

PRAYER

a beginner's guide

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1 Introduction

As you pick up this book, you may not realize it, but you are joining the growing numbers of Christians who are beginning to understand just what an important role prayer has to play in their daily lives. When this book was first published, I worked as the Prayer Co-ordinator with the Evangelical Alliance UK and was in touch with many individuals, churches, organizations and networks that were beginning to pray for different towns and cities and issues across the nation. Today, the numbers and types of prayer initiatives are continuing to grow. I still have the privilege, working with the World Prayer Centre Birmingham as their National Prayer Director, of being in touch with many prayer-based ministries and churches, and with people being drawn to pray around our country. Prayer is definitely on God's agenda.

The growth of round-the-clock, day-and-night or 24-7 praying is on the increase both across Britain and around the world. Thanks to the 24-7 Prayer movement, which was started on the south coast of England in 1999, we have seen a wide range of churches and denominations commit to a year of day-and-night praying. We have also seen hundreds of churches and communities take up the challenge of a 24-7 prayer week, which has led to involvement in local and overseas mission (see <http://uk.24-7prayer.com>). During the 2007 year of prayer in preparation for Hope08, churches organized 24-7 prayer cover for Manchester and London; in fact, London has continued to maintain this watch of prayer. Citywide 24-7 prayer chains are started by inviting different churches

to take a day or a week to engage their congregations in praying for local and national needs.

We have witnessed the rise of special seasons of prayer. Over recent years, Prayer Week has been used by God to unite individuals and churches locally, nationally and globally to pray together for a week in May. Organizations such as the Evangelical Alliance now provide prayer guides through the season of Advent just before Christmas. Churches in the Hull region have taken the lead in providing resources to help churches pray through the season of Lent (before Easter). And the Global Day of Prayer initiative has mobilized prayer all around the world for ten days before Pentecost Sunday. (We will discover more about this in Chapter 4.)

There has been an increase in the way individuals and churches are reconnecting with issues in their communities through prayer: for example, through partnerships with the police, working to reduce crime and the causes of crime. Prayer initiatives are now in place for social justice, education, arts and media, health, education, sport, the family, the environment, economy and government, the workplace and for the mission of the church.

Here in Britain you will find many young people involved in prayer initiatives through a range of organizations and networks. Children are meeting before going to school and hundreds of teenagers connecting via mobile phones and networking websites. There are networks of Christians who link up to pray across the whole of Britain, including in every parliament and assembly building. There are interchurch groups praying in many towns, villages and cities. In the London Docklands,

thousands of people gather to pray quarterly through the night for London and Britain as a whole.

A number of ministries have joined together to provide prayer resources: for example, Prayer Alert, Prayer Magazine, Prayer Diary, Pray Right Now and a website to enable people to access these resources and up-to-date news for prayer.¹ As you will discover as you read this book, prayer is no longer something that takes place only inside a church building. God, by his Holy Spirit, is compelling churches to offer prayer for their communities through prayer walking and healing rooms, prayer tents and so on.

Before the year of mission in 2008, Hope08 was launched at a national prayer day ('Trumpet Call') and a year of prayer took place, with Christians uniting on Fridays to pray for their friends and neighbours as well as for national issues. In many of the 1450 communities that took part, regular interchurch prayer meetings were an integral part of their mission.

This increase in prayer is not restricted to the UK. The worldwide movement for prayer was described a number of years ago as 'out of control'—and it still is today! Through the International Prayer Council it is now possible to link up with what is going on in prayer around the world. Christians from different countries have had onsite prayer meetings at almost every G8 meeting since 2000. There was a historic prayer meeting, which I had the privilege of taking part in, at the United Nations building in New York in September 2005. Around 500 Christians (adults and children), from about 45 nations, gathered at the invitation of one of the embassies to spend two days praying for the whole work of the UN

and especially for the Millennium Development Goals. We were joined at one session by 25 ambassadors who welcomed the offer of prayer for them in their roles.

Not only is prayer growing but the gospel is spreading faster than it has ever done in history. Throughout the world, more than 100,000 people become Christians every day. Could there be a connection between this and the growth in prayer? I believe that there is.

There were no Christians in Korea 100 years ago. Now, a third of the population of South Korea is vibrantly Christian. What could account for such phenomenal growth? Prayer! Most Christians spend an hour a day from 5 to 6am and the whole of Friday night in prayer, and thousands go to the country's famous Prayer Mountain.

Nepal has witnessed remarkable growth in the Christian church since a group was formed in 1959 with 29 Christians. According to *Operation World*:

By 1985 there were about 50,000 believers. At the climax of persecution in 1990 there were 200,000. By 2000 there were 400,000; some estimate even 500,000 in 3000 or more congregations. The secret: prayer, willingness to suffer for Jesus, dynamic Nepali initiative in evangelism and church planting, and God's miracle-working power.²

Other stories of how God has used prayer and unity to bring about remarkable change in communities and nations are being researched, documented and made available through videos and DVDs.³

These stories do not tell the whole story, however. Even more remarkable is the fact that many of the people involved in these stories are ordinary church members.

They are not professionals but amateurs in prayer.

- Amateurs who believe that God is powerful and hears and answers prayer.
- Amateurs who know that prayer is not trying to twist God's arm, but is his chosen way of extending his kingdom.
- Amateurs like the couple I met who started praying with other Christians for their neighbours, and now describe it as 'the best thing we have ever done in our lives'.

Prayer is God's gift for all his people. I am certainly an amateur when it comes to prayer. There is much about it that I don't understand and I certainly don't find it easy. But I have discovered that prayer is one of the most exciting and life-changing aspects of being a follower of Jesus Christ.

Prayer lies at the heart of Christianity, and yet most Christians would agree with non-religious people who pray that we all have much to learn about it. Many of us will remember the massive response to the death of Princess Diana, and the shock after 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London. Millions wanted to pray but had no idea how to go about it.

So in our next chapter we will look at one of the most common questions asked about prayer: what is it?

A prayer

God, I feel pretty hopeless at prayer. Please show me its value and teach me to pray. Amen

2 What is prayer?

Prayer is relationship

Prayer is essentially relationship with God, and it is this relationship that is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is amazing to realize that the God who created all that we see around us in the universe wants you and me to be in regular touch with him.

All relationships have to be worked at in order to survive. What holds people together is love built on friendship, daily contact, honest talking and shared lives. It is the same in our relationship with God. We can think of prayer as a conversation between us and God. He wants us to talk and listen, and to allow our lives to touch his. We can talk to God just as we talk with each other—using words. We can ‘talk’ with him in silence. Just as we communicate with another person with a look, a smile, a hug or a kiss, we can also learn to relate to God by using our bodies (which we will explore further in Chapter 11).

But if prayer is a conversation with God, and God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which part of God are we talking to? And does it matter?

Praying to God as Father

If you find it difficult to grasp the idea of God wanting us to pray, you are not alone. Jesus’ disciples took a while to get the idea. As Jews they were used to praying, but as they watched Jesus they realized that they were missing

something. As they heard him pray they recognized that Jesus had a very close relationship with God, something that they had not experienced. So they asked him to teach them to pray. Jesus told them that they could come to God in prayer as if he was their father (Matthew 6:9). They were amazed! He said they were to use the word *Abba*, which in their language meant 'Daddy' or 'dear father'. It was the word commonly used by younger children speaking to their earthly fathers.

Prayer is not something we 'say' to a distant God; when we pray, we come as God's children to our Father in heaven. A friend of mine, John, tells this story about one of his grandsons. When Andrew was six years old, he spent a week in the summer staying with his other grandparents on their farm. They loved having him and told him many times just how invaluable he was in helping them. When Andrew went home, he enjoyed telling everyone that his grandparents were having trouble running the farm without him. As John was laughing over this, God nudged him. 'John, you've been like little Andrew with me! You've treated me like a helper in the sky.' John felt God tell him that the image of Andrew going off on the tractor and sitting on his other grandfather's lap was actually a picture of how prayer should be. The moments of greatest delight in God's relationship with us are when we, in childlike dependence and faith, climb on to his lap in prayer, put our hand on his hand and pour out our hearts to him. He is simply waiting for us to get on board.

I remember when, a few years ago, a small group of us met in our church to pray for our vicar, who was going to

teach in Nigeria for two weeks. As we prayed, it became very evident that we were praying to our heavenly Father who knew everything about the trip. We all left with a profound sense of peace that he would take care of it all. And God did! Our vicar was kept safe and well and was able to offer some very relevant teaching to the churches he visited.

Praying through Jesus

We pray to our heavenly Father through Jesus, ‘for through him we... have access to the Father by one Spirit’ (Ephesians 2:18). Jesus taught the disciples that they should pray to the Father in his name (John 14:13–14; 15:16). To pray in his name does not simply mean that we use his name as a formula, but rather that when we do so we confess his name and acknowledge that he is the only way to the Father.

As we pray, we direct our minds and thoughts in faith towards God and then share with him what is on our hearts. Praying is as simple as making a phone call. Before the days of direct dialling, everyone had to find a telephone, ring up an operator and ask to be put through to the number wanted. Today, with mobile phone technology, we can dial anyone, anywhere in the world, wherever we are. Through his death on the cross and his resurrection, Jesus makes it possible for our prayers always to get through to our Father in heaven. We will never get the ‘engaged’ or ‘number unobtainable’ tones. We will never be put through to an answering service that asks us to ‘hold until...’. All our prayers go to the same person at the same place—

‘Our Father in heaven’—when we pray in the name of Jesus.

Praying with the Holy Spirit

We pray to God the Father through Jesus and with the help of the Holy Spirit. God knows us through and through. He knew that we would never be able to have the strength to love him ‘with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ (Luke 10:27) without help, so Jesus left his Holy Spirit to help us. This unseen Spirit of Jesus is our helper, guide and comforter. He is the one who enables us to say that Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3).

The Holy Spirit is essential for our praying. He prompts us when to pray. He helps us know how to pray, and, when we are stuck and don’t know what to pray for, he steps in (Romans 8:26–27). The Holy Spirit provides different gifts to help each Christian follow Jesus. One of these is a new heavenly language (also known as ‘speaking in tongues’), which we can use to pray when ordinary words run out (1 Corinthians 14). One of my favourite descriptions of this says, ‘Praying in tongues is what sometimes happens when God’s love takes your breath away, and you’re left with God’s breath instead.’¹ This gift is widely used in some parts of the Church. Paul Yonggi Cho, a Korean pastor who for many years led one of the largest churches in the world, has often spoken of his reliance on the Holy Spirit, whom he calls his ‘Senior Partner’, and whom he consults before praying and making any sort of decision.

Prayer is a key

Prayer is also a key to understanding God's heart. Richard Foster movingly describes how God is longing to welcome us 'home'.

He invites us into the living room of his heart where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom where we can learn... and the workshop of his creativity... He invites us into the bedroom of rest where new peace is found, and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free.²

The key to this home—which is the heart of God—is prayer. Prayer not only enables us to talk to God about the things that concern us, but it also helps us to understand God better.

One of the most famous prayers, used in every denomination and across the world, is the Lord's Prayer, so called because Jesus taught it to his disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.*

*Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen*

The Lord's Prayer covers all the aspects of prayer that we will explore in this book. It starts with praising God for who he is and what he wants to do. Then we are told to ask for our own needs and the needs of others. Next we are challenged to confess our sins and whatever we may be holding against others and to ask for the strength to stand against temptation. And it ends as it starts, with praise and worship to God. It is a prayer that invites us to talk to God about the important things of life.

The more we discover about who God is and what he longs to see happen in his world, the better we are able to pray, as we shall explore in the following chapters.

- Prayer is not something we have dreamed up: we are created to be in touch with God. God invented prayer.
- Prayer is not simply saying the words or prayers at a set time, although having regular times of prayer, using written prayers, is one of the many ways we can pray.
- Prayer is not about trying to change God's mind. It is actually about us coming into line with his mind.
- Prayer is not a matter of reeling off a list of requests, although asking does form a very important part of prayer (see Chapter 7).

Instead, as some well-known practitioners of prayer have explained:

- Prayer is keeping company with God.³
- Prayer is to the spiritual life what the beating of the pulse and the drawing of the breath are to the life of the body.⁴
- Prayer is me being me in the presence of God being God.⁵

As we continue in our exploration of prayer, we need to look at an important question: why do we need to bother if God knows everything anyway?

A prayer

Father God, there is much about you I don't understand. Please help me to get to know you better. Amen

Getting started

- * Take a few moments to stop.
- * Pause and stop what you are doing. Relax. Make room for God.
- * Presence: know that he is with you.
- * Ponder Psalm 42:1–2: 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.'
- * Picture the scene: think about the dry areas in your life. See yourself seeking and finding him. Speak to him in your heart.

- * Promise: hold on to his promise as you reach out to him, remembering the words of the psalmist: 'Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge' (Psalm 62:8).