

“Joseph Harrod draws from the riches of Scripture and the Christian tradition to help us to think deeply about prayer. Here is a helpful and stimulating book about prayer that will not only answer many of your questions but also enhance both theological discernment and practical devotion.”

—Joel R. Beeke  
president, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Joe Harrod has written a wonderful guide to improve our communication with God. The 40 questions span the spectrum from biblical and theological issues to historical models and practical guidance for praying. These chapters which are deeply researched and documented are written in a form that would appeal to new believers as well as more experienced Christians looking to refresh their prayer life. Dr. Harrod isn't afraid to examine some of the thorny questions about prayer, including: Does God answer the prayers of unbelievers? Does prayer change God's mind? And, is it acceptable to argue with God in prayer? This book would be a valuable resource for college courses in Christian spirituality as well as study groups for the local church. I highly recommend it and trust it will be eagerly received by all readers.”

—Tom Schwanda  
associate professor, emeritus of Christian formation and ministry,  
Wheaton College

“Dr. Joe Harrod writes an amazing book on prayer! It is both practical and rich in depth. It answers so many of the questions that we are all asking to understand our call to pray. Dr. Harrod will warm your heart and challenge your mind, leading you to adore the Savior who invites you to call upon his great name!”

—Aaron Harvie  
senior pastor, Highview Baptist Church

“What air is to this terrestrial globe, so is prayer to the kingdom of God. It is vital for life in the kingdom, though if the truth be told, far too many of us wrestle with the discipline of prayer. When we should be wrestling in prayer, to use a Pauline image, we are wrestling just to be diligent and disciplined in praying. Joe Harrod's study of prayer through the medium of 40 questions—surely this must be the first time that prayer has been discussed via such means—is an excellent reminder of prayer's necessity. May close study of it also make us, its readers, men and women who pray—and that with passion and assiduity!”

—Michael A.G. Haykin  
chair and professor of church history,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Joe Harrod’s *40 Questions About Prayer* is faithful to Scripture, clearly written, and extremely helpful for Christians seeking to grow in their understanding and practice of prayer. I think many churches and ministry groups will find this book perfectly formatted for group discussions. Highly recommended!”

—Robert L. Plummer, PhD  
Collin and Evelyn Aikman Professor of Biblical Studies  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *40 Questions About Prayer*, Joe Harrod provides a sound and accessible resource for Christians who have questions about prayer. This fine book is anchored in Scripture and will be proven helpful for any Christian who wants to grow a prayerful life. As a pastor, I am excited about this excellent work and will recommend it for use in our church.”

—Jamaal Williams  
lead pastor of Sojourn Church, Midtown, Louisville, KY;  
president, Harbor Network

**40** QUESTIONS ABOUT  
Prayer

**Joseph C. Harrod**

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor



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*To Tracy  
All my love, always.*



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# Foreword

Perhaps it is one of the primary indications of our fallenness that when we pray, we seldom feel the gravity and reality of what we are actually doing: talking to God himself. Knowing God through his Son Jesus is the supreme privilege of any human. And it is a glorious blessing to worship God, to serve him, and to learn about him. Beyond these we also experience the inestimable gift of him speaking to us by means of his written self-revelation, the Bible. But think of it: in prayer we actually get to talk with God.

Maybe it is because of the ease and frequency in which we enter into prayer that we often fail to appreciate the reality and profundity of talking with the king and creator of the universe on his holy throne in heaven. Or possibly it's because we are accustomed to seeing those with whom we converse, whereas in prayer we are speaking with one who is invisible to us. In any case, isn't it strange that talking with God can sometimes seem mundane and, shall we admit it, even boring?

Another matter influencing our attitude toward prayer may be the fact that we often see so little come of our prayers. We can't help but wonder, *Why is this? Is there something wrong with me? Is there something wrong with my prayers?* And it is here that my friend and colleague, Joe Harrod, meets us with *40 Questions About Prayer*.

What Christian doesn't have many questions about prayer?

For example, what Christian hasn't asked, "What does it mean to pray 'in Jesus's name'?" It's more than just special words to add at the end of our prayers. And to hear many say the phrase (often so quickly as to be almost indecipherable), it borders on the "meaningless repetition" that Jesus warned against in Matthew 6:7. So what does it really mean, and how do we pray "in Jesus's name"?

And there are so many other questions we all have about prayer, such as:

- May we pray to the Holy Spirit?
- If God is sovereign, why pray at all?
- Does God hear the prayers of unbelievers, since they cannot really come "in Jesus's name"? And if not, should we teach our young, unconverted children to pray?

- What does it mean to “pray without ceasing,” as we’re commanded in 1 Thessalonians 5:17?
- Is it acceptable to use written prayers in church?
- What should we do if our mind often wanders in prayer?
- And perhaps most of all, why don’t we receive more answers to our prayers?

The need for such an encyclopedic resource like *40 Questions About Prayer* is obvious.

When I was in college, the first Christian book I ever bought was on prayer. And I did so because I had so many questions about prayer, and both wanted and needed help with my prayer life. Would that this book had been available fifty years ago!

I read *40 Questions About Prayer* with as much eagerness as I did that first book on prayer, and I’m so glad I read it. I’ve done a lot of reading, writing, and teaching on prayer in the past half-century, but I still learned a great deal about prayer from this book. One of my favorite chapters is, “How Might Christians Pray Scripture?” I’ve seen this one concept of turning the words of Scripture into the words of your prayers instantly and permanently transform the prayer lives of countless believers. I’m excited to know you’ll be learning about that in the pages to come.

This book is saturated with Scripture—exactly what you want in a book about prayer. Ultimately, we want the Word of God to teach us how to talk with God. Second, it is clear. Joe Harrod is a scholar, but he is also a faithful churchman, and he has written this book primarily in service to ordinary believers and the local church. Third, it is useful. Beside the great benefits of an individual reading of *40 Questions About Prayer*, this book would also serve well as a classroom text or a small group study on prayer. Each of the brief chapters closes with questions to consider privately or to discuss with others. Fourth, as I’ve already noted, its breadth—forty specific questions answered—makes it spectacularly helpful.

I’ve had the privilege of knowing Joe Harrod for well over a decade. He has earned three degrees in theology and was one of the first graduates from our PhD program in Biblical Spirituality here at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Initially I met Joe in one of my doctoral colloquia. I was immediately impressed with his research abilities. He always did more than the minimum requirements in any writing project, displaying an unusual depth of research, even beyond the recommended resources. He has an inquisitive and analytical mind, which makes him just the kind of person for writing answers to forty separate questions as this project required.

But being a good scholar does not by itself make a good writer on prayer. I’ve come to know Joe Harrod much deeper as a friend and colleague in our Biblical Spirituality department in the last several years. He is first

and foremost a man of God. He is a deeply devoted follower of Christ, and this manifests itself in his home, his church, and in his relationships with students and fellow faculty. I know this man and this book, and I highly commend both to you.

—Donald S. Whitney  
Louisville, Kentucky



# Introduction

It is hard to limit oneself to only forty questions about the topic of prayer, for there are many things we long to know. The questions in this book are ones that I have asked and that others have asked me. The first time I remember praying was the day my father died. On that day, my prayers seemed to go unanswered and God felt very far away. I am thankful I did not give up on prayer after that experience. I have thought about prayer much since then, now more than thirty years removed, and I hope some of the reflections in this book will be helpful to you as you wrestle with the mystery of prayer.

Throughout the book I have tried to engage a variety of Christian traditions of prayer while anchoring fast to Scripture. My hope is that the reflections in this book lead readers back to Scripture often, even while recognizing that there are aspects of the practice of prayer where considerable freedom exists. That said, some readers will notice that I have prioritized Protestant authors even as I have included Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox writers. Spirituality is inseparable from theology. Adopting particular practices without considering their underlying doctrinal commitments is unwise. Scholarly readers will notice I have not mentioned topics like the Orthodox practice of stillness (*hesychasm*), the Jesus prayer, centering prayer, or mystical prayer. I have questions about these kinds of prayers, to be sure, but I have concentrated on discursive prayers here.

The flow of this book is as follows: After four general questions about prayer, we examine a series of theological questions related to prayer before turning to a number of questions about prayer in the Bible. Then we consider some practical questions about prayer and end with three questions about prayer and history. During the writing of this book, other questions about prayer arose, including those about contemplative prayer, prayer in the global church, prayer among women, and praying for and with those who are disabled. There is simply not enough time or space to answer these questions here.

The list of people I need to thank is very long. At the risk of omitting or offending many whose help has been welcomed and timely, I will not try to mention every name, but I do want to thank Dustin, Eric, Junior, and Michael: acquaintances who became friends and friends who became brothers. I offer my gratitude to Pastors Aaron Harvie and Jeff (and Jana) Goodyear

for providing feedback on specific chapters. I am thankful for their pastoral insights in this process. Many of my colleagues at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary have contributed to this book in various ways, some taking time to read drafts of chapters and offer encouragement or suggestions of a refocus of my efforts, some by their own writings and teaching on prayer, others by the way that they have prayed over the years. I am especially grateful to my colleagues in the Biblical Spirituality department, including Michael Haykin, Matthew Haste, Stephen Yuille, and to Dustin Bruce, the Dean of Southern's undergraduate school, Boyce College. I am particularly grateful to Don Whitney for writing the foreword to this book and for many years as a mentor and a friend. I appreciate Dustin Brown's help in finding key sources at a pivotal time. Several graduate students at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary read portions of this manuscript and offered helpful suggestions: Timothy Bitz, Ben Khazraee, Robbie Piel, Scott Reeder, Zachary Thoenen, and Kenneth Trax. Robert Hand, Deborah Helmers, and Shawn Vander Lugt at Kregel have been very helpful editors and I appreciate their insightful comments and questions. For our sons, thank you for asking to pray and for praying for me. Finally, for my wife Tracy, without whom this book would not be, I am sorry that I have not led you in prayer the way I should have and am so thankful for your prayers which are powerful in their working. All my love, always.

**PART 1**

# General Questions About Prayer





## QUESTION 1

# What Is Prayer?

Students of Western thought know well the Latin of philosopher René Descartes’s famous maxim *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”). It may be fitting to adapt this saying for the beginning of our discussion: *oro ergo sum* (“I pray, therefore I am”). We begin our series of questions on prayer by acknowledging the basic human impulse to pray and the fact that prayer, in almost all cultures, is something that faithful people can grow in. We conclude with a survey of definitions of prayer before identifying a fitting one for this book.

### Prayer Is a Common Part of Religion

Prayer, or something like it, exists in many religions. Prayer is a central experience in the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>1</sup> The experience of prayer in Islam and Judaism varies from the ritualized daily fivefold *ṣalāt* (Islam) or the threefold ‘*amidah/tefillah* (Judaism) to free prayers of devotion to the mystical contemplations of Kabballah and Sufism. Prayers of petition thrive in some branches of Hinduism and Buddhism while it is virtually absent from others. Among various nature religions, prayer takes the forms of communication with or devotion to deity.<sup>2</sup> Some atheists even pray.<sup>3</sup> Even though there is wide disagreement between

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1. For a detailed survey of similarities and differences between prayer in these faiths, see Clemens Leonhard and Martin Lüstraeten, “Prayer,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions*, eds. Adam J. Silverstein and Guy G. Stroumsa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2. “Nature religions” includes various forms of pagan and neo-pagan practice such as Wicca, Druidism, or goddess spiritualities. See Janet Goodall, Emyr Williams, and Catherine Goodall, “Pagan Prayer and Worship: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions,” in *The Pomegranate* 15, no. 1–2 (2013): 178–201.

3. A Pew Research Center study showed an increase in the number of atheists who prayed “seldom/never,” from 87 percent in 2007 to 97 percent in 2014. See <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-family/atheist/#frequency-of-prayer>.

such groups about what “prayer” means, its widespread practice is telling. Tim Keller summarizes this situation well when he writes, “Prayer is one of the most common phenomena of human life.”<sup>4</sup>

### Prayer Is Learnable

By describing prayer as part of religion and so common a part of human experience, we might err in assuming it is fixed or immutable, not admitting to change or growth. We can all learn to pray or learn to pray differently. Yet if prayer is so basic to human experience, in what ways is it learned? Why might speech so basic require change or even growth? One analogy comes from normal human development. Newborns and infants possess the ability to communicate basic needs, but as any parent can attest, such communication is often inarticulate. Normally, as children mature, so do their ability and capacity for increasingly nuanced and meaningful relational conversation. So it is with prayer.

When asked by his disciples for instruction on prayer (cf. Luke 11:1), Jesus offered guidance willingly. The prayers of a recent convert may reflect the simplicity of the tax collector’s prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Such a prayer is true and beautiful. Over time, however, he will likely learn to see other needs—especially the needs of others—and find other ways of expressing his heart to a listening heavenly Father. In an earlier century, Pastor Andrew Murray (1828–1917) emphasized this dynamic: “Though in its beginnings prayer is so simple that the feeblest child can pray, yet it is at the same time the highest and holiest work to which man can rise.”<sup>5</sup> Learning to rise in prayer is a theme addressed throughout this book.

### A Working Definition

Definitions of prayer abound. Donald Bloesch cataloged around a dozen different definitions from secular, philosophical, and varying Christian traditions.<sup>6</sup> One recent definition is that prayer is “the primary speech of the true self to the true God.”<sup>7</sup> In the early medieval period, John of Damascus (c. 660–c. 750) said, “Prayer is an uprising of the mind to God or a petitioning of God for what is fitting.”<sup>8</sup> Question 178 of the Westminster Larger Catechism

4. Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 36.

5. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Urichsville, OH: Barbour, 1992), 2.

6. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1988), 14–18.

7. Ann and Barry Ulanov, “Prayer and Personality: Prayer as Primary Speech,” in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24.

8. John of Damascus, “An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” in *St. Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 9b, A

asks, “What is prayer?” and answers, “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of his Spirit; with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, Tim Keller has called prayer “a *personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God*.”<sup>10</sup> There is no shortage of definitions, yet we must adopt a definition for asking and answering the questions that compose the balance of this book. The definition we choose will be shaped inherently by our worldview. The following summary is an adaptation of James Herrick’s helpful synthesis of the main elements of the Christian worldview: God exists as “a personal, creating, and wholly other God”; the Bible, as the revealed Word of this God, has supernatural authority; everything else that exists owes its existence to God and thus owes God worship and obedience. We bear the consequences of our first parents’ fall into sin, which consequences include “spiritual confusion, a state of spiritual separation from God and the inevitability of physical death.” Jesus is God incarnate, and through his life and death accomplishes reconciliation between God and humans. History is moving toward a decisive judgment with people held accountable for their sins. The God who made all things orders and sustains his world, and prayer is part of his sustaining and ordering of all things. God intervenes in human affairs, at times, through prayer.<sup>11</sup>

For this book, I have chosen to prioritize the definition of seventeenth-century British Baptist John Bunyan (1628–1688). Bunyan developed this definition in his tract *I Will Pray with the Spirit* (1663) while imprisoned as a religious dissenter. According to Bunyan,

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God hath promised, or, according to the Word, for the good of the Church, with submission, in Faith, to the will of God.<sup>12</sup>

Bunyan’s definition includes (1) a rich description of the practice of prayer (“sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul”), (2) a

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Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899), 70.

9. Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 363.
10. Keller, *Prayer*, 45 (italics original).
11. See James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 32–33.
12. John Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit, and I Will Pray with the Understanding Also, or, A Discourse Touching Prayer, from I Cor. 14.15*, 2nd ed. (London: 1663), 4–5. I was happy to find that Fred Sanders, a gifted theologian in the Methodist tradition, has also featured Bunyan’s definition of prayer in his *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 214.

Trinitarian emphasis (“to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit”), (3) fitting delimitations (“for such things as God has promised, or according to his Word”), (4) the ecclesiological context (“for the good of the church”), and (5) an appropriate attitude (“with submission in faith to the will of God”). Throughout this book, we will consider each of these elements more fully as we consider questions about the biblical foundations, theology, and practice of prayer.

Bunyan’s definition, as an observant student noted recently, describes *petitionary* prayer, or prayer that asks things of God. This is not the only kind of prayer, as we will see in our second chapter, but for many reasons that will become clear throughout this book, it is the most common sort of prayer. That Bunyan mentions prayer in the name of the triune God and in the context of the church sets his definition apart from competing definitions. If we ignore these two elements, our understanding of prayer can easily veer away from the richness of a fully biblical practice.

### Summary

Prayer is part of the basic human experience and appears in nearly every religion and culture. Prayer, in its most basic expression, is talking to God. This speech may be little more than an urgent, unplanned cry for help or it might be an intentional part of a daily life focused on seeking fellowship with God. Prayer is communication that we can learn and grow in as we mature in our spiritual lives. This fact does not mean that “mature” prayer must be inherently complicated, long, or nuanced, even though it might be all of these things. The fact that prayer is learnable and that we may grow in it is part of the impetus for this book and its various questions. Those who “call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26), to use the earliest biblical expression for prayer, might have many motives for doing so. One of those motives, hopefully, is wanting a closer relationship, or “communion,” to use a richer word from a bygone era, with God. Growing in prayer is one important way that believers come to know God.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you define prayer?
2. What do differing definitions of prayer have in common?
3. Why do you think definitions of prayer vary so much?
4. How have you experienced growth in prayer?
5. Why do you think prayer is so prevalent in world religions?

## QUESTION 2

# What Are Various Types of Prayer?

In the first chapter we called prayer a “pouring out of the heart or soul to God.” This language is that of communication and communion. Following a classic definition by John Bunyan, we also said that this communication is “for such things as God has promised, or according to his Word,” which involves asking, supplication, or petition. Petitionary prayer is our default mode of speaking to God, for we recognize quite easily how insufficient are our resources for life and how inexhaustible his provision is. Without undermining the place of petitionary prayer, which is addressed in many of the questions in this book, this chapter considers other types of prayer such as intercession, confession, thanksgiving, and adoration. The earliest Christians practiced these sorts of prayer as faithful Jews had done before them and thus these prayers deserve our attention.

Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 2:1–2 begin our discussion of the variety of prayers. Here, Paul implores Timothy to make “supplications” (*deēseis*), “prayers” (*proseuchas*), “intercessions” (*enteuxeis*), and “thanksgivings” (*eucharistias*) on behalf of all people, especially those having political power, in order that Christians might “lead a peaceful and quiet life.” Presumably, Paul believed these four ways of speaking to and with God could bring about this condition of stability for the church. Similarly, in Philippians 4:6, Paul uses various expressions for prayer when he exhorts the church to avoid anxiousness and instead to make their requests known to God by “prayer” (*proseuchē*) and “supplication” (*deēsei*) with “thanksgiving” (*eucharistias*). Paul indicates that these ways of speaking to God could calm worried hearts. Neither passage presents a comprehensive view of prayer and both passages place “prayer” alongside other ways of speaking to God, thus we should not make too much of these distinctions even as we appreciate the differences.<sup>1</sup> In what follows,

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1. On this point, see Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, trans. Philip Buttolph and Adela Yarbo, Hermeneia

we will consider intercession, confession, thanksgiving, and adoration, four common kinds of prayer, more closely.

### Intercession: Others-Focused Prayer

If “supplication,” or petitionary prayer, generally focuses on *our* own needs and situation, intercessory prayer focuses on the situation and needs of others. In the Old Testament, intercession is one of the responsibilities of those who would lead the people of God: the patriarch Abraham; priests like Aaron or Joshua; prophets like Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Daniel, and Amos; lay leaders such as the elders of the community; and kings like David or Hezekiah all interceded on behalf of others. It may be that the patriarch Job’s regular sacrifices on behalf of his children (Job 1:5) served an intercessory function. The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Lord’s servant “makes intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12), and New Testament texts like Romans 8 and Hebrews 7 and 9 connect this type of prayer with Jesus. Although intercession is not restricted to leaders alone, those responsible for shepherding God’s people ought to see intercession as a particular burden and responsibility of their ministry. God calls every Christian, though, to the ministry of intercession by virtue of naming us “a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

Patrick Miller, in his study of prayer in the Bible, notes that intercessory prayer might take a number of forms.<sup>2</sup> That is, there is no particular phrasing that we must follow when interceding for others, although Scripture gives us many examples of intercession (see Questions 18 and 35). From 1 Timothy 2:1, we understand that it is right that Christians intercede for “all people.” We ought to intercede for other Christians within our congregations and larger circle of relationships, asking God particularly to meet specific needs as we become aware of them. It is also right for us to make intercession on behalf of Christians we do not know. As we hear of Christians suffering deprivation or persecution around the world, we may intercede on their behalf, seeking comfort for them from God (2 Cor. 1:3–4) and asking his will to be done on earth in their circumstances (Matt. 6:10). When we hear of the gospel expanding in the midst of totalitarian opposition, we can pray for a continued spread of the word. Even when we are unaware of particular needs, we might intercede generally on behalf of other Christians in light of God’s revealed will for all believers that they might grow in holiness, forsaking sexual immorality (1 Thess. 4:3); that they might experience spiritual wisdom and understanding

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(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 36. As early as the 230s, Christians noted this passage and the varieties of prayer. See Origen, *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Rowan A. Greer, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 83.

2. Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 267.

(Col. 1:9); that they might walk in a manner worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1); and so forth. Every ethical imperative to which believers are called provides occasion to pray for other Christians, whether their faces and stories are familiar to us or remain unknown. It is also fitting for Christians to intercede on behalf of strangers, that their faith might be stirred to trust Christ or to trust Christ more, whatever the situation may be. Furthermore, Christians should intercede on behalf of those who by their open declaration are sinners, opponents of the gospel, enemies of God, and even our own enemies (Matt. 5:44), asking that “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). Though from our perspective such a person may be far from hope, we cannot see God’s hidden and eternal plans, for only God knows the extent to which the prayers of other Christians have led to our own saving faith. As the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote regarding praying for sinners, “No man should be denied the help of prayer.”<sup>3</sup>

### Confession: Grace-Focused Prayer

As he lay dying, the aged North African bishop Augustine (354–430) asked friends to copy several of David’s psalms onto large sheets that could adorn his walls so he could read them from his bed in order to prepare himself to meet God. In later generations, Christians came to call these particular Scriptures “penitential psalms,” or psalms that help believers confess sin.<sup>4</sup> Though a Christian’s sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven in Christ, we continue to sin. When we sin, our experience of relational nearness to God is disrupted; yet God is so kind as to allow us to continue to draw near to him in prayer, even when we feel far away. Confession is often the start of restoring our sense of nearness to God.<sup>5</sup>

Considered as a group, these penitential psalms describe the inward experience of unconfessed sin as a heaviness (Pss. 32:4; 38:4) or weakness (Pss. 6:2; 32:3; 102:3) or weariness (Pss. 38:5–8; 143:4). They help us recognize the physical and emotional effects of harboring sin. Then, these psalms also speak of confession as freedom. Though God knows our sin, confession is necessary (Pss. 32:5; 51:4). We have confidence that God hears our confession (Pss. 6:8–9; 38:9; 102:1–2; 130:4, 7) particularly because of his prior faithfulness toward us (Pss. 102:18–22; 143:5–6). These psalms also motivate us by picturing the joy of restoration that confession brings (Pss. 32:1–2, 11; 51:8, 12, 15; 130:4).

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2.83.7, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.II-II.Q83.A7.Rep3>.

4. The seven penitential psalms are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. See Question 16 below.

5. Although this book does not permit space to explore nuances of sin, one classic treatment is that of John Owen, *Indwelling Sin*, in *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, eds. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 229–407. This work also appears in vol. 6 of Owen’s *Works*.

The Old Testament provides other rich examples of confession, from David's acknowledgment before the prophet Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:13), to Daniel's prayer on behalf of his exiled people, "O Lord . . . we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled" (Dan. 9:4–5). Surprisingly, the idea of confessing sin comes up less frequently in the New Testament. When it does appear, confession involves *public* acknowledgment of one's sin.<sup>6</sup> The verb "confess" (*homologeō*) carries a lot of theological significance, but here we will focus on the simple definition of "agreement."<sup>7</sup> With regard to prayer, confession is our agreeing with God about our sin and its effects, and then seeking mercy, forgiveness, and renewed fellowship. Scripture offers us great hope of forgiveness and purification at this point: "If we confess (*homologōmen*) our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive (*aphē*) us our sins and to cleanse (*katharisē*) us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

What exactly are we to confess *about* our sin? First, we are to agree with God that specific actions we have committed, thoughts we have considered, or attitudes we have harbored are sinful when they transgress God's moral boundaries. This is the kind of confession we see most often in the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Second, we confess specific things we have left undone, known as sins of omission. These sins might include words of forgiveness or restoration that we have withheld, occasions where we should have given testimony of God's goodness yet remained silent, acts of charity that we ignored, and the like. The question of whether we ought to confess *past* sins that we have previously mentioned to God is a disputed matter, for if God has forgiven and cleansed us through the blood of Christ in light of previous confession, it seems that continuing to bring them up again and again expresses uncertainty as to whether God has really "remove[d] our transgressions from us" as far as east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). Similarly, the question of whether we ought to confess our sinful *nature* is disputed also, "For [God] knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14).

Reformer John Calvin suggests that confession ought to take priority in our prayers.

To sum up: the beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt. Nor should anyone, however holy he may be, hope that he will obtain anything from God until he

6. So Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5; Acts 19:18; and James 5:16. The context of 1 John 1:9 is ambiguous regarding public or private confession.

7. In different contexts, this verb might mean to declare something publicly, to swear allegiance, to admit a fact, to make a public commitment, and so forth.

8. See Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 246.



is freely reconciled to him; nor can God chance to be propitious to any but those whom he has pardoned. Accordingly, it is no wonder if believers open for themselves the door to prayer with this key.<sup>9</sup>

Prayers of confession might begin by inviting God's penetrating gaze into our soul: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!" (Ps. 139:23). David does not ask God to undertake this investigation in order that God might learn something; God already knows everything about David's life (139:1–5) and is completely present (139:7–16). Rather, like David we ask God to search us in order to help *us* see and "discern [our] errors" and expose our "hidden faults" (Ps. 19:12).

Confessing our sin before God—that is, agreeing with him about the sinfulness of our sins—must be matched by repentance toward God. Baptist theologian John Gill (1697–1771) identified six kinds of repentance: natural, national, external, hypocritical, legal, and evangelical. The first five kinds are common enough in the world, and observable in Scripture, but only the final sort ("evangelical" or gospel-focused repentance) brings true restoration. Its hallmarks, according to Gill, are "a true sight and sense of sin," "a hearty and unfeigned sorrow for it," a genuine shame and detestation of the sin we confess, and "a resolution, through the grace of God, to forsake sin."<sup>10</sup> Prayer is the proper place for repentance to occur.

### Thanksgiving and Adoration: God-Focused Prayer

One mark of spiritual growth is coming to love God for who he is and expressing this love in prayers of thanksgiving and adoration. The biblical foundation for our love of God is "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Christians "bless God" and remember "all his benefits," including forgiveness, redemption, and the way he satisfies our soul (Ps. 103:2–5). As we grow in our walk with God, so grow our motives for loving him. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the charismatic leader of a monastic community in what is now France, wrote of four degrees of love for God, moving from self-motivated love of God for his benefits to a purer love of God for who He is.<sup>11</sup> Much later, the early evangelical theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) also noted growth and change in

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1:3.20.9.

10. John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or a System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures*, new ed., vol. 2 (London: Tegg & Company, 1839), 366–69.

11. For a modern translation, see Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God," in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. and ed. G. R. Evans, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 173–205.

our love for God that overflows in speech: “The true saint, when under great spiritual affections, from the fullness of his heart, is ready to be speaking much of God, and his glorious perfections and works, and of the beauty and amiableness of Christ, and the glorious things of the gospel.”<sup>12</sup> What Edwards wrote regarding our speech surely applies to our prayers.

Presbyterian minister and Bible commentator Matthew Henry (1662–1714) gives timeless perspective on thanksgiving: “Our errand at the throne of grace is not only to seek the favour of God, but to give unto him the glory due unto his name . . . by a grateful acknowledgment of his goodness to us.”<sup>13</sup> Following Paul’s lead, we are also to offer thanksgivings for “all people” (1 Tim. 2:1), which Paul regularly did in his letters. We can never separate our love for God from the blessings of gospel transformation, but through the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit, gospel transformation allows us to see God with new eyes and consequently to praise him with purified mouths (cf. Isa. 6). Prayers of adoration and thanksgiving focus on God, not on us or our needs. Without drawing a hard and fast distinction, prayers of thanksgiving often come from reflection on what God has done and prayers of adoration from consideration of who God is in himself.

Prayers of adoration focus on who God is, as he has revealed himself in Scripture and as he makes himself known in experiential communion and fellowship. As mentioned earlier, prayer is one important way we express a growing, deepening love for God. Put simply, humans talk about those whom they love. What happens, however, if we struggle to adore God in prayer? As we grow in the path of discipleship, Christians sometimes encounter an awkward phase where our adoration of God might seem forced. It is important for us to acknowledge this awkwardness in order to grow in our prayer lives.

Adoring God for who he is sometimes seems awkward because we are so accustomed to self-love. The apostle Paul understood that every human can see God’s glory in the work of creation, but described our common problem: we do not naturally honor or thank God (Rom. 1:18–21). Turning our attention away from ourselves is unnatural because our nature is distorted by sin, which is why we depend on the ministry and mercy of God’s Spirit, working within us, to help us worship God aright. Paradoxically, confessing our difficulty of adoring God is often an important first step in learning to adore him.

Another reason that prayers of adoration can seem difficult, especially to new believers, is that we have vague or distorted ideas about who God reveals himself to be because coming to know God takes time and effort. We come to know God the Father experientially through our union with Jesus Christ,

12. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 252.

13. Matthew Henry, *A Method for Prayer: Freedom in the Face of God*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 1994), 79.

who himself is the perfect image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), and through the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). We come to know God and to clarify vague ideas about him by giving our attention to hearing, reading, and meditating upon Scripture, for it is here that he makes himself known. As we read the Bible, we ought to pray as Moses, “Please show me your glory” (Exod. 33:18), and to look expectantly for God to do just that. As we grow more familiar with the Bible, we can also grow deeper with God through deepening our theology.

At its best, theology is the study of God that leads us to prize him and praise him. Over time, theology moved from a pastoral task in the ancient church, to the monastic scriptoriums of the medieval period, to the classrooms of academies in the high Middle Ages, before coming full circle in Reformation pulpits. Although “theology” is a legitimate discipline of academic study, it is also the calling of all who would follow God.

Anytime we speak about God and go beyond quoting Scripture, we are engaging in the task of theology, and theology can help us cultivate adoration for God. How so? Consider that the field known as *biblical* theology can help us adore God as we step back to see the grand story of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. *Historical* theology moves us to adore God for his faithfulness in each generation of preserving and defending the faith. What most readers likely hear in the word “theology,” though, is *systematic* theology. Systematic theology helps define the parameters of true faith by deep reflection on specific areas of doctrine, such as the attributes of God, the person and work of Christ, the promises of the gospel, the hope of Christ’s return, and similar areas. Within each area of systematic theology, Protestants have long identified specific *loci* (Latin for “places”)—including the doctrines of God (theology proper), the doctrine of the person of Christ (Christology), the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), and the doctrine of the Trinity—as particular areas that concern the person of God. How might reflection on these *loci* prompt adoration? The following reasons barely scratch the surface.

Theology proper reminds us that Yahweh alone is to be completely adored (Deut. 6:4–5), for he alone is the living and true God (Jer. 10:10), uniquely holy (Exod. 15:11), alone able to redeem (Isa. 43:11–13), whose will is never thwarted (Dan. 4:35), whose glory fills the heavens (Ps. 8:1) but who dwells with the lowly (Isa. 57:15), whose attributes include incomparable love, knowledge, wisdom, righteousness, justice, truth, patience, compassion, self-existence, and so many more. As we consider Jesus Christ, with Paul we proclaim him “God over all, blessed forever” (Rom. 9:5), whose incarnation makes communion between humans and God possible, who is the unique mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), who “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15), who humbled himself and is to be exalted and worshiped (Phil. 2:5–11), who is our wrath-bearing substitute

(2 Cor. 5:21), who exercised direct control over nature, disease, demons, and death. Jesus is Lord! The Spirit who hovered over creation (Gen. 1:2) now washes and renews us inwardly (Titus 3:5–6) and works to transform those who behold Christ into the very image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:17–18), even as he brings to fruition various virtues (Gal. 5:22–23) and acts to guarantee the deposit of salvation in the gospel (Eph. 1:13). These are but some of the reasons for which we adore the triune God in prayer.

### Does Sequencing Matter?

Should Christians sequence various kinds of prayer in a particular way? One popular acronym for helping Christians remember these different prayers is Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplications (A.C.T.S.). This approach is simple, memorable, and has probably been the way that hundreds of thousands of Western Christians have learned to pray for decades. Some suggest that the sequencing of this acronym follows the pattern of the Lord's Prayer and follows a theological priority of beginning by adoring God, which leads to confession of sin, prompts thanksgiving for mercy received, and ends with supplications for our needs.<sup>14</sup> Another popular approach, though less memorable, suggests a sequence of confession, followed by adoration and thanksgiving, intercession, and finally supplication for one's own needs.<sup>15</sup> Apart from placing petitionary prayer last, these two influential models differ on what kind of prayer ought to come first, each source offering thoughtful, biblical reasons for their sequencing. How might we sort out this difference?

It may be helpful for us to recognize that while models like these are “biblical” inasmuch as they seek to make sense of the Bible's teaching on prayer, the Bible gives us great freedom in how we pray. Faithfulness to Scripture would not require us to include all of these types of prayer every time we pray. When we are moved to awe at the work of God, we might respond appropriately with an extended time of adoration, asking nothing, focusing all attention on him. Similarly, when God's Spirit convicts us concerning sin, we might respond with an extended prayer of confession. We might vary our pattern, sometimes beginning with confession, other times beginning with adoration, still other times petitioning God for urgent needs. Freedom would allow us to follow either model, or no model, with near infinite variation. The helpfulness of such models comes in their reminder of the diversity of prayer.

14. See, for example, R. C. Sproul, “A Simple Acrostic for Prayer: A.C.T.S.,” <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/simple-acrostic-prayer>.

15. Frank Houghton, et al., *Quiet Time: An InterVarsity Guidebook for Daily Devotions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 15–16. The introduction of “intercession,” thankfully, prevents the acronym C.A.T.S.

**Summary**

In this chapter, we've considered several of the diverse kinds of prayer found in the Bible. Our human "default mode" is supplication, or petitionary prayer, focused on our own needs. But the Bible also calls us to give attention to prayers of confession, thanksgiving, adoration, and intercession. In confession, we agree with God about our sin and seek restoration of fellowship. Adoration focuses on worshiping God for who he is while thanksgiving emphasizes what God has done in our lives and the lives of others who have responded to the gospel. Intercession allows us to fulfill our calling as priests to God as we beseech God on behalf of others. Each kind of prayer is biblical and fitting for those who would walk closely with God.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. How is intercession different from supplication?
2. What are some challenges you have faced in adoring God through prayer?
3. What is the benefit of beginning times of prayer with confession or adoration?
4. Which kind of prayer is the most difficult for you? Why so?
5. Why is confession of sin so important for the Christian life?

