

## Why Pray?

What happens when we pray? Is it just empty words, spoken into the air? Or is there someone listening? Someone who love us and weighs each request with perfect wisdom, who dearly wants us to draw near and to reach for what He alone can do?

Sometimes, after a tragedy, you may hear someone say that they are “sending their thoughts and prayers.” And just as often you’ll hear others respond critically that “thoughts and prayers are not enough”—and by that they mean that action is needed. But what if prayer is action? Action that is greater and deeper and more powerful than we could possibly realize?

I’m James Banks, the author of several books about prayer, a pastor, and a writer for *Our Daily Bread*. I’m looking forward to talking to you about prayer, because I believe that prayer, the way God intends it to be, is an adventure. Just imagine: the God of the universe, who spoke the stars into existence, wants *us* to talk to *Him*. He wants *us* to get to know *Him* and to have a relationship with Him. He wants us to see things that will only happen if we pray.

“Why pray?” is the title for our lesson today because sometimes we really can wonder if prayer makes any difference. And we’re going to talk candidly about that today and in the lessons that follow. In these ten, brief lessons we’ll be exploring prayer from a number of angles. We’ll look at why it’s so important, and how to pray when you don’t know what to say. We’ll discover what it is God really wants us to ask for, and also consider things that can hurt our praying. We’ll explore how we can love others through our prayers and how to listen to God when we pray. We’ll dive into how to pray when it seems like no one is listening, and how to keep praying when we feel like giving up. And we’ll look at how to live day by day, moment by moment with God through prayer. We’ll build all of this on the foundation of His Word and what it has to say about communicating with Him.

That’s a lot to cover! So let’s get started. But before we do anything else, let’s pray:

*Father, we ask for what only You can do. Bless this time, use it,*

*empower it, that we may be Your servants and live for the praise of Your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.*

### Why Pray?

- God really wants us to.



### Why Pray?

- God really wants us to.
- Jesus modeled it.

Today we're going to look at three brief answers to the question, "Why pray?" And the first and best is one we've already touched on: God really wants us to—better yet, He invites us to—He invites His people through His Word, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3). I love that invitation, but it's not the only one. David wrote this in Psalm 27:8: "My heart has heard you say, 'Come and talk with me.' And my heart responds, 'LORD, I am coming.'" 1 Chronicles 16:11 also encourages us, "Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always." That phrase "seek his face" describes what it means to really pray. We're not just seeking His hand—the things He can do for us—we're seeking His face, and that means so much more.

Prayer is not something we have to do; it's something we *get* to do. Prayer is the greatest privilege of our lives—that's not overstating it. And it's not something that only super-spiritual people can do. All believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have access to this privilege in a beautiful way through Him. Because of Jesus, God's Word tells us, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

And that brings us to the second reason why we should pray, and that is simply: Jesus modeled it, setting the example for us. The Bible tells us that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray" (Luke 5:16) and shows Him praying multiple times. When He taught about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, He began with the words "When you pray"—so it's clear that He expected prayer to be a regular part, a consistent part of our lives. Now sometimes we might mistakenly think that prayer has something to do with skill. Sometimes you hear someone who is very well meaning say "I don't have the spiritual gift of prayer." But did you know that of all the spiritual gifts listed in Scripture, prayer is not among them? And there's an excellent reason for that. Prayer is meant for all of us.

Now we've all had those moments where we prayed and prayed about something and nothing seems to change. But the Word of God encourages us to keep coming back. It tells us, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" in Colossians 4:2. We're also encouraged to "pray continually" in 1 Thessalonians



5:17. God wouldn't want us to devote ourselves to something that's a waste of time. He has discoveries for us along this road; and a deeper relationship that results from spending time with Him is the greatest discovery of all. That's why David prayed in Psalm 116:1–2 (NLT), "I love the LORD because he hears my voice and my prayer for mercy. Because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath!"

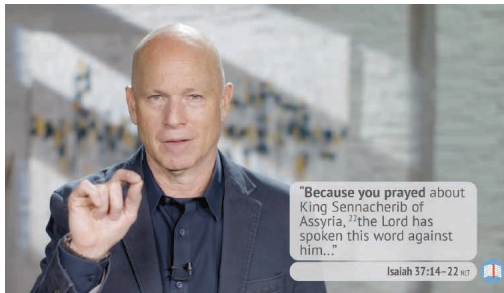
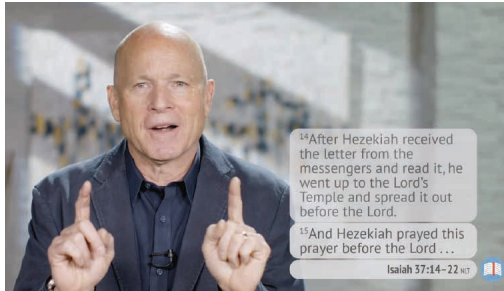
I love that imagery: God bending down to listen to you and me. Someone who bends down to listen wants to hear us. He cares about us and what we have to say—like a good Father. That's why Jesus modeled such tender prayer, even calling God "Abba, Father," an affectionate term that's used in families. It's because God is so good that we *can* pray; and [when we discover that,] we'll *want* to talk to Him. That's why David says, "Because He bends down to listen, I *will* pray *as long as I have breath*." If you'd like to be inspired and encouraged to pray more, begin by thinking about how good God is. Think about His kindness to us in Jesus, who loves us so much that He went to the cross for us. Think about how He's with us now, because He's given us His Spirit to help us and He will never leave us.

We really can talk to someone like that. We can pour out our hearts to Him. And here's something beautiful—we can also trust that He has good things in store for us when we pray with faith. And that's the third reason why prayer matters so much: God's Word promises that "He rewards those who earnestly seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). Think for a moment about what that means. It means that we will miss out on genuine blessings that God has for us if we do not pray. Imagine a surprise party where God has everything planned if we will just show up. But if we choose to run our lives in our own strength and go our own way, we miss the party. We miss the good He wants to do in and through and for us. Of course that analogy is imperfect because prayer is about so much more than a party for us. God wants to catch us up in the wonder of who He is so that we delight in Him. God even allows for the interaction of our wills with His own when we pray—that's an amazing thing—so that we can sometimes have a powerful say in things that happen in this world.

There's a great illustration about this found in Isaiah 36 and 37. Jerusalem is under siege from the Assyrian army, and their brutal king Sennacherib writes a letter threatening to destroy them. Hezekiah, the king of Judah, takes the scroll the letter is on— the scroll that has all of these things that Sennacherib is going to do

### Why Pray?

- God really wants us to.
- Jesus modeled it.
- God rewards those who earnestly seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)



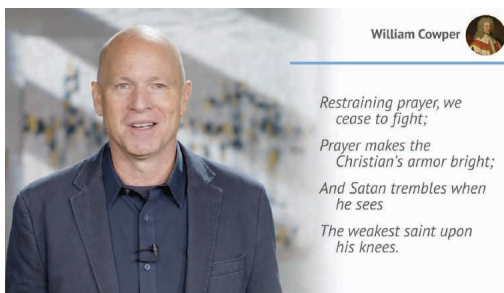
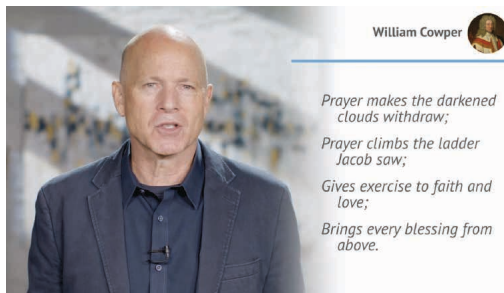
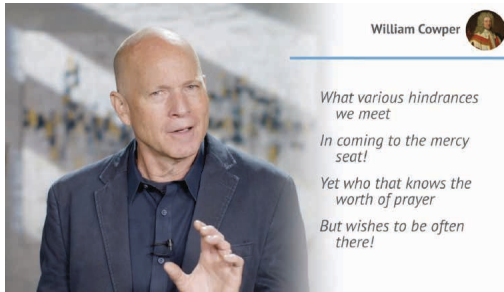
to destroy them—and spreads it out before the Lord in the temple and prays—and, by the way, in that prayer he says, “Bend down, O LORD, and listen!” Then the prophet Isaiah sends a message to Hezekiah with an answer from the Lord promising help, and it begins with these words: “Because you prayed.”

“Because you prayed!” Those three words indicate that his situation would not have changed if he had not come to God about it. That doesn’t mean things will go our direction every time we pray, but if we learn to pray proactively—making prayer our “first resort” and not a “last resort”—we will may see God do breathtaking things. He wants to help us lift our eyes above our circumstances so that we can catch a glimpse of His goodness and love. He wants us to pray so that we will get to know Him—and that really is the best part about prayer. True prayer is about so much more than just requests or answers—it’s about a relationship with the One who will love and sustain us even when the answers don’t seem to come.

I learned that in a challenging time in my own life when my son was struggling with heroin addiction. We did everything in our power to help him, but we came to realize that try as hard as we may, only God could change his heart. We prayed for him for years, and eventually God did a beautiful thing—he set him free. My son is a youth pastor today in the same city where he once abused, and even sold heroin. But all along the way, the entire time my wife and I were praying, God was teaching us, drawing us near, doing something in our hearts and lives as we prayed. Often our circumstances didn’t change from day to day, but somehow just being in His presence made the difference we needed day by day. We found peace and comfort and strength—and we would eventually see powerful answers to prayer—but what we learned is that God Himself is the best answer to prayer, just being in a relationship with Him that lasts for all eternity matters more than anything else. That’s the greatest blessing of all when we pray. God wants to show us more and more of His goodness and mercy and love. He wants to give us Himself.

William Cowper was a British poet, a gifted genius who suffered from chronic depression. But he found hope in God and wrote brilliant hymns and poetry, some of which were about prayer. We’ll wrap up with one today. Cowper begins this one by talking about the “mercy seat,” which is the throne of grace described in Hebrews 4:16—the throne that God wants us to approach boldly.





What various hindrances we meet  
In coming to the mercy seat!  
Yet who that knows the worth of prayer  
But wishes to be often there!

Prayer makes the darkened clouds withdraw;  
Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw;  
Gives exercise to faith and love;  
Brings every blessing from above.

Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;  
Prayer makes the Christian's armor bright;  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.

You know, you may feel sometimes like the weakest saint, but oh, the beautiful thing about our God, is that he will meet us and lift us and help us.

I don't think it would be appropriate to wrap up this introductory lesson on prayer without praying again. I know that I'm on video, and it may seem a little funny praying along. But here's the thing—God exists outside of time, and He will hear your prayers as you pray with me in this moment. So you know what we get to do now? We get to pray. Let's do it.

*Father we ask that you will help us to apply everything that we've learned in this lesson and more as you lead us through your spirit, and your word, and your strength. Help us to pray, help us to love to spend time in prayer with you. In Jesus' name, amen.*

In the next lesson, we're going to talk about asking why it matters so much to God, and what Jesus shows us about how to do it. You won't want to miss it.