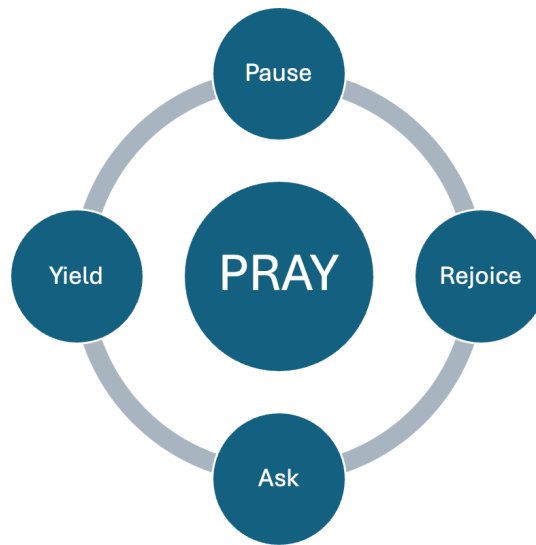


Prayer Course 2024



Pause, Rejoice, Ask, Yield (from Pete Grieg, founder of 24/7 Prayer)

Why Pray?

- * Our word 'prayer' comes from the Latin *precarius* - we pray because life is precarious
- * To be human is to pray - the Lord's Prayer is prayed on Easter Day by one person in every four
- * Scripture is full of prayer, of course it is. **Ephesians 6:** prayer against the dark spiritual forces; **Romans 8:** we are caught up in a heavenly prayer meeting; **1 Corinthians:** we are edified by truths revealed to us only in prayer
- * Jesus prayed and prayed and prayed. Prayed all night before choosing his disciples, after feeding the five thousand he must have been tired but still climbed a mountain to pray, in the Garden of Gethemane he prayed so hard his sweat fell like blood, after his resurrection Jesus commanded his disciples to follow his example, the Church was born as 'they all joined together constantly in prayer'
- * The poet Mary Oliver:

Praying

It doesn't have to be
 the blue iris, it could be
 the weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
 small stones; just
 pay attention, then patch
 a few words together and don't try
 to make them elaborate, this isn't
 a contest but the doorway
 into thanks, and a silence in which
 another voice may speak

- * Because God likes us - a lot! And wants to spend time with us

So I want you to realize with Whom (as they say) you are dealing and what the good Jesus offers on your behalf to the Father, and what you are giving Him when you pray that His will may be done in you: it is nothing else than this that you are praying for. Do not fear that He will give you riches or pleasures or great honours or any such earthly things; His love for you is not so poor as that. And He sets a very high value on what you give Him and desires to recompense you for it since He gives you His Kingdom while you are still alive. Would you like to see how He treats those who make this prayer from their hearts? Ask His glorious Son, Who made it thus in the Garden. Think with what resolution and fullness of desire He prayed; and consider if the will of God was not perfectly fulfilled in Him through the trials, sufferings, insults and persecutions which He gave Him, until at last His life ended with death on a Cross.

(Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*)

- * Karl Barth, probably the greatest theologian of modern times: 'we are set at God's side and lifted up to him and therefore to the place where decisions are made in his government'. If the Prime Minister called you to say that your name had been selected to spend a whole day with the Cabinet on a range of issues, would you go? Would you be excited? **Exodus 32: 11-14**
- * Keep it simple, keep it real, keep it up
- * Doesn't have to be gentle, you can be angry with God, tell him how you feel, he knows anyway so don't hide. Jacob wrestling the angel, it was so important

that the angel blessed him, he was wounded and never healed. **Genesis 32: 22 - 31**. You are allowed to pick a fight with God!

Pause

- * Slowing and Centring: 'The best way to start praying is to *stop* praying'. Put down your prayer list, stop talking *at* God
- * *Selah* is used 71 times in the Psalms - it means 'pause and calmly think of that.'
- * Find a place, change your posture...

Relax

- * Sit/stand, kneel, raise your hands, lie prostrate, dance (King David danced naked!)

Breathe

- * Inhale the life-breath of the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathed on his disciples and said 'receive the Holy Spirit'. Breathe **in** the Holy Spirit and breathe **out** your worries, distractions, fears, busyness

Speak

- * 'Father in heaven' (breathe in) - 'Hallowed be your name' (breathe out)
- * Say the Jesus Prayer from the Desert Fathers: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'
- * Say *Maranatha* from **1 Corinthians 16:22** - 'Come, Lord Jesus'
- * St Francis of Assisi just said 'My God and my all'
- * Or a Taizé chant *The Lord is my light, my light and salvation / In him I trust, in Him I trust*

Repeat

- * Say a prayer of stillness - **Psalms 131**

Rejoice - background

After **Pausing**, slowing and centring, focusing on being in God's presence, we then can move into a period of giving God our adoration, praise and gratitude. We need to adopt an attitude/posture of **Rejoicing**.

Jesus's disciples, when they asked him to teach them how to pray, would no doubt have been shocked to hear Jesus start his prayer course with the words 'Our Father'. They knew that their scriptures occasionally compared God to a Father, but they would never have dreamed that they could address him in such familiar terms. Jesus was inviting them - and us - to a new, even shocking level of intimacy with the Creator God of the Universe.

Some people say that the most interesting thing about anyone is how they view God (who do they really think/feel he is? What do they think he thinks of them?). And this 'lens' ('filter') that we see God through for many people is the biggest stumbling block to them being able to adore and praise him. So this step of **Rejoicing** may be very difficult for some people.

How do you see God? Do you see him as scowling at you, frowning at you, with an expression of disapproval and disappointment on his face?

How do you *really* see God?

Some of us see God through our own experiences of our parents, our own fathers, if these relationships were cold, distant or even abusive, it's really hard to think of God the Father without looking through this 'lens'. And it's no wonder then that many of us want to avoid spending time with him in prayer, we may even try to avoid his gaze.

But Jesus talks about God the Father in a very different way. He makes it clear in the parable of the Prodigal Son, that the God we pray to is extravagantly kind, a father who comes running to us with arms open wide, *whenever* we approach him, *wherever* we've been, *whatever* we've done. **Luke 15: 11 - 32**

But along with the intimacy there must also be reverence - '*Hallowed* be thy name'. We sometimes have a notion of divine love that's devoid of divine sovereignty. We sometimes 'unhallow' God's name. Overfamiliarity can breed complacency, we forget the God of love is also a God of holiness, and that we as his people have been set aside for holiness, too. For some of us, our unconfessed sin or disordered lifestyles and choices can also be a stumbling block to coming to God with the right reverence and praise.

Of course, we need to have a measure of faith that we are praising the God of the universe and that we can join with him in seeing his will done in the world.

The author Annie Dillard says this:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

The first Christians didn't have crash helmets, but they certainly understood the sovereignty of God in a way we can't or won't. Look at the spontaneous sermons of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, or the apocalypse of John in Revelation, and you come to the conclusion that their God seems so much bigger than ours. I wonder what we've lost along the way from them to us? They certainly understood the 'fear of the Lord', even the 'dreadful thing' it can sometimes be 'to fall into the hands of the living God.' (**Hebrews 10: 31**)

Rejoice - practical steps

Awaken your soul

* Waking your soul up should can often be an act of will, you may not be in the mood, you may not feel like it. We can't just be with God when we 'feel it'. In the

letter to the Hebrews we hear Paul talking about a ‘sacrifice of praise’ (**Hebrews 13: 15**); this sacrifice should be offered continuously

- * It may well be that our sacrificial approach to God in difficult praise may be even more precious to God than our praise and worship when things are easy
- * Don't let your feelings and emotions be a block to your praise, even if you don't feel it, just do it.

Brother Lawrence - practising the presence of God in the ordinary:

A middle-aged injured soldier called Nicolas Herman saw a leafless tree in winter and, knowing it would burst into new life in Spring, felt a stirring of hope in his soul. He joined a Carmelite monastery in 1651, and changed his name to Brother Lawrence, spending the rest of his life there doing menial jobs in the kitchen. He learned how to live a life of praise and worship, practising, as he called it, the ‘presence of God in the ordinary’, his writings on this have inspired countless Christians ever since. ‘As often as I could’ he wrote, ‘I placed myself as a worshipper before him... this proved to be an exercise frequently painful, yet I persisted through all difficulties’. For almost 500 years Brother Lawrence has been inspiring people to stay focused on God’s presence in their ordinary lives. As he said ‘even the smallest remembrance will always please God’.

Rejoice the Psalms

One of the easiest ways to praise and worship is by reading a Psalm (or part of a longer one), you could do this as a discipline every morning and evening (and at other times, too). Jesus knew this prayer book backwards, even quoting from it on the cross (**Psalm 22**) ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’

- * Psalm 4 lends itself to the evening ‘in peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety’
- * Psalm 5 is good for a morning prayer ‘in the morning Lord, you hear my voice, I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly’
- * Psalm 139 talks of God's guidance and overwhelming presence ‘Where can I flee from your presence? if I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there you will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast’.

- * Say them out loud, or sing them, this is what they were written for
- * Find your own favourites that speak to you for what's going on now in your life
- * About a third of the psalms are complaints to God 'why do the wicked prosper' **Psalm 73** or despairing cries from the soul ' you have put me in the darkest depths, your wrath lies heavy on me... why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?... you have taken me from my friend and neighbour, darkness is my closest friend'. **Psalm 88**
- * You'll find that a phrase will resonate with you, take that phrase and keep repeating it throughout the day

Rejoice with music

As well as praising in silence and in speech, you can fill your prayer time with music. I find that I can praise God when I'm singing worship songs and playing the guitar - this is only for my own consumption - this isn't meant to be musically brilliant, but is meant as a praise offering to God. If you feel you're not musical, have a go anyway! Everyone can sing, or at least make noises a bit like singing.

- * Put holy music on, sing along if you can (Taizé chants, hymns, anthems, or the more modern Bethel/Hillsong/Elevation Music/Maverick City Music, you could even try Christian Metal bands such as Crimson Thorn or Grave Declaration)
- * Create some playlists on Apple Music/Spotify, different ones to suit different moods, times of prayer, morning/evening etc.
- * Some people have gentle music on as a background to their whole prayer times

Rejoice with Liturgy

For many people, whether from a traditional Christian background or not, set liturgy can be a helpful means to praise. If you find some liturgy that speaks to

you, read it through prayerfully. This usually means slowly, reverently, with pauses for reflection. Many people find it useful to read liturgy out loud; many people find that having a notebook/prayer journal at hand is very useful

Have a look at these sources, all available on websites:

1. The Book of Common Prayer (Church of England)
2. Common Worship (Church of England)
3. Roman Catholic service liturgy
4. Methodist Worship Book
5. Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Hours, Divine Office (*Officium Divinum*)

Rejoice ‘with your own weirdness’

- * There are no rules! Think about when you last felt close to God... Where were you, who were you with, were you listening to music, or silence, or your child breathing as they slept...
- * For Olympic athlete Eric Liddell it was running: ‘God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure’.
- * King David praised when he saw the night sky: ‘When I consider your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and stars you set in place...’ **Psalm 8: 3.**
- * The craftsman Bezalel, commissioned to decorate the Temple praised God using the skills of his hands.
- * Mary’s Magnificat, that great song of praise, was spontaneously sung in response to her pregnancy.
- * The Magi were led to Jesus by their scientific pursuits.

- * I find I praise God in a load of different things and activities, just one is in reading poetry, especially that written by that great Jesuit poet and mystic Gerard Manley Hopkins. Find out what works for you!

Ask - background (petition, intercession, persistence)

Petition

Prayer means many things to many people, but at the heart of it we're all, in some way, asking God for help. The Lord's Prayer invites us to ask God for everything from the very simple, temporary and practical (our daily bread) to the awesome and eternal (thy kingdom come)

Everyone prays simple prayers entreaty from time to time, perhaps because we feel desperate or that we're in a desperate situation (there are no atheists in a falling plane).

Jesus himself entreats us to pray, saying: 'Ask me for anything in my name and I will do it' John 14:14, the Apostle James says: 'You do not have because you do not ask God' James 4:2.

When Jesus meets blind Bartimaeus, the crowds tried to shut him up but he kept crying out to Jesus, he got Jesus' attention. And Jesus asked him this seemingly ridiculous question: 'What do you want me to do for you?' - wasn't it obvious! - and Bartimaeus says: 'Lord, I want to see!' And Jesus heals him.

God the Father even says to his own son Jesus 'Ask of me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance'. So we do need to ask.

But note that Jesus says 'anything in my name', which leads us to the importance of our asking the right things for the right reasons. We know from scripture that it's God's great pleasure to give us what we want, but we need to remember 2 things:

1. We are children of God, yes, but also 'heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ' Romans 8:17. So we need to ask from God with confidence, the confidence we have from knowing that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross redeemed us to that relationship with God the Father
2. What we ask for has to be scripturally appropriate and align with God's will for us as a church as us as individuals

George Müller

19th century evangelist. Opened 5 orphanages in the Bristol area. Never did any fundraising, never asked for a donation. He just prayed. Spent hours each day in prayer and bible reading.

Through all this, Müller never made requests for financial support, nor did he go into debt, even though the five homes cost more than £100,000 to build. Many times, he received unsolicited food donations only hours before they were needed to feed the children, further strengthening his faith in God. Müller was in constant prayer that God touched the hearts of donors to make provisions for the orphans. For example, on one well-documented occasion, Müller publicly gave thanks for breakfast when all the children were sitting at the table even though there was nothing to eat in the house. Just as they finished praying, a baker knocked on the door with a donation of sufficient fresh bread to feed everyone, and the milkman gave them free urns of fresh milk because his cart had just broken down in front of the orphanage.

In his autobiographical entry for 12 February 1842, he wrote: A brother in the Lord came to me this morning and, after a few minutes of conversation gave me two thousand pounds for furnishing the new Orphan House ... Now I am able to meet all of the expenses. In all probability, I will even have several hundred pounds more than I need. The Lord not only gives as much as is absolutely necessary for his work, but he gives abundantly. This blessing filled me with inexplicable delight. He had given me the full answer to my thousands of prayers during the [past] 1,195 days.

The George Müller Charitable Trust is still going to this day, and last year distributed over £1m to children in poverty. They have no fundraising strategy, no fundraising team, they never ask for donations they just pray.

We **petition** God in prayer, in faith, because, as the writer Richard Foster says: ‘we are not locked into a pre-set, deterministic future. Ours is an open, not a closed universe. We are co-labourers with God, working with him to determine the outcome of events.’

Intercession

Intercession is asking God for others. But sometimes, if we’re honest, we’re really not sure if our small, whispered prayers can ever make any difference to: the relative who is entirely resistant to the gospel, or a terminal diagnosis, or the government that actively persecutes its Christian minority and has done for many years. But, take heart. The theologian Karl Barth said, ‘To clasp your hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the chaos and disorder of the world.’

Intercession is about ‘standing in the gap’, in the liminal spaces between earth and heaven, Creator and creation, the glory of heaven and the dirt of earth.

- * **Get informed:** find out some facts, ask some questions
- * **Get inspired:** with know the Trinity is continuously ‘dancing in prayer’. Just join in with what’s already happening
- * **Get indignant:** engage with your heart. Pray through tears, groan with the Holy Spirit, plead with God until your voice gives out, go without food, vent righteous anger, cry out with clenched fists ‘Lord, let your kingdom come’
- * **Get in synch** (Pete Grieg): pray with others - see Acts 4.

Persistence

It’s often hard to keep praying, especially when we feel that God is far away and that our prayers are not being answered. It’s annoying, but that’s just the time when we need to keep going.

1. Don't hide away, don't be on your own. Be with your church, be with your friends. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his arrest took

three close friends with him, Peter, James and John. Find people you can be vulnerable with, who will support you and love you

2. Keep pushing into God in prayer. Isn't it amazing that the gospels record the actual prayer that Jesus prayed in his darkest hour: 'Abba (Daddy), Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'
3. Hold onto God's love, however desperate we are, however desperate the situation. All we need, according to Jesus, is faith the size of a mustard seed. St Paul says: 'do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' *Philippians 4: 6-7*
4. Hold out for God's power: 'everything is possible for you'
5. Be honest: 'take this cup from me'

Christ's prayer at Gethemane almost perfectly mirrors the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father	Abba Father
In heaven, hallowed be your name	Everything is possible for you
Your kingdom come	Take this cup from me
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven	Yet not what I will, but your will be done

God's kingdom will only come when Jesus obeys his Father and takes the cup of unbearable suffering on the cross. So Jesus is going 'off script' here, you can imagine the suffering of God the Father as he hears his beloved Son say this. But it means Jesus has given permission to us to pray imperfectly, honestly, perhaps even improperly. He understands, he's been there, done it.

So we, too, can pray the 'prayer of relinquishment':

*Lord, I do not know what to ask of you, only you know what I need
I simply present myself to you;
I open my heart to you;*

*I desire only one thing: to do your will.
Teach me to pray.
Amen.*

(François Fénelon, 17th century French archbishop and promotor of universal human rights)

Yield - contemplation, listening, confession and reconciliation

Once we've Paused, Rejoiced and Asked, we can now start to yield, to recognise that God is God and we are not. To surrender to him, to allow his will to be done. To let him answer our prayers - or not. To spend time with him, in awe at his majesty. To acknowledge that he is always with us, that he sometimes breaks in, he sometimes comes along when we least expect, or we know we are fallen and full of sin, embarrassed that he comes to be with us, his fallen children.

Here's a poem by Thelma Laycock:

He seems to come in like the leaves -
Blown in at the open window,
On a light and airy day
Or in stormy weather
And always, I've noticed,
At an inconvenient time -
Right in the middle of the washing.
He looks at me and shows me those holes in his hands.
And I can see the ones in his feet.
'Not again', I say.
Please don't stand there bleeding
All over the kitchen floor.'

Sometimes he comes softly, sadly,
At night - close, by the side of my bed -
Sometimes I latch the door -

But he never goes away

Contemplation

Contemplation is described by Teresa of Avila as ‘the prayer of quiet, an intimate sharing between friends’.

Others describe it as ‘a trusting openness to the God who dwells at the centre of our being.’

- * Spending time with God, being consumed by his love
- * It’s mostly quiet, a wordless form of silent meditation upon Christ
- * It’s experiential, not about logic, more about feelings

It can be seen as a journey of three parts

1. Mediation - ‘me and God’

Fix your thoughts on an object, an icon, a picture. Sing a line of a hymn, anthem, worship song. Or a phrase of scripture. If a particular concern comes into your mind don't block it out, lift it to God as an offering. Remember the Holy Spirit is interceding with you, ‘groaning’ with you in prayer Romans 8:26

2. Contemplation - ‘God and me’

Let God take centre stage, try to sense his presence and his grace. Stop *doing* and start *being* in the presence of him.

Bishop Steven Verney: ‘it’s not that I'm contemplating divine love, but that divine love is also contemplating me. He sees me. He accepts me.’

3. Communion- ‘only God’

In this stage it feels like time has stopped, you can feel as if you've stepped into eternity. Anthony of the Desert (a mystic who lived more than 700 years ago)

‘Perfect prayer is not to know that you are praying.’ Like getting totally caught up in a movie, or an opera, we lose ourselves in something beyond us.

‘Show up, shut up, look up’!

Listening

‘My sheep know me and listen to my voice’ **John 10:27**

We can all learn to recognise the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd - but it’s not always easy. We may have been hurt by people who misappropriated God's word. Or tried to listen and only heard silence. We can hear God's voice in a number of ways:

1. In the Bible
2. In dreams and visions
3. In the counsel of others
4. In personal reflection

Confession and Reconciliation

‘Getting right with God’

It’s all going well, isn’t it? But here’s the hardest bit of all, to confess our sins. It’s the only line of the Lord’s Prayer with a caveat, ‘as we forgive those who sin against us.’

Frederick Büchner (Presbyterian theologian): ‘To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn’t already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge.’

As is said: ‘It doesn’t matter what you've done, what you've thought, where you've been or who you've been there with, there’s more grace in God than sin in you.’

The parable of the prodigal son, stumbling stinking up the road with his flimsy apology tucked in his pocket: ‘Father I have sinned.’ But it wasn’t about the words, was it? It was only that he came home.

Pope Francis says: ‘he always forgives, we’re the ones who get tired of asking for forgiveness.’

‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.’ **1 John 1: 9**

Pray the Examen (‘Pray as you Go’ app) from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola:

1. Replay
2. Rejoice
3. Repent
4. Reboot

When I think I know better than God, or I question what he wants me to do, or when I am in danger of allowing my own self-importance to take hold I grab my Bible and read the **Book of Job, Chapter 38**.

Reconciliation

Forgiving others, handing them over to God's mercy and judgement. In 1987 the IRA planted a bomb in the town of Enniskillen killing 11 people. One of those was a local nurse, Marie Wilson. Her father, Gordon Wilson, was pulled alive from the rubble and said in a BBC interview recorded just a few hours after the bombing these words about his daughter Marie: ‘I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet. She’s dead. She’s in heaven and we’ll meet again. I will pray for these men who killed her tonight and every night.’

Archbishop Desmond Tutu forgave. He set up the Truth and Reconciliation Committee to help guide South Africa from the horrors of apartheid to a better future for all races in the country. Growing up as a black man under apartheid

with a violent and alcoholic father, it would have been easy for him to descend into bitterness. When asked why he didn't, he answered: 'prayer'. His own prayer life was transformed when he was chided by a nun who said : 'you have been a celebrity for too long, and it's taking a toll in you and those around you. You need once more to realise your nothingness before God.'

Amen

The one who numbers every hair on our head and stores every tear that we cry also remembers every prayer that we've ever prayed

Keep it simple, keep it real, keep it up

And the future...

Throughout history, whenever God was about to do a new thing, he first mobilised his people to pray. What happens next for us here at St Ann's is anyone's guess, but it's an exciting time.

'One day, the trumpets will sound, the golden bowls of our prayers gathered in heaven will be emptied out upon the earth, a great 'Amen' will resound in heaven, and Jesus Christ will finally return. When that happens, the Lord's Prayer will become the world's prayer. Every knee will bow before the Father, every tongue will hallow his name, and people from every tribe and tongue will cast their crowns before him, declaring that:

The kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen'