

Tools for Spiritual Growth

The Privilege and Power of Prayer

The Bible reveals and discusses several tools we can use to grow spiritually and build our relationship with our Creator. In this first article in a series on these tools for spiritual growth, we examine the foundational tool of prayer—a key to communication with God.

by Don Hooser

"Phone home!" Sound familiar? Maybe you heard it from your parents. Parents want to hear from their children—because they love them.

God wants to hear from His children for the same reason—because He loves us.

What is prayer? It is speaking to and conversing with our Creator. Everyone can do it and *should* do it. What is breathtakingly inspiring is that God hears, is interested in and answers prayers! Prayer is effective—in other words, prayer from those sincerely responsive to God gets results.

Phone home! God is never asleep or too busy to listen. There is never a bad connection or a bad time. You never get a busy signal or voice mail or get put on hold. You have unlimited free minutes—and hours. So no excuses!

The most powerful man in history

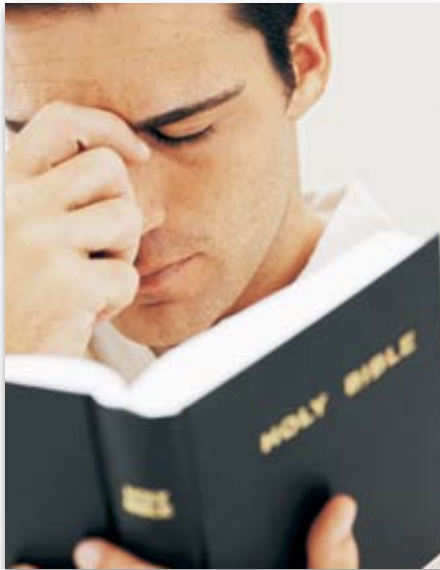
Even though Jesus Christ was God in the flesh (John 1:1-5, 14), He knew the importance of praying to our heavenly Father. The Bible gives us many examples of Jesus fervently praying to His Father, not only praising God but asking for help. Jesus clearly knew that God in heaven was the ultimate source of success in every endeavor.

If Jesus Christ needed help from His heavenly Father, how much more do we! And we have many other role models as well. All the dedicated people of God in the Bible and in history have been people of prayer.

Jesus' disciples soon realized their Master's source of power. They said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Would you like to learn Christ's teachings regarding prayer? You probably have them in your home. They are scattered throughout the Bible.

Anyone can begin to pray even before he has learned anything about prayer. God hears and appreciates the simplest of prayers. Jesus made it plain: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). It's noteworthy that in English the first letters of the key words "ask, seek, knock" spell *ask!*

But God wants us to *grow* in understanding and application of how to pray. Like



Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand, along with serious introspection about how to apply God's teachings in our own lives.

learning a new hobby, sport or activity, satisfaction and rewards increase with added knowledge and skill. So it is invaluable to read and understand the biblical teachings regarding prayer.

We can gain much understanding and inspiration from many wonderful *examples* of prayers in the book of Psalms and throughout the Bible. Daily *practice* naturally leads to added proficiency and pleasure in prayer. Countless people have attested to this.

Talk to God as your Father

When His disciples said, "Teach us to pray," Jesus began His lesson in prayer by giving them a brief outline of some of the most important things to pray about on a daily basis. Commonly called the "Lord's prayer," Jesus' instruction is found in Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-13.

Note that Jesus suggested that the most frequent way that we are to address God

is as "our Father in heaven." We can and should have many relationships with God, which are revealed by the names and titles for God found in Scripture. But the most important relationship is that of *our Father*—an all-loving and perfect father.

All human beings can and should think of God as their Father since He is their Creator. And as their relationship with God becomes closer, that father-child relationship builds to deeper and more intimate levels.

So how should we talk to God? He wants us to come to Him as a beloved parent. We should feel confident, secure, understood, appreciated and loved in coming before Him. When we talk with our physical fathers, we are not repetitious or scripted, we don't use an unnatural syrupy tone or a monotone. And we don't use archaic language because we think it sounds more religious. Neither is this necessary with God.

Our heavenly Father cherishes prayers offered with complete honesty and sincerity, even if they include respectful complaints. The prayers in the book of Psalms certainly portray candid honesty.

When people pray nice words while thinking and doing contradictory things, they apparently think God can't read minds. When we use our tongue to "bless our God and Father, and [to] curse men," our prayer is counted as hypocrisy (James 3:9-12, 17; see also Matthew 7:21-23).

Imagining what God is like is relatively easy for someone who has had a loving and attentive earthly father. Admittedly, it is much more difficult, especially at first, for someone whose parental experience has been with a cold, uncommunicative, abusive or absentee father.

Such a person should make a major effort to learn what an ideal father is like and establish that picture in his or her mind's eye. Some inspiring and encouraging descriptions of God as our heavenly Father are found in Matthew 7:9-11; John 3:16-17; James 1:5, 17; 1 John 4:8-19; Psalm 103 and Luke 15:11-32 (the father in the parable of the prodigal son).

Life is about relationships

Of all God's creatures, human being have

the unique and awesome privilege of being created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). The greatest benefit of this is being able to have a personal relationship with God.

Throughout His Word, God repeatedly stresses the importance of right relationships. In fact, Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love your fellow man (Matthew 22:35-40).

Beginning with our creation, God has done many things to initiate a relationship with us. It is up to us to respond to Him and

Without prayer, life is precarious

Physical, frail human beings are highly vulnerable to countless dangers—physical, mental and spiritual perils. The greatest danger is from our greatest enemy, Satan the devil, who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Ephesians 6:10-20 explains how we need spiritual armor “to stand against the wiles of the devil,” and prayer is an important part of that armor (verses 18-19). Why face life’s

As we grow in our relationship with God, it is only logical that He expects us to fulfill certain conditions if we want His help. God will not continue to answer prayers for someone who is unwilling to do his or her part—to read the Bible, obey what it says and learn to love God. “We love Him because He first loved us,” 1 John 4:19 tells us.

But what is the primary evidence of love for God? The apostle John sums it up: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). And John makes it clear that *obedience to God* is the most important condition for answered prayer: “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

If we expect God to continue hearing our prayers, we must begin obeying the Ten Commandments and His other commandments.

In the name of Jesus Christ

Some people have not learned that Jesus Christ is the one “door” and the one “way” to God (John 10:9; 14:6). Does God ever answer their prayers anyway? Because God is immensely merciful, He probably does. If a person’s religious practices at first fall short of true biblical Christianity, God may for awhile answer some of his prayers *in spite of his religious ignorance* rather than because of it. But that won’t last if he makes no effort to learn and do as the Bible teaches.

The only *promise* of answered prayer on a regular basis is to the true followers of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One who, though divine, became a human being, lived a perfect life and suffered and died to pay the penalties of sin for all mankind. He alone is the Savior of the world. Speaking of Jesus, the apostle Peter said, “There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, Revised English Bible)

Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you” (John 16:23-24; see also John 14:13-14). As human beings, we do not of ourselves have the right, authority or privilege to approach God’s throne with our prayers because of our own goodness. But through faith and commitment to Jesus Christ, He authorizes us to call on God in His name, acting with His authorization. Thus, with His approval, we have access to God when we pray “in Jesus’ name.”

Jesus further serves us as our High Priest by interceding and mediating on our behalf with the Father (Romans 8:34; 1 John

Additional conditions for answered prayer (And God will help you to fulfill the conditions!)

Confess your sins to God so that your sins will no longer stand in the way. Remember that to be forgiven, we must be forgiving of everyone (Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Isaiah 59:2).

One’s motives should not be selfish, greedy or trying to impress others (James 4:2-3; Matthew 6:5-6; 18:9-14).

Study the Bible to know and pray according to God’s mind and will (John 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15; Matthew 4:4).

Believe—have full faith in God’s love, mercy and promises—and expect answers (Mark 11:24;

Hebrews 10:22, 38-39; 11:6; James 1:5-6).

Be extremely grateful to God and express thanksgiving and praise profusely (Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Be wholehearted, fervent, passionate in prayer (James 5:16; Psalm 119:145; Hosea 7:14).

Multiple repetitions of words and phrases are worthless, although Christ taught persistence in repeating a petition to God day after day (Matthew 6:7-8; Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-7).

Ask God to guide and inspire you with His Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-15, 26-27; John 14:26).

show initiative in nurturing that relationship with good communication. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you,” James 4:8 tells us. Our prayers keep us connected to God.

Jesus said to His disciples, “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). Here Jesus explained a crucial factor in true friendship—*ongoing open and sincere communication*. A true friend is someone you talk with openly and regularly.

God is the Great Communicator. He records in the Bible His revelation of everything we need to know about His plan for our lives. His Word gives us His worldview, the framework for a true perspective on life—past, present and future. Plus He communicates with us and guides us in other ways—by His Holy Spirit, through His Church, through other individuals, through circumstances and through experiences that He sets up.

But a good relationship depends on *two-way communication—a dialogue*. Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand, along with serious thought and introspection about how to apply God’s teachings in our own lives. Each of us must ask: How good a friend am I to God? How good a son or daughter am I to my Father? Call home daily!

battles with no armor? If we don’t pray, we become prey to this ruthless predator.

We are terribly foolish to try “going it alone” in this evil and dangerous world—neglecting to rely on God. Some suffering is punishment from God, particularly when people knowingly sin against Him. But most suffering comes automatically from our own actions, the actions of others, or time and chance.

However, God will intervene for those who are relying on Him to protect them from the majority of mishaps. God allows His followers to suffer *some* personal trials to learn certain lessons, but He protects them from most dangers.

For those who seek to do God’s will and ask for help, He will continually guide, help and protect them. If we don’t forsake God, He will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). What a promise! And what peace of mind that promise brings!

To continue to get answers, God has conditions

It’s inspiring to hear how many people have had obvious answers to their prayers even before they knew much about God or were trying to obey Him. That shows how wonderfully merciful and generous God is toward people who are taking their first sincere steps to humbly talk to their Maker. By granting their desires, He is encouraging them to take further steps in building their relationship with Him.

2:1-2). This assures us that we have access through Him to the fullness of God's mercy and forgiveness (Hebrews 2:17; 4:14-16; 10:19-22). Then God the Father makes the decision as to how to answer the prayer, and Jesus Christ carries out the Father's will.

A few more points on prayer

God certainly "hears" silent prayers, and someone who is close to God may utter silent prayers often throughout each day. The Bible tells us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

But God is also pleased to have us vocalize audible prayers. Numerous times the Scriptures mention the praying person using his voice, mouth, lips and tongue. The Bible also frequently uses expressions like *cry*, *cried out*, *cried aloud*, *called to*, etc.

Certain biblical references to frequency of prayer, like twice daily (Psalm 88:1) and thrice daily (Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10), probably refer to the number of audible prayers, not the number of total prayers.

Regarding bodily positions during prayer, the Bible mentions several—kneeling, standing, sitting, lying down. Circumstances, including health problems, sometimes limit us in what positions we can choose. We can talk with God while taking a walk or driving a car. The most important consideration is to always do your best to express humility and deep reverence.

The Bible includes examples of appropriate public prayer and group prayer, but the majority of our personal prayers should be private communication with God (Matthew 6:5-6). However, *family prayer* is vitally important. It's important to teach children from a very young age to pray. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me" (Matthew 19:14). God is very interested in and responsive to their prayers.

Busy? Most of us are. Lack time to pray? Consider that we all make time for those things we consider most important. And we will accomplish more in the long run when we put God first. Hence we cannot afford to *not* pray. Prayer needs to be a top priority and a daily habit.

In your prayers, besides going through your needs and wants, make sure to take time to thank God for the many ways He has blessed you in your life. And take time to pray for others.

If you're coming to God about a problem, pour out your heart to Him about it without dictating what His solutions should be. Father knows best. God always responds in the way that is best for us spiritually, and that sometimes means the answer is "no" or "not now," or the answer is something other than what we expected or wanted.

Phone home

"What is man that You are mindful of him?" asked David in Psalm 8:4. It's a wonder of wonders how God cares for His little creatures—that He would listen to each of their prayers and give them His personal attention. But it's true—He does.

Let's not let the wonderful spiritual tool of prayer go to waste by not using it. Let's walk with God—obey Him and talk with Him—in prayer.

The Bible compares this life to our being pilgrims living in tents far from home. Our goal is enter the Kingdom of God—to "dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:6). Home is wherever God is, and our destiny, after Christ returns to earth, is to dwell with Him forever.

In the meantime, we can stay in touch—daily and more than daily—with our Father and our elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

Phone home. *Pray.* **GN**

Teach Your Children How to Pray

Teaching children to pray is a vital part of passing on our faith. Hebrews 4:16 reminds us that Christians can "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." It's important that our children learn that they can also go to God, our loving Father, who is there to help and strengthen them. He wants them to build a relationship with Him through prayer as well as Bible study.

Children learn in many ways. One of the most effective teaching tools is by *example*. It is important that our children understand that we, as Christian parents, talk to God in prayer on a regular basis.

The formal examples they see of asking a blessing at mealtime, of anointing and prayer for illness and of prayers at Church services provide important lessons about our relationship with God. But children also need to see that parents spend time with God in *personal* prayer on a daily basis and that we should go to God first when faced with a difficult trial or an important decision.

The instructions that Jesus Christ provided in the Lord's Prayer (actually His *outline* for prayer), found in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:1-4, are useful in teaching our children how to pray. Friday evening on the Sabbath, before bedtime or shortly after dinner, is an ideal time for the entire family to kneel down and use this outline of prayer as a teaching tool. Following is a practical way of doing this.

Using blank cards, write on each card a phrase from the Lord's Prayer followed by a simple explanation of what to pray about. For example, write on the first card the phrase "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name," followed by the statement, "Praise and thank God."

On the next card write, "Your kingdom come," followed by the statement, "Pray about why the world needs the coming Kingdom of God and the changes it will bring."

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" can be written on three separate cards followed by the statements, "Pray for the work of the Church," "Pray for others (family, the sick, needy, etc.)," and "Pray for God's direction in our own decisions."

On another card write, "Give us this day our daily bread" with the statement "Pray for things we need."

On the next card write, "Forgive us our debts (our sins), as we forgive our debtors (those who sin against us)" followed by, "Things we are sorry for."

On the next card write, "Do not lead us into temptation (or sore trial), but deliver us from the evil one" followed by, "Ask God for protection."

On the last card write, "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever" followed by "Praise and thank God again."

The entire family should kneel down together and each one will draw one of the cards. The statement on the card is what each one will pray about that evening and what the children will be asked to pray about during the week.

For example, those who draw the cards that say "Praise and thank God" will think about things to praise God for and about things for which they are thankful to have or to understand and will pray out loud about those things.

Dad should begin the session by praying out loud about what is on his card. Mom follows and then each child according to whatever order is established. Dad and Mom's prayer may last a few minutes, and each child's prayer will probably be shorter.

The prayers of very young children will be simple and probably very brief. As children get older, their prayers will reflect more mature thinking and will lengthen in time. If a child has difficulty in thinking of something to pray about, Dad or Mom may want to suggest a few items and at times may need to coach little ones throughout their brief prayers.

Dad can then bring the entire session to a close with another brief prayer asking God's blessing on the family and His protection through the night, ending with "Amen" (making sure children understand that this expresses sincerity and trust in God and not "Goodbye," as God never leaves us).

Parents can begin using this technique with very young children and will find that they are usually willing participants. They do not seem to have the sense of awkwardness about praying out loud with others present that teens or adults often have.

Depending on the nature of the relationships within a family, teens and even young adults living at home may be willing to continue to participate in this family tradition if begun when the children are young. Drawing the cards is no longer necessary after a certain age, and each family member can simply pray about what is on his mind.

This method can teach children how to pray about all of the elements in Christ's instructions since, over time, they will hear their parents praying about each one. The time spent together praying out loud also has a powerful bonding effect that can draw family members close to one another as the family draws close to God. As the adage goes, "The family that *prays* together *stays* together."