

how to pray

a simple guide for normal people

pete greig



"The book I've been waiting for,"
from the foreword by Nicky Gumbel

Pete Greig has written *the* prayer masterpiece for today. *How to Pray* emerges from the deep cavern of Pete's own prayers and struggles, his expansive study on prayer through the ages, and the diversity of prayer across his global friendships. *How to Pray* is an easy-to-follow, easy-to-put-into-practice manifesto of prayer for everyday life. Pete is, without question, one of the desperately needed spiritual guides of our time.

CRAIG SPRINGER, executive director of Alpha USA and author of *How to Follow Jesus*

Is there anything more primal than prayer? We reach out to God, and we hope God is reaching out to us in return. Pete Greig is unwilling to surrender this basic human impulse to any of the cultured complexities that we tend to build around it. With *How to Pray*, he helps us enter a habit of prayer that is as life-giving as it is simple.

IAN MORGAN CRON, author of *The Road Back to You*

Pete Greig knows how to pray, and I'm so grateful for this book. His passion and fervor for intercession is contagious and has influenced the church around the world. Get this book. Read this book. Live this book.

BRADY BOYD, senior pastor at New Life Church and author of *Remarkable*

Pete Greig is a gift to the world. This book uses the revolutionary prayer of Jesus as a grounded guide to ignite our spirits to pursue the heart of God. As you read these pages, let these words infuse you with a holy desire for God's Kingdom to come!

DANIELLE STRICKLAND, author of *The Ultimate Exodus*

If you're like me, you may have prayed the Lord's Prayer many times. It has staying power, doesn't it? But that's not surprising, because it's how Jesus teaches us to pray. And it turns out that

when it comes to prayer, Jesus is a great teacher—for him, praying is not fancy or formal but loving and plainspoken. Pete Greig is a respected authority on exactly this kind of praying: simple, honest, straightforward, from the heart. Even when we're asking God for what we want, we're giving him what he wants: our hearts. *How to Pray* will get you started on a lifelong, and life-giving, practice.

MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church

In a get-fixed-quick kind of world, Pete Greig meets us with the kind of guidance that's both immediately accessible and deeply thoughtful. For everyone who's wondered how to move the experience of prayer from distant to personal and powerful, *How to Pray* provides a starting point for new and seasoned believers alike.

NICOLE UNICE, author of *Help! My Bible Is Alive!*

For many years now, Pete Greig has been teaching us how to pray. Since the inadvertent start of the 24-7 Prayer movement nearly two decades ago, Pete's life and witness have been a provocation to the church to enter more deeply into the mystery, magnitude, agony, and beauty of prayer. In *How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People*, Pete brings the best of two decades' worth of insights to us in a deceptively straightforward and endearingly honest way. Savor this book. Then put it into practice. Your life and your world will be better for it.

ANDREW ARNDT, associate and teaching pastor at New Life Church

The simplicity, clarity, and depth with which Pete talks about prayer is remarkable. Whatever barriers you're facing when it comes to a vibrant prayer life, this book will help you move beyond them and walk into a richer relationship with Christ.

MARGARET FEINBERG, speaker and author of *Taste and See*

how to pray

a simple guide for normal people

pete greig



A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit www.NavPress.com.

How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People

Copyright © 2019 by Pete Greig. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

NAVPRESS and the NAVPRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher

David Zimmerman, Acquisitions Editor

Elizabeth Schroll, Copy Editor

Daniel Farrell, Designer

Author photo taken by Alex Douglas, copyright © 2018. All rights reserved.

Published in Great Britain by Hodder & Stoughton.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible.® copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the *ESV*® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

The lines from “Canal Bank Walk” by Patrick Kavanagh are reprinted from *Collected Poems*, edited by Antoinette Quinn (Allen Lane, 2004), by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of the late Katherine B. Kavanagh, through the Jonathan Williams Literary Agency

“Praying” from *THIRST* by Mary Oliver, published by Beacon Press, Boston

Copyright © 2006 by Mary Oliver

Used herewith by permission of the Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64158-188-2

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Foreword *xi*

How to Read This Book in a Couple of Minutes *xiii*

Introduction: How to Make the Most of This Book *xvii*

How to P.R.A.Y.

1 Prayer Everywhere: Why Pray? 3

2 Keeping It Simple: Starting Out in Prayer 15

Step 1: Pause

3 Slowing and Centering: How to Be Still before God 35

Step 2: Rejoice

4 Adoration: How to Worship God 51

Step 3: Ask

5 Petition: How to Ask God 73

6 Intercession: How to Ask God for Others 93

7 Unanswered Prayer: How to Deal with Disappointment 113

Step 4: Yield

8 Contemplation: How to Pray without Words 131

9 Listening: How to Hear God 151

- 10 Confession and Reconciliation: How to Get Right
with God 169
- 11 Spiritual Warfare: How to Exercise Spiritual Authority 187
- 12 Amen 213

How to Use This Book with *The Prayer Course* 223

Toolshed: Index of Thirty Prayer Tools 225

Further Reading and Recommended Resources 227

With Thanks To 229

Notes 231

Heroes of Prayer

Hero of Simple Prayer: Susanna Wesley—England 30

Heroes of Slowing and Centering: The Desert Fathers
and Mothers—Egypt 46

Hero of Adoration: Brother Lawrence—France 68

Hero of Petition: Corrie ten Boom—Holland 91

Hero of Intercession: Count Zinzendorf—Germany 110

Hero of Unanswered Prayer: Joni Eareckson Tada—
America 127

Hero of Contemplation: Blaise Pascal—France 148

Hero of Listening: Amy Carmichael—India 167

Hero of Confession and Reconciliation: Archbishop Desmond
Tutu—South Africa 184

Hero of Spiritual Warfare: Saint Patrick—Ireland 211

Foreword

I AM SO GLAD that Pete Greig has written this book. Prayer is the most important activity of our lives. It is the way in which we develop a relationship with our Father in heaven. Jesus prayed and taught us to do the same. Prayer brings us peace, refreshes our souls, satisfies our spiritual hunger, and assures us of our forgiveness. Prayer not only changes us; it also changes situations. God answers prayer.

But *how* should we pray?

For many years, I have been hoping that someone would write a simple but comprehensive book on how to pray. The only ones I could find were written decades ago and had not stood the test of time.

There seemed to be a big gap in the market. On the Alpha Course, we have a talk around week five on why and how to pray. We like to recommend books but have struggled to find one to recommend relating to this session about prayer. For the last few years, I have recommended Pete's earlier book *God on Mute*, but that is on a more specialized aspect of prayer—why some prayers do not appear to be answered. Nevertheless, I have recommended it because Pete is a legend in the world of prayer—having cofounded the 24-7 Prayer movement—and he combines his passion for prayer with a remarkable gift of writing.

How to Pray

Imagine my joy, then, when Pete told me he was writing a book with the title *How to Pray*. I was deeply honored when he then asked if I would write the foreword for it.

Now, having read the manuscript, I find the book is everything I longed for and more. This is a writer who knows what he's talking about. He writes as he speaks—with great eloquence. He is articulate but easily understood and immensely practical, illustrating his points beautifully with interesting anecdotes, stories, and examples.

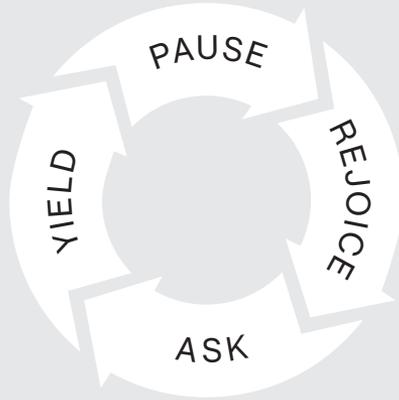
Pete used to lead the prayers at our church, Holy Trinity Brompton, so I have personally experienced the power of Pete's prayers—for myself and for our church, our nation, and the world. If, like me, you have tried leading corporate prayer, you will know how extraordinarily difficult it is to do it well. Pete always does it with consummate skill—with humor but never with intensity; with power and authority but also with a lightness of touch.

This is indeed a book that does what it says—it explains *how* to pray. I, for one, have been greatly helped by it already, and I'm sure that everyone who reads it will be encouraged and helped to pray more like Jesus—and get to know God better.

Here at last is a simple guide to prayer for normal people—the book I have been waiting for.

Nicky Gumbel
London, 2019

How to Read This Book in a Couple of Minutes



How to P.R.A.Y. (Chapters 1–2)

*One of his disciples said to him,
“Lord, teach us to pray!”*

Every pilgrim gets a stone in their shoe eventually. You wake up one morning thinking, *Is this really all there is to knowing the Creator of one hundred billion galaxies?* You read the book of Acts and ask, *Why isn't it like that anymore?* Your world falls apart and you desperately need a miracle. You stare up at the stars and feel things bigger than religious language. You say to yourself, *If this thing is true, there's got to be more power, more mystery, more actual personal experience.* And so, finally, you turn to God, half wondering whether you're any more

How to Pray

than half-serious, and say, “Lord, teach me to pray.” And he replies, “I thought you’d never ask!”

Pause (Chapter 3)

[Jesus] said . . . , “When you pray, . . .”

To start we must stop. To move forward we must pause. This is the first step in a deeper prayer life: Put down your wish list and wait. Sit quietly. “Be still, and know that I am God.”¹ Become fully present in place and time so that your scattered senses can recenter themselves on God’s eternal presence. Stillness and silence prepare your mind and prime your heart to pray from a place of greater peace, faith, and adoration. In fact, these are themselves important forms of prayer.

Rejoice (Chapter 4)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name.

No one stares up at the northern lights thinking, *Wow, I’m incredible!* We are hardwired to wonder and therefore to worship. The Lord’s Prayer begins with an invitation to adoration: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name.” Having paused to be still at the start of a prayer time, the most natural and appropriate response to God’s presence is reverence. Try not to skip this bit. Hallowing the Father’s name is the most important and enjoyable dimension of prayer. Linger here, rejoicing in God’s blessings before asking for any more. Like an eagle soaring, a horse galloping, or a salmon leaping, worship is the thing God designed you to do.

Ask (Chapters 5–7)

*Your kingdom come, your will be done. . . .
Give us today our daily bread.*

Prayer means many things to many people, but at its simplest and most immediate, it means asking God for help. It's a soldier begging for courage, a soccer fan at the final, a mother alone in a hospital chapel. The Lord's Prayer invites us to ask God for everything from "daily bread" to the "kingdom come," for ourselves (petition) and for others (intercession). In this section, we explore the extraordinary, miracle-working power of prayer but also the questions we face when our prayers go unanswered.

Yield (Chapters 8–12)

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. . . . Amen.

The final step in the dance of prayer is surrender. It's a clenched fist slowly opening; an athlete lowering into an ice bath; a field of California poppies turning to the sun. We yield to God's presence "on earth as in heaven" through *contemplative prayer* and by *listening* to his Word, which is "our daily bread." We yield to God's holiness through *confession* and *reconciliation*, praying, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." And we yield to his power in *spiritual warfare*, asking our Father to "deliver us from evil." And so, in all these ways, it's by surrendering to God that we overcome, by emptying ourselves that we are filled, and by yielding our lives in prayer that our lives themselves become a prayer—the Lord's Prayer—in the end.

Introduction

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS BOOK

*With a God like this loving you,
you can pray very simply. Like this . . .*

MATTHEW 6:9, MSG

WHEN ONE OF OUR SONS heard that I was writing a book about how to pray, he said, “Oh, but that’s easy. You just say, ‘Dear God,’ chat to him for a bit, and then say, ‘Amen.’”

In a way, he was right. Sometimes we make prayer way more complicated than it needs to be. *How to Pray* has been written as a simple guide for normal people. It’s an introduction to a vast subject aimed at new Christians and ordinary followers of Jesus who may not have studied theology and don’t consider themselves Jedi prayer warriors but who would still like to grow and go a bit deeper in their relationship with God. It’s going to be a wild and wonderful journey of discovery.

• • •

I am fortunate to live on the edge of open countryside where I often walk through woodlands, around a golf course, or up to the top of a hill where you can see for thirty miles. There is a track that I follow when I’m pushed for time or if it’s raining and I want to avoid the worst of the mud. But tangled around this main artery are veins and capillaries—secret tracks and overgrown trails more familiar to the badger, fallow deer, and tawny owl than human feet.

How to Pray

I choose my path according to the weather, my schedule, or my mood. On sunny days, I tend to head into the hills to drink in the panoramic views. In the autumn, I lose myself on thickly carpeted forest trails, foraging for puffballs and fairy-ring champignons. In the summer, my family lights fires at dusk in hidden glades and sometimes camps wild.

This book is a simple guide to the complex, living landscape of prayer. Get your boots on—this isn't going to be a concrete highway. I realize there are times when we all just need the fastest possible route to God—when you're skidding on your bike toward a parked car, you need the most direct communication possible: "Help!" But there's more to prayer than asking, and God is not in a hurry. There are ways of praying that are more like exploring than imploring: woodland trails on which to shelter, places so beautiful you'll stop and whisper praise. There are secret, intimate places to camp, and paths that take you to the highlands for a longer view under a bigger sky. It'll be an effort to climb, but worth it when you arrive.

Along the way, we're going to discover saints who've made their homes in particular aspects of this varied landscape. You'll find their stories throughout this book, with some featured as "Heroes" at the end of most chapters. Some have camped out in contemplation. Others have built hides in the treetops of prophetic insight. You will eventually find your own favorite terrain in your walk with God.

I must warn you, however, that none of these trails lead to God. That's just not how it works. There's no one superior way to pray. If you're searching for the Holy Grail, go back to where you began. But as you set out on the many paths of prayer, the Lord is going to join you on the journey. (He's putting his boots on right now.) He's going to walk in silence with you and talk with you too. The conversation will ebb and flow. He will tell you things you never knew and ask you things you've never told. Occasionally you'll lose your sense of

him, but not for long. Sometimes he will suggest a rest or a particular path, but mostly he will follow your lead, accompanying you every step of the way until eventually you come full circle, arriving home, knowing yourself known.

We're taking a map with us, of course. The world's most famous prayer—the Lord's Prayer—was given to us by Jesus himself for this very purpose: to “teach us to pray.” In these old, familiar words we are going to discover nine different paths of prayer: *Stillness*, *Adoration*, *Petition*, *Intercession*, *Perseverance*, *Contemplation*, *Listening*, *Confession*, and *Spiritual Warfare*.

Our journey is going to be paced around an easy, four-step rhythm: P.R.A.Y.—*Pause*, *Rejoice*, *Ask*, *Yield*. I'm not a big fan of acronyms—they smack of science textbooks and overeager sermons—but this particular one just *works*, because it's simple, sensible, and sneakily profound. Try not to take its four steps as hard-and-fast rules—rungs on a ladder to some seventh heaven. They are more like dance steps: fluid, interactive, and open to creative interpretation. Give P.R.A.Y. a chance and it'll lend your prayer life a light structure and an easy flow, whether you're on your own or praying in a group (although with children, you may want to swap that tricky word “Yield” for “Yes”).



I've been writing this book for the best part of two decades, ever since a couple of important discoveries inadvertently launched the 24-7 Prayer movement.

The first was that prayer is actually, surprisingly, pretty much the most important thing in life.

The second was that my friends and I were horribly bad at it.

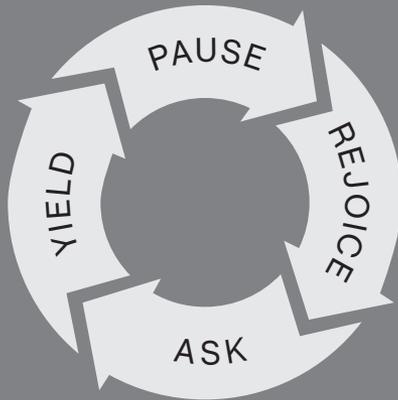
Since that inauspicious start, we've been on an adventure of exploration into this simple, difficult, inevitable thing that beats at the

How to Pray

heart of life and faith and culture. The teaching in this book flows, therefore, not so much from libraries, seminaries, and polished pulpits, but from the practical discoveries we've made praying night and day in hundreds of pop-up prayer rooms over the last twenty years.

You can read *How to Pray* on its own—it's a stand-alone product—but also as a companion volume to *The Prayer Course*, a free online program for small groups that uses videos and discussion starters to apply different aspects of the Lord's Prayer to daily life. As I've indicated, at the end of each chapter, you'll find a "Hero of Prayer" whose life exemplifies the particular type of prayer we've been studying, as well as links to additional online resources available at www.prayercourse.org:

- Toolshed: Index of Thirty Prayer Tools—to help you practice this kind of prayer; and
- *The Prayer Course* Video—relating to each chapter, including a guide for group discussion.



HOW TO P.R.A.Y.

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.”

LUKE 11:1

Every pilgrim gets a stone in their shoe eventually. You wake up one morning thinking, *Is this really all there is to knowing the Creator of one hundred billion galaxies?* You read the book of Acts and ask, *Why isn't it like that anymore?* Your world falls apart and you desperately need a miracle. You stare up at the stars and feel things bigger than religious language. You say to yourself, *If this thing is true, there's got to be more power, more mystery, more actual personal experience.* And so, finally, you turn to God, half wondering whether you're any more than half-serious, and say, “Lord, teach me to pray.” And he replies, “I thought you'd never ask!”

Prayer Everywhere

WHY PRAY?

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.

LUKE 11:1

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.*

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON,
IDYLLS OF THE KING

ON MOUNT ATHOS, two thousand meters above the Aegean Sea, big-bearded Orthodox monks are praying, as they have done for 1,800 years. About eleven miles north of Lagos, more than a million Nigerian Christians are gathering for a monthly prayer meeting at the vast campus of The Redeemed Christian Church of God. On the banks of the River Ganges at Varanasi, Hindu pilgrims are plunging into the sacred waters seeking cleansing and hope. Somewhere in Manhattan, a group of addicts on a twelve-step program is seeking “through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God.”¹ High in the Himalayas, bells are chiming, and strings of colored prayer flags are dancing against sapphire skies. Deep in the forests of giant Redwood and Douglas fir on California’s Lost Coast, Cistercian nuns are keeping vigil beside the Mattole River, where salmon and steelhead swim.

How to Pray

One person in every four prays the Lord's Prayer each year on Easter Day alone. One person in every six bows toward Mecca up to five times a day. Hasidic Jews stand at Jerusalem's Wailing Wall dressed in black and rocking to and fro like aging goths at a silent disco. In front of them, between the giant stones of Herod's Temple, thousands of handwritten prayers are wedged like badly rolled cigarettes between the bricks.

It's worth pausing at the start of a book like this to acknowledge the unending chorus of human longing: a canticle of sighs and cries and chiming bells, mutterings in maternity wards, celestial oratorios, and scribbled graffiti. In the words of Abraham Heschel, "Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."²

Native Language

Our English word *prayer* derives from the Latin *precarius*. We pray because life is precarious. We pray because life is marvelous. We pray because we find ourselves at a loss for many things, but not for the simplest words like "please," "thank you," "wow," and "help." I prayed when I held our babies for the first time. I prayed when work overwhelmed me, and I knew I couldn't cope. I prayed when my wife was wheeled away down the hospital corridor unconscious. I prayed the night I saw the northern lights.

Canadian psychologist David G. Benner describes prayer as "the soul's native language," observing that "our natural posture is attentive openness to the divine."³ We see this posture in many great men and women not necessarily known for religious devotion. Abraham Lincoln admitted, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom . . . seemed insufficient for that day."⁴

Conrad Hilton, founder of the eponymous hotel chain, devotes

the last section of his autobiography to the matter of prayer. “In the circle of successful living,” he explains, “prayer is the hub that holds the wheel together.”⁵

In her semiautobiographical novel *One True Thing*, Anna Quindlen depicts the agony of being nineteen years old and watching her mother receive chemotherapy “drop by drop by God-please-let-it-work drop. Oh yes, I prayed in that cubicle and in the hallway outside and in the cafeteria,” she says. “But I prayed to myself, without form, only inchoate feelings, one word: please, please, please, please, please.”⁶

Rock star Dave Grohl admits to praying desperately when his drummer, Taylor Hawkins, overdosed at England’s V Festival. “I would talk to God out loud as I was walking,” he recalls of the late-night strolls back to Kensington’s Royal Garden Hotel from the hospital where his friend lay in a coma. “I’m not a religious person but I was out of my mind, I was so frightened and heartbroken and confused.”⁷

Early in Elizabeth Gilbert’s bestselling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, she writes: “Hello, God. How are you? I’m Liz. It’s nice to meet you. . . . I haven’t ever spoken directly to you before.” And then she starts to cry. “Can you please help me? I am in desperate need of help. I don’t know what to do.” As her tears subside, she experiences a peace “so rare,” she says, “that I didn’t want to exhale, for fear of scaring it off. . . . I don’t know when I’d ever felt such stillness. Then I heard a voice. . . . It was not an Old Testament Hollywood Charlton Heston voice, nor was it a voice telling me I must build a baseball field in my backyard. It was merely my own voice. . . . But this was my voice as I had never heard it before.”⁸

My friend Cathy was a militant atheist at the University of Wichita when, late one night in her lodgings, gazing down at her sleeping baby, she was overwhelmed with a desire to give thanks to someone or something for this gift of all gifts. Without a husband

How to Pray

or a boyfriend in her life with whom to share her sense of wonder, Cathy whispered a few self-conscious words of gratitude out into the silence. As she did so, the atmosphere seemed to change. Wave upon wave of love, unlike anything she had ever experienced, came flooding into the room. Kneeling there that night beside her sleeping baby, Cathy relinquished her ardent atheism. More than thirty years later, she remains a follower of Jesus.

Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh found himself similarly moved to pray by life's unfathomable wonder, an impulse he describes in his poem "Canal Bank Walk" as "the gaping need of my senses":

*O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a web
Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech,
For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.*⁹

To Be Human Is to Pray

From American presidents to Irish poets, from rock stars in London to single mothers in Wichita, prayer has been the argument "that cannot be proven," the "gaping need" of every human soul since the very dawn of time. Cave paintings dating back more than thirty-five thousand years at Maros in Indonesia and Chauvet in France functioned, it is thought, as spiritual invocations. In modern Turkey, the hilltop ruins at Göbekli Tepe are reckoned to be the remains of a temple six thousand years older than Stonehenge, which may itself have been a place of prayer some three thousand years before Christ.

And what of the future? Is prayer just the diminishing shadow of some primitive dawn? Survey after survey answers no.¹⁰ Three

hundred years after the Enlightenment the world is, if anything, becoming more religious, not less.¹¹ I am based in England, considered to be one of the more secular nations in Western Europe, but even here, one quarter of those who describe themselves as “non-religious” admit that they “take part in some spiritual activity each month, typically prayer.”¹²

Eminent surgeon David Nott illustrates this apparent contradiction well. He operates in three British hospitals but chooses to spend his holidays in the world’s most dangerous war zones. “I am not religious,” he assured Eddie Mair in an interview:

But every now and again I have to pray and I do pray to God and I ask him to help me because sometimes I am suffering badly. It’s only now and again that I am able to turn to the right frequency to talk to him and there is not a doubt in my mind there is a God. I don’t need him every day. I need him every now and again but when I do need him he is certainly there.¹³

That interview in its entirety had a profound effect on its listeners. In fact, experimental artist Patrick Brill (better known by his strange pseudonym “Bob and Roberta Smith”) was so moved by Nott’s testimony that he spent the next four months transcribing every single word, letter by letter, onto a vast canvas which was then hung in the central hall of London’s Royal Academy as the centerpiece of its Summer Exhibition—the most popular annual display of contemporary art in the country and the oldest in the world.

From primitive cave paintings to the whitewashed walls of the Royal Academy, the universal impulse to pray permeates and pulsates through human anthropology and archaeology, sociology and psychology. It is no exaggeration to say that to be human is to pray. The

question, therefore, is not so much *why* we pray, but rather *how* and to *whom*. For billions of people today, the answer to such questions is to be found in the revolutionary life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

The Bible and Prayer

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

MARK 1:35

The greatest person who ever lived was preeminently a man of prayer. Before launching out in public ministry, he fasted for more than a month in the wilderness. Before choosing his twelve disciples, he prayed all night. When he heard the devastating news that his cousin, John, had been executed, “he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”¹⁴ After feeding five thousand people, he was understandably tired, but his response was to climb a mountain to pray.

When the pressures of fame threatened to crush him, Jesus prayed.¹⁵ When he was facing his own death in the garden of Gethsemane, bleeding with fear and failed by his friends, he prayed.¹⁶ Even during those unimaginable hours of physical and spiritual torment on the cross, Jesus cried out to the one who had apparently forsaken him.¹⁷

Jesus prayed and he prayed and he prayed.

But it didn't stop there. After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to follow his example so that the church was eventually born as “they all joined together constantly in prayer.”¹⁸ And then, as it began to grow exponentially, the apostles continued to follow their Lord's example, resolutely prioritizing prayer above the clamor of pressing leadership responsibilities.¹⁹

It was when Peter “went up on the roof to pray” in the city of Joppa that he received a shocking vision of nonkosher animals presented as

food, an epoch-defining epiphany that would catapult the gospel out from its Jewish cradle into the vast harvest-fields of the Gentile world.²⁰

We observe equal prayerfulness in Peter's apostolic counterpart Paul, of whom it is said, immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus, "he is praying."²¹ Paul's epistles bubble and fizz with petition, with spontaneous doxologies and passionate exhortations to pray. We are engaged, he reminds the Ephesians, in active warfare against dark spiritual powers.²² We are caught up, he tells the Romans, in an intense heavenly prayer meeting.²³ We are edified, he tells the Corinthians, in truths revealed to us only through prayer.²⁴

It would be easy to continue in this vein, because the priority of prayer is found in one way or another on almost every page of the Bible and in every chapter of church history. It is neither a peripheral theme nor an optional extra for the desperate and the devout. It does not belong to some other time in history, nor to some other type of person more spiritual or disciplined or experienced than you and me. Prayer is nothing at all unless it is a matter of vast and all-consuming importance for each one of us.

"Prayer is more than a lighted candle," insists the theologian George A. Buttrick. "It is the contagion of health. It is the pulse of Life."²⁵ A real relationship with God means walking with him daily, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It means talking with him intimately, like Moses, with whom "the LORD would speak . . . face to face, as one speaks to a friend."²⁶ And it means listening attentively to his voice because, as Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."²⁷

Finding Your Places of Prayer

We are told that, prior to giving the Lord's Prayer, "Jesus was praying in a certain place."²⁸ That's significant. There seem to have been

How to Pray

certain places in which he preferred to pray. Elsewhere, he advised his disciples, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door.”²⁹ The location clearly mattered. On the day of Pentecost, we are told that the Holy Spirit first “filled the whole house where they were sitting” so that the disciples “saw what seemed to be tongues of fire” and then, moments later, “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”³⁰ Isn’t that an interesting progression? The Holy Spirit filled the *place* before he filled the *people*.

The ancient Celtic Christians understood very well that the Holy Spirit can saturate places as well as people; they described such sacred sites evocatively as “thin places.” Your thin place might simply be a particular chair in your house, a bench in the park, a hallowed half hour on your daily commute, a regular slot in a 24-7 prayer room,³¹ or even time in the sanctuary of your bathroom. Spiritual teacher Richard Foster urges us “to find a place of focus—a loft, a garden, a spare room, an attic, even a designated chair—somewhere away from the routine of life, out of the path of distractions. Allow this spot to become a sacred ‘tent of meeting.’”³²

Even when you don’t really want to pray, a place of prayer can often make it easier. Merely by showing up, you make a declaration of intent. You say, in effect, “Lord, I don’t want to be here, but I’m here!” This has often been my experience with daily devotions and appointments in 24-7 prayer rooms. I may not always want to be there initially—I often drive to the prayer room grumbling, convinced that I can’t spare the time and that 24-7 prayer is the worst idea in world history—but these are often the times when God meets me most powerfully. After decades of night-and-day prayer, I have come to believe that 99 percent of it is just showing up: making the effort to become consciously present to the God who is constantly present to us.

Where's Your Chair?

An advertising executive became a Christian but said that he was too busy to carve out a daily time of prayer. “It’s easy for you,” he told his new pastor. “You have all the time in the world, but I can’t fit anything else into my life.” Perhaps you feel something similar as you begin this book: *It’s easy for Pete*, you may be thinking. *He’s the 24-7 prayer guy. He writes books and talks to squirrels all day. My life is different—it’s manic and stressful!*

The pastor pushed back against the advertising executive’s complaint with a gentle challenge: “You know,” he said, “I’ve always managed to make time for the things I really value.” That new believer went away and bought himself a really nice rocking chair, set it down in front of a window in his house, and began to get up just twenty minutes earlier each day to sit in it, read the Bible, and pray. As he maintained this simple daily rhythm, his wife and colleagues began to notice that he was becoming less scattered, more peaceful, and kinder. That rocking chair was becoming his thin place.

Months turned into years, a daily discipline became a holy habit, and then one morning, as he sat there rocking, the Lord invited him to quit his job, sell the family home, and relocate from Chicago to Colorado, where a church needed his help. It was a life-changing moment that launched his entire family into a new and remarkably fruitful season of life.

Several years later, that successful executive was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of incurable cancer, but he continued to keep his appointments with God each morning in that chair. During his last remaining days, he found strength there in prayer for the hardest transition of them all.

The day of the funeral dawned, and a friend found his grieving

How to Pray

wife gazing at that rocking chair. “What are you going to do with it now?” he inquired.

“Oh, we’re going to pass it down to our children and grandchildren,” she replied without hesitation. “I love to think of them sitting in it the way my husband did, unburdening their hearts, listening to the Lord, letting him shape and direct their lives.”³³

Where’s *your* chair? For my wife, it’s a daily dog walk and weekly appointments with God in a particular coffee shop. For a teacher in our church, it’s her classroom, where she shows up half an hour early each day to pray quietly over every single desk. For a student who recently came to know Jesus from a strict Sikh background, it’s her car. “Driving is my sanctuary,” she told me. “I play worship music really loud and my family can’t stop me!” Wherever you find your chair, try to visit it daily. Let it become your thin place, a sacred space that helps you walk and talk with God through the many twists and turns of life.

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Two thousand years ago, the disciples welcomed Jesus back from his regular time and place of prayer with one of the greatest petitions of all time: “Lord,” one of them said, “teach us to pray.”³⁴ His response to that simple, humble request was astonishingly generous. He didn’t make the disciples feel small. He didn’t say, “You really ought to know by now.” Instead, he gave them the greatest prayer in world history. These were men who would go on to have extraordinary prayer lives. They would intercede until buildings shook. They would spring Peter from a high-security jail by the power of prayer. Their very shadows and handkerchiefs would sometimes heal the sick. They would receive the kinds of revelations that change cultural paradigms. And most remarkably of all, they would one day find the grace within themselves to pray for their torturers at the very point of death.

The disciples were to become mighty prayer warriors, but it wasn't automatic. Prayer didn't get beamed down on them from heaven. It wasn't a guaranteed perk of the apostolic job. Prayer had to be learned the hard way, and their schooling was to begin on a particular day with this simple, touchingly vulnerable request: "Lord, teach us to pray."

And so, of course, he did.



In this opening chapter, I have sought to set out the historical and biblical case for prayer and the universal relevance of sacred space, from the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to a rocking chair in Colorado. My intention has been to reassure you that learning to pray really is the least weird, most natural, necessary, and wonderful thing you can possibly do and to encourage you to follow Christ's example in setting apart "a certain place" (or certain places) for doing so regularly. In later chapters (3–12), we will focus on particular dimensions of prayer, such as adoration, petition, intercession, and contemplation. But first, we are going to address the fundamental question at the heart of this book—how to pray—at its simplest, most literal level.

MORE ON PRAYER EVERYWHERE

PRAYER TOOL: 1. How to Pray the Lord's Prayer
(www.prayercourse.org).

FURTHER READING: *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*
by Richard Foster