

# Toolbox for Prayer

## Resources for talking and listening to God



c Joachim Schlosser / flickr

**'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.'**

This toolbox will provide you with more skills for engaging with prayer. You can work through the book by yourself, or turn it into a short course for a small group (if you get up to more than 6, consider splitting the group).

### Where am I starting from?

Ask yourself **what it is that you want to do**. A doctor or a mechanic takes a good look before they do anything else. Diagnostic skills improve with practice too, so you will get more confident as you get used to taking a look at your relationship with God.

Ask yourself **how you are right now**. Sometimes prayer needs to be like a support bandage, holding us secure while we heal up. Sometimes prayer needs to be like a resistance band, stretching us

and enabling us to build up our fitness level. However you feel you are with God right now, it's good to start where you feel comfortable, and then later move to being stretched and pushing the boundaries a bit.

Ask yourself **what kind of person you are**. If you tend to ask too much of yourself and are never satisfied, maybe now is the time to steer against your expectations and learn to relax. If you tend to take things easy, maybe now you could surprise yourself with what you can achieve.



OK madam, your kettle's working fine now.

Thanks, but I called you in to unblock the sink!



## What do I already do?

Most of us, when we think of prayer, think of shopping list -type prayers, asking God for things. Apart from that, how do you already engage with God? It doesn't have to be in church, and it doesn't have to be in words.

**List five ways you already pray**, apart from intercessory prayer (praying for people in words).



c Quinn Comendant / flickr

## Get real

Where did you feel most alive today? Talk to God about that: invite him in to the experience.

When did you last touch something natural: a plant, or a pebble on the beach, or the earth in the park?

Hold a little piece of God's creation and let it speak to you. Buy or pick some flowers just for you and savour them. Think about it: God enjoys it when you enjoy something. Imagine him saying to you, 'I love the way you appreciate the beautiful world I have made as a gift to you.'

**Share your enjoyment** with someone else: perhaps telling them about it, or maybe just smiling or saying a kind word.

## Earth your prayer

Many people benefit from being more grounded in their body when they pray. This is especially true if you spend a lot of time working with your head, but also if you are easily swayed by your emotions. Standing solidly on God's good earth and learning to listen to your body's aches and niggles in the present moment are ways to be fully present when you begin to pray.

When did you last catch yourself woolgathering when you thought you were praying? **Take time to be fully present** in the moment before you begin to talk to God. Ask yourself what God might be telling you through your body's experience.



c RMMT

# Part 1: a regular rhythm



c Chris 73 / wiki

This way of praying is a comfortable place to start for those who like regularity and order in life generally, and also for those who are more at home with thinking.

It is a challenging way to expand their repertoire for those who are spontaneous, feeling-oriented types.

It is a sober, quiet, monastic style of prayer.

## A structure for my life

A set pattern of words that you say each day can be as short or long as you please. It could be Common Worship Daily Prayer (available as an app), or one of the many other forms of 'daily office' that are around. Or it could be as simple as outlined on the right.

**The key experience here is discipline:** training yourself to show up for prayer every day, whether or not you feel like it. After all, God does.

This kind of commitment teaches you by experience that God is faithful, and that you can come to God in whatever state of mind you are. If you don't really want to pray, but come anyway, you are saying that you want to be faithful to him. And like kissing your spouse goodbye in the morning, it makes a difference even when it's not a great emotional experience. It lays down a bedrock of presence to God which will last through the day.

The daily habit of psalms and readings lets the Bible text sink deep into the core of your being and form you as a disciple of Christ.

## Practice

If you want to start a daily rhythm from scratch, it helps to start small.

A 5-minute pattern you might follow:

Arrive in the moment and turn to God  
Read 5-10 verses of the New Testament  
A short silence to reflect  
Talk to God  
The Lord's Prayer and the Grace

If you have more time, you could add a psalm and some scriptural words of praise like the Magnificat and the Benedictus.

Try it for a week and see if it works for you. It helps to pray at the same time of day if possible, but go with what's realistic.

*If you want to use CW Daily Prayer, you will also need a lectionary to tell you which readings, psalms and collect to use on a given day. This is done for you in the app.*



# Part 2: exploring feelings

A 4th-century image of Christ and the woman with the flow of blood / wiki



This way of praying is a comfortable place to start for those who readily notice their emotional temperature, and also those who enjoy imagining in detail.

It is a challenging way to expand their repertoire for those who find it hard to notice what they are feeling.

It is a way of being real before God, warts and all, without fear.

## Stepping into the gospels

An imaginative meditation takes practice, but can be incredibly powerful. It is a way of connecting the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Bible text, with what is going on in your heart.

Choose a passage of scripture where Jesus is *doing* something rather than just teaching: a healing, calling disciples, a miracle. Take time visualising what is going on (or reflect on what is going on emotionally if you don't enjoy visual detail). Then bring yourself into the story. It's important that you don't just watch it like a film, but experience it as a participant. You could be yourself, or a disciple, or someone in the crowd. What is important is that **at some point you interact with Jesus**. As you tell yourself the story, you will find yourself parting company with the Bible text, when the story takes on its own momentum. That's what you want. Listen to what Jesus says to you, and what you say to him. Notice what you do.

Afterwards, reflect on what God might be saying to you through your experience in the meditation.

## Practice

Things to ask yourself after an imaginative meditation:

What surprised me?

What effect did Jesus' words and actions have on me?

Did what I said to him ring true?

Can I see parallels in my present life or in my past?

Are there things I need to pray about arising from this meditation?

What can I thank God for?

Is Jesus asking me to do something as a result of this meditation?

Spend time afterwards savouring what it was like to be with Jesus. Stay with the experience.

# Part 3: four steps into silence



This way of praying is a comfortable place to start for those who enjoy just being in silence.

It is a challenging way to expand their repertoire for those who need to be constantly active for God.

It can be helpful for stilling down an active mind and becoming attentive to God.

## Holy reading (*lectio divina*)

This ancient method of prayer begins with the Bible text and moves through thinking about the text, to prayer in words, and finally into the silence of just resting with God.

Begin with a passage of the New Testament; a few verses are enough. **Step 1** Read the passage very slowly and with relaxed attention: you are not trying to follow the argument, just to notice individual words. One word or phrase may attract your attention. You can then **stop reading and stay with that word**, repeating it to yourself over and over. Like sucking a boiled sweet, you are trying to get all the goodness out of that word. **Step 2** Soon your mind will begin to think about it: allow this to happen and let your mind wander freely. **Step 3** After a while, you will find yourself moving into talking to God about your thoughts: allow this to happen. **Step 4** Finally (not always, especially if you are tired), you may find yourself resting quietly with God without thoughts or words, though your prayer word will still be resonating in your awareness like the humming of a bell.

## Practice

Try working your way through Mark's gospel or one of Paul's letters, using *lectio divina*. At a rate of 10 verses or so each time, it will take you some time, even if you do it every day.

This is a great way to refresh your awareness of the scripture text if it has become stale through overfamiliarity.

And if you don't know the Bible well, it is a good way to let it sink into your awareness on the level of the heart.

Some bits are OK to skip: lists of names, or dates, aren't very fruitful for holy reading.

# Part 4: review of the day



c Evan-Amos / wiki

This way of praying is easy to start with for almost anybody.

As you learn to become more open to what it shows you, it can become a powerful tool for self-awareness and awareness of God in your daily life.

It is a great way to soften your heart and develop gratitude.

## The examen

Step 1: become still and aware that you are held in God's loving presence. It's worth taking time over this. Remember God loves you more than the person who loves you the most.

Step 2: look back over the day for when you felt most alive / closest to God / most grateful.

Step 3: look for when you felt least alive / least close to God / least grateful. Don't feel you have to fix or change anything

Step 4: if there is anything you need to ask for help with or say sorry for, do that, still knowing that you are held in God's merciful love.

Step 5: recommit yourself to God and entrust the coming day into his hands. Give thanks for whatever you experienced in the examen, and finish by being aware once again that God holds you always in his love.

## Practice

Sometimes difficult feelings come up in the examen. That's fine: it is not an exercise in persuading yourself into unreal feelings of bliss. Just show what's there to God in trust.

You will notice that sometimes even difficult things draw you closer to God.

Sometimes even positive things draw you away from God (e.g. when you look down on other people because you're successful).

You can also do only steps 1-3 if you prefer. Use these if you review the day together with your child.

This is a simple introduction to the Ignatian way of praying, which is all about training yourself in discernment of where God is leading you.



# Part 5: tactile prayer



c Merete Veian / flickr

This way of praying is a comfortable place to start for those who like working with their hands.

It is a challenging way to expand their repertoire for those who sit in front of a screen all day.

It's great for exploring how fun can be prayer and prayer can be fun.

## Praying with stuff

The things you already do can be prayer. That moment when you are caught up in planing a plank, or balancing on a surfboard, or playing an instrument, can be a door into the presence of God.

**That moment of 'flow' is a moment of being in God's presence,** although you might not be aware of it till afterwards.

Choose to find God in something new, too: plant seeds and reflect that God has planted all sorts of seeds in you that are waiting to be discovered. Play with paints or big playground chinks: not trying to make a perfect likeness but just splashing colour around to see what will happen.

Knead bread by hand, kneading in God's love to those who will eat. Let music that you play or listen to move you into the presence of God. Scramble over rocks on a hike and encounter the great outdoors close up. Get muddy, get wet, get tired out, and all to the glory of God.

Reflect afterwards on what God said through it.

## Practice

As well as praying spontaneously with tactile things, you could try making two or three prayer stations for a group or the Sunday congregation at your church.

What practical hands-on thing could show people the love, the majesty, the justice, the kindness, the patience of God?

What speaks to you most: colour, texture, sound, taste, smell? What colour, texture, sound, taste, smell speaks to you of God?

c Ian Britton / [freefoto.com](https://www.freefoto.com)



# Part 6: prayer without ceasing

**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,  
have mercy on me, a sinner.**

This way of praying is comfortable for people who enjoy repetition and familiar landmarks in prayer.

It is a challenging way to expand their repertoire for those who enjoy stimulating their feelings during prayer.

It is helpful for those who would like to increase interior stillness but are not sure how to set about it.

## The Jesus prayer

This is a method of using a 'prayer word' in order to focus your attention on God. You can use it in different ways: you can repeat the prayer while you are sitting in contemplative silence, in order to keep focused without distraction (see next page). It's helpful to shorten the prayer in this case, e.g. to 'Jesus, mercy'.

Or you can repeat the prayer while you are doing something else, to keep your heart oriented on God while your mind is occupied with the other thing. For example: while doing manual work such as housework or gardening, or waiting in a queue.

Over time, you gain a sense that the Jesus prayer is like a river that is always flowing, that you dip into as and when you can. (Those who use daily prayer get the same experience with the psalms.)

You can also use the Jesus prayer in a more active way, by holding a list of people in your mind as you pray the prayer as an intercession for each of them.

## Practice

Feel free to vary the text as is helpful.

Sometimes you may wish to pray '...on us sinners'. Sometimes (especially if you are feeling low) it's better to leave the 'sinner' bit out.

You may like the slightly longer version: '...Son of the living God...' - though the rat-tat-tat rhythm of the short syllables makes it hard to repeat.

For some people it's helpful to synchronise the words with the in-out rhythm of the breath, but for others this gets them in a muddle. It's fine to use what works for you.

This way of prayer is a key element of the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, and is often used with a knotted prayer rope to count the repetitions.



# Part 7: prayer in the dark



c RadicalBender/ wiki

## Contemplative prayer

Contemplation means looking attentively, and the word is sometimes used for considering something in your mind. But contemplative prayer properly speaking is about laying aside every thought as it arises and just waiting passively on God.

*Centring prayer* and *Christian meditation* are also used to describe this way of holding your attention fixed on God. Repeating a prayer word that you associate with God, you gently bring your attention back to just waiting, every time you are distracted. This might be by thoughts of dinner, or of work, or of delightful feelings of adoration. All are gently laid aside as you wait for God to work. **It is a prayer of pure faith** that says *God is here even though I feel nothing*.

After your time of silence, you will want to spend time reflecting on what happened, and talking to God in thanksgiving. If you were distracted many times, but persevered, you have been training yourself in obedience and attentiveness to God: worth giving thanks for.

This way of praying is comfortable for strong introverts, though people don't often start here.

It is a challenging way to expand their repertoire for extraverts and those who find it hard to concentrate.

It's often the place people end up when other forms of prayer have run dry. It's never the only form of prayer you use: a daily office goes well with contemplative silence.

## Practice

Everyone gets caught up in a contemplative moment now and again. Turning it into a daily discipline means a minimum of ten minutes, ideally half an hour. In a perfect world, twice a day.

When it's a daily discipline, that means the times of struggle and nothing much happening are more common than times of wonderful closeness.

This doesn't matter: this prayer is not about producing anything, but being available to God. God works deep down where we can't feel it.

The place to look for fruits of this prayer is in a changed life, not feelings of devotion while it's happening. Sometimes, of course, it feels wonderful, but you don't do it for the sake of a reward. You do it because God is God.

# Part 8: Spiritual journal



c Barnaby Dorfman / flickr

The worth of a spiritual journal is revealed over time, as you look back over your spiritual growth during the last months. You get into the habit of probing your own motivations and reflecting on where God encountered you in your daily life.

Writing laboriously by hand in a hardbound book is a different process from typing on a computer, especially if you associate the computer with work. It can help you 'get into the zone' of talking to God as soon as you open the book.

## What kind of journal?

Some people like to write their prayers instead of saying them. Aibileen, in *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, is one of these.

The kind of journal I mean here is something else: a way of reflecting on your life in God's presence. It doesn't have to be every day, just when something significant happens that you feel you want to reflect on. Perhaps you've had a dream that won't let you go, or there are strong negative emotions around that you can't explain; then beginning to write about them in the journal helps the process of reflection and analysis.

Because you are reflecting on your inner process in the presence of God, this is a form of prayer, a way of inviting God to interact with what's going on inside you. What makes a journal a *spiritual* journal and not just a good way to let go of everyday tensions is that you are learning to ground your relationship with God in reality, and being who you really are before God, not who you would like to be.

## Practice

The examen (see Part 4 above) is a good way of preparing to write in your journal. The difference between the two is that the main focus of the examen is about observing what's there and sharing that with God. In a journal, I would want to take a step further and seek to understand the reasons behind what I have observed in myself, and also evaluate what I have observed and do something about it. The journal thus becomes a trigger for further prayer, as I ask God into the situation and seek to draw on his help and his grace.

### Some starter questions:

Have I moved closer to God or further away this week/month?

Where were the surprises?

Can I see patterns?

Is there something I need to understand more deeply?

Am I being asked by God to do something?

# Part 9: pushing the envelope



If you're in a fairly good place and would like to stretch yourself, consider doing the thing that you automatically shy away from.

If you're a cool, cerebral person, find a way to pray that stimulates the heart.

If you're a spontaneous person, commit to praying through a daily list of intercessions for a month.

And so on...

## Why *this* way of prayer?

Take a moment to ask yourself why you pray in a particular way. What part of you does it help to grow? What difficulty does it help you avoid dealing with? What would be different if you prayed in a different way?

Ask yourself: have I grown closer to God through this way of praying? Is it still the right way to God now? Where is my blind spot? What do I need to work on next?

What is God saying to me? Am I listening?

It's true that 'while I breathe I pray'. But noticing what is going on inside, what draws you and what repels you, where you feel closer and less close to God, teaches you to **pray with closer attention**.

It teaches the skill of discernment, being aware of what God is doing. And this makes us more like Christ, which is what we are called to be by God.

## Practice

Steering against what's comfortable needs to be done carefully. Prayer is meant to feed us and give us strength for our life of service to God. If we are too hard on ourselves, we might starve inwardly. Sometimes it's important to feast on the delights that God offers us.

A helpful way forward can be working with a spiritual director: with them you can talk through how your relationship with God is going. Four or five times a year you meet for a one-to-one conversation, a kind of coaching for the soul.

A week of accompanied prayer is an intensive opportunity to spend time in prayer each day and talk it through with an experienced guide. It can be a real breakthrough in walking with God. Partly it's about learning new ways of praying, but also about learning to reflect and noticing God working in your life.



# Praying together

c Gary  
Bridgman  
/ wiki



These suggestions have all been about personal prayer.

But we all pray together with other Christians on Sundays, sometimes more often. Public worship is all prayer, not just the intercessions slot.

We need both personal prayer and corporate worship to be well-nourished Christians.

## Personal and communal

Our personal prayer supplements and amplifies what goes on in our church community. It may be that only part of your personality is well served by the styles of prayer on offer at church. Nevertheless you may remain committed to the church for other reasons.

Those we worship with on Sunday are the neighbours God has given us, whose idea of God may be different from ours, and whose tastes and temperament probably are too.

We easily overlook the fact that our personal way of praying in the week helps to build the atmosphere of worship that the congregation makes together on a Sunday. If I pray well Monday to Saturday, I am playing my part well on Sunday, even if I just sit in a pew with no visible role.

**Sunday is the fruit, but weekday prayer is the root.**

Personal prayer can get too cosy; praying and worshipping together challenges and energises.

## Practice

Many people also supplement their regular Sunday worship with retreats or annual teaching events. Some go to a monthly Taizé service or centring prayer session at another church.

Worshipping together with like-minded people is powerful and nourishing, as long as we don't use it to avoid engaging with those who are different from us.



c Damir Jelic / wiki

# Suggestions for group work



c Grape Vine / flickr

Before each meeting, agree how you are going to practise the prayer method during the next week.

For example, agree to use Morning Prayer from Common Worship every day, leaving out the first canticle and the responsory.

## Reflection

The prayer style of the week may or may not be fruitful for you.

Before you come to the meeting, make a note of what was good and what wasn't, and why.

When you come together, let each person speak without interruption for an agreed time (say 3 minutes). The others listen with attention but don't respond. When everyone has spoken, go around the circle again, and this time people may pick up on something another person has said, or add something to what they themselves said earlier. The time limit here should be 2 minutes. Then move into free discussion.

Some questions to ask:

What challenges me? What draws me? What is God inviting me to? How can this practice help me with my daily life?

Pray for each other and entrust each other to God's loving care. If you can eat together it's a bonus.

## Practice

A good tool for a regular reflective meeting is a spiritual journal. Write about what happened in prayer, and your thoughts about God nudging you through the ordinary experiences of your life. You don't need to write every day or even every week; you will quickly get a sense for what is important, what is 'journal material'.

Often you will deepen an experience of God by savouring it again as you write. Often you will gain insight as you reflect and try to formulate exactly what went on. This is good material to bring to a spiritual director, a prayer triplet or a small group meeting.

Building trust takes time, and you may not wish to share everything at first. But over time your director or small group can become a great place to try out your sense of what God is saying to you.

# More material

Charismatic prayer could be praying in tongues (unintelligible words), praying for healing or words of knowledge or prophecy.

It can be a way of releasing emotional stuckness and a way of practising 'letting go and letting God', especially for those who are self-conscious about praying. It can increase reliance on God and willingness to change your life.

This style of prayer is more common when worshipping in a group. Careful discernment is important.

Here is a useful list of characteristics of charismatic worship, if it's not familiar to you:

<https://charismaticworship.wordpress.com/styles/>

(written by a Baptist)

The rosary is a traditional Catholic method of prayer that can be easily adapted if you don't want to use the prayers addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It combines elements of *lectio divina* (holy reading), scripture meditation and prayer with a prayer word, with the tactile element of passing the beads through your fingers as you pray.

It's good to do with a group too.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosary>

Other prayers you could use while counting the beads:

'O God, make speed to save me, O Lord, make haste to help me';

'Save us, Saviour of the world, who redeemed us by your cross and precious blood.'

'Jesus my Lord, I thee adore, O make me love thee more and more.'

If you like using the Jesus Prayer, you may wish to make your own prayer rope, praying all the time of course. Instructions are here, fully illustrated:

How to tie an Orthodox Prayer Rope knot, <http://www.wattfamily.org/prayerope.html>

NB there is only one r in 'prayerope'

There are other ways to pray while using your hands, e.g. making a prayer shawl. More at <http://www.shawlministry.com>.

If you play an instrument, try improvising your prayers. Some useful tips are at the bottom of this page on WikiHow, which focuses on the piano, but the tips could be for any instrument:

<http://www.wikihow.com/Improvise-on-the-Piano>





