

# Introduction

There's not a lot to do in solitary confinement. All being well, most of us will never see the inside of a cramped, dark cell, where the only entertainment is to be found in counting the footsteps of the guard outside. Yet if, through some strange collision of circumstances, you found yourself in such a place, what would you do?

The answers to that question can form only a very short list. In solitary, you have no resources, no light, and no one to talk to. Well, almost. Because, as many people persecuted around the world for their faith have discovered, the one thing they can't take away from you is prayer.

When everything else is stripped away, prayer is mankind's last resource. Wherever we are, however old we might be, even if we've lost the power of speech, we can still pray.

In the writer Mark Yaconelli's words, "Prayer is home". It is the thing we can return to when everything else has failed us; when we're defeated; when we're lost; when we're broken-hearted. And it's not just something we can do in those times; it's something we're programmed to *want* to do.

When sudden, unexpected circumstances hit, even the most hardened atheist can turn to prayer. When our lives are interrupted by something that shocks and unnerves us, sometimes the frowned-upon reaction "Oh my God" is less blasphemy than it is a simple acknowledgement of truth – a tiny, desperate, automatic prayer.

The desire and need to pray is created inside each one of us at the same time as we get spleens, eyeballs, and collarbones. Like a computer program that is created to contact its manufacturers regularly and "request latest updates", so we are born with an innate desire to talk to our maker.

That's why, in those desperate moments when we do turn to prayer, we instantly feel some degree of comfort. That's why, to stretch the software analogy a little further, we often walk away from prayer feeling refreshed, updated and upgraded.

## WELCOME, WHOEVER YOU ARE

"What a lovely present," you may have said but not thought as you were passed what will inevitably have become a "gift book". Or perhaps you glanced at the cover in a bookshop somewhere and, attracted by the "bumper-value" aspect of getting 500 of something, excitedly decided to buy – almost at the same time aware that this will probably end up gathering dust in the wishful-thinking department of your bedroom shelf. Maybe you're neither of these; you could just be someone who wants to inject a bit more prayer into your life, and thought that this sounded like a jolly sensible resource for a person with such an aspiration.

Whoever you are, my aim over the next few pages is to convince you that this collection of prayers isn't best suited for dust-collecting or for your next trip to the local charity shop (yes, I am fully aware of the potential irony here), but deserves a regular and dynamic place in your life. I'm not expecting you to take it out with you on a Friday night, but, in putting it together, I've aimed to create a book that will reward your investment every time you open it. So, as a result, I'm hoping you'll want to keep opening it.

The book contains, as you know by now, 500 prayers that I have considered suitable, useful, relevant or important for people journeying through the alternately marvellous and agonizing teenage years. Which immediately poses an important question: who am I, and what gives me the right to tell you what to pray? I'm a youth worker; I volunteer at a medium-sized (whatever that means) youth group run by my local church, and help to run talks, small-group discussions and activities. I am entirely unremarkable in this regard, and by no means the best youth worker around (although I did win bronze in the fictional 2004 World Youth Worker championships). But I do at least know some teenagers, which I hope gives me the edge over other people who might choose to write such a book, notably politicians. As well as doing this in my "extra" time, my day job is editing *Youthwork* magazine, which is the UK's leading Christian youth-work resource. This is a bit like saying the Thames is London's leading river, because of course there aren't any others. But it sounds good at dinner parties and in book introductions. Plus it gives me some insight into the world that you, the reader, inhabit.

That brings me neatly on to the topic of how this collection has been composed. This is *not* a compilation of prayers written in what I imagine "youth" language to be. As a thirty-three-year-old dad of three, I know the days when I could still have claimed to be young are well behind me. So if you were worried that on these pages you might find such horrors as a prayer written in text-speak, some sort of rap liturgy, or a section called "Da Psalms", you can breathe again. In my experience, teenagers don't enjoy being patronized. Instead, I've brought together prayers from a mixture of sources, which I simply believe you will find relevant and accessible. Some of them are classic prayers, written by saints, martyrs and heroes of the Christian faith; others are reinterpretations of psalms

or Bible passages. The majority are original prayers, written by me in straightforward language and in a range of styles. But not including rap. Where I've felt it necessary, I've also included a few words of explanation or application, which you should always feel free to disregard completely. Most of the prayers are written in modern, contemporary English, but one or two I've left untouched in their original, more old-fashioned form. I've done this because I think they're much more amazing without my heavy-handed rewriting, and because I credit you with the intelligence and perseverance to be able to enjoy them as they are.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is split into a number of sections, basically in an effort to help you to find the sort of prayers that you might be looking for at a given moment. Most of the prayers are designed to be used in an individual setting (where it's just you and God), but many of them will work in a youth-group or church context too. In one sense, then, you can view this as a sort of reference book, which you can pick up whenever you're in need of a specific form of words. Yet I hope that's not the only way you'll find yourself using it.

I don't know what the terms "devotional" or "quiet time" mean to you. Ever since I became a Christian, at fourteen, they have been haunting, guilt-inducing reminders to me that I don't spend nearly enough of my time with – or even thinking about – God. When you've made the decision that he exists, and that the point of existence itself is to know him, that's a bit of an oversight. Yet I think part of the problem with prayer is that we get into a cycle of guilt: we don't do any; we feel ashamed that we don't give God even a fraction of our time when we know he deserves our whole life... and

so we push ourselves further away from him because we're suffering from a sort of spiritual embarrassment.

Let's just take a reality check at this point, then: God loves it when we spend time with him. Even just a little bit; even if it's been ages since we last spoke to him. Parents of first-year university students are always fraught with worry when, night after night in that first term, the phone doesn't ring. Their world has shifted dramatically – they no longer know where their beloved sons and daughters are each night – and, as the children get wrapped up in the excitement and intrigue of their new life away from home, the parents left behind become gibbering wrecks. And yet, when that phone call finally comes, that home is filled with joy. There is no anger that the call has taken so long, only delight that it has finally been made.

So it is, on a much larger scale, with God. We should never allow ourselves to get caught up in guilt about how long it's been since we last called; we just need to pick up the phone. All of which is a roundabout way of saying that time with God is something we should aim for every day, and never allow to be overshadowed by the failures of yesterday. One of the ways in which you might want to use this book, then, is to give you some words with which to start off that time. Many people don't find it easy to express how they're feeling when talking to someone face to face; if we're honest, it can sometimes feel even harder when the other person is to some extent invisible. So these prayers, whether they offer words of thanks, apology or request, can help to give language to however you're feeling when you come to pray.

## PRAYER AS A DISCIPLINE

I'll pop up now and again throughout the book to introduce each section, but, before I let you loose on the prayers, a word or two about my own "devotional" life. A few years ago, I heard a preacher make a very bold claim at the front of the church I was visiting. He promised that, if I made the commitment to pray every day, my life would look very different one year on. At the time I was sceptical, yet, several years on, I believe those words so passionately that I would comfortably preach them myself. Although not always at the pace and in the manner we might like, God *does* answer our prayers. Although it makes little sense when viewed through our limited understanding of reality, he *does* hear every prayer, of every person on the earth. In fact I'd go further – I believe he listens intently.

So this book isn't just a series of poems and chants that you can speak into thin air to make yourself feel better; it's potentially a step towards a radically different life. Because, as that preacher promised me, when you start communicating regularly with God himself, you can't really expect things to stay the same. I've taken that idea to heart in my own life only in the last couple of years. I start every day by reading a couple of passages from the Bible, and then praying, probably far too briefly. Because I'm a writer, and that's how I think, I write down all my prayers (this may be completely wrong for you). I've managed at last to get over the cycle of guilt and the mystique of the "quiet time". I keep it very simple, and my suggestion to you is that you do the same, perhaps using this book to help you get started. Why not – however regularly you manage to do it – choose a chapter from the Old Testament and a chapter from the New, select a few prayers that are relevant to your life right now or to the life you hope

to live, and just work through them. That definitely counts as a devotional!

Finally, it's worth noting that the writing of this book was a strange experience, because at times I had a very profound sense that it wasn't just me in the room. I'm not suggesting God wrote this book – it's not *that* good. Yet at times the intensive process of writing many prayers naturally and unexpectedly brought me into the presence of the One they were being written for. It felt as if I'd been unwittingly exposed to radiation – a feeling of being very close to God was a side effect I hadn't bargained for.

There's nothing special about most of these prayers – certainly not the ones I wrote. But the act of prayer can be very special indeed, and sends humble little people like you and me into the gravitational pull of the almighty God. Prayer is one of the most powerful resources in the universe, and yet we rarely treat it that way. Allow this book to be your launch pad into a life of prayer, and, just as that preacher promised me, your life may never be the same again.



## Thanksgiving and praise

As a dad of three small children, I seem to spend half my life reminding them to say “Thank you”. Not because I’m obsessed with turning out children so polite that they could walk straight into the cast of *The Sound of Music*, but because my wife and I want them to appreciate the extraordinary privilege they enjoy growing up in the twenty-first-century West. We’re determined that they won’t take for granted the food, clothing, shelter, possessions, and freedoms offered by the society they’ve been born into. So whenever they find themselves in receipt of any of these things, we quickly trot out that familiar question: “What do you say?” “Thank you,” they reply, struck by a sudden flash of remembrance. And yet ten minutes later, when another privilege is enjoyed or gift received, the words are lost to them once more. Again, they have to be reminded to show their gratitude. Again we have to prompt them: “What do you say?” My children aren’t

ungrateful – in fact, largely owing to my wife’s influence, they’re delightful. But they sometimes forget to say thanks because their lives are full of pressing distractions – they’re busy enjoying life to the max (as far as a pre-schooler can!), and sorting out problems (usually involving toy-sharing).

I think we can all be a bit like that. We’re all inherently grateful, deep down, for the things we have; especially the things that matter, which usually can’t be bought. Yet we’re so distracted by enjoying those good things and dealing with our problems that we forget to be actively thankful. I’m certainly as guilty as anyone in this regard. So this collection of prayers isn’t offered as guilt-inducement from a parent, but as an encouragement to gratitude from a fellow child. Our God has given us so much, and done so much for us. So, now, *what do we say?*

### 1. Whatever else, thank you

Whatever else is on my mind, God,  
 Whatever else I fill my time with,  
 Whatever else I wrestle with,  
 Whatever else I ask or say,  
 Over and above it all,  
 Thank you,  
 For everything I have; for everyone I know;  
 For who you are, and for what you’ve done for me.

### 2. Thank you for the breath

Thank you, God, for the breath in my lungs;  
 For the dreams in my heart;  
 For the energy that courses through my veins.  
 Put my passion, my hopes, my whole life  
 To work for you today.

### 3. Amazed by scale

Extraordinary creator:  
 Sculptor of the mountains,  
 Painter of the universal canvas,  
 I bow in awe as I think of what you have made.

And yet...

You love me; insignificant little me.  
 My heart is filled with thankfulness  
 That the same God who crafted galaxies  
 Made and knows me too.

### 4. I cannot understand

God, I cannot get my head around the idea that you  
 allowed your only Son to die  
 So that I could live for ever.  
 I cannot begin to grasp how you are interested in me –  
 More than that, love me –  
 When you are the creator of all time and space and  
 matter.  
 So I’ll switch off my puzzled mind for a moment, and  
 speak from my heart:  
 Thank you, God, that you love me so very much.

### 5. You offer life

You offer me life;  
 Not just life,  
 But life to the full.  
 I’ll grasp it gratefully,  
 With both hands.



**6. You loved me first**

Thank you that you didn't wait for me to catch up;  
 Thank you that even when I wasn't interested,  
 Didn't care,  
 Didn't want to know,  
 Laughed at the very suggestion of you,  
 Buried my head in the sand,  
 Looked the other way,  
 Rejected you,  
 Went in my own direction,  
 You went ahead and loved me anyway.  
 Thank you that you loved me first,  
 Loved me through all that,  
 And will keep on loving me regardless.

**7. I cannot comprehend**

Lord Jesus, I cannot get my head around  
 The torture of the cross;  
 The relentlessness of the beating,  
 The cruelty of the nails,  
 The agony of breathing,  
 The shame of hanging there.

All I can offer is my grateful thanks,  
 Knowing that a man embraced pain with his arms  
 open  
 And, in doing so, flung wide the same arms to  
 embrace *me*.

**8. For the simple things**

For the simple things, Lord:  
 For the comforting smell of earth after rainfall;

For the crisp crunching stomp of boots on snow;  
 For the brilliant rainbow, scything gloriously through  
 the sky;  
 For the things that don't matter,  
 But which money can't buy,  
 Thank you.

**9. Grace and mercy**

Your grace offers us a life we do not deserve;  
 Your mercy spares us from the death we've earned.  
 You pour out both on us; gifts that overflow.  
 Thank you for your mercy;  
 Thank you for your grace.

**10. David's prayer of thanks**

*The Message, a paraphrase of the Bible by scholar Eugene Peterson, puts the Scriptures into modern language that everyone can understand. This prayer of David, rewritten by Peterson, sees the great king overwhelmed with thankfulness for the life that he has been given, full of praise for the character of God, and asking for protection over everything he loves.*

Who am I, my Master God, and what is my family,  
 that you have brought me to this place in life? But  
 that's nothing compared to what's coming, for you've  
 also spoken of my family far into the future, given  
 me a glimpse into tomorrow, my Master God! What  
 can I possibly say in the face of all this? You know  
 me, Master God, just as I am. You've done all this not  
 because of who I am but because of who you are – out  
 of your very heart! – but you've let me in on it.