

LIVING WELL¹ #1: PRAYING WELL – PRAYER PROBLEMS

ESV TCL 2025/07/20

Q. How does Jesus help us a) to avoid prayer problems and b) to pray as he, the perfect human, did?

1. WHAT IS PRAYER?

Problem #1: We don't really know what prayer is!

Basic definition of prayer: 'calling on the name of the Lord'.

Genesis 4:26b At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.



Further definition of prayer: 'Faith expressed as words or even just groans' (Romans 8:26).

Romans 10:11-13 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Ultimately, 'the Lord' is Jesus: *1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ...*

2. ABRAHAM PRAYS

Problem #2: We think that prayer is unwanted "God-bothering".

The Pre-incarnate Jesus, God the Son, visits Abraham, to give him a prayer opportunity:

Genesis 18:17-23 The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ...

²² So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD.²³ Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ...

Two things to notice about Abraham's prayer:

- The LORD gives Abraham opportunity to intercede and bring *blessing* to foolish Lot.
- Abraham argues with *the LORD*, giving him reasons why he should hear his prayer; e.g. he appeals to God's character and justice (righteousness). The LORD wants us to "bother" him!

3. THE LORD HEARS

Problem #3: We think God is not listening to us his people any more.

In Exodus 3, once again, the pre-incarnate Christ appears, to Moses:

Exodus 3:2-8 And the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ...

¹ John 4:10-14 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you **living** water."¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the **well** is deep. Where do you get that **living** water?"¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the **well** and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water **welling** up to eternal life."

⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them ...

The LORD had already heard their prayers (cry), and had already deployed himself.

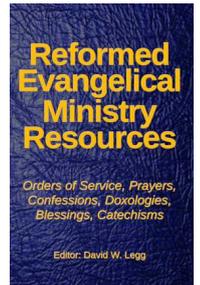
4. A PRAYER BOOK

Problem #4: We don't know what to pray.

In addition to the situations described in Romans 8:26 and James 1:5, we should remember that the Bible is full of example prayer material and promises to claim, especially the books of Psalms; the vast majority contain prayer.

When we are young, the psalms seem irrelevant, distant and even just miserable. But when we get a little older, we really appreciate their content and depend on them to help us pray. Therefore, it is important to be familiar with Psalms before² trouble (evil ESV) comes.

There are many other sources of material to help us pray, e.g. →



5. MOTIVATION

Problem #5: We sometimes pray with bad motives.

James 4:2 ... You do not have, because you do not ask (ESV) [God NIV].

In addition to the very basic problem of prayerlessness, our motives are also important:

James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

We need to examine ourselves when we pray to discern whether we are praying aright. See also **Psalm 66:18-20**.



6. SAMUEL GOLDENBERG AND SCHMUÏLE

Problem #6: We are too proud to beg for mercy.

Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition* contains a movement portraying a pair of Polish Jews (paintings by Viktor Hartmann →). One is proud and rich, the other poor and snivelling. We are unwilling to take the humble rôle in Jesus' parable:



Luke 18:10-14 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

¹³ 'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

¹⁴ 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

² See Ecclesiastes 12:1

7. HOW NOT TO PRAY

Problem #7: Praying to others rather than to God.

Jesus' sermon on the mount of Olives contains some of the most explicitly practical teaching on prayer.

Matthew 6:5-8 'And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ 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. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Q. What must we learn from the Pharisees' (hypocrites) mistakes?

Q. Must all prayer be done *in secret* (v6)?

8. HOW TO PRAY

Problem #8: No-one has taught us how to pray!?

Prayer can be both taught and learned, as per when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them in Luke 11:1. Back in the sermon on the mount:

Matthew 6:9ab 'This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven,

*^{9c} hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

*¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one."*

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Q. Why does Jesus teach us to pray to **our Father**? (John 11:41; 20:17)

Q. What does the **first half** of the Lord's prayer teach us? (9c-10)

Q. What does the **second half** teach us? (11-13)

Q. What additional motivational teaching is in **verses 14 and 15**?

9. HOW TO KEEP ON PRAYING

Problem #9: “I don’t think God is ever going to hear my prayers about X.”

If we have examined our motives, are coming to God through Jesus, then Jesus teaches that we can be absolutely confident that God hears our prayers and will answer in whatever way is best in his perfect wisdom, as we see later in the sermon on the mount:

Matthew 7:7-11 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

He will never give you a stone or a snake!³ He is your *Father*; he gives what is best⁴.

Answers to prayer include ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘wait’, ‘here is something better’.

Q. How do God’s promises help us to persevere in prayer?

10. PRAYER MEETINGS

When Christians meet for prayer, we share both personal and kingdom needs, encourage each other, and learn to pray from each other, all with especial help from the Holy Spirit⁵.

Acts 1:4 [Jesus:] ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, ...’ ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. ... ^{2:1} When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, ...

And the rest, as they say, is history. The first Christian day of Pentecost happened in response to a Sunday prayer meeting.

Q. How many examples of prayer meetings can you think of in the Bible?⁶

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3 Nor a scorpion in Luke 11:12.

4 See the example above of Abraham praying for Lot and Sodom in Genesis 18, and God’s actual answer to his prayer in Genesis 19.

5 In addition to the Holy Spirit indwelling us individually, there is his corporate presence among us (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, also Matthew 18:19-20).

6 For starters, see Acts 1:14; Acts 12; Acts 13; 2 Chronicles 6–7; Ezra 10; Nehemiah 9; 2 Chronicles 20.