

*Prayer***Reasons to Study Prayer****The ultimate reason**

As New Testament scholar Nijay Gupta rightly states, “We must begin with the fact that Israel always viewed prayer as conversation and worship in communion with a personal God.”<sup>1</sup> Prayer is relational and it’s modeled and mandated for us in the Old Testament and in the New Testament by Jesus, most significantly in the Lord’s Prayer and via the apostles. Simply put, prayer is not optional but is essential for us as Christians to strengthen our relationship with God.

**Additional reasons**

- **Theological:** There are theological issues (Trinitarian roles and functions, divine attributes, God’s sovereignty and human freedom, faith, healing, etc.) that intersect with prayer.
- **Pastoral:** Many Christians fail to pray, or pray ineffectively, because they don’t understand various aspects of prayer.
- **Apologetic:** Many non-Christians (especially former Christians who’ve “deconstructed”) consider the apparent fruitlessness of prayer as a strong argument against Christianity.

**Defining Prayer****What prayer is**

*The Lexham Bible Dictionary* defines prayer as “Communication with God, primarily offered in the second-person voice (addressing God directly). May include petition, entreaty, supplication, thanksgiving, praise, hymns, and lament.”<sup>2</sup> More broadly, the term denotes speaking to beings thought to exist in the spiritual realm, including (for some forms of Christianity) Mary, the angels, and the saints (see more below), and in other religions, any number of gods or semidivine beings.

For our purposes, prayer can be reduced to two key elements: (1) communication from human beings (2) directed toward God. This simple definition excludes two serious misunderstandings.

**What prayer is not**

- ***Silence is not prayer.***

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<sup>1</sup> Nijay K. Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2017), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie T. Hardin, “Prayer,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Silence can be an element in a person's practice as a way of seeking to focus on or experience the presence of God (e.g., Ps. 62:1, 5). However, silence is not by itself a form of prayer. Viewing silence as a form of prayer misses at least one of the two key elements of our definition: prayer is *communication from human beings*.

- ***Prayer is not a kind of mental energy.***

The idea of prayer as mental energy is advocated today as a serious, “scientific” concept. Note the following comment: “From a scientific perspective, if prayer is indeed considered to work, thought should also be given to the possibility that it may not require a deity. It may, instead, invoke some hitherto unidentified mental energy that has healing power.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea of prayer as mental energy comes largely from the metaphysical or mind sciences and was popularized in the New Age movement. We commonly hear people say that they are “sending thoughts and prayers” to the persons in need. There is no scientific credibility to the notion that thoughts can carry energy from one person to another, and, of course, there is no biblical credibility to the idea of sending prayers to those in need.

The belief that prayer is mental energy that affects us or others directly is a nontheistic belief. It misses the other key element of the definition: prayer is *directed toward God*.

## **Proper Recipient of Prayer**

### **Prayer to the Father**

In the Old Testament, prayer is properly addressed only to Yahweh (Jehovah, the LORD), the God of Israel, who as the Creator is the only true God (*passim*, note esp. 1 Kings 8:22–23; 2 Kings 19:14–19 = Isa. 37:14–20; 2 Chron. 20:5–7; Ps. 86:6–10; Jer. 32:16–20; Dan. 9:3–5). God is “the one who hears prayer” (Ps. 65:2 CSB). Isaiah warns against “praying to a god that cannot save” (Isa. 45:20; cf. 44:17). The New Testament likewise speaks frequently of praying to God (Acts 12:5; 16:25; Rom. 10:1; 15:30; 2 Cor. 13:7; Phil. 4:6; 1 Thess. 1:2).

Jesus consistently prayed to the “Father” (Matt. 11:25–26 = Luke 10:21–22; Matt. 26:39, 42 = Mark 14:36 = Luke 22:42; 23:34, 46; John 11:41; 12:28; 17:1–5, 11, 21, 24–25). The one exception was his cry of dereliction on the cross, in which he followed Psalm 22:1 with the address, “my God, my God” (Matt. 27:46 = Mark 15:34). Jesus taught his disciples to pray to the Father (Matt. 6:6–9; 7:11; Luke 11:2, 13; John 16:23), so, unsurprisingly, the apostles refer to prayer to the Father, too (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 3:14; 1 Peter 1:17).

### **Prayer to the Son**

Yet Jesus on one occasion invited his disciples to pray to him (John 14:14), and the apostles did so and taught believers in Christ to do so (Acts 1:24–25; 7:59–60; 9:14; 22:16; Rom. 10:12–13; 1 Cor. 1:2; 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8–9).

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<sup>3</sup> Chittaranjan Andrade and Rajiv Radhakrishnan, “Prayer and Healing: A Medical and Scientific Perspective on Randomized Controlled Trials,” *Indian J. of Psychiatry* 51.4 (Oct.–Dec. 2009): 247–53.

Bruce Ware is an evangelical theologian who unusually argues that Christians should not pray to Jesus.<sup>4</sup> We will consider his argument briefly.

- Ware: *Jesus taught the disciples to address their prayers to the Father* (especially in the Lord's Prayer, Matt. 6:9; 11:2).  
Response: Christ's purpose in the Lord's Prayer is to teach his disciples what values, priorities, and commitments should be reflected in their prayers—not to provide a template for what words to say whenever one prays.
- Ware: *Christians are supposed to pray to the Father "in Jesus' name."*  
Response: Yes, but evidently it is appropriate to address prayer to Christ in his own name (John 14:14). What's more, if we were to limit prayer to the form presented in the Lord's model prayer, we would not pray "in Jesus' name" (as Ware agrees we ought to do).
- There are simply too many references in the New Testament depicting prayer to Jesus to deny its legitimacy.<sup>5</sup>

### Prayer to the Holy Spirit

- Prayer is never addressed to the Holy Spirit in the Bible. This "argument from silence" does not in and of itself invalidate the practice, but it puts some burden of proof on those who advocate praying to the Spirit. I am not opposed in principle to prayer to the Holy Spirit (who is, after all, God!). However, some arguments in support of such prayer aren't strong enough to keep. What follows is some gentle pushback to Wayne Grudem's arguments in defense of prayer to the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>
- It is unlikely that we see an example of praying to the Spirit in Ezekiel 37:9: "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." (1) We might humbly suggest that one does not simply prophecy to the Spirit! (2) "The breath" is part of a vision that the Lord gave Ezekiel of dead bones coming to life as a symbolic picture of the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile (Ezek. 37:1–14). It is not a reference to the Spirit. (3) Indeed, "the breath" in Ezekiel's vision comes "from the four winds." This suggests that the Spirit is not in immediate view (though the vision represents the work of the Spirit in Israel's restoration [37:14]).
- It is quite true that the Holy Spirit is personal and is God. Questioning prayer to the Holy Spirit does not necessarily impugn his personhood, deity, or power. Rather, the issue is whether his role in the Christian life encourages addressing him in prayer. He is another *paraklētos* (Advocate, Helper) like Christ, but his role as the Advocate is to dwell within us. This is how we "know" the Spirit (John 14:17), how he "testifies" or "bears witness" to us that we are God's children (Rom. 8:16; cf. 1 John 3:24), and how he taught the apostles and reminded them of all Jesus had said (John 14:26). What's more, the Spirit downplays his own authority and points away from himself to Christ (John 16:12–15).
- Liturgical and confessional texts that express faith or devotion to all three divine persons (e.g., the Nicene Creed, the Doxology) have precedent in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14), but these are not the same as prayers addressed specifically and directly to the Holy Spirit and might not offer support for such prayers.

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 18, 44, 47, 151–53.

<sup>5</sup> See further Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *The Incarnate Christ and His Critics: A Biblical Defense* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2024), 145–52.

<sup>6</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 498–99.

- Paul says that the Spirit intercedes for us when we don't know how to pray (Rom. 8:26–27). Both Paul and Jude say Christians should pray “in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). Paul also says we “worship by the Spirit of God” (Phil. 3:3). These texts all indicate that the Spirit is involved in Christian prayers, but it seems that he is involved *internally* to strengthen our worship and prayer and not *externally* as the recipient of prayer.
- We should all agree with Grudem's concluding comment: “But this is not the New Testament pattern, and it should not become the dominant emphasis in our prayer life.”<sup>7</sup> Again, note: our argument is not that prayer to the Spirit is technically wrong, but rather that it is not referenced in Scripture and is thus at least irregular.

### Avoid “modalist” prayers!

Christians may pray to the Father or to the Son; praying to the Spirit is irregular though not necessarily wrong. One point regarding our practice of prayer needs to be made. Sometimes Christians will address a prayer and vacillate between speaking to God as the Father and as Jesus Christ in a way that implies that Jesus *is* the Father. One occasionally hears Christians—even in public church prayers—confusing the persons, as in a prayer like this: “Father, thank you for hearing our prayer. Thank you for coming into the world to die for our sins.” Biblically, Jesus Christ is not God the Father but “the Son of the Father” (2 John 3). Christians—especially those in ministry—should learn not to make this sort of mistake.

### Prayer to Mary or the saints?

- Whereas prayer to the Holy Spirit is not necessarily wrong but irregular, prayer to anyone who is not God is clearly wrong.
- Catholics sometimes argue that they view Mary and the saints merely as interceding for us in heaven, just as believers can intercede for others on earth (1 Tim. 2:1). However, this argument falters unless one can establish the legitimacy of speaking to the departed—another controversial Catholic practice not supported in the Bible.
- Moreover, Catholics view Mary as more than a fellow believer interceding in prayer. She is called “the Mediatrix of all graces” and even “Co-redemptrix.” In fairness to Catholics, these descriptions are qualified so that Mary remains subordinate to Jesus Christ as the Mediator who alone died to redeem us (1 Tim. 2:5–6).<sup>8</sup>
- Thus, the Augsburg Confession (1530) stated:

But the Scripture teacheth not to invoke saints, or to ask help of saints, because it propoundeth unto us one Christ the Mediator, Propitiatory, High-Priest, and Intercessor. This Christ is to be invoked, and he hath promised that he will hear our prayers, and liketh this worship especially, to wit, that he be invoked in all afflictions. ‘If any man sin, we have an advocate with God, Jesus Christ the righteous’ (1 John 2:1).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 499.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Disagreements* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 316–20.

<sup>9</sup> Art. XXI, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 26.

## Types of Prayer

Since prayer includes any verbal communication from humans to God, there is no neat categorization of different types of prayer. We might broadly and somewhat usefully categorize prayers according to the person or persons with whom they are concerned (these categories will come up again when we look at the Lord's Prayer). Note that a single prayer might include multiple categories.

### Prayers about God

- Many prayers about God are expressions of worship, praise, thanksgiving, and generally of faith and appreciation of God for his character—especially his goodness. Many of the Psalms at least include words of praise or thanks to the Lord. A good example of a praise psalm directed to God in prayer is Psalm 138. Significantly, Christ frequently thanked the Father in prayer (e.g., Matt. 11:25–26 = Luke 10:21).
- Perhaps we should include here prayers of lament or complaint, in which the one praying expresses sadness, grief, consternation, or even doubt, arising from circumstances *seemingly* not consistent with God's character and goodness. In Scripture, these laments generally give way to expressions of trust in God despite the circumstances (e.g., Psalms 22, 77). Christ uttered Psalm 22:1 in his personal lament on the cross (Matt. 27:46 = Mark 15:34).

### Prayers about God's work in the world

- Some prayers are appeals to God to further his purposes in the world, whether in some ongoing process or in a specific, urgent situation. As one might expect given the origins of the biblical writings, most of our examples come from people active in ministry or leadership. A classic Old Testament example is Elijah's prayer for the Lord to defeat the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36–37).
- The preeminent, exceptional example of this type of prayer is Jesus' prayer for his disciples the night before his death (commonly called his "high priestly prayer")—the longest prayer recorded in the New Testament (John 17).

### Prayers about ourselves and others

- **Material needs.** Some prayers are petitions for our own needs or those of our immediate family or group. These are typically petitions for our material needs, such as food or a matter of health. Hezekiah's prayer for healing (2 Kings 20:2–3) is an excellent Old Testament example.
- **Repentance and forgiveness.** A crucially important type of prayer is that of expressing repentance for one's sins and asking for God's forgiveness. Psalm 51—David's prayer for forgiveness after his sins involving Uriah and Bathsheba—is a classic example in the Old Testament. Daniel's confession on behalf of the Jews (Dan. 9:4–19) is an example of an intercessory prayer for forgiveness. Our best New Testament examples come in Luke. Jesus' parables of the prodigal son (esp. Luke 15:18–20) and the penitent tax-collector (Luke 18:13–14) illustrate praying for one's own forgiveness. Jesus' prayer for his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), illustrates an intercessory prayer for the forgiveness of others.
- **Spiritual blessing and protection.** David's prayer that the Lord would keep him from sin (Ps. 19:13–14) illustrates that we can and should ask God to protect us spiritually from temptation. More broadly, Paul prayed for the salvation of his Jewish brethren (Rom. 10:1).

## Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prayer in the Old Testament

**Mind the *context*.** A good example of the need to keep context in mind comes from Jeremiah 29. Verse 11 has perhaps been cross-stitched onto more pillows than any other biblical text:

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.” (Jer. 29:10–12)

Many interpret Jeremiah 29:11 as a general promise to all individuals that God has a good life planned for them. But this ignores the historical context. When Jeremiah wrote, Babylon had conquered Jerusalem, carrying off some Israelites into exile and leaving others behind in Jerusalem (the center of the nation’s religious activity). Naturally, it was assumed that those left behind (to participate in the temple) were blessed by God, and those carried off (and thus separated from the temple) were cursed. The exiles—who were far from the seat of David and the Holy of Holies—were tempted to think that they had been expunged from the nation and excluded from the promises to Abraham. But Jeremiah turned this thinking on its head when he declared that God would bring judgment upon Jerusalem (and its religious establishment) and fulfill his purposes through the exiles. There was, however, a catch: those purposes wouldn’t come to fruition in the lifetimes of Jeremiah’s readers. They should thus settle down in Babylon, while keeping their hopes up that God had big plans for their future. They would not be scattered forever. One day, their descendants would return home. Of course, because of Christ (in whom all the promises to Abraham are fulfilled [2 Cor. 1:20]), we too are recipients of the Abrahamic promises (Gal. 3:14–29). In this way, Jeremiah 29:11 foreshadowed our hope. But it does not promise us individual peace and prosperity, contextually defined as a return from exile to Jerusalem and historically fulfilled in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

**Mind the *covenant*.** A good example of the need to keep biblical covenants in mind when interpreting prayer in the Old Testament comes from the popular “prayer of Jabez”:

“Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!’ And God granted what he asked.” (1 Chron. 4:9–10)

Many since the 2000 book *The Prayer of Jabez* have taken 1 Chronicles 4:10 to function as a kind of carte blanche promise that anyone—including Christians today—can “claim” for themselves. But Christians today don’t live under the right covenant to claim such a promise, and they’d probably not like the implications of the promise if they did! Jabez lived in the generations following Joshua’s initial conquest of Canaan, thus falling under the jurisdiction of the Mosaic covenant. Remember, God had promised to Israel through Moses that he would enlarge their borders as a fulfillment of his promise to the patriarchs (Exod. 34:24; Deut. 19:8). With the conquest of Canaan underway, land was divided among the twelve tribes of Israel, which was further divided among the families of each tribe, and the families were instructed to drive out from their allotted land any remaining Canaanites (see Josh. 13–20). Failure to do so had serious consequences (see the Book of Judges!), and Jabez knew this. He didn’t pray to grow his real estate portfolio; he prayed for God’s help in removing remaining Canaanites from the land assigned to him. This is confirmed by his request that that he receive the aid of God’s “hand”—an Old Testament metaphor for God’s

military might in narratives including the conquest of Canaan. In short, Jabez prayed for the ability to obey a divine directive! Rather than attempting to move God to conform to Jabez' human will, Jabez conformed himself to the divine will that had already been revealed—indeed, commanded. This required (1) knowing what God had commanded, (2) reminding God of what he had promised, and (3) taking responsibility for what was personally required. Though we can emulate these basic principles today, we live in the wrong era to pray as Jabez did. Besides, what Christians today are prepared to ask God for an enlarged territory, and then take up arms to secure it? [Maybe I shouldn't have asked that question! But I doubt most readers of *The Prayer of Jabez* are eager for more Crusades.]

**Mind both the *context* and the *covenant*.** Sometimes both principles are relevant to the same text. For example, the immediate *context* and the *covenant* that God made with Israel are both relevant to 2 Chronicles 7:14:

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chron. 7:13–14, see 7:12–22)

Interpreting 2 Chronicles 7:14 as a promise that God will bless the United States of America if Christians pray is a mistaken reading of the text. Israel was subject to the Mosaic covenant during the reign of Solomon under the rule of God. When the *theocratic* nation disobeyed God, he would curse their land (and thus their economy) by destroying their crops through providentially ordained natural means. If the nation turned to God in repentance and once again obeyed his commands, he would bless their land by strengthening their crops and thus bring about economic prosperity. There are no genuinely theocratic nations today—including America. What's more, the church is a decentralized entity, comprised of scattered saints (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1)—from all nations (Rev. 7:9-10)—mysteriously made into one people, a non-geopolitical “holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9-10). Should we pray for the repentance of our leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-4)? Yes! Should we seek the welfare of our nation (Jer. 29:7)? Of course! Are we *guaranteed* economic prosperity in America if our leaders turn from wickedness? No. We're not a *theocratic* nation, and God has not directly promised this to *us*.

### The Lord's Prayer and New Testament References to Prayer

It turns out that all (or at least almost all) New Testament references to prayer exemplify various lines of the Lord's Prayer. At the same time, we find that the New Testament views Christ as the proper recipient of the honors expressed in the Lord's Prayer, and that he is the focus of the ministry of Christians working to advance the kingdom. We have already anticipated these aspects of the Lord's Prayer in our categories of types of prayer, moving from praying about God to praying about his work in the world and then to praying about ourselves or others.

#### Our Father, who is in heaven (Matt. 6:9b; Luke 11:2b)

- We have already shown in detail that prayers are to be addressed to God and specifically to the Father.
- We have also shown that Christians should likewise pray to Christ (John 14:14; Acts 1:24–25; 7:59–60; 9:14; 22:16; Rom. 10:12–13; 1 Cor. 1:2; 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8–9).

## **Hallowed be your name (Matt. 6:9c; Luke 11:2b)**

- Praising and glorifying God, especially concerning Jesus Christ and the work done through his people (Matt. 5:16; 9:8; 15:31; Mark 2:12; Luke 2:20; 5:25; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15, 18; 18:43; 19:37; John 14:13; Acts 2:47; 3:8–9; 4:21; 11:18; 13:48; 21:20; Rom. 11:36; 15:6–11; 16:27; 2 Cor. 1:20; 4:15; Gal. 1:5, 24; Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; 3:21; Phil. 1:11; 4:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:15; James 5:13; 1 Peter 4:11, 16; Jude 25); of Christ directly (2 Thess. 1:12; Heb. 13:21; 2 Peter 3:18; Rev. 1:6)
- Worship (of God, Matt. 4:10 = Luke 4:8; John 4:20–24; Acts 24:14; Rom. 1:25; 1 Cor. 14:25; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 12:28; Rev. 4:10–11; 7:11; 11:16; 19:10; 22:9); of Christ (esp. Matt. 14:33; 28:17; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:14)
- Honoring God's *name* (Luke 1:49; Rev. 15:4; specifically of the Father, Matt. 28:19; John 12:28; 17:11); of Jesus' name (esp. Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:21, 38; 19:17; Rom. 10:12–13; 1 Cor. 1:13–15; Phil. 2:9–11; Col. 3:17)

## **Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2c)**

### ***For Christ to come and bring the consummation of the kingdom:***

- *Maranatha* [Our Lord, come!] (1 Cor. 16:22)
- “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20)

### ***For God's will to be done (a prayer of submission):***

- “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (Matt. 26:42; cf. Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42)
- “Let the will of the Lord be done.” (Acts 21:14)

### ***For people who are in ministry to others and the advancement of the kingdom:***

- For people to become “laborers in the harvest” (Matt. 9:38; Luke 10:2)
- When commissioning someone for ministry (Acts 6:5–6; 13:3; 14:23; cf. 1:24)
- For the opportunity to minister to a group of people (Rom. 1:9–10; 15:30–32; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:10; Phm. 22)
- For God's servants to have boldness to speak God's word, the gospel (Acts 4:23–24; Eph. 6:19–20)
- That those proclaiming God's word would find fruit in their ministry (2 Thess. 3:1)
- For fellow believers, especially those in ministry, to escape from life-threatening or dangerous situations or people (Acts 12:5; 27:29; Rom. 15:30–31; 2 Cor. 1:9–11; Phil. 1:19; 2 Thess. 3:2; cf. Matt. 24:20; Mark 13:18)
- Thanking God for other believers' support in ministry (Acts 28:15; 2 Cor. 8:16)
- For the birth of a child whom God called to special, prophetic ministry (Luke 1:13)
- That kings and other rulers would permit believers to live godly lives in peace, for the benefit of the salvation of others (1 Tim. 2:1–6)

### ***For the spiritual well-being of others (especially those over whom one has charge):***

- That other believers may do right and be restored (2 Cor. 13:6–9)
- That God's people may know the blessings they have in Christ (Eph. 1:15–21)
- That believers may grow in love, knowledge of God, wisdom, discernment, and endurance with God's strength to live fruitful lives for God's glory (Phil. 1:3–11; Col. 1:9–11; 4:12; 2 Thess. 1:11–12; Phm. 4–6)
- For the salvation of others (Rom. 10:1)

***For the miracles that Christ's apostles performed in his name as signs of his power:***

- To cast out a demon (Mark 9:29 [although here the disciples failed to cast it out])
- For the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15 [with miraculous manifestation implied in the context; although others received the Holy Spirit, this seems to have been an unusual if not unique occurrence of the gift being imparted through prayer])
- Peter, when raising Tabitha to life (Acts 9:40)
- Paul, when laying his hands on a sick person (Acts 28:8)

**Give us this day our daily bread (Matt. 6:11; Luke 11:3)**

***Specifically for food:***

- To thank God for food and other good things we have (Matt. 15:36 = Mark 8:6 = John 6:11; Matt. 26:67 = Mark 14:23 = Luke 22:17, 19 = 1 Cor. 11:24; Acts 27:35; Rom. 14:6; 1 Cor. 10:30; 1 Tim. 4:3–5)

***More generally, ordinary human needs:***

- To let one's requests (especially those about which we may be anxious) be made known to God, with the expected result to experience the peace of God (Phil. 4:6)
- Elders are to pray for the sick and believers are to confess their sins to be healed (James 5:14–16)
- For believers to have things go well for them and to be in good health (3 John 2)

**And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4a)**

- For our enemies, those who abuse us, forgiving those who have wronged us (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:28 Mark 11:25; cf. Matt. 6:14–15)
- For God to forgive our sins (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4a) and to be merciful to us in view of our sins (Luke 18:13)—even bad intentions (Acts 8:22)

**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (Matt. 6:13; Luke 11:5b)**

- Not to succumb to temptation (Matt. 26:41; Mark 14:38; Luke 22:40, 46; cf. Matt. 6:13a; Luke 11:4b), including from the cares of this life (Luke 21:34–36)
- For wisdom to respond rightly to temptations or trials (James 1:2–8)
- That someone else's faith might not fail (so Jesus for Peter, Luke 22:32; for his disciples, John 17:6, 11–12, 16)
- For the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13)

**Prayer Theology 101**

- ***God is omniscient, i.e., all-knowing*** (Job 36:4; 37:16; Ps. 139:6). This means that he knows our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; 1 Chron. 28:9, 17; Pss. 7:9; 139:2, 23; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 11:20; 17:10; 20:12; Acts 1:24; Rom. 8:27; 1 John 3:20), he knows every detail about us and our future (Ps. 139:16; Prov. 16:33; Isa. 41:22–23; 42:9; 44:7; 46:9–10; Matt. 10:30), and he knows what we need before we pray (Ps. 139:4; Matt. 6:8, 32). Therefore, he knows what *he* will do in response to our prayer before we pray.

- **God is omnipotent, i.e., all-powerful** (Gen. 18:14; 2 Chron. 20:6; Job 42:2; Ps. 115:3; Isa. 14:27; 55:11; Jer. 32:17, 27; Dan. 4:35; Zech. 8:6; Matt. 3:9; Matt. 19:26 = Mark 10:27 = Luke 18:27; Luke 1:37; Eph. 1:11). Therefore, he can do whatever he chooses to do in response to our prayers.
- **God is morally excellent, perfect in holiness and love, and does only good** (Gen. 1:31; Exod. 34:6–7; Lev. 19:2; Deut. 4:31; 7:9–10; 8:16; 1 Kings 8:23; Pss. 11:7; 34:8; 103:3–8; 107:8; 118:1; Jonah 4:2; Mic. 7:18–20; Nah. 1:7; Mark 10:18; Rom. 8:28, 39; 2 Cor. 13:14; James 1:17; 1 John 4:7–11). Thus, God will not do anything harmful or bad to us in answer to our prayers (Matt. 7:7–11 = Luke 11:9–13).
- **God has created this world so that human choices have real consequences.** In this world, both good and evil are real possibilities (Gen. 1:26–31; 2:15–17; 3:16–19; Deut. 30:15–20; Josh. 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21; Rom. 12:9, 21). It follows that God’s usual mode of involvement in our lives is providential rather than supernaturally interventionist: constant intervention would negate the meaningfulness of our choices and the regularity of the created order necessary for actions to have consequences. Usually, then, God does not answer prayers with miracles (strictly defined as supernaturally caused events), and as a rule we enjoy or suffer the consequences of our actions (Gal. 6:6–9).
- **God genuinely responds to prayer** (e.g., 1 Sam. 1:10–17; 2 Kings 19:20; Luke 1:13; Acts 10:4, 31). This theological truth is consistent with the point just made about human choices and actions having real consequences. “The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29; see also Pss. 31:22; 145:18–19). God answered prayers of repentance by forgiving his people and removing the chastisement he had placed on them (2 Chron. 7:14; 33:10–13). In some instances, in response to prayer God even reversed a previously stated decision (2 Kings 20:1–6 = Isa. 38:1–5). From a human perspective, God *appears* to change his mind in response to prayer, though God knows all things. [See notes for the January 2025 Theological Equipping Class entitled “Providence and the Problem of Evil,” especially sections on God’s two-fold will and the use of anthropopathism in texts where God appears to change his mind.]
- **God uses evil for his own good purposes, which are normally understood only afterward** (Gen. 45:5–7; 50:20; Prov. 16:4; Acts 2:23; 3:15, 17; 1 Cor. 2:7–8). The New Testament citations listed here all refer to the crucifixion of Jesus, an abhorrent act of evil that no one understood at the time was God’s means to produce the greatest good (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6–10). [See notes for the January and February 2025 Theological Equipping Classes on “Providence and the Problem of Evil” and “Divine Providence and Human Responsibility,” respectively, where they deal with the related theological concepts of concurrence and compatibilism.]
- **God providentially works all things together for the ultimate good of those who love him** (Rom. 8:28). In this context “all things” includes starvation, deprivation, suffering, death, and anything else that one might fear (Rom. 8:35–39). The implication is that we should not expect prayer to result in our being spared these things, but it will enable us to endure them with confidence in God’s love.

## Conditions of Sound Christian Prayer

### Jesus’ name

Praying in Jesus’ name is mentioned in John (John 14:13–14; 15:16; 16:23–24) and Paul (Eph. 5:20). We may be sure the point is not to use the words “in Jesus’ name” when praying. (1) We have examples of apostles and others praying without using the phrase and none with it (Acts 1:24–25; 4:24–30; 7:59). (2) Paul instructs Christians to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17 [a text parallel to Eph. 5:20]), which surely does not mean saying “in Jesus’ name” in all activities. This text and others suggest that speaking or acting in someone’s “name”

generally means to do so on his behalf, as his representative (e.g., 1 Sam. 17:45). In some contexts, it may mean speaking or acting with his authority (e.g., Acts 3:6; 16:18; 2 Thess. 3:6). We can pray in Jesus' name by thanking the Father for what Jesus has done for us or in any other way acknowledging Jesus as the one through whom we have a relationship with God.

## God's will

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” (1 John 5:14–15)

In our study of providence and evil, we made the distinction between God's *descriptive will* (what he determines will in fact take place by his providential rule) and his *prescriptive will* (what he tells us are the right things to do). But which sense applies here? Earlier in the epistle, John says that “whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17), clearly meaning God's prescriptive will. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of his purpose being to do the Father's “will” (John 4:34; 5:30; and esp. 6:38–40). The sense here may have a different nuance: Jesus came not just to do good things in keeping with God's prescriptive will, but to accomplish the Father's sovereignly determined purpose for human salvation.

Obviously, asking God for something contrary to his prescriptive will is wrong. In 1 John 5:14, though, God's “will” is not something we are supposed to do, but something that conditions or qualifies what we are asking God to do. We can get a clearer idea of what John means by continuing in the passage:

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.” (1 John 5:16–17)

Evidently, praying for God to give a brother who has sinned life is consistent with God's “will” unless the brother has committed sin that leads to death. Thus, God's “will” in this context is his intention regarding such matters as salvation. Requests from believers that further God's revealed purpose will be granted; no such promise is given otherwise. 1 John 4:14–15 is not a *carte blanche* promise that God will give us whatever we ask as long as it isn't sinful. It is an assurance that God will do what he has promised to do and an invitation for us to participate in that work through our prayers.

## God's promises to all believers

There are specific promises God makes to all believers in the New Testament, assuring us that God shall respond positively to requests in those matters because we know what is his “will.” Examples:

- If we confess our sins, God promises to forgive us (1 John 1:9), so long as we also forgive others (Matt. 6:12, 14–15; 18:35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:13; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13; James 2:13).
- If we ask for wisdom to handle life's trials or temptations, God will give us such wisdom, so long as we are not double-minded about wanting to live with such wisdom (James 1:2–8).

## **Righteous character**

The New Testament teaches that prayers are generally hindered by a lack of godly character (1 Peter 3:10–12 [quoting Ps. 34:12–16]), such as selfishness or greed (James 4:2–3), pride (James 4:4–10, cf. Matt. 6:1–6), or treating family members poorly (1 Peter 3:7). If our life is characterized by obedience to God's commands and seeking to please him, we may be assured that God will hear and answer our prayers (1 John 3:21–22).

## **Responsible action**

Prayer does not take the place of responsible action and right conduct (Prov. 15:8; Isa. 1:15; 29:13–14). Prayer and prudence go together (Neh. 4:9). On the other hand, sometimes we don't seem to have any way out of a situation, but we can still look to God (2 Chron. 20:12). Knowing the right thing to do and not doing it is sin (James 4:17). The Lord may answer our prayers by reminding us of what we need to do!

## **No particular posture required**

The Bible gives examples of believers praying in various positions.

- The posture most often mentioned is kneeling (1 Kings 8:54 = 2 Chron. 6:13; Ezra 9:5; Ps. 95:6; Dan. 6:10; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14). The Gospels say that Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane “fell on his face and prayed” (Matt. 26:39), “fell on the ground and prayed” (Mark 14:35), or “knelt down and prayed” (Luke 22:41), which are simply different descriptions of the same action.
- On the other hand, we are told that Hannah prayed while standing (1 Sam. 1:26), and Jesus spoke about his disciples praying while standing (Mark 11:25).
- A reasonable inference is that when setting aside time for prayer, we ought to do so in a posture that facilitates focusing our attention on prayer.

## **Should We *Expect* Healing in Answer to Prayer?**

Prayer for healing, either for oneself or for others, may be the most common type of prayer in modern times. Perhaps it always has been. But should Christians expect that God will heal people in response to such prayers?

## **Healing in the atonement?**

In some teachings found especially in charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity, physical healing is a present benefit of the atonement, just as is forgiveness of sins, and thus Christians should expect to be healed in answer to prayer. The World Assemblies of God Fellowship, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world, in its *Statement of Faith* says, “We believe that deliverance from sickness is provided for in the atonement and is the privilege of all

believers” (#5, citing Isa. 53:4–5;<sup>10</sup> Matt. 8:16–17<sup>11</sup>; James 5:14–16 [see “The ‘prayer of faith’” below]).

Perfect health and indeed immortality is promised to believers, but only in the future resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42–57). In the meantime, we live in a creation subject to suffering and decay. We await “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). Except for those Christians living when Christ returns, every Christian suffers physical death (1 Thess. 4:13–17). In a sense, then, healing *is* guaranteed in the atonement, but in the future. Christ’s death for our “transgressions” or “iniquities” (Isa. 53:4–5) heals us spiritually now (1 Peter 2:24) and will heal us physically in the resurrection. When Jesus healed people physically during his earthly ministry, he did so to show his authority to heal us spiritually (Matt. 8:16–17; see 9:1–7, where Jesus heals a paralytic to demonstrate his authority to forgive sin).

### The “prayer of faith”

The New Testament never teaches that someone can pray for his or her own healing and be confident it will happen, and it gives us no examples of someone praying for his own healing. In James 5:14–16, the sick person is said to obtain healing through the “prayer of faith” offered by “the elders of the church.” Does this mean that healing is promised for the believer on whose behalf prayers are offered in the church? There are several reasons from the epistle of James itself why this conclusion is not correct.

- James had just cited Job as an example of faithful endurance through suffering. But Job suffered for a long time and his eventual healing was not brought about through any prayer on his behalf (James 5:10–11; cf. Job 1–2, 42:7–10).
- James had earlier instructed believers not to presume that they will even live tomorrow but to acknowledge the sovereign will of the Lord in all such matters (James 4:13–16). If we shouldn’t presume that it is always God’s will for us to be *alive* tomorrow, we shouldn’t presume that it is always God’s will for us to be *well* tomorrow.
- When James speaks of believers praying for one another to be healed, the matter of healing is tied to forgiveness of sins: “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). The relationship between sin and sickness in this passage is complicated and somewhat debated (see also vv. 15, 19–20). James certainly doesn’t claim that all sickness is the result of sin, but it is possible that the sickness in question was associated in some way with sin. In any case, what James means here is not that if we pray for one another we will definitely be healed. Rather, he means that we should pray for one another *asking* that we would be healed.
- James’s reference to “the prayer of faith” (James 5:15) does not mean any prayer offered by someone who believes in God. Rather, it probably means a prayer offered by someone who has a special gift of “faith,” meaning a spiritual gift in which God gives the person praying a revelation assuring him that the prayer will be answered affirmatively. The apostle Paul talked about such a gift in his list of the *charismata*, and in context it was mentioned alongside gifts of healing (1 Cor. 12:9). These were special, extraordinary gifts that God gave only to

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<sup>10</sup> “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” In the immediate context of Isaiah 53:4–5, healing is connected to “transgressions” and “iniquities.” Indeed, this theme permeates all of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, with 11 references or allusions of some sort to sin.

<sup>11</sup> As we’ve taught elsewhere, Jesus’ miracles and signs were audio-visual aids to theological lessons, intended to both authenticate his message and educate onlookers regarding his divine messianic identity.

some people—not to all (1 Cor. 12:4–6, 11, 29-30; 13:2). Thus, James 5 does not appear to be speaking about healings that any and all Christians can obtain confidently through their faith.

- James goes on immediately to cite the example of Elijah, who was a prophet (James 5:17–18). James emphasizes that Elijah was a man with the same nature as ours, but the point here is not that we are all prophets or that we all are supposed to obtain miracles by faith. We know this is not what James meant because his example of something for which Elijah prayed was the drought that lasted for three and a half years. If James wanted to illustrate the power of prayer for healing, he could have used the example of Elijah raising the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17–24) or one of the healings that came through the prophet Elisha (such as the healing of Naaman's leprosy [2 Kings 5:1–16]). The drought is obviously an exceptional matter for prayer; we don't normally pray for drought! Thus, James's example supports the view that he was referring to a special, extraordinary situation in which an individual confidently knows by divine revelation that God is going to do what is asked.

In conclusion, James clearly does not teach that an individual should expect to be healed simply by his own prayers. In this passage, healing—when it comes—is granted through an extraordinary “prayer of faith” offered by elders or sometimes (evidently not in all circumstances) when we pray for one another. The point here is not that God *cannot* heal us today if we ask for healing. God can heal *anyone* at *any* time of his choosing and in *any* way as he sees fit. The point is that we should not *presume* that God will heal people in response to prayer.

### Whatever You Ask?

Several New Testament texts seem to present believers with a generalized promise that God will give them whatever they request in prayer. We have already discussed 1 John 5:14–15, which teaches Christians to have confidence they will receive what they ask in alignment with God's “will” (that is, his revealed purpose for advancing his redemptive work in the world). Let's look at some other such texts.

- “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. . .” (Matt. 7:7–8 = Luke 11:9–10). In Matthew's version, Jesus goes on to say that his disciples may expect that the Father will “give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:11). In Luke's account, Jesus assures his disciples that the Father will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13). [Jesus may have said these things on two different occasions.] While we should not *limit* what Matthew 7:11 means to what is found in Luke 11:13, perhaps we should consider that Luke 11:13 reveals *what sort of* “good things” Matthew 7:11 includes. The disciples are to “seek” the kingdom of God and his righteousness and trust that basic material needs (not all desires) will be met (Matt. 6:31–33; Luke 12:29–31). To “seek the Lord” is basic to biblical piety (e.g., Deut. 4:29; 1 Chron. 16:10–11 = Ps. 105:3–4; Isa. 55:6; Acts 15:17). “Those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (Ps. 34:10). Such is the norm; any deprivation that faithful believers experience will be an exception and something through which God is bringing about a greater good. [See “Prayer Theology 101” above.]
- “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:19–20). In the immediate context, Jesus was telling his disciples that God will support the church in their righteous exercise of church discipline (18:15–18). Thus, by “anything they ask,” Christ means requests pertinent to the integrity and mission of the church.
- “Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:22–25 = Matt. 21:21–22; see also Matt. 17:19–20; Luke 17:5–6). This saying comes in the context of Jesus having cursed a fig tree as a symbolic representation of the curse that was coming on Jerusalem and specifically its temple on Mount Zion (Mark 11:12–21; Matt. 21:12–20).<sup>12</sup> This sort of context does not encourage reading Mark 11:24 as a blanket promise that we may ask God for anything we want and expect to get it! In the context of discussing the temporary role and secondary importance of spiritual gifts, Paul stated, “If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Here Paul clearly alludes to Jesus’ saying and applies it to a spiritual gift of “faith” (see 1 Cor. 12:9 [in the same context as gifts of healing, miracles, and prophecy]). Thus, Paul understood Jesus’ saying about mountain-moving faith to refer to an extraordinary gift of faith pertaining to a specific situation in which the gifted person knows what God wants to have happen. Jesus was not teaching that all Christians should be able to get whatever they want if they have enough faith.

### Keep Praying Until You Get What You Ask?

A quite popular teaching about prayer is that a key to receiving what you ask of God is to keep asking—over and over, if necessary—until you receive it. Is this correct?

- In one of Jesus’ parables, a householder is interrupted in the middle of the night by a friend who wants some bread for his unexpected guests. Luke reports this parable (Luke 11:5–8) immediately before Jesus’ words about asking, seeking, and knocking (11:9–13), which, as we have seen, is about seeking God’s kingdom and trusting him for our needs. A translation issue complicates our understanding of the parable’s conclusion. Some versions read, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs” (Luke 11:8 NRSV). However, the word translated “persistence” here (also in the NET, NKJV, and others), *anaideia*, normally means “shamelessness,” as other versions reflect (NASB, NEB, cf. CSB, NIV; the NLT splits the difference with “shameless persistence”). The term is derogatory and should be understood as “shamelessness” or perhaps “impudence” (ESV, LEB), rather than commendable “persistence.” The point of the parable is not that believers ought to be “persistent” in prayer like the man at the door. Rather, Jesus is arguing *a fortiori* (what the rabbis called *qal wahomer*, “light and heavy”), from the lesser to the greater: if a householder will grudgingly give the rude man at the door what he shamelessly requested, God—who can never be inconvenienced—will much more (cf. Luke 11:13) be willing to give what his people request from him. Understood in this way, the parable is not recommending “persistent” prayer at all. It is not saying that asking God for the same thing over and over is a reliable way to get one’s request answered in the affirmative.
- A similar point is being made in Jesus’ parable of an unjust judge who grudgingly gives a widow justice so she will stop bothering him (Luke 18:1–5). In context, Jesus is not talking about asking God over and over for things we want or even need. Note the conclusion: “And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily” (Luke 18:7 NKJV). God will avenge his wronged people without delay, i.e., without holding up justice due to the kind of neglect

<sup>12</sup> See William R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree*, JSNTSup 1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), followed by many (not all) commentators. See also Kirk R. MacGregor, “Understanding ‘If Anyone Says to This Mountain. . .’ (Mark 11:20–25) in Its Religio-Historical Context,” *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics* 2, no. 1 (2009): 23–40.

attributed to the judge in Jesus' parable. This does not mean there will be no period of time during which the elect will continue to wait and endure their trials. Such a period of waiting is implied by what Jesus asks next: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b). This question implies an unspecified yet apparently long period of time until "the Son of Man comes," at the end of which it is uncertain whether believers will still be found on earth. Luke tells us that the point of the parable is that the disciples "ought always to pray and not lose heart" (18:1). Luke is not saying disciples should repeat their "prayer requests" over and over to move God closer and closer to answering. He is saying that disciples should never give up on God's vindication and final salvation even though circumstances may tempt us to lose heart.

- The New Testament contains two famous examples of repeated petitionary prayers, both of which received a negative answer. Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane that the Father would spare him the "cup" of the cross if it was his will (Matt. 26:44; Mark 14:35–41). Paul asked the Lord three times to take away his "thorn" (2 Cor. 12:7–10). We learn two important truths here. (1) It is not wrong to ask God the same thing more than once. (2) Repeated requests for the same thing do not guarantee a positive response.

### Praying at All Times

Luke's statement that Jesus' disciples "ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1) raises the important, practical question of what it means to pray "always." As we have just suggested, in context Luke means that believers should never give up on God's love and ultimate deliverance. A similar idea comes later in Luke, where Jesus says: "But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36).

Christians sometimes worry that praying "at all times" seems unrealistic. What Jesus says is that we should "stay awake at all times," with "awake" referring to being spiritually alert (Jesus is not prohibiting literal sleep!). Part of maintaining spiritual vigilance is prayer.

The phrase translated "at all times" (*en panti kairō*) can mean on all occasions, in all periods of time, in all seasons of life, and so on, depending on context (see, e.g., 1 Macc. 12:11; 13:5; Sir. 29:3). The same phrase occurs in Paul's statement, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Eph. 6:18 NIV; "at all times," ESV et al.).

Elsewhere Paul emphasizes stick-to-itiveness in a life of prayer: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). The word translated by the ESV "be constant," *proskartereō*, means to be "devoted to" (NASB) or to "persevere in" (NRSV) or "persist in" (NET, cf. CSB) something (see Walter Bauer et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, s.v. προσκαρτερέω 2). The New Testament uses this verb several times regarding prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:42 [cf. 2:46]; 6:4; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2). It is not expressing continuous, never-interrupted prayer, but persistence in one's life in prayer.

Perhaps the most well-known of these "praying at all times" texts comes at the conclusion of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:17). The key to unceasing prayer is thankfulness "in all circumstances." Thus, the point here (and in all the above texts) is that believers ought to persist in prayer no matter the situation, never giving up on God's purposes and not losing heart even when things don't go well.

None of this means there should be no structure to our prayer lives. We see, for example, in the Psalms that ancient Israel practiced evening and morning prayers, and we have at least one reference to praying three times daily (Pss. 4–5; 55:17; cf. Dan. 6:11). These Old Testament texts suggest the importance of praying intentionally on a regular basis.

### Recommended Resources

Websites are suggested with reference to the subject of *prayer* (not all subjects addressed by the sites would receive our recommendation). Listing of any resource here does not imply endorsement of all opinions expressed by it (even on prayer), but rather the general usefulness and informative nature of the resource. Remember my philosophy: research widely, but wisely; read provocatively, but prudently.

### Select Recommended Books

- Boa, Kenneth. *Handbook to Prayer: Praying Scripture Back to God*. Atlanta: Trinity House Publishers, 1993, pb. 2020.
- Bray, Gerald L. *Yours is the Kingdom: A Systematic Theology of the Lord's Prayer*. Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007.
- Carson, D. A. *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.
- Carson, D. A., ed. *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World*. World Evangelical Fellowship. Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990.
- Crump, David. *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 493–515. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020.
- Gupta, Nijay K. *The Lord's Prayer*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2017.
- Harrod, Joseph C. *40 Questions about Prayer*. Benjamin L. Merkle, series ed. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2022.
- Lewis, C. S. *How to Pray: Reflections and Essays*. New York: HarperOne, 2018.
- Longenecker, Richard N., ed. *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*. McMaster New Testament Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Millar, J. Gary. *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 38. D. A. Carson, series ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016.
- Mohler, R. Albert, Jr. *The Prayer that Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019.
- Onwuchekwa, John. *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*. 9Marks Building Healthy Churches Series. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

### Select Web Resources

- Cru. Evangelical ministry founded by Bill Bright originally for evangelizing students and that is now an international organization. Its website provides a helpful beginner's guide to prayer and a daily prayer guide with prompts for every day of the year. <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/prayer/how-to-pray.html>.
- Got Questions.org. "Questions about Prayer." Answers to 124 questions such as to whom we should pray, how to pray according to God's will, what it means to pray without ceasing, etc., as well as questions about practices

that the site criticizes including Catholic prayer, contemplative prayer, praying in tongues, and more.

[https://www.gotquestions.org/questions\\_prayer.html](https://www.gotquestions.org/questions_prayer.html).

Navigators. “Resources: Prayer.” Featuring the “Prayer Hand” (confession, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise), many articles on prayer, and numerous “prayer tools”— practical guidance for starting to pray, personal prayer time, intercessory prayer, and fasting and prayer, as well as NavPress publications on prayer.

[https://www.navigators.org/topic/prayer/?post\\_type=resource](https://www.navigators.org/topic/prayer/?post_type=resource).

Operation World. Best known for its 2010 book of the same title providing information about every nation to equip evangelical Christians to pray knowledgeably about them. OW now provides additional publications and up-to-date online resources for that purpose. This includes a free weekly prayer guide that can be used in churches as well as by individuals. <https://operationworld.org/>.

Persecution.org. Ministry that provides assistance to the persecuted, advocates for policies to protect Christians, and seeks to make Christians aware of the issue. Annual persecution index, free prayer calendar, weekly news updates, etc., all focused on the persecution of Christians throughout the world.

<https://www.persecution.org/>.

The Gospel Coalition. Self-described as “a fellowship of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition,” founded by D. A. Carson and the late Tim Keller. The website includes numerous resources of relevance to prayer including articles, blog posts, sermons, videos, podcasts, and a new course on “Praying with Paul,” which is also the title of a book co-authored by Carson. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/topics/prayer/>.