

When You Don't Know What to Say

Sometimes we can struggle with not knowing what to say when we pray. Maybe you've prayed in a group of people, and the person beside you just finished, and they sounded so good. As you were listening, you could almost hear the heavenly choirs and see angels descending—such beautiful thoughts and words. Ah, but then it's your turn, and the words just won't come.

Ever been there? I know I have. And if you've struggled with knowing what to say, I'd love to encourage you. Real prayer, prayer that moves the heart of God and heaven and earth along with it, has nothing to do with our ability to string words together. Our Father in heaven is so loving and kind—and what kind of a father would say, "You have to get your words just right before you can talk to me?" He's not like that, not at all.

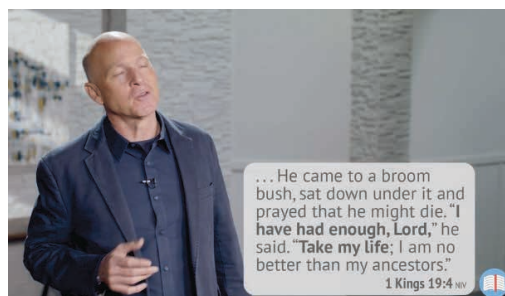
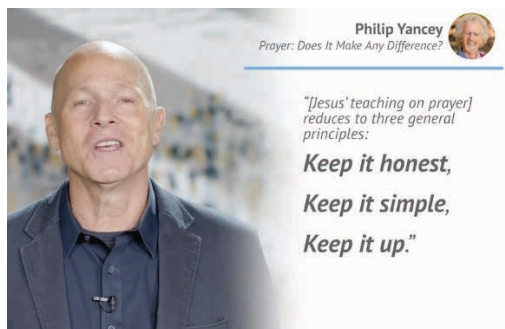
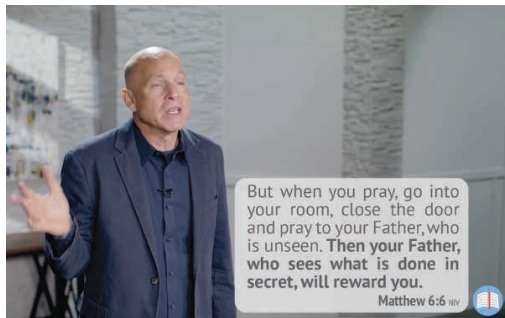
Let's go one step further. He knows us better than we know ourselves. David wrote about Him in Psalm 139:4, "Before a word is on my tongue, you, LORD, know it completely." God knows what we are going to say before the words ever come out. Jesus said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). And He still wants us to pray. Why? Because prayer isn't about words, not at the deepest level. It's about relationship, as we discussed in our previous lessons. And in that relationship God cares about what we think and feel and wants us to express that to Him. Not only that, He has chosen to use our prayers as the means through which He changes history and accomplishes great things! He wants us to interact with Him. He welcomes us to do it, not because He needs us to do it, but simply because He is that good.

God has given us so much encouragement and so many great examples in His Word for how to communicate with Him, and today we're going to consider three very practical biblical insights for how to talk with God.

Here's the first: When you struggle with what to say when you pray, just be yourself. Real prayer is authentic and from the heart—we can't be anything other than what we really are before Him, because He knows everything. God wants us to bring to Him the real circumstances of our everyday lives. If we try to be

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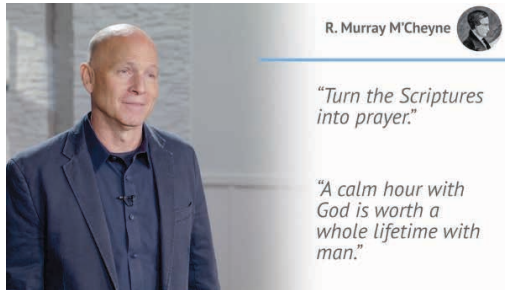
- Just be yourself.



something other than what we are, we're not really praying. Jesus explained it this way. He talked about those who like to be seen by others when they pray, and He said, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Jesus wasn't against praying with others or in front of them—He did that Himself on several occasions and taught that we should. What He's really after here is preventing us from making our prayers into some kind of show. And by telling us to go to God in private, He's saying, "Be real. Just talk to Him, and then, when you do, you will be blessed for it."

Philip Yancey in his book *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* wrote that Jesus' teaching on prayer "reduces to three general principles: keep it honest, keep it simple, and keep it up" (Yancey, *Prayer*, 191). I like that. When you and I are real with God, He makes Himself real to us. When we place the nitty-gritty, everyday situations of our lives before Him with expectant and faithful prayer, we deal with God on a level where we can see Him intervene. I think this is part of the reward that Jesus is talking about when He says "Your Father, who sees what's done in secret, will reward you." It's not that our prayers are always answered the way we want. But because we have moved closer to God, it's as if we get a front row seat to the things that He's doing; and He increases our strength and hope even if our situation doesn't change.

A few years ago I wrote a book called *Praying the Prayers of the Bible*, where I categorized as many prayers from God's Word as I could. There are several different categories of prayer in the Bible: prayers of praise, prayers of thanks, prayers to strengthen faith, prayers about everyday needs, prayers to confess sin, prayers for help and protection, and blessing prayers. But there was another category which really surprised me, because it's not the first thing you think about, and those are what you might call "wrestling prayers." Prayers like that of the father who came to Jesus with a demon-possessed son and asked for his help, saying, "Lord, I believe. Help me overcome my unbelief!" We can all relate to a request like that—that's a very real prayer. Some of the prayers of the Bible are so down-to-earth that they don't sound like prayers at all. Think about Moses' prayer when God called him to free His people in Exodus 4:13, "O LORD, please send someone else to do it." Or Elijah's prayer in 1 Kings 19:4: "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life." Or here's another from David in Psalm 13:1: "How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever?"



I believe that God allowed these prayers to be included in His Word for a reason. They show us what a real relationship with God looks like—nothing is put on here. And in each of those situations God provided help for the one who was being so real with Him.

We want to get as close to Him as we can when we pray, and that brings us to our second practical biblical insight: When you struggle with what to say when you pray, let God's Word help you.

R. Murray M'Cheyne, a Scottish pastor from nearly two hundred years ago, encouraged his congregation to "turn the Scriptures into prayer." He was a deeply humble man who had an exemplary faith and once said that "a calm hour with God is worth a whole lifetime with man."

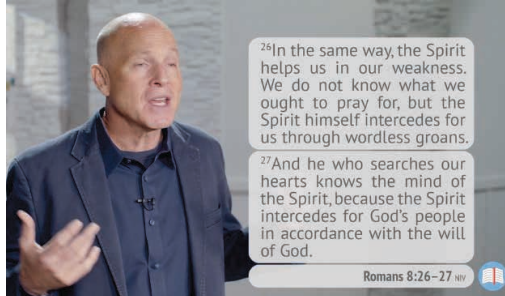
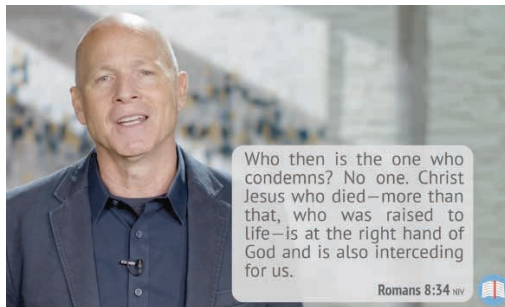
You know, God can pack so much into just a moment with Him. Time spent with Him is always worth it; and His Word shows us how to pray by example. If you're wondering how to praise God, just go to the Psalms and start reading. If you'd like to learn how to pray for others, look at some of Paul's prayers for others in Colossians or Ephesians. When you pray the prayers of the Bible, you learn by example from Jesus and Paul and Moses and David and Jeremiah and many others, and you also catch a glimpse of the amazing things God has done again and again in answer to prayer. The best reason for learning to pray the prayers of the Bible is that Jesus did it on several occasions, including from the cross.



We need to learn the prayers of the Bible, to take them to heart and memorize them. The Holy Spirit moves through God's Word in powerful, inspiring ways, and when we let the prayers of the Bible teach us how to pray and become a starting point for our own prayers, you'll find He gives our own prayers wings. When we struggle with sin, we can pray with David in Psalm 51:10 KJV: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Learning a few key Scripture verses by heart can help us in moments of crisis or in the middle of the night. When I can't get to sleep I love to pray the 23rd Psalm, and work my way through it: I thank the Lord for being my shepherd, and then I remember that He is everything I need. I quiet myself before Him, imagining that I am with Him in green pastures and beside quiet waters. I ask Him to restore my soul, and to guide me in His way. I thank Him that He will be with me no matter what I face, and for how He has blessed me even in difficult circumstances. I think about how His goodness and love will follow me all of the days of my life

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- Remember that God hears you with love because of Jesus.



and I will be with Him forever, and I praise Him and rest in Him. Sometimes when I'm praying that way I think of John leaning on Jesus as I put my head on my pillow, and I usually don't get through the whole psalm before I've fallen asleep. This is just one example of how helpful and meaningful it can be to pray the prayers of the Bible and turn God's Word into prayer.

And that brings us to the third practical scriptural insight: When you struggle with what to say when you pray, remember that God hears you with love because of Jesus. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that because of Jesus and what He has done for us, we can "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." Not only that, God's Word promises us in Romans 8:34 that if we have received Jesus that we are received with love and without condemnation and that Jesus Himself is at the right hand of the Father interceding for us.

But there's even more hope for us in the Word of God. When you and I struggle with how to pray, the Holy Spirit also prays for us. Romans 8:26–27 tells us that "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. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God." So you and I can have every confidence that our prayers are heard and understood by God and received with love because of our Savior. Jesus prays for us, the Spirit intercedes for us, and the Word of God tells us in Revelation 5:8 that our prayers are so precious to Him that "He keeps them before Him like incense, in golden bowls."

Our prayers matter deeply to our heavenly Father. And it's not just about what we say. Remember that prayer is also listening, and simply keeping company with God. So we can pray without words at all, loving God from the heart, and doing nothing other than just being with Him. We can pray with just a simple gesture, kneeling like Peter or lifting our hands like Moses or Paul or bowing facedown like Abraham or even dancing like David. You see different postures for praying in several places in Scripture; and God will lead us in what works best for us at any time. The main thing is that we just make ourselves available. As we quiet ourselves in His presence, we'll find that prayer becomes more natural for us over time. And if we're going to be in God's presence for all of eternity, we need to learn to be with Him now.

In our next lesson, lesson 4, we'll look at several obstacles to our praying, and the difference it makes when we get them out of the way.