

What does it mean to pray?



7 days exploring prayer

As Christians, we know that prayer is vitally important, but it's also something that many of us struggle with. Most of us, if we're honest, wish we were 'better' at praying, and lots of books have been written on the subject of how to pray and different methods we can try. But what does prayer mean, and what does prayer actually do?

Over the next 7 days, I'd like to invite you to think about some different images of prayer – what it is, and what it does. I've taken for the basis of this a hymn by Narayan Vaman Tilak in which each verse highlights a different facet of prayer – and then I've added a couple of verses of my own.

Each day includes: the verse from the hymn; images, quotes, and bible verses relating to it; an 'ask' question to ponder; an 'action' to take in response; and a song to listen to. I have been blessed and enriched by putting this together, and I hope that it will help you in your prayer life too.

Prayer to a heart of lowly love

Prayer to a heart of lowly love
opens the gate of heaven above.

Ah, prayer is God's high dwelling-place,
wherein His children see His face.

From earth to heaven we build a stair,
the name by which we call it, prayer.

Prayer is the gracious Father's knee;
on it the child climbs lovingly.

Love's rain, the Spirit's holy ray,
and tears of joy are theirs who pray.

Prayer to a heart of lowly love
opens the gate of heaven above.

Narayan Vaman Tilak

Tune: www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5zwwT6t-A0

Day 1: Prayer is ... a Gate

*Prayer to a heart of lowly love
opens the gate of heaven above.*

Jesus said: 'The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture (from John 10:2-9).

Thomas Brooks was a great Puritan author and preacher who lived in the sixteenth century. He observed that "the best and sweetest flowers of paradise God gives to his people when they are upon their knees. Prayer is the gate of heaven."



O enter then his gates with praise,
Approach with joy his courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless his name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

William Kethe:
All people that on earth do dwell



Ask: What gates need opening in my life? What gates could I open for others?

Action: Find a gate and ask for God's help as you open it and walk through

Listen: Harvest worship: Open every door — www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw4LNdTIVxQ



Gates are two-way, we can enter in or go out, we can allow others in or shut them out. But as we come to Jesus he opens the gate to his kingdom and offers us a place to be safe.

Jesus says, 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in ...' (Revelation 3:20)

Day 2: Prayer is ... God's dwelling

*Ah, prayer is God's high dwelling-place,
wherein His children see His face.*



The Psalms tell us that God inhabits (the praises of his people. His dwelling-place is in heaven, yet he chooses to make our places of worship his dwelling-place too. And he also call us to be his temple, so that he can dwell with our hearts.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you? (1 Corinthians 3:16)

But Thou art holy, O Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.

⁴Our fathers trusted in Thee; they trusted, and Thou didst deliver them (Psalm 22:3-4, KJ21)

Wherein his children see his face ...

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15).

How lovely is your dwelling-place,
Lord Almighty!

⁴Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. (Psalm 84:1,4)

Ask: How does it feel to be God's dwelling place? Where do you see Jesus when you pray?

Action: Go on a prayer walk and ask God to show you his face

Listen: The Belonging Co: Dwelling place—www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXezDy2xMK8

It is in Jesus, through whom we pray, that we see God's face most clearly, for 'in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form ...' (Colossians 2:9)



Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:8-9).

Day 3: Prayer is ... a stairway

*From earth to heaven we build a stair,
the name by which we call it, prayer.*

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac ... ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go' (Genesis 28:10-15).

I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth" (John 1:51)



We build a stair up, only to find God already reaching down, his Spirit carrying our prayers upwards and his blessing down.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans (Romans 8:26).

Ask: What do you find it hard to bring to God?

Action: Build a tower of pebbles and ask the Holy Spirit to lift your prayers to heaven

Listen: Bushfires Ministries: Jacob's Ladder (Angels coming) - www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9vQn0w-qzA

... look at the Bridge of My only-begotten Son, and see the greatness thereof, for it reaches from Heaven to earth, that is, that the earth of your humanity is joined to the greatness of the Deity thereby. I say then that this Bridge reaches from Heaven to earth, and constitutes the union which I have made with man.

- *St Catherine of Siena*

Day 4: Prayer is ... the Father's knee

*Prayer is the gracious Father's knee;
on it the child climbs lovingly.*

Human fathers may let us down, but God welcomes us as his children, and always offers us a safe space in him.

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these' (Matthew 19:13-14)

'When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love.

To them I was like one who lifts
a little child to the cheek,
and I bent down to feed them
(Hosea 11:1,4).



Prayer is like sitting in God's lap with his arms around you, telling him about your day, listening to his guidance, and feeling him beam at you with unending love (source unknown)

Ask: Where do you need to know God's love?

Action: Find a teddy (or a safe person) to hug and imagine God hugging you and keeping you safe.

Listen: Come away with me – Godfrey Birtill - www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-sk1xhQ3NM



Yvonne Rooney writes: I recently chatted to a priest friend and as we discussed prayer he asked me if was familiar with the 'Father's Lap'. I was not. This prayer intrigued me and sounded very appealing. Basically, we all know what it is like to see a young child settle into their parents or loved one's arms. Most of us have experienced holding a young infant and as they wriggle and squirm and settle into a comfy place in the crook of your arm, or shoulder high, or even under your chin, the child becomes still. We have all seen the images of contentment and peace this embrace gives. The Father's Lap is a moment of embrace, for us, in the loving arms of God. (<https://catecheticalcentre.org/adult-faith-resources/the-fathers-lap-yvonne-rooney/>)

Day 5: Prayer is ... sunbathing

Love's rain, the Spirit's holy ray,
and tears of joy are theirs who pray.

"... there's something about sunbathing that tells us more about what prayer is like than any amount of religious jargon. When you're lying on the beach or under the lamp, something is happening, something that has nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time, and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You simply have to be there where the light [is] ... Give the time and let go of trying hard (actually this is the difficult bit). God is there always. You don't need to fight for his attention or make yourself acceptable. He's glad to see you. And he'll make a difference while you're not watching, just by radiating who and what he is in your direction. All he asks is that you stay there with him for a while, in the light. For the rest, you just trust him to get on with it."

Rowan Williams, Radio 2 'Pause for Thought', October 2005

Ask: Where do I need to see the sunshine behind the rain clouds?

Action: Find a sunny place to sit and simply enjoy being bathed in God's warmth and light.

Listen: Lord, the light of your love is shining—www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3iB30gCqAc



Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the
house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
¹¹ For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favour and honour;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose way of life is
blameless (Psalm 84:10-11)

...but sometimes it rains

Let us acknowledge the Lord;
let us press on to acknowledge him.
As surely as the sun rises,
he will appear;
he will come to us like the winter rains,
like the spring rains that water the
earth.' (Hosea 6:3)

Land that drinks in the rain often
falling on it and that produces a crop
useful to those for whom it is farmed
receives the blessing of God
(Hebrews 6:7).



Day 6: Prayer is ... a feast

*Prayer is a feast of heavenly food
where all may taste that God is good*

The Bible talks about feasting just as much as about fasting. Time with God gives us the nourishment we need.

‘Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.

² Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not
satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of
fare. (Isaiah 55:1-2)

Jesus said, ‘This, then, is how you should
pray ... Give us today our daily bread
(Matthew 6:9,11).

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of
life. Whoever comes to me will never go
hungry, and whoever believes in me will
never be thirsty’ (John 6:32-35).



*Paul puts it like this in 1 Timothy 4:4–5:
“Everything created by God is good,
and nothing is to be rejected if it is
received with thanksgiving, for it is
made holy by the word of God and
prayer.” So, the difference between
unholy feasting and holy feasting is not
what’s on the table, but what’s in the
mind and in the heart. Is the mind
grasping the God-centered meaning of
these things from the word of God, and
is the heart sending up joyful prayers of
thanksgiving as we taste more of the
goodness of God in the very things
we’re eating?*

[www.desiringgod.org/interviews/
ingredients-for-a-theology-of-feasting](http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/ingredients-for-a-theology-of-feasting)

Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in
him (Psalm 34:8).

Ask: What is God offering that I’m
reluctant to taste? What am I feasting
on that isn’t good for me?

Action: Think of something to thank
God for then eat a grape and taste his
goodness

Listen: Taste and See (Shane & Shane)
[www.youtube.com/watch?
v=yOzf0VrDNGU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOzf0VrDNGU)



Day 7: Prayer is ... dancing

*Prayer leads our steps to dance with God
drawing us deep into his love*

We may invite Jesus into our heart, but really it's about accepting his invitation to become part of his dance – Father, Son, and Spirit, ever One and ever Three, moving together in harmony.

You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,¹² that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.

Lord my God, I will praise you for ever. (Psalm 30:11-12)

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever –¹⁷ the Spirit of truth.¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.²⁰ On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (John 14:16,18-20)



The early theologians took their inspiration from the words of Jesus in John 17:21: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you”. They envisaged God as a dynamic activity of Father, Son and Spirit, eternally giving themselves to each other in love. 'One fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching...The divine dance is fully personal and interpersonal, expressing the essence and unity of God' (La Cunga, C. M., *God for Us: the Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco, Harper, 1991, p.271).

[John of the Cross] sings of a God who is community. Father, Son, in Spirit: living water in infinite personal exchange. And that God is community with a maximum immigration policy ... the Spirit rapture of Father and Son lets them issue an entirely open invitation. ... So John knows a living water which just loves to overflow so as to gather all else in its flow.” Iain Matthew, *The impact of God: soundings from St John of the Cross* (London, Hodder, 1995) p.73

Ask: What stops you joining God's dance?

Action: Play a worship song and dance!

Listen: Lord of the dance—
www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8c3-GMOs10

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Songs from YouTube; all links correct March 2026

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