

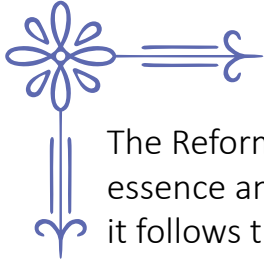
What Is Prayer *Really?*



By Lianna Davis



Bible Study Tools



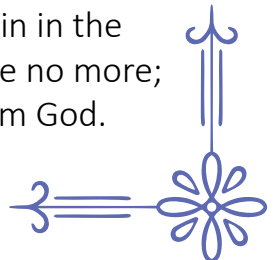
The Reformer Martin Luther said, “All teachers of Scripture concludes that the essence and the nature of prayer are nothing else than the raising of the heart, it follows that everything which is not a lifting up of the heart is not prayer.” At the consideration of this teaching, falsehood in prayer falls away. Banished is the attempt to impress the living God with our words, or to control Him with demands.

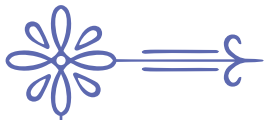
According to Oxford Dictionary, the definition of prayer is: “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship.” But what does prayer really look like in the Christian life? Is there a right way to pray?

Following from Luther’s statement and definition above of a Scriptural teaching on prayer, I make two observations: prayer requires honesty and upward direction.

Prayer requires us, the whole of our inner persons and the genuine expression of our selves before God. Think of the laments in the psalms- of the way the heart is pried widely to tell the Lord of the mental and emotional habitation of the writer. Psalm 88 expresses God has put the psalmist in lands of difficulty: “You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths” (Psalm 88:6). We know from Scripture that God would be just to punish every sinner immediately in damnation. Given that, I do not assume that the psalmist blames God, for he speaks accurately.

Some of the lowest depths we experience in suffering can be in the form of the death of those dearest to us. God put us in these places of loss; we can cry that in justice He said to Adam that death would surely follow sin. I would suggest that the psalmist is citing the Lord’s just hand in suffering because of what logically follows—the One who enacted that consequence for sin can devise the way for it to be lifted. He has done so in the marvelous plan of salvation, the mystery now revealed of the perfect God in flesh bearing the punishment for sin in the place of sinners. This plan causes us to know that death will one day be no more; the psalmist longs for this kind of deliverance that can solely come from God.





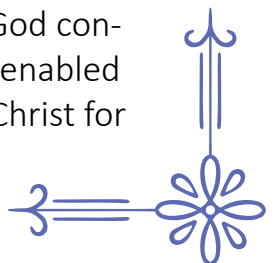
In our prayer to Him, we pray in one direction, raising our hearts to the One above us. We confess in prayer that we are not above God, as if we could sway Him by our goodness or control Him with our anger, sorrow, or determination. No, the raising of the heart implies the confession and acknowledgement of our true state before Him—beginning with Him being God, and us not.

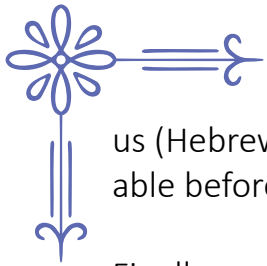
I consider the complaints in the lament psalms to be akin to confessions. We proclaim, in essence, “My Father, I do not claim to be right, but this is what I do feel and think. Help me.” Laments are not the final home of prayer; even if God has put us in the lowest pit, the darkest depths, we are called to not idle there indefinitely, to the exclusion of other considerations. We can think of all that has been done for us in Christ—all of the love that lies open before us demanding a fitting response of eternal praise. For, even living in this world that bears the marks of punishment and sin ought to be most highly understood as living in a place of grace—for we have not been destroyed. No, we can respond to God’s grace with our cries of thanksgiving that restoration with Him through His Son is possible and is God’s desire.

How Can Prayer Be Real?

As pastors and commentators note, a pattern of prayer can be noticed in Scripture: typically, prayer is considered to be lifted to the Father, mediated through the Son, and offered in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus offered His prayer to the Father; we follow His example. Jesus teaches us to pray by starting with the expression: “Our Father in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9). As Jesus’ communion with the Father was frequent, on-going, near, and open, so we find that the Son’s Father is ours, who have become children of God. We have the ear of the God of heaven. We approach this Person.

Each time we approach the Father, we declare our belief in the gospel. For, we could only find ourselves in His audience through the Son. The writer of Hebrews tells us that we can find, through Christ, the throne of grace in prayer (Hebrews 4:16), rather than the throne of judgment. We find this home before God confidently because we step near on the ground of Christ’s work that has enabled our cleansing—and through the reality of the present intercession of Christ for





us (Hebrews 7:25). The Son renders the prayer of fallen men and women acceptable before God.

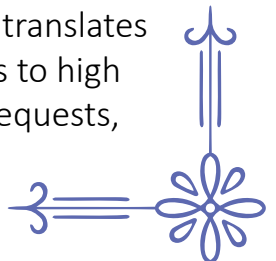
Finally, our prayers are offered in the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 6:18). He illumines the Word of God to our hearts, all while convicting us of sin and convincing us of the truth (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit—who indwells us who believe—prompts us and prods us with what needs confession, what gifts of the Lord need expressions of praise, what longings need to be submitted to God’s throne, or what truths of Scripture need to be recalled from our memories to be considered and meditated upon in the present.

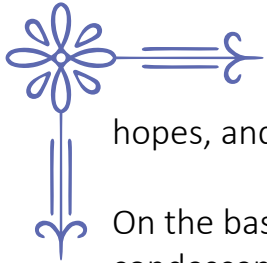
How Can Prayer Be Successful?

The Holy Spirit ministers the Word of Christ to us, helping us confess through Christ, praise Christ, submit our hearts and minds to Christ, and recall Christ. For prayer to be successful, we pray with the Word of God before us, tangibly or intangibly. The foundational premise of the Scriptures- “in the beginning, God” (Genesis 1:1)- informs the context of our prayers. Scripture is from God: we have not initiated the conversation, but He has regarded us.

The nature of Scriptures reminds us of the audience we approach in prayer. For, Scripture is without error, a divine gift of God—the high and holy God in heaven whose greatness is unsearchable. Before this God, in our honesty, we are to be yet careful of what we say and attend to our words in order to rend them fitting of majesty. We think of what God is due. My expressed thoughts very often in prayer are transformed immediately when I utter what I am honestly thinking before this divine One; my thoughts have been revealed as trite and faithless. Often, they have been revealed to be small—small concerns and small requests before the owner of all.

This God is the high and holy one who also “regards the lowly” (Psalm 138:6). Martin Luther wrote that prayer is the raising of the heart. We do this act. God also does this act. He lifts our hearts to Him. He regards the lowly and translates our prayers into His holy presence through marvelous grace. He lifts us to high and holy heaven, partakers in Him (Hebrews 3:14). He heightens our requests,





hopes, and expectations for Himself.

On the basis of the Scriptures, then, we reply to God who is over all and has condescended to raise us. We point a finger to the text, and we ask God for the result or promise there to be true in our lives in the present. Author and pastor Colin Smith says, “Prayer is standing in the gap between what God has said and what you experience and it is bringing the two together.” Being successful in prayer involves aligning ourselves with the conversation, so to speak, that God has already begun—making God’s concerns ours, asking for our God’s promises and truths to be realities in our lives and hearts as we increasingly know Him who changes us.

What Is the Result of Prayer?

Prayer can result in submission, like Jesus in Gethsemane. Prayer can result in answers of yes, like the yes Abraham received when praying for Sodom (Genesis 18:16-33). Prayer can result in rest in God Himself, as with the tender confessions of the lamenters of Scriptures who find solace in God’s character and sovereign power. Prayer can result in worship and awe, as we join the heavenly chorus of praise to the excellent Lamb of God (Revelation 4:6-11). Prayer to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit unites our spirits with the truths of God’s Word in this very day. We must pursue the honest, pretense-denying presentations of our hearts to God. And, we must assume the directionally correct route—we are below Him, and He is above us.

To take the step of prayer necessitates that we believe in a God who cares, who intends to do us good, and who looks upon us such that we can pray, “Keep me as the apple of Your eye” (Psalm 17:8). And, we must trust that God cares to hear our prayers; if we are sure of all the Father has intended for us, the Son has accomplished for us, and the Spirit is doing within us to mediate the way of prayer—we cannot doubt it.

Lianna Davis is author of Keeping the Faith: A Study in Jude and Made for a Different Land: Eternal Hope for Baby Loss. She and her husband, Tyler, live outside of Dallas, Texas and have two dear daughters.

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