

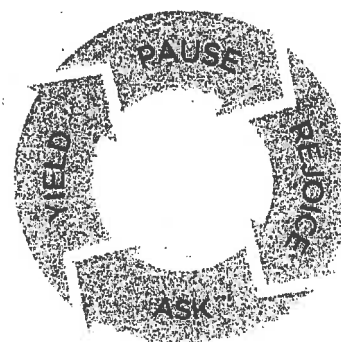
a free online programme for small groups that uses videos and discussion-starters to apply different aspects of the Lord's Prayer to daily life. As I've indicated, at the end of each chapter, you'll find a 'Hero of Prayer' whose life exemplifies the particular type of prayer we've been studying, and links to two additional online resources available at www.prayercourse.org:

1. **TOOL-SHED: 30 PRACTICAL PRAYER TOOLS** – to help you practise this kind of prayer.
2. **THE PRAYER COURSE VIDEO** – relating to each chapter, including a guide for group discussion.

HOW TO P.R.A.Y.

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.
When he finished, one of his disciples said to him
'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'
(Luke 11:1)*

Every pilgrim gets a stone in their shoe eventually. You wake up one morning thinking, 'Is this really all there is to knowing the Creator of 100 billion galaxies?' You read the book of Acts and ask, 'Why isn't it like that any more?' Your world falls apart and you desperately need a miracle. You stare up at the stars and feel things bigger than religious language. You say to yourself, 'If this thing is true there's got to be more power, more mystery, more actual personal experience.' And so finally you turn to God, half-wondering whether you're any more than half-serious and say 'Lord, teach me to pray.' And he replies, 'I thought you'd never ask!'



1: Prayer Everywhere

Why pray?

*'One day Jesus was praying
in a certain place . . .'*

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
(Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*)¹*

On Mount Athos, two thousand metres above the Aegean Sea, big-bearded Orthodox monks are praying, as they have done for 1,800 years. Thirty miles north of Lagos, more than a million Nigerian Christians are gathering for a monthly prayer meeting at the vast campus of The Redeemed Christian Church of God. On the banks of the River Ganges at Varanasi, Hindu pilgrims are plunging into the sacred waters seeking cleansing and hope. Somewhere in Manhattan a group of addicts on a Twelve Step Programme is meeting, seeking 'through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God'.² High in the Himalayas bells are chiming, strings of coloured prayer flags dancing against sapphire skies. Deep in the forests of Giant Redwood and Douglas Fir on California's Lost Coast, Cistercian nuns are keeping vigil beside the Mattole River, where salmon and steelhead swim.

goths at a silent disco. In front of them, between the giant stones of Herod's temple, thousands of hand-written prayers are wedged like badly rolled cigarettes between the bricks.

It's worth pausing at the start of a book like this to acknowledge the unending chorus of human longing: a canticle of sighs and cries and chiming bells, mutterings in maternity wards, celestial oratorios and scribbled graffiti. In the words of Rabbi Heschel, 'Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.'³

Native language

Our English word 'prayer' derives from the Latin '*precarius*'. We pray because life is precarious. We pray because life is marvelous. We pray because we find ourselves lost for many things, but not for the simplest words like 'please', 'thank you', 'wow', and 'help'. I prayed when I held our babies for the first time. I prayed when work overwhelmed me and I knew I couldn't cope. I prayed when my wife was wheeled away down the hospital corridor unconscious. I prayed the night I saw the Northern Lights.

The Canadian psychologist David G. Benner describes prayer as 'the soul's native language', observing that 'our natural posture is attentive openness to the divine'.⁴ We see this posture in many great men and women not necessarily known for their religious devotion. For instance, Abraham Lincoln admitted, 'I have been driven upon my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom . . . seemed insufficient for that day.'⁵

The entrepreneur Conrad Hilton, founder of the eponymous hotel chain, surprisingly devotes the last section of his autobiography to the matter of prayer. 'In the circle of successful living,' he explains, 'prayer is the hub that holds the wheel together.'⁶

In her semi-autobiographical novel *One True Thing*, Anna Quindlen depicts the agony of being nineteen years old and watching her mother receive chemotherapy 'drop by drop by

please-let-it-work-God drop. Oh yes, I prayed in that cubicle, and in the hallway outside, and in the cafeteria,' she says. 'But I prayed to myself without form, only inchoate feelings, one word: please, please, please, please, please.'⁷

The rock-star Dave Grohl admits to praying desperately when his drummer Taylor Hawkins overdosed at England's V Festival. 'I would talk to God out loud as I was walking,' he recalls of the late-night strolls back to Kensington's Royal Garden Hotel from the hospital where his friend lay in a coma. 'I'm not a religious person but I was out of my mind, I was so frightened and heartbroken and confused.'⁸

Elizabeth Gilbert begins her best-selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* like this: 'Hello, God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you . . . I've always been a big fan of your work. I haven't ever spoken to you directly before.' And then she starts to cry, 'Can you help me please? I am in desperate need of help. I don't know what to do.' As her tears subside she experiences a peace 'so rare that I didn't want to exhale for fear of scaring it off. I don't know when I'd ever felt such stillness. Then I heard a voice. It was not Charlton Heston, nor was it telling me to build a baseball field. It was my own voice, but a voice I had never heard before.'⁹

My friend Cathy was a militant atheist at the University of Wichita when, late one night in her lodgings, gazing down at her sleeping baby, she was overwhelmed with a desire to give thanks to someone or something for this gift of all gifts. Without a husband or a boyfriend in her life with whom to share her sense of wonder, Cathy whispered a few self-conscious words of gratitude out into the silence and, as she did so, the atmosphere seemed to change. Wave upon wave of love, unlike anything she had ever experienced, came flooding into the room. Kneeling there that night beside her sleeping baby, Cathy relinquished her ardent atheism. More than thirty years later, she remains a follower of Jesus.

The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh found himself similarly moved to pray by life's unfathomable wonder, an impulse he

describes in his poem 'Canal Bank Walk' as 'the gaping need of my senses':

*O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a web
Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech.
Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech,
For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be
proven.*¹⁰

To be human is to pray

From American presidents to Irish poets, and rock stars in London to single mothers in Wichita, prayer has been 'the argument that cannot be proven', the 'gaping need' of every human soul since the very dawn of time. Cave paintings dating back more than 35,000 years at Maros in Indonesia and Chauvet in France, were painted, it is thought, as spiritual invocations. In modern Turkey, the hilltop ruins at Gobekli Tepe are reckoned to be the remains of a temple 6,000 years older than Britain's Neolithic Stonehenge, which may itself have been a place of prayer some 3,000 years before Christ.

And what of the future? Is prayer just the diminishing shadow of some primitive dawn? Survey after survey answers 'no'.¹¹ Three hundred years after the Enlightenment the world is, if anything, becoming more religious, not less.¹² I am based in England, considered to be one of the more secular nations in Western Europe, but even here one quarter of those who describe themselves as 'non-religious' admit that, in fact, they 'take part in some spiritual activity each month, typically prayer'.¹³

An eminent London surgeon called David Nott illustrates this apparent contradiction well. He operates in three British hospitals but chooses to spend his holidays in the world's most dangerous war zones. 'I am not religious,' he assured Eddie Mair in a BBC Radio 4 interview:

But every now and again I have to pray and I do pray to God and I ask him to help me because sometimes I am suffering badly. It's only now and again that I am able to turn to the right frequency to talk to him and there is not a doubt in my mind there is a God. I don't need him every day. I need him every now and again but when I do need him he is certainly there.¹⁴

That interview in its entirety had a profound effect on its listeners. In fact, the experimental artist Patrick Brill (better known by his strange pseudonym 'Bob and Roberta Smith') was so moved by David Nott's testimony that he spent the next four months transcribing every single word in full, letter by letter, onto a vast canvas, which was then hung in the central hall of London's Royal Academy as the centrepiece of its Summer Exhibition – the most popular annual display of contemporary art in the country, and the oldest in the world.

From primitive cave paintings to the whitewashed walls of the Royal Academy, the universal impulse to pray permeates and pulsates through human anthropology and archaeology, sociology and psychology. It is no exaggeration to say that to be human is to pray. The question this begs, therefore, is not so much *why* we pray, but rather *how* to pray and to *whom*, and for billions of people today, the answer to such questions is to be found in the revolutionary life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

The Bible and prayer

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

The greatest person who ever lived was pre-eminently a man of prayer. Before launching out in public ministry, he fasted for more than a month in the wilderness. Before choosing his twelve disciples, he prayed all night. When he heard the devastating news that his cousin, John, had been executed, 'he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place'.¹⁵ After feeding

the five thousand, he was understandably tired but his response was to climb a mountain to pray.

When the pressures of fame threatened to crush him, Jesus prayed.¹⁶ When he was facing his own death in the Garden of Gethsemane, bleeding with fear and failed by his friends, he prayed.¹⁷ Even during those unimaginable hours of physical and spiritual torment upon the cross, Jesus cried out to the one who had apparently forsaken him.¹⁸

Jesus prayed and he prayed and he prayed.

But it didn't stop there. After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to follow his example so that the Church was eventually born, as 'they all joined together constantly in prayer'.¹⁹ And then, as it began to grow exponentially, the apostles continued to follow their Lord's example, resolutely prioritising prayer above the clamour of pressing leadership responsibilities.²⁰

It was when Peter 'went up on the roof to pray' in the city of Joppa that he received a shocking vision of non-kosher animals presented as food; an epoch-defining epiphany that would catapult the gospel out from its Jewish cradle into the vast harvest-fields of the Gentile world.²¹

We observe equal prayerfulness in Peter's apostolic counterpart Paul, of whom it is said, immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus, 'he is praying'.²² Paul's epistles thereafter bubble and fizz with petition, with spontaneous doxologies, and with passionate exhortations to pray. We are engaged, he reminds the Ephesians, in active warfare against dark spiritual powers (Eph. 6). We are caught up, he tells the Romans, in an intense heavenly prayer meeting (Rom. 8). We are edified, he tells the Corinthians, in truths revealed to us only through prayer (1 Cor. 14).

It would be easy to continue in this vein, because the priority of prayer is there to be found in one way or another on almost every page of the Bible, and in every chapter of church history. It is neither a peripheral theme nor an optional extra for the desperate and the devout. It does not belong to some other

time in history, nor to some other type of person more spiritual or disciplined or experienced than you and me. Prayer is nothing at all unless it is a matter of vast and all-consuming importance for each one of us.

'Prayer is more than a lighted candle,' insists the theologian George A. Buttrick. 'It is the contagion of health. It is the pulse of Life.'²³ A real relationship with God means walking with him daily, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It means talking with him intimately, like Moses with whom 'The Lord would speak . . . face to face, as one speaks to a friend.'²⁴ And it means listening attentively to his voice because, as Jesus said, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.'²⁵

Finding your places of prayer

We are told that, prior to his giving of the Lord's Prayer, 'Jesus was praying in a certain place'.²⁶ That's significant. There seem to have been certain places in which he preferred to pray. Elsewhere he advised his disciples, 'When you pray, go into your room, close the door.'²⁷ The location clearly mattered. And then a little later, on the day of Pentecost, we are told that the Holy Spirit first 'filled the whole house where they were sitting' (Acts 2:2) so that the disciples 'saw what seemed to be tongues of fire' (v. 3) and then, moments later, 'all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit' (v. 4).²⁸ Isn't that an interesting progression? The Holy Spirit filled the place *before* he filled the people.

The ancient Celtic Christians understood very well that the Holy Spirit can saturate places as well as people, describing such sacred sites evocatively as 'thin places'. Your thin place might simply be a particular chair in your house, a bench in the park, a hallowed half-hour on your daily commute, a regular slot in a 24-7 prayer room,²⁹ or even time in the sanctuary of your bathroom.

'I urge you, too,' writes the spiritual teacher Richard Foster, 'to find a place of focus – a loft, a garden, a spare room, an attic, even a designated chair – somewhere away from the routine of life, out of the path of distractions. Allow this spot to become a sacred "tent of meeting".'³⁰

Even when you don't really want to pray, a place of prayer can often make it easier. Merely by showing up, you make a declaration of intent. You say, in effect, 'Lord, I don't want to be here, but I'm here!' This has often been my experience with daily devotions and appointments in 24-7 prayer rooms. I may not always want to be there initially – I often drive to the prayer room grumbling, convinced that I can't spare the time and that 24-7 prayer is the worst idea in world history – but simply by showing up I am making myself available, and these are often the times when God meets me most powerfully. After decades of night-and-day prayer, I have come to believe that 99 per cent of it is just showing up; making the effort to become consciously present to the God who is constantly present to us.

Where's your chair?

An advertising executive became a Christian but said that he was too busy to carve out a daily time of prayer. 'It's easy for you,' he told his new pastor. 'You have all the time in the world, but I can't fit anything else into my life.' Perhaps you feel something similar as you begin this book: 'It's easy for Pete,' you may be thinking. 'He's the 24-7 prayer guy. He writes books and talks to squirrels all day. My life is different – it's manic and stressful!'

But the pastor pushed back with a gentle challenge, 'You know,' he said, 'I've always managed to make time for the things I really value.' That new believer went away and bought himself a really nice rocking chair, set it down in front of a window in his house, and began to get up just twenty minutes earlier each day to sit in it, read the Bible, and pray. As he maintained this simple, daily rhythm, his wife and colleagues began to notice that he was becoming less scattered, more peaceful and kind. That rocking chair was becoming his thin place.

Months turned into years, a daily discipline became a holy habit, and then one morning, as he sat there rocking, the Lord invited him to quit his job, sell the family home and relocate from Chicago to Colorado where a church needed his help. It

was a life-changing moment that launched his entire family into a new and remarkably fruitful season of life.

Several years later, that successful executive was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of incurable cancer, but he continued to keep his appointments with God each morning in that chair. During his last remaining days he found strength there in prayer for the hardest transition of them all.

The day of the funeral dawned and a friend found his grieving wife gazing at that rocking chair. 'What are you going to do with it now?' he enquired. 'Oh, we're going to pass it down to our children and grandchildren,' she replied without hesitation. 'I love to think of them sitting in it the way my husband did, unburdening their hearts, listening to the Lord, letting him shape and direct their lives.'³¹

Where's *your* chair? For my wife, it's a daily dog-walk and weekly appointments with God in a particular coffee shop. For a teacher in our church, it's her classroom where she shows up half an hour early each day to pray quietly over every single desk. For a student who recently came to know Jesus from a strict Sikh background, it's her car. 'Driving is my sanctuary,' she told me. 'I play worship music really loud and my family can't stop me!' Wherever you find your chair, try to visit it daily. Let it become your thin place, a sacred space that helps you walk and talk with God through the many twists and turns of life.

Lord, teach us to pray

Two thousand years ago, the disciples welcomed Jesus back from his regular time and place of prayer with one of the greatest questions of all time: 'Lord,' one of them said, 'teach us to pray.' His response to that simple, humble request was astonishingly generous. He didn't make them feel small. He didn't say, 'You really ought to know by now.' Instead he gave them the greatest prayer in world history. These were men who would go on to have extraordinary prayer lives. They would intercede until buildings shook. They would spring Peter from a high-security jail by the power of prayer. Their very shadows and handkerchiefs would

sometimes heal the sick. They would receive the kinds of revelations that change cultural paradigms. And most remarkably of all, they would one day find the grace within themselves to pray for their torturers at the very point of death.

The disciples were to become mighty prayer warriors, but it wasn't automatic. Prayer didn't get beamed down upon them from heaven. It wasn't a guaranteed perk of the apostolic job. Prayer had to be learned the hard way, and their schooling was to begin on a particular day with this simple, touchingly vulnerable request: 'Lord, teach us to pray.'

And so, of course, he did.

* * *

In this opening chapter I have sought to set out the historical and biblical case for prayer and the universal relevance of sacred space, from the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to a rocking chair in Colorado. My intention has been to reassure you that learning to pray really is the least weird, most natural, necessary and wonderful thing you can possibly do, and to encourage you to follow Christ's example in setting apart 'a certain place' (or certain places) for doing so regularly. In later chapters (3-12) we will focus on particular dimensions of prayer such as adoration, petition, intercession and contemplation. But first, in the next chapter, we are going to address the fundamental question at the heart of this book; how to pray; at its simplest, most literal level.

You can discover more about the aspects of prayer discussed in this chapter at www.prayercourse.org including:

- **PRAYER TOOL:** *How to Pray the Lord's Prayer.*
- **FURTHER READING:** *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, by Richard Foster.