

God talks for teens

A study guide for groups and individuals
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So You Want to Pray...

Prayer is one of those things we often hear about but only in general terms. We know that prayer is a good thing. It usually involves being quiet and bowing your head (folding your hands, optional), but what exactly is it? Let's start with you.

1. List the last five times you have prayed.

2. Describe your current prayer life. How often do you pray? For how long? About what?

I became a Christian when I was a teenager, and it was a bumpy road. No one in my family took issues of faith seriously, and my church didn't know what to do with people like me who hadn't been following Jesus their whole lives.

When asked what I should be doing to grow in my faith, the answer was always the same—read the Bible and pray every day. The same people who told me this didn't know what to say when my spiritual life stalled several years later. I must have had something out of alignment, they thought. Reading the Bible + prayer = growth. Clearly I was getting at least one of them wrong.

My mentors were correct that Bible-reading and prayer contribute to spiritual growth, but those things alone do not guarantee spiritual growth, especially if we only ever pray silently by ourselves early in the morning, with no one else to enrich our prayer life and no variety in the ways we express ourselves to God. No one explained to me how to pray with other people, pray by singing, pray while walking, or use the many other prayer methods that can enlarge and deepen our conversation with God.

The truth is that prayer is the beating heart of the Christian life. God created us with prayer as one of our primary duties/joys in life, and this unimaginably creative God built in a depth and diversity to prayer that we can barely imagine.

This study guide will explore what prayer really is and various prayer forms that we can use to connect with God.

3. What does prayer look like? How can you tell when a person is praying?

4. What prayer format do you most often use?

There is no one-size-fits-all in prayer. Following Jesus is about growing, and when people (often our elders) tell us to read the Bible for 15 minutes a day, what they often forget to say is that it's only a starting point. You could read the Bible for three hours a day, but if you close the book and only take the words with you, you're missing the point. Prayer is about encountering God. It's about bringing what we read in the Bible, along with our thoughts and feelings, into God's presence and speaking to Him and listening to Him there.

I pray before bed—does that count?

Of course it counts. God hears every word we utter in His direction (and all our other words, too!), but whether that prayer counts isn't the question. The question is: how much does it mean to you and God? Talking to God for a few minutes once you're in bed is a fine way to connect with Him, but if you find yourself falling asleep mid-sentence almost every night, then it's safe to say that this particular method is not fully developing the deep, profound, interactive relationship that it could be.

5. What do you normally say when you pray?

Many of us use prayer to ask for things, whether for us or for others. To avoid any confusion, let me say it in bold—it's O.K. to ask God for things. People throughout the Bible and later history did it all the time, not to mention the disciples. And they asked for pretty extreme things, too—like the right to sit next to Jesus in heaven and for Jesus to rain fire down on a certain city. God does not mind when we ask for things. That's not to say we'll get all the things we ask for (God knows our needs better than we do), but prayer isn't just about asking—it's about encountering God.

6. What kinds of things do you typically ask God for?

7. What do you normally listen for from God?

Try it Centering prayer



This is a focused prayer exercise to help us listen to God. At the beginning of the prayer we quiet our minds, and then move in faith to God dwelling in our depths, speaking to us in the silence. At the end of the prayer we take several minutes to come out of the silence, mentally praying the Lord's Prayer or some other familiar prayer.

Prepare

- Clear your schedule for at least 15 minutes and find a quiet place
- Choose a comfortable position
- Loosen any tight clothing, like collars or watches

Pray

- Take a minute or two to relax. You may find it helpful to start by saying a brief prayer such as "Lord, help me to hear you," "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" from 1 Samuel 3:9-10, or the Lord's Prayer (found in Matthew 6:9-13).
- When you've quieted down, allow yourself to be silent, listening for God, for several minutes.
- After resting in the silence, take up a single simple word that the Lord brings to mind. Examples of words include "love," "stronghold," "rain," or "savior"—whatever God brings to your mind.
- Your mind will wander, but try to keep pushing aside any distracting thoughts by repeating your prayer word. This will help you stay focused in the silence, ready to hear God's voice.
- At the end of the prayer, take several minutes to finish, silently praying the Lord's Prayer or another prayer of your choice.
- If observing silence is new for you, it may be very difficult. If that's your situation, just remember that silence is an acquired skill. You may not receive a direct revelation from God the very first time you listen, but you will develop a heart that is more able to hear Him.

8. How did this prayer method affect you? Did you hear from God? Did you find the prayer helpful? Frustrating? How would centering prayer affect you over time if you practiced it regularly?

Praying for Rain

Is it O.K. to pray for rain? I had to answer this question on an exam once. It's the best test question I ever faced because it gets at the heart of what prayer is. Yes, it's O.K. to pray for rain (or for other needs and longings), but asking for things is not primarily what prayer is about. Prayer is about encountering God. It involves times of listening and speaking on our part (which includes asking for things), but the solid core of prayer is encountering God.

1. When have you prayed for rain, asking God to intervene in a situation that was largely out of your hands?

Doesn't prayer change the world?

Yes, it definitely does. But not directly. We often think that our words spoken in prayer immediately make things happen, kind of like a magic spell. I say what I want to happen in the right way, and somewhere that thing happens. Prayer is not a spell. When we pray, we join together with God, listening, being open to what He has to say, asking not only for what we want but also asking what He wants. When we do this, prayer transforms the world and us, too.

2. When have you been changed through prayer? What about you changed? Was it your perspective? Your feelings?

How should I talk to God?

Talking with God works pretty much the same way as having a conversation with any other person you care about. The main thing to remember is that any good conversation has times for speaking and listening.

Think of it this way. Let's say I wanted to ask a ravishing beauty named Polly to go out with me, and I decided to go to her best friend Sara to see if Polly would even consider going out with me. Would I spend the whole time

blabbing about how great Polly is and how much I like her, or would I shut up and let Sara answer my question? (When I did this in real life, I eventually managed to shut up.) When we pray, we often go to God who is the source of all knowledge and wisdom, and forget to listen to what He has to say about our lives.

3. What was the most recent thing that God said to you or made very clear to you?

But why pray if God already knows what I'm going to say?

I first asked this question to a Catholic nun when I had been a Christian for about a month. Her answer was wise and has always stuck with me. She said that it's not about giving God information; it's about a relationship. God wants to have that one-on-one time with us, and our souls need that one-on-one time with Him in order to truly live (whether we realize it or not). In prayer we bring ourselves our minds, our thoughts, our feelings, our concerns, our fears—everything—to God. We do this not so that He can be brought up-to-date but so that He can be an invited guest at the events of our lives. We bring everything to God not so that He can see what we're doing with our lives but so that we can see what He is doing with our lives. Prayer is about joining together with God. It is an attempt on our part to get in close and find out what He is thinking and doing and feeling.

How far does prayer go?

Prayer goes everywhere you go. You can pray at home or at school or at sports games—anywhere. Prayer has no boundaries. You can pray anywhere at any time about anything. All of life is open territory, so even prayers that can seem trivial—praying before meals, for a good grade, for a parking space—are valid. You can pray anywhere you are. But it works the other way around, too. You can pray anywhere God is. Even if you've never left your hometown, you can still pray for people in Sudan because God is already there, working.



Try it the house of God

This is a prayer exercise that requires you to use your imagination. If you're worried about relating to God through your imagination when you could be using something rock-solid like reasoning skills instead, let me just remind you that God created us to have imagination at least as much as He created us to have reasoning skills.

In this prayer method, you begin by settling down into a comfortable prayer posture as described in the centering prayer exercise of session one. When you are fairly settled, imagine yourself at the front door of a house—God's house.

Picture the door in front of you. Is it high, thick, narrow? Is it a door you'd see on a castle or a house in your neighborhood or at a supermarket? When you're ready, open the door and go inside.

God's house has many, many rooms of all different sorts. Explore them. Picture the hallways and rooms as you walk through the house. People who practice this exercise often usually attach meanings to the rooms they imagine. For example, they go to the kitchen when they need to be spiritually fed. They go to the washroom when they need to be cleansed from sin. They go to the throne room to bask in God's glory. Other pray-ers have rooms that include: an armory, a closet, an attic, a basement, a wine cellar, the library, a music room, even Jesus' own bedroom.

Use your imagination to engage the rooms as actively as possible. If you go to the kitchen for spiritual food, what food is it? Meatloaf? Bread? A bowl of peaches? Picture the walls and ceilings and doorknobs (if there are any). Listen for any sounds or ambient noises. Use your imagination to fill in the blanks.

Also, remember that this is God's house, so you never know when you will see Jesus. Maybe He'll pass you in the hall, or maybe He'll be waiting in one of the rooms to have a meaningful experience with you. Follow the imagination God gave you and the Holy Spirit inside of you to allow this different venue to encounter God.

Make sure to review the prayer afterwards to interpret anything you encountered in God's house, and to reflect on what God is telling you through this interaction.

4. How did this prayer method affect you? Did you find it helpful? Uncomfortable? Exciting? How would imaginative prayer affect you over time if you practiced it regularly?

Making time for God

Busyness is a disease in our culture that affects millions, including teens. We run hurriedly from one place to another, one activity to another. We struggle to find time to eat at all, let alone eat with our families. All of our time goes into required activities, like homework, leaving no time for extra things like prayer.

1. List out all of things that you spend time doing in the course of a week. Remember to include things like going to school, sleeping in on Saturdays, going to church—anything that you consistently spend time doing.

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How do I make time to spend with God?

The short answer is: anything worth doing is worth having a time and place for. We make time for what is important to us, and if growing spiritually and connecting with God are important to us, we will find a way to do them. Here are some tips:

- Prioritize. If you are so busy that you are often worn out, identify some activities that may be doing you more harm than good. (Sure, both the debate and chess teams will look good on a college application, but is it worth hours of practice every week at the expense of your prayer life?) Remember that praying for, say, one hour a week doesn't take you away from life for an hour; it actually helps you live more fully for the remaining 167 hours in a week.
- Take breaks. Make some times every week when you are not working—that is, you're not doing things for school or money. (That time is called rest, and prayer is a restful activity.)
- Remember that prayer is not task-oriented. The goal of prayer time is not a five-page paper, a two-page journal entry, or even a one-word message from the Lord. The goal is the process, spending time with God.
- Don't keep trying things that don't work. If you simply can't cut back on activities and have no energy to spend any quality time with God on a daily basis, consider spending a longer block of time with him on a weekend day.
- Get help. Prayer is not meant to be something that you run around trying to figure out all by yourself. Consider forming a prayer group so you can all help each other and share what you're learning about God, prayer, and yourselves. Consult resources like books, pastors, or (gulp!) parents. Remember, when your body needs help, you go to a doctor; when your soul needs help, you can go to people who can help you with that, too.
- Time yourself. Or at least be aware of the time you spend praying. Find out what times of day are most and least effective for you to pray. If your best prayer time is in the mid-morning, you may need to choose your second-best time for now since you're still in school.

- Help yourself. Find out what physical things help you to pray. Do you have a room or a garden you could go to that inspires you? Maybe it helps to sing a song first or light a candle (without causing a fire hazard) or just take some deep breaths. I tend to pray while drinking coffee because it puts me in mind of having a talk with a close friend.

1. So, how can you make time to spend praying? Go back to the list you made earlier and plan out at least two times you could spend praying each week. (This isn't a commitment to pray in those times; it's just looking for prayer opportunities.)

Try it spiritual reading



Spiritual reading is a prayer practice that Christians have been doing for centuries. (Its official name is "lectio divina" in case you want to look it up later.) It is a form of Bible reading that focuses on finding a particular word, phrase, or image that God prompts you meditate on in prayer. When choosing a passage to read, try to choose a few short paragraphs that you don't already know by heart, so that you can focus more on listening to God instead of listening to what you already know.

Here are the four steps to doing spiritual reading.

- Reading: Slowly read a short passage of Scripture, being alert to any word or phrase that attracts your attention. Read it again and again until you are drawn to a specific portion of

the passage. Linger over that phrase or word, savoring the richness of that for you. This is slow-motion reading, so don't rush it!

- **Reflecting:** Reflect on the meaning of your word or phrase. Enter into dialogue with this portion of the Scripture. What memories, images, feelings, thoughts or connections with other passages arise?
- **Responding:** As you continue to linger over this word or phrase, what is God calling you to? How does your heart respond—in joy, expectation, sorrow, confession, or some other way? Voice your response to God in prayer.
- **Resting/receiving:** Remain quiet in God's presence (Psalm 46:10). Do not try to force any lesson or insight from God. It may come, but simply rest gently in God's arms (Psalm 131:2).

2. Take some time to practice spiritual reading.

3. How did this prayer method affect you? Did you find it helpful? Frustrating? Something else? How would spiritual reading affect you over time if you practiced it regularly?

Keeping up the conversation

So how do we pray consistently? Keeping in the prayer groove over weeks and months is like praying during a single day.

- Look for patterns. Just as there are times of day when you are more alert, there are times within each month or season that you are more rested and ready to encounter God. Plan special prayer events for those times.
- Anticipate problems. Every semester has mid-terms and finals. Be ready for them. Either build up your prayer time going into finals so you can focus more on schoolwork then, or make sure to stick to your regular prayer times even when finals or concerts or productions are reaching their high points. Remember to rest up and pray up after the big events are over.
- Use the year. As they train over the course of a year, long-distance runners take different routes so they don't get bored with the terrain. Prayers should do the same. In winter, plan on spending some quiet time indoors. In the summer, pray in a garden or spend some time praying while hiking.
- Take retreats. Maybe you think only old people or spiritual gurus take retreats, but retreats are for everyone. It's very useful to have a time away from your regular life to get a different view on things. A quick internet search will show you some retreat centers near you, but you could also just go camping or visit a friend or relative for a few days. See if a church group is planning a retreat that you could participate in. The summer is a great time for taking prolonged retreats when school is out of session.

1. What is your peak season? What is your off-season? Why?

2. What are some prayer methods you can practice over the next few months?

Is prayer all in my head?

Not at all. There is a great way to pray using physical objects to focus our attention on God. I call this praying with stuff. Whatever item you use can unlock a series of images in your mind and feelings from your heart that God can use in your life. When you sit down to pray with an object, look at it, feel it in your hands. Smell it. Be open to similarities and connections that it brings to mind. For the actual prayer, follow the basic steps for a centering prayer listed in session 1, but instead of a saying a prayer word, focus on your prayer object. Or for a different approach, you could journal out a prayer that reflects on meanings of the prayer object. Here are some examples of objects you might pray with and questions you might reflect on:

- Cell phone—if God called you right now, what would He say? If you carry your phone with you all the time, what does it mean that you are always “on call” as a follower of Jesus?
- Keys—what spiritual keys do you hold? What keys does God hold? What do you wish you could unlock?
- Coins—what is the currency of Heaven? How do you get that kind of wealth? What do you do with that kind of wealth?
- A stone—How is God your rock? What does the Bible mean when it says that even the stones will cry out to praise God?
- Shoes—How faithful is the path you are walking with Jesus? Where does He want you to go?

Try it praying with stuff



Choose an object at hand and spend some time praying, allowing the object to help you focus and direct your conversation with God.

1. How did this prayer method affect you? Did you find it helpful? Distracting? Focused? How would praying with stuff affect you over time if you practiced it regularly?

Additional Prayer Resources

www.sacredspace.ie hosted by Irish Jesuits

Prayer by Richard Foster

Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis, offers some great segments on prayer

Focusing our Faith edited by Terry L. Brensinger, chapter 10

Stepping Stones by Steven Grosse and Brian McCann, available at the Grantham BIC Church