questions for yourself, I’m providing a collection of resources that address this issue in clear, biblical ways.

**David Platt: ‘Relenting Wrath’** – (available at [www.t4g.org](http://www.t4g.org)). If you have the time (an hour), this is the place to go. David Platt lays out the Bible’s teaching on this topic in a deep, passionate plea for prayer. It will be good for your soul.

**John Piper: A Theology of Prayer in Three minutes** (available at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)): If you have slightly less time, this will still help you. Piper discusses the place of Revelation 5 and 8 in our understanding of prayer and God’s sovereignty.

**Sam Freney, Satan's lies about prayer** (available at [www.thebriefing.com.au](http://www.thebriefing.com.au)): An excellent article, covering several aspects of prayer, including the question of whether prayer really changes things.

**John Piper, The Sovereignty of God and Prayer** (available at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)): In this article (written before I was born!), Piper describes the ways in which biblical categories of thought combine to shape our understanding of prayer: “just as God will see to it that his Word is proclaimed as a means to saving the elect, so he will see to it that all those prayers are prayed which he has promised to respond to. I think Paul’s words in Romans 15:18 would apply equally well to his preaching and his praying ministry: “I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles.” Even our prayers are a gift from the one who “works in us that which is pleasing in his sight” (Hebrews 13:21). Oh, how grateful we should be that he has chosen us to be employed in this high service! How eager we should be to spend much time in prayer!”

**Tim Chester, Prayer and the sovereignty of God** (available at [www.timchester.wordpress.com](http://www.timchester.wordpress.com)): I always appreciate Tim Chester’s insights into the Bible, and this is no exception: God has ordained that he will be affected by our loving communication to him.... From eternity he has woven our prayers into the cause and effect of the universe.”

## **Day 24: Fifty great quotes on prayer**

As I was putting together '31 Days of Prayer', I scoured books and websites for quotes on prayer that would encourage and inspire me in my own prayer life, and would help as I wrote this series. Over the course of these 31 days, not all the quotes are going to find their way into the posts, but they're just too good to pass up. So, here are 50 of the best quotes on prayer that I could find. Be challenged and encouraged by the insights of God's people! Which is your favourite?

“God likes to see His people shut up to this, that there is no hope but in prayer. Herein lies the Church's power against the world.” (Andrew Bonar)

“Prayer is the most tangible expression of trust in God.” (Jerry Bridges)

“The great antidote to anxiety is to come to God in prayer. We are to pray about everything. Nothing is too big for Him to handle, and nothing is too small to escape His attention.” (Jerry Bridges)

“Our prayer must not be self-centered. It must arise not only because we feel our own need as a burden we must lay upon God, but also because we are so bound up in love for our fellow men that we feel their need as acutely as our own. To make intercession for men is the most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.” (John Calvin)

“To know God as the sovereign disposer of all good, inviting us to present our requests, and yet not to approach or ask of him, were so far from availing us, that it were just as if one told of a treasure were to allow it to remain buried in the ground.” (John Calvin)

“We ought to contemplate providence not as curious and fickle persons are wont to do but as a ground of confidence and excitement to prayer. When he informs us that the hairs of our head are all numbered it is not to encourage trivial speculations but to instruct us to depend on the fatherly care of God which is exercised over these frail bodies.” (John Calvin)

“Believers do not pray, with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray, in order that they may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from Him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things.” (John Calvin)

“All of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.” (D.A. Carson)

“You can greatly improve your prayer life if you combine these first two principles: set apart time for praying, and then use practical ways to impede mental drift.” (D.A. Carson)

“The unvarnished truth is that what we most frequently give thanks for betrays what we most highly value.” (D.A. Carson)

“Effective prayer is the fruit of a relationship with God, not a technique for acquiring blessings.” (D.A. Carson)

“Prayer is not like a good recipe: simply follow a set of mechanical directions and everything turns out right in the end.” (D.A. Carson)

“We cannot justify our relative prayerlessness by saying that those who are peculiarly effective are more gifted than we.” (D.A. Carson)

“We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray.” (D.A. Carson)

“People do not drift toward Holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. ... We slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.” (D.A. Carson)

“Prayer does not fit us for the greater works; prayer is the greater work.” (Oswald Chambers)

“Prayer is the battle; it is a matter of indifference where you are. Whichever way God engineers circumstances, the duty is to pray.” (Oswald Chambers)

“Prayer is a child asking her Father for help – *nothing more, nothing less.*” (Tim Chester)

“I’m not a great pray-er. I’m easily distracted. ... But in Jesus and through Jesus, I’m a great pray-er. I pray prayers that God delights to hear and delights to answer.” (Tim Chester)

“In many ways, it’s a mistake to focus on prayer itself, as if prayer was some kind of skill to be acquired. All that a child needs to know is that she is needy and her father loves her. And all you need to know to pray well is that you’re needy and your heavenly Father loves you.” (Tim Chester)

“It is God’s will through His wonderful grace, that the prayers of His saints should be one of the great principal means of carrying on the



designs of Christ's kingdom in the world. When God has something very great to accomplish for His church, it is His will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of His people.” (Jonathan Edwards)

“There is no way that Christians, in a private capacity, can do so much to promote the work of God and advance the kingdom of Christ as by prayer.” (Jonathan Edwards)

“The mighty, all-powerful God, who by rights should destroy us as his enemies, has instead reached out to us in love, wiped away our sins, and adopted us as his own children. He has become our Father, and he allows us to approach him and pour out our requests to him at any time, promising that he will hear us and give us every good gift. This is the first, and in a sense the only, necessary reason for prayer.” (Phillip Jensen)

“The true posture for prayer is repentance and humility. We approach the holy God in prayer only through his grace to us in Jesus Christ.” (Phillip Jensen)

“God will answer your prayers as though you had asked for what you would have asked for, had you known what He knows.” (Tim Keller)

“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” (Martin Luther)

“We pray because we are unworthy to pray. Our prayers are heard precisely because we believe that we are unworthy. We become worthy to pray when we risk everything on God's faithfulness alone.” (Martin Luther)

“Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of God's willingness.” (Martin Luther)

“God will either give u what you ask for, or something far better.”

(Robert Murray M’Cheyne)

“What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.”

(Robert Murray M’Cheyne)

“Next to the wonder of seeing my Savior will be, I think, the wonder that I made so little use of the power of prayer.” (D.L. Moody)

“The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God’s hand, but a humble acknowledgment of helplessness and dependence.” (J.I. Packer)

“Prayer is the way and means God has appointed for the communication of the blessings of His goodness to His people.” (Arthur W. Pink)

“One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.” (John Piper)

“Prayer is a huge hole in the canvas of the Reformed resurgence.”

(Attributed to John Piper)

“God is not an employer looking for employees. He is an Eagle looking for people who will take refuge under his wings.” (John Piper)

“Prayer is a wartime walkie talkie for spiritual warfare, not a domestic intercom to increase the comforts of the saints.” (John Piper)

“Prayer is one of God’s appointed means of bringing the elect to faith.”

(John Piper)

“Instead of imagining all the things we can accomplish, we ask God to do what only he can accomplish. Yes, we work, we plan, we organise, and we create, but we do it all while we fast, while we pray, and while we constantly confess our need for the provision of God.” (David Platt)

“Perhaps the greatest hindrance to the spread of the Gospel today is the people of God trying to do the work of God apart from the power and presence of God.” (David Platt)

“Fear not because your prayer is stammering, your words feeble, and your language poor. Jesus can understand you.” (J.C. Ryle)

“Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin, or sin will choke prayer.” (J.C. Ryle)

“What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!” (Joseph Scriven)

“Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the Kingdom. If you may have everything by asking in his name, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is.” (Charles Spurgeon)

“We shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians.” (Charles Spurgeon)

“Shall I give you yet another reason why you should pray? I have preached my very heart out. I could not say any more than I have said. Will not your prayers accomplish that which my preaching fails to do? Is it not likely that the Church has been putting forth its preaching hand but not its praying hand? Oh dear friends! Let us agonize in prayer.” (Charles Spurgeon)

“I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach.” (Charles Spurgeon)

“Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.” (Charles Spurgeon)

“Prayer is the open admission that without Christ we can do nothing. And prayer is the turning away from ourselves to God in the confidence that He will provide the help we need. Prayer humbles us as needy, and exalts God as wealthy.” (A.W. Tozer)

“Prayer is never an acceptable substitute for obedience. The sovereign Lord accepts no offering from His creatures that is not accompanied by obedience. To pray for revival while ignoring or actually flouting the plain precept laid down in the Scriptures is to waste a lot of words and get nothing for our trouble.” (Tozer)

## **Day 25: Dust off your prayer book and learn to pray**

Prayer is meant to be simple – right? Just a helpless, trusting child talking to a loving Father in heaven. No fancy words needed, no magical techniques required, no limits on what we can pray about.

So if that's true, is there a place for actually working at the content of our prayers? Does it matter what we pray for, or how we pray? Or is it more godly for our prayers to remain in a state of spiritual infancy, lest we try to impress God with our words?

Like most things in the Christian walk, a life of prayer is caught more than it's taught. Over the next couple of days, we'll look at what the Bible teaches us about the content of our prayers – how the model prayer of Jesus teaches us, and how the examples of Paul's prayers shape our understanding. But for today, let's think about something that, for most of us, has probably gone well and truly out of fashion: using formulaic prayers.

The very word 'formulaic' repels most of us. It sounds stodgy, negative, like something from a stuffy, bygone era. But if we choose our formulaic prayers well, there is incredible blessing and richness to be gained by using the pre-packaged prayers of others. We can also learn to pray well publicly- not that public prayer requires great eloquence, but it should be filled with biblical content and priorities that will teach and edify our listeners.

Let me offer two examples. The Book of Common Prayer is perhaps the greatest thing about the tradition of Anglicanism (my own denominational background). Though first written hundreds of years ago, the BCP contains rich, Bible-saturated prayers that will edify and help

any believer who's struggling to pray on their own. My favourite prayer is this confession, to be said by God's people before they share 'holy communion'. Get past the old school language and soak this in:

*Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter Serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

Who would understand the gravity of their sin, and appreciate God's mercy more: someone who prays that prayer, or a churchgoer who hears someone pray, "Dear God, sorry for all the times we've stuffed up this week'?"

Second, let me introduce you to the Puritans, and the wonderful book *The Valley of Vision*. A few years ago at CMS Summer School in Katoomba, I was wonderfully encouraged to hear Mike Raiter (the main speaker at the Conference) commend this book. We sing other people's songs and read other people's books, he pointed out, but why don't we think to use other people's prayers? *The Valley of Vision* is a magnificent resource, a collection of around 200 Bible-shaped prayers covering every part of life. It will inform your understanding of God and his gospel, but which will also help you to pray when you don't know how to pray, or when the words just aren't coming. And we've all been there.

Here's just one example – a prayer of 'Morning Dedication':

*Almighty God, as I cross the threshold of this day I commit myself, soul, body, affairs, friends, to Thy care. Watch over, keep, guide, direct, sanctify, bless me. Incline my heart to thy ways. Mould me wholly into the image of Jesus, as a potter forms clay. May my lips be a well-tuned harp to sound Thy praise. Let those around see me living by Thy Spirit, trampling the world underfoot, unconformed to lying vanities, transformed by a renewed mind, clad in the entire armour of God, shining as a never-dimmed light, showing holiness in all my doings. Let no evil this day soil my thoughts, words, hands. May I travel miry paths with a life pure from spot or stain. In needful transactions let my affection be in heaven, and my love soar upwards in flames of fire, my gaze fixed on unseen things, my eyes open to the emptiness, fragility, mockery of earth and its vanities. May I view all things in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of my Lord, listening for the last trumpet call, hastening unto the new heaven and earth. Order this day all my communications according to Thy wisdom, and to the gain of mutual good. Forbid that I should not be profited or made profitable. May I speak each word as if my last word, and walk each step as my final one. If my life should end today, let this be my best day.*

Amen!

## **Day 26: The glories and ironies of the Lord's Prayer**

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)*

It's the most important, precious prayer ever uttered – a lesson in prayer from the master, an intimate guide from the perfect Son on praying to the perfect Father. Just 57 simple words (in Greek, as recorded by Matthew), but words that have changed the world in untold ways.

What can be said about the Lord's Prayer that hasn't been said already? Let's be honest – nothing. But when it comes to Jesus' model prayer, what we need is not brand new insights, but something far more important: lives and prayers that are shaped by this prayer.

What would that look like? What would our lives and prayers be like if they were shaped by this prayer? Put simply, we would enjoy and delight in God above all else. Our hearts would be filled with an abiding passion for God's glory, not just our own earthly comfort. We would be obsessed with God's plans and desires. We would live for – and pray for – the kingdom of God, centred on his Son. We'd pray (and act in other ways) that people everywhere would live for the glory of God.

The Lord's Prayer has, rightly, been treasured by Christians since the first century. It's among the first words that many children learn. Around the world at this very moment, countless people are praying with these words. Yet it's fascinating to note that Jesus taught this prayer as part of a warning against monotonous, repetitive prayer – yet in an incredible



irony, this is exactly how it's so often used today. In the Australian Parliament, for example, it's in grave danger of becoming 'a piece of historical theatre'. Pray this prayer, memorise it, teach it to your children. But don't fall into the ultimate irony of using this prayer in exactly the way Jesus condemns.

But there's something else about this prayer that I find fascinating: *Jesus commands us to pray for something that is absolutely certain to happen*. Is there anything more certain than God's kingdom coming and God's name being hallowed? The Bible is crystal clear – God WILL triumph. Yet this is precisely how Jesus teaches us to pray.

I used to assume that once God had promised something, there was no need to pray for it anymore. After all, what's more fundamental to God's character than that he always keeps his promises? But that's not the Bible's view of prayer (for another example, see 2 Samuel 7:18-29). Praying for the fulfillment of God's promises is exactly what Jesus teaches.

“This implies that prayer is not only a duty of man but a gift of God. Jesus will awaken in his people the spirit of prayer that asks for everything it will take to accomplish God's purposes in the world. The prayers of Jesus' followers and the purposes of God will not fail.” (John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, p. 112).

### **A Prayer (what else?)**

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. In Jesus' name. Amen*

## **Day 27: Why your shopping list prayers are right and wrong**

*And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)*

Somewhere along the line, some clever Christian came up with the belittling idea of ‘shopping list prayers’. You know the idea – when you want to criticise someone for praying selfish, navel-gazing prayers, just deride it as a ‘shopping list prayer’.

I think the ‘shopping list’ has become a decidedly unhelpful Christian putdown. There’s nothing wrong with bringing all our requests to God. In fact, there’s everything right with it: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Phil 4:6) “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7) There is plenty to be anxious about in the average life, so bring your ‘shopping list’ to God, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

However...

The ‘shopping list’ critique is onto something. When you read the Bible’s prayers – not to mention the whole Bible – we do need our prayers to get a big larger than, ‘I’ve got a test coming up,’ ‘work’s pretty busy,’ ‘I’m really tired,’ or ‘pray for good time management’.

The Lord’s Prayer, yesterday’s reflection, is the supreme example of how

we ought to pray. Our daily needs are important enough to rate a mention in this prayer, but that's not the focus; the focus is clearly on something much bigger – God's plans, God's glory, God's gospel, and God's name.

Like Jesus' model prayer, the prayers of the apostle Paul are enlightening and inspiring when it comes to shaping the content of our prayers. If you want to dig deeply into this topic, the place to turn is *A Call To Spiritual Reformation* by Don Carson. But if you want a brief guide to help you begin the process of reorienting your prayers:

- Start by reading carefully through each of Paul's prayers for others (eg: Romans 10:1, 15:5-6, 15:13; Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-21; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:9-14; 1 Thessalonians 3:10-13, 5:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12, 2:16-17). Consider memorizing a few of these verses, or write them out and keep them with your prayer notes (depending on what system you decide to use).
- One at a time, note the specific things that Paul prays for other people. For example, in Romans 10, he prays for the salvation of his fellow Israelites. In Philippians 1, he prays that Christians will grow in gospel-shaped love, that they will be found pure and blameless on the day Christ returns, and that they'll be filled with the fruit of righteousness. Spend some time meditating on the content of these prayers.
- Start praying this way for yourself, and for other people you know. There's nothing wrong with using Paul's prayers word-for-word and simply inserting people's names.
- Pray that God would help you to pray with these kinds of concerns at the centre of your prayers.
- Look at the things Paul asks others to pray for him (eg: Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1). Notice how gospel-centred

his prayers are, how little he focuses on his own earthly needs, and how obsessed he is with the word of God being clearly proclaimed and properly received?

Don't stop praying for your own needs to be met and your own anxieties to be met. But make sure this is not the sum total or the focus of your prayers. Pray in line with the Bible's models. Pay attention to how older, more mature Christians around you are praying. Pray as Jesus taught you, and as the apostle modeled. Pray for God's kingdom and God's glory, and for the spread of the gospel in the world. After all, don't you long to pray the kinds of prayers that God delights to answer?

### **A Prayer**

*Father in heaven, thank you for the wonderful models of prayer given to me in your word. Thank you that I can pray about all my anxieties and cares, but please help me not to be bound by selfish concerns. Help me instead to pray prayers that line up with your priorities and your purposes for the world. Help me to pray the kind of prayers that you most delight to answer. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **Day 28: Fighting the spiritual battle on our knees**

***Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ... Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. (Ephesians 6:12, 18)***

One of the reasons prayer is hard (and it is, in case you missed the memo on that) is that's it's part of an unseen but all-too-real spiritual battle.

We're not just battling our own busyness and tiredness, our own sinfulness and self-sufficiency when we try to pray. We're battling Satan, the great adversary of God. And he delights in prayerless Christians.

That's why the perspective of Ephesians 6 is so vital for people like me, who find it so easy to walk by sight, not by faith (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:7). This famous passage on 'spiritual warfare' and 'the armour of God' lifts our eyes and reminds us of the reality that is really being played out when we pray (or don't).

Without wanting to be minimise Satan's power, this is not a fair fight. The poor fool has shown up to a nuclear weapon fight with a water pistol, because he's not fighting against me. He's fighting against the Holy Spirit. God arms his people with 'the strength of his might' (Eph 6:10) and tells us to take up 'the whole armour of God' (v. 13) – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace for our shoes, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. We wield the greatest weapon imaginable – the sword of the Spirit, the word of God – a weapon that wards off the lies and deceptions of the evil one.

And through it all, the Spirit enables us to pray – to pray for ourselves, for God’s people, and for the spread of the gospel.

Many Christians, guys in particular, love the image of spiritual warfare, of getting kitted up for battle and charging the gates of hell. But this is a battle we fight on our knees – wearing only the armour that God provides, and relying totally on God as we pray. We can’t fight the battle on our own, and why would we want to? God’s call to arms is a call to pray – to ‘pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests’ (6:18).

When the alarm clock goes off tomorrow morning, you may find yourself wondering, ‘Do I do it? Can I be bothered? Do I drag myself out of bed and spend time praying for God’s kingdom? Or do I hit snooze and go back to sleep?’ If you think those thoughts, remember the scene being played out well beyond your cosy bed. In the heavenly realms, the fight is on. It’s not a fair fight – Jesus’ victory is completely guaranteed, secured in his death and resurrection – but he still calls us to join the fight. Will you suit up for battle? Will you pray? “Perhaps the greatest hindrance to the spread of the gospel today is the people of God trying to do the work of God apart from the power and presence of God.” (David Platt)

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the decisive victory that the Lord Jesus has won over Satan. Thank you for the might and the armour you offer me while we’re living in this age and waiting for Satan’s final overthrow. Please help me to remember that the battle is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, and strengthen me to pray in the Spirit at all times. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## **Day 29: Don't give up – don't ever give up**

***And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. (Luke 18:1)***

Would you be relieved to know that Jesus understood prayer is hard work? Would you be encouraged to know he taught a parable specifically designed for people who were tempted to lose heart when it came to prayer? Me too!

The opening words of the parable in Luke 18 fill me with enormous hope. Jesus knew that prayer would be a struggle, and he told a parable to address this struggle. In this parable, Jesus describes a 'persistent widow' coming before a judge – a man who neither fears God nor respects man – to seek justice against her adversary. After initially refusing her request, the unrighteous judge relents, giving her justice so he won't be beaten down 'by her continual coming'. Jesus then makes his point: "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:6-8)

Have you ever wondered, 'Why do I need to pray for something more than once? If prayer works, why not pray once then leave it to God?'

Prayer is a relational activity, because God is a relational God. If it were simply a mechanical exercise, Jesus wouldn't have taught this parable. Instead, he would have said, 'Don't persist in prayer – ask once, then move on.' He wouldn't have taught us to pray for our daily bread. Instead, he would have taught (the slightly longer and less memorable), 'Give us the bread we need today and every day between now and when

we die, thanks very much’.

When we pray persistently, we mustn’t think we’re wearing down God’s resistance, forcing his arm, or eliciting the kind of grudging response the widow won from the unrighteous judge. Rather, we’re depending on our heavenly Father, delighting him with our ongoing trust in him, recognising that our prayers are answered in his timing (not ours), and expressing a genuine (not a fake, mechanical) relationship with our heavenly Father.

A similar sentiment is found in many of the Psalms (and elsewhere in the Old Testament), where psalmists ‘wait’ and ‘hope’. Consider two of the many examples: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.” (Psalm 130:5-6) “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.” (Psalm 40:1-2)

Prayer requires effort. It’s a struggle (ask Epaphras, Colossians 4:12). Jesus understood that, and graciously offered us the encouragement we need to keep going. And if the effort and the struggle draw us to a deeper trust in God – hoping in him, waiting patiently for him, even as we continue to pray – then maybe we’re finally getting it.

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the encouragement from your Son to persist in prayer, and not lose heart. Please help me to heed his teaching. Please help me to put my hope in you, and to wait patiently for you. Help me to always pray. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*



## Day 30: Resources to get us praying

As much as I hope '31 Days of Prayer' has helped you grow in your knowledge of prayer and in your prayerfulness, there's only so much that short, daily reflections like this can achieve. So today, I'm providing a short guide to some of the best books on prayer.

Remember, reading about prayer is not the same thing as praying. If we think highly of prayer but never actually do it, then something is seriously missing. So if you're going to embark on reading a whole book about prayer, do it thoughtfully and carefully, and with a willingness to change your priorities so you pray more.

That said, all these books will do you good. No doubt there are many others that could be added to this list, but these are the ones I've found most helpful (or which people I trust have recommended to me). Why not pick at least one, order a copy, and set a time to read through it?

### ***Prayer and the Voice of God* by Phillip D. Jensen & Tony Payne**

– A wonderfully clear, no-nonsense book on prayer that covers the key biblical material and will answer most people's biggest questions about prayer. Biblically rich and wonderfully practical.

### ***A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D.A. Carson** – Essential

reading. Carson works through the apostle Paul's prayers, showing how they should transform not just our prayers, but every part of our spiritual lives. A modern classic.

***You Can Pray* by Tim Chester** – I always appreciate Tim Chester's earthy, insightful approach to the Bible, and this is no exception. It opens with a Trinitarian approach to prayer, then moves on to consider

challenges and questions that make praying difficult.

***The Valley of Vision*** – a collection of over 200 prayers from Puritan writers. A brilliant resource that will teach you to pray, and help you to pray biblically when your own words won't come.

***Praying by J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom*** – Typical Packer, this book is thorough and biblically rich. I like his choice of title – selected deliberately to convey the idea that thinking about prayer doesn't matter nearly as much as actually *praying*.

***Our Father by Richard Coekin*** – (unread) A guide to 'enjoying God in prayer' by working through the Lord's Prayer.

***Praying Backwards by Bryan Chapell*** – (unread) From the back cover: "*Praying Backwards* introduces believers to the transforming process of beginning our prayers in Jesus' name – not by moving a simple phrase, but by understanding and embracing the meaning behind the phrase. To truly pray in Jesus' name is to reorder our priorities in prayer – and in life – away from ourselves and toward Jesus and his kingdom. It is to pray, "Not my will, but your will be done." It is to pray boldly, expectantly, and persistently. If you want to revolutionize your prayer life, begin by *Praying Backwards*."

***Prayer by Tim Keller*** – (released November 2014) If you're a fan of Tim Keller's growing body of work, you'll want to add this to your list.

## Day 31: Time to pray!

We made it – 31 days of prayer, done and dusted. If you’ve been here throughout the month, or if you’ve just dropped in occasionally, thanks for being part of it!

Actually, let’s not kid ourselves. Thirty-one days of writing (or reading) about prayer is hardly 31 days of prayer. My lingering suspicion – based largely on my personal experience – is that it’s far, far easier to talk about prayer, read about prayer, or think about prayer than it is to pray.

Anyone with me?

So as we finish, let me recommend a short article from Don Carson, ‘Lessons from the School of Prayer’, as a way of helping you take specific action. This originally formed an Appendix to his magisterial book on prayer, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, but has now been reproduced in an abridged form with his permission. Google it – it’s easy to find, for free.

Carson writes: “We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self-consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray. What we actually do reflects our highest priorities. That means we can proclaim our commitment to prayer until the cows come home, but unless we actually pray, our actions disown our words. This is the fundamental reason why set times for prayer are important: they ensure that vague desires for prayer are concretized in regular practice.”

‘Unless we pray, our actions disown our words.’ So true.

It’s well worth taking ten minutes to read the whole article, but here are Carson’s big ideas – a potent mixture of biblical insight and practical wisdom:

- We do not pray because we do not plan to pray
- Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift
- At various periods in your life, develop, if possible, a prayer-partner relationship
- Choose models – but choose them well
- Develop a system for your prayer lists
- Mingle praise, confession, and intercession; but when you intercede, try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture
- If you are in any form of spiritual leadership, work at your public prayers
- Pray until you pray

Well, what are you waiting for? Make your plans, and get praying!

### **A Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank you for all that your word teaches about prayer. Please help me to avoid the danger of thinking about prayer without praying. Please help me to pray for all things at all times, but especially help me to pray, as Jesus taught, that your name would be hallowed, that your kingdom would come, and that your will would be done on earth, just as it is in heaven. Please give me my daily bread, forgive my sins, and deliver me from evil. Please help me to pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.*