

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
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PART 1: WHY PRAYER IS EASY (HOW WE PRAY)

1. The Father Loves to Hear Us Pray	15
2. The Son Makes Every Prayer Pleasing to God	27
3. The Spirit Helps Us as We Pray	39

PART 2: WHY PRAYER IS DIFFICULT (WHY WE PRAY)

4. “I’ve Got More Enjoyable Things to Do”	53
5. “I’ve Got More Urgent Things to Do”	70
6. “When I Needed Him, God Didn’t Answer”	84
7. The Battle to Pray—and How to Win It	106

PART 3: WHAT WE PRAY

8. The Arguments of Prayer	123
9. The Priorities of Prayer: God’s Glory	137
10. The Priorities of Prayer: Our Needs	153

Notes	173
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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK WILL TELL YOU how you can be a great pray-er.

I realize that's a bold claim.

You may be new to the Christian faith, and prayer just feels weird. You're supposed to close your eyes, and God is somehow there. You're supposed to talk to God, but it can feel a lot like you're talking to yourself.

Or you may have been a Christian for some time. You know how to say a prayer. Yes, you know the right words to use. But still you struggle to pray, to pray as if it mattered. You try to discipline yourself each day, but it can feel very perfunctory—like an item to tick off a list. Or you just never quite get round to it. Perhaps you hear stories of great prayer warriors. Perhaps you resolve to spend more time in prayer. But life happens, and prayer just doesn't happen.

So what does it take to be a great pray-er?

Acquiring the skill of meditation? Hours spent alone with God? A lot more self-discipline than you seem to be able to muster? A jump to a higher level of spiritual living?

There may be merit in some of these. But none will make you a great pray-er.

I used to work hard at my praying. I developed elaborate patterns. I experimented with different spiritual traditions. I tried emptying my mind so I could hear God speaking. I was attentive to my posture and created special spaces for prayer. I lit candles to focus my concentration. I became quite accomplished at different techniques. But I didn't become the great pray-er I longed to be. Indeed, I suspect I often spent so much time fussing about the externals that I didn't do much real praying at all.

The fact is that the secret of great praying has nothing to do with human effort or skill. Plenty of people would like to think it does because they want to make prayer an achievement. They want to be able to think of themselves as great pray-ers.

But, surprising as it may seem, the secret of great praying is this. You need to know three things about God:

1. God the Father loves to hear us pray.
2. God the Son makes every prayer pleasing to God.
3. God the Holy Spirit helps us as we pray.

If you know these three things, then every prayer you pray will be a great prayer.

In preparation for writing this book, I conducted a survey through my blog.¹ One of the things I asked was what questions people had about prayer. Here is a selection of responses:

- “Do my prayers really make a difference?”
- “Is prayer more often a therapeutic method that helps us to work through our emotions?”

- “What’s the best way to approach God in prayer? What’s an effective prayer?”
- “How can I grow in my prayer life?”
- “How can we spur individuals on to better prayer habits? And how can we spur our community on to better prayer?”
- “I would love to get a behind-the-curtains peak at the inner workings of prayer from God’s perspective.”
- “How can I have better times of extended prayer along with spontaneous prayer throughout the day?”
- “How do you stop yourself from being distracted and letting your mind wander off God?”
- “I sometimes feel like I’m being selfish if I ask for myself. I know I shouldn’t feel that way, but it’s hard to overcome.”
- “Sometimes I don’t know what else to say to the Lord. Is it enough just to remember the person or situation before him, or should I put in more effort?”
- “Does God mind if I can’t think what to say?”
- “I know it’s essential for my soul, so why is it so hard?”

I wonder how many of these resonate with you?

The reality is that I’m not a great pray-er. I’m easily distracted. In fact, I don’t think there are any great pray-ers at all, with one exception. And that exception is Jesus. But in Jesus and through Jesus, I’m a great pray-er. I pray prayers that God delights to hear and delights to answer. And in and through Jesus you can pray too.

PART 1
WHY PRAYER IS EASY
(HOW WE PRAY)

THE FATHER LOVES TO HEAR US PRAY

HOW DO YOU FEEL about prayer? Maybe you love praying. You want “to do business” with God and “wrestle” in prayer. Or maybe your heart sinks. You think of a wearying sense of duty or boring prayer meetings. Maybe you feel the burden of being expected to do something you find difficult. Who, after all, feels like a great pray-er? Or maybe you fear being exposed.

If you struggle, you’re in good company. The disciples weren’t sure about prayer either. So they asked Jesus how to pray:

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

He said to them, “When you pray, say:

‘Father,
hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.
 Give us each day our daily bread.
 Forgive us our sins,
 for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
 And lead us not into temptation.”
 (Luke 11:1–4)

Our Father Loves to Hear Us

Jesus’ teaching on prayer begins with the word “Father.” Prayer starts with the fatherhood of God.

What images come into your mind when you think about praying? Perhaps a monk deep in contemplation. Or a great Christian leader praying beautiful, profound public prayers. Or a prophet like Elijah performing miracles through his prayers. I think of an elderly man in our church when I was a teenager whose prayers were long, eloquent, and full of allusions to the Bible. Or friends at university who always seemed to be hearing God speak to them. Whichever it is, it’s intimidating!

But Jesus says prayer is like a child asking her father for help. Simple as that.

I can’t overstate how important this is. So many books and talks on prayer make prayer a discipline that we need to work on, so we can become good pray-ers. Prayer then becomes something we achieve. But it’s not. Prayer is a child asking her father for help—*nothing more, nothing less*.

The disciples ask their question because they see Jesus praying. Jesus has a relationship of intimacy. He is the true Son of God, as Adam and Israel were intended to be. Moreover, he is the eternal Son of God. He has always been in an intimate, close, loving relationship with his Father. He is the one and only Son, eternally begotten of the Father. He speaks only what he hears from his Father and does only what is

his Father's will. He honours the Father, and the Father honours him.

All of that is way beyond our experience of God—except that Jesus now invites us to share that relationship. By faith, we're united with Christ. We're "in" him. His relationship with God becomes our relationship with God. His intimacy with the Father becomes our intimacy with the Father. *The Father will no more reject our prayers than he will reject the prayers of his own Son, Jesus.* Amazing.

Matthew's version of this prayer begins, "our Father." It reminds us that this is a corporate prayer. Even when we pray on our own, we do so as part of a family. But this "our" is not just about you and me. It's about you and Jesus. When we pray "our" Father, we're praying to the same Father as Jesus.

Imagine Jesus praying as he does in verse 1. You would expect his Father to hear those prayers. Jesus is his only begotten Son and his obedient Son. Yet the Father is as ready to hear your prayers as he was to hear the prayers of Jesus.

In many ways, it's a mistake to focus on prayer itself, as if prayer was some kind of skill to be acquired. We've seen that prayer is the act of a child asking her father for help. And you don't have to teach a child to ask for things! All that a child needs to know is that she is needy and her father loves her. And all you need to know to pray well is that you're needy and your heavenly Father loves you.

Think about how earthly fathers react when their children first speak. They don't go, "What did you say? 'Dada'? It's not 'Dada.' It's 'Father.' How can you be so ignorant? Don't talk to me until you've learnt how to speak properly." No, in my experience, earthly fathers tend to say, "Did you hear that? She said, 'Daddy.' She's so amazing." (And all the while, I'm

thinking, “It just sounded like a gurgle to me!”) Most fathers love it when their children talk to them. It may be garbled and inarticulate, but they’re thrilled to hear their child speak, especially when they call their name.

When you pray, you may hear a voice accusing you, saying, “That’s not a good prayer. You need to try harder. You need to do better.” *This is the voice of Satan.* Satan is like the grumpy onlooker who remains resolutely unimpressed by the first words of a small child. The difference though is that Satan’s intent is far more malign. He never wants you to talk to your Father. Don’t listen to Satan. Rather, listen to your heavenly Father who applauds even your faltering, jumbled attempts.

God gave his own Son for this very reason, so that you can call him “Father,” so that you can pray. Prayer is a gift and an opportunity we’re given through Christ. It’s nothing more and nothing less than a child asking her father for help.

This is how we worship God. Think about all the things you affirm when you come before God as a child asking her Father for help. You affirm the presence of God—he’s able to hear you wherever you are. You affirm the power of God—you ask him, because he’s able to deliver. You affirm his grace—he welcomes you despite your sin. You affirm his kind-ness—he receives us as a Father.

Our Father Loves to Bless Us

Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and

my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need."

(Luke 11:5–8)

Jesus continues his teaching on prayer by telling a parable. Imagine a Palestinian family sleeping together in their small home. Suddenly, there's frantic knocking on the door. A friend has come asking for bread because he's received an unexpected visitor. In the culture of the time, there was a strong expectation that generous hospitality should be shown to visitors. Failure to do so would be a cause of shame. But most food was prepared daily, and there were no fridges. So the only resort of the host without food is to beg from someone else. Hence the late-night call. But the man is reluctant. His children are sleeping with him, so to get up would disturb the whole family.

Jesus was talking about a situation his hearers would well understand. They could appreciate both the desperation of the man outside and the reluctance of the man inside. They could imagine the reluctant neighbour hoping the caller would try somewhere else. But they could also imagine him conceding to his request.

What is clear is that Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. He's not saying that God is like a reluctant neighbour who has to be nagged before he'll do anything for us. No, he's saying this: If a reluctant human being will give you what you want out of concern for his reputation, *how much more* will your loving heavenly Father do so? If a man will answer your cry even though he's asleep with his family, *how much more* will he who never sleeps?

God is ready to hear us. Our Father is willing to hear our prayers. So Jesus applies the parable with a threefold promise in verses 9–10:

So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

The leader of any nation is surrounded by various levels of security. Downing Street, the home of the British prime minister, is protected by iron gates. A policeman stands outside. Security officers are positioned inside. They travel everywhere with him. If you want to see him, you will need an appointment, but only a few people actually get an appointment with the prime minister. His time is too precious and his security too important. But imagine you're one of the prime minister's children. The policeman on the door opens it for you. The secretary lets you in without an appointment.

That is what it means for us to pray to our Father. Our God is much more powerful than earthly presidents and prime ministers. But we can go to him at any time because he's our Father. We pray to someone who is always willing to listen.

Must We Believe to Receive?

But does faith in the Father's willingness to bless us mean that we need to believe God will always give us whatever we ask for? Or, as one of the respondents to my prayer survey asked, "Does believing or not believing a specific prayer will be answered make any difference to whether God answers it or not?" The answer is no. Indeed, a lot of

pastoral harm has been caused by people claiming that God will always give us whatever we ask, if only we have enough faith. The implication is that, if God doesn't answer, it's because I lack faith. People's suffering is then compounded by the mistaken belief that it's their own fault for lacking faith.

Of course, we do need faith to pray. Prayer is an expression of faith. We become God's children when we put our faith in Christ. Unbelievers can pray, but our heavenly Father only guarantees to hear the prayers of his children. When we pray, we need to believe that God is a gracious Father who delights to hear our prayers and a sovereign Father who can answer our prayers.

But we don't need faith that God will definitely and specifically give us whatever we ask before our prayers can be effective. In Acts 12, the believers are praying for Peter to be released from prison when, amazingly, Peter himself knocks at the door. God has answered their prayers and sent an angel to escort Peter out of the prison. But no one believes it's Peter at the door. Clearly they didn't believe God would give the specific thing for which they were praying. But he still did!

Will God the Father Give Us Whatever We Ask?

But what about passages that suggest that God will give us whatever we ask when we pray? In Mark 11:22–24, for example, Jesus says,

Have faith in God . . . Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

It's important to realize that Jesus is not talking about any old mountain. Mark tells us where Jesus is: on the outskirts of Jerusalem. So "this mountain" is the temple mount. Jesus has just pronounced judgment on the temple and created a picture of that judgment in his cursing of a fig tree. The temple should have been a house of prayer for the nations, but the nations were excluded by the trading going on in the court of the Gentiles. Now, as Jesus judges the religion represented by the temple, he tells his disciples that *they* will be the new temple, the place where the nations can pray to God and where God promises to answer prayer. If the disciples have faith in Christ, then they will replace the temple and form this new community of prayer.

"I will do whatever you ask." Surely then this means every prayer is answered if we pray with enough faith? This phrase comes from John 14:13–14 where Jesus says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." The key is "so that the Father may be glorified in the Son" and "in my name." This is prayer that matches the agenda of Jesus, and his agenda is to glorify his Father. God may, for example, be glorified through a miraculous healing, but he may also be glorified by our patient endurance of illness. We can be confident our Father will answer our prayers for his glory, but we must leave it to him to decide how he will achieve this. True faith trusts our sovereign Father and trusts that he will do what is best. Paul describes how he prayed three times for a problem to be taken away: "But [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). We'll return to the subject of unanswered prayer (a sensitive and sometimes perplexing issue) in chapter 6.

But even as we qualify what Jesus means by these statements, we mustn't lose their rhetorical force. When Jesus promised that God will grant us whatever we ask, he didn't "balance" these statements, argues Paul Miller, because "we are not balanced." We're either confident in ourselves or despairing of ourselves, and in both conditions we don't come to God in prayer. So Jesus responds with hyperbole to get us praying.

Like a parent whose toddler is about to wander off, Jesus is yelling, "My Father has a big heart. He loves the details of your life. Tell him what you need and he will do it for you." Jesus wants us to tap into the generous heart of his Father . . . All of Jesus' teaching on prayer in the Gospels can be summarized with one word: ask.¹

An Indulgent Father?

There are two contrasting dangers into which we can fall. We can think God will give us whatever we want. Wrong. God doesn't pander to our sinful desires. Human fathers don't give their children whatever they ask for—otherwise tooth decay would be rampant! We respond to our children with love and wisdom. And it's the same with our heavenly Father. His response is always loving and, because it's always loving, he sometimes allows hard things in our lives to make us more like Jesus.

An Indifferent Father?

But we can go the other way and think that God is trying to trap us or trick us. He can't quite be trusted. He's making life difficult just so he can play with us or test us. Now, the Bible talks about God testing us to refine our faith. But we can also think—wrongly—of God testing us to find us out or trip us

up, a cruel father who says, “I’m just toughening you up, son.” Jesus continues:

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

(Luke 11:11–13)

Again Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. If earthly fathers give good things to their children, *how much more* will our heavenly Father do so.

Imagine a father playing a practical joke on his child, laughing cruelly as the egg on his son’s plate unfolds into a scorpion, or the fish turns out to be a snake. God isn’t like this. He’s not a practical joker, messing with our heads while he laughs at us from heaven. His purposes are always good. He doesn’t always give us what we want, but he always gives us what is good.

The reference to snakes and scorpions in 11:11–13 is an echo of a verse in the previous chapter of Luke’s Gospel. When the disciples return from the mission Jesus has sent them on, Jesus says, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you” (Luke 10:18–19). Through their mission, the forces of Satan are being defeated. Now Jesus says the Father doesn’t answer our prayers with snakes and scorpions. We pray to our Father who is willing to bless us and who especially wants to bless our missionary endeavours. When we pray for our Father’s help in mission, he gives us the Holy Spirit. Through our prayers:

- opportunities will open up and people will hear the gospel.
- we will have the power to proclaim boldly, even in the face of ridicule and rejection.
- lives will be changed, marriages restored, addictions broken, neighbourhoods blessed.
- hearts will be melted, and eyes will be opened.
- eternal futures will be decided—those who reject the gospel will be eternally judged, and those who accept it will be eternally saved.

You may already routinely address God as “Father.” If not, try starting with the words “My Father” or “Our Father” *every* time you pray throughout this coming week.

YOU CAN PRAY

At the end of each chapter you will find a prayer based on a Bible prayer. I’ve changed a few words (like the pronouns) to turn what is normally a report of a prayer into an actual prayer we can pray. I suggest you do two things with these prayers. First, when you finish reading each chapter, pray the prayer as it is written. Secondly, take each line as a heading for your own prayers. Use each one to shape your requests. You can use most of these prayers to pray for both yourself and other people.

A Prayer Based on Colossians 1:9–14

Father God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
fill us with the knowledge of your will
through all the wisdom and understanding that
the Spirit gives,
so that we may live a life worthy of you

and please you in every way:

bearing fruit in every good work,

growing in the knowledge of you,

being strengthened with all power according to your

glorious might

so that we may have great endurance and patience,

and giving joyful thanks to you, our Father.

For you have qualified us to share

in the inheritance of your holy people in the kingdom of light.

You have rescued us from the dominion of darkness

and brought us into the kingdom of the Son you love,

in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Amen.

“This book is not about the steps you can take to become a great pray-er. The message of this book is that you already are a great pray-er in Christ. Through Christ, you can pray.”

Tim Chester shows us how we become *great* pray-ers who pray *great* prayers simply through knowing three foundational truths about God:

- God the Father loves to hear us pray
- God the Son makes every prayer pleasing
- God the Holy Spirit helps us as we pray

When these truths are in place, we discover why prayer is easy, why prayer is difficult, and the arguments and priorities of prayer.

Prayer is like a child's asking her father for help—and that's not beyond any of us. Here you will find the grace and encouragement to talk with your heavenly Father every day.

“I am so grateful for *You Can Pray*. It is gracious yet challenging, accessible yet theologically robust. If you've ever wondered why we need to pray, or how to get better at it, this book will help you enormously.”

—PETE GREIG, Founding Champion of the 24-7 Prayer movement

“A very encouraging and enjoyable read. It put a spring into my step and got me praying more than I had been.”

—SAM ALLBERRY, Author of *Lifted* and *Connected*

“*Enjoyment* and *prayer* are words that are not normally associated together, but after reading *You Can Pray* you will not be able to separate them! . . . A must-read for anyone who wants to make prayer easy, biblical, and God-glorifying.”

—ANDREW CHARD, European Director for AIM International

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