

# Pray the Bible

with Kevin P. Halloran

## Module Introduction

Several years ago, I made an embarrassing discovery about my prayer life: I was complaining about my struggles to pray rather than seeking to grow in prayer.

I even said things like, "Everyone struggles to pray. Is a good prayer life even possible?"

One time after verbalizing a comment like that, God convicted me. What does saying such a pessimistic thing about prayer say about my view of God and His gospel? After that moment of conviction, I asked God to forgive me. I asked Him to teach me to pray and overcome the obstacles I faced in prayer.

That prayer launched a several year journey of searching the Scriptures, talking to dozens of other believers, and reading a lot of great books on prayer. I eventually published the book *When Prayer Is a Struggle: A Practical Guide for Overcoming Obstacles in Prayer*.

I'm so grateful for how God worked in my heart on this journey, taught me to pray, and most importantly grew my love for Him. I'm also very thankful for a surprising lesson I learned: often it is the outrageously simple solutions that help us the most to overcome our struggles in prayer.

And out of all the helpful simple solutions, one proved itself a solution par excellence: **praying the Bible**.

That's what this teaching module called *Pray the Bible* is all about. The five teaching sessions will give you practical tools that will help you sidestep many of the obstacles you face in prayer.

It shouldn't be surprising that God's Word can help us pray. After all, it's easiest to get into a good conversation when someone starts the conversation and gives you something to react to. And prayer, at its most basic, is simply responding to the conversation that God started with us in His Word.

Now, before we move on, let me define the focus of this module. There are two different ways I use the phrase: 'praying the Bible'. One is **praying in direct response to the words of the Bible**. The other meaning is **praying with our hearts in line with the Bible's message and priorities**. We want God's Word to shape not only the words we pray, but also the heart attitude we bring to prayer.

We want the words of Psalm 19:14 to ring true for our prayers:

*"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."*

This module has three simple objectives:

First, to encourage you to pray to our gracious and glorious heavenly Father. We can easily lose sight of Who God is and drift into legalistic tendencies in prayer. We *need* to remember Who God is and how He invites us to pray in Christ.

Second, this module will equip you with practical tools you can implement right away in your prayer life. The tools may be something completely new to you or a fresh take on something familiar.

Third, this module will equip you to lead others. Many tools and methods I share are transferable by nature. As you learn, think of others in your life who would benefit from learning these tools as well. It may be a family member, your small group, or others you minister to.

One beautiful thing about equipping others in prayer is the fruit that will come. God will work in our hearts and the hearts of those we teach as our prayers are heard and prayer lives strengthened. Our encouragement may be the small spark that ignites a great blaze resulting in lives changed, God's Kingdom expanded, and great joy in our Triune God.

### **Session 1: Why Prayer Matters**

This first session will lay the foundation for praying the Bible by looking at why prayer matters.

One way we can tell young children are developing intellectually is that their questions begin to change. They first ask "What" questions. My daughter would ask, *What is that police siren she hears in the distance?* Or she'll point to my Bluetooth earbud and ask *what is that?* Then questions morph into more "Why" questions. *Why do we hear a police siren? Why do I have that goofy looking Bluetooth in my ear?*

The shift from "what" questions to "why" questions shows that she's thinking deeper about the purpose of something she is familiar with. Without understanding the why, we might totally miss the purpose of the "what."

It's like that commercial from a while back where a daughter asks her elderly father how he's enjoying the iPad she gave him. He says it's great, and then proceeds to chop vegetables on it like it was a cutting board. He obviously missed the point!

I think this principle applies to prayer as well. When we don't have clarity about *why* we pray, the *what* (the content of our prayers) and the *how* (the way that we pray) will suffer.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray with the Lord's Prayer, He gave us the basic grid for *what* we should pray. What we may not realize is that, through this prayer, He also gives us seven reasons for *why* we should pray. This session will walk through those seven reasons.

## *Seven Reasons to Pray*

In the English Standard Version's rendition of Matthew 6:9–13, the Lord's Prayer has a mere fifty-two words. If I saw a fifty-two-word review of a product that I was considering buying, I'd probably look for one that was longer and more helpful! And yet, Jesus' fifty-two words provide a master class on prayer, a comprehensive outlook on both prayer and the Christian life.

The late theologian J. I. Packer wrote:

The Lord's Prayer in particular is a marvel of compression, and full of meaning. It is a compendium of the gospel, a body of divinity, a rule of purpose as well as of petition, and thus a key to the whole business of living. What it means to be a Christian is nowhere clearer than here.

The Lord's Prayer is foundational because it helps us look at prayer from God's perspective; He's the one to whom we pray, and His perspective is the only one that matters. As we walk through the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, we not only will see God's reasons for why we should pray but will also see a glimpse into the heart He has for us—and His world.

Our Father in heaven,  
     hallowed be your name.  
     Your kingdom come,  
     your will be done,  
 on earth as it is in heaven.  
     Give us this day our daily bread,  
     and forgive us our debts,  
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
     And lead us not into temptation,  
 but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9-13 ESV)

Prayer: Father God, we praise You for Your power and wisdom that we find in your word. We humbly ask that You teach us to pray. Open our minds to understand the riches we have in this prayer and help us to be more joyful, faithful, and fruitful Christians as a result. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, amen.

Let's now walk through the Lord's Prayer and see the seven reasons to pray.

### **Reason #1: Pray because God is our Father. (“Our Father in Heaven”)**

Prayer is unabashedly God-centered. The first half of the Lord's Prayer focuses on Him, which is a vitally important thing for naturally selfish people in an individualistic age to do. While the second half focuses on our needs, it exalts Him as well— because only a sovereign God could provide what He offers, and only a loving God would offer it in the first place.

The first words of the Lord's Prayer, “Our Father in heaven,” indicate *relationship*. One surefire way to get off track during prayer is to forget the nature of this relationship. Some see God as a boss who will be happy with us as long as we put in the spiritual work of praying and see results.

(You might call this a contractual approach to prayer.) Others see Him as an ATM or Santa Claus—like figure who will automatically give us what we want without having any interest in a real relationship. Or perhaps God is like the Force in Star Wars, and prayer to this impersonal “force” is nothing more than throwing wishful thinking into the air and hoping that the winds of the universe blow in our direction. *But for those who are in Christ, God is Father.*

If there’s one thing that I want you to take with you from this video, it’s that God loves you unconditionally as a *Father*. Before we had saving faith in Christ, Romans 5 says we were enemies of God, Ephesians 2 says we were dead in sin, sons of disobedience, and children of wrath.

The glorious truth of the gospel is that despite our wickedness and opposition to God, He sent His Son to the cross for sinners like us and now adopts us into His family. He fills us with His Spirit to testify of His love for us and to enable us to cry “Abba! Father!” to Him in prayer.

A good earthly father cares for his children, wants them to come to him when they’re in pain, and wants to provide for their every need. How much more does our perfect Father in heaven care for us and want to hear from us—His beloved children!

I recently met a Christian woman from Ireland and heard her testimony. For many years she lived as a content unbeliever who had dabbled in religion in the past. A friend invited her to a Bible study, and she decided to go. She reflected on her experience. She said, “I had no idea what was going on when they studied the Bible. But when they prayed—*oh, how they prayed!*—they prayed like they actually knew God! And that told me I needed what they had.” She recognized that a real relationship with God the Father is possible and that it is oh, so good.

When you pray the Lord’s Prayer, don’t skip past “Our Father.” Dwell on God’s character and His relationship with you. Remember His redemptive work throughout human history. Rejoice in His extravagant grace—because as J.I. Packer says, “to grasp [God as Father] is to know oneself rich and privileged beyond any monarch or millionaire.”

## **Reason #2: Pray because You Want His Name to Be Praised (“Hallowed Be Your Name”)**

To *hallow* means to treat as holy, to revere, to sanctify. Hallowing God’s name means not taking it lightly. God loves the glory of His Name enough to build the honoring of it into the Ten Commandments: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Ex. 20:7). The root of the Hebrew word for *vain* connotes “emptiness” or “nothingness.” Using God’s name in an empty way doesn’t convey the honor and glory that He is due.

If you want to see the gold standard for demonstrating the proper way God’s name is to be exalted, look to heaven. The book of Revelation repeatedly pulls back the curtain to reveal how God’s name is exalted in the heavenly worship of angels and saints. Here’s one example from Revelation 15.

Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!  
Who will not fear, O Lord,

and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.  
 All nations will come  
 and worship you,  
 for your righteous acts have been revealed. (Rev. 15:3–4)

Unfortunately, our world falls far short of heaven’s standard. God’s name is used as a cuss word or a punchline and is even openly mocked.

The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:24, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles.” And yet it’s not just the Gentiles who blaspheme God’s name; Paul’s next words are convicting, he adds “*because of you,*”—this shows that even God’s people can dishonor His holy name by living sinful lives. That’s why Jesus wants us to start our prayers with worship, by saying “Hallowed be Your name.”

When we pray, “Hallowed be Your name,” we ask for God to exalt His name in all the earth. We ask for all people to honor and glorify His name. We ask Him to help us glorify Him in all we do. He is worthy!

So, pray because you want His name praised.

### **Reason #3: Pray because You Want His Kingly Rule to Expand (“Your Kingdom Come”)**

Several years ago, while on a trip to train pastors in Latin America, I sat in a pastor’s office in one of Ecuador’s largest cities while preparing my heart to preach in thirty minutes’ time.

Pastor Jaime offered me coffee and started sharing the history of his church’s building. I was a little confused at first (I don’t normally enjoy hearing anecdotes of foreign real-estate transactions before I preach), but soon Jaime’s story gripped me.

Jaime and his wife Lirio had been grieving the destructive impact that a local nightclub was making on their community: local youth were being led astray, households were being destroyed, and crime rates were increasing. So Jaime and Lirio began to pray for the nightclub to close. They continued to pray for about five years—until one day, by God’s grace, it closed. The building where it had been sat empty for two years.

Meanwhile, God was reaching people through the church that Jaime was pastoring, so the church sent Jaime and his family to plant a new branch of the congregation. But where would it meet? Jaime and his church family prayed for a location that would help the church reach more people with the gospel. And the best option turned out to be the former nightclub that was sitting empty.

After discussing the opportunity with the building’s owner and sharing the gospel with him, Jaime bought the building for half the asking price. Now the church meets in the former nightclub—proclaiming the gospel in the community, strengthening families, and reaching youth in the process. Crime in the area even went down. God turned a den of darkness into an embassy for Christ’s kingdom.

By praying for the closure of the nightclub and for the gospel to be advanced through their ministry, Jaime and Lirio were praying for God's kingdom to come.

God is working all throughout human history to build a people for Himself. While even the greatest nations on earth come and go, God's kingdom is eternal. While earthly nations have fixed borders, God's kingdom encompasses people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Jesus is building His church, and the gates of hell won't prevail against it. That is true whether you're in Quito, Quebec, or Queensland.

To pray "Your kingdom come" is to express our longing for God's perfect rule on earth. It is to bow before King Jesus and forsake our personal kingdoms. It is to acknowledge the transience of earthly kingdoms and their true place in history (see Ps. 2; Dan. 2). It is to ask for God to bring salvation to the lost and judgment to His enemies. With the words 'Your kingdom come', we pray that He will cripple the domain of darkness and speed ahead the advance of the kingdom of light. We ask Him to help us to live with His kingdom in mind as we raise our kids and talk to our neighbors.

Praying "Your kingdom come" also helps us to look ahead to the ultimate ushering in of His kingdom—one that is closer to you than when you first started reading this. This is when "the dwelling place of God [will be] with man" and when "He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes" (Rev. 21:3–4).

Come, Lord Jesus!

#### **Reason #4: Pray because You Want His Perfect Will to Be Done ("Your Will Be Done, on Earth as It Is in Heaven")**

I still remember when I heard the news—Mom had cancer and needed immediate surgery. But a successful surgery didn't fully take the cancer away. Our family prayed for healing and persevered with my mom, for three and a half years, through chemo treatments, hospital visits, encouraging prognoses, and discouraging ones, while shedding many tears along the way. When the outlook was bleak, we prayed for more time, and God mercifully granted her the health to attend my wedding as well as my brother's five weeks later.

But on March 22, 2016, with our whole family huddled around her bed, Denise Halloran breathed her last. Moments after we saw my mom pass into the Lord's presence, my dad quoted Job 1:21: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

God wants us to pray "Your will be done," as Jesus did in the garden (Matt. 26:42), to help us to acknowledge that His ways, wisdom, and purposes are higher than ours. To remind us of our creatureliness and His omnipotence. To humble us.

When we don't pray in a posture that says "Your will be done," we are shaking our fists at God and saying, "My will is better!" Such pride makes prayers ineffective, for as James 4:6 says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble". That's not to say that we can't wrestle with God in prayer, but at the end of the day we must humbly submit to our Maker out of

confidence in His good and eternal purposes for us (see Rom. 8:28–29). Only when we submit to God’s will can we worship while in tremendous pain.

Twentieth century Missionary E. Stanley Jones wrote, “Prayer is surrender—surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.”

Sometimes our most genuine worship comes in the wake of bad news, when we can say from the depths of our hearts, “Blessed be the name of the Lord” and “Your will be done.”

### **Reason #5: Pray because You Need His Provision (“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”)**

Because “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1 NIV), we can confidently ask our omnipotent Creator to meet our needs—He owns it all anyway!

When we ask for His provision of any need we have (bread, a job, finances, wisdom, encouragement, faith, strength to endure persecution, safety, or guidance for a life situation), we acknowledge His power to provide as well as our reliance on Him. When we recite this petition from the Lord’s Prayer and think of all that He has provided throughout the decades of our lives, we grow grateful to our Provider. When we pray for our daily bread, we also expand our horizons by being led to think of others in need and how God may want to use us to provide for *them*.

Although this petition focuses on our temporal needs, it also reminds us of God’s greater spiritual provision. Yes, we need physical bread and other material goods. But at a more foundational level, we need spiritual bread. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Elsewhere, He said that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; quoting Deut. 8:3). Our spiritual appetite is satisfied only by God’s Word, written in the Bible and incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have great needs in this world—both physical and spiritual. And as Paul writes in Philippians 4:19, “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” God’s provision won’t always look the way we expect or come according to *our* timing, but we can be confident that He wouldn’t teach us to pray for provision if He weren’t willing and able to provide exactly what we needed.

### **Reason #6: Pray because You Need His Forgiveness (“Forgive Us Our Debts, as We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors”)**

This next petition reminds us how important relationships are to God. We need God’s forgiveness when we sin, and we need to extend forgiveness to others when they sin against us. If we didn’t do this, how could we follow the first and second Great Commandments—to love God and love our neighbors (see Matt. 22:37–40)?

We first ask God to forgive us our “debts,” which we incur when we come up short in fulfilling our duty. Another word for debts is sin. While believers can rest confidently because Christ has paid for their sins on the cross (see Rom. 8:1), our sin grieves the Holy Spirit of God (see Eph. 4:30) and thus hinders our ability to commune with God through the Spirit.

When we ask Him for pardon, we acknowledge our sinfulness—as well as our inability to do anything about it on our own. Our only hope is to issue a desperate cry for help, from a broken heart, to a faithful Father who hears. His loving heart is moved to forgive, because the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross covers our sin and makes forgiveness possible.

Tying our forgiveness (by saying “forgive us our debts”) with the forgiveness we grant to others (when we say “as we also have forgiven our debtors”) reminds us that *forgiven people forgive* (see Matt. 18:21–35; Eph. 4:32). Other people let us down in many ways and don’t pay us what they owe—be it respect, time, energy, or something else. But we can’t let their failure prohibit us from loving them as God desires. If we do, the weeds of bitterness, anger, jealousy, and hatred grow in our hearts.

God wants His children to walk in love with Him and with one another. Our past sin hinders this, and that’s why the next petition requests protection from future sin.

### **Reason #7: Pray because You Need His Deliverance (“Lead Us Not into Temptation, but Deliver Us from Evil”)**

After God signs our adoption papers and welcomes us to His family, He signs our enlistment papers for a spiritual battle. It’s a battle that we’ve been in since birth, but we don’t see it until the Spirit opens our eyes.

“Lead us not into temptation” is a plea for God’s help with fighting our *internal* battle against “the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). This petition acknowledges the weakness of our flesh and our willpower in the face of temptation. It’s a reminder that sin is deceptive and that our only hope is to “be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength of *his* might” (Eph. 6:10).

As I’ve grown older, I’ve seen horrible sin crop up in many people’s lives where you would least expect it, making me realize how weak and vulnerable we all are. The apostle Paul warns us, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall,” (1 Cor. 10:12). Praying for God’s help reminds us that He won’t let us be tempted beyond what we can endure and that He promises a way of escape (see 1 Cor. 10:13).

Praying “Deliver us from evil” reminds us of the battle that we also fight with an *external* enemy. Some translations say, “Deliver us from *the evil one*”—referring to Satan. Satan hates God’s people and their prayers, and he will do whatever he can to keep us from praying. When we pray for deliverance from evil, we acknowledge God’s power to deliver us due to His supremacy over every spiritual being (see Eph. 1:20–21; Col. 1:16). We express our desire for God’s grace to help us overcome evil.



We *need* God’s deliverance from evil spiritual powers. We need God’s deliverance from human pawns of the enemy. Prayers for deliverance from enemies pervade the Psalms and the prayers of the apostle Paul. Why should we think we’re immune?

## Conclusion

To summarize what we learned, we pray to glorify God. We pray to unify our hearts with His kingdom vision for the world and to align ourselves with His will. We pray for provision, restored relationships, and protection from the evil that comes from both inside of us and outside.

I don't know about you, but after digging into the Lord's Prayer, my heart is burning for the things of God. If you sometimes realize that you’ve gone for almost a whole day (or for several days) without even thinking of God or prayer, take heart. I’ve been there too, and many other believers have as well. But you can’t stay there. ***Prayer flows from faith in God and love for God.*** Because of that, perhaps the most important thing to do is pray for more faith, and for that faith to express itself in prayer.

How might you grow your faith? How might you remind yourself of the importance of prayer? I try to keep reminders always before me: a sticky note on the bathroom mirror, framed art containing the Lord’s Prayer in my kitchen, a daily phone notification that asks me if it’s “Time to Pray.” I try as best as I can to build prayer into my relationships, as well as into my routines, so that it becomes a habit. As I fellowship regularly with the church, prayer becomes more natural.

The key to growth in prayer is not immediate perfection; it is making small and faithful progress while remaining confident in who God is and His gracious invitation to us in Christ.

I hope this session helped you remember why prayer matters. Join us for the next session when we will see why praying the words of Scripture back to God is such a powerful way to pray.

This content has been adapted from chapter 1 of *When Prayer Is a Struggle: A Practical Guide for Overcoming Obstacles in Prayer*. © Kevin P. Halloran (P&R Publishing, 2021)

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