

Going Deeper in Prayer



Growing in this vital area of your leadership.

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The Problem with Prayer

Why is prayer such a constant struggle?

by Janine Petry

I'll admit, I've got mixed emotions when it comes to the topic of prayer. There's a part of me that loves to pray—that longs for a deeper, more meaningful experience when it comes to prayer. And I hope for it. I truly desire to be better connected to the Lord, consistently listening and communicating. But then there's another part of me that feels dejected about praying. I carry a sense of failure and confusion about what, when, how, and why to do it. Often, I allow this dismal attitude to keep me away from the communion I desire.

The extremes can tug at me on a daily basis. But here's what's setting me free: I'm learning that this struggle can be characteristic of walking by faith. Prayer is one of the most powerful ways faith is tested. It requires faith for me to come to God, believing that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6). It requires faith to believe that God





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listens, hears, and responds to my prayers, despite my fears, failures, and lack of eloquence before him. It requires faith to believe that he loves me, accepts me, and wants me to come to him. It requires faith to take the time to obey in this area, especially when I cannot always see what it's accomplishing. From beginning to end, prayer is a walk of faith.

If you've ever struggled with your prayer life, know that you're in good company. As you seek to grow in this area, this download will help guide you. In it, you'll find articles that will challenge and grow your understanding of prayer. You'll find insights to help you evaluate this aspect of your leadership, as well as advice for strengthening and revitalizing it. We've also packed plenty of other resources inside for you to go even farther in finding the prayer life you've always wanted. Remember, doubts and uncertainties may come and go, but as we press on we'll experience abundance—for the righteous find life by faith (Romans 1:17).

Blessings,

Janine Petry
Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership
Christianity Today International

Introduction



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THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

To Lead or to Pray?



Understanding the unique challenges that leaders face in prayer.

by Terry Muck

What frustrates Christian leaders about prayer? Perhaps it has something to do with the differences between leading and praying. When a random sample of people was asked what the term *leadership* brought to mind, they responded with words like *authority, decisiveness, confidence, and power*. The word *prayer*, on the other hand, evoked words such as *humility, pleading, and powerlessness*.

The difference illustrates a conflict Christian leaders face. As leaders, they preach, counsel, and organize with efficiency. Leaders must see that things get done. They plan, decide, act, and evaluate. In most people's minds, leadership means the ability to solve problems.

This expectation extends beyond administrative duties. Sometimes it seems Christian leaders are expected to have answers to most of life's problems. Even the leader's personal spirituality is held up as a public example of a faith that works. The writer to the Hebrews called it a "faith we should imitate" (13:7).

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Men and women of prayer, however, operate in a different sphere, where feelings of inadequacy and helplessness predominate. Those feelings sometimes conflict with the tasks of ministry. Jeff Ginn, pastor of Noelridge Baptist Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, notes: “We all want our ministries to have results. We see our work schedule as a time for production. If I have to choose between my quiet time and a meeting with a young Christian, often I’ll choose the young Christian because that meeting will produce something tangible in my ministry.

“The results of prayer aren’t quite so tangible. The need for prayer pulls at me over the long haul, but it’s not an urgent pull. A fish on the line is an urgent pull. Getting the boat in the right place with the right fishing tackle all oiled and ready to go is a far less urgent task, yet it can make the difference in whether the fish is landed.”

Prayer does prepare us for the more tangible ministry tasks. It makes us better leaders. But the effects of prayer can’t be measured in terms of problems solved per square inch. For the administrator, decisiveness that averts a \$5,000 mistake by the building contractor is laudatory. In the prayer closet, the same quick decision making may be counterproductive—it might lead to the oversight of an important spiritual subtlety only quietness and patience can discern. Or willingness to take responsibility for a hair-splitting ethical decision concerning Mrs. Smith’s wayward son is a sign of strong leadership. Someone must do it. But in the prayer closet, that same willingness to make firm decisions in ambiguous circumstances may blunt a creative paradox God could use to teach spiritual truth. Administrative problems follow the rules of cause and effect; prayer operates by God’s unpublished rules.

When cause and effect meet divine guidance, they often clash. The result? The roles of confident decision maker and humble penitent do regular battle in the soul of the Christian leader, and an incomplete, guilt-ridden prayer life may plague the ministry.

“My spiritual pilgrimage is like the front and back yards of my life,” says C. D. Monismith, a pastor in Salem, Oregon. “The front yard is for public view—manicured, watered, weed free, and beautiful. The back yard is not so good. It’s utilitarian; it’s mowed but not





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manicured. Some weeds grow around the edges, and there are patches of brown. It could use watering. My front yard is like my corporate, public spiritual life. My back yard is like my personal prayer life. I'd like to know how other pastors manicure the back yard as well as the front."

Monismith speaks for many of his peers. Most Christian leaders desire a stronger prayer life. In a survey of Leadership readers (80 percent of whom are pastors or pastoral staff) done two years ago, 56 percent of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time they spent in prayer. Yet when asked how much time they did spend in prayer, over 50 percent said they prayed more than twenty minutes a day, almost three times the seven daily minutes other surveys indicate is average for the general Christian population.

Further, Christian leaders like to read and learn about prayer. Articles on the subject published in Christian magazines get high readership. When asked, "What is the single area of leadership you'd most like help with?" Christian leaders most often responded, "My own spiritual walk with God." For this group of people, where prayer is concerned, more is better.

But "more" is not easy to come by. Our thirst for prayer is camouflaged by our hunger for less nutritious food. The attractions of a nonpraying life—busyness that fills up the hours, distractions that divert attention, temptations that distort priorities—block our efforts to increase praying time.

Many of these blocks are not unique to the Christian leader. Laziness, impatience, rebelliousness, and unconfessed sin plague everyone. Lifestyles that include jam-packed schedules, jangling telephones, raucous radios, and fast-paced television programs don't offer quiet opportunities for reflection. Modern society is characterized by thinkers who put prayer in the same category as witch hazel and other old wives' tales. Immanuel Kant called prayer "a superstitious vanity"; Sigmund Freud said it was a way of "shuffling off one's human responsibilities"; Ludwig Feuerbach said it resulted in "religious alienation." It's no wonder prayer sometimes seems under attack.





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Three Blocks to Prayer

In addition to the common pressures, Christian leaders face three that are unique to their vocation. One is the expectation placed on them by historical roles. Modern church leaders still labor under clerical traditions traced back to the fourth-century monastic movement when clerics began to be viewed as professionals separated from the laity.

Monks established specific hours of prayer—seven or eight times a day set aside for on-the-knees devotion. Had this remained a monastic practice, all would have been fine. But soon it became generalized for all clergy, whether withdrawn from the world or not. The Emperor Justinian, sounding a little like a contemporary bishop, berated the overworked parish priests for “neglecting a task [prayer] to which you are obliged by profession.” The seven or eight times of daily prayer soon became seven or eight full hours of prayer a day—for monks especially, but sometimes for parish clergy too.

Even though the pressure of this was mitigated somewhat by church leaders like Benedict, who recognized the spiritual significance of work as well as prayer, the trend it set for clergy expectations remained. The heritage today can be seen in the question often asked the pastor, “But what else do you have to do all day besides prayer and study?” Usually this criticism is unthinking rather than vindictive. Most laymen, if questioned, would recognize the heavy administrative responsibilities of modern church leadership. Most would agree this makes spiritual work difficult. But subconsciously, the expectations remain. And it loads our Christian leaders with intense guilt about their prayer life.

Guilt also comes from the expectations of church leaders themselves. Many assume leadership roles in answer to God’s call. Too often, though, the call is interpreted as a responsibility to personally fulfill the entire Great Commission. The faulty logic runs like this: “Saving the world required a perfect sacrifice: Christ. Since I’m not perfect, I must work even harder to save the world.”

One pastor said: “The greatest relief of my young ministry was when I finally realized God could get his work done without me. That freed me to do even more for the Kingdom without loading myself with guilt for what I couldn’t do.” One’s personal prayer life can suffer horribly from a self-induced messiah complex—or even an honest workaholic ethic fueled by popular maxims like “Wear out, don’t rust out for Christ.”





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A third source of guilt is the natural bent of most church leaders toward rational methods of learning. Analytic thinking works for most areas of Bible study and theology. But the experience of prayer extends beyond the rational. Listen to people who want to talk about prayer. They start enthusiastically, but the words don't last long. The enthusiasts soon discover prayer is too central, too much a part of the core to be reduced to a series of convincing syllogisms. So they end up talking around it. They talk about great answers to prayer and their troubles in being consistent in prayer. But the experience itself eludes attempts to verbalize.

Prayer is a very private experience. One pastor whom several people suggested as a model of powerful praying noted that studies of other people's prayer lives run the risk of invasion of privacy: "There are areas of Christian experience, like marriage, that are almost too sacred for research. The 'how-to-do-it' books on prayer can show us the direction to the secret place and help us find time for the closed door, but who is the person who will attempt to define, delineate, and demonstrate what takes place there?"

For the rational, straight-thinking church leader, this can be a frustration. Why can't prayer be attacked like any one of a dozen problems solved this past year? We repaved the parking lot, helped Al Aronson work through his depression, and I planned my speaking engagements for the next year and penciled in preparation time for them all. But prayer ...

In spite of these apparent contradictions, leadership responsibility and prayer are not incompatible. Many Christian leaders have successfully wedded the two and enjoy the marriage. The offspring is a fruitful ministry.

But the marriage works only when leadership and prayer are seen as a private partnership instead of jealous brothers competing for God's time. The conditions of the partnership are not difficult. In fact, they are really rather ordinary. The key is to match God's terms with the ordinaries of life.

Terry Muck is former editor of Leadership. This article first appeared in Liberating the Leader's Prayer Life, a LEADERSHIPBOOKS, 1985.

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Thought Provokers

- *The author writes, “The roles of confident decision maker and humble penitent do regular battle in the soul of the Christian leader, and an incomplete, guilt-ridden prayer life may plague the ministry.” How is your prayer life? How have you experienced something like this?*
- *Describe the “front and back yards” of your spiritual life. How do you care for both? Do you desire a stronger prayer life, or are you satisfied with the amount of time you spend in prayer? Why?*

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How To

Change the Way You Talk to God

9 secrets to revitalize your
prayer life .

by Sandra Picklesimer Aldrich

Early in my widowhood, as I prayed with my son and daughter about a possible move, I ended the prayer with “Thank you, God, that you’ll show us what to do.”

As I stood up, my then 12-year-old daughter, Holly, said, “Mom, you didn’t say ‘Amen.’”

I nodded. “That’s because the Lord and I are going to talk about this all day long.”

And we did, too—while I was driving, washing dishes, and waiting in the dentist’s office. Eventually my children and I made that cross-country move that opened a new career for me. But, more importantly, I’d begun a new adventure in connecting with God.

Here are some things I’ve learned about prayer along the way.

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We do not pray to air. Here in Colorado Springs, majestic Pikes Peak rises above the city. On those rare cloudy days when the Peak is obscured, we citizens don't wander around the streets saying, "I knew it was too good to last. The Peak is gone!" We know the Peak is there even though we can't see it. That's the way it is with God. He's real and at work even when we can't see his hand.

Jump right in. We can read all the books on prayer or listen to the greatest intercessors in the world, but none of that means a thing if we don't just jump in and start talking to God. Because of what Jesus did on the Cross for us, we can talk to our heavenly Father as naturally as we talk to a good friend.

Jana remembers her grandparents' prayers filled with sacred sounding Thees and Thous that made her feel uncomfortable about approaching God. She says it wasn't until she tried to start a stubborn lawn mower during her husband's absence that she wiped the perspiration from her forehead and sighed a pitiful plea. Her simple prayer of "Lord, I really need your help"—and the resulting catch of the engine—thrust her into a new awareness of his presence.

There's no "right" way to pray. Anyone who's ever attended a seminar on prayer undoubtedly has heard the five Ps: Be in the same *place* for prayer each day, during the same *period* of time; use the same *posture*; select a Scripture *passage*; then *pray*. While those are good suggestions, sometimes they can cause us to concentrate on the process rather than the privilege of prayer.

Years ago, as I explained a workplace challenge I was having to a New York friend, he leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, and said, "Let's just give this to the Lord right now." And then he proceeded, with eyes wide open, to pray.

Startled, I immediately put my head down, clasped my hands together, and squeezed my eyes closed. But even with my eyes shut, I knew my friend continued gazing out the window, talking to the One who'd created all that beauty. I was amazed both at his physical boldness and spiritual humility, but knew he had just introduced me to looking at prayer in a new way. Today, depending on the circumstances, I readily pray with my eyes open—on walks with a friend or even on the telephone as I try to encourage a troubled caller.





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Make prayer a natural part of your day. My Kentucky grandmother, Mama Farley, talked to God so casually that I often thought we had company. I'd meander into our kitchen expecting to see one of our neighbors, but discover it was just Mama and the Lord discussing the day.

"Now, Lord," Mama would say, "You're going to have to do something about the well. You know we need water. And you've said all we have to do is ask, so thank you for the way you'll guide us in solving this. Meanwhile, keep the men strong and safe as they dig." My grandfather and uncles reached a good water table by the next morning.

Let your emotions show. When my son, Jay, was a toddler, he'd often exclaim, "Hey, take a see!" instead of "Look!" What if we offered that same joyful call to our heavenly Father as we thank him for a beautiful sunrise or the early morning dew balanced on a summer leaf?

In the same way, what if we were truthful in our pain? As a single parent, many of my prayers have begun with "Lord, you know I hate days like this," as I've faced yet another crisis. When the Lord said, "Come unto Me," he didn't add, "Come with a smile on your face" or "Come with the right attitude." He just said "Come!"

Pray even when—especially when—you don't feel like it. One of my single-mom friends, Debi, heard her then nine-year-old son, Shane, screaming as he charged into the house one summer morning. He was clutching his left hand with his right—and blood was oozing out between his fingers.

"Shane! What happened? Let me see!"

The child backed up. "No! You'll hurt me!"

"Shane, Mommy can't help unless you show me your hand."

"No! Get away!"

Finally, Debi wrestled him to the floor and carefully opened his fingers, expecting to see exposed bone and tendon. But the cut was just one of those skin scrapes that bleeds a lot. After washing and dressing the wound, Debi released Shane to his ball game.





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As she put away the first-aid kit, she marveled at her son's dramatics. Then she realized she'd been doing the same thing to God. Her husband's walking out had so stunned and hurt her that she wouldn't pray. It was as though God were saying, Let me see, while Debi stood with fists clenched, saying, "No, you'll hurt me."

Right there in the kitchen, she sobbed out her pain to the Lord, telling him what he already knew but she needed to hear herself saying. Her own healing had begun.

Give the crisis to God. Think of the most spectacular answers we've had to prayer. Haven't they come when our backs were to the wall and we could do nothing to pull ourselves out of the mess? That's when God can show his power.

I've taken days and even weeks to work through numerous dilemmas, but sometimes, especially in the midst of a crisis, all I had time for was a panicked "Lord!" That's all I could do in Pennsylvania when a speeding car spun out of control and headed right for us. The car missed us by a fraction.

But another rainy afternoon near our home, a car skidded into our lane—and right into our auto's rear panel even as I yelped the same prayer. I don't know why sometimes God chooses to intervene and other times allows the crisis to occur. I just know the Lord is with us even when he allows the bad stuff to happen. The morning before my husband died, he told me, "Just remember, San. The Lord never promised us an easy road, but he did promise always to be with us on that road." Some days that's all that gets us through.

We can pray even when we're powerless. Aunt Adah was paralyzed for the last five years of her life and unable to speak for the last two years. My mother cared for her totally—bathing her, turning her, feeding her. She also challenged Aunt Adah to accept a special prayer ministry, saying that the family needed the prayers she could still offer in her mind.

Throughout the day, as Mother received word of a particular need, she'd pass it along to Aunt Adah and wait for the coded eye blinks that assured her my aunt understood. My children and I were recipients more than once of those special prayers—especially on days when we were due to fly in for a visit.

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As soon as we'd arrive at my parents' home, we'd go to Aunt Adah's bed in the living room, bend over the rail to kiss her forehead and thank her for praying. Often we'd add specific details—such as our making it to the second flight even though the first flight had been delayed. How Aunt Adah's eyes would shine then.

The Lord released Aunt Adah from her tired body last year, but her prayers are sorely missed. I've often thought about how her prayers surrounded us in our busy schedules, but I've also wondered how they affected her as well. Even in the midst of her pain, she possessed a graciousness and peace I wouldn't have expected from one so bound to a paralyzed, pain-filled body. Perhaps her constant prayerfulness wrapped her in God's grace.

Trust God's sovereignty as you pray. After my husband Don's brain cancer went into unexpected remission, I dared to ask him if he thought all the prayers on his behalf had changed God's mind. He lifted his face to the morning sun as he shook his head.

"Then why do we pray if our prayers can't change God's mind?" I asked.

He turned to give me one of his gentle, patient looks. "To show our submission to the Master."

That scene has stayed with me even these 14 years after Don's death, reminding me we don't have to know the future when we pray. All we have to do is trust the One who does.

Even in loss, find something for which you can be thankful. After Don's death, I was determined that although ten-year-old Jay and eight-year-old Holly had lost their dad physically, they weren't going to lose me emotionally. Thus, every night as I tucked them into bed, I asked if they wanted to talk before we prayed together. Sometimes Jay shared a special memory of his dad or had a question about something at the funeral. But not Holly. Even after two weeks, she hadn't cried and kept all her questions inside. I began to ask my friends to pray for her to open up.

Shortly thereafter, as I tucked her in and routinely asked if she had any questions, she said, "I do wonder one thing. When we prayed, didn't God listen?"

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Oh, boy. With that one question, she'd uttered the universal heart's cry. Mentally I shot a quick prayer for help, then began the hardest explanation I've ever tried to give.

I reminded Holly of my Grandpa Ted who'd died after his leg was severed in a Kentucky coal mine. He was only 22 years old and left three children under the age of four. Then I talked about God's gift to us of those extra 16 months, after the doctors said her daddy would die within weeks. I added that he could have died with the first cancer when she had been only three years old.

When I was talked out, I asked Holly if she felt like praying that night. She nodded, then began. "Thank you, God, that Daddy died now instead of when I was little."

Since that night, I've had numerous occasions to ponder why God doesn't always answer the way I've asked him to. I still don't have a solution. All I know is that he wants us to keep talking to him and that we do not pray to air.

Sandra P. Aldrich is a TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN contributing editor and freelance writer, speaker, and author of such books as Men Read Newspapers, Not Minds, and Kids Fight When the Phone Rings (both Tyndale). This article first appeared in the May/June 1997 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *Which of the author's nine tips encourages you the most? Which one challenges your view of prayer and why?*
- *When it comes to prayer, how can you relate Debi's son, who exclaimed, "No, you'll hurt me" instead of reaching out for help? Or how can you relate to the author's daughter, Holly, asking, "When we prayed, didn't God listen?" Where do you find answers to your tough questions about prayer?*





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PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

I'll Be Praying for You

How to say it—and pray it—like you mean it.

by Michele Cushatt

I sat across the table from my friend Susan, searching her pain-filled eyes and wondering how I could help. Her situation was outside my realm of influence: She had suffered an unexpected personal attack from former friends within the congregation her husband pastored. And I had no words to right the wrongs or ease her aching heart. “I’m sorry,” I attempted weakly. She half-smiled, then asked me to pray for her.

Unable to offer anything else, I promised I’d join her in making Mondays a day of fasting and prayer for her and her church. But after leaving our lunch and resuming my crazy schedule, would I actually keep my promise?

Entering the Interior

Too often when I encounter someone’s desperate need, I offer a quick “You’re in my prayers” without slowing down enough to make good on my word. Any “real” praying I do consists of a hastily muttered sentence during my busy day, as if I’m merely checking off my to-do list or making God aware of a situation he might’ve missed.

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But the responsibility to pray for others deserves serious attention, as the abundance of biblical examples indicates. Moses regularly spoke with God on the Israelites' behalf because of their sin (Numbers 21:7). Esther requested her people to fast three days before she faced a volatile king (Esther 4:15–16). Paul asked early church members to pray for his speaking ministry (Ephesians 6:19–20). And Jesus spent most of his longest recorded prayer in passionate intercession for us (John 17).

Intercession—derived from the Latin words *inter* (between) and *cedere* (to go)—is an intervening or mediating between two parties with the goal of reconciling differences. And the key to a spiritual intervention is prayer. In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers calls intercessory prayer “the ministry of the interior” and “the real business of your life as a saved soul.” If so, we need to move past good intentions and make interceding a vital part of living in Christian community.

Standing in the Gap

God invites us to participate in his concern for his children by going before him on their behalf. During the prophet Ezekiel's lifetime, the Lord longed to show mercy to his wayward people through an intercessor: “I looked for a man among them who would ... stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it” (Ezekiel 22:30). My friend describes this kind of gap-standing prayer as “reaching out a warm hand to a hurting friend while never relaxing your other hand's firm grip on God. You make a life-giving connection.”

Although my prayers reach God regardless of their length or eloquence (Matthew 7:7–12, Revelation 5:8), they need to go beyond brief, one-sided conversations to make this connection that so many people need. A few weeks ago, my friend lost her mother to melanoma. A pregnant woman in my Bible study recently watched her husband leave her. And last week, another friend's husband pulled a gun on her. For these kinds of needs, my half-hearted prayers seem comparable to approaching my neighbor's burning house armed with only a water bottle. I dishonor the need by not matching my response to the problem's significance.

God did intercession first and best, matching a sizeable problem with a sufficient solution. He recognized the flames of our sinful nature had consumed us, and he sent Jesus, the fullness of himself in human flesh. Christ offered a life-giving connection: one hand extended to us and the other firmly holding our salvation. He didn't pour out a water bottle—

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he unleashed the floodgates. And his intercession on our behalf continues: “Christ Jesus . . . is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Romans 8:34).

Positioning with Purpose

While I know Christ’s intercessory prayers are effective, I often wonder if mine will make a difference.

The Bible overflows with examples of situation- and people-altering intercessory prayer. Job’s friends obtained God’s forgiveness after Job prayed for them (Job 42:8, 10). Lazarus rose from the dead when Jesus petitioned heaven (John 11:41–42). And the prison doors opened after Paul and Silas worshiped and prayed (Acts 16:25–26).

Still, we’ve all prayed to no avail at times. Our loved one died, the conflict never resolved, the physical ailment remained.

I’ve begged God repeatedly to restore health to my friend Kate, who’s lived with pancreatic cancer for nearly four years. Though she’s felt almost “normal” for the past few glorious months, she called this week to say the doctors believe her oasis of health is drying up. As I cried with her, I fielded an internal barrage of questions: Do I need to pray harder? Is God even listening? What’s the purpose of my prayers?

The tortuous journey of illness was a familiar one to C.S. Lewis, whose wife Joy’s recurring cancer and remission are portrayed in *Shadowlands*, a movie based on the couple’s relationship. In response to this marriage of joy and pain, the Lewis character comments, “I pray because I can’t help myself—the need flows out of me. It doesn’t change God; it changes me.”

Perhaps the purpose of prayer is more about positioning than petitioning. It moves me from being self-centered to being God-centered and other-centered. As I’ve prayed regularly for Kate, I’ve started to view my unrelenting schedule and relational conflicts through the lens of her cancer. Now I’m thankful I’m physically able to have a full schedule, and I’m less flustered with daily stresses. I reflect God’s grace toward strangers and his patience toward loved ones. Intercession has freed me from self-absorption (Galatians 6:2, Matthew 5:44–45), relieving me of my misery so I can engage in ministry.

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Joining in the Experience

Following the example of Jesus' ministry is costly. The intercession he performed on our behalf—standing between us and our need—required his life. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,” Jesus proclaimed (John 15:13). And though our prayerful intercession can't compare to his, it requires we also “lay down” our lives, altering our habits or donating our time to take on the need we're bringing before God.

When I carved out Mondays to fast and pray for Susan's struggles with her church, I had no idea what I was getting into. I enjoy eating three meals (at least) a day! But when I stepped outside my comfort zone, changed Monday appointments, and accepted nagging hunger pangs that brought me to my knees in prayer, I found myself transported into the middle of her crisis, grieving her loss, experiencing her powerlessness, and feeling her deep wounds of disappointment and betrayal.

However, my costly involvement in Susan's life through intercession also came with a bonus: I became more intimately connected to God. With one hand reaching out to Susan, I reached up in desperation to him. And I witnessed God's activity in the crisis—I saw his concern, felt his presence, trusted his purposes.

I also discovered the motivation for the sacrificial, risky, and sometimes exhausting business of intercession: God's love (Romans 8:34–9:1). In his book *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*, Philip Yancey explains love's effect: “When I pray for another person, I am praying for God to open my eyes so that I can see that person as God does, and then enter into the stream of love that God already directs toward that person. Something happens when I pray for others in this way. Bringing them into God's presence changes my attitude toward them and ultimately affects our relationship.”

Learning to love one another the way God loves us moves us to do what we've never before considered. It bubbles up in kindness when we lack ability. It stirs up compassion when we'd rather stay detached. It frees up our busy schedules when we see that a friend—or even an enemy—needs us to intercede.

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And if we fear we don't have enough love for such a task, we can ask the Author of love to pour a bit of overflow from his heart into ours as we open it up to a passionate ministry of gap-standing prayer.

Michele Cushatt is a Bible teacher, writer, and speaker at women's events. She lives with her family in Colorado. This article first appeared in the November/December 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *The author confessed, "Any 'real' praying I do consists of a hastily muttered sentence during my busy day, as if I'm merely checking off my to-do list or making God aware of a situation he might've missed. . . . My half-hearted prayers seem comparable to approaching my neighbor's burning house armed with only a water bottle." What's wrong with this approach to prayer? How can you relate?*
- *How is prayer more about "positioning" rather than "petitioning"? How can intercession free us from self-absorption and enable us to engage in our ministries as leaders?*





REVITALIZE

Fresh Air

3 practices to breathe life into your conversations with God.

by Keri Wyatt Kent

It's ironic. I used to call the time I set aside for God my "quiet time." However, those times, filled with words—the words I read, studied, wrote, or whispered toward the ceiling, wondering if God even heard—felt anything but quiet. They felt more like "doing" times—as in completing tasks on a list. And, truth be told, sometimes they also felt like "doing time," as in punishment or an obligation.

I knew Jesus offers us "life to the full" (John 10:10), but I wondered if that was possible. I tried to study my Bible, but I'd forget the words I read as soon as I closed the book. Or I'd think, *I've read this all before*. It seemed stale. But just when exhaustion and guilt made me ready to give up, God brought some people and books into my life that showed me ways to put the quiet back into my quiet times, old ways to revitalize my relationship with him that were new to me.

Maybe you too are looking for that full life Jesus promises instead of a life stuffed with too much responsibility and pressure. If Jesus is the one who promises that kind of life, it makes sense the way we





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access it is by spending time with him. But if you're thinking, *I already do that, but it's beginning to feel a bit dry, a bit routine*, don't worry. There's hope.

Here are three practices I've found to help me connect with God more deeply. I've been using them for more than a decade now. They're simply ways to spend time with Jesus so you can let him give you that abundant, full life.

1. Deep Listening

Christians have prayed and listened to Scripture through a practice called *Lectio Divina* (Latin for "Sacred Word") for centuries. You read a passage slowly several times, spending time in silence between readings, letting the words sink into your soul as you listen for the one word or phrase that touches you most deeply.

Lectio Divina is a way to meditate on Scripture by listening and then responding—breathing in God's Word, breathing out a prayer. Traditionally, this practice includes four parts: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Deep listening to Scripture requires a focus on God's words rather than ours. In *Lectio Divina*, I listen to what God wants to say just to me through the text. I'm open to listening not just to general truth that's applicable to everyone, but for specific truth that applies to my unique circumstances.

In this practice, I read a short passage. For a month or more one summer, I kept going back to Psalm 27, reading a few verses at a time. I found myself drawn to verses 3–5, so for several days, I returned to that short section. I read it slowly, noticing how often I found myself drawn to the word "dwell." What did it mean for me to "dwell in the house of the Lord" (vs. 4)? Did I really believe I was "safe in his dwelling"? How could I truly dwell in his presence?

These verses became a love letter from God to me, an invitation to deeper intimacy with him. At the time, a work project had me feeling nervous—fearful I would fail, that I couldn't do it. God spoke through Psalm 27, telling me to trust, that he would keep me safe, he would dwell with me. I responded with prayer: Lord, help me to stay connected, to dwell with you, to notice you, and to trust you. As I slowly worked on the project, I'd think of that word "dwell" and





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knew he promised to be with me as I did what he'd called me to do. But he also reminded me that my work wasn't the most important thing; my intimacy with him was.

Try this: Read a short passage of Scripture slowly, noticing which word seems to jump off the page. Spend a few moments in silence. Do this several times, looking for God's invitation or encouragement in the word he seems to be highlighting. Reflect on the word or phrase; listen for God's invitation. Be quiet; let that word draw you into prayer, into wordless companionship with God.

2. Breath Prayer

A breath prayer is a short prayer that can be prayed in the space of one breath. It expresses your love for God and your desire for God's touch in your life. Usually a breath prayer combines a name for God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit with a deep desire of your soul, forming a single sentence you pray. It focuses on God but names your deepest need. Sometimes, it's a form of confession or self-examination. A classic breath prayer used for centuries comes from Luke 18:13: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Breath prayer is a way of meditating on Jesus, letting go of distractions so you can be in his presence. Psalm 1:2 exhorts us to meditate on God's Word, to delight in it. Unlike Eastern meditation practices, which focus on emptying the mind, a breath prayer is a way of filling your mind—but filling it with God alone. It's like sitting in companionable silence with God, not having to talk but being aware of his company, and how his very presence meets your deepest needs.

Try this: Use a verse of Scripture or a simple phrase that expresses your deepest spiritual desire. In one particularly difficult season of my life, I carried the prayer "Peace and strength of Christ flow into my heart" through my days. I'd breathe in that peace and strength, then exhale my fear and tension. I silently prayed it for other people even as I talked with them. This practice soon began to change the way I felt and responded to others around me. I felt more peaceful, more aware of Christ. I think that's how he answered that prayer.





3. Being There

Have you ever read a biography or a great novel and felt so swept up in the story that the book's characters became real to you? As you read their story, you felt you actually were spending time with them? Gospel meditation, or "being there," has traditionally been called the Ignatian Method, after Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). He instructed his followers to spend time with Jesus by imagining themselves in the Gospel story.

David Benner, author of *The Gift of Being Yourself*, writes, "Gospel meditation provides an opportunity to enter specific moments in Jesus' life and thereby share his experience. Shared experience is the core of any friendship. And Spirit-guided meditation on the life of Jesus provides this possibility."

Once I was reading Mark 1:35–38, where Jesus tries to get some time alone. His disciples come and find him, saying, "Everyone is looking for you!" I imagined the scene, thought about how Jesus felt, and realized this: Jesus had his solitude time interrupted! Like me, he'd experienced interruptions, so he knew what I was going through when I had trouble finding time to be alone.

Try this: Choose a passage from one of the Gospels. Read it slowly. Daydream about it, imagining you're there. Perhaps you're a bystander watching Jesus, or the person talking to Jesus. Try playing various roles in the scene. Use your imagination to add details. Put yourself into the story via your five senses: What do you see, hear, feel, taste, and smell? By being there, you're spending time with Jesus.

When I slowed down, used fewer words but took them deeper, I not only enjoyed my time with God more, I actually found myself thinking throughout the rest of my day about the things on which I'd reflected. I realized God continued to speak even after I closed my Bible. Or I found myself recalling a breath prayer, using it as a way to calm down and connect with God when I couldn't even collect my anxious thoughts.





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This more contemplative approach may be just what you need to revitalize your quiet times. Try putting aside your current routine and substitute one or two of these practices just for a week or two. Play with them; experiment. My prayer is that they'll provide a breath of fresh air for your soul.

Keri Wyatt Kent, a TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN Regular Contributor, is author of several books, including Oxygen: Deep Breathing for the Soul (Revell). Learn more at www.keriywattkent.com. This article first appeared in the January/February 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *How is it possible for a quiet time to feel more like a “doing” time—or like “doing time,” as in punishment or obligation? How can you relate to the author’s experience in this area? How does the biblical view of prayer differ from this experience and why?*
- *Which of the three suggested practices helps you to see prayer in a refreshing way? How can these, or other, practices be implemented without turning them into more “doing”?*

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BRINGING IT HOME

Praying for Your Kids

5 easy ways to get started.

by Susan Alexander Yates

My phone rang yesterday. It was our 22-year-old daughter, Susy, calling from California.

“Mom, what are you doing today? How can I be praying for you this week?” Susy asked.

“Pray for me to become a woman of gratitude. Too often I take God for granted. How about you?” I continued. “How can I pray for you?”

“Please pray for my job. My boss is leaving, so that impacts my duties. Oh, and thanks for praying for my daily devotions. I’ve had consistent quiet times this week.”

Could it be that the most important thing we do as a parent is pray for our kids? Unfortunately, sometimes we’re so busy trying to make it through the day that it’s hard to make the time. Here are five suggestions to help you activate your prayer life for your children.





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Get Organized

I use a notebook that's divided into seven sections, one for each day of the week. Under each section I list my children, my husband, and myself. I have certain things I pray for each person on that particular weekday. For example, on Mondays I pray for my son Chris's study habits, his time alone with God, his friendships with three guy friends, and his ability to discern God's direction about his next step school-wise. On Tuesdays, I pray for different things for Chris. This way I don't feel as though I have to cover all my children's needs on any one day. As things come up, I simply add them to a day of the week.

My husband, John, has a similar notebook. He loves to glue photos of each person he's praying for next to their section. (I'm not that organized!)

Ask What Your Child Needs

It's all too easy to respond to your life randomly rather than intentionally. But the good thing about summer approaching is that it offers you a little more time with your kids, especially if they're young. So look at them with fresh eyes and ask yourself, *What are my children's needs for this summer?* Perhaps your elementary school-aged daughter's struggling to find friends or your teen's questioning his faith. Ask God in the weeks ahead to reveal specific things you should be praying about for each of your children.

Then, mark a date on your calendar now for some time in August to discuss with your husband your family's needs and goals for the coming year. If you're a single parent, do this with another mom or couple, and agree to pray for each other's children over the next several months.

Use Prayers from Scripture

When I don't know how to pray specifically for one of my children, I head directly to God's Word, which contains wonderful prayers. For example, Ephesians 1:17–19 is a beautiful prayer. So is Philippians 1:9–11. Insert your child's name into the prayer wherever it says "you." My mom inserts her grandchildren's names into the Lord's Prayer to pray for them. Stormie Omartian's book, *The Power of a Praying Parent* (Harvest House), or author Jodie Berndt's *Praying the Scripture for Your Children* (Zondervan) are excellent resources, particularly for mothers of young children.





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Expect God to Answer

God always answers prayer—but he doesn't always answer it in the way we expect or according to our time frame. I've found his answers generally fall into one of three responses: "Yes," "No," or "Wait." If the answer is "wait," you may find yourself wondering if God hears or really cares. But God hears your prayers—and is at work in your child's life! For instance, if you have a rebellious child, you may not see God's answers for years. But remember, he loves your child and wants what's best for her. So during a waiting period, ask God what he wants to teach you. It may be a lesson about something unrelated to the issue at hand.

Remember Who's in Control

The task of praying for our kids can often overwhelm us. But don't forget, your children are God's children first. He knows them better than you do—and loves them more than you do. He also knows the plans he has prepared for them (Jeremiah 29:11). God's your partner in parenting; it's not all up to you.

You can go to God in confidence not because of who you are (sometimes I feel like the worst mom in town!). Go to him because of who he is—King of kings, the one for whom nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37), the one who is praying for our kids (Hebrews 7:25). When you feel overwhelmed, say out loud God's character traits: He's faithful; he's merciful; he's slow to anger; he's mighty, an ever-present help, etc. Remembering these aspects of God will help your faith to grow.

Well-known author Oswald Chambers has said, "We look upon prayer as a means of getting things for ourselves; the Bible's idea of prayer is that we may get to know God himself." That's exactly what happens when you pray for your kids.

Susan Alexander Yates is the author of numerous books, including And Then I Had Teenagers (Baker Book House). This article first appeared in the May/June 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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Thought Provoker

- *How is it possible that “the most important thing we do as a parent is pray for our kids”? If this is true, what priority does this have in your life?*
- *How does praying for our children influence and lead them? In what ways would you like to lead your children when it comes to prayer? How can you begin making this a reality?*

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LEADERSHIP TOOLS

Prayer Pointers

6 ways to add more prayer
into your day.

by TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN *Readers*

We women are busy! There's work, kids, church commitments, cooking and cleaning, and a myriad other demands on our time each day. So how do you make time to connect with your Creator, the only One who can really help you with all those things on your to-do list? Why not borrow some ideas from six TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN readers.

Walk with Fido and Your Father

I pray while I walk my dog, Diamonds, every morning. I pray for protection for my kids, Brandon and Amanda, as they head off to school, and for my husband, John, as he puts in another day of work to provide for our family. And I thank God for the breathtaking sunrise and an occasional bunny or deer that delight me with God's magnificent creation—reminding me of Who's in charge of my life.

—*Suzanne L. Barath, Ohio*

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Dial Up and Dial In

I used to get frustrated waiting for my computer to fire up and then to connect to the Internet. It seemed to take forever. But now I find this a perfect time to connect with God through prayer—and wouldn't you know it, the time seems too short now!

—*Lisa Hendry, Colorado*

Reclaim Random Moments

In addition to regular prayer time at home, I also find moments out and about throughout my day to speak to God—walking in my neighborhood, riding my exercise bicycle, driving in my car, sitting in my office before one of the classes I teach, even while cleaning my shower.

—*Ruth Aipperspach, Texas*

Book an Appointment

I schedule time for prayer in my daily list of things to do. Frequent prayer times of as little as one to five minutes throughout my day can be quite uplifting. The more time I spend praying, the more I desire to pray.

—*Pansy Crumpler, North Carolina*

Nap Time = Prayer Time

I pray during my son's nap time. I've found it's the most practical time for me in this stage of my life. I've tried early in the morning, but discovered I'm not a morning person. At night, I want to spend time with my husband. Nap time works best.

—*Julie Potter, Missouri*

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Connect During Your Commute

When I'm on the way to work, I turn off the radio and pray about the things preying on my mind. This helps me give all my cares to God before I get caught up in the worries of the day. Also, when I'm in the school drop-off line, I pray with my ten-year-old son about what's happening at school that day. We end the prayer with me placing my hand on his head and blessing him. My son may be too big to kiss good-bye in front of his friends, but he loves receiving this blessing every morning.

—*Ellen Symonds, Alabama*

*This article first appeared in the September/October 2005 issue of
TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

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Additional Resources

More places for more information.



A Leader's Guide to Prayer, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. In this resource, you'll take a deeper look at all aspects of prayer, read about prayer working in the lives of leaders, and get advice on ways to pray (even in crises), and tips on leading others in prayer. But most of all, you'll come away encouraged to keep pressing forward in your prayer life as a leader, because truly great leaders need to be truly great pray-ers. One of the most important parts of a leader's life is prayer. Use the materials in this download to help you develop a deeper prayer life.

Casting Vision, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. This resource will be a helpful tool as you seek to develop, share, and implement a vision for your workplace or ministry. Learn about developing and sharing a common goal.

Find Your Calling, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. This downloadable packet helps you learn to listen to God's call, discern his voice, and act on his words. You'll find practical advice to help you discover what God wants for your life.



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Get Out of a Spiritual Rut, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. Revitalize your relationship with God the Father. Use this resource as a tool if you are entering in, sitting in, or climbing out of a spiritual rut. These articles act as a safeguard and provide helpful tips. Read the testimonies of others, who by faith and perseverance, reached out and were met by God.

Listening to the Holy Spirit, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. Learn to follow as you lead. This packet helps you see what it means to lead in the power of the Holy Spirit and invites you to see if you are using the gifts the Spirit gives us.

Spiritual Gifts, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. This downloadable packet offers ways to learn more about the spiritual gifts, how to grow in them, and how to guard against their misuse. Here's what you need to know.

Hearing God's Voice, by Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby (B & H Publishing Group, 2002). This book is for those ready to listen. According to the Blackabys, God speaks to individuals in ways that are personal and unique to each person. God never says anything contravening what he has already said in the Bible, and he usually confirms what he has said. You'll learn to discern the voice of God, identify ways he speaks, and respond to revelations of his will. After you learn to listen to God, hearing from God will be as natural as communicating with a close friend.

How to Have a Fulfilling Prayer Life, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. Are you ever discouraged because your prayers aren't answered, or at least not answered the way you expected? Most of us feel discouraged at some point, but we know the truth about prayer is much bigger than our meek understanding. In this guide, you'll be reminded that prayer is about trusting God, not about pleasing yourself. Download it today to receive a comprehensive, fresh look at the whys and hows of prayer.

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No Time for Quiet Time?, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. Are you desperate to find a way to make Bible reading and prayer a daily, disciplined part of your life? Between the craziness of life and Satan's careful maneuvers, quiet time is something that can easily slip out of routine. In this guide, you'll find new ideas not only on how to make time to read and pray, but also creative ways to journal. You'll be less likely to say "I'm too busy" and more likely to find a strategy that works for you.

Patience in Prayer, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. It's never easy to wait—especially when you're waiting on God. It is difficult to remember that we are never waiting alone. In this guide, you'll find advice on how to make it through periods of silence from God and be encouraged by others who have learned from waiting on the Lord.

The Power of Praying Through the Bible, by Stormie Omartian (Harvest House Publishers, 2008). Stormie Omartian has inspired millions of men, women and families with her prayers and other writings. Now she takes you on a journey from Genesis to Revelation, revealing how God designed prayer so you can embrace the promises of Scripture, release burdens to God's care, listen to the Spirit and walk with Jesus daily.

Trusting God When You Don't Understand, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. If you have been sitting in what the Bible calls "the desert" for weeks, months or even years don't lose heart. Download this guide today and let these articles and stories encourage you. This resource provides practical ways for you to stay strong by keeping your focus on God and not on your circumstances.

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Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

IF you're a capable, called, and gifted Christian woman in leadership, join the conversation at **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This blog, along with downloadable resources, will help you safely converse with other women about the issues you face. You'll walk away feeling encouraged, supported, challenged, and definitely not alone!



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