

Prayer - Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God

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[0 : 00] I want you to start by imagining a beggar picking bins on Wednesday morning. The bins are out, and he's an old guy, and he's just trundling early on before the rubbish truck comes, from bin to bin, and he's dragging his trolley behind him.

You don't have to imagine, because sadly that is the situation for so many people in our country. So many people have to resort to that just to get scraps of things to survive. Anyway, he's going along, and in one of the bins, he sees a pretty decent secondhand pair of trousers that someone's obviously thrown away or got too big for, and he looks down at his torn pants with holes in them, and it's really cold, and he sees these trousers, and he puts them up next to him, and he sees they're going to fit him.

And so he takes them, obviously puts them in his trolley, and when he has a moment later, he puts them on, and they're a great fit, and they're nice and warm, and he carries on his day, his morning, pushing his trolley and picking in bins to get just scraps, just anything he can.

What he doesn't know is in the pocket of those trousers is a winning lottery ticket with 28 million rand.

Now, I just want you to see that picture in your mind's eye for a moment. A man trying to get whatever he can from bins, and he's got 28 million rands in his pocket, and he doesn't know it. Anyway, he carries on.

[1 : 42] The rubbish truck comes, and all the last scraps are gone, and he trundles home, gets late. He arrives home, and he puts his hand in his pocket, and he feels a little piece of paper.

And suddenly, there's joy in his heart, because he's got a little bit of spare tobacco, and he needs something to roll it in, because all he feels like is a smoke to end his day.

And so he takes it out, doesn't even look very closely at it, rolls his tobacco, and has a nice smoke before bed, and he goes to sleep.

And there in his ashtray, smoldering away are the ashes of a winning lottery ticket that he was oblivious to. He never knew the value of what he had.

I think prayer is like that ticket for most of us. It's access to untold resources, and yet typically what we do, Christian or not, our tendency is to spend our lives digging amongst what the world can offer to give us just scraps of joy, scraps of satisfaction and happiness in whatever ways the world can offer, and we dig and we walk and we look what the world can give us, change the channels, just looking for something, when all along, closer than we ever thought, is the opportunity to gain everything we've ever wanted.

[3 : 21] if only we realized how happy true prayer can make us, how much delight we can actually get from the thrill of real communion with the source of all glory and satisfaction and happiness in the universe.

And yet because prayer seems so ordinary, we tend not to look closely enough at it to discover just what we have, but rather, like that beggar, are content to use it as something just to get us through the next day.

And so tonight what I want us to do is I want us to look a bit closer at prayer and try to grasp what we have as Christians so we can use it for the purpose that it was given to us.

And so first, we're going to look at three, we're going to look under three headings at prayer. We're going to look at what is prayer, firstly, then what does it do? What is the goal of prayer?

And then at the end, we're going to look at practically how do we do it? So let's start with what is prayer? What is prayer? Well, at its most basic, prayer is talking to God.

[4 : 43] Now, you're probably thinking, okay, why did I come all this way? Tell me something I don't know. But that's the problem right there.

It's too ordinary. We're too familiar with it. Talking with God, yeah, sure, okay. And we forget how profound that is.

How profound it is to be able to talk with the creator of the cosmos. So I want us just to stop and think about that seemingly simple thing of being able to talk to God.

Okay? Because we should not be able to. Think about it. We should not be able to talk to God. We are little, tiny creatures on a little, tiny planet amongst billions of stars and planets.

the creator of all of this glory is utterly transcendent. And so just by nature of us being creatures and him being outside of time and space, we should not be able to connect with our creator.

[6 : 00] It's just, it shouldn't be possible because of God's transcendence. He's by nature out of our reach. But there's another reason it shouldn't be possible, and that is because God is holy.

So holy. He dwells, as the Bible says, in unapproachable light near whom no darkness can dwell. No imperfection can survive. And yet we know by looking at our own hearts we are sinners.

We are imperfect. And so not only is the transcendence of God something that makes prayer not, shouldn't happen, but the holiness of God is another layer that should make us being able to connect with God utterly impossible.

But for Christ, that's where Jesus comes in. Because, think about it, Jesus overcomes both of those barriers. Both God's transcendence and God's holiness that would destroy us if we come into his presence without any protection.

Christ, in the gospel, which is central to the Bible, overcomes both the transcendence of God by connecting the creator with the creation by himself being creator and creation.

[7 : 16] Okay? So Jesus, just by his very nature, overcomes the transcendence that is inherent in the distance between the creator and the creation by Jesus uniquely being both of those.

That's the only person, the only being in all of creation that is both creator and creation. It is profound and it's amazing. And so because of who he is, he connects the creator and the creation, but he also overcomes the barrier of our sin, as you know, by providing unique atonement for the sins of his people on the cross.

And so he can over, he's uniquely qualified to overcome the two major barriers that should make prayer impossible. and Jesus is actually the only human who has the privilege of access to God, the Father.

And he's the only human who ever will have access to the privilege of access to God. It's not a given. We shouldn't have it. We don't have it in our own nature.

Jesus is the only one who has the right to pray, who has the privilege of access. And so without him, true prayer is impossible. That is why he taught us to pray in his name.

[8 : 33] Remember that? He taught multiple times. He says to his disciples, pray in my name. Because it's only through him that we have the privilege of being able to connect with our creator.

And so only those who are in Christ, those who have put their faith in Christ's death and resurrection and are his people, only those who are in Christ, unified with him, have access to God through him.

So as we approach God, it's in Christ. It's like he's our vehicle that gives us access we wouldn't have otherwise. So we don't normally, we shouldn't have access.

And that, we need to get that right. We should not be able to pray. It should be an impossible task for mere humans. And yet because of Christ, prayer is now possible. True prayer. Anybody can say words and look at the sky and send their words to the sky and hope that it's going to land somewhere.

So you see in many religions forms of prayer. Even non-religious paganism has forms of sending words up into the sky.

[9 : 42] But only those who are in Christ have access to real prayer that actually works. And so, once we have that through Christ, now we need to stop and just ponder what a profound thing it is.

I mean, think of what happened, what needed to happen just for us to be able to pray. Okay? Thousands of years of God setting up covenants and forming this plan of salvation and Christ incarnate, dying and atoning death, rising again, all so that you can pray properly.

Okay? That's the gift that we have. And so let's not think of it lightly. So we've got to just stop and think of what a profound thing prayer is.

Imagine the thrill of having an audience with a head of state. Anybody ever met a president, an in-office president or a sovereign king or queen? No. Because we're just ordinary people, right?

We don't have that kind of privilege. Because they've got a very limited set of people who will actually warrant being able to meet with them and talk with them.

[10:50] Now imagine the thrill of actually having an audience with the president, a sit-down face-to-face meeting with the president of a nation. Imagine, like, the American president, Joe Biden, or a king, King Charles.

Imagine you had a meeting with them. Because this is someone who can really do things. Okay? No matter what you think of their politics, they are in a position where people listen to them and things get done when they speak.

And their decisions actually matter. They affect things. They change things. And so no matter what you think of their politics, what you think of the person, even if you're totally against Joe Biden's presidency, it would still be a thrill to meet the man, wouldn't it?

Or any head of state. Or any king or queen. But imagine not only do you have an opportunity to meet them, but they're also really interested in you.

And they want to hear from you. They actually want to know what you think and what you want. And they've requested to meet you and they've guaranteed that they're really going to listen to you and act in response to what you say.

[12:04] Now if you had that meeting set up on your calendar, say, four o'clock on Wednesday, you were going to meet the president of America. He was going to send jets and they were going to fly you up to Washington, D.C.

And it was in your calendar and he says, I want to hear what you have to say and I'm going to act in response to it. What would you do? You would prepare for that, right? It would be very exciting and very sobering.

You would organize your week around preparing for that hour, say, that you have with them and you would spend a lot of time preparing them. Just, you know, what I'm going to say. How am I going to shake his hand?

How formal must I be? Must I bow first? You're going to think, how am I going to go into that meeting? I remember watching *Invictus*, the rugby movie about the 95 World Cup and that scene where Francois Pina is about to meet Nelson Mandela and he's like so nervous and he's thinking, okay, what do I say?

How do I do this? And then the people tell him, this is what you must do. So, any head of state, any sovereign, someone who can change things, we will feel nervous to meet, we'll spend a lot of time preparing.

[13:16] And yet we don't feel that about approaching the majestic sovereign God of the universe. Why? We rush into our prayers without thinking of what we're doing.

We rush into prayer and see it more like Twitter, I think. You know, sending out our thoughts and frustrations into the air, more to get it off our chest than anything else.

As one person put it, prayer for many has become just worrying in God's direction. And we forget that this is a real meeting with a sovereign, with the sovereign.

And so that's the first thing we need to do when we approach this topic of prayer. We need to appreciate what a profound thing it is that we're doing when we pray.

And that because of Christ, it is real, it is connecting us with the sovereign God of the universe. And then second, we need to realize the place of prayer in the Christian life.

[14:27] What prayer means for a Christian. So John Calvin, famous reformer, which is very appropriate because it's Reformation Day tomorrow, by the way. John Calvin, there he is.

John Calvin says, and this is a French, great, very wise, learned Christian who wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and many others.

and in his work, the *Institutes*, book three, on prayer, he summarizes it like this. He says, prayer is the chief exercise of faith.

Prayer is the chief exercise of faith. I just want us to think about what that means. Now, in one sense, what that means is that prayer is the greatest outcome that our faith can lead to.

Prayer, in a way, is the main goal of all the doctrines that we have faith in, it's so that we can pray. Now, that already puts prayer much higher than we normally give it credit for, doesn't it?

[15:30] Like, all the stuff we learn, actually, it's so that we can pray properly. That's how important prayer is. Which means it's not just another spiritual discipline. Often, you'll read books on developing your spiritual disciplines, giving, fasting, and prayer will be one of those.

It'll just be on a list of a number of different spiritual disciplines. But, I think that's unhelpful, because prayer is in a category of its own. It's not just another spiritual discipline that we must kind of fit into our life.

Because those other things, fasting, tithing, those are all a means to an end. That we do those so that something else can happen, right? A means to an end. While prayer is actually an end in itself. That's what Calvin's implying here. Prayer is the chief exercise. It's the thing that we learn the doctrine so that we can do. It's the end in itself. And once we have real prayer, we actually have all other things.

And that's why we don't need anything more. Prayer is not a means to an end, in a way, because once we have prayer, we have all we could want. So that's the first sense of what Calvin is saying there.

[16:45] Prayer is the chief exercise of faith. But there's another sense. It also means that prayer is the way we apply the faith that's in our head to the circumstances in our life.

It's the way we take the faith that we have mentally, the things that we know to be true, and we actually then apply them to our lives, to our days, to our work, to our family, to the people around us.

And that step is absolutely essential. It's like, I was just thinking of an illustration, it's like faith is the paint in a bucket. You're about to paint your house or your room or something, and you've got the paint there.

You've bought the paint, it's right there, it's sitting, great paint. But it's useless if it's just sitting in the bucket, right? What do you need to do? You need to take a brush or a roller, and you need to start applying it to the walls or to whatever you're painting.

In the same way, we learn a whole lot of stuff when we come to church about God, about salvation, about this world, about ourselves. That's the paint that's being put in the bucket. But unless we now take what we learn and apply it to the situations of our lives, it's not going to do much good.

[17:58] Prayer is the paint roller. Prayer is the way we take what we've learned on a Sunday and we apply it into our circumstances, into our lives.

That's why it's such an important activity. It's the activity that takes our theology and connects it with all the things in our lives and so makes our faith real, exercises our faith.

That's what Calvin means by prayer is the chief exercise, application of the things we believe. particularly the truths of the gospel itself, where really the gospel is the central doctrine of scripture and it's what everything else connects to, points to, leads to.

And Calvin also says this about the gospel. He says, listen to this, this is great. We dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel and which our faith has gazed upon.

we dig up by prayer, do I have it up there? Yeah. The treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, which our faith has gazed upon.

[19:14] So, I mean, okay, Calvin's illustration is probably better than my paint one, but he's saying the same thing, you need to get this. He's saying the gospel has immense treasures but they're buried in a field and so in order to get to that treasure you need two things, you need a map and you need a spade.

This is as one person reflecting on his word said, the map is scripture, the spade is prayer. The spade is the way we actually get hold, take hold of those treasures that our faith has gazed upon in the gospel.

And the treasures the gospel gives us are true knowledge of God, who he really is, because we only see that in the gospel. All other religions show us a false God, he doesn't exist.

Allah, as per the Quran, does not exist. He's a figment of human imagination and inspired by spiritual forces of deception.

But that's another story. The only God that we can know to be true is the one who has revealed himself and shown himself to be the true God in the gospel. And so what do we know about that God? We know about his love, his grace, his absolute sovereignty over all things, his justice, to punish all wrong doing and sin.

[20:35] We know these things in our head about God, right? But it's when we pray that we take hold of those things and apply them to our lives, to our country, to our world, we apply those truths of God to actual situations and they become real.

So that's what Calvin means by we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel in which our faith has gazed upon.

And this experiencing the gospel, not just believing and leaving in the bucket the gospel, but actually experiencing it, putting it into practice in our lives, is absolutely essential for our lives. John Owen was a famous English Anglican Puritan preacher during a time, 200 years or so after the Reformation, where the Anglican church was getting much more worldly and he stood up and amongst others opposed that.

And he was a prayer and he was a man who suffered many things in his life. He outlived all of his family, his wife and all of his children.

[21 : 46] He saw them all pass away. He was a man who went through many trials and he was an expert in things like prayer because he got to practice it so much. and he said it's vital that we do not just hear the gospel and just believe the gospel, but we experience the gospel in our daily lives.

Otherwise, I quote, he says, if you don't experience the gospel, all your profession is an expiring thing. If you don't experience the gospel, all your profession, what you say you believe, is an expiring thing.

It has an expiry date. It doesn't last. So we need to experience the gospel and we experience the gospel through prayer. Are you starting to see why prayer is more important than we think it is? And so that is what prayer is. Prayer is the chief exercise of our faith. I want us to move on to the next heading on your notes, which is what is prayer for?

What is the goal of prayer? What does a prayer achieve? Well, at its most basic, prayer makes things happen, right?

[23 : 06] Again, now you're going, oh, seriously? But it does. It makes things happen. We pray because we want things to happen. Simple, right? Give us our daily bread because we want bread.

We want something to eat. And if prayer didn't make things happen, it would be pointless to pray. We gather for a prayer meeting once a term at St.

Mark's, not just to make ourselves feel better about things, right? We don't gather for a prayer meeting and pray for the country and the crime rate just so we can feel better about it. We pray because we actually want things to happen, and we believe that through prayer they do.

We're meeting with the sovereign of the universe. Things can happen when we pray. But of course, the things that we want to happen, the things that we pray for, is not so much the things that we want, but the things that God wants.

And that's how he's knitted prayer into the Christian life to achieve his ultimate outcome rather than ours because, well, what we want is often just not the best thing for us or others.

[24 : 12] God has chosen to use the prayers of his people as the means to carry out his will, not ours, his. He's got a will. It's going to happen and he's going to do it.

God will always achieve what he set out to do and that's just as well because it's always the best thing because he's God. He's the perfectly wise, perfectly good sovereign of the universe.

He will achieve his will, but he has chosen to get you and me in on that process and include the prayers of his people as the means to carry out his will and that can work because he's put his Holy Spirit in his people to teach us how to pray and what God actually wants.

Now, I know it does seem kind of a roundabout way of doing what he wants, right? It would be much simpler if he just cut us out completely and did what he wanted. But he wants to include us in the process.

He wants to include us in the process of what he's doing in the world. That's why he's given us prayer. I was thinking of it like this once. It's like a pilot who's flying, let's say, an airliner and his son is a passenger, his little eight-year-old son.

[25 : 29] And he calls his son over to the cockpit and the son's like wide out. I don't know if you've flown when you were a kid. It happened to me once. I flew to London and got to visit the cockpit.

I was so scared because I had so many buttons and I didn't want to touch a button and the plane crashed. But I just stood there and watched the pilots do their thing and then the air host there said, okay, come back to your seat.

But imagine the pilot wants to show his son the cockpit and he lets him sit in the pilot's seat. And he sits over in the co-pilot's seat and the son is wide-eyed and he's like, wow, this is amazing.

And he says, okay, now take the control, son. Okay, now pull back a little bit. Okay, he pulls back and he feels the plane going back and the son is just mind-blown. Now, that dad, the pilot, is still

totally in control of his plane, right?

It's still going to land where he's wanting it to land. But he is allowing his son to be part of the process, to experience what it's like to fly the plane.

[26 : 36] And his son's wide-eyed, but he's not freaked out because he knows his dad's still in control. If his dad, like, went to the toilet or something, then he would be freaked out.

But he knows his dad's right there. He's in the co-pilot's seat. He's totally still in control of the airplane. And that is why he can be confident in that situation. That's kind of like what God is doing by letting us pray for things.

He's letting us feel what it feels like to make a difference in the world, to be part of what God is doing in the world, because we're going to do that in eternity one day.

And so he wants to kind of train us what it's like to run the world in little ways. And he lets us do things that make a difference. But we don't get freaked out because we know he's still in control.

And this is the paradox of praying, but also knowing that God's going to achieve his will. It's like that son, knowing that what he's doing makes a difference, but knowing that his dad's still in control.

[27 : 37] This is, by the way, why John Calvin also said in his Institutes, we can pray with confidence. And the reason we can pray with confidence is because we know God won't give us everything we ask for.

Think about that. We can pray with confidence because we know God won't give us everything we ask for. because if he automatically gave us everything we ask for, I would never pray because what if I get it wrong?

But we can pray with confidence because we know he's still in control and yet our prayers make a difference. This is the paradox of prayer and it's beautiful, isn't it? But again, why give us that privilege?

Why allow us to come sit and take the controls? Why did God condescend to include us in the process?

because God could have easily and actually much more efficiently achieved things in this world without us praying. He knows all things. He knows what's best for us. He doesn't need us to tell him.

[28 : 35] It's not like we're going to pray and God goes, oh really? You need that? I didn't know that. Well, I'm glad you told me. God knows exactly what we need when we need it.

And therefore, because God knows all the things, he knows what's best and he doesn't need us to tell him. What that means is that the purpose of prayer isn't primarily to get the things we're praying for.

Again, you know, God could have given us these things without prayer. Which means that the primary purpose of prayer is actually to change us.

God has included us in the process because he wants to transform us through prayer. Even though those prayers actually do things, them doing things is not the primary purpose because he could have done those things anyway.

He includes us in the process because he wants prayer to slowly change us and for us to grow in relationship with God.

[29 : 33] That's the primary purpose of prayer, our relationship with God, which is far more important than the things we pray for. You know, the actual things we pray for, they seem to us the most important things.

Our needs, our anxieties, our concerns. We pray for those. Those things are just taking up our mind. Those are the most important things. And yet God has just put those things in our life so that we come to Him in prayer to achieve the purpose that He's actually given us, prayer, which is to grow in relationship with Him.

Those actual things we pray for are incidental to that main purpose. Put another way, prayer isn't primarily to attain things from God, but to attain God Himself.

prayer isn't primarily to attain things from God, but to attain God Himself. In Isaiah 64, verse 7, the prophet Isaiah is summarizing to God in a frustrated prayer.

He's summarizing to God the problem with Israel at that time. They had fallen away. They were caught up in all kinds of sin and he was so frustrated.

[30 : 50] And he summarizes the problem like this in Isaiah 64, verse 7. He says, No one calls on your name striving to take hold of you.

To him, that's the purpose of prayer, to take hold of God. You see, the things that we ask from God are just a means to that far greater end to take hold of God Himself.

And so you know what God does? Because that is what we need, because that is what Christ died to give us, God puts needs in our lives and refrains from giving us all things so that we really learn to take hold of Him and in doing so to discover that He is all we need.

That's what God wants us to realize. That's what glorifies Him and that's what gives us the greatest joy when we come to the realization, and it's a lifelong process of realizing God is all I need.

And He'll put these little needs in our life, which seem so big to us, so that we pray, so that through the process of prayer, over time we realize we don't need this.

[32 : 08] We just need God. That is the real primary purpose of prayer. And we see this principle over and over again in Scripture.

I'm not making this up. We see this in Scripture. I want to take us to some places, and I want to read some quotes from Tim Keller, who writes a book called Prayer.

Prayer. And it's a book that, I must say, has been very helpful for me and inspired a lot of what I'm talking about tonight. And I just want to read you some excerpts. So, the first thing is that he talks about the book of Job.

You know Job? Right. And what I've only come recently to realize is Job is a book about prayer. Job is a book about what prayer does in the progression of Job's story.

Anyway, we see this principle of God allowing difficulties and needs in our life so that we learn to take hold of him. We see it in Job, throughout the book of Job.

[33 : 16] I want to read to you what Keller says. Here. The question of the book of Job is posed in its very beginning.

Remember when Satan approaches and challenges God, our Job just loves you because of what you give him. Remember that? So, listen to what Keller says about it. The question of the book of Job is posed at its beginning.

Is it possible that a man or woman can come to love God for himself alone so that there is a fundamental contentment in life regardless of the circumstances? That's the real question posed at the beginning of the book of Job.

By the end of the book we see the answer. Yes, this is possible but only through prayer. What had happened? The more clearly Job saw who God was, the fuller his prayers became.

And you see this as you read through the book of Job. Moving from mere complaint to confession. Appeal and then praise. In the end he broke through and was able to face anything in life.

[34 : 22] This new refinement and level of character came through the interaction of listening to God's revealed word and answering in prayer. So Job's transformation, realizing that all he needed was God, not the things that had been taken away, came through this process of prayer throughout the book.

Job needed to go through the experience of his faith. He believed things but he needed to apply these things to his life and his life was fine so he never saw the need to apply what he believed to life until all the stuff was taken away.

And then only in doing that, experiencing his faith through prayer, he slowly discovered that all he really needed was God. And he concludes on this and it's such a cool verse.

Job 42 verse 5. Listen to what he says. I had heard reports about you, but now my eyes have seen you. Isn't that beautiful?

And doesn't that summarize the whole purpose of prayer? It's taking what we believe, heard reports about you, I knew that about you, but this is experiencing it.

[35 : 35] Now I've seen you, now I've experienced you. He needed to be put in a difficult situation so that his head knowledge of God could become a real experience of God. And that happened when he prayed and only when he prayed.

Now we don't only see it in Job, we also see it in 2 Corinthians. This was the verse, in fact, that Dylan quoted in his sermon this morning.

And you'll probably see a lot of overlap between what I'm saying and what we heard about in the Israelites and the Egyptians this morning. I think God is trying to tell us something. Dylan and I didn't get together and plan this, but you know, this is true.

2 Corinthians, Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, right at the end of it. 2 Corinthians, 12. I don't know why it's the Corinthian books, but typically when I ask someone to turn to 2 Corinthians, they turn to 1

Corinthians without realizing.

So it's 2 Corinthians, 12, from verse 7. Because of these extraordinary revelations, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me, so that I would not exalt myself.

[36 : 49] So this is some difficulty. We don't quite know what it is. It could have been a health difficulty, most likely, that Paul really struggled with. Verse 8, concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me.

So he prayed, please take this away. But, verse 9, he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.

Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties for the sake of Christ.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. You see the same principle as Job happening here? God sent Paul a difficulty that he didn't remove, even when Paul prayed about it, so that he could come to discover that in God, he had all he needed already.

And Paul desperately needed to know that if he was going to fulfill the mission God gave him to do. That's why God sent this difficulty, and then said no when Paul asked him to take it away, so that Paul could come to realize that God is where his strength lay, God was all he needed.

[37 : 59] And that's why when he prays for the Ephesians, we see after that experience, you start to see Paul in his letters to Christians, and his experience and his philosophy of prayer coming out.

I'm just going to go to Ephesians. Listen to what he prays, 1 from verse 17. And he's praying for the Ephesians. Now the Ephesians are a group of persecuted Christians under the Roman rule, and he prays this for them.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

That's the things, that's the kind of prayers Paul started to pray after his experience with his thorn in the flesh. Before his thorn in the flesh, I imagine he probably would have prayed, can you please protect them from the Romans?

Please give them enough stuff. You know, they need a new sound system. Can you please organize that for them? But Paul prays for the Ephesians, despite their many difficulties.

[39 : 21] He doesn't pray for their difficulties to go away or their circumstances to change. But he prays that they would come to know God. That they would really experience what they believe.

Because that's all they need, he realized. Because that experience, that coming to know God in reality, is the main thing we need. And all other needs are subservient to that.

And that's something we need to realize. And we only realize that through the exercise of prayer. That experience of God, of who God is. That moving of our theology that we learn on Sunday from our head to our heart and into our lives.

And the discovery that God is all we need is a lifelong journey that happens only through prayer.

And so that is what prayer is for. Thirdly and finally, then, we need to ask, how do we do it?

How do we pray? You know, this is what the disciples asked Jesus. Remember in Luke 11? They came to Jesus kind of out of the blue and they said, Lord, teach us to pray.

[40 : 33] Now these were Jews. They had been brought up in the disciplines of prayer. They were trained in prayer all their life. But they realized what a big thing this was.

And they needed to know how to do it properly. So if the disciples, these Jewish men who were trained in prayer all their life, realized that they needed to know how to do it, how much more do we?

And Jesus' reply to them was interesting. He didn't say to them, well, you know, just pray as you feel the spirit moving. Pray as you feel led.

No. He gave them, in answer to their question, an intentional thought-through structure to use, which we know is the Lord's Prayer. Because he knew that they naturally wouldn't pray for the right things, they wouldn't pray with the right priorities, and they wouldn't pray the right way.

And so he said, okay, first answer to your question, just, yeah, here are the main categories you need to pray for. Baby steps. Let's start with this. You know, the Lord's Prayer has been the topic of

so many sermons and books, and yet I think that's just Jesus' baby steps for prayer.

[41 : 51] Okay, just, here's a list of stuff you should at least pray for. And so, I must say, study of the Lord's Prayer is always profitable for a Christian.

It's always a wonderful exercise, and there are many books and sermons on the topic of the Lord's Prayer going through each petition. And there's so much we can gain from that. We don't have time for that tonight. And so for tonight, what I want to do is I just want us to read how some of the great reformers, men of the faith during the Reformation, who spent so much time praying because everybody wanted to kill them, and they lived in a time that they had so many trials, and they were masters of prayer.

We can learn so much from their words because they knew how to pray. I mean, Luther spent two to three hours in prayer every day, according to one report.

He's got this famous quote. I love it. He says, I have so much to do today that I should spend at least four hours in prayer. That's not how we think, eh?

These guys knew how to pray. And so what we're going to do tonight is we're just going to take some of the principles that they've distilled from the Bible, from the Lord's Prayer, into very practical steps.

[43 : 08] And so I want us to meet three reformers tonight, and I think it's great because it's Reformation Day tomorrow. If you don't know what that is, it's when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses, his argument against the Catholic Church, the door in Wittenberg in 1517, 1517, and started the Reformation, which is bringing people back to Scripture rather than to what people say, and lighting this flame throughout Europe, which then spread under God's providence to the rest of the world.

And so we're going to meet three of them. Firstly, I'd like you to meet Thomas Cranmer. Thomas Cranmer was the guy who wrote most of this, the prayer book.

He was the leader of the English Reformation. And his wisdom of prayer, he didn't really write a big treatise on prayer like Calvin did.

What he did instead was he took all of his wisdom that he knew from prayer, and he knitted it into the prayers in this book. And so in here is gold. It's why we still use it hundreds of years later.

He knitted his wisdom of prayer throughout the prayer book in order to teach people how to pray and what to pray for and what to think about when they pray.

[44 : 32] And what you'll notice is that we have collects, these short little prayers. This is a collect for every week. And what you may not have noticed is these collects all have a similar structure.

And they go like this. The structure itself gives us great wisdom in thinking about how we pray. It starts with an address. Every collect starts with an address, who God is.

It's an address of God, and it might be different each time. But it's addressing who God is. Then it says a doctrine, a truth from scripture. It reminds us of something about God or ourselves or the world.

Then it has a petition asking for something specific. And then an aspiration, which is what is going to happen when we receive this thing?

Why are we asking for it? What do we hope to happen? And then it ends off with an address to remind us who we're receiving it from. And so most of the collects are written like that. In fact, I'll give you an example.

[45 : 31] This morning's one. My sheet was taken away. So I'll just turn to a collect.

And you can see this and what it's like, this structure of prayer. Here's one. Epiphany 6 is an example. Starts with an address.

Almighty Father. Almighty Father. Okay? So just that. That's the address. Almighty Father. Who are we coming to? We're coming to Father. Next, a doctrine. Almighty Father, whose blessed Son was revealed so that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us the children of God and heirs of eternal life.

That's the doctrine that follows the address. So it's a reminder of something true in our world and in the plan of salvation. And then comes the petition.

Grant that having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure. And then the aspiration, the result of receiving it. That when he shall appear again with power and great glory, we may be like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom, where you, now this comes to the final address, who we're receiving it from, where you, where with you, Father, and with the Holy Spirit, he lives and reigns

one God forevermore.

[46 : 54] And so each of these collects, look out for the structure when we pray them in church. An address, a doctrine, a petition, an aspiration, and an address. It's not just, God, please give us this stuff. It's thinking through, why am I praying for this?

Who is this God that I'm asking it for? Why do I want this? And what truth of scripture can I base this prayer on? Cramner was a genius in prayer.

And you see it knitted throughout these prayers we pray. And it teaches us the benefit of well-thought-out prayers.

That we shouldn't just dive into prayer without, like, you're not going to meet the president without preparing, or thinking through at least what you're going to say. Well, we should think through what we're going to say to God, because it's real.

This is a real meeting. So we should actually think through, what am I going to say to God? And that's what Cramner teaches us to do. Throughout the prayer book, we see well-thought-out prayers that help us to turn our gaze away from the thing we want and onto God himself first, and then back to the thing we want, and we see it in a whole new light.

[48 : 03] And that's why set prayers are so helpful. That's why we do set prayers in church. That's why we pray together. Because they're prayers that are knitted with this great wisdom in how to pray and what to pray for, that focus our minds on God himself.

So that's the first reformer that's giving us some tips on prayer. The second is Martin Luther. Now, I need to share with you that this is the method of prayer that I most use in my personal prayers, is what I've learned from Martin Luther.

And there's a number of things he says on prayer. I'm just going to give you a few. First, he says prayer has got to be a habit. And he wrote a letter to a man who was his...

There's an interesting story. I forgot the name of this man. He was a German. And this man was his barber. He shaved him and cut his hair. But he ended up stabbing his son-in-law to death.

That would be a pretty scary barber to have. And he ended up in prison. And he then was kind of converted and repented and asked Martin Luther, how do I pray?

[49 : 13] And Martin Luther wrote him this whole letter of how to pray. And it's wisdom that applies to all of us. And I've greatly benefited from. Firstly, he says, you've got to have a habit of prayer.

He proposes twice daily. He says this, I quote, it is a good thing to let prayer be the first business of the morning and the last at night. Guard yourself against those false, false deluding ideas which tell you, wait a little while.

I will pray in an hour. First, I must attend to this or that. And it's interesting. When Martin Luther wrote this on prayer, he was writing, it soon becomes clear, he's writing not just to this guy.

He knows his letter will be read and distributed. So he's writing to everyone about how to pray. And guard yourselves against the deluding ideas which tell you, just wait a little while.

I'll pray in an hour once I've just dealt with this. And so it's very practical. And I think we can all relate to that. How many times have you said, yeah, I'm going to spend some good time in prayer this morning, but I've got to do this first and then never happens, right?

[50 : 18] And he goes on and he says, the reason we must make sure it's a habit and put it first is because we must remember, I quote, we are strictly and solemnly commanded to pray as in the other laws, not to kill, not to steal, et cetera.

Now that's quite a thought, isn't it? God has commanded us to pray just as he's commanded us not to kill people. It's a law. It's a command from God.

It's not an option. It's not something we choose to do when we feel like it. Like, yeah, I'll choose not to kill someone when I feel like it. You know, we don't treat God's commands like that and he's commanded us to pray.

That's why we must make a habit to pray whether we feel like it or not. Because here's the thing, not every prayer is going to feel awesome. Not every prayer is going to make us feel something every time.

Not every prayer is going to be a transcendent experience. You know? It's like human relationships, isn't it? When I talk to my wife, it's not always a transcendent experience.

[51 : 25] I mean, it often is. But, and yet it's the, just talking to someone is the means by which the relationship continues. Even if we don't feel something every time.

You don't go and have a relationship and talk to someone because you're always anticipating feeling amazing when you talk to them. No, you talk to them because the relationship matters. Even if you don't get anything out of talking to them in that particular instance.

It's the same with God. And it goes beyond that with God because talking to someone is generally a fairly comfortable experience. But talking to God is, can be very uncomfortable.

It can be very uncomfortable because we are still flawed sinners coming before the God of complete, absolute holiness.

And when we stop and pray, we realize how empty we are. When we stop and pray, we realize, I don't know what to pray for. I don't even have a desire to do this.

[52 : 27] And we want to avoid that feeling so we actually avoid praying. Because praying makes us feel exposed. It makes us feel empty. It makes us uncomfortable.

And that is actually good. Let me read to you another quote from Tim Keller. He says this, The first thing we learn in attempting to pray is our spiritual emptiness.

And this lesson is crucial. We are so used to being empty that we do not recognize the emptiness as such until we start to try to pray. We don't feel it until we begin to read what the Bible and others have said about the greatness and promise of prayer.

You know, we read about these guys and, Oh, prayer is this amazing experience. It's so great. And then we go into it. We start to do it. We try to do it and we feel so empty.

And it's an emptiness we don't like and so we want to avoid it. But it's important because it's through feeling our emptiness that we learn to look to God to fill it. And so when you come to prayer and you feel that uncomfortable emptiness of I don't know what to pray for.

[53 : 41] I should feel that I want to do this. I don't really want to do this. Just, you've got to realize that is part of the process. And then you look to God to fill that emptiness and that lack.

And He does. Next, so that's, Luther proposes you make a habit of it whether you feel like it or not. Next, He proposes that we prepare to pray.

That we do something in preparation before we pray. He says it's wrong to approach prayer without anticipation, lightly. And He advises the following process.

This is the process I use and I can commend it to you. You know, you might find a different process. But this has been really helpful for me. He says you start with Scripture because all prayer is actually answering what God has already said.

You start with Scripture. You don't have to read a lot. I normally read through Psalms and I'll maybe just read one or two verses in a day. Or I'll read a Psalm and then I'll, one or two verses will strike me.

[54 : 48] And then He says meditate on something that you've read. Meditate on a truth because there's always some truth when the Holy Spirit's in you that He's going to draw your attention to. And just meditate on it.

Stop and mull it over in your head for a little while. And then ask yourself four questions from that piece of Scripture. First of all, what does it tell me about God?

Or what does it tell me about myself? What does it instruct me? In other words, the first thing is what instruction am I getting from this? What am I learning from it? Secondly, what can I thank God for from this text?

Thanksgiving or praise. What can I praise God for or thank God for based on this text that I've read in Scripture? Thirdly, confession. How has this revealed something that is lacking in me?

And then fourth, you pray. You ask God for something. But I promise you, when you get to that point of asking God for something, after going through those first three steps, you'll be much more equipped and prepared to ask God for what you want to ask Him.

[56 : 03] So those are four questions. You meditate on a piece of Scripture and then you ask, what instruction is it giving me? What thanksgiving does it inspire from me?

What confession should I make based on this text? How does it expose something that I need to confess? And then, what should I pray for? What is it? Practically, in response to this text.

Does that make sense? Because, and the reason this is important, because we dive into prayers of petition first. We dive into, this is what I need, God.

But we've got these other categories of prayer. Thanksgiving, praise, adoration, confession. And prayer, because prayer is not so much about getting things than getting God himself.

Prayer is not all petition, but it's actually about relationship with God. That's the first and primary purpose of prayer. And so, just as important as the things we pray for is thanksgiving and praise and confession.

[57 : 06] That's part of the relationship. Another way of thinking that is quite helpful is thinking of prayer in this way. There's upward prayers, there's inward prayers, and there's outward prayers. And you should include all three of the categories as much as you can.

Upward prayers are prayers of praise and thanks to God. And they can be specific, thanking Him for doing something, thanking, just praising Him for who He is. So, praise and thanks are very similar.

Praise is thanking God for who He is. Thanksgiving is thanking God for what He's done, whether it's in history, whether it's in your life. Praise and thanks, those are upward prayers.

But then you get inward prayers, looking at ourselves and realizing I need to confess my sins. So, inward prayers are about confession, about pouring out your heart to God. And then outward prayers are prayers of petition for yourself and for others.

So, you can think of it like that. Upward prayers, inward prayers, and outward prayers. And many Luther advisors further, once we've done this, we've worked through this scripture and just thought, it can be a quick, a few minutes.

[58 : 11] Instruction, what did I learn from this? Thanksgiving, what can I thank God for this? Confession, what should I confess now and what should I ask for? Then He says, it's healthy to work through the petitions in the Lord's Prayer, but see them as headings for our own prayers of petition so that we can at least organize our prayers and maybe trigger things to pray for that we wouldn't have prayed for if we weren't putting it in some kind of order.

And that's partly what Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer for, an order of prayers. Always remember, the first three petitions in the Lord's Prayer are about God. Hallowed be your name, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Your kingdom come. It's all about God first before me and then give us today our daily bread, forgive us our sins, et cetera. So it's a way of ordering our prayers and under each of those headings I think, okay, how can I pray for God's kingdom to come now in the life of my friend or in the life of the people I know or in my country or whatever it is.

Okay? So work through the Lord's Prayer and you should have it memorized if you're a Christian. If you don't, then go home and memorize it because then you don't, you can pray anytime and work through that process.

And then finally, this was so helpful. Luther says, when you pray, keep a lookout for the Holy Spirit.

[59 : 40] Let me explain to you what I mean. And Keller, again, picks this up in his book on prayer. Keep a lookout for the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit is actually there. He's working in your prayers. So look out for when He starts to inspire prayers that you didn't even think of because then the Holy Spirit is speaking and you can learn something.

So let me read to you from Keller. He says, if as we are meditating or praying, an abundance of good thoughts comes to us. And this is now Luther that he's quoting.

We ought to disregard the other petitions, disregard, you know, the structure we had laid out, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence and under no circumstances obstruct them.

The Holy Spirit Himself preaches here and one word of His sermon is better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.

This is Luther saying he's learned things from his prayers because he realizes that when he has these word-saturated prayers, then the Holy Spirit starts to pray His words to the Father through us.

[60 : 59] Our prayers are His words. That's quite a thought, isn't it? And it's then that we start to realize that we have become part of a conversation between the Holy Spirit and the Father.

That's what's happening. When we saturate our prayers in the Word and the Holy Spirit inspires these thoughts we wouldn't have had without Him, remember where the Holy Spirit is in His people, where the Father is in Heaven.

the Holy Spirit prays and inspires our prayers to connect with the Father. So the Holy Spirit is having a conversation with the Father and we're caught up in that in prayer.

I think it's part of what Paul means when he writes in Romans 8 26-27 in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses because we do not know what to pray for as we should but the Spirit

Himself intercedes for us with unspoken groanings and He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. The Holy Spirit is praying to God through our prayers. Keller's interpretation of this verse he writes the Spirit makes our groaning His groaning putting His prayers to the Father inside our prayers. [62 : 24] Isn't that amazing? That's quite something to remember. And so Luther says look out for the Holy Spirit in your prayers and then stop whatever you were planning to pray for and see what He preaches to you.

And just Luther's simple system has helped me I must say in a more regular and thrilling experience of prayer to focus on what God is saying to me first realizing this is a conversation.

I'm meeting with the Sovereign and I'm about to answer what He's just told me in a conversation with God to focus on what God is saying first and just to work through those four steps.

I don't do it perfectly and I don't always do it but it's very helpful when I do instruction. What is this saying to me? Thanksgiving what can I thank God based on this confession? What should I confess and then what should I ask God for based on this?

And then when I have time I also work through the Lord's Prayer as well. And what it's done for me is it's made prayer for me a real time conversation with my Creator.

[63 : 34] And that's when now I don't feel amazing every time but often I do and it's actually I walk away from that and I just like my day's got so much better. That's Martin Luther.

Finally let's ask Johnny for some advice. John Calvin now he's got a lot to say about prayer. He wrote a whole section in his Christian Institutes in the Christian Religion and he's the last reformer we're going to consult tonight.

and he said a lot on it and I can't I can't summarize everything he said on it. I encourage you to actually read book three of the Institutes.

You can. It's actually there's good English translations and it's deep stuff. Just read it slowly.

Anyway he's got lots to say but there's one thing that struck me and stuck with me about what he said about prayer.

And he speaks of the approach we have before coming to pray namely that we learn to approach God with awe. He says I quote nothing is worse than being devoid of awe in prayer.

[64 : 49] And we need to get in our heads the magnificence of the thing we're about to do before we pray and the glory of the one we're about to approach.

He said there should be no giddiness in prayer. That's what Calvin says. What he means by giddiness is wondering thoughts about other things.

When you meet the president you're not thinking about what you're having for supper tonight, right? Because you're fully focused okay I want to make the most of this meeting. He says the same there should be no giddiness in prayer.

Just focus on what you're doing and realize what you're doing and let it wash over you before you open your mouth. That's why the habit I've also found along with Luther's system is before praying I try to stop and think about God for just a few seconds to remember that he's real and he is at this very moment surrounded by glory in heaven with scores of glorious heavenly beings serving him and he's listening to me.

and then I try to let my heart and my mind just be filled with who God is that I'm about to speak to knowing that he's listening to me before I presume to open my mouth.

[66 : 13] And so that's for me the main thing that stood out for me in John Calvin's instructions and prayers learn to approach prayer with awe. Stop before you open your mouth and think of who you're praying to.

Because it is an awesome thing to pray through Christ to the true and living God. And I admit I don't do it well. I forget. My habits are bad.

Very much even though I've read it and I'm teaching it I still do it. Where the deluding idea which tell you wait a little while pray in an hour first I must attend to this or that.

I still do it so often. My habits are bad and it's because I'm lazy and it's because the evil one wants to keep us away from the chief exercise of our faith.

And he's working every day to keep us from praying. I mean he probably doesn't even care if we've got a lot of paint in the bucket as long as we don't paint it on anything. And he also wants to make prayer less than it is.

[67 : 26] And he puts distractions in our way and he will use any tactic to keep us from real prayer. I want to close this evening by quoting from C.S. Lewis' classic The Screwtape Letters.

Anybody ever read that? Oh come on people! Nobody read The Screwtape Letters! Okay you read some? Yeah? You read The Screwtape Letters? Okay good.

Put your hand up. Screwtape Letters is a fictional book but it's based on reality. It's about a senior devil Wormwood writing letters to a junior tempter who's his nephew whose name is Screwtape or is it the other way around?

No Screwtape's the nephew. Yeah he says dear Screwtape Screwtape Letters. Anyway and he writes these letters on training a junior tempter how to tempt Christians and he calls Jesus the enemy and Christians the patience that we've got to try to tempt away from the enemy.

Anyway this is his letter that I want to read to you one of excerpts from it when he's warning Screwtape about the dangers of Christian prayer and he says this it is it is high time for me to write to you fully on the painful subject of prayer.

[68 : 45] The best thing where it is possible is to keep the patient from serious intention of praying altogether prayer. But if that fails and Wormwood goes on and he says it's much better to make sure that he rather prays to his idea of who God is rather than the true God.

So that's if it fails that you can't keep him away from prayer then get him to pray to his idea of God. And he goes on if he ever comes to make the distinction between the two if he ever consciously directs his prayers not to what he thinks God is but to who he truly is well our situation is for the moment desperate.

Once all his false thoughts and images of God have been flung aside and the man trusts himself to the completely real external invisible presence there with him in the room and never knowable by him as he is known by it why it is that the incalculable may occur but in avoiding this terrifying situation this real nakedness of the soul in prayer you will be helped by the fact that the humans themselves do not desire it nearly as much as they suppose there's such a thing as getting more than they bargained for end quote well I hope that you desire it this trusting of yourself to the completely real external invisible God I hope that this has encouraged you to seek deeper and more intimate prayer with that God through Christ and to realize that in that chief exercise of faith you will find a deep and lasting satisfaction that you can't find anywhere else as you take hold of God himself and I hope that you also end up getting much more than you bargained for well let me I feel quite scared to actually pray for us now yes father we approach you now and again are amazed that surrounded by heavenly beings with running the universe in front of you you condescend to listen to us tonight because we're your people and you you seek relationship with us and Lord we we're so blown away what is man that you are mindful of him the son of man that you care for him and yet you've you've gone to such an extent to connect with us to become incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ to die for our sins that we might approach you in prayer help us never to forget what a great privilege that is and all that you've done so that we could pray properly and truly to our God and creator and Lord we thank you and we ask that you would help us to seek to take hold of you in prayer each and every day help us to realize that the needs that you have intricately designed for us to have are but ways that you are causing us to grow in relationship with you and causing us to find out that you are all we need and we pray that you would help us to realize that grow in the true knowledge of that and apply the gospel to our lives through prayer into every situation and find the great joy and satisfaction irrespective of our circumstances that we can get in applying your truth the truth of the gospel the truth of who you are into our every circumstance and leaving it in your hands knowing that you are sovereign and you do all things well perfectly and so we pray

[72 : 56] Lord that as we part now you would go with us by your Holy Spirit and Holy Spirit that you would engage in our prayers and that your groanings would be our groanings pray in our prayers and that we would learn through our prayers that you inspire and Lord I pray for all of us gathered here and all of those listening to the recording that you would help us to realize and find a great happiness in prayer that is not like anything else we can find help us to stop digging in the bins of the world for dregs of happiness but rather to realize what we have right with us the amazing privilege of praying through Christ knowing that we can approach you that we can approach confidently your throne of grace and help us to use our prayer time well and to prepare to pray and to approach you with awe and we pray that you would be glorified and we would be satisfied deeply through that exercise and we pray all this through

Jesus Christ Amen