

Psalm 34:1-8; 17-19 (The Message)

I bless GOD every chance I get;
my lungs expand with his praise.

I live and breathe GOD;
if things aren't going well, hear this and be happy:

Join me in spreading the news;
together let's get the word out.

GOD met me more than halfway,
he freed me from my anxious fears.

Look at him; give him your warmest smile.
Never hide your feelings from him.

When I was desperate, I called out,
and GOD got me out of a tight spot.

GOD's angel sets up a circle
of protection around us while we pray.

Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see—
how good GOD is.

Blessed are you who run to him.

Is anyone crying for help? GOD is listening,
ready to rescue you.

If your heart is broken, you'll find GOD right there;
if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your
breath.

Disciples so often get into trouble;
still, GOD is there every time.

Does God Answer Prayer?

Of course!! What sort of loving father ignores his children? Jesus repeatedly teaches his disciples (that includes us!) that we can rely on God in all things. Now, we may not always get the answer to our prayers that we want nor when we want it. After all, the parent often knows better than the child what is best for the child.

In the same way, God knows our hearts and needs better than we do. With boldness, the psalmist writes "But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer" (Psalm 66: v.19). The only question for us is whether we will trust God. Will we trust that he listens and answers, even when it seems to us that he does not? See King Hezekiah's story in the p. 3 textbox if you want to ponder just how carefully God listens and, perhaps surprisingly, just how God responds.

Psalm 63:1-8 (NRSV)

¹O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where
there is no water.

²So I have looked upon you in the
sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

³Because your steadfast love is better than
life,
my lips will praise you.

⁴So I will bless you as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on
your name.

⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful
lips

⁶when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of
the night;

⁷for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I
sing for joy.

⁸My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Do you thirst for God? Do you live and breathe God? If your answers are yes, then the holy habit of prayer will be as natural as eating or drinking. If your answer is no, then the holy habit of prayer must become part of your path to such joyful thirst.

In Psalm 63, the psalmist stands with open mouth, thirsting for God, hungering for God, praying to God, praising God. He thinks about God at night, in the dark. The psalmist's soul clings to God like a child that clings to its mother. The psalmist lifts up his hands to God, calls God by name, and trusts God. What a powerful image of someone who has given themselves over to God completely, holding nothing back. Someone who has dropped all pretensions to self-sufficiency. Someone who has transcended the world's appetites.

Likewise with Psalm 34. *Living and breathing God!* "Open your mouth and taste how good God is." No wonder the psalmist can't wait to get the word out. He has found his true home and met the God who has always been there.

Do the psalmists describe your own relationship with God? For what or whom do you hunger? What do you think about at night? For many Christians, these images can be a bit intimidating or at least very “other,” certainly not describing themselves. The world seeks

to cultivate very different appetites in us and often succeeds.

What is Prayer?

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. In his book, *Prayer*, Richard Foster writes about 21 forms of prayer. But even Foster does not exhaust prayer’s meaning. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God. Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: “And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don’t even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God’s own will” (Romans 8:26-27, NLT).

Yet, such joyful thirsting and fulfillment is not some impossible ideal nor the privilege of a special few. Rather, it is available to us all. God desires it for us all. It is this for which we were made and for which our souls long.

The seven holy habits, including prayer, are long-practiced disciplines that are necessary to our spiritual growth, to becoming people who live and breathe God.

Still, for many of us, the question is where do we begin?

How to pray (and how not to)

In the very center of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns to the subject of prayer. But before teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus warns them about the basics. They are not to be hypocrites. They are not to pray so that everyone can see what good “pray-ers” they are. They are not to pile up a bunch of empty phrases in their prayers. In all this, Jesus is pushing his disciples toward prayer that is grounded in sincerity and honesty, humility and forgiveness – these are the basic ingredients of prayer that is grounded in true faith! Why?

Because prayer is conversation with God; conversation that must be grounded upon trust. So, just as we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don’t hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don’t hesitate; they trust God!

Though prayer consists of more than our words (see the textbox above), setting aside time for deliberate prayer is important, even essential. Here are a few tips that many Christians have found helpful as they work toward a deeper prayer life:

- *Don’t just think the words . . . say them.* A wandering mind is one of the biggest hurdles to a rich prayer life and it happens to all of us. Actually speaking the prayer will help you stay on track.
- *Don’t just pray about what you’d like God to do.* Tell God how you feel. Make time to give thanks and even to be honest with God about your mistakes or failures. Try to be specific in your prayers.
- *Keep a prayer list.* Most of us trouble remembering everything on the fly.
- *Pray in this way daily . . . and don’t be afraid to start small.* Even five minutes a day is a start. Too many people never start because they intimidate themselves right from the beginning.
- *Say grace before each meal.* This seems like such a small thing, but you’ll find that it helps you to stay more aware of God all day. If the setting is inappropriate for you to pray aloud, even a silent word of grace will be meaningful.

Can Prayer Change God's Mind?

I will always remember what I was once told by a young woman. She said that of all the things we Christians claim are true, the most difficult one for her to believe was that God heard her prayers. The Creator and Sustainer of the Cosmos listening to the words of one young woman in Plano? It is hard to believe! But, of course, no harder than that this same God became flesh and was born to another young woman.

Many Christians struggle with prayer. I believe that one of the reasons, perhaps the biggest one, is that we have notions about God that undermine our confidence in God. I see this in the questions I get about prayer: Doesn't God know what I'm going to pray before I do? What good will it do? Isn't the future already set? If not, how could we say God knows the future? How can prayer actually change anything?

The Bible often paints a portrait of God that is a good bit different from what many of us carry around in our heads. Consider a couple of stories we've looked at recently. In one, Abraham negotiates with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. *Negotiates??* I'm sure Plato and Aristotle never imagined anyone negotiating with the Unmoved Mover. In the second story, Jacob physically wrestles with God on a riverbank. *Wrestles with God?* Despite the puzzling strangeness of these stories and others like them, I believe they convey deep truths about the nature of God – and it doesn't sound much like Plato.

Here is another story that will make you stop and think. It is from 2 Kings 20.

Hezekiah was the king of Judah at the time when the Assyrians were the great power in the region and had overrun the nation of Israel to Judah's north. The Assyrians seemed poised to overrun Judah and Jerusalem as well. Indeed, it seemed inevitable. Instead, Hezekiah prayed for Jerusalem's deliverance. Then, Isaiah prophesied that the city would be saved and God did just that. An angel defeated the Assyrian army as they slept (see 2 Kings 17-19 for all this).

King Hezekiah was one of the few Israelite kings to get a good report card in Scripture. Most of the kings, like Ahab, did "what was evil in God's sight" but Hezekiah did "what was right in the eyes of the LORD" (2 Kings 18:3). He is even compared to David!

At one point, Hezekiah fell ill. The prophet Isaiah showed up and brought Hezekiah this word from God: "Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover" (19:1). Isaiah turned to make his way out of the palace. But Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and began to pray: "Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly."

Before Isaiah is even able to get out of the palace, the "word of the LORD came to him." Isaiah was to turn around and go back to Hezekiah to tell him, "The LORD says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you . . . I will add fifteen years to your life."

So . . . you tell me what we are supposed to do with that story. Either God wasn't truthful when he told Hezekiah that the king would soon die, which can't be right, or Isaiah got it all wrong, which undermines the Bible, or . . . God changed his mind in response to prayer. But how can God change his mind? Does that idea even make any sense if God knows not only the past and present, but also the future? If we take Scripture seriously, as being "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), then this story, like the stories about Abraham's negotiation and Jacob's wrestling match, has to be taken seriously. Could it be that we matter so much to God, that the Creator of the Cosmos not only hears us, but responds to us, even changing his plans? Could our prayers really matter that much. I think if more of us believed that they really do matter, many fewer of us would struggle with our prayer lives. In fact, you might hardly be able to shut us up!

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Here are some important Scripture passages on prayer.

Monday, 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10 Hannah prays to God for a son.

Tuesday, 2 Kings 20:1-15 The story of Hezekiah's illness and God's change of mind

Wednesday, Luke 18:1-8 Jesus' parable about a persistent widow

Thursday, Luke 11:5-13 Another of Jesus' parables about persistence

Friday, Matthew 6:5-18 Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teachings about prayer

Saturday, Matthew 26:36-46 Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane.

