

Prayer

Principles and Practice



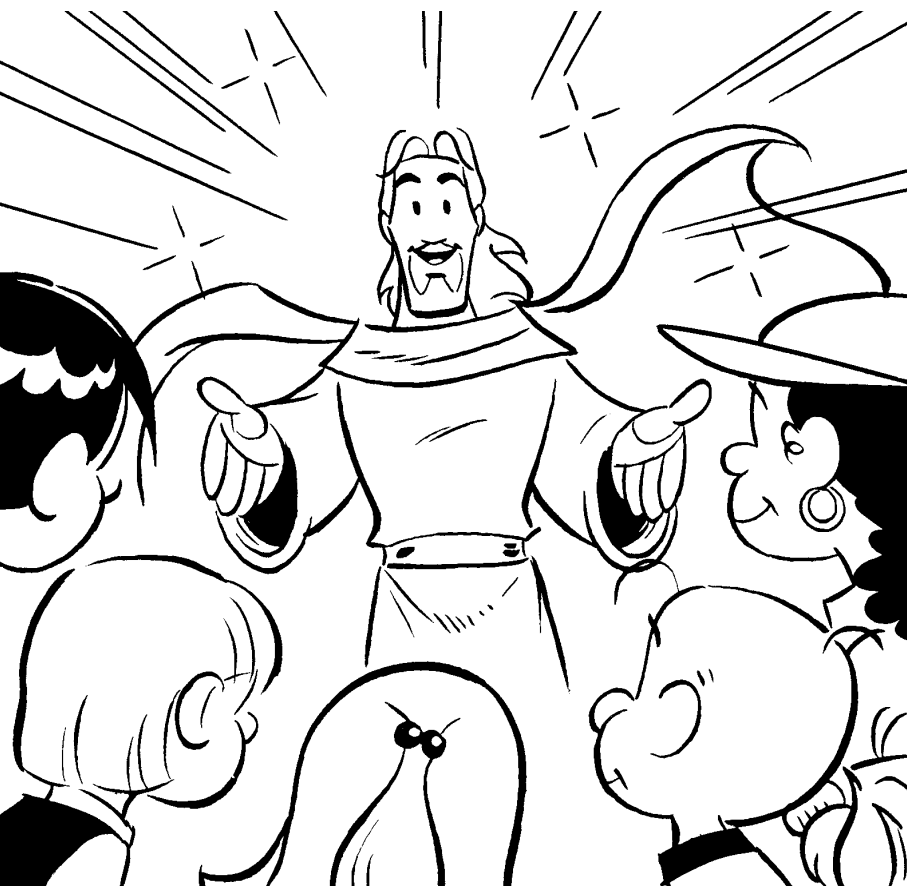
Class Section 1: Prayer Principles

We want to start our study of prayer by looking at our relationship with the Lord. Prayer is not a ritual. The position of your body doesn't matter very much. What counts is the position of your heart. When we talk about prayer we're talking about your relationship and communication with the Lord and His relationship and communication with you.

* Our Constant Companion

God sent Jesus into the world so that through Him we could develop a relationship with God. God is too big, too infinite for our understanding. We don't know what He looks like. We can't really picture Him in our mind's eye because He is too vast.

But we can think of Jesus. We can comprehend and picture Jesus, because He took on the form of a man and lived a life here on Earth.



Jesus came to save us for eternity, and He also came to be our companion through life. You can picture Jesus as a constant Companion Who is always beside you and to Whom you can go for counsel and comfort.

"Jim, It's Jesus!"

The story is told of a certain minister who was disturbed to see a shabby old man go into his church at noon every day and come out again after a few minutes. What could he be doing? He informed the caretaker and asked him to question the old man. After all, the place contained valuable furnishings.

"I go to pray," the old man said in reply to the caretaker's questioning.

"Come, come now," said the other, "you are never long enough in the church to pray."

"Well, you see," the shabby old man went on, "I cannot pray a long prayer, but every day at twelve o'clock I just come and say, 'Jesus, it's Jim,' and wait a minute and then come away. It's just a little prayer, but I guess He hears me."

When Jim was injured some time later and taken to the hospital, he had a wonderful influence on the ward. Grumbling patients became cheerful and often the ward would ring with laughter.

"Well, Jim," said the nurse to him one day, "the men say you are responsible for this change in the ward. They say you are always happy."

"Aye, that I am. I can't help being happy. You see, it's my Visitor. Every day He makes me happy."

"Your visitor?" The nurse was puzzled. She always noticed that Jim's chair was empty on visiting days, for he was a lonely old man, with no relations. "Your visitor? But when does he come?"

"Every day," Jim replied, the light in his eyes growing brighter. "Yes, every day at twelve o'clock He comes and stands at the foot of my bed. I see Him and He smiles and says, 'Jim, it's Jesus.'"

Prayer is praise, petition, listening

We've seen how prayer is our communication with the Lord.

Understanding these three principles of prayer will enhance your relationship with the Lord: 1) praise, 2) petition, and 3) listening.

We'll talk about these in more detail during the next classes, but in brief:

1. Praise

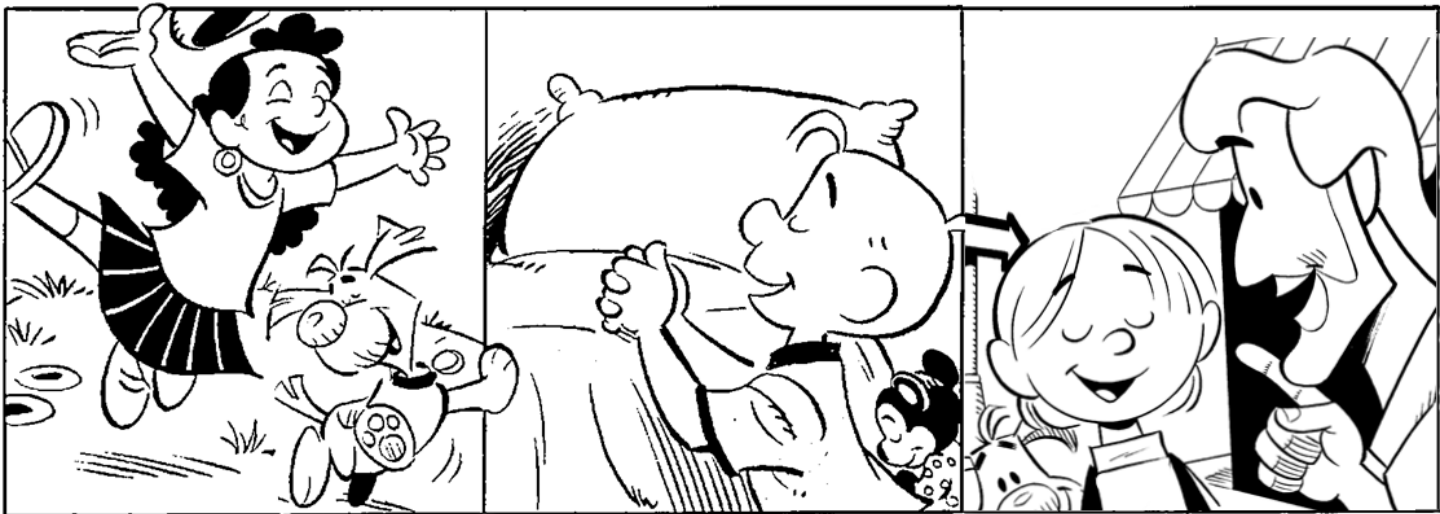
The Lord gives a lot of instruction in His Word that you should come into His presence with thanksgiving and enter His courts with praise. Thank and praise the Lord! Give Him the praise and honor that is His due.

Psalm 100:4—Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.

2. Petition

After you've thanked the Lord for what He has already done for you and given you, then you can pray for what you still need. He encourages us to ask:

John 16:24b—Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.



3. Listening

A lot of people have a conversation with the Lord and it's a one-way conversation. They talk to Him and tell Him everything they want, but they never give Him time to say anything!—Except they hope He'll say "yes" to whatever it is they're asking Him for. After they've given Him their long list, they then hope that He okays it!

That isn't the way it should be! Your relationship with the Lord should also include you listening to Him. Prayer is not just speaking your piece, but most of all letting God speak His piece, and waiting in quietness and confidence until He answers. Take time to hear from God, and He'll take the time to straighten out your problems.

Mark 4:2-3—Then He ... said to them in His teaching: "Listen!"

Mark 7:14b—He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand:"

*** Concentration and visualizing Jesus**

John 4:24—God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

When you pray, think about the Lord and visualize Him if you can.

Try to close your mind to other things and distracting thoughts. If you make an effort to concentrate on Him, you're less likely to think of other things or be distracted while you pray. You're thinking about the Lord! Isaiah wrote,

Isaiah 26:3—You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Class Section 2: Twelve Steps of Effective Prayer

1. Have a praiseful, thankful attitude

Before you begin to list all the things you would like God to do, take a minute to praise and thank Him for all He has already done.

Philippians 4:6—With thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.



2. Start with a clean heart

Before you can have faith that the Lord will answer your prayers, you need to be sure that things are right between the Lord and you.

1 John 3:20-22—If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. If our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

If you have done wrong, what you need to do to set things straight is to acknowledge your guilt, ask the Lord to forgive you, and pledge to try to rectify the matter or be reconciled with any others involved. Once you do that, the Lord is quick to forgive, and to hear and answer your other prayers.

1 John 1:9—If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God does not ask for perfection. He only asks that we put our will over on His side; that with all our heart we try the very best we know how.



3. Pray for God's will to be done

When you are doing your best to please the Lord, then it pleases Him to grant you your heart's desires.

Psalm 37:4—Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.

1 John 5:14-15—Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

4. Put the needs of others ahead of your own

God expects us to pray not only for ourselves, but also for others.

Job 42:10—And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

*1 Thessalonians 1:2—
We give thanks to God
always for you all,
making mention of you
in our prayers.*

*Psalm 31:1—Blessed is
he who considers the
poor; the Lord will
deliver him in time of
trouble.*



5. Be specific

Specific prayers get specific answers. Jesus wants us to be definite in our requests. He asks us,

Luke 8:41 — "What would you have Me do for you?"

Specific prayers get specific answers. Vague, aimless prayers usually indicate one of three things: Either you're not very concerned, or you don't really know what you want Him to do, or you don't have faith that He can do it. So be as clear and definite as you would if you were writing a check drawn on the Bank of Heaven. Fill it out for the exact amount you want, make it payable to yourself or someone else who needs it, date it, sign it—and it's yours!

6. Be wholehearted

It's not how long you pray or how much you pray, it's how much you believe.

It's true that God knows what you need before you even ask Him, but He still expects you to pray. It shows that you are depending on Him, that you need Him. It's a positive declaration of your faith that He can answer your prayers, and that pleases Him.

God wants you to show concern and pray about things.—And in serious matters, He expects you to be serious about asking for His help. If you stir yourself, God will stir Himself!

Jeremiah 29:13—You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

7. Exercise your faith

What is faith? It's taking God at His Word. It's believing that what He has promised, He will do. With faith, it doesn't matter whether reason or logic point in that direction; you just know it will be because God promised it so, whether your human mind can figure it all out or not.

The greater your faith in the Lord's ability to answer, the greater answers to prayer you will receive. These two contrasting examples demonstrate the point especially well:

Matthew 9:27-30—When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you." And their eyes were opened.

But another time we read that He didn't do many miracles in one town because of the people's unbelief.

Matthew 13:58—Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

So it's pretty clear that your measure of faith determines the measure of God's response.

How do you build your faith muscles? You nourish them with God's Word, and exercise them daily through prayer.

8. Pray in the name of Jesus

When Jesus came to Earth to die for our sins, He became our Mediator with God, the Father. The Bible tells us:

1 Timothy 2:5—For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.

We approach God via Jesus.

John 14:6—Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

We know that's true of salvation, but this is true also of prayer! Jesus repeatedly told His disciples to pray in His name:

John 14:13-14—And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.

*John 16:23b-24—
Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*



9. Claim God's Word

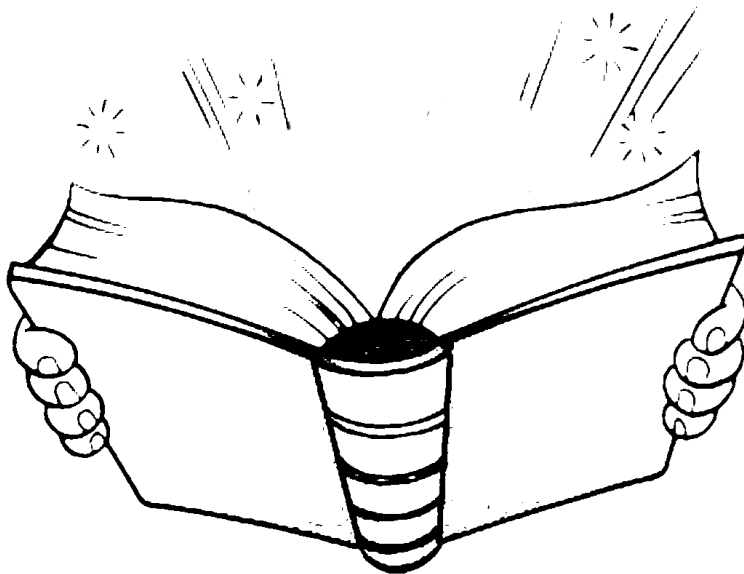
Quote Scripture when you pray. Hold God to His Promises.

God has a storehouse of matchless treasures and infinite wealth, all that you could ever ask or need or imagine—and it's all been promised to you in His Word.

2 Peter 1:4—There have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature.

All you have to do is lay claim to the promises!

God's Word is a contract that He has bound Himself to. The first step is to familiarize yourself with the terms of the contract. You do that by reading His Word. Then, when you pray, He wants you to hold Him to those terms. When you remind Him of His promises, it shows you have faith in what He has said, and that you believe He is able and will do what you are asking.

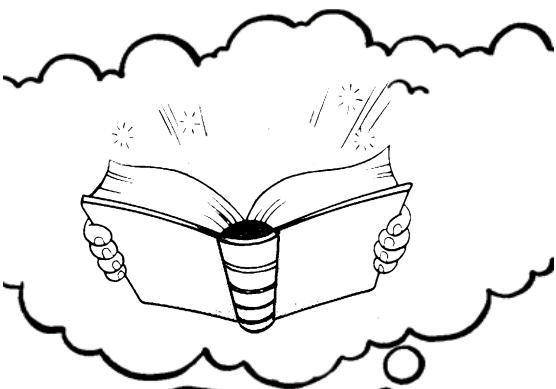


Of course, the contract also has terms that you must fulfill. Many of God's promises come with conditions.

1 John 3:22—Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

In order to claim His promise, "whatever you ask," you must do your best to keep His commandments and please Him. When you keep your part of the bargain, you can boldly claim all that is rightfully yours according to His Word.

Memorize a few key promises to claim when you pray. They will greatly strengthen your faith in time of need. Besides the verses you have committed to memory, you can also claim verses by reading them.



Here are a few promises that have been favorites for many over the years:

- John 15:7—If you abide in Me, and My Words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.
- Mark 9:23—Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes."
- Jeremiah 33:3—Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.

10. Refuse to doubt

James 1:6-8—Ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. (7) For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; (8) he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

It has been said that there are two different kinds of Christians—those who pray and really expect to see something happen, and those who just pray but do not expect anything to happen. Accept that God has answered even before you see the answer!

Mark 11:24—Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

11. Count it done

Every prayer that is in line with God's will and according to what God wants and knows is best for everyone involved, is answered—as far as God is concerned—before the prayer itself is even finished.

Isaiah 65:24—It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear.

He may not answer the way we expect Him to, or we may not see the answer right away, but God has set things in motion to be fulfilled in His time, providing it's His will. So once you have presented your request to the Lord, it's time to take what is known as the "stand of faith." You must trust that the answer is on its way, and believe that if you've fulfilled your part of the bargain, He will come through for you, even if it sometimes takes a while. Count it done!

When It Seems God Isn't Answering

Why do some prayers take longer to be answered than others, and why do some seem to go unanswered? There are a number of reasons. God always answers our prayers, but not always right away and not always in just the way we expect Him to. Sometimes He says “yes,” sometimes He says “no,” and sometimes He says “wait.”

When it seems your prayers aren't being answered, ask yourself these questions:

Am I sure that what I'm praying for is what God also wants, that it's His will?

God doesn't answer some prayers the way we want or expect Him to because He knows that what we're praying for is not really good for us, or not good for others. The Bible warns us that if our heart isn't right, or our motives are selfish, the Lord may not give us what we ask for.

James 4:3—You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.

God sometimes doesn't answer our prayers because He has something better for us. God knows best, and He gives the very best to those who leave the choices up to Him.

Have I done my part by obeying what the Lord has told me to do?

Faith and obedience come first, then God answers prayer. If you are doing your best to fulfill your part of the deal by doing what you can to help bring about the desired result, and if you're doing your best to do what's right and what will please Him—that is, loving Him and others—then you can be confident that He will answer your prayer.

Is the Lord perhaps testing my faith?

If you keep on by faith, even when it looks like God isn't answering your prayer, you will please God. He likes the kind of faith that refuses to quit, the kind that will continue on in spite of outward appearances. He likes those who keep believing it will be so, just because He said so.

A good example of this is Abraham in the Old Testament, who was over a hundred years old and still without a promised heir. God had promised that his wife Sarah would bear a son, but she was now ninety and long past childbearing age. But Abraham continued to believe God's promise despite the impossible odds, and sure enough, God came through. Sarah miraculously conceived and gave birth to a son, Isaac, who through his son Jacob became the forefather of the Hebrew people.

The Apostle Paul wrote of Abraham's stand of faith:

Romans 4:20-22— And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness.



Is the Lord perhaps trying to teach me patience or some other lesson?

It just seems to be part of human nature to reach out to God more when we need something from Him. He's happy to meet our needs, but He's also smart enough to take advantage of those times when He has our full attention to teach us lessons that will bring us closer to Him and make us better people. Patience seems to be one of His most frequent lessons, but He may also be trying to teach you to be more loving, more humble, more prayerful, or any one of the other lessons that make up life. If that's the case, when you have learned whatever He's trying to teach you, He will answer.

12. Thank God for answering

It's just as important to end your prayers with praise and thanksgiving, as it is to start them that way.

Just like we get specific with God in the things we ask for, we should be just as specific in thanking Him for the things He gives us. Let's get just as enthusiastic in thanking Him, as we were desperate in asking Him!

If you really believe that God has heard and answered your prayer, you won't wait till you see the answer to thank Him for it; you'll thank Him by faith.



Review of the Twelve Steps

1. Have a praiseful, thankful attitude.
2. Start with a clean heart.
3. Pray for God's will to be done.
4. Put the needs of others ahead of your own.
5. Be specific.
6. Be wholehearted.
7. Exercise your faith.
8. Pray in the name of Jesus.
9. Claim God's Word.
10. Refuse to doubt.
11. Count it done.
12. Thank God for answering.

Dear Jesus,

Thank You that You understand my heart. Thank You that I never have to worry about whether You understand or not. When I feel that I can't explain properly and I fumble over my words, or when I can't find the right words to express what I really want to say, thank You that I can just rest in Your arms and know that You make sense out of these words I speak. Thank You, Jesus, that I don't always even have to talk to You in words. You just understand everything I'm trying to say, as I pour out my heart to You.