

## **Prayer in the Christian Life**

**By Dan Jensen (2023)**

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “basics” series first. It can be found on my website.)

This essay is intended to help Christians have a better understanding of prayer from a biblical perspective. I have already discussed the immense importance of prayer in the third book of my “basics” series. I recommend reviewing that section. This essay is not about the importance of prayer in the Christian life, that will simply be assumed throughout this work. This essay is to help Christians have a robust prayer life informed by the word of God, the Bible.

We are only going to look closely at a few key biblical passages in this essay, but it must be said that the Bible extols the virtue and vital importance of prayer over and over again throughout its pages. The first and probably most important passage we will begin with is 1 Thessalonians 5:17. The NLT is not a great translation here. If you are not familiar with the differences between the various English translations, I briefly cover this topic in the first book of my “basics” series (chapter 4). One could get the mistaken idea from the NLT that all this passage is commanding is for us not to give up on praying. As in don't ever stop praying altogether. But that is not what the original Greek said. The idea in the Greek is of praying constantly, all throughout the day. This is why most of the good English translations usually translate it as something along the lines of, “Pray without ceasing.”

Now obviously, Paul is using some hyperbole here as he is often prone to do. We all have to sleep at the very least, and so we all must stop praying at some point. And of course, we can't be praying during every activity of the day. The point though, is that we should be praying in our head as often as possible all throughout the day. Every day.

Many worry that this would make God our personal genie. But, this is not so at all. First of all, most of your prayers do not have to be requests. We should be thanking, praising, and worshiping God in prayer all throughout the day. And even when we make our requests, as long as we understand that God will answer all of our prayers as He sees fit, and we are content with that, we are not turning Him into our own personal genie.

Many Christians often complain that God feels distant from them. They say that they struggle to pray and to read the Bible consistently. Well, as long as you don't pray all throughout the day and make time for regular Bible reading, you will indeed feel distant from God. I am not at all trying to be legalistic, but this just is the way it is. Pray that God would give you the strength to be obedient in these areas and He will answer. And the more you get in the habit of engaging in these practices, the closer you will feel to God, and the more you will long for these practices. No one will be able to keep you away. If you are a new Christian or an immature Christian, you need to understand that Satan is doing all in his power to make you feel like you don't want to do these practices, even though deep down you know that you do. If you allow him to have the victory over you, he will keep taking it. So again, pray that God will give you the strength you need in these areas through the power of the Holy Spirit and He will give it to you.

Always make sure that your prayers are reverent. Many Christians approach God like He is their casual neighbor. God is not your casual neighbor though. He is the high and holy one! Many Christians say that God is our Father, Jesus is our brother and friend, and the Holy Spirit is our comforter. Hence, they reason that they can indeed come to God in a loose manner. God is absolutely all of these realities to us, but none of this changes that God remains God. Once we are saved, God is our closest and dearest friend. But He remains God. And the Bible from beginning to end, over and over and over again, says that we are to fear the Lord. People sometimes try to say that this only applies to unbelievers. But that is not true. Over and over in the Psalms, for example, it tells the followers of God to continue to fear Him. Now we are not to fear God in the sense of being scared to come before Him. 1 John 4:18-19 makes this clear. But we are to fear God in the sense of having intense reverence towards Him. You can and should

pour out your heart to God in deep intimacy, but always, always, always be extremely respectful. This doesn't mean you have to use fancy language or perfect grammar. All it means is that you must give Him the highest respect with your language.

We must pray in Jesus' name. This does not mean that if you on occasion forget, you have committed a sin. It simply means that in the vast majority of cases, we should end our prayers in the name of Jesus. We do this to indicate that we only have the right to come before God because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. He is our sole mediator as far as salvation is concerned. It is true that many prayers as they are recorded in the Bible do not end in Jesus' name, and this can confuse new Christians. It must be remembered that during the Old Testament period, the people of God could not pray in His name because He had not been born yet. And in the New Testament, we don't have a lot of full prayers recorded for us. Usually, we are only given snippets of sermons and prayers for the sake of brevity. But, the New Testament is clear that we are to pray in the name of Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5 and John 14:13-14).

It is good and holy to on occasion pray in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is to recognize that we are praying to the one and only true Triune God of all things. With that said, based on the verses above, most of our prayers should end in Jesus' name to indicate that we fully recognize that we have no right to come before God in ourselves. We are always praying to the Trinity, even when we are specifically praying to one person of the Trinity, because they are all united as one God. Therefore, even when we end our prayers in Jesus' name, we are still praying to the Triune God covered by the blood and righteousness of Jesus. Again though, on occasion it is good to pray in the name of all three members of the Trinity to indicate that we know who our God truly is.

Most of our prayers should be directed towards Jesus Himself, especially the shorter ones we pray all throughout the day. This is because we can most relate to the Son because He became human. This is all made clear in the first book of my "basics" series (chapter 1). When we pray in this manner, we are not putting Jesus in a higher place

than the Father and the Spirit. All three are completely equal, and as true Christians we recognize this. But, it is the role of the Son to become human so that He can save us and we can most relate to Him.

Many object to this because they say that most of the prayers recorded in the New Testament are directed towards the Father. But, these are more formal prayers and we will discuss those soon. Some Christians even make the mistake of saying that we should only pray to the Father. They are not saying that the Son and the Spirit are not God, but they say that it is the role of the Father alone to receive prayer. I strongly believe this is not what the Bible teaches (John 14:14; Acts 2:59; and John 14:15-26). It is true that we are only to pray to the Holy Spirit on rare occasions. It is His role in the Trinity to point us to the Father and to the Son, especially the Son. But as our advocate, which includes the idea of comforter, we are certainly to pray to the Spirit. We are to pray to the Spirit when we are most scared or feel like we are in the most need of God's help.

In most of our prayers, we should say a statement where we recognize that we are submitting to the will of God. By *will of God* here, I'm not referring to the commandments of God. It is certainly true that the commandments of God can be said to be the will of God. However, there is a sense in which the Bible often speaks of the will of God in a broader sense. This sense is that God has willed all that comes about. This was discussed in the second book of my "basics" series (chapter 1), if you are interested. By saying this, we are saying that while we are making our requests to God, we submit to the fact that God's will shall always be done and we are content with that. This principle is based on the doctrine stated above and especially on James 4:13-16. It is true that James is not directly talking about prayer in this verse. He is talking about how we talk with others. This is why you will often hear Christians say, "Lord willing," after saying that they are going to do this or that. But, the basic principle certainly applies to our prayers as well.

We are also to pray more formal prayers to the Father. This is because it is His role in the Trinity to represent the more formal side of God. This does not mean that He is in actuality more formal than the other members of the Trinity. This is impossible as they are identical as far as attributes or characteristics are concerned. But they do have distinct roles, and the Father is clearly the representative of the more formal side of God. This is why the Bible often talks about how the Son reconciled us to the Father. We are saved by all three members of the Trinity, and we are reconciled to all three as well. But, it is the role of the Son to represent us in salvation, and it is the role of the Father to represent God in salvation. This is why most of the recorded prayers in the New Testament are directed to the Father, and this is why the Lord's Prayer is directed to Him as well. This means that most prayers in church; in Bible studies; in family worship; and in most public settings in general; should be directed to the Father in Jesus' name. There is of course nothing wrong with praying to the Son, or the Spirit, or to all three, on occasion in these settings, but most of the time these prayers should be given to the Father.

Finally, we must pray formal prayers alone to the Father in line with the instructions given to us by Jesus in what has become known as *the Lord's Prayer*. Jesus makes it clear that most of our prayers should be done in private so that we are not showing off (Matthew 6:5-13). This of course does not mean that public prayers are forbidden. We have tons of evidence of public prayer in the Bible. And praying with our brothers and sisters in Christ can be one of the most special things we do as Christians. With that said, most of our prayers should be private and when we do pray publicly, we should be careful not to go on and on in order not to draw attention to ourselves. It is important to understand that private prayers do not have to be all alone. As we saw, we should be praying all throughout the day and that can be with people around. But, these prayers are private in the sense of saying them in our head and not closing our eyes. However, it can be very hard to concentrate with people all around and so all such prayers should be fairly brief.

The formal prayers we individually say to the Father should be alone, on our knees (if health permits), and with our eyes closed. It is also necessary to pray longer prayers to Jesus alone as well. During these times we can freely pour out our hearts to Jesus regarding whatever is on our mind. But these prayers can be while on a walk or hike, on a long drive, or alone on our bed, etc. I highly recommend praying prayers of this nature at least once or twice a week. The more formal alone prayers that we are to pray to the Father, I recommend praying at least once a month.

The Bible talks about praying on our knees on many occasions. But, it also shows many examples of godly people praying while not on their knees. Therefore, if your health allows, we should pray on our knees alone as often as possible. And our formal alone prayers to the Father should be on our knees based on this principle. There is nothing unbiblical about reciting the Lord's Prayer word for word. Many churches will do this as part of their church services. Most use the version found in the KJV because of its beauty. But this is certainly not mandatory. With that said, we should not say the Lord's Prayer word for word over and over again. When this happens, we are simply going through the motions and this horrible practice is very common within Roman Catholicism (Rome calls this prayer the "Our Father"). Jesus Himself, in the very context of the Lord's Prayer, makes it clear that we should not pray this way (Matthew 6:7-8). We should never think of prayer as some magic formula the way so many false religions do.

With all that laid out, it is clear that the Lord's Prayer is primarily a guide for organizing our formal alone prayers to the Father. The point is not to say the words exactly as they are presented to us in Scripture (although there is nothing sinful about doing this on occasion as stated), but to organize our prayers after the pattern Jesus gives us. We now turn to this pattern.

The Lord's Prayer is broken up into 9 key sections. Below in list format are these sections.

- 1.) Address
- 2.) Praise and Thanksgiving
- 3.) Kingdom Come
- 4.) God's Will be Done
- 5.) Requests
- 6.) Forgiveness
- 7.) Forgiveness of Others
- 8.) Deliverance
- 9.) Conclusion

We will look at each section one by one. We start with the address. It is important to start out these formal prayers to our Father by addressing Him as Father. This can be done by saying phrases such as "Dear Father;" "Holy Father;" "Heavenly Father;" etc. Jesus also uses the word *our* in the address. This shows that it is good and holy to pray this prayer with our fellow believers. When praying this prayer in a fuller sense alone, it doesn't make sense to use this word, but we can still recognize the fact that God is not just our Father. He is the Father of all of His people. And God's people are our people. As true Christians, our people are not our family; our race; our ethnicity; our nation; our company; etc. All such things are important and can certainly be emphasized, but our people in the fullest sense are the true church of God. So, it is good to often say things like, "My Father, the Father of all of my brothers and sisters in Christ."

Next, we move to praise and thanksgiving. When Jesus tells us to recognize that God is in heaven and asks that God's name be kept holy, He is telling us to see God for who He is. These are recognitions of the attributes of God. When we recognize God for who He is, we are both worshiping Him and thanking Him. When Jesus asks that God's name be kept holy, this may seem like nothing more than a simple request. But that isn't the case. Yes, Jesus is asking that God would grant that His true people would keep His name holy more and more, but there is also a sense in which Jesus is saying by this request that God's name is already holy. He is asking that God's people would keep God's name holy more and more because it is so holy. And God's name is so holy

because God is so holy. Therefore, after addressing our Father in reverence, we should take some time in these formal prayers to praise and worship God for who He is. Then we should take some time and sincerely thank Him for all that He is and all that He has done for us. And thank the Father for all that the Son and Spirit have done for us as well. Yes, this prayer should be addressed to the Father throughout, but we must thank the Father for all that He has done for us through His Son and Spirit.

Next, we must ask God that He would bring His full kingdom to earth in our lifetime. This is what all true Christians long to see. We must humbly ask that God would grant this to us. Next, we must ask that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. This does not refer to the will of God whereby He brings about all things according to His predestined plan. This refers to the commandments of God. Now we know from Scripture that on occasion God allows Satan and the demons to enter heaven to accuse us. So, there is a sense in which the commandments of God are not followed by all in heaven at all times. But, Jesus' point here is that for the most part the commandments of God are followed in heaven. And this gives us a foretaste of what things will be like on the new earth. When we come to this section in these formal prayers, we must pray for things such as wars; disease; famine; crime; brokenness; injuries; and all the suffering that goes on in this world. These prayers can be general, otherwise we would get bogged down and they would take forever, but it is also good to pray about specific things you have been hearing about that God puts on your heart. During this section, we must also pray that God would continue to bless His church and advance His kingdom through the preaching of the gospel (the Great Commission).

Next, we move to our requests. We should make requests both about our own needs and also the needs of others, especially God's people. We should be very careful to avoid frivolous and prideful prayers. When we make such prayers, we are asking God to help us sin and that is in itself a very sinful thing to do. We should not pray that God would make us the most handsome person in our office, for example. Having said that, there is nothing wrong with making requests about small things, either for ourselves or others. Let me give an example to try to clear this up a little bit. Let us say you have a



child that loves candy bars. If you pray to your Father asking that He would provide candy bars for your child every day, this would be a frivolous and sinful prayer. It is frivolous because candy bars are hardly a big deal. And children should not be eating candy bars every day, this is unhealthy. So, you are asking God to grant you something sinful. You are asking God to help you be a bad parent. Therefore, such a prayer is indeed sinful.

However, let's say you are on a long road trip and your child has been miserable because he or she is very active. Having to sit and be buckled down is horrible for him or her. But, your child has had a great attitude despite how hard this trip is for him or her. And let us say that your child asks you for a snack and you are out of snacks. You were planning to stock back up at the next city. At the moment of this request, you are in the middle of nowhere. In such an instance, there would be nothing wrong with praying that a small town would be up ahead with at least some candy bars. Your desire is to bless and reward your child whom you love so much. That is certainly a small prayer compared to praying that God would relieve the awful suffering of the Ukrainian people, but it is still a holy and fitting prayer.

A lot of Christians wonder if it is ok to pray imprecatory prayers, and if so, when is it ok. The term *imprecatory* comes from the imprecatory Psalms. These are Psalms where the author is asking God to curse His enemies. And by *curse* here, I am not at all referring to the dark magical curses found in many false religions. I am merely talking about asking God to punish someone at His discretion. Because Jesus told us to pray for our enemies, to bless them and not curse them, many Christians wonder if it is ok to still pray imprecatory prayers today. The answer is yes it is, but with tremendous caution. For example, right now it is entirely holy and good to ask that God would curse Vladimir Putin for his atrocious war in Ukraine, where he is slaughtering civilians on a daily basis. But imprecatory prayers should only be used for extreme examples like this. And we should still pray for his salvation. In that sense, we must bless him and not curse him. These imprecatory prayers can be prayed in this section, but also in the

section where we are asking the Father to cause His commandments to be followed on earth more and more.

In the section on requests, do not try to get in all of your requests as this will only bog you down. There is so much to pray for, and so many people to pray for, it can be overwhelming. I highly recommend making a prayer list. And most Christian leaders agree with me here. This is not a command from God, so if you have an amazing memory or some other method, that is of course fine. But this is very sound advice as most of us cannot remember everything that needs to be prayed for, or where exactly we left off the last time we said a formal prayer to our Father alone. Pray for as much as you feel the Spirit is leading you to pray about, and then mark your spot so that you can return there the next time. You can add items to your list as necessary, and cross off items that God has fully answered as you go forward in your journey with God.

Next, we come to asking for forgiveness. We can never remember every sin we have committed. Every day we sin in countless ways. Every small negative thought is a sin. I'm not trying to produce guilt here at all, I'm simply saying that this is the reality. Therefore, we should begin this section with a heartfelt recognition before our Father of how sinful we are across the board. Then, we can pray for specific things we do remember that have been on our heart. Then, we should pray for specific areas where we really struggle. When praying these prayers, always have in mind that you only have the right to ask for forgiveness because of what God has done on our behalf in salvation.

Next, we come to telling our Father that we forgive those that have sinned against us because He has forgiven us. I understand that this can be a very difficult thing to do when some people have been so terrible to us. But we must forgive. This does not mean that we cannot set boundaries, or seek justice, or that we should ever willingly allow ourselves to become a doormat. Sometimes we must cut off people from our lives. Having said that, we can still pray for such people unless we strongly believe they have committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. But even then, we should pray for ways we

can bless such people from a distance. We must avoid bitterness. When we struggle with this, as we often will, we must ask God for His strength.

Next, we come to deliverance. By *deliverance* here, I am not talking about safety. We should absolutely pray that God would deliver us and our loved ones from this extremely dangerous world. But that prayer should be made in the requests section. Here we are specifically talking about deliverance from sin. We must fervently pray that God would sanctify us through and through. We must long for greater holiness and righteousness in our lives, and to whatever extent we don't long for this, we must ask God to grant us a deeper longing. Jesus makes a point to bring up Satan as he is in some sense behind all of the evil that goes on in this world. We must pray for sanctification, but we must also pray that God would weed out of our lives all of the things that often cause us to sin. Satan uses all of the tools at his disposal (the demons, people, circumstances, and all the temptations of the world) to cause us to sin and stray from God. We must fight against him through prayer.

Finally, we come to the conclusion. Even though Jesus does not explicitly talk about a conclusion as He is mostly trying to help us understand how to organize our formal prayers to the Father, it is common sense to do so. It is best to say some final words of thanks and praise, and to end in Jesus' name. It is common, based on many examples found throughout the Bible, to end our prayers with an *amen*. And this certainly seems appropriate with these formal prayers to our Father. This term simply means to agree. You are saying that you meant everything you said in your prayer.

Having a robust prayer life can seem too daunting to many Christians. But, if you pray the Lord's Prayer in the more formal sense just once a month; you pray a fervent prayer to Jesus at least once a week; you pray to the Spirit when you are feeling really scared and helpless; and you pray to Jesus throughout the day as you feel led, you will have a robust prayer life. Most people can fit that into their very busy schedules. And once you get used to this, you can add further fervent prayers to Jesus and formal prayers to the Father as you feel able and led by the Spirit. And even if you only read the Bible in

chunks on Sunday and pray in this manner, you will have the basic foundation of a truly godly life. I do recommend reading godly works every so often as you have time as well, but even just beginning with the basics of prayer and Bible reading as I have laid out in this essay and the essay on the Bible reading plan, will lead to a strong walk with God.

Ok, start praying without ceasing!

### **Appendix: Morning, Evening, and Meals**

A lot of Christians wonder about praying first thing in the morning, before every meal, and before bed. This is because many Christians insist that prayers must be made at all of these times. The Bible nowhere clearly commands this or implies this. Hence, I think the above position is a bit legalistic, albeit not heretical at all. With that said, if we love God far above all else, He should be the first thing we think about when we wake up and the last thing we think about at the end of the day. Further, we often see people praying before meals throughout Scripture (including Jesus), and the Lord's Prayer specifically talks about thanking God for our daily bread. Therefore, I do believe that we should pray at these times as often as possible. They don't need to be long prayers or prayers we say out loud. With that made clear, it is very appropriate and godly for Christians to pray out loud together before a meal when many of us are gathered together. I don't mean that everyone present has to pray out loud, I simply mean that the group can pray together with one person praying out loud for the group.

Many Christians enjoy these types of public prayer when at restaurants with groups of Christians. This can be a good way to set a godly example for those around us. Some Christians though, worry about it coming off like we are showing off. This is a gray area and you will have to decide where you stand on it. As long as you are not trying to show off if you do pray out loud in a restaurant, or you are not ashamed of praying in public if you choose not to, this is an individual conscience issue for Christians. In general though, we should avoid public prayers (not completely) according to the words of Jesus (Matthew 6:5-6). It is good and healthy and godly for Christians to publicly pray in

groups to show to the world that we are one as Christians. It is also good to pray for people if you are out doing outreach to the homeless or something along those lines. Ask people if you can pray for them. With all that laid out, we should not as individual Christians go out and publicly pray out loud by ourselves for people to see. That only comes off as showing off and it is condemned by Jesus. And we should even keep public group prayers to a minimum to keep from seeming like we are trying to show off as the church.

None of what I just said should be interpreted by anyone as me advocating a secretive Christianity. Anyone who knows me can testify to how opposed I am to this. I believe in Christian tv, Christian radio, Christian bookstores, Christian museums, Christian YouTube channels, etc. I believe that evangelists and apologists should be out preaching and teaching the truth as much as possible. I believe that Christians should be active in politics. I believe that Christians should tell people about their faith whenever opportunities arise. I am simply saying that we should be cautious regarding public group prayers in light of what Jesus said in Matthew 6.