



# PRAYER

## An Introduction

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### *Who is God?*

God matters. Being in relationship with God matters. Prayer matters. How we think about God in prayer matters. Pause for a moment. Perhaps nothing matters more in our prayer life than how we think about God; our **image of God**. Who is God? Who are we praying to when we pray?

#### **God of Power and Might**

When we pray, do we think about God the way the Israelites did when Moses was up on a mountain about to receive the Ten Commandments? Is God the All-powerful God of earthquakes and thunder, smoke and clouds, fire and lightning? Is this how we think of God?

#### **Heavenly Tyrant**

Is God a great heavenly tyrant<sup>1</sup> who does whatever God wants whenever God wants; sometimes being cruel and sometimes being kind; loving some people and hating (or simply ignoring others) according to God's whims? Does God sneak around spying on us, trying to catch us doing something bad so that he can get us and punish us? Is this our view of God and if so, how will this affect how we pray?

#### **Old Man up in the Sky**

There are many people who, when they think about God, imagine God to be like a sentimental heavenly granddaddy. God is that all-loving "old man up in the sky" who wants to spoil us (to give us everything we want), to answer all our questions, solve all our problems, and protect us from the hurts and hard knocks of life. For many, God is kind of like Santa Claus. It doesn't really matter if we've been "naughty or nice," this God will never put a lump of coal in our stocking. God is like a giant genie who will grant us three wishes if we rub his lamp the right way. Like a vending machine, all we have to do is pay the money and push all the right buttons and then we'll receive whatever we want. If this is our view of God, how does this affect how we pray?

#### **Higher Power**

But what if you think God is just an intellectual pursuit, a heavenly idea, a "Supreme Being" or "Higher Power"... completely impersonal, distant, so far above us or anything that we can comprehend, that we can't even begin to relate to "IT". How would this affect your prayer?

#### **Wayward Watchmaker**

Or what if you think of God as if God were some kind of wayward watchmaker. God creates the universe, winds it

up—gets it ticking—and then lets it go. If you believe that God is not involved in the world at all, that God is an absentee-God, that created the world and then stepped away to let the world run on its own according to the laws of nature, then why would you pray at all? What would be the use of prayer?

### *Where is God?*

**Who** God is matters. How we think about God matters. It affects how we pray. But so does **where** we think God is? Is God a distant God (up in heaven) or is God an ever-present God (a God who is near)?

**The Transcendence of God** Is God the transcendent God we read about in scripture; the God who is above, other than, and distinct from all God has made? Does God transcend it all? And does this mean that God is no longer here but "up in heaven?" We worship the God who says "*Heaven is my throne; the earth is my footstool.*" (Isaiah 66:1). It was Solomon who said, "*But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!*" (1 Kings 8:27). The Psalmist writes "*For you, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.*" (Psalm 97:9). In Isaiah, God says "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" (Isaiah 55:8–9). It was Jesus who taught his disciples to pray: "Our Father, *who art in heaven*"? As we reflect on these images of God, isn't it true that many of us think that the God to whom we pray is distant from us, absent from us, just a "phone call" away? For many, our relationship with God is a long-distance relationship punctuated by prayers that feel more like emails or text messages rather than one-on-one conversations with a God who is present with us.

**The Immanence of God** And yet, in the scriptures we read that this transcendent God is also an immanent God—a God who is near. Is this what the Apostle Paul affirms when he says "*There is one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*" (Ephesians 4:6)? Jesus, who was called Emmanuel, "*God with us*" (Matthew 1:23), talks about the Spirit of God who is like the wind who "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). After his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus proclaimed to his disciples "*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew



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28:20). In the Psalms, we read “*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*” (Psalm 139:7-8). And we can’t forget Psalm 145:18 “*The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.*” All of these scriptures speak to the nearness of God. And so when we pray do we imagine that God is near or far? Is God close or is God distant? Where is God?

### *What is prayer?*

#### **Prayer is an attitude of the heart.**

The fundamental purpose of prayer is to deepen our intimacy with God and this requires entering into prayer with a proper attitude. In prayer we come before God with an attitude of humility, hopefulness, appreciation, and love. We open ourselves up to God and we turn our heart’s attention toward God. *Prayer is about “showing up” with an open mind and heart, being willing and ready to grow and change.<sup>2</sup> Prayer is an attitude toward life that see everything as ultimately sacred, everything as potentially life-changing, everything as revelatory of life’s meaning. It is our link between dailyness and eternity.<sup>3</sup>*

#### **Prayer is communication.**

Most of us understand that prayer involves speaking. But do we understand that prayer also involves listening? Prayer is both. In prayer, we pour out our heart to God and God pours God’s heart into us. Prayer involves listening with the heart. Through intimate conversation about what matters to us most, with the living God who loves us, we are drawn closer to God—we are drawn deeper into relationship with God. As we listen in prayer, God reveals God’s deepest desires, God’s greatest truths, our darkest sin, and God’s amazing grace. *A life with God is a life which the rhythms of silence and listening alternate with rhythms of sharing and service. By praying with every part of who we are, the grace that pours from the well of living water trickles through all the aspects of our being, nourishing and hydrating that which was parched and dis-eased.<sup>4</sup>*

#### **Prayer is communion with God.**

Prayer is how God relates to us and how we relate to God. It involves being present and attentive to God as God is present and attentive to us. *Prayer is a matter of making connections with the One who stands at the center of all life.. and of learning to live with those connections all the time.<sup>5</sup>* It is more about seeking Him than seeking help. It is more about relationship than it is about answers or outcomes. It

is about living and working and breathing in tune with the alternative rhythm of God in this world. It is about becoming attuned to God and God’s way of life.

#### **Prayer is an act of faith, hope, and love.**

Prayer hopes and trusts that God cares, that God listens, that God is and will continue to be present and active in our lives and in our world. There is something mysterious about prayer. We will always have questions that are difficult to explain or answer. And we will never fully understand the outcomes or answers to our prayers, yet we still pray, we still call out, we still reach out to God in faith and hope and love, we still say to God, “Here I am.” Prayer is where we find hope for ourselves, our neighbors and our world. *We pray to see life as it is, to understand it and to make it better than it was.<sup>6</sup>*

#### **What is prayer?**

Prayer is about God. It is being with God. It is speaking to God. It is listening for God. It is living and seeing life while recognizing and acknowledging the presence of the God.

### *Why do we pray?*

One reason needs to be stated from the outset. We pray because God invites us to. God longs for us to turn our hearts towards Him and call out to Him in prayer. That’s one reason. The second reason is the reverse. We pray because we long to be in relationship with God. Can you imagine being in a relationship with someone you never talk to or never spend time with? We desire to know God and to be known by God. We desire to rest in God’s presence. We desire to praise God and celebrate God. We desire to share ourselves and our lives with God—both the good and the bad. We desire to listen as God speaks to us—as God whispers into our hearts and minds. And in those moments when we are sad or lonely, angry or worried or distressed, we turn to God for help because we desire God’s comfort and love, God’s presence and influence. As we look at the world around us, we beg and we plead that God will change it, that God will transform it, that God will fix it and we pledge ourselves to join in this work.

#### **Why do we pray?**

We pray because God is the source of all creation and life and love and peace and joy and goodness and wholeness—and we want to be in touch with those things. We pray because we want to experience and enjoy new life, new birth, God’s Kingdom, God’s touch in our lives. Listen to



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how Mark Yaconelli and Alexx Campbell describe where prayer begins: *“Often prayer begins as a longing in the heart, a longing for love, a longing for connection, a longing to make contact with a Power greater than ourselves. Sometimes it begins as a desperate need for help, peace, strength, or comfort. Other times prayer’s beginning is a deep hope for others—an ache for suffering to stop, for the earth’s healing, for care of the poor. Sometimes prayer begins in fear. We reach out for something to save us, to protect us, to let us know that we’ll be okay. Sometimes prayer feels like a longing that’s been met, like a deep spring of peace welling up within our hearts, spilling over and filling us with gratitude and love.”*<sup>6</sup>

### Jesus—A prayer filled life

Jesus himself modeled an intimate and open relationship with God, addressing God as “Abba, Father”<sup>8</sup> (a word used by young children to address their own fathers in the privacy of their homes). Throughout his ministry, Jesus sought silence and solitude *to rest in God’s presence and speak to God.*<sup>9</sup> In moments of compassion, Jesus reached out to God in prayer *with and for the benefit of others.*<sup>10</sup> Jesus turned to God in prayer in moments of joy<sup>11</sup>, moments of frustration,<sup>12</sup> times of distress,<sup>13</sup> and even times of pain.<sup>14</sup>

Having followed Jesus and having observed the importance of prayer in his life and ministry, the disciples made the connection between these times of communion with God and Jesus’ all-encompassing love and spiritual power. And they yearned to participate in that reality as well. So they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

### The Psalms—Models of Prayer

When we look in the Psalms, we see that within the prayers of Ancient Israel, we find the whole range of human emotions and circumstance reflected in their prayers.

We find prayers of *confession*,<sup>15</sup> prayers of *lament*,<sup>16</sup> prayers of *anger and frustration*,<sup>17</sup> and *betrayal*,<sup>18</sup> prayers of *comfort*<sup>19</sup> and *longing*,<sup>20</sup> prayers of *thanksgiving*,<sup>21</sup> prayers of *praise*,<sup>22</sup> prayers of *confidence and trust*,<sup>23</sup> and prayers of *waiting and patience*.<sup>24</sup> We find pleas for *mercy*,<sup>25</sup> *guidance*,<sup>26</sup> *vengeance*,<sup>27</sup> *justice*,<sup>28</sup> *help, protection, and deliverance*.<sup>29</sup> And what we learn is that we can turn to God in prayer in any circumstance. We can turn to God in prayer when we are happy or sad, worried or frustrated, confused or impatient, loving or angry. We can turn to God in prayer

when we feel close to God as well as when we feel guilty or distant.

### Paul—A prayer filled life

Paul’s entire ministry was grounded in and developed from prayer. Reading Paul’s letters, it is easy to see that Paul is constantly praying for his churches, talking about prayer, encouraging prayer.

Paul, in his *Sermon on the Unknown God* at the Areopagus in Athens says (Acts 17:24-28): *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”*

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul urges the church to *“pray without ceasing”*. And what he means by this is that all of life can be lived with an attitude of prayer. Throughout our days, we can remain aware of God’s presence, remain in communion with God, remain in communication with God. To pray without ceasing is to see all of life through a Godly filter, a God-lens, keeping our minds focused on Christ and Christ’s ways, and offering our praise and thanksgiving to God in everything that we do.

Listen to what Paul says in Philippians 4:4-9: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”*



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### Who is prayer for?

But who is prayer for? Is prayer for us (for our benefit) or is pray for God (for God's benefit)? Does God "get anything" out of prayer? The answer is yes. God gets our love and affection and attention. And this pleases God. The scriptures describe our prayers as incense before God. The Psalmist says "I will call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me; give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141:1-2). In Revelation we read about the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders who fell before the Lamb, "each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, **which are the prayers of the saints**" (Revelation 5:8). So yes, God "gets" something out of prayer.

But when you really think about it, prayer is really more for us. When we pray, we aren't telling God anything that God doesn't already know. When we pray we are not bringing God up to date on what is going on in the world. It's not like God has missed out on something and we are the ones who need to "fill God in". God knows our thoughts and prayers even before we think or speak them.

Also, prayer is not a means of forcing God to do something that God otherwise would not do. Prayer is not leverage on God or a way to manipulate God. God does what God does because of who God is; because of God's gracious nature. Prayer does not make God do anything. We don't pray because of the effect it has on God. We pray because of the effect it has on us. Prayer is a tool God has given us for our own benefit. Prayer does not change God. It changes us.

### Prayer changes us!

Imagine that you are in a boat out on a lake and you are ready to head back to shore. So you turn your boat around and drive it back to the dock. When you get close to the dock, you jump to the front of the boat, you reach out for the dock, grab hold, and pull. When you do this, are you bringing the dock closer to you? Or are you bringing yourself closer to the dock? Most of the time, the dock doesn't move. It stays where it is. But you move. When you pull on the dock, you pull yourself closer to the dock; more in line with the dock. This is similar to what happens in prayer. In prayer we pull ourselves closer to God—we align ourselves to God and God's ways. We attune ourselves to God and God's rhythms. And we begin to see the world

more like we should. Prayer aligns our heart with God. That's how prayer is for us. That's why we say prayer is more for us than it is for God.

In Philippians Paul says, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6). Prayer changes us. Being in God's presence changes us. Contemplating who God is, celebrating the things that God has done, learning to care about the things that God cares about, all of this changes us. Looking inside ourselves, being honest about our own shortcomings and failings, sharing our deepest darkest secrets, changes us. Learning how to live life with a greater awareness of God changes us. God changes us. We might not recognize the changes right away. But continued exposure to God in prayer changes us.



It's like the child who throws a rock into a stream. As she stares at the rock just below the surface of the water, the rock looks the same as it did before. And if she were to return an hour later, the rock might have moved a little, but most likely little has changed. But imagine if she were to take a photograph of that rock. And then imagine that she returned to that same location twenty years later; to that same rock. Would it still look the same? Not at all! She would notice that over the years, many of the rough spots have been made smooth. She would see that great change has taken place from the constant washing of water over the rock. Through persistent prayer, God has a way of smoothing out our rough spots; of grinding down our sharp edges; of washing away the dirt and the stains.

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<sup>1</sup>Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (WJK Press, 1994). <sup>2</sup>Joyce Rupp, *Prayer* (Orbis Books, 2007). <sup>3</sup>Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* (HarperOne, 2009). <sup>4</sup>Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God* (UpperRoom, 2003). <sup>5</sup>John Killinger, *Beginning Prayer* (UpperRoom, 1993). <sup>6</sup>Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*. <sup>7</sup>Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, *Way to Live*, (UpperRoom, 2002). <sup>8</sup>(Mk 14:36) <sup>9</sup>(Mk 1:35, Mt 14:23, Lk 6:12). <sup>10</sup>(Mk 7:34, Mt 19:13-15, Jn 11:41-42, Jn 17:1-26). <sup>11</sup>(Lk 3:21-22, Lk 10:21-22). <sup>12</sup>(Lk 22:32, Mt 11:20-27). <sup>13</sup>(Jn 12:27-28, Mt 26:36-44, Mk 14:32-39, Lk 22:41-42). <sup>14</sup>(Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34, Lk 23:34,46). <sup>15</sup>(Ps 32, 51, 130). <sup>16</sup>(Ps 13, 25, 43, 137). <sup>17</sup>(Ps 55, 74). <sup>18</sup>(Ps 55, 74). <sup>19</sup>(Ps 23, 63). <sup>20</sup>(Ps 42). <sup>21</sup>(Ps 9, 21, 30, 103, 116, 138). <sup>22</sup>(Ps 8, 66, 100, 117, 147). <sup>23</sup>(Ps 5, 27, 62). <sup>24</sup>(Ps 130). <sup>25</sup>(Ps 79, 85, 123). <sup>26</sup>(Ps 25). <sup>27</sup>(Ps 109, 139). <sup>28</sup>(Ps 26, 82). <sup>29</sup>(Ps 7, 10, 12, 59, 64, 69, 86, 87, 140).