

when prayer is a struggle

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR OVERCOMING
OBSTACLES IN PRAYER

kevin p. halloran

FOREWORD BY COLIN S. SMITH

Let me be honest: my heart's reaction to another book about prayer is that I'd rather spend more time praying than reading about it. As I was reading *When Prayer Is a Struggle*, however, I felt as if I had a friend leading me, on a path, to pray more, to pray better, to pray until I could pray. I just couldn't put it down, except to pause regularly to pray about a particular truth or with the prayers at the end of every chapter. Before I started, I wasn't aware of how much I needed the wisdom in this book. More importantly, I now feel motivated (and more prepared) to spend more time before the throne. And for that, I'm so thankful to the Lord for moving Kevin to write this.

—**Jairo Namnún**, Director for International Coalitions, The Gospel Coalition

How often I have reached toward my bookcase for a book on prayer, only to pivot to another volume. What's that about? Guilt . . . shame . . . embarrassment over my pathetic prayer life. Books that are written by prayer masters too often intimidate rather than inspire me. Kevin Halloran's *When Prayer Is a Struggle* has had the opposite effect on my soul. Here's a fellow traveler—a fellow failure—who has identified obstacles (my obstacles) to praying and provided a hope-filled way forward. Kevin is a wise yet approachable coach who will encourage you to keep praying and not lose heart.

—**Craig Parro**, President, WordPartners

A summary of the beginning and end of the Christian life might be that “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17). And for an explanation of the essence of that life of faith, one can do no better than that of Calvin, who writes that “the chief exercise of faith is prayer.” So what do Christians do when we struggle to pray? Does it mean that our faith is inadequate when this happens? The resounding answer is *no*. Kevin Halloran, as a fellow struggler,

identifies some of the obstacles we face to the exercising of our faith through a life of prayer, and he guides us in how we can overcome those struggles. This is not just another book about prayer; rather, it is intended to be a Spirit-prompted aid to fostering and nourishing prayer. I recommend that you first read through the book prayerfully while pondering the questions about each of the obstacles to prayer that it tackles. And then I encourage you to do the same with another Christian or in a small group. In the Lord's kindness, may this book be used to bear the fruit of a life of prayer in its readers.

—**Gregory C. Strand**, Executive Director of Theology and Credentialing, Evangelical Free Church of America; Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Prayer is one of the greatest privileges and weapons that we have as believers—and it's also one of the things that the enemy most seeks to distract, discourage, and derail us from. And, despite the fact that prayer struggles are common to man, we often feel alone in them. For that reason, we've been encouraged and blessed by Kevin Halloran's down-to-earth, relatable, and practically helpful approach to addressing the most typical hindrances to our prayer lives—and to addressing how we can grow to see prayer as a gift and joy rather than a duty or struggle. Whatever the state of your prayer life may be, you will find yourself somewhere in the pages of this book—and you will be encouraged and challenged to experience the depth and richness of communing with your heavenly Father.

—**Jeff and Sarah Walton**, Authors, *Together Through the Storms: Biblical Encouragements for Your Marriage When Life Hurts*

Prayer is a challenge for me, as it is for most Christians—probably because we fail to fully feel just how dependent we are on God.

Kevin Halloran's book offers a wise combination of theological reflection and practical helps—both of which are intended to drive us to our knees in prayer to the One who knows and loves us.
—**Trevin Wax**, General Editor, The Gospel Project; Author,
Rethink Your Self, This Is Our Time, and Gospel-Centered Teaching

When Prayer Is a Struggle truly is a practical guide that helps us to connect, or reconnect, to the heart of the Father. Kevin honestly shares his own journey while asking us to consider our relationship with God and with others through prayer. I was challenged once again to pray the Word through Kevin's encouragement. His excellent, thought-provoking questions at the end of each section help us to explore the heart of the matter. Helpful, insightful, and timely for each of us—and especially for the world in which we live today. Well done, brother!

—**Mickey Weston**, Executive Director, Unlimited Potential Inc.; Former Major League Baseball Pitcher

Kevin's book on prayer is incredibly heartfelt. He is a praying person, and it makes me want to be a prayerful person too. Offering us practical wisdom for growing in the discipline of prayer, Kevin writes with a pastoral heart and an obvious love for God. I now have several takeaways that I'm eager to use when I pray!

—**Kristen Wetherell**, Author, *Fight Your Fears*; Coauthor, *Hope When It Hurts*

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To God's praying people

"The prayer of the upright is His delight"
(Prov. 15:8 NASB)

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foreword

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your prayer life?

If yours is a 10, you probably don't need this book. You must already be seeking God with passion, persistence, and persuasion on behalf of your family, your church, and our world.

This book is for the rest of us.

Since you have opened this book, I assume that you are not a 10—and that you are interested in getting help with your prayer life. You are not alone.

One of the privileges and responsibilities entrusted to a pastor is that of meeting with members of his congregation to offer them practical help and encouragement. But here's what I found, through doing this: sometimes when people meet with a pastor, they don't know what to say, and so they fill the time with general conversation. How could I, as a pastor, open the door to an interaction that would be of lasting spiritual value?

Some years ago, I devised a list of topics that I thought people might like to discuss with their pastor. I wrote out questions on the front of envelopes, which I then filled with cards that offered various possible answers to them.

Now when I meet with a member of my congregation, I sometimes begin by saying, "We have an hour together, so let's make the best use of this time. If you have something you'd like to talk about, we can do that. If not, I have some suggestions

written on these envelopes. You could choose one that might interest you.”

Most times, people ask to see the envelopes.

The issues that are marked on the front of them include doctrine, effective witnessing, growth in Christian maturity, relationships with other believers, and Christian ministry. But there is another envelope that has been, without question, the most popular. I reckon that over the years, 80 percent of the people who have looked at the envelopes have chosen the one that asks, “How would you describe your prayer life?”

When they open this envelope and pull out the cards inside, each bears a word or two that might describe a person’s prayer life: *Enjoyable, Hard Work, Valuable, Irregular, Unstructured, Aimless, A Failure.*

It is fascinating to watch how people process these cards. Spreading them out on the table, most people go through a process of elimination. “Well, it’s not a failure. But I wouldn’t say it’s enjoyable, either. . . .” Most often, they choose two of the cards: “Irregular” and “Aimless.”

People are looking for help—and if you are one of them, this book is for you. Kevin Halloran has brought together a treasure chest of wise and practical counsel that will deepen your prayers.

Kevin will help you bring structure and purpose to your prayer life. He will show you how to use any sense of failure you feel so that it helps, rather than hinders, your prayers. This book will expand your horizons and give you a new vision for how you can engage more effectively in prayer.

May God use it to bless and encourage you.

Colin S. Smith
Senior Pastor, The Orchard
President, Unlocking the Bible

introduction: the struggle is real

“Everyone struggles to pray. Is a good prayer life even possible?”

I regretted those words as soon as they left my mouth. I knew that such a thought reflected a shallow view of God, of His gospel, and of prayer. And yet I had just blurted it out in front of our entire Bible study group!

While avoiding eye contact with others for a few minutes, I reflected on what I had said. Even though I knew my words were wrong, they reflected what I had felt for a long time. I had had many ups and downs in pursuing God through prayer. I was frustrated. A good sermon or book would encourage me for a few days or weeks, but then I'd drift back to where I had started and feel defeated by seemingly insurmountable obstacles. I had thought that attending seminary or holding leadership positions would fix this—but to no avail. Why did my growth in the daily discipline of prayer always sputter out?

Have you ever felt like I did? I suspect that you also struggle to pray if you picked up a book with this title. Maybe you've followed Christ for years; you love His Word and His church. But when it comes to prayer, you feel like a car stuck in mud. You make an effort, but your wheels are spinning and you're not going anywhere. You know there's more to God and the Christian life,

but you aren't sure how to grow in prayer. You know the struggle to pray is real.

But did you know the struggle is also *good*?

THE STRUGGLE IS . . . GOOD

You heard me right. Think about it: you don't struggle to do what you want to avoid. For example, I don't struggle with the urge to light wads of my hard-earned cash on fire or take a sledgehammer to my car. I *do* sometimes struggle to exercise, even though I *desire* to be healthy. I *do* struggle to steward my money wisely, even though I *do* want to be faithful with what God has entrusted to me. Similarly, we all struggle to pray because *we have a desire to pray*. If we didn't have the desire, we wouldn't have a struggle.

The desire to pray isn't a given. When man rebelled in the garden of Eden, his sin cut him off from communion with God (see Gen. 3:8, 22–24). “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,” writes the prophet Isaiah, “and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isa. 59:2). The apostle Paul says similarly, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:10–11; see also Psalm 14:1–3). Spiritually speaking, there is an infinite chasm between sinful humanity and a holy God. His face is hidden from sinners. He doesn't have to answer your prayer any more than you would have to do a favor for someone who betrayed you.

Thankfully, God sent His Son Jesus to bridge the gap between sinful humanity and himself. Jesus Christ's death on the cross has atoned for our sins (see Rom. 5:8–10; Heb. 10:12). His resurrection justifies us before God the Father (see Rom. 4:25). His ascension guarantees that He intercedes for us at God's right hand (Rom. 8:34). Because of the work of Jesus, God has filled His children with His Spirit, causing our hearts to cry, “Abba, Father!”

when we pray (Gal. 4:6) and giving us the desire to seek Him and honor Him. For those who trust in Jesus and repent of their sins, God the Father is no longer inapproachable—not only are we now able to pray to Him but, in fact, He is the one who invites us to pray. Because of the gracious invitation God issues through the gospel of His Son, prayer is possible.

That's all good news. Our struggle to pray is good, because it reveals that the Spirit has given us a desire to pray. The trouble comes when competing desires distract us from pursuing God. (We also face an enemy who hates it when God's children pray and will do whatever it takes to stop us from engaging in the powerful act.) Sometimes these struggles are because of a lack of head knowledge: *What is prayer about, and why should we do it?* Sometimes they are a heart issue—our sin or pain trips us up. Other times, we simply need to learn practical ways to walk out what we already know.

THE FOUNDATION OF TRUE PRAYER

Let's look at two heart postures that are essential for a true and growing life of prayer.

Faith in God

The number one obstacle to prayer is a lack of faith. James 4:2 says, "You do not have, because you do not ask." And we do not ask because we do not believe—either in God or in prayer. "Without faith it is impossible to please him," writes the author to the Hebrews, "for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The more we participate in faith-building activities like reading God's Word and fellowshiping with God's people, the easier prayer will become. Prayer is the natural overflow of a growing faith.

Love for God

Not just any type of faith pleases God; even the demons have faith—and shudder (see James 2:19)! True prayer flows from a love for God. When God the Father invites us to Himself through the gospel of His Son, we become His children (see Eph. 1:3–6). As we live in loving obedience to our heavenly Father, we experience more of Him (see John 14:21). And as we experience more of Him, we grow in our love for Him, desire Him more, and, thus, pray more. Because of this, *When Prayer Is a Struggle* is a book about prayer, but it's also a book about the whole Christian life, because we were made to love and worship our Creator, and prayer is one essential expression of devotion to our Lord.

You can't overcome any struggle involving prayer without both *faith in God* and *love for Him*. Faith is the breath in the lungs of the praying life, and love is the heartbeat. We can't move forward on the path of knowing God as we pray without breath in our lungs or blood flowing through our veins. Keep faith and love in mind as we walk through the nine struggles that are presented in this book.

A HEAD-HEART-HANDS APPROACH TO OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

A couple of years ago, my brother Kenny talked me into running an obstacle-course race. The idea was simple: run a 5K and conquer a couple of dozen obstacles along the way. My brother was an accomplished athlete who had won many of these races before; I was a newbie whose primary goal was to not die. He finished the race about an hour before I started mine, which allowed me to pick his brain about the course and hear his advice before running it myself. The wisdom that he shared made the race easier for me and more enjoyable; I avoided rookie mistakes and

approached challenging obstacles with the wisdom of a veteran. (I also stayed alive!)

I hope to coach you through obstacles to prayer the way my brother coached me through the obstacles in that race. I'm not a gray-haired sage who has all the answers. I'm a normal guy who realized that he struggled to pray and went on a journey to pursue a more faithful and joyful life of prayer while pleading to God for help along the way. I'm also only one person—and so I've included quotes and stories from other believers, both past and present, to show how they have overcome their struggles and grown in their own love for God.

My driving motivation for writing this book has been the belief that a life of faithful, fruitful, and joyful prayer is within the grasp of every Christian. God has helped me in spectacular ways, and I know that He will help you, too. Do you believe this? If so, will you join me on a journey of thinking long and hard about why we struggle to pray and how we can face our struggles head-on?

Together we will follow a head-heart-hands approach, as we

1. see how gospel truths speak to the struggles we face in prayer (because biblical truth is the solid foundation for faithful prayer);
2. diagnose issues of the heart that keep us from true prayer (because our hearts matter to God); and
3. learn how to move forward in prayer (because informed heads and transformed hearts still need practical help).

I'm a firm believer that you don't learn to pray by reading books any more than you learn to ride a bike by hearing a classroom lecture—you learn by doing.¹ That means if you find

1. I have borrowed this illustration from the Reverend Dick Lucas. See "Interview with Dick Lucas: Your Favorite Preacher's Favorite Preacher," WordPartners, November 30, 2020, <https://wordpartners.org/dicklucas>.

yourself with the desire to pray while reading this book, set it aside and pray—that’s what the book is all about! For this reason, each chapter also includes a prayer and reflection questions.

God can and will change you as you read this book, and that’s not because the book is so good—it’s because *He* is so good. He is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). Read this book prayerfully. Read it humbly. Read it expectantly. It might surprise you how a little help can take you a long way when God is the one blessing it.

PRAYER

Father God, thank You for calling me to be part of Your family in Jesus. You know my struggles with prayer, my lack of faith, and my lack of love for You and others. Help my unbelief! Increase my love. Cause me to see the world as You do and to see prayer as a gift from Your gracious hand. Convict me of sin and lead me to treasure the cross more greatly. Thank You for all You’ve done for us by making prayer possible and powerful. In Jesus’s name, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you ever felt stuck in your attempts to pray—like a car in the mud with its wheels spinning? If so, why?
2. Explain in your own words why struggling to pray is actually good.
3. Look at this book’s table of contents. Which of the nine chapters of the book do you think you need the most? The least?
4. Why are faith and love both crucial for growth in prayer? What would happen if you lacked one or the other?

1

i forget why prayer matters

“I pray because I crave fellowship with my Father. I pray because it shrinks me, my problems, and other people to their proper size. I pray because it’s the best way to get the gospel deep into my heart.”
—Jack Miller, quoted by Scotty Smith

The late newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst collected great works of art. One day he heard about some valuable art treasures that he wanted for his collection. So he sent his agent on a search to track down the works. Months passed without success. Then one day the agent finally tracked down information about the owner of the works. After months of waiting, Hearst was surprised to learn that the owner was none other than . . . *William Randolph Hearst!* He had gone to great pains to obtain what he already had access to. He’d forgotten what he already had.¹

In our spiritual lives, we are often plagued by a similar forgetfulness. So many Christians forget the riches of the gospel that

1. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich: Gaining the Things That Money Can’t Buy*, NT Commentary (Ephesians), 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), chap. 3, Kindle.

belong to us in Christ. We long for something that can immediately satisfy, but we forget God and prayer and look for satisfaction in other places. This spiritual forgetfulness opens us up to many spiritual deficiencies.

Before we get too invested in any activity, we first need to understand the *why* behind what we're doing. Business leaders have caught on to this and realize that consumers won't buy in to a product or service unless they understand the *why* behind it.² When we don't have clarity about *why* we pray, the *what* (the content of our prayers) and the *how* (the way that we pray) will suffer.

AWESOME NEWS AND FORGETFUL HEARTS

Through our redemption in Christ, we have a direct line to heaven. God never sends His children to voicemail or rejects their calls. And yet none of us pray as we should. We still forget to pray and forget why prayer matters. We wonder whether prayer works. We don't feel like praying unless a trial or major need brings us to our knees, and then once the trial passes or the need is provided for, we go back to our forgetful ways.

Prayer sometimes feels like an annoying item on our to-do lists, similar to paying our bills or flossing our teeth. We are tempted to think about prayer in legalistic terms—as if God's acceptance of us is based solely on the quality or frequency of our prayers. Other times, prayer seems boring and slow in a fast world of noise and entertainment that offers instant gratification. Sometimes it's the hectic pace of our lives that keeps us from prayer.

I'm convinced that every reason behind our inclination to forget the *why* of prayer is the result of one foundational issue:

2. See Simon Sinek's teaching in *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Portfolio, 2009) and his TED talk called "How Great Leaders Inspire Action," filmed at Puget Sound, Washington, September [2009], video, 18:34, May 4, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp0HIF3SfI4>.

our lack of faith. As I said in this book's introduction, we can't please God, or truly pray, without faith (see Heb. 11:6). We may think that we are praying, but without faith, the recitation of many words or the mindless mouthing of familiar phrases means nothing to God (see Matt. 6:7).

Now that we've talked about why we forget to pray, let's move on to one of the most important questions that we can ask: Why pray in the first place?

WHY PRAY?

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray through what's known as the Lord's Prayer (see Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4),³ He gave them, and us, the basic grid for *what* we should pray.⁴ What we may not realize is that, through this prayer, He also gives us seven reasons for *why* we should pray.

In the English Standard Version's rendition of Matthew 6:9–13, the Lord's Prayer has a mere fifty-two words (fifty-seven in the Greek). If I saw a fifty-two-word review of a product that I was considering buying, I'd probably look for one that was longer and more helpful! And yet these simple words of Jesus provide a comprehensive outlook on both prayer and the Christian life. The late theologian J. I. Packer tells us, "The Lord's Prayer in particular is a marvel of compression, and full of meaning. It is a compendium of the gospel (Tertullian), a body of divinity (Thomas Watson), a rule of purpose as well as of petition, and thus a key to the whole

3. I am indebted to several resources for the material in this section: my pastor, Colin S. Smith's, sermon series "Six Things to Ask of God" (The Orchard Evangelical Free Church, Arlington Heights, IL, May 3–June 7, 2020), available online at unlockingthebible.org/series/six-things-to-ask-of-god/; John Calvin's treatment of the Lord's Prayer in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.34–49; and J. I. Packer's exposition of it throughout "Learning to Pray: The Lord's Prayer," part 3 within *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).

4. In chapter 2 we will go into more detail about the content of our prayers.

business of living. What it means to be a Christian is nowhere clearer than here.”⁵

We must look at prayer from God’s perspective; He’s the one to whom we pray, and His perspective is the only one that matters. As we walk through the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, we not only will see God’s reasons for why we should pray but will also see a glimpse into the heart He has for the world—and for us. He wants to use this prayer to shape your own heart. Will you let Him?

Pray because God Is Your Father (“Our Father in Heaven”)

Prayer is unabashedly God-centered. The first half of the Lord’s Prayer focuses on Him, which is a vitally important thing for naturally selfish people in an individualistic age to do. While the second half focuses on our needs, it exalts Him as well—because only a sovereign God could provide what He offers, and only a loving God would offer it in the first place.

The first two words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father,” indicate *relationship*. One surefire way to get off track during prayer is to forget the nature of this relationship. Some see God as a boss who will be happy with us as long as we put in the spiritual work of praying and see results. (You might call this a contractual approach to prayer.) Others see him as an ATM or Santa Claus-like figure who will automatically give us what we want without having any interest in a real relationship. Or perhaps God is like the Force in Star Wars, and prayer to this impersonal “force” is nothing more than throwing wishful thinking into the air and

5. Packer, *Growing in Christ*, 136. I appreciate the words of Martin Luther found in *A Simple Way to Pray*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 15, as well: “To this day, I nurse on the Lord’s Prayer like a little child, and as an old man now, I eat and drink from it, but never get my fill.” I’ll throw in another illustration: the Lord’s Prayer can simultaneously serve as a kiddie pool for learning the basics of prayer while also having a deep end that is so profound that the most mature believers will never plumb its depth.

hoping that the winds of the universe blow in our direction. But for those who are in Christ, God is Father.

If there's one thing that I want every reader of this book to take away with them, it's that God loves you unconditionally as a *Father*. Before we had saving faith in Christ, Scripture says we were enemies of God (see Rom. 5:6–10), dead in sin (see Eph. 2:1), sons of disobedience (see Eph. 2:2), and children of wrath (see Eph. 2:3). The glorious truth of the gospel is that despite our wickedness and opposition to God, He sent His Son to the cross for sinners like us (see Rom. 5:8) and now adopts us into His family as beloved children. He fills us with His Spirit to testify of His love for us (see Rom. 5:5) and to enable us to cry “Abba! Father!” to Him in prayer (see Rom. 8:15–16). A good earthly father cares for his children, wants them to come to him when they're in pain, and wants to provide for their every need. How much more does our perfect Father in heaven care for us and want to hear from us—His beloved children!

I recently met a Christian woman from Ireland and heard her testimony. For many years she lived as a content unbeliever who had dabbled in religion in the past. A friend invited her to a Bible study, and she decided to go. “I had no idea what was going on when they studied the Bible. But when they prayed—*oh, how they prayed!*—they prayed like they actually knew God! And that told me I needed what they had.” She recognized that a real relationship with God the Father is possible and that it is *oh, so good*.

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, don't skip past “Our Father.” Dwell on God's character and His relationship with you. Remember His redemptive work throughout human history. Rejoice in His extravagant grace—because “to grasp [God as Father] is to know oneself rich and privileged beyond any monarch or millionaire.”⁶

6. Packer, *Growing in Christ*, 146.

Pray because You Want His Name to Be Praised (“Hallowed Be Your Name”)

To *hallow* means to treat as holy, to revere, to sanctify. Hallowing God’s name means not taking it lightly. God loves the glory of His name enough to build the honoring of it into the Ten Commandments: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain” (Ex. 20:7). The root of the Hebrew word for *vain* connotes “emptiness” or “nothingness.”⁷ Using God’s name in an empty way doesn’t convey the honor and glory that He is due.

Heaven is the gold standard for demonstrating the proper way God’s name is to be exalted. The book of Revelation repeatedly pulls back the curtain to reveal how God’s name is exalted in the heavenly worship of angels and saints. Here’s one example.

Great and amazing are your deeds,
 O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
 O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord,
 and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
 All nations will come
 and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed. (Rev. 15:3–4)⁸

Unfortunately, our world falls far short of heaven’s standard. God’s name is used as a cuss word or a punchline and is even openly mocked. “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles,” writes Paul in Romans 2:24, in reference to the prophet Isaiah. And yet it’s not just the Gentiles who blaspheme God’s name; Paul’s next

7. *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, ed. Francis Brown with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), s.v. “שׁוֹמֵם.”

8. See also Revelation 4:8–11; 5:9–14; 7:9–12; 11:17–19; 16:5–6; 19:1–9.

words, “*because of you,*” indicate that even God’s people can dishonor His holy name by living sinful lives. That’s why Jesus wants us to start our prayers with worship, by saying “Hallowed be Your name.”

When we pray, “Hallowed be Your name,” we ask for God to exalt His name in all the earth. We ask for all people to honor and glorify His name. And we ask for His help to live in a way that honors Him. We ask Him to help us to glorify Him in all we do (see 1 Cor. 10:31). He is worthy!

Pray because You Want His Kingly Rule to Expand (“Your Kingdom Come”)

Several years ago, while on a trip in order to train pastors in Latin America, I sat in a pastor’s office in one of Ecuador’s largest cities while preparing my heart to preach in thirty minutes’ time. Pastor Jaime offered me coffee and started sharing the history of his church’s building. I was a little confused at first (I don’t normally enjoy hearing anecdotes of foreign real-estate transactions before I preach), but soon Jaime’s story gripped me.

Jaime and his wife Lirio had been grieving the destructive impact that a local nightclub was making on their community: local youth were being led astray, households were being destroyed, and crime rates were increasing. So Jaime and Lirio began to pray for the nightclub to close. They continued to pray for about five years—until one day, by God’s grace, it closed. The building where it had been sat empty for two years.

Meanwhile, God was reaching people through the church that Jaime was pastoring, so the church sent Jaime and his family to plant a new branch of the congregation. But where would it meet? Jaime and his church family prayed for a location that would help him to reach more people with the gospel. And the best option turned out to be the former nightclub that was sitting empty. After discussing the opportunity with the building’s owner and sharing the gospel with him, Jaime bought the building for

half the asking price. Now the church meets in the former nightclub—proclaiming the gospel in the community, strengthening families, and reaching youth in the process. Crime in the area even went down. God turned a den of darkness into an embassy for Christ’s kingdom. By praying for the closure of the nightclub and for the gospel to be advanced through their ministry, Jaime and Lirio were praying for God’s kingdom to come.

God is working all throughout human history to build a people for Himself. While even the greatest nations on earth come and go, God’s kingdom is eternal. While earthly nations have fixed borders, God’s kingdom encompasses people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Jesus is building His church, and the gates of hell won’t prevail against it (see Matt. 16:18). That is true whether you’re in Quito, Quebec, or Queensland.

To pray “Your kingdom come” is to express our longing for God’s perfect rule on earth. It is to bow before King Jesus and forsake our personal kingdoms. It is to acknowledge the transience of earthly kingdoms and their true place in history (see Ps. 2; Dan. 2). It is to ask for God to bring salvation to the lost and judgment to His enemies. With these words, we pray that He will cripple the domain of darkness and speed ahead the advance of the kingdom of light. We ask Him to help us to live with His kingdom in mind as we raise our kids and talk to our neighbors.

Praying “Your kingdom come” also helps us to look ahead to the ultimate ushering in of His kingdom—one that is closer to you than when you first started reading this chapter—when “the dwelling place of God [will be] with man” and when “He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes” (Rev. 21:3–4). Come, Lord Jesus!

Pray because You Want His Perfect Will to Be Done (“Your Will Be Done, on Earth as It Is in Heaven”)

I still remember when I heard the news—Mom had cancer and needed immediate surgery. But a successful surgery didn’t

fully take the cancer away. Our family prayed for healing and persevered with my mom, for three and a half years, through chemo treatments, hospital visits, encouraging prognoses, and discouraging ones, while shedding many tears along the way. When the outlook was bleak, we prayed for more time, and God mercifully granted her the health to attend my wedding as well as my brother's five weeks later. But on March 22, 2016, with our whole family huddled around her bed, Denise Halloran breathed her last. Moments after we saw my mom pass into the Lord's presence, my dad quoted Job 1:21: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

God wants us to pray "Your will be done," as Christ did in the garden (Matt. 26:42), to help us to acknowledge that His ways, wisdom, and purposes are higher than ours. To remind ourselves of our creatureliness and His omnipotence. To humble ourselves.

When we don't pray in a posture that says "Your will be done," we are shaking our fists at God and saying, "My will is better!" Such pride makes prayers ineffective, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). That's not to say that we can't wrestle with God in prayer, but at the end of the day we must humbly submit to our Maker out of confidence in His good and eternal purposes for us (see Rom. 8:28–29). Only when we submit to God's will can we worship while in tremendous pain.

"Prayer is surrender," writes E. Stanley Jones—"surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."⁹ Sometimes our most genuine worship comes in the

9. E. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 383, quoted in Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from The Success Syndrome* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988), 73.

wake of bad news, when we can say from the depths of our hearts, “Blessed be the name of the Lord” and “Your will be done.”

Pray because You Need His Provision (“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”)

Because “the earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1 NIV), we can confidently ask our omnipotent Creator to meet our needs—He owns it all anyway! When we ask for His provision of any need we have (bread, a job, finances, wisdom, encouragement, faith, strength to endure persecution, safety, or guidance for a life situation), we acknowledge His power to provide as well as our reliance on Him. When we recite this petition from the Lord’s Prayer and think of all that He has provided throughout the decades of our lives, we grow grateful to our Provider. When we pray for our daily bread, we also expand our horizons by being led to think of others in need and how God may want to use us to provide for *them*.

Although this petition focuses on our temporal needs, it also reminds us of God’s greater spiritual provision. Yes, we need physical bread and other material goods. But at a more foundational level, we need spiritual bread. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Elsewhere, He said that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; see also Deut. 8:3). Our spiritual appetite is satisfied only by God’s Word, written and incarnate.

We have great needs in this world—both physical and spiritual. And our great God and King “will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). God’s provision won’t always look the way we expect or come according to our timing, but we can be confident that He wouldn’t teach us to pray for provision if He weren’t willing and able to provide exactly what we needed.

Pray because You Need His Forgiveness (“Forgive Us Our Debts, as We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors”)

This next petition reminds us how important relationships are to God. We need God’s forgiveness when we sin, and we need to extend forgiveness to others when they sin against us. If we didn’t do this, how could we follow the first and second Great Commandments—to love God and love our neighbors (see Matt. 22:37–40)?

We first ask God to forgive us our “debts,” which we incur when we come up short in fulfilling our duty, and which are known simply as sin (see the wording of the parallel passage in Luke 11:4). While believers can rest confidently because Christ has paid for their sins on the cross (see Rom. 8:1), our sin grieves the Holy Spirit of God (see Eph. 4:30) and thus hinders our ability to commune with God through the Spirit. When we ask Him for pardon, we acknowledge our sinfulness—as well as our inability to do anything about it on our own. Our only hope is to issue a desperate cry for help, from a broken heart, to a faithful Father who hears. His loving heart is moved to forgive, because the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross covers our sin and makes forgiveness possible.

Tying our forgiveness (by saying “forgive us our debts”) with the forgiveness we grant to others (when we say “as we also have forgiven our debtors”) reminds us that *forgiven people forgive* (see Matt. 18:21–35; Eph. 4:32). Other people let us down in many ways and don’t pay us what they owe—be it respect, time, energy, or something else. But we can’t let their failure prohibit us from loving them as God desires. If we do, the weeds of bitterness, anger, jealousy, and hatred grow in our hearts. God wants His children to walk in love with Him and with one another. Our past sin hinders this, and that’s why the next petition requests protection from future sin.

Pray because You Need His Deliverance (“Lead Us Not into Temptation, but Deliver Us from Evil”)

After God signs our adoption papers and welcomes us to His family, He signs our enlistment papers for a spiritual battle. It’s a battle that we’ve been in since birth, but we don’t see it until the Spirit opens our eyes.

“Lead us not into temptation” is a plea for God’s help with fighting our internal battle against “the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). This petition acknowledges the weakness of our flesh and our willpower in the face of temptation. It’s a reminder that sin is deceptive and that our only hope is to “be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength of *his* might” (Eph. 6:10). As I’ve grown older, I’ve seen horrible sin crop up in many people’s lives where you would least expect it, making me realize how weak and vulnerable we all are. “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall,” warns the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 10:12). Praying for God’s help reminds us that He won’t let us be tempted beyond what we can endure and that He promises a way of escape (see 1 Cor. 10:13).

Praying “Deliver us from evil” reminds us of the battle that we also fight with an external enemy. Some translations say, “Deliver us from *the evil one*”—referring to Satan. Satan hates God’s people and their prayers, and he will do whatever he can to keep us from praying.¹⁰ When we pray for deliverance from evil, we acknowledge God’s power to deliver us due to His supremacy over every spiritual being (see Eph. 1:20–21; Col. 1:16). We express our desire for “increases of God’s grace [to] continually be showered upon us, until, completely filled therewith, we triumph over all evil.”¹¹ We

10. As the old hymn says, “Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.” William Cowper, “What Various Hindrances We Meet,” 1779.

11. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, *Books III.XX to IV.XX*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.20.46.

need God's deliverance from evil spiritual powers and from human pawns of the enemy that seek to devour us as a lion does its prey (see 1 Peter 5:8). Prayers for deliverance from enemies pervade the Psalms (see Pss. 35; 59; 140; 143), and the apostle Paul repeatedly asked even fellow believers to pray for him to be delivered from his human enemies (see Rom. 15:30–33; 2 Cor. 1:8–11; 2 Thess. 3:1–5). Why should we think we're immune?

REMEMBERING WHY PRAYER MATTERS

We pray in order to glorify God. We pray in order to unify our hearts with His kingdom vision for the world and to align ourselves with His will. We pray for provision, restored relationships, and protection from the evil that comes from both inside us and outside.

If you sometimes realize that you've gone for almost a whole day (or for several days) without even thinking of God or prayer, take heart. I've been there too, and many other believers have as well. But you can't stay there. Don't forget that prayer flows from faith—and because of that, perhaps the most effective action to take in order to remember the purpose of prayer is to pray for faith that will go on to express itself in prayer.

How might you grow your faith? How might you remind yourself of the importance of prayer? I try to keep reminders always before me: a sticky note on the bathroom mirror, framed art containing the Lord's Prayer in my kitchen, a daily phone notification that asks me if it's "Time to Pray." I try as best as I can to build prayer into my relationships, for a little added accountability, as well as into my routines, so that it becomes a habit. As I fellowship regularly with the church, prayer becomes more natural.

As with all the struggles that we'll examine in this book, the key to growth in this area is not immediate perfection; it is making small and faithful progress while remaining confident in who God

is and in the gracious invitation He has offered us to pray. You will still lack faith. You will still sometimes forget why prayer matters. But over time you will better remember the *why* of prayer.

In the next chapter, we'll look more closely at what the content of our prayers should be.

PRAYER

Dear heavenly Father, thank You for adopting me into Your family and giving Your Son for me. Thank You for the glorious and undeserved invitation you have offered me to come into Your presence through prayer. I admit that I often forget to pray and that, deep down, I lack faith. Stir in me a heart of prayer, by Your Spirit, and help me to grow as a person of humble, moment-by-moment dependence on You. Please use this little book to show me how I can experience more of Your grandeur and glory through prayer. In Jesus's name, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What has most helped you to grow in prayer?
2. Are you ever tempted to view God as a boss, an ATM, or an impersonal force like in Star Wars? How should viewing God as Father change your perspective?
3. Of the seven reasons to pray that the Lord's Prayer gives us, which one do you need to focus on the most?
4. What changes can you make in your life to help you better remember God's invitation to pray?