

PRAYING

THROUGH

**OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES
THAT KEEP US FROM GOD**

JARRETT STEVENS

Over the past decade, I have watched Jarrett Stevens get on his knees and seek the heart of God through so many circumstances. The honesty and openness of his process has allowed him to become a trusted voice in my life—and through this book, I believe he can become the same to you.

KYLE KORVER, NBA veteran

Jarrett Stevens is a dear friend and a deep soul. And what he has given us through this book is a real gift. If you're looking to connect with God in real and authentic ways but find yourself stuck or lost, this book is for you. Through refreshing honesty and humor and spiritually practical wisdom, *Praying Through* helps you find your way to deeper places with God no matter what season you find yourself in.

MIKE FOSTER, founder of People of the Second Chance, host of *Fun Therapy* podcast

There are many books out there on prayer, but not like this one. *Praying Through* is not just theoretical or overly mystical or written so long ago that it is hard to apply today. It doesn't leave you feeling defeated and guilty because you aren't praying enough. It is an encouraging, practical, real-life, sticking-to-the-actual-Bible-teachings guide to prayer. By the end of this book, because it relates to the real struggles we have today, you will find yourself becoming increasingly aware of how much God loves us, and you'll pray more naturally and often as a result.

DAN KIMBALL, Vintage Faith Church

I've known Jarrett for almost twenty years, and he is honestly one of the most gifted teachers around. He has a brilliant way of bringing lofty theological ideas into the messy reality of everyday life. This book is no exception. Jarrett has taken a topic that feels both overfamiliar and overwhelming and offers tangible handles and on-ramps. Through stories, Scripture, a great sense of humor, and the weighty wisdom of someone who has walked the journey for many years, this book will help you move from feeling paralyzed by the idea of prayer to saying, "I can do this!"

AARON NIEQUIST, author of *The Eternal Current*

We serve a conversational God, a God who wants to know us and who wants us to know him through every season of life. What Jarrett has done through this book is to uncomplicate what so many Christians have complicated: how to simply have a conversation with God. I thank God for this book and for my friend Jarrett.

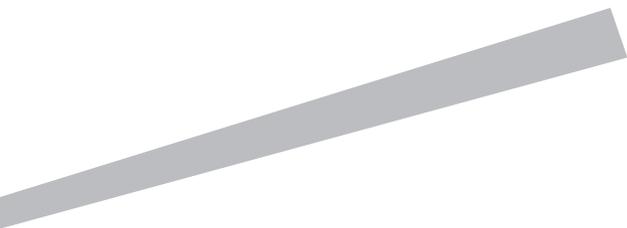
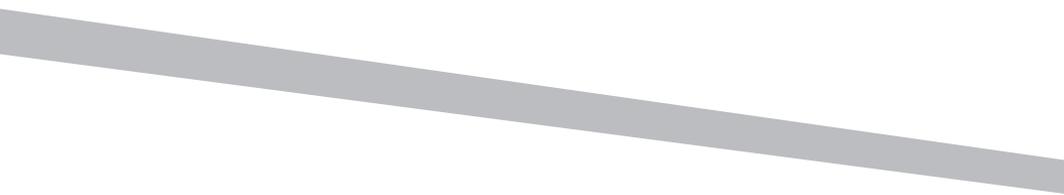
CARLOS WHITTAKER, author of *Kill the Spider* and *Moment Maker*,
host of *Enter Wild* podcast

You don't find many books on prayer that are written in the voice of this generation. This is that kind of book! *Praying Through* is honest, hilarious, and helpful. Jarrett has a way of turning deep spiritual disciplines into helpful habits that we can actually practice in each and every season of life. No matter where you're at with God or with prayer, this book is for you!

SAM COLLIER, host of *A Greater Story* podcast, speaker and host at
North Point Ministries

As the daughter of a pastor, I grew up around prayer. It was like a second language in our home. But just because I grew up *around* prayer doesn't mean that I grew up *in* prayer. Over the years, I've found myself occasionally stuck and lost, passionless and purposeless in prayer. We all have. That's why I *love* this book: Jarrett Stevens has given us a deep and simple guidebook for navigating all of life's seasons through prayer. If you want to grow in prayer and your relationship with God, then TREAT YO SELF to this book!

BIANCA JUÁREZ OLTHOFF, copastor of The Father's House OC,
author of *How to Have Your Life Not Suck* and *Play with Fire*



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NavPress 

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**I dedicate this book to the lives and memories
of my father-in-law, Bill Pieczynski,
and my brother-in-law, Andy Pieczynski.**

Bill (aka “Pops”),

You never allowed me to see you as a father-in-law—only as a father.

Thank you for the example you gave me. For teaching me how to love your daughter well. For showing me how to change the oil in my car. For helping Jeanne and me build our first home together. For listening to early-90s hip-hop with me. For leaving me big shoes to fill.

Although you left us too soon, you left us with so many loving memories and stories. And you left me a legacy that I am still doing my best to live into.

Andy (aka “The Bison”),

My heart is still reeling and grieving and grappling with your life ending so unexpectedly and so soon.

Andy, you were a good son. A good brother. A good friend. A good uncle. And a great husband to Anto and father to Ewan. Thank you for welcoming me into your family so many years ago. Thank you for your incredible and impeccable example of faithfulness and loyalty. Thank you for loving Anto like you did. And thank you for bringing Ewan into this world. I see you in him every time I am with him. Anto and Ewan are part of our family now. They are well loved and will always be taken care of.

I miss you, brother.

And I'll see you soon.





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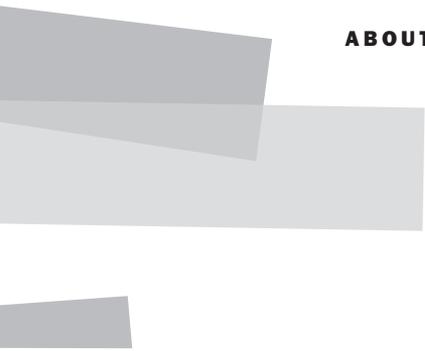
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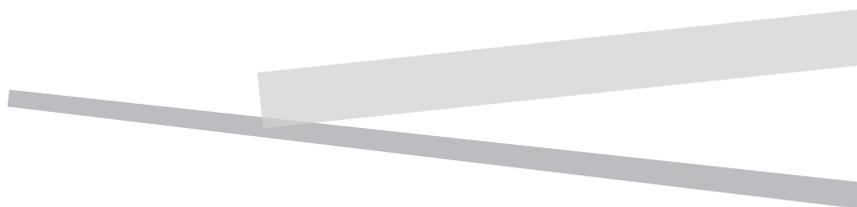
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FOREWORD

To be human is to pray, although almost everybody I know feels a little uncertain about it. Christians often feel guilty about praying too little. Atheists—a surprising number of whom pray—feel guilty about praying at all.

But we're often unclear about how prayer works. One of the most famous passes in football is called a "Hail Mary." When time is running out and the end zone is a long way away, the quarterback will heave the ball into the air and—since human competence is not enough to ensure success—heave a prayer along with the ball. We say things like "You haven't got a prayer," meaning "You haven't got a *chance*."

And yet, we pray—when we're sick, when we're scared, when we're hopeful, when we're hopeless. There is Something or Someone out there that we can't stop calling on.

Which is why Jarrett Stevens has written a guide for all kinds of prayer for all kinds of people. Jarrett reminds us that when the disciples asked Jesus to "teach us to pray,"¹ it meant that prayer is a spiritual skill that can be learned and that

we never stop learning. Thomas Merton wrote about what Jarrett reminds us: When it comes to prayer, “we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!”²

Part of what is so helpful about this book is how very concrete and practical it is. Prayer, in one sense, is not mysterious; it is simply taking the expressions that flow naturally and powerfully from the human condition and turning them Godward. We cheer and celebrate—which is very close to worship. We are crushed and remorseful—which is just a hair away from confession. We are desperate—and desperation lives right next door to intercession. It may be that you know more about prayer than you know. It may be that you pray more than you know.

We begin the adventure of prayer with the master prayer of all time, as Jarrett unpacks the depth of the Lord’s Prayer. But the beauty of prayer is that it’s as simple as single words: *Wow. Please. Help. Thanks. Yes!* The early church fathers and mothers used to say that the Gospels are so wide that anyone can learn from them, yet so deep that no one can ever plumb them. So it is with prayer. It is the great laboratory of the spirit. The most prodigal skeptic on earth can plunge in. The greatest saint on the planet has only skimmed the surface.

For prayer is as deep as God.

This book will also change the way you live and pray, because in it, Jarrett reminds us that our living *is* a form of praying. It is impossible to ask for forgiveness, for example, without living in the slipstream of forgiveness offered to

FOREWORD

others—what Dallas Willard used to call the “unity of spiritual orientation.”³

But what is especially wonderful about Jarrett’s journey is the heart of prayer, because it is in the depths of prayer—our confusion, our inadequacy, our hurt, our wonder—that we meet the depth of God. And we find there a Father more filled with love than we could imagine.

So whatever you’re facing—you’ve picked up the right book.

You have hope.

You have a prayer.

John Ortberg



INTRODUCTION

DEAR GOD...

*Prayer is not about changing God . . .
but being willing to let God change us.*

RICHARD ROHR

I was almost thirty years old before I sent my first text message. It was on my Motorola flip phone, a marvel of modern technology that is now considered a relic. My friend Oomen sent me my first text: “what up, man. we should hang! :)” As profound as his text was, I had no idea *what* it was. I knew who it was from, but I didn’t know how to respond. So I called him.

“Dude. What was that?”

“What was what?” he replied.

“That . . . email . . . you sent to my phone. What was that?” (Don’t judge. This was the early aughts. Pre-iPhone. Pre-DM. Pre-GIF. It was a simpler time in those days.)

He told me about texting and how I could reply by

pressing the numbers on my phone multiple times to get the letters that I needed to spell the words that I wanted. (Note to millennial readers: Back then mobile phones used to serve only for making phone calls and playing the occasional game of Snake. There was no keyboard. Each number on the phone's keypad had letters associated with it: 2 = ABC, 3 = DEF, 4 = GHI, and so on. To get to the letter "C," you had to press the "2" button three times. The letter "E" took two pushes of the "3" button. You get the idea . . .) I spent the next five minutes after our call composing my first text: "thnx man. this is cool."

Fast-forward a little more than a decade. Our daughter, Gigi, was sending me texts *filled* with emojis—all the emojis—at six years old. At a very young age, our kids learned how to text. Now they send texts to their friends. They send GIFs to me and my wife. They send videos to their grandparents. To them, texting is native. They took to it naturally. What was new to me is normal to them. It's just another way they communicate.

The same could be said of prayer. It may seem new, unfamiliar, and a little clunky . . . until it isn't. Eventually prayer becomes innate and normal. Talking with God can become as natural as talking with a friend. With presence, patience, and practice, prayer becomes another way to communicate—perhaps the most important way, one that communicates the most important things about your life. It can become easier and more essential. You can and will find your way, find your voice, and—ultimately—find God

more present and available than you could have ever possibly imagined.

WHEN PRAYING SEEMS HARD

I've been a pastor for more than twenty years, and I can't tell you how many times I've heard the following:

“I just don't know how to pray.”

“I didn't grow up doing this kind of stuff.”

“I've found it hard to pray after this loss.”

“I'm too angry at God to pray right now.”

I get it. I've had my fair share of frustration and struggle with prayer. Years ago, my father-in-law died suddenly and unexpectedly while running a race with his son. None of us saw it coming, and none of us saw how we would make it without him. Many months passed before I felt like talking to God again. When my workload is particularly intense (precisely the time I need to be praying the most), I tell myself the last thing I have time for is prayer. Like when my family is running late in the morning. Or when I'm exhausted at the end of the day.

I get it. Praying seems hard.

For many people, learning to pray feels like learning a second language: You're never quite sure if you're using the right words the right way. You can feel like a tourist lost in a foreign land, where everyone else knows something that you don't.

Or maybe prayer seems hard because you feel like you're

not praying enough. Ask anyone who prays how often they pray, and they will most likely tell you, in somewhat deflated and potentially shame-laden tones, “Not enough. I should be praying more.” *Should* is one of the unhealthiest, most unhelpful words in the English language. It’s filled with guilt and obligation, especially when it comes to prayer. Like sleeping, flossing, exercising, and eating healthily, praying is another thing that we know is good for us but just don’t do *enough* of—as if there were a prayer quota that we never quite seem to reach.

Then there are times when prayer becomes hard because you just don’t want to do it. You’re either too tired or too busy. Or you don’t feel like bothering God with your silly little prayers. Over time, praying can seem rote and repetitive, stagnant and stale. You may sense that you’ve run out of words to say.

And for some people, a great loss, the presence of pain, or an unwelcome season of grief makes praying feel like stumbling and fumbling around in the dark. Maybe you’ve experienced the flame of prayer that once burned bright but has now dwindled to a flicker at best, and you just can’t see a way through the darkness.

Maybe you’ve found that the sweet and simple prayers of childhood faith are no longer big enough for the complexities of adult life. Formulas for prayer fall short and eventually fail us. Sometimes all the words in the world cannot seem to connect the dots from our hearts to God’s. Martyn Lloyd-Jones,

a famous twentieth-century Welsh minister, acknowledged the perplexity of prayer by calling it “the supreme expression of our faith in God”¹ and saying that “everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.”²

Praying is hard. Or at least that’s what we tell ourselves. The goal of this book is to help you see that while prayer is mysterious, it is not as hard as you think. In fact, without being in any way even slightly patronizing, praying is honestly quite simple.

The problem for many of us is that we have forgotten how simple prayer really is: so simple that a child can do it. It’s just talking with God. That’s it. If you can talk to a friend, you can pray. God didn’t make prayer hard—we did.

My kids have been praying since they could talk. Not because my wife and I are amazing parents, but because to them it’s simple. They just talk to God. They pray without pretense. They use their own words to let God know how they are feeling and what they want. They pray for their friends, they pray for their schoolwork, they pray for each other. They even pray for their stuffed animals. Chiggers the Lion and Roary the Bear have been covered in prayer.

The power of prayer is in its simplicity. And yet so often we find ourselves feeling the same way Jesus’ disciples did when they asked, “Lord, teach us [how] to pray” (Luke 11:1).

**Anyone who has committed
in their heart to pray has
found it hard to pray.**

And if you can posture yourself like those first followers of Jesus and ask God to make prayer your way of life, I believe this book will be not only helpful but also liberating and life-giving to you. Because we need prayer more than we know.

PRAYING IS ESSENTIAL

Whether you think prayer is hard or easy or something in-between, one thing is for certain—prayer is essential. It is our lifeline. It centers us, sustains us, and connects us to a God who is for us; a God who makes himself available to us, if we just pray. Prayer is not only our way *to* God but also our way *through* life. It is our way through this beautiful and broken world. Prayer is not merely a thing we do in life but also the very *way* we do life. It is how we choose to live with God in this world. If you are going to make prayer a way of life, you must be honest about where you're at and how you feel about prayer.

Prayer is not merely a thing we do in life but also the very way we do life.

Not that long ago, I found myself saying good-bye to my dear friend Jeremiah, a worship leader in our church. I did not want to say good-bye. I was not prepared to say good-bye. He and his beautiful wife, Tamara, and their amazing son, Kanon, had been part of Soul City Church since the beginning. Jeremiah's death came quicker than any of us were

ready for. After a year of battling lymphoma and awaiting stem cell surgery, Jeremiah left this world and went on to lead worship in the very presence of God. Jeremiah modeled for our church what it means to worship God “in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). He built our prayer ministry from the overflow of his own prayer life. And as we stood there saying good-bye to a soul who was already gone, I knew I wouldn’t be able to get through that season without prayer. My struggle to pray in the season following my father-in-law’s death had already taught me how much I needed prayer in such times. Without a connection to God, I would be consumed by grief. I needed a safe and sacred place to cry, to grieve, to pour out my heart to a heart that is familiar with grief and loss.

Our pains and pitfalls, hurts and hungers, dramas and decisions, sadnesses and sicknesses are often our greatest paths to prayer. Sometimes it takes getting to the end of yourself for your prayer life to begin. When every door seems to have closed, *then* we are open to prayer. This isn’t just true of those who are in a relationship with God. When life gets hard or out of control, even people who don’t believe in God believe in prayer. Somehow we simultaneously know and forget how essential prayer is for this life. Life is too full and too fragile to *not* be supported by prayer.

Wherever you’re at and whatever you’re facing as you read these words, my hope—my prayer—is that you will discover prayer as your way of making it through.

YOU'RE ALREADY AWESOME

Here's the thing—you already know how to pray. It's true! No matter how hard or challenging it may seem, no matter how new you are to it or how long you've been at it, you are already awesome at praying.

If you've ever cheered for your favorite team, you already know how to *worship*.

If you've ever said, "I'm sorry," you already know how to *confess*.

If you've ever worried about anything, you already know how to *meditate*.

If you've ever talked for hours with a friend, you already know how to *talk with God*.

Simply put, prayer is all about taking the things you do naturally and making them supernatural. That doesn't mean that you won't get stuck. All of us get stuck in prayer. All of us need help. The goal of this book is to give you a way to pray through this life by offering honest reflection, biblical connections, and real-world application. You get to learn from those who've gone before you, who've faced the same struggles you

Prayer is all about taking the things you do naturally and making them supernatural.

have, so you can go further in your faith. The goal is not to make you a black belt in prayer but simply to help you know and fall more in love with God, to live your life so connected

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to him that you can face whatever comes your way. This is not a “Three Simple Steps” kind of book. Prayer just doesn’t work that way. This book is about you accessing the power and presence of God in your everyday life. It’s about you growing closer to God and becoming more of who he created you to be.

Whether you’re new to prayer or have been at it a long time, my hope is that before you know it, you’ll be connecting with God in deep and meaningful ways. That prayer becomes your way through this life; that it becomes as natural and normal as texting a friend. And that no matter what season you find yourself in, there is always a way to pray through.

“TAFN. THX. BRB.”





1

WHEN EVERYTHING IS NEW

To pray means to be willing to be naive.

EMILIE GRIFFIN



I've torn my ACL . . . twice. The same knee. Four years apart, almost to the day. The first time was shortly after I turned forty. I had made a list of forty things that I wanted to accomplish in my fortieth year. One of them was picking up where I had left off with skateboarding some ten years prior. My resurrected skateboarding career lasted all of forty-five minutes. It ended with me clawing and crawling my way out of a six-foot-deep bowl at a skate park in Des Moines, Iowa, and driving five hours back home to Chicago . . . with a torn ACL and three Advil in my system.

The second time I tore my ACL was in the heat of battle. Our staff had converted the church into a Nerf-gun battle

zone, and it was men versus women. The women, led by my wife, Jeanne, were cheating terribly. Something had to be done. Someone had to put an end to their tyranny. That someone was me . . . until, running around a corner, I heard the familiar “pop” of my left knee. I knew exactly what I had done. I had torn my ACL—playing with Nerfs.

Leading up to and well after surgery each time, I had an unpaid part-time job: going to physical therapy. Three times a week for four months, I showed up. Each time, I spent an hour to an hour and a half doing the smallest and seemingly most insignificant exercises: Balancing on one foot. Balancing on one foot while standing on a foam pad. Balancing on one foot while standing on a foam pad while throwing a ball against a wall. Walking. Stepping on and off a six-inch wooden block. Sitting. Rainy-day recess involved more exercise than this, and yet I had to do it to get back to where I had been. I had to do things that felt simple and small over and over until they became normal.

This is how prayer can seem when everything is new. It can feel slow and small and frustrating. It can feel intimidating and overwhelming. It can feel like learning to walk all over again. Or more specifically, learning to talk all over again. It can feel clumsy and repetitive and leave you wondering if you’ll ever figure it out. If you’re new to prayer or coming back to prayer and find yourself having this kind of reaction or experience, here’s some good news—you’re never

going to figure it out. Encouraging, right? Here's why it's good news: You're not supposed to figure it out.

Prayer is a spiritual practice that takes . . . wait for it . . . practice. The point of prayer is not perfection but participation. No one ever figures out prayer. Now, I know what you're thinking—*But what about Jesus? He seemed to have prayer figured out.* True. Jesus is a safe answer to most spiritual questions. But even all of Jesus' prayer bona fides didn't cause him to pray any less. If anything, he prayed more. We find Jesus praying all the time. Jesus, who was fully God and fully human, chose to practice prayer, which is a great reminder to those who have been praying for a long time. I have been praying for almost forty years, and there have been several times in my life when I needed to start over with prayer to get back to that first-crush rush that comes from connecting with God. Maybe what you most need is a do-over with prayer, and you're ready to begin again.

**The point of prayer
is not perfection
but participation.**

If you want to grow and are willing to start where you're at, you can learn to pray just like Jesus. If you're willing to ask God for help with prayer (as one of Jesus' disciples does in Luke 11:1), you are already further along than you realize. And over time, as you commit yourself to prayer, what is new right now will become a natural and necessary part of your life—something that you love to do and don't even have to think about. Just like learning to walk all over again.

EVERYTHING YOU KNOW WAS NEW ONCE

Except for a handful of things, *everything* you do you had to *learn* to do. Things like breathing and sleeping and blinking were included in the box. Everything else you had to learn.

You learned how to eat solid foods (as well as which foods you liked and which ones you didn't like).

You had to learn how to walk.

You had to learn how to talk.

You had to learn how to dress yourself (post-onesies).

You had to learn how to read by yourself and write without autocorrect.

You had to learn how to ride a bike.

You had to learn math, history, and science—and how to play “Hot Cross Buns” on the recorder.

You had to learn (albeit awkwardly) how to kiss.

I could go on and on. Just about everything you know how to do was new at some point. Either someone taught you or you figured it out on your own. No one argues that. The place where we often have a problem, however, is in admitting that we don't know things. No one likes to admit they are a newbie. Acknowledging that you don't know how to do something requires a level of humility and vulnerability that doesn't always come naturally.

During college, I landed a high-profile job in the domestic-foods export industry. Okay, I was a pizza delivery guy (but you must admit, it sounds better the other way).

One night when my car broke down, I had to borrow a coworker's car to keep making deliveries. He threw me the keys as he asked, "You know how to drive a stick (manual transmission), right?"

"Of course!" I answered. I did not. It was one of the longest nights of my life as I revved and rolled my way backward through the hills of San Francisco's East Bay. True story: It took me forty-five minutes to deliver one particular order . . . only two miles away.

Why didn't I just answer honestly? Why was it so hard to admit that I didn't know how to drive a stick shift? One word: *pride*. I didn't want my coworker to know that I didn't know. You may not think of yourself as a prideful person, but if you've ever found it hard to admit that you don't know something or have resisted being taught something new, then you have wrestled with pride. And when it comes to prayer, nothing gets in the way more than pride. Our fear of vulnerability and aversion to authenticity can keep us from intimacy with God. Pride prevents prayer. If you are not ready to admit that you don't know, then you are not ready to really grow. This is why Andrew Murray, a nineteenth-century writer and pastor, wrote that "pride must die in you or nothing of heaven can live in you."¹

Pride prevents prayer.

If, however, you are willing to admit to God and yourself where you are *actually* at with prayer, endless possibilities await. If you can summon the courage of humility to say

that you need help, you are already well on your way to an ever-expanding prayer life.

A friend recently and quite radically said yes to Jesus for the first time. As someone who had been very successful in his career and had achieved more than he ever could have dreamed, he found himself, in his midforties, starting from the beginning with God. He didn't own a Bible. He had never really prayed before. And he had never visited church more than two weeks in a row.

Beginning a relationship with God halfway through your life can be very humbling. But rather than playing into pride, he has unapologetically owned where he is at. We got him his first Bible (rather, he stole it from church, but we let that slide). He asked where he should begin in the Bible. We told him the Gospel of Mark. He finished it in a week and decided to read Matthew, Luke, and John on his own. He admitted that he had never really prayed before but wanted to learn.

At dinner recently, we talked about prayer, and he told me, "I've been praying to God, and I haven't really heard anything from him lately . . . so I've moved on to the Holy Spirit." I love it! His hunger for spiritual growth is awe-inspiring. And what is most impressive to me is his humility. When you are willing to admit where you're at, you can go just about anywhere.

Perhaps the most powerful prayer for someone who is new to prayer or coming back to it is simply this: "God, teach me how to pray." Rather than pretending you know it

all or shaming yourself for not, can you muster the courage to meet Jesus where you are at and echo the simple request of one of Jesus' own disciples? To admit that you are new and to start there?

PRACTICING PRAYER

Again, think about all the things you've learned how to do up to this point in your life. My hunch is that in the process of learning whatever it is that you don't even think twice about anymore, you never stopped to think about why you didn't know how to do it. You probably didn't get all that discouraged or defeated. You just came across something that you didn't know how to do, and you tried it. And you tried it again. You might have fumbled around for a bit until you figured it out. Or you found someone else who knew how to do it, and you asked for help. But you kept doing it and kept doing it until it became second nature to you.

So it is with prayer.

Like just about everything else in your life, you start where you're at, and you try. And you try again. And you fumble around for a while. And eventually you muster enough courage to ask for help—which, in so many ways, is what you have already done by placing this book in your hands.

It all comes down to whether you are willing to learn. Are you willing to start where you're at? And are you willing to believe that God isn't waiting for you to get it all right . . . but in fact is already with you, teaching you how to pray?

TEACH ME TO PRAY

If there were a Greatest Hits of Prayer, without a doubt the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) would top the list. It's the "Bohemian Rhapsody" of prayer . . . only with less falsetto. It's easily the most well-known prayer from the Bible, recognized around the world. This prayer has been studied, memorized, recited, and sung for some two thousand years. It is familiar to both children and adults. In the church that I grew up in, we sang it as a song on Sunday mornings. I always loved that because it built and built until the end, when everyone sang at the top of their lungs and from the bottom of their hearts, "For thine is the kiiiingdom, and the powwwwer, and the gloooooorrrry foreveeeevvvverrrrr. Aaaaamen." It was definitely a showstopper!

But this iconic prayer that Jesus taught us did not come from some three-point sermon or prepared remarks. It came from a deep place. It came from raw and real desire. It came from Jesus recognizing that his friends, who were new to prayer—or at the very least, prayer like this—needed help. They were willing to admit that they needed help. In fact, it says in Luke 11:1,

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

What we see here is that the disciples had seen something—two somethings, to be precise:

1. They had seen Jesus pray.
2. They had seen John's disciples pray.

And they wanted what others seemed to have.

Watching Jesus Pray

At this point, the disciples had been with Jesus for a year, maybe more. They had seen Jesus pray a good bit. They noticed that he regularly pulled away from the din and demand of the crowds to seek silence and solitude. They had also heard him pray. In Luke 9, we read several accounts of Jesus praying. He prayed as he gave thanks for the miraculous provision of God at the feeding of the five thousand (verse 16). He prayed with a handful of his disciples right before his transfiguration (verses 28-29).

After seventy-two of his followers returned from their first ministry adventure, Jesus prayed while “full of joy through the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21). And in Luke 11:1, we see that the disciples had been watching Jesus while he prayed. They had seen Jesus pray. They had seen God the Son speak with God the Father. Jesus, the one we pray to, was a participant in prayer. This is worth considering for a moment.

Can you imagine what that would have been like? God the Son . . . praying through God the Spirit . . . to God the Father. I'm not sure if there is any purer, more potent prayer

than that. And the disciples got to witness it! They got to experience it with him. It would be like sharing a driveway basketball hoop with LeBron James. Or like having Danica Patrick as your Uber driver. They had proximity to prayer in its most powerful and personal state. You'd think that watching Jesus pray would have been enough of an education for these first followers. But it wasn't. They had their eyes elsewhere as well.

Watching Others Pray

Luke 11:1 tells us that a large part of the motivation for the disciples' interest in prayer was rooted in some level of comparison and competition. They had seen the way John's disciples prayed. The John they are referring to here is Jesus' cousin, John the Baptizer. Like Jesus, he had disciples. And apparently, John had taught *his* disciples to pray. Whether out of inspiration, comparison, or competition, Jesus' disciples wanted what John's disciples seemed to have when it came to prayer. This is common for folks who are new to prayer or are coming back to it: We want what others seem to have.

I remember hearing one of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, pray at an intimate event where she was speaking years ago. I had been praying for most of my life, but I had never prayed like she prayed. It was honest and unpolished. Raw and real. She may have even sworn in that prayer; I can't recall. But it wouldn't surprise me. This was *not* how I

was taught to pray, but I was immediately captured by it. I wanted to pray like Anne Lamott prayed.

The disciples' desire and demand for Jesus to teach them to pray is an invitation for us to ask the same. The disciples were not new to prayer. As good Jewish kids, they had grown up reciting prayers and attending prayer services. Some examples of these follow:

- *the shema*—a morning and evening prayer declaring God's wholeness, holiness, and oneness
- *the shaharith*—a morning prayer service filled with blessing and naming the day's needs
- *the minhah*—an afternoon prayer service for confession and contrition
- *the maarib*—an evening prayer service for recommitting the body to God's service
- *the birkat hamazon*—a prayer of grace said after meals

These were prayers they were taught and had memorized and practiced since they were kids. They knew how to pray *these* kinds of prayers, but there was something about the way Jesus prayed that felt new. It was personal rather than polished—more in the moment rather than merely memorized. Not that there was anything wrong with the way they had been taught to pray . . . it just seemed as though there could be more. Rather than feeling intimidated, they became intrigued. So they asked Jesus for help. And help, he did.

A WAY TO PRAY

Jesus gave us a *way* to pray. Forgoing formulas and trite prayers to recite, Jesus laid out the spirit and flow of how we can come to God with all of who we are to experience all of who he is. If you're new to prayer—or like Jesus' disciples, new to this way of praying—the Lord's Prayer can be not only helpful but also transformational. Rather than rushing through it or just reciting it, let's go slowly through Matthew 6, taking a moment to find all that God has for us in this way to pray.

“Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed Be Your Name”

Right off the bat, Jesus acknowledges who God is, where he's at, and how we come to him. From this most familiar prayer, it is perhaps these first two words that we have become most familiar with: *Our Father*. They're why some folks call this prayer “the Our Father.” It's not a very original title, but it is effective. In our formality and familiarity with this prayer, though, it's easy to miss what Jesus was teaching us. Many biblical scholars believe that the Aramaic word Jesus used for *Father* here is *abba*. *Abba* does not translate to the formality of the word *father* as we understand it but is best understood in our language as *daddy*. It's intimate. It's personal. It immediately implies the type of relationship we are meant to have with God. He is our Abba Daddy.

But this is no ordinary daddy; this is a perfect parent who is enthroned in heaven. Jesus uses the word translated as *hallowed* to deepen our relationship with God. *Hallowed* is a “Bible-y” word if ever there was one. It's not one we tend to

use every day. When was the last time you described a movie as “hallowed”? Probably not recently (or often). Simply put, *hallowed* means holy, sacred, and set apart. In other words, God is our Holy Daddy who is worthy of all worship in heaven and earth . . . and yet is intimately available to us whenever we call. He’s bigger than we can conceive and closer than we can imagine.

**“Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done,
on Earth as It Is in Heaven”**

Jesus continues, teaching us that we are to ask and expect God’s Kingdom, will, and way to be present in our lives. This is not merely some future hope or expectation but a present manifestation in *me*. In *us*. In my home. In my neighborhood. At my work. The idea is that you and I bring God’s perfect way to the often-imperfect ways of this world, that this physical realm becomes the place where we practice what is commonplace in heaven.

“Give Us Today Our Daily Bread”

Next, Jesus teaches us that we can ask and expect God to provide for each one of our needs. The phrase *daily bread* serves as a reminder of the Exodus story, specifically Exodus 16. After God had led the Israelites out of captivity and while they were wandering their way toward the Promised Land, God miraculously provided them with manna every morning. God’s instructions were simple: “I will provide you with what you need for that day. No more. No less. That’s my job.

Your job is to rest and trust in my provision. Don't worry about tomorrow's bread. Don't hold on to yesterday's bread. I will always have all that you need for today." Jesus shows us that when we pray, it's okay to ask God for what we need and to trust that he not only knows but is also faithful to provide us with exactly that. Every day.

"And Forgive Us Our Debts, as We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors"

Jesus moves from requesting to repenting by revealing that we can come to God directly to receive the forgiveness only he can offer. This idea was shocking and new for Jesus' disciples. For more than a thousand years, forgiveness from God was typically sought by proxy, through a priest. Ceremonial sacrifices were offered. Someone was needed to intercede. But not so with Jesus. He taught that we can come directly to God to receive the forgiveness that we so desperately need.

But Jesus attached an addendum. "As we also . . ." was an assumption that just as we are free to ask for forgiveness from God, we are also free to offer forgiveness to those who sin against us. Can you imagine how freeing it would be to end your day by fully forgiving anyone who had wronged you? To have a clean slate? To not carry today's wrongs into tomorrow? This is one of the many ways we get to practice the way of heaven here on earth. We offer others the forgiveness we ask for and receive from God.

***“And Lead Us Not into Temptation,
but Deliver Us from the Evil One”***

Jesus then teaches that we must ask God to guide and guard us against the pull and lull of temptation. James 1:13 tells us that God is not the one who tempts us—rather, the enemy, Satan, does. What Jesus is showing us here is that just as there is an enemy who tempts and attacks us, there is a God who protects and rescues us. God knows what tempts us, and *we* ought to know what tempts us! It serves us well to ask God for the protection that he perfectly provides.

***Bonus: “For Yours Is the Kingdom and the Power
and the Glory Forever. Amen.” (NASB)***

Some translations of Matthew’s Gospel include an epilogue to Jesus’ prayer.² It’s the way I learned it as a child. It serves as a climactic conclusion to this powerful prayer. Jesus ends where he began by bringing us back to the fact that when we pray, we access the power and presence of a God who is in, above, and at the center of it all. It reminds us what’s really going on when we pray and to whom we are talking. This line is both the point and the exclamation point of it all.

In a few short sentences, Jesus gives us a profoundly powerful and surprisingly simple way to pray. A way to come to God when we are still learning to walk with him. A way of talking with God that is both uncluttered and uncomplicated. He gives us a way to pray when we’re not even sure what we should say.

MAKING A NEW NORMAL

As someone who grew up in America, I was taught the national anthem at a young age. It's something we sang at school assemblies and sporting events, and of course on the Fourth of July. As familiar as its lyrics may be, they're easy to forget. There are countless YouTube videos of singers struggling to hit the notes and remember the lyrics in front of thousands of people. It can be a ton of fun to watch people improvise lyrics to this famous song. But before you find yourself in a YouTube rabbit hole, you should answer this question: How much of the national anthem do *you* know from memory? I'll help you with the first few lines:

Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
 What so proudly we hailed, at the twilight's last gleaming?

Do you know the next couple of lines? Are you sure? Were you able to get past the part about streaming ramparts? The reason the national anthem is so easy to forget is because it's filled with language and imagery that aren't commonly used anymore. Think about it. Do you even know what a rampart is? And when was the last time you "gallantly" did anything? Probably not recently.

It's possible to hear something so much that you forget it. To become so familiar with something that it loses its power and purpose. Like the national anthem, the Lord's Prayer has been recited so often that it's easy to lose the significance

of what Jesus was teaching us about God, ourselves, and prayer itself.

If you're new to prayer or are looking for a fresh way to pray, I honestly can't think of a better place to start than with the Lord's Prayer. It is a powerful and personal way to pray when you don't quite know what to say. But it's important to note that what Jesus gave us was not simply a prayer to recite from memory but a lifestyle for us to embody.

So what would that look like? How can you take what Jesus taught his friends and followers and make it yours? Anne Lamott, in her brilliant and beautiful book *Help, Thanks, Wow*,³ refined prayer down to its most simple state. She contends that just about all prayers we pray can be summed up in three words: "HELP," "THANKS," and "WOW." I suggest that you can pray the way Jesus prayed by starting with just a few words:

- *WOW.*
- *PLEASE.*
- *HELP.*
- *THANKS.*
- *YES!*

WOW

A great place to start in prayer is with God . . . not you. As I grew up attending church, I heard lots and lots of people pray. I remember one person, an older man, would begin his prayers with the longest list of names and attributes of God. "Great and gracious God . . . Maker of heaven and earth . . .

our Alpha and Omega . . . author and perfecter of our faith . . . Jehovah Jireh” (or Jehovah Nissi or Rapha or Roi, or sometimes all the above).⁴ It would be two to three minutes before he even got to the meat of the prayer!

A great place to start in prayer is with God . . . not you.

But there is something so right and rightsizing about beginning your prayer in a state of WOW. Jesus taught that you can pray simultaneously on your knees and in the arms of the Father. That you need both reverence and relationship when you come to God in prayer. One of the simplest ways for you to practice this is to start praying with the words “God, you are . . .”

God, you are holy.

God, you are here.

God, you are so beautiful.

God, you are so loving.

God, you are so patient.

God, you are _____ (you fill in the blank).

This is what Jesus taught us when he began his prayer with “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” In that one sentence, Jesus declares several truths about the character and nature of God:

- *Our Father*—We have a relationship with God. We know him, and he knows us.

- *in heaven*—There is an “otherness” to God. He is with us but is greater than us.
- *hallowed be your name*—God is holy and perfectly deserving of our praise.

In his opening line, Jesus begins with WOW. He starts by declaring who God is before he says or requests anything else.

When you come to God in prayer, how can you begin with an attribute or attributes of him that you are most aware of or that you most need in that moment? Can you begin by telling him who he already knows he is? Can you start with God before you get to you? I suggest this not because God needs to hear it or has somehow forgotten who he is but because *we* so often do. When you start with a posture of WOW before God, it reminds you of who you are in relationship to him and why you are approaching him in prayer in the first place. God does not need to be reminded of who he is—you and I need the reminder. And WOW is a great way to do just that.

PLEASE

After telling God who he is, tell God what it is that you need. Whatever it is, ask him. Like WOW, your PLEASE prayers are about things that God already knows. He already knows all your needs before you do—and better than you do. Again, PLEASE is more for you than it is for God. And the invitation of prayer is to be as bold as you are specific. In Matthew 7:11, Jesus reminds us that God is a perfect parent

who loves to “give good gifts to those who ask him.” So why wouldn’t you ask him?

Our daughter, Gigi, has no problem with being bold. She gets it from her mother. Gigi is responsible to thank God for dinner in our house. And she uses this time as an open mic to let God know all the things that she needs, wants, and expects him to do. She has prayed for specific desserts to be served. She’s prayed for puppies. She’s prayed for previous consequences to be lifted. She’s not afraid to ask God for Christmas presents . . . in July. She has no problem saying PLEASE. I wonder . . . do *you*?

Jesus taught us that a right way to come to God is to come with what we need. You are not bothering God when you ask him to provide for you. He loves to take care of his children. He always has, and he always will. The question is, Are you willing to say PLEASE? Are you willing to take the posture of being openhearted and empty-handed? Are you willing to trust that God has all that you need and that he will take care of you, no matter what?

HELP

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus gave us an insight into ourselves and into the heart of God. He taught that we shouldn’t be afraid to ask for God’s help with what we often struggle with on our own—forgiveness and faithfulness. These practices do not appear to be a struggle for Jesus, but they are for me. And my hunch is that they are for you as well.

Jesus reminds us that we need help forgiving others and

ourselves. That it doesn't come naturally. That in fact, forgiveness is supernatural. In the Lord's Prayer, we see that while God freely offers us forgiveness, we still need to ask for it. I cannot completely absolve myself of my sin—believe me, I've tried. There is no cosmic moral ledger where enough good deeds cancel out bad ones. I need forgiveness. I need to be forgiven.

Jesus also shows us that we need help being faithful to God so we aren't drawn down paths that lead us away from his best for our lives. That temptation is real. And no amount of self-will or self-discipline can do for me what God promises through the power of his presence. No matter how secret or subtle it may be, the truth is that temptation is never faced in isolation. God is with you. He is there. This is what David was working out in Psalm 139:7: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

For some of us, this may trigger unhealthy and unhelpful fear. "I can't escape God! I can't get a break! He's always watching!" But those with more experience with God don't see this as a burden at all but as a blessing. "Thank you, God . . . you are here! I am not alone. Even in the darkest places, your light still shines." They see the promise of God's presence, that he is not only *with* me—he is also *for* me. He is here to help. All I have to do is ask.

THANKS

While Jesus doesn't specifically say "Thank you" in this prayer, he does acknowledge that everything comes from and

belongs to God, that it's all his. And Jesus acknowledges that God shares it with us by providing us with exactly what we need. We will explore this more later in this book, but it is helpful to note that gratitude is always a good rule of thumb.

“Thank you, God, for loving me. Thank you, God, for hearing me. Thank you, God, for being with me. Thank you, God, for providing for me. Thank you, God, for forgiving me. Thank you, God, for helping me. Thank you, God, that you are God and I most definitely am not. Thank you for all the things I don't even know to thank you for” (this is the “D: All of the above” prayer)!

YES!

As mentioned earlier, some translations close out the Lord's Prayer with a powerful and poetic “Amen.” I suppose we should take a moment in this book on prayer to talk about the word *amen*. Anyone who has ever prayed has likely tacked it on to the end of a prayer. But most folks don't really know what it means. It's just something we reflexively say when we pray.

Amen is rooted in an ancient Hebrew word that simply means “truth.” It's a way of putting an exclamation point at the end of what you're saying, claiming in faith that God is there, that he hears you, and that he can answer your prayer. It's a truth rooted in past, present, and future realities. This is true because of who God is, what he has done, and what he can and will do. *Amen* isn't a throwaway word. It's a way of reminding yourself, at the end of whatever you just prayed,

that it was worth praying for. That you are not just tossing words out into the universe like forgotten pennies into a wishing well but are communing with the God of the universe. That you have his full attention. That you can access his power and presence in real time, at any time. And that your prayer—no matter how big or small, no matter how long or short, no matter how quiet or loud—is a prayer that matters to God. Amen?

This, then, is how you can pray.

SIMPLY PRAY. PRAY SIMPLY.

If prayer feels new or foreign to you, know this: You are not alone. It's that way for everyone who sets out to pray. Remember, even Jesus' disciples didn't know how to pray. Not knowing how to pray is no reason not to pray. You can't do it wrong. The only "wrong" way to pray is not to pray. If you're worried about doing it wrong, pray about that. Tell God that you don't know how to do all this yet. Start there, and you are already on your way. The point of prayer is to pray. It's about engaging God in your everyday life. And if you're still feeling unsure, think of all the things you've already done today that you didn't know how to do at one point in your life. You used to not know how to read, and here you are. You used to not know how to drink coffee, and now, chances are high that you don't know how to *not* drink coffee. You used to not know how to talk and think about spiritual things, and here you are deepening and growing your relationship with God. Remember, everything you now know was new at some point. The same is true of prayer. And

just like everything else in your life, the more you do it—the more you make prayer part of your everyday, ordinary life—the more normal and natural it becomes. This is my prayer for you: that you would simply pray.

I have a friend who sums up the Lord's Prayer this way: "Simply pray, and pray simply." Don't overcomplicate it. Don't smother it in "should." Don't make it some sort of spiritual competition with others. *Wow. Please. Help. Thanks. Yes!*—start there. You will have enough to pray for. In fact, if that's all you ever prayed, that would be enough. Prayer matters too much to let it be hijacked by fear or insecurity. Prayer is how you *start* and how you *stay* in a relationship with God. The God who made you for relationship made prayer a way for you to grow and deepen your relationship with him. Even if your prayers don't feel deep, even if they feel a little simple, the invitation is yours . . . to simply pray.

PRACTICE

The Lord's Prayer is one of the best spiritual practices for practicing prayer. It makes sense to start and stay there this week, to make the Lord's Prayer *your* prayer. Rather than mindlessly repeating the words that Jesus said, what would it look like for you to mindfully incorporate this prayer into your life? To make it your way of praying throughout the day and this week?

Here's a fun way you can do just that: Go into the calendar in your phone and set up five alarms to go off each day this week, with words from the Lord's Prayer attached to

every alarm. Think of it as your personal call to prayer. You can set it up just like this:

9:00 a.m.—WOW

Stop for a minute or so, wherever you are and whatever you are doing, to tell God all the things that you are mindful of about him in that moment. Maybe your prayer will be about the weather you're having. Maybe it will be about God's faithfulness and how he's given you another new day, or about God's provision and how he has given you all that you need. It might be about God's grace or mercy and how he has yet to run out of love or forgiveness for you. Whatever it is, take a minute or so to tell God what he already knows about himself—just how amazing he is.

12:00 p.m.—PLEASE

When this alarm goes off, take a moment to bring all your requests to God. Whatever you need, tell him. It may not be the first time that you've said "Please" about this or that, and it doesn't need to be the last. It may have to do with a financial need. It may be something work related. It may be for a breakthrough in your life that only God can bring. You will know what it is, because odds are, you've been fixated on it already and have exhausted all kinds of time and energy worrying about it. Use this moment to ask God to do what only he can do in your life.

3:00 p.m.—HELP

Afternoon is typically when our days feel like they have the most risk of running off the rails. It can feel like work is dragging on. It can feel like the kids have found your last nerve and are holding it hostage. It can feel like school will never end. This is a great time to ask for help. Invite God to come alongside you wherever you feel like you're drowning. Lean into your neediness. Claim your dependence on God. Remind yourself that you are his child and that he is a perfect parent who loves to come alongside his children and help them become all he created them to be.

6:00 p.m.—THANKS

Our family has a practice of praying before each meal. Lots of families do. It's a simple practice of giving thanks. But rather than going through the motions of thanking God for the otherwise expected things (this day, this meal, the hands that prepared it), what if you took it up a notch and consciously thanked God for EVERYTHING that comes to mind, being as specific as possible? Thank him for big and small things from that day. Take a moment to inventory God's provision, and name those things out loud to him. Stop running, stop revving, stop resisting, and simply stop to say, "Thanks."

9:00 p.m.—YES!

As the day closes, take a moment to simply say YES to God. *Yes, I believe that you are with me! Yes, I believe that you hear me! Yes, I believe that you can! Yes, I believe that you have been*

faithful! Yes, I believe that you will be faithful! YES! Rather than ending your day by numbing out, distracting yourself, or stirring up a stew of fear and anxiety, end your day by claiming the confidence that comes from knowing God. YES! I may not know how it's all gonna work out, but I know you, God. I may be amid uncertainty, but I am certain that you are with me and for me. I may not feel like I can make it, but I know that you made me and call me your own. What a powerful way to reframe whatever the day may have thrown at you. Go to sleep knowing that God is with you and will watch over you while you sleep and eventually enter a new day.



This exercise may seem simple or even a little silly at first, but think about all the other things that fill your calendar and your life. Some things are expected; others are uninvited. Rather than allowing your day to be controlled by your circumstances, you are choosing to take back your day and your thoughts with prayer. I did this little exercise of prayerful calendaring not too long ago, and I can't begin to tell you what a difference it made. It shifted my perspective. It re-centered me. It detangled me from what I thought were the demands of my life. And it gave me a way to simply pray and pray simply. Whether you're new to prayer or not, this is a powerful way to pray, one that can radically reframe and reorient your heart and mind.

PRAYER

Jesus,

Thank you for giving me a way to pray when I don't
know what to say.

Thank you for teaching me just as you taught your
disciples.

Help me not to overcomplicate prayer.

Remind me that you are not seeking perfection in prayer
but have given me an invitation to transformation
through prayer.

Thank you that you know me.

Thank you that you love me.

Thank you that you hear me.

Thank you that you are with me.

Thank you that even as I pray this prayer,
you are teaching me to pray.

YES and amen!