What is prayer and how do you do it?

Christian Living · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/what-is-prayer-and-how-do-you-do-it/

Prayer is simply communicating with God. It is the privilege believers have to speak to their heavenly Father through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Prayer includes praise, thanksgiving, confession, lament, worship, and requests. At its core, prayer is not a ritual for manipulating God but a relationship of trust, dependence, and fellowship with Him.

The Bible teaches that Christians pray because God invites us to. Prayer is not about informing God of things He does not already know (Matt. 6:8). Rather, it is one of the primary ways believers express faith, dependence, worship, repentance, and love toward Him.

Jesus assumed His followers would pray. In the Sermon on the Mount, He did not say “if you pray,” but:

> “When you pray…” (Matt. 6:5)

Prayer has always been central to the life of God’s people. Throughout Scripture we see believers crying out to God in joy, grief, fear, thanksgiving, repentance, confusion, and worship. The Psalms especially show us that prayer is not limited to polished religious language. Biblical prayer is deeply honest.

One of the most important passages on prayer is when Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray:

> “Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name…’” (Matt. 6:9)

This prayer—commonly called the Lord’s Prayer—is not merely words to recite mechanically. It is a model that teaches several foundational truths about prayer:

- God is our Father.
- His glory and kingdom come first.
- We depend on Him daily.
- We confess sin and seek forgiveness.
- We ask for protection and guidance.

The opening phrase alone is remarkable: “Our Father.” Through Christ, believers are welcomed into a relationship of intimacy and trust with God (Rom. 8:15). Christians do not pray to a distant impersonal force but to a loving Father who hears His children.

The New Testament also teaches that Christians pray in Jesus’ name (John 14:13–14). This does not mean adding a magical phrase to the end of a prayer. It means approaching God on the basis of Christ’s authority and mediation rather than our own worthiness. Jesus is the reason sinful people can approach a holy God with confidence (Heb. 4:14–16).

Practically speaking, prayer does not require special vocabulary, posture, or location. Scripture records people praying:

- standing (Mark 11:25)
- kneeling (Acts 20:36)
- sitting (2 Sam. 7:18)
- lying face down (Matt. 26:39)
- privately (Matt. 6:6)
- corporately (Acts 1:14)

The Bible gives freedom in these matters. What matters most is sincerity, humility, faith, and dependence upon God.

Jesus also warned against two distortions of prayer. First, He warned against praying for public recognition:

> “They love to stand and pray… that they may be seen by others.” (Matt. 6:5)

Second, He warned against empty repetition and pagan-style formulas:

> “Do not heap up empty phrases…” (Matt. 6:7)

Prayer is not a performance or incantation. God is not manipulated through eloquence or sheer repetition.

At the same time, Scripture encourages persistence in prayer. Jesus told parables about continuing steadfastly in prayer and not losing heart (Luke 18:1–8). Christians are called to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), meaning believers cultivate an ongoing life of communion with God.

One common misconception is that prayer guarantees God will give us whatever we ask for. The Bible does encourage bold prayer (Matt. 7:7–11), but prayer is not about bending God's will to ours. Jesus Himself prayed in Gethsemane:

> "Not my will, but yours, be done." (Luke 22:42)

Christian prayer ultimately seeks God's glory and wisdom above our own desires.

The New Testament also teaches that the Holy Spirit helps believers in prayer. Sometimes Christians do not even know how to pray rightly, yet:

> "The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." (Rom. 8:26)

This is profoundly comforting. Prayer is not effective because Christians perform it perfectly. Prayer is effective because of God's grace and Christ's mediation.

Historically, Christians have often summarized prayer using the acronym ACTS:

- **Adoration** — praising God
- **Confession** — admitting sin
- **Thanksgiving** — expressing gratitude
- **Supplication** — bringing requests

That structure is not required, but many believers find it helpful for cultivating balanced prayer.

One final point matters greatly: prayer is not merely about getting things from God. Prayer itself is part of the relationship. Throughout Scripture, God's greatest gift to His people is ultimately His presence.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Matthew 6:5–13 — Jesus teaches how to pray.
- Luke 11:1–13 — The Lord's Prayer and persistence in prayer.
- Philippians 4:6–7 — Bring anxieties to God through prayer.
- Hebrews 4:14–16 — Believers approach God confidently through Christ.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 — Pray continually and give thanks.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: “Why pray if God already knows everything?”

Because prayer is relational, not informational. God already knows our needs (Matt. 6:8), yet He commands prayer as part of our fellowship, dependence, worship, and growth in faith.

Common Objection: “Why doesn’t God answer every prayer the way we want?”

God answers prayer according to His wisdom, goodness, and will—not merely our desires. Sometimes God says yes, sometimes no, and sometimes wait. Even Paul experienced unanswered requests according to his own preferences (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

Common Objection: “Do I need special words or formulas?”

No. Scripture consistently emphasizes sincerity and faith rather than polished religious language. Some of the shortest prayers in the Bible are among the most profound (Luke 18:13).

Why This Matters

Prayer is one of the primary ways Christians experience communion with God. It reminds believers that they are dependent creatures speaking to a sovereign and loving Father.

Understanding prayer biblically also protects Christians from treating God like a vending machine or prayer like magic. Prayer is not about controlling outcomes but about trusting God and drawing near to Him.

Most importantly, prayer continually redirects the believer’s attention back to Christ. Christians pray because Jesus opened the way for sinners to approach God with confidence and peace.

Recommended Resources

- Prayer — by Timothy Keller. Excellent introduction to the theology and practice of prayer.
- Too Busy Not to Pray — by Bill Hybels. Accessible and practical encouragement toward consistent prayer.
- A Praying Life — by Paul E. Miller. Honest and deeply practical treatment of prayer.
- Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer — by C. S. Lewis. Thoughtful reflections on prayer and theology.
- The Lord’s Prayer — by Martin Luther. Rich theological reflection on the model prayer given by Jesus.