

methods of  
prayer

# methods of prayer

The primary purpose of prayer is to engage us in an intimate, growing relationship with God. Prayer is the discipline by which we share our life with God, and God shares life with us. Wherever you are, approach prayer as a conversation with God. Just like other relationships in life, your prayer relationship with God will grow and change over time.

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# Five Finger Prayer

When you fold your hands, the thumb is nearest you. So begin by praying for those closest to you — your loved ones (Philippians 1:3-5).

The index finger is the pointer. Pray for those who teach — Bible teachers and preachers, and those who teach children (1 Thessalonians 5:25).

The next finger is the tallest. It reminds you to pray for those in authority over you — national and local leaders, and your supervisor at work (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

The fourth finger is usually the weakest. Pray for those who are in trouble or who are suffering (James 5:13-16).

Then comes your little finger. It reminds you of your smallness in relation to God's greatness. Ask Him to supply your needs (Philippians 4:6,19).

# **ACTS Prayer**

One structure for prayer is given by the acronym “ACTS,” representing adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication (or intercession).

## **Adoration**

To adore God, to worship him and to fulfil the commandment to love him with all of our heart, mind and soul. As we spend time in adoration, we praise God for who he is - our Creator, our Sustainer and our Redeemer.

## **Confession**

Allows us to clear away the things in the relationship between you and God which are displeasing to Him. All of us have sinned. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (I John 1:8,9)

## **Thanksgiving**

From childhood we are brought up to say “Thank You” when someone does something for us, or gives us a gift. Each moment God is blessing us, every minute we can recall the wonderful things that God has done for us, and the gifts that we have been given. And so, we need to be constantly thanking God for his blessings. In writing to Timothy, Paul makes it clear that we also need to be giving thanks for everyday, worldly things “ I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” 1 Timothy 2:1.

## **Supplication or Intercession**

Finally we come to ask God for our needs and the needs of others. There are many demands on our prayer time — many topics and issues that we could pray for, so we need to choose, and to be specific.

Source: [www.prayerguide.org.uk/actsmodel.htm](http://www.prayerguide.org.uk/actsmodel.htm)

# Physical Prayer

There are many ways that we can pray using our bodies. Take some time to explore them here.

## Kneeling

Kneeling is a posture of reverence and submission. This is a position often adopted by people in prayer and in receiving the Eucharist (communion or the Lord's Supper).

## Genuflecting

Genuflecting is used to reverence holy objects or people. Al Kresta says it is a rehearsal of the "regenerating moment at the end of history 'when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.'" (Philemon 2:10-11)' We're a little slow at learning so we thought we'd begin early.

"Genuflection is such a small thing. We bend the right knee to the floor and rise up again before a holy person or object. But it's a little gesture that demonstrates some big things: repentance, petition, veneration."

## Prostration

The ultimate sign of humility is to prostrate oneself face down on the ground. This is a sign of submission, often taken by the loser on a battlefield so that the victor can stand on his back. It is also the posture several people took when they met Jesus, like the leper in Luke 5:12-13. What would it mean for us to prostrate ourselves in worship before God? What might it do to us?

## Spreading the Palms

Standing with arms outstretched, fingers spread, and palm up is an ancient posture of prayer. It is an act of surrender to God as well as a petition to receive God's blessings. There are accounts of the Desert Fathers praying for hours with their

arms outstretched in the shape of a cross.

### **The Sign of The Cross**

A common physical prayer among Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Anglicans is the sign of the cross. There are many variations, a couple of which we'll explore here.

The prayer at the sign of the cross is often Trinitarian (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). As one crosses oneself, you might say, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." This echoes the words spoken in our baptism. In Eastern traditions, this prayer is often used: "Holy God, Holy strong One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us."

To make the sign of the cross, you might begin by taking your index, ring and middle fingers of your right hand and put them together. This reminds us of the Trinity. The pinky and thumb point to one another, or even touch, reminding us of the Mystery of the Incarnation, God becoming flesh in Jesus. Then touch your three fingers to your forehead (your mind), your abdomen (your soul and gut), and each shoulder (your strength) and finally rest on your chest (your heart). Which shoulder you touch first is a matter of preference – Orthodox Christians touch the right shoulder first, Anglicans tend to touch the left shoulder first. You might try saying the prayers mentioned above either aloud or in the silence of your heart as you make the sign of the cross.

Another sign of the cross is to use your right thumb and make a small cross on your forehead, mouth, and chest, sanctifying your mind, speech, and heart.

# Breath Prayer

The breath prayer is an ancient way of practicing the presence of God. It is a way to cultivate a posture of constant awareness and availability toward God.

Like prayers of repetition, breath prayers can be phrases from tradition, scripture, songs or hymns. We repeat these phrases with our lips, carry them in our hearts, and whisper them under our breath.

The breath prayer is a way to act on your decision to be present to God who is always present to us. Practice your breath prayer at special times when you give God your undivided attention. Continue to say your breath prayer under your breath; let it become a habit of the heart.

Spend a few minutes now in developing and praying your breath prayer.

Ron DelBene (pronounced like bane), a contemporary author of books on the spiritual life, has written extensively on creating and using personal breath prayers. The following steps are taken from his book “The Breath of Life: A Workbook.”

## Step One

Sit comfortably. Close your eyes and remind yourself that God loves you and that you are in God’s loving presence. Recall a passage of scripture that puts you in a prayerful frame of mind. Consider “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1) or “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

## Step Two

With your eyes still closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Hear God asking you: “(Your name), what do you want?”

## Step Three

Answer God with whatever comes directly from your heart. Your answer might be a single word, such as peace or love or forgiveness. Your answer could instead be a phrase or brief sentence, such as “I want to feel your forgiveness” or “I want

to know your love.”

Because the prayer is personal, it naturally rises out of our present concerns.... Your response to God’s question “What do you want?” becomes the heart of your prayer.

#### **Step Four**

Choose your favorite name or image for God. Choices commonly made include God, Jesus, Creator, Teacher, Light, Lord, Spirit, Shepherd.

#### **Step Five**

Combine your name for God with your answer to God’s question “What do you want?” You then have your prayer. For example:

<b>What I Want</b>	<b>Name I Call God</b>	<b>Possible Prayer</b>
Peace	God	Let me know your peace, O God.
Love	Jesus	Jesus, let me feel your love.
Rest	Shepherd	My Shepherd, let me rest in thee.
Guidance	Eternal Light	Eternal Light, guide me in your way.

What do you do if several ideas occur? Write down the various possibilities and then eliminate and/or combine ideas until you have focused your prayer. You may want many things, but it is possible to narrow wants to those most basic to your well-being. Thus, the question to ask yourself is: What do I want that will make me feel most whole? As you achieve a greater feeling of wholeness, serenity will flow into the many areas of your life.

When you have gotten to the heart of your deep yearning, search for words that give it expression. Then work with the words until you have a prayer of six to eight syllables that flows smoothly when spoken aloud or expressed as a heart thought. A prayer of six to eight syllables has a natural rhythm. Anything longer or short usually does not flow easily when said repeatedly. Some prayers are more rhythmic when you place God’s name at the beginning; other prayers flow better with it at the end.

Source: Ron DelBene, *The Breath of Life: A Workbook* (Nashville, Tenn)

## **Lectio Divina** - divine reading

One of the most central and ancient practices of Christian prayer is lectio divina, or divine reading. In lectio divina, we begin by reading a few verses of the Bible. We read unhurriedly so that we can listen for the message God has for us there. We stay alert to connections the Spirit may reveal between the passage and what is going on in our lives. We ask, “What are you saying to me today, Lord? What am I to hear in this story, parable or prophecy?” Listening in this way requires patience and a willingness to let go of our own agendas and open ourselves to God’s shaping.

Once we have heard a word that we know is meant for us, we are naturally drawn to prayer. From listening we move to speaking — perhaps in anguish, confession or sorrow; perhaps in joy, praise, thanksgiving or adoration; perhaps in anger, confusion or hurt; perhaps in quiet confidence, trust or surrender. Finally, after pouring out our heart to God, we come to rest simply and deeply in that wonderful, loving presence of God. Reading, reflecting, responding and resting — this is the basic rhythm of divine reading.

God is present in you through the Spirit, who speaks to you now in scripture, and who prays in you and for you. Ask for the grace to listen to what God says, then choose one of the short Biblical passages here, and follow the steps: Read, Respond, Reflect, and Rest.

- Do Justice, Love Kindness (Micah 6:8)
- Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4-7)
- God’s New Thing (Isaiah 43:19-21)
- Trust in God (Psalm 62:8)
- Do Not Fear (Isaiah 43:1-2, 4)
- God Comforts Us (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)
- Jesus’ Baptism (Luke 3:21-22)
- Let Your Light Shine (Matthew 5:13-16a)

- My Burden Is Light (Matthew 11:28-30)
- Too Many Fish (Luke 5:4-7)
- Clothe Yourselves with Love (Colossians 3:14-16a)
- Travel Light (Luke 9:1-6)
- Be Still (Psalm 46:10-11)
- Unless the Lord Builds (Psalm 127:1-2)
- A New Heart (Ezekiel 36:26-27a)

### **1. Read the scripture slowly.**

Watch for a key phrase or word that jumps out at you or promises to have special meaning for you. It is better to dwell profoundly on one word or phrase than to skim the surface of several chapters. Read with your own life and choices in mind.

### **2. Reflect on a word or phrase.**

Let the special word or phrase that you discovered in the first phase sink into your heart. Bring mind, will and emotions to the task. Be like Mary, Jesus' mother, who heard of the angel's announcement and "treasured" and "pondered" what she had heard (Luke 2:19).

### **3. Respond to what you have read.**

Form a prayer that expresses your response to the idea, then "pray it back to God." What you have read is woven through what you tell God.

# Praying the Psalms

Psalms has been called the prayer book of the Bible in both Jewish and Christian traditions. It is a collection of sung prayers that has been used in worship from the time of ancient Israel up to the present. Because the psalms range so widely in emotional expression, from the heights of adoration and praise to the depths of vengeful curses against the enemy, they have special relevance to our prayer life. They teach us to hide nothing from God, but to bring all that is real into the only relationship that can bless the best and heal the worst in us.

No matter what we are feeling — distress, trust, anger or delight, we find the words of the psalms accompany us into God's presence. In the psalms we find words to express every conceivable human condition and feeling. These prayers give us words to glorify, confess, hope, ask, and even curse. In so doing, they give us permission to share our whole being with God.

There are a few different samples of the Psalms here. Pick any one to explore. Try reading the same Psalm from more than one translation or paraphrase.

## **Anxious or Afraid**

- Psalm 70

## **Envious**

- Psalm 73

## **Despairing**

- Psalm 77

## **Sick and Tired**

- Psalm 6

**Grateful**

- Psalm 9

**Contended**

- Psalm 23

**Wrongly Accused**

- Psalm 17

**Awed by God**

- Psalm 29

After exploring the Psalm, you might chose to write your reflections in your journal or even try writing your own psalm.

# Praying with Icons

Many of us were taught to close our eyes when we pray. Praying with icons is an ancient prayer practice that involves keeping our eyes wide open, taking into our heart what the image visually communicates. We focus not on what is seen in the icon, but rather on what is seen through it -- the love of God expressed through God's creatures.

This is prayer without words, with a focus on being in God's presence rather than performing in God's presence. It is a right-brain experience of touching and feeling what is holy -- a divine mystery. Icons are not simply art; they are a way into contemplative prayer, and are therefore one way to let God speak to us. They are doorways into stillness, into closeness with God. If we sit with them long enough, we too can enter into the stillness, into the communion . And if we listen to them closely enough, with our hearts, we just may discern the voice of God.

To begin your prayer, you may want to light a candle nearby. A flame is a metaphor for prayer, inviting us into the presence of Holy God. Look at the icon as you pray. See it as a point of connection with Jesus and the community of saints. Try extending your hands and turning your palms upward, a gesture both of openness to God's grace and the gift of your hands to God.

Even though you may feel pressured by the demands of the day, try not to pray in a hurry. Better to pray for a short time with quiet attention to each word and each breath than to rush through many prayers. Be aware of your breathing. You are breathing in life itself, breathing in God's peace. You are breathing out praise and gratitude, breathing out your appeals for help.

As you pray, cultivate an inner attitude of listening. God is not

an idea and praying is not an exercise to improve our idea of God. Prayer is the cultivation of the awareness of God's actual presence. We may speak words to God or just look attentively at the icon and let God speak to us.

For further reading:

“Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons” by Henri J. M. Nouwen, © 1987 Ave Marie Press.

“Praying with Icons” by Jim Forest, © 1997 Orbis Books.

# **The Examen** - remembering the day

In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius urged that all be taught the examen, a daily examination of our deepest feelings and desires. He called these feelings our consolations (what connects us with God, others and ourselves) and desolations (what disconnects us). He believed that God would speak to us through these feelings and desires. It's not surprising that this saint felt so strongly about the examen — this prayer practice changed him from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem.

## **The examen helps us:**

- Acknowledge sad or painful feelings and hear how God is speaking to us through them.
- Overcome a pessimistic outlook by encouraging us notice the good in each day.
- Tell the truth about who we truly are and what we need, rather than who we think we should be.
- Become aware of seemingly insignificant moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives.

## **Preparation:**

You may wish to light a candle. Do whatever helps you to experience God's loving presence with you. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe in God's love, and when you breathe out, fill the space around you with it.

## **Step One**

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are most grateful.

- If you could relive one moment, which one would it be?
- When were you most able to give and receive love today?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so good.

Breathe in the gratitude you felt and receive life again from that moment.

## **Step Two**

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are least grateful. When were you least able to give and receive love?

Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult. Relive the feelings without trying to change or fix it in any way.

Take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.

## **Step Three**

Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. If possible, share as much as possible of these two moments with a friend.

# Ignatian Method

Think of the Ignatian Method — named after Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) — as a sort of virtual experience of the scripture where you read the scripture and then create in your mind a short film about what you read.

You use your imagination to enter into the reading, asking yourself ...

- What do I see and hear? What do I smell, taste or touch?
- Who are the characters and what's going on with them?
- If I were in this movie, what role would I play?
- If I were Jesus in this story, what would I be thinking, feeling, saying?

In the Ignatian Method, you enter into the story so that you can learn more about and participate more fully in the mind, the heart, and the work of Christ.

Generally, Ignatian prayer works best with narrative material in which actual characters live a story of faith. The idea is to place yourself into the text as a careful observer — a fly on the wall. Ignatius commended the use of the five senses in such meditation. You taste, hear, see, smell and feel your way through the passage. Occasionally you become one of the characters, seeing the story unfold from his or her viewpoint. Most of all, the aim is to help you perceive the narrative from the viewpoint of Jesus so that you may more fully participate in his mind, heart and work.

**Choose a scripture below to try:**

- Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42)
- On the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- Storm at Sea (Mark 4:35-41)
- Woman with Hemorrhages (Mark 5:21, 24-34)
- The Tax Collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14)
- Jesus and the Awesome Catch of Fish (Luke 5:1-11)

# The Jesus Prayer

**“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

Like breath prayer, the Jesus prayer is a way to tie prayer to your breathing. The text of the prayer is rooted in Scripture. In his book on the spiritual disciplines, “Soul Shaper,” Tony Jones writes:

“...the Prayer itself is strongly rooted in the Gospels, an amalgam of many who called out to Jesus, including blind Bartimaeus who shouted, ‘Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me,’ (Mark 10:47 and parallel in Luke 18:38) and the tax collector in Jesus’ parable who beat his breast and cried out, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ (Luke 18:13). The cry for mercy, for God’s unrelenting steadfast love is a constant of Scripture... The need for God’s mercy seems obvious.

Frederica Mathewes-Green writes, “The problem is not in God’s willingness to have mercy, but in our forgetting that we need it. We keep lapsing into ideas of self-sufficiency, or get impressed with our niceness, and so we lose our humility. Asking for mercy reminds us that we are still poor and needy, and fall short of the glory of God. Those who do not ask do not receive, because they don’t know their own need.”

To cry out for mercy as a helpless sinner seems foreign to modern sensibilities, even to modern Christianity. All the more reason for us to make a practice of doing it....

While the final self-referential tag, “a sinner,” seems like a harsh conclusion, it is, of course, the truth. Many modern recitations of the Prayer omit this ending, but I always use it in my own practice. It stings me and awakens me to my own weakness. It also makes the Prayer a loop, for as I conclude by considering my own sinfulness, I’m compelled to once again call upon God’s mercy for my life. In this way, when practiced rhythmically, the

Prayer has no beginning and no end.” (pp. 64-65)

**Practice:**

Sit in a comfortably alert position. Many people throughout history have prayed this prayer for hours on end, so it's important that you are alert and comfortable! A dimly lit room and silence will also help to facilitate your experience of the Prayer.

With great concentration, one can cause “the mind to descend into the heart with the breath.” So, seated comfortably alert, attend to your breathing, and then begin the prayer in rhythm to your breathing. Breathe in: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God;” breathe out: “have mercy on me, a sinner.” Guarding the mind against all distractions, the person praying focuses during every repetition on the meaning of the words, praying them from the heart and in the heart.

Though many practitioners of the Prayer have done as many as 12,000 repetitions (taking between 11 and 14 hours!), a repetition of 100 to 500 prayers is a valuable and achievable practice for us today. Develop your concentration by starting with 30 to 40 repetitions.

# The Lord's Prayer

“The Lord’s Prayer is easily the most recognized prayer throughout the Christian faith. It is more than something to be memorized and recited. As described in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus uses the Lord’s Prayer as a guide for teaching his disciples how to pray.”

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**Our father, which art in heaven - hallowed be thy name  
Thy kingdom come - thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven  
Give us this day, our daily bread  
And forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us  
And lead us not into temptation - but deliver us from evil  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever  
and ever - Amen.**

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**Taken verse by verse, it could be viewed this way:**

“Our Father in heaven” simply states where prayers should be directed while, “Hallowed be thy name” is about worshiping and revering God.

The phrase “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven” is a reminder to pray for guidance to follow God’s plan, rather than our own. Christians are to pray for God’s will to be done, not their own.

Christians are expected to ask God for that which is necessary to “give us today our daily bread.”

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” reminds Christians to forgive their enemies much as God has forgiven them.

The conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” is a plea for avoid the lures of sin and transgression.

# Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer. Contemplative Prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative Prayer a way of making one-self aware of the presence of God who is always there. It is prayer that is not the absence of thoughts but the detachment from them. Centering Prayer is a method of prayer that is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer — verbal, mental or affective prayer — into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond talking conversation with Christ to communion with Him.

The source of Centering Prayer, as in all methods leading to contemplative prayer, is the Indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. The effects of Centering Prayer are ecclesial, as the prayer tends to build communities of faith and bond the members together in mutual friendship and love.

## **Basil Pennington's suggested Centering Prayer Method:**

1. Be with God within
2. Use a word to stay
3. Use the word to return

## **Thomas Keating/Contemplative Outreach's suggested method**

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with the eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer, remain in silence for a couple of minutes.

# My Daily Prayer

Each day spend some time in prayer. Write down the method of prayer you practice that day. You may try different forms of prayer or practice the same method. There is space to write about your experience below.

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Day 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 7 \_\_\_\_\_

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Day 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 7 \_\_\_\_\_

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