

What is Prayer?

Prayer begins with God

Though we think of prayer as something we do, the first initiative belongs to God. We are called to dwell in a love already given, and be at home in God who has freely chosen to be at home in us. Prayer is the experience of being drawn into intimacy with God, the same intimacy as exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



Prayer is about relationship

Prayer is therefore about a relationship between you and God. God knows you, loves you and is with you. In prayer you turn your mind and heart to God whose mind and heart is always turned to you. To pray is to choose to respond to the invitation to relationship with God.

Prayer is where longing turns to seeking

Below the surface of our lives we long for completeness: to be free to live out what is best in us, and to be loved for who we are. For all that makes our lives full, we sometimes glimpse that something is missing. Our longing can move us in many different directions, and we enjoy the many good things of life. But at other times we may be restless, weary or hollow inside, frustrated at our inability to live the way we would wish to. We sense we have no still centre, no rest, and no final and complete 'home'.

In the Gospel we meet many people like us – the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well, the fishermen Peter, the taxman Matthew sitting at the side of the road as Jesus passed by. Something happened when they met Jesus...there was something about the way he looked at them. They intuitively knew that here was what they were longing for, and their longing turned into a choice to seek to be in his presence. Prayer is where our longing turns into seeking. We move from simply asking for things to make our life better, to seeking a relationship with the One who alone can make our lives complete.

Prayer is seeking and finding our home

Jesus wants us to make our home in him, just as he chooses to be at home in us.

- Abide in me as I abide in you [John 15.4]
- As the Father has loved me so I have loved you; abide in my love [John 15.9]
- Those who love me will keep my word and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them [John 14.23]

Home is where we go out from and come back to, where we can let go of our pretences and be ourselves, and where we are known and cared for. God wants you to be 'at home' in this way. Prayer is the way you will find this home.

In prayer we share what is within our hearts

In prayer we share ourselves with God; this sharing can involve speaking: bringing to God what we feel, think or hope for. We can be ourselves with God, saying just what we need to, whether we are happy, sad, angry or anxious. At other times the sharing of ourselves is without words: we can simply 'be' with God, resting in God's presence.

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Tools for Prayer

Prayer is attentiveness and awareness

Prayer also involves being open, and listening, for God desires to share himself with us. God's word is spoken through scripture but also in daily life – in what we see, hear, read, think and feel. This is 'heart to heart' conversation, sharing what is deepest in us and being open to allow God to share what is deepest in him.

Prayer is being present to 'Presence'

God is always present to us...always 'here', always 'now'. God is there not just there in the special moments when an awareness of God breaks through to us, but always and everywhere. We can step into this 'always' whenever we wish, in busy places as much as quiet places. Prayer is stepping into the 'always' that is God's loving presence.

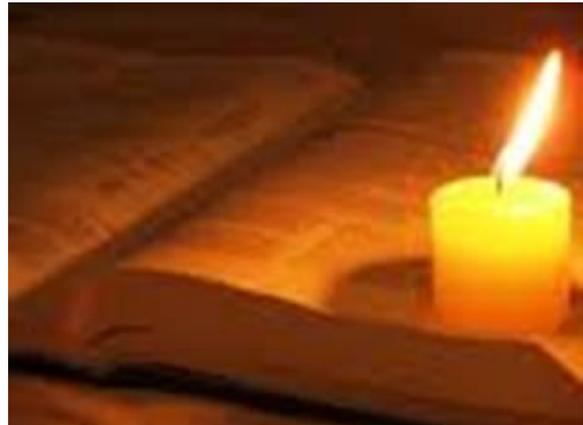
If we persist in prayer this sense of God's presence in the whole of our life will grow.

Prayer opens us to inner transformation

When we pray we make room for God to be at work within, bringing us healing, moving us towards wholeness, and setting us free. We open ourselves to Love, and in turn our capacity to love grows. In prayer we are drawn into God's compassion for others and find ourselves wanting to share our time and gifts in ways that bring life to others. We not only pray but begin to live 'Your kingdom come, here on earth as in heaven'

Many ways into prayer

There's not a right way to pray – we don't need 'the right words' – what matters is what is in our hearts. As we begin so God will help us, giving us the words to say and helping us be open to hear and receive. We may have been brought up with a particular style of prayer – with an emphasis on loud praise, or on quiet presence, or a formal liturgy – all have their place, and it's good to stretch ourselves by experiencing ways of prayer that are unfamiliar.



Let go to God

Sometimes we experience something when we pray; sometimes nothing seems to happen. All of this is in God's gift. What matters is not whether we feel this or that but whether through prayer we become more open to, and aware of God in the whole of life.

There are things that can help us to pray: finding a regular place or time for prayer, using a visual focal point, relaxing our bodies or using a prayer word or 'mantra' to help still our minds. Ultimately though, prayer is not about having the right technique. Prayer isn't something we do in our own effort – it's something we allow the Spirit of God to do in us. Trying too hard or worrying whether we are doing it right can actually get in the way. 'Let go and let God' very much applies to prayer. Though we make the active choice to seek God, everything else lies in God's gift.

Ask, seek, knock

Jesus said 'Ask, seek, knock' [Luke 11.9]. Prayer is expressed in our desire to be present to God, knowing our need of his life. The desire for God is at the heart of prayer, and this desire itself is something we can ask for.

Starting to Pray

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Prayer also involves being open, and listening, for God desires to share himself with us. This is 'heart to heart' conversation, sharing what is deepest in us and being open to allow God to share what is deepest in him. Sometimes we feel or experience something when we pray; sometimes nothing seems to happen but all the same we go away feeling somehow refreshed or unburdened, or realising that we're not, after all, alone.

If we persist in prayer this sense of God's presence in the whole of our life will grow.

Jesus told us he wanted us to make our home in him, just as he chooses to be at home in us. Home is where we go out from and come back to, where we can let go of our pretences and be ourselves, and where we are known and cared for. God wants you to be 'at home' in this way. Prayer is the way you will find this home.

There's not a right way to pray – we don't need 'the right words' – what matters is what is in our hearts. As we begin so God will help us, giving us the words to say and helping us be open to hear and receive.

Here are some brief suggestions you might find useful in your prayer

- **Find a focal point** - for example, a candle or a cross – something that you can rest your eyes on as you pray.
- **Use words and silences:** Share your thoughts and feelings openly with God but make time to be still too, resting in God's presence.
- **Use your breathing to help still you:** For a while be conscious of nothing else but your breathing; be aware of how you draw air in and then release it. As thoughts come to you don't fight them but return to this attentiveness to your breathing. After a while you will find yourself more still, relaxed and ready to pray.
- **Decide on a regular meeting time:** Maybe 5 minutes at the start or end of the day, or during your lunch break at work. You may find yourself praying at different times and places as you go through your day but this regular space will give you a solid foundation you can build on.

Take a deep breath

It can be difficult to still ourselves to pray when so much is going on in our lives and in our heads! From ancient times it has been recognised that focusing on one's breath is one way to find the inner quiet that helps us be open to God. In Hebrew, the word for breath and spirit is the same; like the physical act of breathing that sustains our life, we breathe in God, breathe out God, and our spirit lives.

Sit comfortably with your feet on the ground and your hands at rest in your lap or by your side. Close your eyes. Then give all your attention to your breathing; be aware of your drawing breath in and then releasing it out; feel the physical change happening in your body as you do so. You'll become aware of the underlying rhythm of your breathing. Thoughts will come into your head, but rather than dwelling on them or fighting them off, return to the awareness of breathing in, breathing out. After time and with practice, you will find yourself stilling down and relaxing.

One way of turning this stilling down more consciously into prayer is by holding a prayer word or short phrase before us as breathe in and out; for example, 'Jesus' or 'My life, my help' or 'Come, Lord Jesus'. The silent repetition of this prayer word in time with your breathing may help you in your seeking God, and being more open to the God who seeks you.

We don't need hours of time to 'take a deep breath' in this way; we can find 5 minutes between jobs, or on the way to work in a quiet train. We can use this way of prayer when we are anxious, or over-busy and under pressure, or simply whenever we want to make space for ourselves and for God.

I will show you how I do not cease praying, simply by going on with my work. I am sitting there in God's presence. And when I put my little leaves to soak, and when I start to weave a rope I say, 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love' [Psalm 51.3]. Is not that a prayer?

Sayings of the Desert Fathers: quoted in the Roots of Christian Mysticism, Olivier Clement, New City Publishing, 1993, p205]