

When Should We Pray?

Bible Study by Ken Puls
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This evening, before our time of prayer together, I want to take a few moments and consider a simple question related to prayer. This is a question that can be answered several ways and it will require us to look to several passages of Scripture to answer it thoroughly.

The question is: **“When should we pray?”**

We know that God commands prayer, that He desires us pray. But when are we to pray?

I want to take a few moments tonight to look at Scripture, so we can see how the Bible answers the question. Then I want consider some practical ways that we can implement and do what the Bible commands us.

I hope when I asked the questions, that several answers and several verses or passages of Scripture came to mind. The Bible has a lot to say about prayer. I am going to summarize the Bible’s response to the question into seven answers that I want to bring to your attention.

Now, the most obvious answer to the question of when to pray is **always**. We are to pray without ceasing. I want to come back to that one and consider it last. But let’s begin with some other times that we are to pray.

1. In times of affliction and distress

We pray when we feel a great need to pray. Maybe we are facing a situation beyond our control and we realize that God is our only help and our only hope. Now, in truth, that is our situation at all times. But we are not always mindful that we live moment by moment in dependence upon God. And so God in His kindness and providence will sometimes bring trials across our path simply to remind us of who He is, in His great abundance and provision and power and faithfulness, so that we will remember and seek Him in prayer. We see an example of this in Psalm 102. The very title describes a situation of distress:

Psalms 102 title	A PRAYER OF ONE AFFLICTED, WHEN HE IS FAINT AND POURS OUT HIS COMPLAINT BEFORE THE LORD.
Psalms 102:1–2	Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress!

Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily **in the day when I call!**

This is a time when we most certainly should pray—in the day of our distress.

In Acts 4 Peter and John had been arrested and brought before the authorities. They were threatened and charged not to preach any more in the name of Jesus. So what did they do?

They gathered the church to give testimony and to pray—

Acts 4:23–31

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“Why did the Gentiles rage,

and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves,

and the rulers were gathered together,

against the Lord and against his Anointed’ —

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

When the church sensed the need to pray, they came together and sought the LORD. And in their prayer, they looked to the testimony of God in His Word (from Psalm 2). They saw how Jesus had fulfilled what David had sung, and they were filled with hope.

2. In times of blessing and prosperity

When God is good to us, we are to remember and give thanks. We see this in Psalm 107—

Psalms 107:1-3

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

This psalm continues in each stanza with examples of people crying out to God in distress.

God answers each prayer and the refrain is repeated:

Psalms 107:31 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
 for his wondrous works to the children of man!

We should not reserve our prayers for times of affliction, but, when God answers us, give thanks as well.

3. **At morning and evening**

God set this precedent in the Old Testament with worship at the Temple. 1 Chronicles 23:30 records that the priests and Levites were “to stand every morning to thank and praise the Lord, and likewise at evening.”

Consider these verses that encourage us to pray as we arise from sleep:

Psalms 88:13 But I, O LORD, cry to you;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.

Psalms 57:7–8 My heart is steadfast, O God,
 my heart is steadfast!
I will sing and make melody!
Awake, my glory!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
 I will awake the dawn!

Psalms 5:1–3 Give ear to my words, O LORD;
 consider my groaning.
Give attention to the sound of my cry,
 my King and my God,
 for to you do I pray.
O LORD, **in the morning** you hear my voice;
 in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

Psalms 59:16 But I will sing of your strength;
 I will sing aloud of your steadfast love **in the morning**.
For you have been to me a fortress
 and a refuge in the day of my distress.

Scripture encourages us to make a practice of beginning the day with prayer. We see this example in the life of Jesus. He also made a practice of praying in the morning:

Mark 1:35 And rising **very early in the morning**, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Another time of the day, when we are encouraged to go to prayer is in the evening as we prepare to end the day:

Psalms 4:4 Be angry, and do not sin;
 ponder in your own hearts **on your beds**, and be silent. Selah

Again we see Jesus' example; he prayed in the evening:

Matthew 14:23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. **When evening came**, he was there alone.

Not only are we to pray at morning and evening, we should pray:

4. **At noon and at night**

Psalms 55:16–17 But I call to God,
 and the LORD will save me.
 Evening and morning and at noon
 I utter my complaint and moan,
 and he hears my voice.

This was Daniel's practice in the Old Testament when he was taken to Babylon. Daniel 6:10 tells us that he would kneel down in his room with his face toward Jerusalem and pray three times a day: morning, noon and evening. He was disciplined enough in his prayer life, that his enemies used his consistency to trap him and have him cast into a lion's den.

This also seems to have been Peter's practice. In Acts 10:9 we read:

Acts 10:9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop **about the sixth hour** to pray.

The sixth hour was noon. Peter took time in the middle of the day to stop and to pray.

God's Word calls us to pray morning, noon, and evening, and also night:

Psalms 119:145–148 With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD!
 I will keep your statutes.
 I call to you; save me,
 that I may observe your testimonies.
 I rise **before dawn** and cry for help;
 I hope in your words.
 My eyes are awake **before the watches of the night**,
 that I may meditate on your promise.

Even in sleepless nights the psalmist found great delight in meditating on God's Word, thinking on His promises.

Psalms 88:1–2 O LORD, God of my salvation;
 I cry out **day and night** before you.
Let my prayer come before you;
 incline your ear to my cry!

Psalms 92:1–2 It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
 to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love **in the morning**,
 and your faithfulness **by night**,

Each morning we rejoice that God’s mercies are new each day; each night we rejoice that He has been faithful in bringing us through another day.

There were times when Jesus prayed at night:

Luke 6:12 In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and **all night** he continued in prayer to God.

We see this in Paul’s life. He also prayed night and day:

1 Thess. 3:9–10 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly **night and day** that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

2 Timothy 1:3 I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers **night and day**.

5. **As we remember God**

When God comes to mind, His person and power, His ways and Word, we are to pray.

Psalms 63:4–7 So I will bless you as long as I live;
 in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
 and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
 and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
 and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.

As God reminds you of Himself and brings truth to your mind, make your thoughts of Him a prompt to prayer.

6. **As God burdens us to pray**

In 2 Chronicles 6 Solomon prays for the nation of Israel at the dedication of the Temple. Near the middle of his prayer, beginning in verse 28, he prays:

2 Chronicles 6:28–31 “If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemies besiege them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own sorrow and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear from heaven your dwelling place and forgive and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways, for you, you only, know the hearts of the children of mankind, that they may fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.”

Solomon knows that there will be times when the people will cry out to God, individually and as a nation, and he prays that God will be merciful and hear their prayers and answer.

Each of us will have our own burdens, our own grief, our own concerns that weigh upon our hearts. As God impresses these things upon us, we should look to Him in prayer.

7. **While God may be found**

Listen to how Psalm 32 begins:

Psalms 32:1–7

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah
I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah
Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you **at a time when you may be found;**
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

This gives some urgency to our prayers. We are to pray while God may be found. Jesus taught His disciples “that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). We are to be urgent and diligent in our prayers. Today is the day of salvation. Today we must pray!

In summary, we are, as 1 Thessalonians 5:17 teaches us, to **pray without ceasing**. When you take all the passages together, you can see that prayer should be something that envelops our lives.

The difficulty comes, however, when we try to live this out. Even though we see abundant testimony in God's Word, calling us to pray, we so often fall short. We are so easily distracted and caught up in other pursuits. We don't give God the thought and the time that we ought.

So how can we practice this?

What can we do to be more consistent and more abundant in our prayers?

I want to suggest five practical ways you can bolster your praying.

1. Look for reasons to pray

- as God burdens you
- as you remember truth, Scripture
- as you hear of requests from others
- when you face difficulties and decisions
- when you receive blessing and prosper

We live in a fallen world; we don't have to look far to find reason to cry out to God. Look for those reasons to pray. Are you facing difficulty? Are brothers and sister in Christ facing difficulty? Are you facing decisions? Has God blessed you and prospered you?

As Scripture has shown, all of life is an occasion that should drive us to prayer. Ask God to make you sensitive to occasions for prayer and more intentional in going to Him in prayer.

Prayer doesn't always have to be long or formal or even well-thought out, but prayer should be frequent, spontaneous, and from the heart.

2. Try to begin and end the day in prayer

Make it a practice of seeking God with your first thoughts as you awake and your last thoughts as you fall asleep. In your first waking moments, thank Him for giving you a new day, for keeping you through the night. As you drift off to sleep, turn your thoughts to God. You will not offend God by talking to Him when you are tired or even by falling asleep in the middle of your prayer. There is, in fact no better way to prepare yourself for rest than by crawling into the arms of God as you pillow your head at night. Make it a practice as you doze off at night to thank the Lord for bringing you through the day. Trust Him! Set your mind at ease acknowledging that He is good and in control of all things. Sleep is a wonderful gift of God that reminds us that we are not God and we are not in control. There are regular intervals when we are out and the world goes on without our involvement. Sleep is a wonderful reminder that God is God and we are not. Use those times of retiring and rising as prompts to prayer.

3. Take opportunity with other believers to pray

Use the times of fellowship you have with other Christians as occasions for prayer. We gather together at times such as this evening specifically for prayer, but even when you visit during the week, or have occasion to see one another, or speak to one another on the phone, take time to stop and pray, especially as you hear of needs and blessings. Pause to intercede and to praise.

4. Set aside time during the day to be alone and pray

Make opportunities for yourself to be alone for prayer. Go for a walk; go to a place where you can be by yourself for a time. Unplug. Turn off your TV, your computer, your phone—and pray.

You may need to take advantage of times you are already by yourself: driving to or home from work in your car, taking a bath or a shower.

Seek times to be by yourself that you can give to God. Ask God to create time for you and prompt you to pray. When God in His providence removes you from the presence of other people (by sickness or by other means), use the opportunity to seek Him.

5. Use everyday tasks to prompt your prayers

As people we are often habitual and very predictable. We do the same things over and over. We have our routines and daily practices. These can work against us if they are sinful or harmful and hard to break. But many routines are actually quite useful in helping us navigate and manage our day. And these can be enlisted and established as prompts to prayer.

One to whom we can look as an example of this is General Stonewall Jackson. Jackson was a general in the Confederate army during the civil war, and he was a devout believer. He took the command to “pray without ceasing” as a rule of life.

Let me read for you this excerpt about his life written by his wife:

[A] friend once asked him what was his understanding of the Bible command to be “instant in prayer” and to “pray without ceasing.” “I can give you,” he said, “my idea of it by illustration, if you will allow it, and will not think that I am setting myself up as a model for others. I have so fixed the habit in my own mind that I never raise a glass of water to my lips without lifting my heart to God in thanks and prayer for the water of life. Then, when we take our meals, there is the grace. Whenever I drop a letter in the post-office, I send a petition along with it for God’s blessing upon its mission and the person to whom it is sent. When I break the seal of a letter just received, I stop to ask God to prepare me for its contents and make it a messenger of good. When I go to my classroom and await the

arrangement of the cadets in their places, that is my time to intercede with God for them. And so in every act of the day, I have made the practice habitual.”

[from *Life and Letters of “Stonewall” Jackson* by Mary Anna Jackson (1892; reprint, Harrisburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1995), 72-73.]

Jackson took even the menial tasks of life and associated them with prayer:

Getting out of bed in the morning, getting dressed in the morning, getting a drink of water, eating a meal, getting ready to teach a class—all of these became prompts to prayer.

I encourage you tonight, as we come to a time of prayer, to be thoughtful and creative in ways that you could begin prompting yourself to pray. Don’t wait for time of need. Don’t wait for circumstances or trials to bring you to your knees. Make your life a life of prayer. Look for signposts in your life that will continually and consistently direct your thoughts to God. We can learn to pray without ceasing!

Let’s go now to prayer.

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