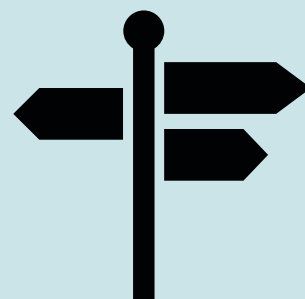
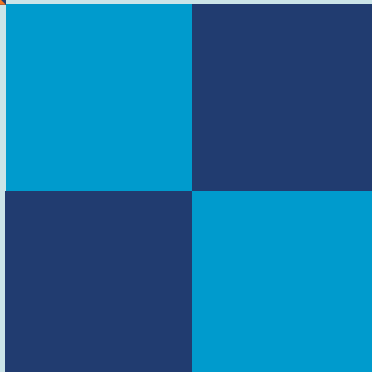




A VISUAL GUIDE TO **PRAYER**

CHRISTOPHER D. HUDSON



A VISUAL GUIDE TO
PRAYER

CHRISTOPHER D. HUDSON

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To Brian Doyle

When I was sixteen, your words transformed my life and directed me toward Jesus—the foundation for everything written in these pages.

Whether you're working through this book on your own,
leading a small group, teaching a class, or preaching a sermon series,
you can find helpful free resources at
readengageapply.com/a-visual-guide-to-prayer
or use the QR code below.





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INTRODUCTION

I used to think that prayer was the horrible obligation of a Christian. Maybe you've felt that too. For years I wanted to be a *good* Christian and went through the routine, but I rarely felt like I encountered God. I experimented with different methods and journals. I downloaded every prayer app in the app store. Each offered promise and hope, but none brought life to my prayers. They gave me structure and helped make prayer routine, but it was a routine that felt dull.

Eventually, an older mentor challenged my view of God and prayer. He asked, What if Jesus—the Author of Life—could bring *life* to your prayers? What if prayer wasn't an obligation but an opportunity to visit with God? What if your relationship with him could be vibrant? Enjoyable? What if prayer could become the most life-giving part of your day? With his help, I decided to try again.

I never imagined that the answer to finding more life in my prayers would be found in a one-word answer: *time*. When prayer is boring, the last thing you want to do is spend more time doing it. You want to finish, not linger longer in silence. But I began a different approach. Prayer became a place to sit with God and bask in his love rather than give him a list of assignments I had prepared for him. Over time, the more I sat with God, the more prayer changed. It became the best part of my day—the part I really didn't want to go without. For me, prayer became a place where I stopped talking at God and started communing *with* him.

This book is designed to help you get there too. It begins with an introductory chapter to prayer, helping you understand what prayer can be. The book then walks you through different kinds of prayer—some of which may be new to you—whether prayers of praise and worship, prayers of confession, bringing your requests to God, or seeking his direction. You'll explore the three-word prayers, the five-finger prayer, and the Prayer of Examen. All of these help build what I hope becomes your own growth in learning how to be with God and finally settle into your own life of prayer.

What makes this book remarkable is the strong use of infographics, charts, and images to help make prayer accessible and memorable. Each chapter presents material in a way that makes complex spiritual concepts and models of prayer easier to grasp so you can personalize them more fully.

I organized this book so you can read it straight through, chapter by chapter, building on your understanding of prayer. Or you can jump to the chapter that addresses the challenge you face right now. If you're going through a difficult time, the best place to start might be learning how to create your own prayer of lament (chapter 5). Or if you find your times of praising God a little dull, perhaps learning that there are seven different Hebrew words for praise will change how you begin to think about praising God (chapter 3). Whether you use this book in a class or in your personal life, I hope you'll engage it personally and not just academically. This guide—and prayer itself—is meant to be lived, not just studied.

Prayer is an invitation to bring God into our world, into the situations that concern and stress us most. Even when we're busy, taking time to pray reminds us that we need God's assistance and help, and that we depend on him.

If you just want to learn more about prayer or if you're stuck in the same cycle I was—doing all the right things but not connecting with God—then this book is for you. The chapters that follow are an invitation to discover prayer not as a duty to fulfill or a discipline to master, but as a journey through Christian practices that lead to a relationship you can enjoy.

Christopher D. Hudson

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Chapter 1

WHAT IS **PRAYER?**



WELCOME TO PRAYER

Prayer is a personal conversation with God that has the potential to alter the world as we understand and experience it. It's a momentary word of praise that touches the heart of the eternal Almighty. It's a whispered plea that reverberates throughout the very throne room of heaven itself.

Prayer is a discipline, a privilege, a lifeline, and, ultimately, a mystery. Scripture gives us the instruction, encouragement, and motivation we need to approach God with our praise, thanksgiving, confession, and requests. But it tells us little about what happens to our prayers after we hit send. The Bible says that God receives every dispatch from our end, but we know little beyond that. Why, when, where, and how he responds lie far beyond our understanding.

Prayer may become a habit, but it's never predictable. Our Partner in prayer is endlessly surprising. God cannot be pigeonholed. At times his strategies do not follow a discernible pattern. His options are as limitless as his love for us. So, every prayer is an adventure, an opportunity, a cause for hopeful anticipation.

In the pages that follow, we will explore the nature of prayer, the passages of Scripture that establish its framework, the experiences of prayer warriors who went before us, and the hard-earned wisdom of those who made prayer their life's pursuit. Yet we will only scratch the surface because the experience of prayer is as uniquely personal as DNA. You can prepare yourself to pray by absorbing the material in this book, but nothing can truly prepare you for prayer—for the seismic shift that happens when prayer becomes a priority in your life.

That's between you and your heavenly Father.

The Simplicity of Prayer

The first thing we need to remember about prayer is not to overthink it. Prayer doesn't have to be formal. It doesn't have to take place in a church. It doesn't require the lighting of candles. It doesn't demand that we assume a certain posture. Prayer can be as casual as expressing a simple thought. You can speak with God as you might with someone riding in a car with you.

There are no special incantations needed to enter God's presence. There are no special

WHAT WE KNOW

God hears every prayer
 God invites us to come
 Prayer connects us
 with God

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How God will respond
 When God will respond
 Why he responds as
 he does

qualifications needed for prayer. You don't need to have your feelings properly sorted. You don't need to get yourself together first. People mystify prayer—and understandably so—to keep it reverent and to acknowledge that it involves an extraordinary kind of conversation. But in the end, it's simply that: a conversation. It just happens to be a conversation with the God of the universe.

On one level, it can be understandably overwhelming that the audience of our prayer is the God of all creation. But on another level, this lofty thought can put us at ease. In prayer, we are communicating with the one who has the power to act—the one who can bring ultimate good from our requests. Beyond that, prayer provides an opportunity for us to get to know our creator in an intimate way.

Presence over Performance

God created humanity to commune with him, to be near him. He did not create us

to perform for him—to conjure the perfect words so that he might pay attention to us. If we simply make ourselves available to him, we will find that he is ready to hear us and be with us.

The perfect example of this is found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisee was big on performance. He devoted himself to lengthy prayers delivered in prime time, in the right locations, for maximum audience interest. Those who watched his prayer show couldn't help but be impressed or come away thinking he was a model of devotion. Jesus contrasted this man with a lowly, unethical tax collector who didn't have his act together or have the lofty, “proper” words to offer to God. His heart wasn't pure, but the tax collector recognized his shortcomings and approached God with honest humility: “O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

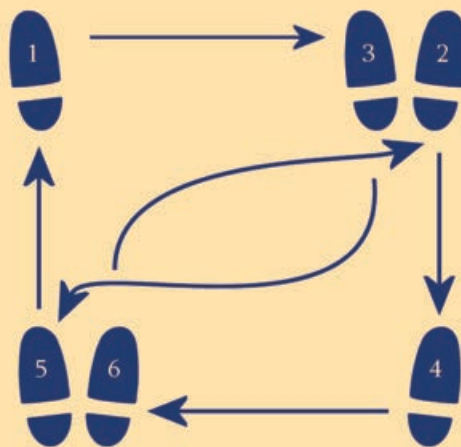
God heard and answered him.

The Problem with Performance

A performance mindset may be useful as we learn to pray, learn models of prayer, and ensure that we remember the heartfelt issues we want to discuss with God. But these techniques are nothing more than prompts to enter his company and are not the objective themselves. To put this in a relatable illustration, consider a woman whose church attendance is somewhat like her social club attendance: She smiles, offers people a hug or handshake, sings the songs, and listens to the sermon all while her heart and mind are set on herself rather than God. She's just going through the motions. Now consider another woman who does all the same activities as the first, but hers are done from a position of giving herself to God, seeking him, and meeting him through the process. Actions matter only if they lead us to God—they are not the goal.

Sometimes the tools we use can get in the way and divert our attention from appreciating our time with God. If we're too focused on the words we use, the format of prayer, and how we structure it, we will spend all our energy going through the motions without actually

Prayer can involve steps ...



... but it's never about the steps.

noticing God's presence. We might kneel to pray for an hour, but if in that time we're overly concerned about saying the right words or having correct theology, these details can hinder our ability to engage with God. It would be the equivalent of a dancer staring so intently at his feet to ensure they're in correct position that he misses the most important part of the dance, which is connection with his partner.



If prayer feels like a performance to you, who are you performing for? God?
Other people? Yourself? How aware are you of God's presence when you pray?

Prayer as a Relationship

For Christians, prayer is the place where faith becomes personal. Without prayer, faith would be just a system of rules to guide our lives. Prayer turns the lights on and helps us see that God is in the room with us. Once we realize that he is there, that we can hear from him, and that we can tell him what we think, we start to grow as his people.

God is, by nature, relational. That may come as a surprise to some people. But he has always existed in community with the other persons of the Trinity. There has never been a time when he has been alone. He is always

engaging, relating, and being within the Godhead. When God made man and woman, he extended that circle of relationship to include us. He created us to have a relationship with him.

If we approach prayer as though we are talking in an empty room, we will find very little satisfaction in it. Likewise, if we treat prayer as a transactional tool—we stick a quarter in the slot, pull the lever, and maybe get something worthwhile out of it—it might be thrilling for a time, but in the end, it will seem demeaning and useless. What good would it be to approach an all-powerful deity who provides for us when he feels like it or who demands our petitions before he acts? That dynamic would lack warmth and affection.

But if we consider prayer to be an opportunity to relate with the one who made us, who has our best interests in mind, and who can grow us in remarkable ways, then we will approach it with a sense of excitement and anticipation. The book of Acts speaks of God as the one in whom “we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:28). Prayer, then, becomes the place where we can be absorbed in God’s nearness and experience his transforming power. Prayer helps us regain a little of the garden of Eden experience of walking with God.

The Movement of Prayer



God's Grace Invites Us into Prayer

Every prayer begins with grace because every prayer begins with God's kindness and initiation. This truth can be traced back to the garden of Eden. Genesis 3 tells us that God would walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (verse 8). The phrasing of the passage may suggest that this was normal—that God walked with Adam and Eve regularly in the garden and they enjoyed a special closeness with him.

When Adam and Eve sinned, God drove them from the garden and banished them from his nearness. But the rest of the story of the Bible is about God reaching out to his children for the purpose of rebuilding his bond with them.

We see this truth—that God desires closeness with his people—in his dealings with the Israelites when he said to them, “I will be your God, and you will be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). We see it in the book of Jeremiah where God says, “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). And we see it in the New Testament where Paul writes that God's people become a temple where God's Spirit

lives (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). The Bible emphasizes God's desire for closeness with his people. He has been reaching out for communion since the day he first made humanity.

Jesus's work on the cross gave us entry to the throne room of God. Christ died for us so that he might serve as our high priest and usher our prayers to the Father (Hebrews 4:14–16). So, in many regards, God began a conversation with us before we ever thought to pray. He made us for fellowship, he saved us, he dwells within us, he opened a pathway to bring our prayers to him, and he even gives us the words to speak when we don't know what to say (Romans 8:26). Prayer

is a response to his grace and forgiveness. We are not passive spectators but people who offer reciprocal gratitude and love for what he's done for us.

Prayer is a means of grace. It's a place where we find forgiveness and mercy in the eyes of God. And in prayer we learn how to forgive and extend mercy to others. Our souls are changed as we grow in our faith and become more closely aligned with him.



Through prayer, God begins the miraculous work of showing us the world through his eyes. We begin to embrace his will rather than our own. Prayer is a place where we're able to release our anxieties and bitterness, a place where we intentionally step away from the busyness of the world to experience God's nearness.

In prayer, we discover that while there are billions of people in the world, God knows us each by name. He deeply and profoundly cares for us as individuals. The God of the entire cosmos, the one who is managing the laws of physics, sustaining the universe, and orchestrating world events according to his plan, is never too busy to hear our requests.

When John F. Kennedy was president of the United States, his young children were known to wander into the Oval Office, even during meetings. Important people had to wait their turn while the most powerful man in the United States said good morning to his children. This is similar to the dynamic of prayer. God's children can "interrupt" him at a moment's notice. They can enter his presence without fear of being turned away or put on hold.

In God's presence, we're reminded of his holiness. He is the one the angels worship in Revelation, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come" (Revelation 4:8). We, in contrast, are sinful, sinful, sinful. We don't deserve to be near God, yet he allows us into his presence anyway. Jesus, the high priest, ushers us in.

"Since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most."

Hebrews 4:14–16



What is one word or one phrase from Hebrews 4:14–16 that encourages you the most when you think about approaching God in prayer?

Prayer Acknowledges Our Need

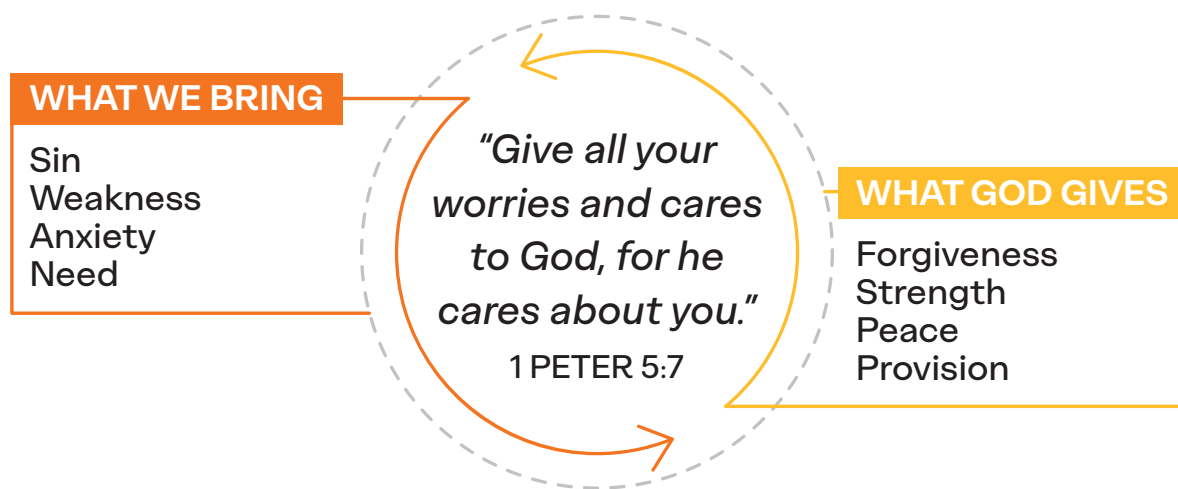
Prayer reminds us of our reliance on God. It's where we praise and offer worship to the one who made us and the universe. It's where we acknowledge a power greater than ourselves. It's also where we acknowledge our own limitations.

This spiritual conversation is where we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness because God is able to save us from the penalty of sin. Prayer is where we remember that every good and perfect gift comes from

the Father above (James 1:17), so we must look to him for all we need.

Through prayer we consciously divert our attention to God and open our hearts to him. We invite him into our circumstances, whether they involve something small, like having lunch, or something profound, such as a major career move. We bring every part of our day to him and acknowledge that Christ is Lord, not only of the big concerns but also the small.

The Exchange of Prayer



From Urgent Needs to Deep Intimacy

For better or worse, prayer often involves a sense of urgency. We tend to approach God on a transactional basis. We need financial help. We need strength to get through the day. We

need more hours to get things done. We need God to work in a painful relationship to make it better. Those are valid prayer requests, and we see them represented in Scripture. We see

Jesus thank God for bread (John 6:11). We see Joshua ask God for more daylight (Joshua 10:12–13). We see Hezekiah ask God for a longer life (2 Kings 20:1–6). We see psalmists ask God for strength (Psalms 28:7; 46:1).

But we also need to recognize that we can go deeper in our prayers. We can ask God more significant questions:

- ❖ Lord, what do you want to accomplish in my heart, or in someone else's heart, in this situation?
- ❖ How can I grow in my relationship with you?
- ❖ How can I help ensure that your will is done, both in my life and worldwide?

These questions often resonate most deeply when we are vulnerable with God—when we share with him our thoughts, desires, and heartaches. As we welcome God into our most personal and tender places, we grow in communion with him. We show him that we rely on him, not just for physical needs but for our deepest spiritual and emotional longings.

The Marriage Analogy

Old Testament prophets frequently used marriage imagery to describe God's bond with his people, and they accused God's people of being unfaithful in that relationship (Jeremiah 3:20; Ezekiel 16:32; Hosea 2:2–13). Marriage is a wonderful illustration of our union with God. In healthy marriages, couples sometimes plan dedicated

date nights during which they share in deep, meaningful conversations over an extended period of time. On other occasions they quickly exchange thoughts and ideas without time to dialogue about them. They communicate as situations dictate, but they do so with a sense of mutual honor, respect, and trust.

The same is true of our bond with God. There is mutual adoration and respect. Sometimes our ideas and thoughts don't need to be fully explained for God to know the heart behind them. He knows our thoughts and ideas even before we have fully articulated them for ourselves.



**Prayer is not performance.
It's participation in divine love.**

Three Little-Known Truths about Prayer

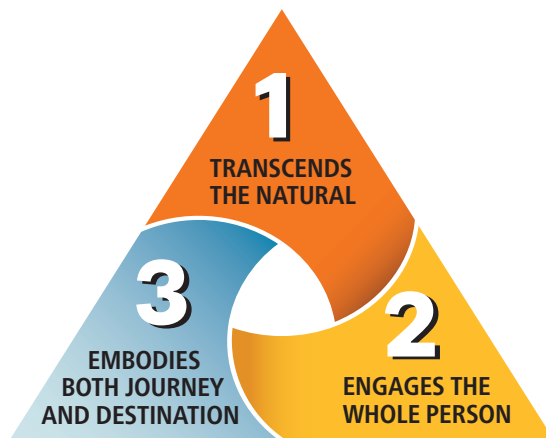
Prayer does more within us than we realize. Here are three truths about prayer that affect us in ways that aren't always obvious.

I. Prayer is a supernatural act.

When we pray, we leave behind our focus on the kingdom of earth and turn our attention to the kingdom of heaven. It's there that we meet God, who stands above time and space and is not bound by the constraints of our human existence. When we pray, we enter an otherworldly realm to talk to a God who is immaterial and not limited in any way. And we know that he hears and receives us. The book of Hebrews says that through Jesus we can boldly enter the Most Holy Place (10:19–22).

The very act of asking God to intervene in our lives is supernatural—it's miraculous. We ask him to provide our daily bread because our needs do not take care of themselves. We ask him to work and supply, using his supernatural abilities. When Jesus called his disciple Peter to step out onto the water (Matthew 14:28–29), Peter took that miraculous step in obedience, and God provided for and protected him. God does the same thing for us, even when we're not walking on water. So, when God answers our prayers, he does so supernaturally.

When God heals a person who's battling cancer or brings peace between two people



in conflict, it's a miraculous intervention. When God works in hearts, even when we're in rebellion against him (Romans 5:8), so that we follow him, love him, and become agents of love to others, it's also miraculous. These are examples of what can occur when we meet God in prayer.

2. Prayer involves the whole human experience.

We live with physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions, and prayer brings them all together.

Prayer is *physical* because we assume a posture when we talk with God. Whether we kneel in prayer, stand before him with our arms outstretched, or just sit quietly, we are engaging physically with God.

Prayer is *emotional* in that it lays bare our hearts before God. We share our deepest feelings, the issues that set off our anger or



break our hearts. We celebrate with him the successes that bring us joy and happiness.

Prayer is *social* in that it often involves praying for others, asking God to work in their lives.

Prayer is *spiritual* because it's the place where we connect with heaven, and heaven connects with us. We're able to approach the throne of grace with confidence to meet God.

3. Prayer is a journey *and* a destination.

Prayer is both a *process* and a *destination*. Prayer in itself is not the means to an end. We don't pray so that God does what we want or gives us the requests we bring. Prayer is about being with God.

As with any relationship, it can be awkward at the beginning of prayer to figure out what to say, how to communicate, what our style is, and what we're going to share. But as we grow in our faith, our conversations with God will become much more free-flowing, and we

will communicate naturally without giving it a second thought. Allowing ourselves to pray and develop such a bond with God allows our communion and fellowship with him to deepen over time.

Because we are with God, who made us and knows our words before we speak them (Psalm 139:4), the words we speak in prayer are less important than we may realize. With a spouse or a good friend, we usually need to speak words. Sometimes that person can anticipate our thoughts and finish our sentences. And they may do so with some accuracy but never completely. It's different with God. He knows our thoughts and feelings even when we don't express them out loud.

Sometimes being with God in silence can be sufficient because our attention is turned toward him. We know he's there and can sense his love for us. Sitting with him can be enough, even if words are not exchanged.

Prayer as a Foundation

Prayer is a foundational spiritual discipline. We see it in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve walked with God, in the exchanges between Noah and God, and between Abraham and God. It became a model for us in Jesus, who took moments to pray at set intervals, like early in the morning, but also in passing moments, such as giving thanks for food.

Because prayer is ultimately reliance on God, it becomes the underpinning of other spiritual practices, such as Bible reading, worshiping, fasting, and ministering to others. Prayer is a practice we can do at any moment, regardless of our situation. It becomes the air we need, which sustains us with every breath. Prayer is spiritual oxygen that keeps us near to the Father.

Prayer Is Like Spiritual Oxygen



**Inhaled
for life**



**Needed in
a crisis**



**Lack of it makes
us weak**



**Keeps a heart
healthy**



What is your relationship with God like? Remember, there is no right or wrong answer to that question. Honesty is what matters.