

Prayer for beginners. 1 (And we're all beginners...)

Prayer is a basic part of life as a Christian. We pray in church, at home, together, on our own... We offer thanks to God, ask his forgiveness when we get things wrong, pray for people we care about and much more. Often we pray 'on the spur of the moment', responding to situations as we meet them. Choosing to pray in a disciplined way, though, is a step further in life with God.

There are lots of patterns of prayer which we can use, and I'll try to write a bit about some of them over the coming months. Please do share any ideas that have helped you to pray – we're all in this together, and have a lot to learn from each other.

One thing is vital if you're going to build a pattern of prayer – time. It doesn't need to be a lot, but you need to set aside at least a few minutes regularly, and to make yourself do it – even if that means leaving some other things undone for the moment.

Get yourself comfortable, and don't feel that you need to rush straight into praying. Often it helps to spend a few moments being still and breathing deeply to let your mind slow down a bit.

Then comes the praying part. If you're trying to get started in this, why not use the prayer Jesus taught us? It's both a wonderful prayer in itself and a great pattern for our own prayers.

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 forever. Amen.

From early on in the church, it's been recommended that we stop to pray this prayer at least three times a day – on rising, at mid-day and in the evening. Try praying it slowly and thoughtfully this way for a few days.

Then take a bit longer, and perhaps once a day, stop after each line to think and pray about the kind of things the prayer mentions. So after 'Our Father in heaven' just take a moment to think about God – what do you believe he is like? Ask him to help you to know. After 'Hallowed be your Name', think of three things to praise and thank God about. Think through what each line of the prayer means, and spend a few moments praying about those things.

Try this for a week, and see how you feel about prayer then!

The Rev'd Nick Watson

Prayer for beginners 2 – Praying for the world

One of the sides of prayer that we're often most comfortable thinking about is that of prayer for other people. The traditional name for this is *intercession* and it's a vital part of our life as Christians. In the Lord's Prayer we pray for the world first, and only then for our own needs; this isn't a bad pattern to keep to in all of our prayers.

What happens when we pray?

The short answer is that we don't really know! We know that prayer isn't meant to be some kind of magic we work on God to make him do what we want. At the same time, Jesus told us several times that we should be persistent and disciplined in praying, to keep going when prayers don't seem to be answered.

Perhaps the best way that I've found to see it is that prayer is how God somehow allows us to share in his work in the world. When we can't affect a situation in any other way, we can still share in what God is

doing through others. When we have the opportunity to help someone or to make a difference ourselves, then we seek God's help and strength to do so, trusting that his work through us will somehow lead to more than we would achieve by our own efforts alone.

Often this has as much to do with allowing God to shape our thoughts as it does with 'getting our prayers right' in the first place. St Paul in his letter to the Romans says that God the Holy Spirit actually prays to God the Father from within us. When we don't know what to pray (or even what to think) about a situation, God can take over and include us in his conversation with himself! Prayer for others can be a wonderful but challenging experience if we listen to ourselves and to God as we pray.

How can we pray?

It's good to be specific in your prayer, and to stick at it. It might help to have a list of people and situations that you'll pray for, and refer to it regularly. If there are many things on your prayer list, don't try to rush through them all every time. Part of this prayer is to concentrate on what you're bringing to mind and to God, and rushing through things tends to feel a bit like a shopping list! It's probably better to spread things over a few days or a week – though there may be a few people or situations you'll want to pray for every day.

There are other parts to prayer, but one way or another it's good to let yourself be still for a few minutes. First ask the Holy Spirit to help you to pray. You might read a bit of the Bible or use the prayer for the week (usually printed on the weekly readings sheet in church) to help yourself to come closer to God. Then just use your list or whatever else is on your mind to ask God to do what's right and best in each situation – even if what's best isn't actually what you yourself would want.

You don't need elegant words, or even any words at all – bringing together your focussed concern for others and your trust in God (however weak that feels!) is what matters.

Ideas for prayer

Start with what matters most to you, whether people, parts of the world or any kind of issue. The more it matters to you, the easier it'll be to keep praying.

Then use the news! Whether you read a paper, watch TV news or listen to the radio, take a note (at least mentally!) of anything you'd like to pray for. You could even get into the habit, if it's quiet when the news is on, of praying *as you read, listen or watch*. It may affect the way you think about the world.

The weekly welcome sheet in church lists a few people who've asked for the church's public prayers. You could also look at the prayer board by the south door and take a couple of notes for the week's prayers. Most Christian charities and mission agencies are happy to provide monthly or quarterly prayer lists, to let you know about some of the areas in which they work, and to help to focus your prayers. Contact any you already support by giving, and ask to receive these if you don't already.

A couple of warnings and an encouragement

First, don't be surprised if the answers that come to your prayers aren't always the answers you would like. God does answer prayer, but not always with a straightforward 'yes'. Sometimes his answer can be the gift of strength to accept a different situation from the one we would have chosen.

Second, look out. If you're praying for a person or a situation, God may challenge you to do something else about it. Be ready to find that you're meant to be part of the answer to your own prayer!

Lastly, do talk to (*Church minister*). We all keep learning, and advice from how someone else has found they can pray may be very useful.

Rev'd Nick Watson

Prayer for beginners 3 – listening to God

We've talked in the last couple of articles about the side of prayer that's to do with our speaking to God. Prayer is meant to be a conversation, though, and it's good to spend time listening as well as talking. That's not a bad thing to remember for *any* relationship, with God or with the important people in your life...

Starting with the Bible

One of the most reliable ways to listen to God is through careful and prayerful reading of the Bible.

Christians believe that this is God's word – not dictated by him, but inspired by him and written by human authors over a period of more than a thousand years. Another time I'll write more on reading the Bible, but there are lots of resources to help you if you're interested.

For now I'm concerned with using the Bible as part of your prayers. One thing to do first is to get a good translation to read. In church we use the *New Revised Standard Version*. You might like this or the *New International Version*, but some others are easier to read. If you don't have a Bible you're comfortable reading, do ask me for advice or call in to a specialist Christian bookshop and ask them to explain the differences between different translations. You'll also find that you can buy Bibles with all kinds of 'extras' (notes, maps, indexes etc.), but the most important thing is that the text is accurate and readable.

Then you need to decide which bits to read. It's better for this kind of reading to concentrate on a short passage. You could use the readings we hear in Church on Sunday – if you're able to get to Church they're printed on a sheet, or you can buy a booklet called a *Lectionary* which will tell you what they are (again, ask at a Christian bookshop, or ask me for a list of readings).

You could decide you'd like to read through a book of the Bible (I suggest starting with one of the gospels). In this case, you might like to make sure that your Bible has section headings added to the text, and read one of them at a time.

A good way to begin, though, is with one of the many series of Bible reading notes which you can get (yes, Christian bookshop again!) Look through a few and decide which one is going to suit you best. These notes will suggest a Bible passage, and give you some background, a few thoughts on it and often a prayer or suggestion for something you can do. One of Bishop Tom Wright's books on 'the Bible for everyone' would give you the same sort of material.

Getting going

However you choose a passage, set aside a few minutes to read and pray with it. First sit comfortably and let yourself rest. Then pray that God will help you to hear what he wants to say, and read the passage slowly and carefully. Try to be aware of your thoughts and feelings as you read it. Take a moment just to let it sink in, and to think about what it says.

If you're using notes, now is the time to read them, and give yourself a bit more time to absorb what they tell you or suggest to you. (You don't have to agree with them!) Try to decide what God wants you to do and to pray as a result of the passage, and ask his help to do it.

Now turn to the part of your prayer which is about speaking (see the last couple of weeks) and let what you've read shape what you pray.

Keep going with it, and before long you'll be amazed at how much of the Bible you come to understand, and at how God helps you to pray as a result.

Rev'd Nick Watson

Prayer for beginners 4 – 'Helps' to prayer

I wrote last time of a more reflective approach to prayer, and mentioned giving yourself time to rest into stillness. Not everyone finds that easy! This time I've got a few suggestions of things that might help.

A place

If you can find the right place that will help. I do have the privilege of praying regularly in church, where the atmosphere of shared prayer does make things easier! You may need to find a more personal place. Many people find that (for the deliberate time of prayer you set aside) it helps to have a regular place to pray in. It should be somewhere as quiet as possible, and with a chair on which you can sit comfortably but without danger of falling asleep! You can also buy prayer stools which some people find helpful.

If your 'prayer place' can have somewhere to rest your Bible, and space for a candle and perhaps a cross, an icon, flower or something else to look at, that would be great.

A time

Disciplined prayer does need time set apart, and most people find it helpful (when it's possible) to have a regular time of day in which to pray. Find your own best time – it may depend on your own rhythms (whether you're most awake in the mornings or the evenings) or your family or work circumstances. If there are others in the house, agree with them when you can have a few minutes undisturbed. Don't try to set aside too long a time. You'll find it harder to keep to, and probably a struggle to use well if you do manage – to begin with, at least.

A focus

Looking at something, or perhaps listening to music, can be helpful especially as we settle in to prayer.

I mentioned a candle, and other things to look at. Many people find that lighting a candle helps to mark out a 'special' time, and that looking at its flame while thinking of Christ, the light of the world, helps us to be still and at peace. An icon is a particular kind of spiritual painting, representing Jesus, God or one of the saints and symbolising their presence with us. A cross reminds us of God's love for us in Jesus; something natural is another good possibility to help us to think and pray.

Another thing which often helps is something to *do*. To use the beads of a rosary can be a good way of concentrating, and you don't need to use the traditional Roman Catholic prayer, the 'Hail Mary' if you're not comfortable with it. If you'd like to explore prayer with a rosary, or other prayer beads, ask [*church minister*](#) for a bit of advice.

A friend

You may or may not find it helpful to pray with someone else. You don't need to talk – you can pray side by side in silence if that's more helpful. But it may well help to have a friend to whom you can at least talk about prayer and about how God is at work in your life. Why not make it an early part of your prayer to ask God to bring you together with the right person to support one another in this?

I hope that something in this article helps you to develop your own prayer and your friendship with God.

The Rev'd Nick Watson