

*On Prayer*  
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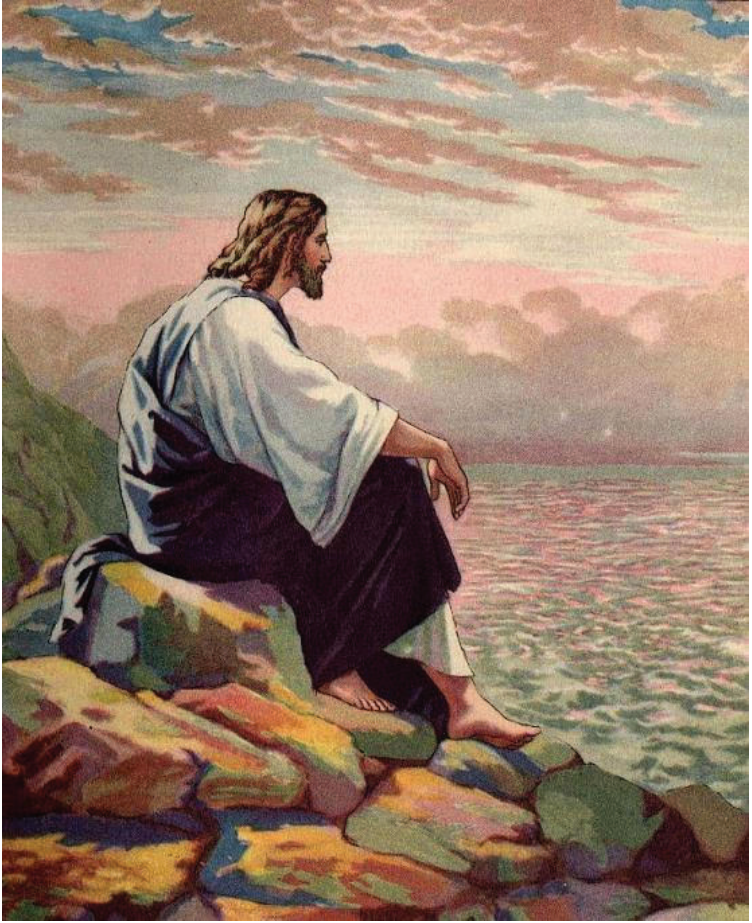
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*And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out and departed into a solitary place and there prayed.*

— Mark 1:35

*And when he sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray and when the evening was come, he was there alone.*

— Matthew 14:23

*And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down and prayed, saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine be done.*

— Luke 22: 41-42

*And going ahead a little, he fell on the ground in supplication and asked that, if it were possible, the appointed time might pass by him. And he said, Abba—father—everything is possible for you. Take away this cup from me. But still it has to be what you want, not what I want.*

— Mark 14:35-36 Sarah Ruden translation



Whenever I start to think or write about a spiritual issue, I turn first to the gospels to see what Jesus of Nazareth had to say on the subject. His comments are always insightful and invariably lead me to see connections with what other spiritual traditions or teachers have to say on the same subject. This is what happened when I turned to the gospels for guidance on how to pray.

For most of my life, I have been uncertain how to pray. Growing up as a Catholic, I learned to recite the “Our Father,” as it was called—the prayer Jesus gave to his disciples. I said it so frequently as a child and teenager that I can reel it off verbatim today without even thinking about what the words mean. And that was the problem: I learned how to memorize, not how to pray. Nor did I learn how to pray when I became a Quaker, other than to use the phrase “holding in the Light” when praying for others.

When I went to the gospels to see what I could learn about how to pray, I was looking for examples of how Jesus prayed on the many times when the gospels say he went off to a “deserted place” by himself to pray. But as frequently as the gospels mention him doing that, they never describe what he did—how he prayed—when he got there. The only example of what he said during a time when he went off by himself was the prayer he said

in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested, the prayer in which he says, “remove this cup from me, nevertheless not my will but thine be done.”

I’ve often wondered how anyone could know what he was saying at that time. He was alone; his three nearest disciples were asleep on the ground, and he was arrested immediately afterward. Yet, the prayer attributed to him has a ring of authenticity to me: it sounds like what he would say. Although I had read that prayer many times, when I thought about it carefully, I was surprised to discover a series of clear guidelines on how to pray that also seemed applicable to how he most likely prayed on other occasions as well—and how I might pray today.

## GUIDELINES

### *Find A Place To Be Alone*

Jesus always goes to a “deserted place” to pray, a place where no one else is around. He advises his disciples to do the same when he says, “when thou prayest enter into thy closet [another translation says “store-room”], and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, which is in secret.” [Matthew 6:6]. Thomas Merton gives similar advice:

*There should be at least a room, or some corner where no one will find you and disturb you or notice you. You should be able to untether yourself from the world and set yourself free, loosen-*

*ing all the fine strings and strands of tension that bind you, by sight, by sound, by thought, to the presence of other [people].*

For Jesus—and probably for his disciples—a “deserted place” was more likely to have been outside in a natural setting than in a closet or storeroom. On one occasion he is described as going to a mountain and on others he probably went to the hillsides or fields surrounding the places he visited. For most people, being in a natural environment, particularly one in its natural condition, brings forth a feeling of spiritual connection. I always feel different in such a setting, more at peace and more receptive to the presence of God, and I have to believe Jesus felt that way too. However, regardless of where you pray the important thing is to be in a place where you will be undistracted and undisturbed.

### ***Demonstrate Humility Before God***

To me, the gospels portray Jesus as a humble man. There are many examples of his humility, but the most significant one is in the Gospel of John’s version of the Last Supper, which says he picked up a basin of water, took off his robe, knelt on the floor, and washed his disciples’ feet. It’s hard to be more humble than that. So it is not surprising that when he approaches God to pray, he does so with humility in both action and words.

The very first thing Jesus does when he goes off to pray in Gethsemane is to kneel down or fall “on the ground

in supplication.” By this physical act he shows his humility before God. Most people kneel when they pray in a church; Muslims prostrate themselves, head touching the ground, when they pray five times a day. Early Quaker men removed their hats and knelt when they prayed in meeting for worship. Showing humility in a physical way seems to be an essential characteristic of praying.

Jesus also demonstrates humility in the way he addresses God. Throughout the gospels he refers to God as Father. In her translation of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, Sarah Ruden uses the word he uses—*Abba*—the word a child would use, whose meaning is closer to Dad or even Daddy than Father. I believe Jesus uses this word not as a description of God, but as an indication of the nature of his relationship with God. He believes that he is connected to God in the same personal and intimate way a child is connected to a loving parent. Seeing himself as a child in relation to God as a father is a further indication of his humility.

### *Address Your Prayer To God*

By beginning with the word Father, Jesus makes it clear he is praying to God. This indicates that he believes there is some entity for which he uses the word God. We don't know much about what he means when he uses that word. The closest he comes to defining it is when he says, “God is spirit.” [John 4:24] However he conceives that Spirit to be, it is external to him; he is

praying **TO** it. He is not looking inward to the presence of God within himself; he is looking outward to this Spirit that is the source of all creation. He clearly believes he can have a direct communication with God and that God both hears and responds. Why else would he pray for guidance unless he believed he would be heard and answered?

### *Use Your Own Words; Have A Conversation With God*

Jesus is not reciting a prayer someone else has written and he has memorized. He is speaking in his own words, speaking from his heart. He is having an informal conversation with God. Edgar Cayce, one of my favorite spiritual teachers, says, “In prayer we speak to God, in meditation God speaks to us.” That is what Jesus is doing; he is speaking to God as informally as he would speak to a person sitting next to him.

### *Share Your Feelings And Concerns, Including Your Hopes And Desires*

In this moment of distress, Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter: let this cup pass. He is sharing his honest feelings, including his own hopes and desires regarding his situation. But here is the difficult and critical part: he believes that God has a will, an intention for his life. “Not my will but *thine* be done” is the most important expression of his spiritual beliefs. God has an intention, a pur-

pose, for his life which may very well be different from his own. But it is God's will, God's intention, that will prevail. So although he expresses his hopes and desires, he does not ask for a specific outcome. "If it is *your* will," he says, and turns the outcome over to God.

### *Ask For Guidance And The Strength To Follow It*

I do not believe that Jesus could predict the future. Why would he be praying for guidance if he knew what the outcome was already? The fact that he prays shows that he is uncertain and that he is seeking God's guidance. Although he does not explicitly ask for guidance, the whole prayer is a simple request: Help me to know your will for me at this moment.

Similarly, he does not ask for strength to accept God's will. But the fact that the gospel says that after he prayed "there appeared unto him an angel strengthening him" [Luke 22:43] is an indication that he was implicitly asking for the strength to accept God's will and follow it.

One of the most powerful expressions of the willingness to accept God's will that I've come across was written by Arthur Ashe in his memoir *Days of Grace*. Ashe is best known as an international tennis player, but he was also a deeply spiritual person. He had a heart condition that required him to have a blood transfusion before blood supplies were being tested for the HIV virus. As a result, he contracted AIDS. Near the end of his life he wrote this statement about prayer.

*Prayer is not for asking God for things for oneself or others. Prayer is a medium through which I ask God to show me God's will and to give me strength to carry out that will. .... When I played tennis, I never prayed for victory in a match. I will not pray now to be cured of heart disease or AIDS.*

### **Wait For God's Answer**

When Jesus finishes praying, he walks away confidently prepared to go on with his life while awaiting God's answer. "Let go; let God" is a good description of his approach. If we believe, as Jesus did, that our prayers will be answered, then the question is *how* will they be answered? The gospels description of that night suggests the way.

He prays and it appears no answer comes, so he prays again and again with greater intensity. Still, there is no answer. But Jesus knows that God does not speak directly to him; God speaks through other people and events that guide him along the path of God's intentions. So, when he sees Judas and the temple guards approaching, he recognizes that this is God's answer—the cup will not pass—and he calmly accepts it. He could have hidden; he had time to run away while his disciples distracted the crowd, but he does not do either. While his disciples skirmish with the temple guards he stands calmly by, accepting God's intention for his life. He stands calmly before the

Jewish authorities, before Herod, before Pilate. He surrenders his will, his life, fully to God—that is his strength and his message: not my will but thine be done.

For Jesus, God’s response to his prayer was immediate. But for us the response may not come immediately; it may not come for days or even weeks. There may be no obvious response, which is in itself a response. But it is most likely to come in the same way it did for Jesus—through unexpected events and people who unknowingly serve as God’s messengers.

## PRAYING ON OTHER OCCASIONS

This is the advice I found when I considered Jesus’s prayer that night and the circumstances in which he prayed. However, Jesus did not only pray in times of distress. The gospels describe him going off to pray on many other occasions. On those occasions his *manner* of praying was probably the same, but the *content* of his prayer was probably different. Although I cannot point to something in the gospels that indicates what that content might have been, it seems likely to me that on those occasions he would have focused on two things: giving thanks and praying for others.

### *Give Thanks For The Good Things In Your Life*

Jesus gives thanks to God on many occasions. He offers a prayer of thanks before feeding the 5,000 [John

6:11] and thanks God for his ability to heal as in the case of raising Lazarus. [John 11:41] He tells a story of ten lepers [Luke 17:11-19] to point out the importance of giving thanks for the good things you have received. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that he would give thanks for the good things in his life when he prayed. Prayers of thanks are a means of staying in regular communication with God. By letting God know we appreciate all the gifts we have received we also remind ourselves of our blessings.

### *Pray For The Well-Being Of Others*

I also have no doubt that at these times Jesus prayed for others and that when he did, he did so in the same way he prayed for guidance for himself—not for a specific outcome but for the other person to feel God’s presence and trust in God’s guidance. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the well-known book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, describes a similar way of praying when he prays with people who are sick:

*When I pray with a person who is in the hospital, I explain that we are not just praying for a miracle cure or a good outcome to surgery. We are praying for the presence of God. .... I simply and openly pray for the presence of God because I am a different person when I feel I am in the presence of God.*

The Quaker practice of “holding in the Light” is also an example of this kind of prayer. Holding someone “in the Light” is a way of acknowledging that we don’t know what is best for another person; we are simply holding that person in the Light of God’s love, hoping that the individual involved will feel God’s presence and that it will bring comfort, courage, and guidance.

These two additional ideas suggest that Jesus may have had two forms of prayer—one for normal times when he gave thanks, prayed for others, and asked for God’s guidance in general, and another in difficult times when he expressed his concerns about a specific situation and asked for guidance related to it.

## WHY PRAY

Although Jesus is described as praying quite frequently, his disciples do not seem to do the same. I wonder then, why should we pray? There seem to be four reasons implied by Jesus’s example.

First, praying regularly helps us remember that God is a constant presence in our lives. Such diverse spiritual traditions as the Rule of St. Benedict and the six pillars of Islam recommend frequent periods of personal prayer throughout the day to remind us of God’s presence and to encourage us to behave as a spiritually-led person.

Second, praying assists us to open our hearts to receive God’s guidance, God’s will, and prepares us to

recognize it when it is revealed. But accepting God's will is not always easy; it is an act of faith that takes courage. Rabbi Kushner reminds us that prayer can give that courage. When he talks about praying with people in the hospital he says, "God's job is not to make sick people heathy. That is the doctor's job. God's job is to make sick people brave." That applies to well people too.

Third, prayers of thanks for the good things in our lives remind us that many of them come through no effort of our own and enhances our ability to see the positive aspects of our lives even in difficult times. Research has shown that consistently expressing gratitude benefits both physical and mental health.

Lastly, praying for others reminds us of our connection to the people who have enriched our lives and to those who may be suffering. It brings forth feelings of love and compassion that may inspire us to take actions to support others.

All these reasons make it clear that praying is not about God: it is about us. It is about strengthening our ability to face the opportunities and challenges life presents with confidence that we are not facing them alone.

## **SOME PRAYERS**

Although my ideas about prayer come primarily from the gospels and although I believe that prayer should be primarily in our own words, I have found that the

words of others often express my feelings better than my own. Here are a few examples.

### **Edgar Cayce**

Not my will but thine O Lord be done in me and through me. Let me ever be a channel of blessings today, now, to those that I contact in every way. Let my going in, my coming out be in accord with that Thou would have me do, and as the call comes, “Here I am, send me, use me.”

— *A Search for God, Book One*

### **Thomas Merton**

My Lord God, I have no idea where I’m going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

— *A Book of Hours / Thomas Merton,*  
*Kathleen Deignan, editor*

### **A Greek Orthodox Prayer**

Lord, grant me to greet this day in peace. Help me in all things to rely on your holy will; in every hour of the day reveal your will to me. Bless my dealings with all who surround me; teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with the firm conviction that your will governs all. In all my deeds and words guide my thoughts and feelings, in unforeseen events let me not forget that all are sent by you. Teach me to act firmly and wisely without embittering and embarrassing others; give me strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all that it shall bring; direct my will, teach me to pray, pray yourself in me.

— *Found in a pamphlet in a Greek Orthodox church*

### **An Episcopal Prayer**

I will try this day to live a simple sincere and serene life, repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity and a habit of holy silence; exercising economy in expenditures, generosity in giving, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service and a childlike faith in God. In particular I will try to be faithful in those habits of prayer, work, study, physical exercise, eating, and sleep which I believe the Holy Spirit has

shown me to be right. And as I cannot in my own strength do this nor even with the hope of success attempt it, I look to you oh God and ask for assistance.

— *Found in a pamphlet in an Episcopalian church*

### **Muslim Prayer of Du'a of Istikhara**

O Allah, if in Your knowledge, this matter be good for my faith, my livelihood and the outcome of my affairs in the world and the Hereafter, then ordain it for me and facilitate it for me and grant me blessing in it. But if in your knowledge this matter is bad for my faith, my livelihood and the outcome of my affairs in the world and the Hereafter, then turn it away from me and turn me away from it and ordain for the me the good wherever it be and cause me to be pleased with it.

— *Sahih al-Bukhari, a collection of hadith of Muhammad*

### **Anonymous Benedictine Nun**

Thank you for everything. I have no complaints.

— *Quoted in "Holy Boldness," an FGC address by Peggy Senger Morrison*

Do you have a favorite prayer? Send it to me:  
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Image: *Jesus, Alone On A Mountain By the Sea of Galilee*; artists, O.C. Stemier and Bess Bruce Cleveland, 1921; Wikimedia Commons

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John Andrew Gallery lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he attends the Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). This pamphlet is a companion to his other pamphlets—*On Love*, *On Generosity*, and *On Forgiveness*. John is also the author of four pamphlets published by Pendle Hill Publications and two self-published spiritual books. For more information about John and his spiritual writings, or to order other pamphlets, go to [www.johnandrew-gallery.com](http://www.johnandrew-gallery.com).

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