

**RE-TEACH US TO PRAY**  
**Uncapping the Ancient Wells**  
**Suggestions for Renewing a Prayer Life**

And Isaac dug again the wells of water  
which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father.  
—Genesis 26:18

A wonderful young friend asked me for suggestions in how to revitalize his prayer life. He inquired about the ways he might engage spontaneous, contemplative, and liturgical prayer, and about how I have formed my own practice in daily prayer. In other words, his request boiled down to, “RE-teach me to pray.” Of course, Jesus has already answered that question, but I also understand the need for encouragement. My first suggestion is always, “Take Brian Zahnd’s prayer school next time it’s available.” It really can be a life-changing weekend.

But in the meantime, I offered a primer in my own approach, which has been fruitful, at least for me. While prayer is incredibly personal, perhaps something in what follows could be of use to others. I suggested that my friend look through my practices and “try some on” to see what fits him best. I will offer a number of ideas that others can draw from to create a daily prayer ritual. Some of these could and probably should be applied every day. Others can be included in rotation over the course of a week.

I recommend trying a variety of prayer exercises of different genres and traditions so that one can either focus on what they are most drawn to or experience a variety to stay fresh. I would start very simply, with maybe just a few prayers per day. Jesus made it clear that if you were ONLY to pray the “Our Father,” that would be enough. Lengthening our prayers doesn’t make us more spiritual (see Matthew 6:5-8), but on the other hand, our time sitting or walking or resting with Jesus is wonderful, especially once you understand you’re in a real conversation with a living Friend.

**I. PLACE AND TIME:**

While we learn to pray throughout the day, whether spontaneously or by a schedule, I recommend choosing a particular place and time for daily prayer that feels safe and comfortable to you. This may range from a favourite chair to a favourite walk (though if you choose a walk, have a bad weather backup). It’s best to develop a rhythm where the prayer time has priority rather than hoping to slot it in during spare parts of your day that quickly disappear.

Since I was a little boy, I have focused on my nighttime prayers in bed, which has disadvantages (I fall asleep) and advantages (I fall asleep). I’ve had life-long insomnia, so I often pray in the night when I’d otherwise be worrying. But if you can actually be sitting up, relaxed but attentive, that’s normally better for most people.

But aside from your physical location, remember that your heart is a temple, a meeting place with God. ALL prayer is conversation with God. Not only speaking but listening too. Dialogue of the heart in the heart. Zahnd calls this “sitting with Jesus.” I call it the Meeting Place. This is where we pray: in our hearts. So please also see my guide to facilitating a Meeting Place [HERE](#).

## II. JESUS-FOCUSED:

From Alpha to Omega, Christ is our focus. This means he is my foundation for prayer. For me, this means I pray the following daily:

### 1. The Jesus Prayer: *“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”*

NOTE: At the outset, Western believers may be self-triggered into imagining this as worm-theology, begging for mercy. I suspect that's a projection. Three quick facts: (1) "Sinner" is not our identity. We are sons and daughters who approach the throne of grace boldly. But we are sinners in the existential sense that we recognize our daily need for mercy. (2) Nor do I need to beg. Asking is simply opening our hands and hearts to the ever-flowing spring of divine goodness. Asking does not turn on the tap of God's love. It's more about positioning myself to receive what's already flowing, as we do with forgiveness. And (3) the mercy of God is not reduced to him withholding wrath. The many mercies of God describe God's superabundant goodness and generosity toward the entire range of my life needs.

I often pray the Jesus Prayer with a prayer rope or prayer beads. I pray it maybe thirty times in a row as I touch each bead and I go at the rate of my breathing, mindful of inhaling mercy and exhaling whatever has troubled me. I use this throughout the day, especially in anxiety-inducing situations, standing in line-ups, and to ward off panic attacks. After practicing this consistently over the years, I notice that sometimes my heart will start praying it automatically from within even before I make a rational choice to pray it. For this reason, it is also called “the prayer of the heart.”

I also like to pray this one visually. That is, I imagine myself under the waterfall of God's mercy and as I pray it, I imagine his mercy washing away my anxiety.

I also use this to pray for others. Even in lists. For example, I may pray through my family, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on Sweet Momma E” (and then I imagine pulling her beneath the refreshing waterfall). Then I do the same for each family member, their partners, their children, my own parents and siblings, etc. And then I do the same for each friend that comes to mind, each ministry partner, each co-worker, my 12-step group, etc. As many or as few as you like. But if you have someone to pray for, it's a good method.

### 2. The Lord's Prayer: the 'Our Father'

I pray this every day because Jesus literally said to his disciples, “When you pray, pray this.” You can pray it as is, but one thing that has freshened up this prayer for me (and slowed my pace to be more mindful) is that I often sing it (normally just in my mind). This seems to also engage my heart more. I recommend finding or creating some melodic version of the Lord's prayer and pray to its melody.

### 3. The Beatitudes

In order to train your discernment, I *strongly* recommend using (and eventually memorizing) the Beatitudes and praying them back to Jesus (who gave them to us) every day. This will, more than any other practice, guard your heart and mind from deception, because it is the constitution of the kingdom of Christ. For example, a believer you cited these verses every day would have never been

deceived by the insanity of Q-Anon or the grandiose false prophecies of the far-right charismatics. Imagine if we prayed them five times/day like Muslim's pray their prayers. But for you, I recommend praying the Beatitudes once/day using alerts on your phone. Many believers around the world pray them precisely at noon and you could know that you are joining them.

When I pray the Beatitudes, I actually start out by praying, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, remember me when you come into your kingdom." This is adapted from the prayer of the thief on the cross, who had nothing to offer and who was, above all people, "poor in spirit." The first Beatitude then covers that, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

#### **4. The Apostle's Creed (or Nicene Creed)**

Christian doctrine has become either too sloppy or too dogmatic through the centuries. But the ancient faith had a very clear sense of the essentials of the apostolic gospel and summarized it in their creeds. The creed is what believers affirmed at their baptism and every Sunday thereafter. It helps us stay on track theologically while also allowing tremendous freedom because it also keeps essentials to a minimum. For you, I recommend praying (and hopefully memorizing) the Apostle's Creed as a daily confession, specifically to reaffirm your allegiance to Jesus Christ:

I believe in God,  
the Father Almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
He descended into hell;  
on the third day He rose again from the dead;  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Holy Catholic Church,  
the communion of Saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting.

### **III. PRAYING THE PSALMS:**

The Psalms are actually our God-given prayer book. While the whole hymnal is meant for our use, there are some that are special to me. I lean on particular ones for various reasons:

- 1. Psalm 23: The Good Shepherd** – I pray this to create a visual encounter with Christ as Good Shepherd. As I picture each line, the psalm takes me on a walk with Jesus. I take my time, stepping into each scene, watching the Shepherd's face, his expression and listening for his voice:

- a. The spaciousness of a broad meadow where I sit in the field with him.
  - b. The peace of hiking along a path beside a quiet stream.
  - c. The safety of his presence through the dark valleys.
  - d. The festivities of his banqueting table.
  - e. The glory of his house or temple.
2. **Psalm 51: David's Confession** – When I am troubled by guilt or shame, I pray David's bold confession and let it draw me out of hiding and into my closest face-to-face engagement with God. Note: everything he prays has already been answered with a superabundant "YES" of grace through the Cross. So, for example, when David says, "Take not your Holy Spirit from me," the pre-answered response from the Cross is, "Of course I won't!" When he says, "Wash me and I shall be clean," the answer came in the blood of Christ so that I can emphasize "SHALL" as a bold faith statement.
  3. **Psalm 103: Gracious & Compassionate** – This is a good one to pray to remind us of all that God has done and is doing for us. Gratitude is the number one practice for addicts who want to stay in recovery. How much more so for Jesus-followers who want to stay lit.
  4. **Psalm 6 & 13: How long?** – I just use these when I'm in despair or when I'm praying with someone who has an ongoing illness like chronic fatigue and just needs to grieve. So I don't pray them often but they are enormously powerful for those occasions.
  5. **Psalm 137, 139: Cursing and blessing enemies:** You don't need to chant the Psalms but I do. Here is why: chanting reminds me that these are poetic prayers from the heart and not straightforward theology for the mind. Beware of literalism. Even the angry, violent prayers against enemies are confessions meant to help us get resentment out of our hearts so that we can then proceed to processing forgiveness. Their function is actually to purge me of malice through confession. For example, if you need to practice love of enemies, we begin by being honest about our anger. The Psalms help us do that. Then we take them to your waterfall too and pray, "Lord, show them the same mercy I want for myself." Then we watch what he does and listen to what he says. We leave them there with him and ask for mercy for any ill feelings we had been clinging to.

#### IV. ORTHODOX PRAYERS:

By way of supplements, I am including a prayer I open with every day (the Trisagion Prayer) and one that I use especially through Lent but often as my heart needs it (the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim).

##### 1. Trisagion Prayer:

O heavenly King, O Comforter, Spirit of Truth,  
 Who is in ALL places and fills ALL things,  
 Treasury of good gifts and Giver of life,  
 Come dwell with us,  
 Cleanse us from every stain,  
 And save our souls O Good One.

Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal,  
 Have mercy on us,

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Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal,  
Have mercy on us.

Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
Now and ever and unto ages of ages, Amen.

All Holy Trinity,  
Wash away our sins,  
Pardon our iniquities,  
Visit and heal our infirmities,  
For you are a good and merciful God,  
And you love mankind.  
Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.  
Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
Now and ever and unto ages of ages, Amen.  
[and then this is when I start into the Lord' Prayer].

## **2. Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim:**

O Lord and Master of my life,  
Grant me not [protect me from] a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition and idle talk.  
Grant to me, your servant, a spirit of purity, humility, patience and love.  
Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother,  
Since you are blessed to the ages of ages.

O God, cleanse me a sinner (10x)  
[this is asking God not just to forgive, but to wash out the stains of addiction, shame and regret, too].

[Repeat] O Lord and Master of my life,  
Grant me not [protect me from] a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition and idle talk.  
Grant to me, your servant, a spirit of purity, humility, patience and love.  
Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother,  
Since you are blessed to the ages of ages.

**V. 12-STEP PRAYERS:** I use the Serenity Prayer a lot, but some of my addict friends, even non-Christians(!) also pray the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi every day:

### **1. Serenity Prayer:**

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

### **2. Prayer of St. Francis:**

Lord make Me an instrument of Your peace  
Where there is hatred let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that I may  
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
To be understood, as to understand.  
To be loved. as to love  
For it's in giving that we receive  
And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it's in dying that we are born...  
To eternal life.  
Amen