

THE
LOST DISCIPLINE
THAT WILL
CHANGE YOUR LIFE

PRAYER



MICHAEL ROSS

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gave her heart to Jesus at age seven, grew up in West Virginia, and is committed to being Christ's "hands and feet" to the people of Long Island, New York—where she ministers with her husband, Walt. Vanessa is passionate about prayer and trains others in how to get the most out of this "discipline that will change your life." She contributed to chapter 13.

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INTRODUCTION

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” Jesus said, “This is how you should pray: Father, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. Give us each day the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And don’t let us yield to temptation.”

LUKE 11:1–4 NLT

Prayer was the breath that Jesus breathed, the driving force of His life, the secret of His amazing ministry.¹ He modeled a perfect prayer life, and He encouraged His disciples to never stop praying. “But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again” (Matthew 6:6–7 NLT).

As Jesus traveled throughout Judea and beyond, ministering everywhere He went, the disciples saw the place of prayer in His life. And the more time they spent with Him, the more they caught His teaching on the importance of a persistent prayer life.

Jesus prayed in public, and He prayed alone; He prayed for the young and the old alike. He prayed during joyful moments, and He prayed during times of trouble.

Jesus prayed often—*everywhere* and in *every* situation:

- while speaking to crowds of people (Matthew 11:25–26)

- before He walked on water (Matthew 14:23)
- as He interacted with little children (Matthew 19:13–15)
- during the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26)
- in Gethsemane before He was betrayed (Matthew 26:36–44)
- as He was dying on the cross (Matthew 27:46)
- before He traveled to Galilee (Mark 1:35–36)
- as He healed a deaf and mute man (Mark 7:31–35)
- at His baptism (Luke 3:21–22)
- after healing people (Luke 5:16)
- all night long before He selected His disciples (Luke 6:12–13)
- before Peter called Jesus “the Christ” (Luke 9:18)
- during His transfiguration (Luke 9:28–29)
- when He was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:21)
- before He taught the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1)
- as He prayed for Peter’s faith (Luke 22:31–32)
- right after He was nailed to the cross (Luke 23:34)
- during His dying breath (Luke 23:46)
- when He broke bread after His resurrection (Luke 24:30)
- as He blessed His disciples before ascending into heaven (Luke 24:50–53)
- before He fed a crowd of five thousand people (John 6:11)
- before He raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41–42)
- while He asked the Father to bring glory to God’s name (John 12:27–28)
- as He considered His mission, as well as the faith and work of His disciples and all believers (John 17:1–26)

If prayer was an essential part of Christ's life, shouldn't it be the same for us? Prayer keeps us trusting God for everything, opens the way for the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Jesus, and enables God to touch the lives of others whom we meet.²

Yet, too often, prayer is lacking in a believer's life.

Too often, prayer is the "lost discipline."

"Where we should be the strongest, we're the weakest," author and internationally renowned speaker Kay Arthur observes. "Is this why so many who profess Christ live such impotent and ordinary lives? Why so many people, even those who have been 'well-known' in the Western world of Christianity, have 'fallen into sin'?"³

Our own research at Back to the Bible has uncovered both the power of prayer and the tragic consequences when believers avoid it. And every day we receive dozens of letters from Christ-followers who desire a better prayer life but just don't know how to achieve it.

"My prayer life has never been what it needs to be," wrote Keith, a forty-two-year-old from Pennsylvania. "I feel like the act of prayer can be so stiff—so 'holier-than-thou.' You have to achieve this certain stage in order to come to God. For me, my prayers vary. Sometimes I talk out loud while I'm driving. Sometimes I pray silently to the Lord. A lot of times in my heart, I'm yelling. A lot of times, I'm begging. And the Lord just keeps loving. He is 'God with Me.' He is here and now. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. He is closer to me now than ever before in my life."

Ready for real transformation? Let's ask the same question the disciples took to Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray." We'll take

our curiosity straight to God's Word, and together we'll uncover secrets of "the lost discipline that will change your life."

And as you read these pages, keep in mind three truths:

1. *God delights in our prayers.* He longs to demonstrate His power in the tremendous trials that shake the foundation of our lives, as well as in the tiny troubles that annoy us. Giant needs are never too great for His power; small ones are never too insignificant for His love.

2. *God answers prayer because He is the supreme ruler of all.* He governs both world events and our individual lives, ready at our request to act, to intervene, to overrule for our good, His glory, and the progress of the Gospel.

3. *God moves through prayer.* Not only are we called to this divine activity (Philippians 4:6 and 1 Timothy 2:1–3), but we are guaranteed of God's action in response to our prayers. And as 2 Chronicles 7:14 clearly states, if we pray, God promises results. He has assured us that prayer is the way to secure His aid and to move His mighty hand. Therefore, even in sickness, failure, rejection, or financial distress, we can pray and experience His peace. "Have faith in God," Jesus said. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them" (Mark 11:22–23).

Let's get started. . . .

PART ONE

PRAYER BASICS



A PEEK INSIDE YOUR CLOSET: PRAYER LIVES OF EVERYDAY CHRISTIANS

*Devote yourselves to prayer with
an alert mind and a thankful heart.*

COLOSSIANS 4:2 NLT

On any given day, we encounter multiple opportunities to pray for others. Sometimes specific requests for prayer come through conversations, other times via email, text, or even social media. They come from family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and even, at times, complete strangers.

We're not surprised by how often people request prayer. Every day at Back to the Bible, we receive hundreds of prayer requests. Life can be tough and each of us encounters those storms in which we need help. No, what surprises us is who the requests come from. We've had practicing Christians, practicing Muslims, Hindus, agnostics, and even those who are functional atheists ask us to pray for them or for someone they love.

It appears there's a nearly universal tendency for people to pray (or at least petition prayer from others). If you ask just about anyone, "How do you communicate with God?" you'll receive one answer: *prayer*. In a recent survey of adults in the United States between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, we found that 80 percent believe in prayer. Our twenty-country study from several years ago looked at how often people from different religions pray. In a typical week, 90 percent of Muslims, 86 percent of

Hindus, 77 percent of Christians, 47 percent of Buddhists, and 46 percent of Jews will pray.¹

Scientists have also noticed the popularity of prayer. A survey in the early 2000s found that prayer was the most commonly named alternative health treatment in the US.² Another study of critical care nurses revealed that prayer is very common in their circles as well. Eight out of ten reported having been asked by patients or their families to pray, and the same proportion have recommended prayer to patients.³

It's not surprising then that prayer has become a topic of research. In this chapter—with the help of Dr. Pam Ovwigho, executive director of the Center for Bible Engagement at Back to the Bible—we'll take a closer look at two areas of that research: Christians' prayer practices and the effects of prayer.

What's Going On in That Prayer Closet?

As I (Pam) walk into my church sanctuary, the usher hands me a small piece of paper. One side provides the outline of the upcoming sermon. The other lists our congregation's prayer needs. In our church of more than two thousand men, women, and children, this list is quite long. We pray for these needs during the worship service. Our pastor also encourages us to pray for them during the week in our own private devotional time.

If I'm truthful, more often than not this list generates guilt for me. Although I do take time to pray each day, I'm not always diligent about praying for my local church needs.

I wonder if I'm the only one who falls into this category. My parents, in contrast, are all about praying for their fellow congregants. They each keep a lengthy list, praying over and updating it regularly. In addition, they are a link in the church's

emergency prayer chain. I've witnessed this chain in action many times. The phone will ring, and usually my mom will answer and take down the information. When she hangs up, she and Dad will pray immediately. It doesn't matter what they were doing before the phone rang. Everything stops until they have lifted the need to the Lord.

What about you? Have you ever wondered what other believers' prayer lives are like? If so, this is the chapter for you! Over the years we have surveyed more than two hundred thousand people about all aspects of their spiritual lives. Let's take a look at what we've learned about how they talk to God.

Importance and Frequency

One way we peek into believers' spiritual lives is by asking them to rate on a five-point scale how important different spiritual practices are to them. Typically, prayer receives the highest ranking for importance, slightly higher than worship and Bible engagement.

Using the same scale, I also like to ask folks how satisfied they are with the way they are living out the different spiritual practices. Satisfaction ratings are generally lower than the importance ratings. This is true for prayer as well, with an average "satisfaction" rating of 3.16 but importance of 4.84. The gap between these numbers is bigger than for other spiritual practices, suggesting that this may be an area where many of us struggle.

We mentioned earlier that most people pray at least sometimes. How regularly does your average Christian? Through our many church surveys, we've found that about two-thirds of Christians pray daily. The remaining third will pray on two or