

Praying the Way

with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John



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Introducing the gospels

This collection of readings and prayers is an invitation to journey with the four gospel writers, as they share with us the precious pearl that is God's kingdom, revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Each writer told the story of Jesus in their own distinct way, reflecting the sources and traditions they knew and the situations which they and their church communities faced. Each brought their own wisdom, background and gifts to bear as they shared the good news of Jesus, energised by God's Spirit. Their fourfold witness to Christ is a source of delight rather than concern and difficulty; their very differences give reality to their testimony. Ultimately there is only one gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – but the four witnesses bring a more rounded, fascinating and dynamic picture of Christ than one storyteller could produce.

Each invites us to follow the way of Jesus. In the book of Acts, Luke describes the early Christian movement as those who belonged to 'the Way': Saul journeyed to Damascus, 'so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem' (Acts 9:2). 'The Way' has a whole variety of meanings within Acts and the New Testament as a whole, with deep roots in the Old Testament. It speaks both of God's initiative and of our human response.

First and foremost 'the Way' is God's rather than our own; it is God who reaches out to the world to bring rescue and liberation. Isaiah spoke of a new exodus, with the exiles in Babylon returning to Jerusalem, and the gospel writers took up this imagery as they reflected on the work of Jesus. Quoting from the book of Isaiah, they describe John the Baptist as the voice crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight' (e.g. Mark 1:3).

God opens the way for us all – the way to God and the way to truly live. In Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, God dwells with humanity, having made a way into the world. Luke's great song of Zechariah describes the coming of Jesus as a new dawn for humanity, giving 'light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1:79).

The dawn does not come without cost. Jesus is recognised as one who teaches the way of God, but this does not prevent his being rejected by those with power or position to lose. The way of Jesus becomes the way of the cross. At a critical moment in the gospels Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem and begins to speak of the rejection, suffering and death he will face there. Yet the way of the cross is ultimately transformed into the way of victory as, raised to new life on the third day, Christ breaks the bonds of death and hatred. That evening he walks unrecognised with two disciples on the road to Emmaus and shows himself risen and alive as he shares bread with them. They recall how their hearts were burning within them as he talked to them on the road (see Luke 24:13–35). The way of life is open ahead of them, a life to be lived and shared with the world.

All this is God's doing and the gospel writers emphasise the centrality of God's kingdom and the person of Jesus, contrasting this with the doubts, misunderstanding, failures and inadequacies of his disciples. John sums up the message in the great 'I am' statements as he meditates on the person of Jesus: Jesus is 'the way' (John 14:6), making the unseen God known and opening God's heart to all who trust in him.

The Way is of God's making, but humanity is challenged to respond and to enter this way. Key to the gospel message is Jesus' invitation, 'follow me'. For the fishermen and the many others it meant their world's being turned upside down, with a new way of looking at God, the world and themselves, and a new way of living too. That following required trust, risk and love. It involved listening deeply

to Jesus' teaching and learning from his every action. Mistakes and misunderstandings became the opportunity to discover their need, experience forgiveness and take to heart the challenge to trust more in Jesus. They and all potential disciples are invited to follow the difficult way that leads to life and to build on rock, rather than shifting sand.

As we prepare to embark on our reading of the four gospels and to pray with them, it is good to reflect on the way we will be taking. Prayer at its simplest is about giving loving attention to the God who is the source and goal of all life. As we pray with the gospels we give our attention to Jesus, and listen for that word of God that was made flesh in him. We seek God's Spirit to enlighten and connect his story with our own situation and the world in all its wonder and terror. We choose to follow the Way and pray:

The gospel comes to me, full of choices:
the choice to follow or to stay,
to walk the broad path that may destroy my soul
or the narrow way that leads to life;
the choice to be built on rock or on sand;
trust or fear, love or hate,
blessing or curse, life or death;
the choice to live by outward appearance
or the inward naked heart,
to respond to need or to turn away.

Living Lord, help me to choose life,
not once, but each and every day.
Show me how to pray and walk your way
not tomorrow or yesterday,
but now.



1

Praying with Matthew

How do we best pray the way with Matthew? One of the great keys to prayer in Matthew's gospel lies at the heart of the sermon on the mount (Matthew 6:5–15). It begins by warning against parading our prayerfulness, but then goes deeper with the instruction to go 'into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father' and not to heap up 'empty phrases as the Gentiles do' (Matthew 6:5–8). These four verses are unique to Matthew and lead on to the giving of the Lord's Prayer, in the form Christians use to this day.

The verses are both beguiling and challenging in their directness and simplicity. Here Jesus gives the three entry points into true prayer as being space apart, stillness of heart and trust of God, the one who knows our need. All these are hard to achieve in our frantic 21st-century society, where technology provides a huge umbilical tube to keep us constantly connected, where we are bombarded with an unceasing flow of words and images that remain in our minds long after we turn off our televisions or computers, and where trust is often in short supply. Matthew's Jesus speaks of a room where the door can be shut, a storeroom for treasure, a place of safety; Elisha 'closed the door... and prayed to the Lord' (2 Kings 4:33). Here is a place of the heart, a place to encounter the God who

is in secret and sees in secret, a place where one's motivation is truly exposed.

This is the groundwork necessary to prepare to pray, to be in the presence of the one who sees into the heart. Our praying is constantly in danger of degenerating into an exercise of self-justification and self-importance, into that hypocrisy that Jesus confronts so brutally in his attack on paraded piety. So we are challenged to enter the room of prayer and shut the door, yet assured that the room is not empty – God is present.

Matthew underlines this by breaking the threefold teaching on secret piety (almsgiving, prayer and fasting) to include teaching on prayer itself. After encouragement not to babble, Jesus gives his disciples a way of praying that is a series of petitions addressed to 'Our Father in heaven'. The Lord's Prayer is, in effect, the pinnacle and centre of Jesus' first collection of teaching. It begins 'Our Father in heaven' (Matthew 6:9), unlike the simpler 'Father' in Luke's version (Luke 11:2), to emphasise the communal dimension of prayer. Matthew has a particular concern for the life of the Christian community and is the only gospel to use the word 'church'. Even alone we pray in the company of God's people; if nothing else, God's reality as 'our Father' connects us together.

The balance of the prayer as Matthew records it is perfect, with three petitions focusing on God's name, kingdom and will and three petitions focusing on our bread, our wrongs and our struggles. Anthony Bloom likens the prayer to a series of ripples spreading from where a pebble falls into a pond, the centre of the circle being 'Our Father in heaven'. This careful construction reflects the Jewish traditions from which Jesus and Matthew himself came. Three times Jesus' followers are to ask for God's purposes to be fulfilled; then and only then do they turn to their own needs and challenges. This is a challenging way to enter prayer, but a necessary antidote to the self-help agendas of our own times. 'Strive first for the kingdom of

God and his righteousness' (Matthew 6:33) and then the rest will follow.

Prayer is always bound up with action. We pray so that we may live more according to the will of God, more in tune with the kingdom to come. We pray in dependence to God for our day-to-day lives, our very sustenance. We pray for forgiveness for the ways we have acted at odds with the teaching of Jesus and for help to forgive those who have wronged us. We pray for strength and wisdom in the face of trial, temptation and evil, praying for ourselves and others. Praying flows into living, and living is reflected upon in prayer. It expresses our utter reliance on the grace of God, the faithful presence of 'God with us'. Matthew assures us that this faithful presence will not fail, ending his gospel with Jesus' assurance, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

1 The surprising God

Matthew 1:1–25

‘... and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’

MATTHEW 1:23

Jesus, Son of Abraham,
we worship you in word and silence.
We will not forget
your deep roots in the Jewish story,
fulfilling the Hebrew scriptures
and the promise of blessing
made to an elderly couple
long ago.

Jesus, Son of David,
we worship you in word and silence.
We will not forget
that you are the Messiah, the Christ,
fulfilling the longing of Israel
for a just and gentle ruler
for all nations.

Jesus, Son of Mary,
we worship you in word and silence.
We will not forget
the woman who carried you in her womb,
vulnerable yet strong,
bearing hope for us all.

Jesus, Son of Joseph,
we worship you in word and silence.
We will not forget the one
whose compassion and vision
protected your mother and you
from scandal or worse.

Jesus, Son of God,
we worship you in word and silence.
We will not forget
your presence with us always
as God with us
in the very heart of our living.

2 I shall not pass by

Matthew 2:1-23

**'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children...'**

MATTHEW 2:18

I shall not pass by this story
of evil, pain and grief,
a tyrant's rage
and an order to destroy,
obeyed without mercy:
a story of death when life had hardly begun
and the agony of loss that none can quench.

I shall not pass by this story,
echoed in every generation
in genocide and holocaust,
in gas chambers and ethnic cleansing,
Rwandan village, Armenian town
and Nazi concentration camp.

I shall not pass by.
The tears of so many overwhelm me.
I can only look to the child,
who escaped for a time
but not for very long.
When the hour came
he entered anguish and darkness,
a lonely death amid hatred and fear.
I can only look at his wounds,
the wounds of all humanity,
and pray, 'Lord, have mercy.'

3 The Beloved

Matthew 3:1-17

**And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased.'**

MATTHEW 3:17

Come immense, amazing God.

Come as the water of life,
immersing this world with your goodness,
turning our lives towards your kingdom,
our hearts and minds
to a new way of thinking
and a new way of being.

Come as the fire of truth,
exposing our presumption and complacency,
confronting the world's corrupt powers with your light
and our fruitless greed with your simple grace.
Yet in your fierce judgement,
do not forget your mercy.

Come as the Spirit of love,
freeing us from all that binds us,
drawing us into your kingdom way,
showing us that we too can be your beloved sons and daughters,
to walk the way of Jesus and delight your heart.

4 Wilderness struggle

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

MATTHEW 4:10

God of the wilderness,
in the name of Jesus,
who hungered in the desert,
we pray for humanity today.
We hold before you
those who hunger for food and justice.
We do not ask you to change stones into bread,
but to speak your living word,
to touch hardened hearts and burdened spirits,
to release the oppressed from the systems we create,
that the bounty of the earth may be shared by all.

God of the wilderness,
in the name of Jesus,
who held true to your living word,
we pray for your people today.
We do not ask for a magician's wand to keep us from all harm,
but a deep courage and perseverance,
the faith that will change lives and see us into your kingdom.
And when we hear your word,
give us the wisdom to hear it well
and not twist it for our own comfort and security.

God of the wilderness,
in the name of Jesus,
who resisted all evil and temptation,
we pray for the powerful of our world,
those whose words and actions affect so many.
We ask you to guard all from false pride or twisted vision,
the worship of power and wealth itself,
the delusion of being self-made.
For you alone are God,
the living God to be worshipped for evermore.



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Through raw and authentic prayers, Terry Hinks leads us into the heart of the gospels to see more clearly the needs and joys of today's world. This highly original book helps us to pray out of, and with, the words of Jesus and to discover the joy of prayer as a two-way conversation – listening as much as speaking to God.

'Terry writes with freshness and honesty to all those who, like him, are trying to walk Christ's way. Like a seasoned traveller, he crafts prayers – inspired by the four gospels – that act as a way marker for his fellow travellers. I warmly commend this resource to enable us all to pray the way before turning back to the challenges that await us on the road.'

**Revd Richard Church, Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship),
The United Reformed Church**



Terry Hinks is a United Reformed Church minister, serving churches in Hereford, Reading and Romsey before moving to two churches in the High Wycombe area. He served as Secretary to the URC Doctrine Prayer and Worship Committee and contributed the Order of Daily Worship to the URC's Service Book Worship. He is the author of a number of books on prayer.



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