

*Learning to Pray*

As children, much of our sense of security comes from connecting with other members of our family. We want to know they care about us and will be available when we need them.

There is nothing that delights a father more than knowing that his children like to be with him, and that they rely on him, confide in him, and learn from him. In the same way, God, our heavenly Father, invites us to come. *Abba* is the Aramaic term that Jewish children use to address their fathers. The English equivalent of *Abba* would be the terms *daddy* or *papa*.

In Romans 8:15, the apostle Paul said that because we are God's adopted children, we can cry out, "Abba, Father." By encouraging us to address Him with such an affectionate name, God not only invites us to come, but He opens wide His arms and encourages intimacy with Him. He is not a standoffish, stern Father. He's our heavenly Daddy Who longs for us to know Him.

But where do we go to learn how to access a satisfying prayer connection with our heavenly Father? The answer lies in observing the prayer life of His Son, Jesus.

## I. Jesus' Priority of Prayer

In Mark 1:35–39, we see the priority Jesus put on prayer. After an exhausting time of healing sick and demon-possessed people late into the night, Jesus woke early in the morning, went to a solitary place, and prayed. It seems that Jesus used this time for regaining His spiritual center. Peter interrupted Jesus' devotional time to express the further demands of the needy crowd. Rather than responding to the immediate need, the Lord reaffirmed a commitment of greater outreach in other cities.

A closer look at the text will show the inner workings of our Lord's own devotional life.

- ***Seeking Isolation and Communion***

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

he prayed (Mark 1:35 NIV)

Why did Jesus Christ need a quiet time? We are all aware of our own weaknesses and sins. The need for cleansing and renewal is often the felt need of the committed believer. But the Bible teaches the sinlessness of our Lord—He “who had no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV). So why did Jesus go to a solitary place while the disciples slept?

During His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus chose to limit the exercise of His divine attributes. He was fully God, but He chose to depend on the Father and the indwelling Spirit working through Him. He did this to show us how we are to depend on God. That dependence can be seen in the way Jesus sought times alone with His Father. The term translated “solitary place” means “a desert, wasteland, uninhabited region.”

After such dynamic emotional interactions as healing the crippled and sick, Christ needed solitude to make communion with the Father most effective.

The walk of faith requires coming repeatedly to God for His unique guidance. Jesus’ time alone with God redirected His vision from local needs to greater outreach.

- ***Listening to God’s Direction Amid Distraction***

Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: ‘Everyone is looking for you!’ Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.’ (Mark 1:36–38 NIV)

The word *found* in verse 37 is better translated “hunted down.” Can you imagine a more annoying scenario? Peter thought he knew best how Christ should spend His day. And he was even willing to interrupt the Lord’s prayer time to offer his advice. The need Simon Peter was expressing was clearly an urgent one: “Everyone is looking for you.”

No one active in ministry (either full time or as a volunteer) has escaped the pressure of certain ministry “interest groups.” Their needs are often valid, and they sometimes have representatives who plead for immediate attention. Yet look at what Jesus did. He was not worried about being perceived as Someone Who wasn’t

responsive to immediate needs. Having only a limited amount of time and energy, He had received direction from His Father to go elsewhere.

You would think Jesus' quiet time would have made Him more sensitive to the people right there with Him. But to meet only needs directly in front of us is to ignore God's all-encompassing concern for those who are lost. Time alone with His Father brought Jesus back to His purpose for coming into the world: "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10 NIV).

- ***Carrying Out Application***

So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons (Mark 1:39 NIV)

It's so easy to skip over the significance of the last verse of this section. It's not just a review of what was said in the previous verse. Not by a long shot! Verse 39 is the payoff to the whole passage. Jesus actually did what He said He was going to do. He went to the synagogues and preached.

The word *preaching* is used over and over again within the pages of the New Testament as the apostles duplicated the Lord's pattern for spreading the good news in expanding circles of outreach. Jesus' target area for ministry was expanded to include "all Galilee." Later, as His disciples followed in His steps, it would extend "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV).

It's important to apply what comes out of our prayer time. Meaningful fellowship with Christ comes when we follow His example (1 Peter 2:21) and apply His Word in the power of the Spirit.

## **II. One Helpful Approach to Prayer**

An acrostic that serves as a guide to a balanced prayer time is the word **ACTS**. Each letter represents a key component of responding back to God in prayer: **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication. Let's examine each of these briefly to see how each fits into a vital prayer life.

- ***Adoration: Worshiping God for Who He Is***

As you reflect on what you have learned from the study, tell

God what you appreciate about His character. The word *worship* in English originally was spelled “worthship” and means to recognize the dignity and merit of something. It is what angels and redeemed humans express to God in heaven, and it’s our privilege to do so on earth: “You are worthy, O Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” (Revelation 4:11 NIV).

- ***Confession: Acknowledging Sin***

When we receive Christ as Savior and Lord, we are cleansed in our standing before God from all sins—past, present, and future. However, we still have a sin nature that is capable of disobedience. When we choose to disobey God, our hearts can become spiritually callous. Therefore, to keep our hearts open to God’s presence, we need to periodically confess our sin to God. The word *confession* in the New Testament means to “say the same thing as or agree with” God. This is the time when no attempts at rationalization should be made. Instead, we must be open and honest with God. The result will be a sense of cleansing and empowerment that only the blood of Christ can bring.

- ***Thanksgiving: Thanking God for His Grace***

Gratefulness is high on the list of virtues in the Christian life. In recording mankind’s fall away from God, Paul provides a list of sins that characterize the descent into depravity. Surprisingly, the apostle adds to the list: “nor gave thanks to him” (Romans 1:21 NIV).

To be a believer in Jesus Christ is to be a recipient of God’s unmerited favor. As we stand at the floodgate of God’s blessing, we are to acknowledge those grace gifts whenever they come to us. This can be a great opportunity for “counting your blessings” at a set time each day.

- ***Supplication: Asking God for Things***

Children can be incredibly needy. Yet, the loving parent enjoys meeting those needs. Have you ever noticed how much fun it is to delight small children with unexpected gifts? Jesus put this idea into spiritual perspective when He said,

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? . . . If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to

those who ask him! (Luke 11:11,13 NIV)

Supplication is making needs known to our Father in heaven Who cares and is eager to answer according to His will.

### III. Prayer as a Way of Life

Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them” (John 14:21 NIV).

If we see our devotional time only as a spiritual oasis once a day, we may fall into the trap of compartmentalizing our spiritual life.

From the garden of Eden until now, God has desired to walk with His people in life’s journey (Genesis 3:8). So it’s essential that we take what we learn in our Bible reading and prayer with us throughout the entire day.

### IV. Carrying the Divine Dialogue Into the Day (Luke 24:13–32)

Our Lord’s encounter with the two who were walking on the Emmaus Road is filled with insights on how to keep the divine dialogue with God going throughout the day.

- *Encountering Jesus in Real-Life Problems*

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. (Luke 24:13–16 NIV)

Little is known about the two who walked the well-worn path from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. But the Bible makes very clear that they were troubled. They were experiencing an “internal conflict,” an emotional struggle based on a very disappointing life experience. Yet the problem was mulled over in the context of a trusted friend. We human beings are, by nature, problem solvers,

and we usually don't do it alone.

It is in the context of felt human need that Jesus approached the two men as they walked. What wonderful words: Jesus drew near and journeyed with them! The risen Christ really does want to invade our human circumstance and carry on a dialogue. Life is a journey and Christ wants to be our companion on it, not just someone we talk to at the last rest stop.

- ***Trying To Make Sense of God's Ways***

He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?'

'What things?' he asked. 'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.' (Luke 24:17–24 NIV)

In response to Christ's question, the two went into detail about what was troubling them. Their summary is a concise review of the hope that Jesus of Nazareth would be the Messiah Who would redeem the nation, Israel. Instead, He had been put to death in the cruelest form of execution—crucifixion. And to make their thoughts even more agitated, there had been reports of His tomb being empty and the appearance of an angelic messenger.

The two walking next to our Lord were baffled by the soaring hopes that had become shattered dreams. And their experience is similar to what many of us have experienced.

To be human is to look at life's events through a keyhole. Each of us is finite, and we can only take in part of the picture in any

circumstance.

So often what we believe the Bible teaches doesn't make sense in our limited perspective of an apparent tragedy. Whether it's our expectations of how God should answer a prayer or how we view life's apparent misfortunes, we are at best limited in our understanding.

But Jesus wants us to tell Him our concerns as we process our experiences. He has a listening ear and is concerned about the details of our lives. It is because of our unique relationship with Christ that preoccupation with Him through prayer should accompany us in life experiences.

- ***Letting Jesus Explain Himself***

He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27 NIV)

Our Lord's response sounds abrupt. Yet in reality, this situation is a case study in education. Look at the wording. "Foolish ones" is a compound word that literally means "without knowledge." The men of the Emmaus Road were handicapped by having only limited information.

"Slow of heart to believe" has the connotation of "slow in trusting God" for what He had claimed. Jesus then provided the only remedy for spiritual ignorance, and that is to gain more information. The Teacher focused their attention on key passages of the Old Testament, which explain that the Messiah must suffer before being glorified.

The lesson for us today is that when we struggle with a great disappointment, we need to keep in mind that we may lack complete information to make sense of it at the time. As life goes on, the Lord may provide people and other information to bring closure to the problem. But in some cases, we will not find the answer until we meet Christ face-to-face in eternity. However, because life on earth is a spiritual boot camp of sorts, it is essential to be teachable and in constant contact with the Teacher so that our faith and knowledge can grow.



- ***Learning To Keep the Conversation Going***

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them (Luke 24:28–29 NIV)

Sometimes when we reach a destination, an unexpected travel companion has become a friend and we don’t want him to go. The two travelers had several miles to hear what this “mysterious Stranger” had to say, and they wanted to hear more. “Abide with us,” was their response. They wanted to show hospitality to the One Who had provided such insight into Messianic prophecy.

There are circumstances in our lives that naturally nurture or militate against the development of our spiritual lives. The key is to know what is happening when we begin to lose contact with the Lord and to know how to reestablish our closeness with Him.

- ***Responding to Glimpses of Divine Activity***

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ (Luke 24:30–32 NIV)

Reminiscent of Jesus’ Last Supper, the breaking and blessing of the bread took place at dinner that night. We are told that their eyes were opened and they recognized Him.

Whereas before, their eyes were “held back” from recognizing Him, here their eyes were opened. It’s interesting that the word for “opened” is built on the same root word as “foolish” and “ignorant.” It means “to penetrate the mind.” Once their minds understood Who He was, they recognized Him from previous encounters.

Surprisingly, the supernatural disappearance of our Lord did not inspire any recorded comment between the two. Instead, they reflected on what it was like to be on the road and in dialogue with Jesus about the Scriptures.



Their hearts were aflame with supernatural insight as Jesus Himself explained the Old Testament along the way. The word for “opened” the Scriptures to their understanding is the same as the one used when they recognized Him at dinner that night. Recognizing Christ in the Scriptures and in life experiences should be a through-the-day process, not just an isolated event.