

A few weeks ago, Glenn preached a message on prayer, in which he addressed the question of why we should pray. I liked Glenn's idea, that prayer is not so much about asking God for things, rather prayer is about intimacy with God. This isn't something we necessarily think about. Tragically, if we're honest, we sometimes treat God like a heavenly vending machine – not a Being to be known.

I thought Glenn's message timely because today I'm starting a short series on prayer; but while Glenn asked *why we should pray*, this series will look at the question of *what we should pray*.

One of the great hurdles to prayer, that many people struggle with, is knowing what to say in prayer. I have felt on many occasions, and I am sure you have too, that when you come to pray you simply don't have the words. This might be because you're new to prayer, and the thought of speaking words into the air, or saying thoughts in your mind to God, might seem strange. Or, it might be the subject you're praying about is complex – like world affairs (who knows precisely what to pray about the Gaza conflict, or the Ukraine war, aside from asking for peace?). Or, you might be praying for a sick family member, or a problem that concerns you deeply, and again, you don't have the words to say.

We've all been there at one time or another.

If only there was a resource we could turn to that gave us the words to say.

Well, the good news is that there are resources for prayer, both in the Bible and outside of it. The Bible is filled with prayers, in both the Old and New Testaments. And these prayers are not just there for us to read; they're there for us to *pray*. The most memorable is possibly the Lord's Prayer, but there are many others, that we can both use and learn from; that we can borrow and build on.

For this series, I am going to do something I've not done before: I'm shamelessly going to stick close to, and borrow from, a book by New Testament scholar Tom Wright, called *The Lord and His Prayer*. The book title should give you an indication of where this series is headed; but before I get into the Lord's Prayer as a model for our prayers, today I want to highlight some of the many prayers we find throughout the Scriptures that can aid us in our prayers, then I want to share with you some of the many, many, prayers that the Church has used down the centuries that can enrich our prayer lives, and finally I want to talk about having a liturgy of prayer.

So firstly, when we turn to the Bible we find within a host of prayers that the Biblical writers first prayed and then wrote down for our benefit. For example, the Apostle Paul often wrote down the prayers he prayed for the churches he wrote to.

At the beginning of Ephesians Paul writes:

I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called ... I pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him.¹

So here we have three prayers Paul prayed for the Ephesians. First that God would give the Ephesians spiritual wisdom and insight that they might grow in their knowledge of God. Next he prayed that their hearts would be flooded with light that they could understand the hope God has given. And lastly, he prayed they would understand the incredible greatness of God's power.

These are three prayers we can pray for others and for ourselves. If we are struggling in our faith or life, or if the same is true for a friend or loved one, these are prayer we can pray. When life feels dark or hopeless, we can pray God would flood our hearts with light that we understand the hope he has given us. When life is overwhelming, we can pray that we could understand the incredible power of God that is at work in and around us – a power that is infinitely greater than any circumstance.

I believe that Paul must have had some insight into these things, which is what enabled him to endure the struggles and sufferings of his life. In the book of Acts, when Paul was on a ship that eventually crashed and sunk, he was able to maintain a confident hope in God for he understood the power of God at work despite his circumstances.

Now, to be clear, I am not say that as we grow in our knowledge of God that our lives will cease to have struggle; *I am saying* that as we grow in God we will have a deeper appreciation of God presence within our struggles.

These prayers that Paul prayed for the Ephesians, we can pray as well.

¹ Ephesians 1:16–19

Another prayer Paul prays is for the Colossian church:

We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding.²

But in this case, Paul then explains why he prays this way: “Then the way you live will always honour and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit.”

It would seem to me that this is a prayer we should also pray. We should pray for complete knowledge of God’s will, and for wisdom and understanding, because then our lives will please the Lord.

However, Paul also knows that knowing God’s will and doing God’s will are two very different propositions.³ So, it is encouraging that in 2 Thessalonians we find Paul praying this way:

“... we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honoured because of the way you live.”

Paul prayed that God would enable believers in Thessalonica to obey God’s will, and I find in this some comfort because sometimes it is hard to obey God. It is sometimes hard to follow Christ on what He called ‘the narrow way that leads to life’,⁴ and Paul knew this. So, he prayed for the church that God would help them. We can pray this for ourselves and others – because it is as hard to obey God today as it was when Paul wrote.

The last prayer we’ll look at from Paul is in 1 Timothy. The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy were written to his young apprentice, Timothy. In them Paul gave instructions for how Timothy was to lead the church in Ephesus. In 1 Timothy Paul gave instructions on prayer that are useful for us:

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who

² Colossians 1:9

³ See Romans 7:14–20

⁴ Matthew 7:13–14

*are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.*⁵

Paul urges Timothy to pray for all people. This should be a high priority for Timothy. Prayer is a privilege, and the ability to pray to Almighty God, knowing that God hears us, is a humbling thing. Paul tells Timothy to pray for everyone, asking God to help them, and giving thanks for them. Timothy is to pray for those in authority, ‘so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.’ I believe this is what most people want – the ability to live their lives in peace. With this in mind, we should pray for our leaders that they might lead their people in peace, not as war mongers, or oppressively.

Prayer is a prominent feature throughout the Old Testament, with the Psalms playing a central role.⁶ There are too many prayers in the Psalms to mention them all, but one famous one is found in Psalm 51. This psalm is an appeal for God’s forgiveness, and is traditionally associated with king David, after Nathan the prophet confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba.⁷ Yet, while the words do fit this occasion well, no where in the psalm are these events specifically mentioned, suggesting that the psalm “was written not to memorialize that moment, but to serve as a model prayer for others ... who find themselves in similar, though not identical, circumstances.”⁸

In short, Psalm 51 can, and has been used, as a prayer of forgiveness anyone can pray – and indeed we’ve used it in church on several occasions as a model for our Prayer of Confession.

The Psalm begins:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
because of your unfailing love.
Because of your great compassion,
blot out the stain of my sins.
Wash me clean from my guilt.
Purify me from my sin.
For I recognize my rebellion;*

⁵ 1 Timothy 2:1–2

⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2018), 145

⁷ See 2 Samuel 12

⁸ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 218

*it haunts me day and night.*⁹

Notice that the Psalm begins with an acknowledgement of God's unfailing love and great compassion. The Psalmist knows he can trust God to forgive, because of God's character. When we sin, while our circumstances will no doubt be different, this Psalm can serve as a basis for our prayers for forgiveness.

While the Bible is a rich and primary source for our prayers, there are many other prayers that the church has prayed down the centuries that are also excellent sources of inspiration.

One short prayer that is used primarily within Catholic and Eastern Christianity is the Jesus Prayer. It says, simply,

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

It is often used in personal prayer and encapsulates both humility and trust in God.

Another, longer prayer, taken from the Church of England's morning liturgy reads thus:

*Blessed are you, creator of all,
to you be praise and glory for ever.
As your dawn renews the face of the earth
bringing light and life to all creation,
may we rejoice in this day you have made;
as we wake refreshed from the depths of sleep,
open our eyes to behold your presence
and strengthen our hands to do your will,
that the world may rejoice and give you praise.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*¹⁰

While this prayer is written in the second person, it can also be prayed as a personal prayer each morning.

Another short prayer, dating from around the 4th century, is a brief doxology or prayer of praise. It is called the Gloria Patri, and reads:

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,

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¹⁰ <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-in-daily-prayer/morning-prayer-contemporary-thursday-24-july-2025>

as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Another famous prayer, likely written in France in the early 1900's, but often attributed to St Francis of Assisi because it reflects his values of peace, love and humility begins:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.*

All these, and far, far more, are prayers that have served the church and deepened people's faith for centuries. We are indebted to those who wrote these prayers because we can still be inspired by them and pray them.

I have shared just four short prayers, but there are hundreds, if not thousands of prayers we can draw upon, that can aid us in our prayer lives.

But once upon a time, I believed that praying prayers others had written, was not sincere. As a young Christian, I came to the belief (I'm not sure why) that genuine prayer had to be spontaneous prayer; every prayer, if it was truly heartfelt, had to be new and improvised on the spot. I held to this view for many years, and it only started to be eroded when I started attending Massey Presbyterian Church, about twenty years ago. There I heard prayers that were pre-prepared and written down – and yet were just as heartfelt as any spontaneous prayer. In fact, because they were pre-prepared, they were often more thoughtful and articulate than many prayers I'd heard before.

Then, some years ago I read a book by – surprisingly – a Pentecostal pastor; it was his spiritual biography of sorts, in which he described his journey into prayer.

He moved from a life of endless spontaneous prayers to having a liturgy of prayer – or a set routine of prayers he prayed each day. He described these set prayers as his “track” of prayer, and of his liturgy he says:

It's not a recitation of rote words; it's a liturgy brimming with life. It's not empty; it's full of sacred truth. It's not dry; it's as fresh as the Holy Spirit. It's not mere self-expression, but formative prayer. What we might think of as extemporaneous or improvisational prayer has not been lost—it's right there in the middle in what I designate as "petition and intercession." During that time I can pray about whatever I want. But before I reach that point I first focus on being formed by a true liturgy.¹¹

This liturgy is what you each received a moment ago.

The writer came to believe that prayer can be, and often is, instructive and formative for our lives. How we address God reveals our thoughts about God; what we pray about reveals what is in our hearts. Therefore, this liturgy is both Scripturally informed and steeped in Christian history, that it might 'shape' those who pray it.

You'll notice that it is only about halfway through that space is given to pray for family and others. This is intentional as it prevents us from making prayer solely about asking God for stuff. As Glenn reminded us, prayer is primarily about knowing God.

You will also notice that the writer includes time for contemplation. This, he describes, is time to simply 'sit with Jesus.' He sits quietly for about 10 minutes and thinks about Jesus.

You'll Also notice that there is a lot of scripture, with gospel readings, and psalms. Prayer is about more than speech; it is about listening to God as well.

I have given you this prayer not in the expectation that everyone will start using it; but if you find prayer challenging, or if prayer has become dry, maybe this liturgy will help fire your imagination for prayer once again.

We are the people of God, and our God has called us to pray. My hope and prayer is that this series will spark a new season of prayer at Iona.

¹¹ Zahnd, Brian. Water To Wine: Some of My Story (p. 89). Spello Press. Kindle Edition.