

LESSON 3

Talking to God

On learning to speak to someone you can't see

Prayer is how you talk to your Father — and he's not grading your form.

WATCH BEFORE YOU BEGIN



Scan to watch the Lesson 3 teaching video – a 14-minute companion to this lesson.

CORE SCRIPTURES

Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'

—Matthew 6:9-13

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

—Philippians 4:6-7

NOBODY TELLS YOU THAT PRAYER IS GOING TO FEEL STRANGE AT FIRST.

You became a Christian. You were told that God is now your Father, that he knows you, that he's near. And then someone said, *go talk to him*. And you sat down to do exactly that, and the words didn't come. Or they came out wrong. Or you said the same three things you always say and then felt guilty for not having more to say. Or you got distracted halfway through and spent the last five minutes thinking about what you needed from the grocery store.


That's not a spiritual failure. That's Tuesday.

Before we go any further, know this. The apostle Paul, the man who wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, who had been caught up into what he described as the third heaven itself, wrote this

about prayer: *The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* (Romans 8:26)

Read that carefully. Paul doesn't say *new Christians* don't know how to pray. He says *we* don't know how to pray as we ought. That's everyone. The confusion you feel in prayer isn't a sign you're behind. It's the normal human condition before God, and apparently, it's been that way since the first century.

FIGURE 3.1 Two Pictures of Prayer

THE WRONG PICTURE	THE RIGHT PICTURE
<p>Performance</p> <p><i>"Did I do it right?"</i></p>  <p><i>formal · monitored · rehearsed</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal words and tone • Self-monitoring • Pressure to perform 	<p>Conversation</p> <p><i>"Abba — Father."</i></p> <p>you</p> <p>Father</p> <p><i>he already knows. show up anyway.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honest words, real life • Show up badly, again • He already knows
<p><i>Not a discipline you master. A relationship you grow into.</i></p> <p><small>Lesson 3 · Matthew 6:8 · Romans 8:15</small></p>	

The problem, for most of us, isn't that we don't want to pray. It's that we've absorbed a picture of prayer that makes it feel like a performance. Somewhere along the way we got the idea that real prayer sounds a certain way: formal, eloquent, theologically precise. That it requires the right posture and the right words and a certain level of spiritual seriousness that we're not sure we've earned yet. So we either avoid it, or we show up and spend the whole time monitoring ourselves instead of talking.

That picture is wrong. And Jesus spent a fair amount of time saying so.

DISCUSSION: *Before this lesson, what did prayer feel like to you? Have you seen it as a conversation, a performance, something else entirely? What shaped that picture?*

What Jesus Taught

Right before Jesus gave his disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer, he said something that doesn't get nearly enough attention.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7–8)

Focus on that last sentence. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

FIGURE 3.2 The Lord's Prayer as a Map

Not a script to recite. A map of what prayer covers.

1
GOD'S REALITY

Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.
Start with who God is — before what you need.

2
DAILY DEPENDENCE

Give us this day our daily bread.
Today's bread. Come back tomorrow.

3
HONEST CONFESSION

Forgive us our debts.
Name what's true. Don't manage it.

4
ONGOING RESCUE

Lead us not into temptation; deliver us.
Human fragility built right in.

Lesson 3 · Matthew 6:9-13

That's not a reason to skip prayer. It's a description of the kind of relationship prayer is happening inside. You're not informing God of something he missed. You're not constructing an argument to change his mind. You're not accumulating enough words to finally get his attention. He already knows. He already sees. What prayer does isn't transfer information to God; it draws you into an honest relationship with him.

Then Jesus gives them a framework.

Not a script to recite on autopilot, but a map of what prayer covers. He starts with God's reality, *your kingdom come, your will be done*, before he gets to human need. That ordering is intentional. Prayer begins by orienting yourself toward who God is and what he's doing, before turning to what you need. It's the difference between showing up to a conversation thinking only about yourself and showing up genuinely interested in the other person.

Then it gets practical. *Give us this day our daily bread*. Not the bread for next month. Today's. There's something deliberately small about that request. Jesus is teaching us to stay close to God through regular, ordinary dependence rather than big, dramatic petitions in crisis moments. Daily bread means you come back tomorrow. And the day after. The rhythm of prayer is built into the request itself.

Then comes the part that trips up many new Christians. *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*. If you've just come out of Lesson 2 knowing the verdict doesn't move, that there's no condemnation for those in Christ, you might wonder what this is doing here. And the answer is that forgiveness in prayer isn't about re-earning standing. It's about honesty. You come to God with what you did. You name it. You don't manage it or minimize it. That kind of confession keeps the relationship clean, not because God needs the information, but because you need to say it out loud.

And finally: *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. Even the Lord's Prayer ends with an acknowledgment of human fragility. Jesus built a request for ongoing rescue right into the framework he gave his disciples. You're not expected to have outgrown that need by the time you're praying. It's assumed to still be there.

DISCUSSION: *Jesus says your Father knows what you need before you ask. Does that make prayer feel more or less urgent to you? What does it change about why you'd pray at all?*

Bring the Real Thing

Paul's instruction in Philippians 4 is almost absurdly simple. *In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* (Philippians 4:6)

Everything. Not just the spiritual things. Not just the things that sound appropriately humble and faith filled. *Everything.*

The anxious thing you've been turning over at 2 am. The situation at work that you haven't mentioned to anyone because it feels too small or too complicated. The question about God you're embarrassed to ask out loud. The anger you feel that you're not sure is okay to bring into a prayer. All of it qualifies.

Psalms 62:8 puts it in even more physical terms: *Pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Pour out.* That's not a carefully curated presentation. That's what happens when something that's been contained finally gets released. The Psalms model this constantly: David is angry, afraid, confused, abandoned, elated, grateful, and desperate across those 150 poems, sometimes all in the same poem. He doesn't filter it before he brings it to God. He brings it and filters it in God's presence.

That's what Philippians is describing. Not polished requests delivered by someone who has already gotten their emotions sorted out. Actual life, brought to God in real time, with the mess still in it.

There's one word in that verse that new Christians sometimes skip over: *thanksgiving*. Paul doesn't say pray with thanksgiving when things are going well. He says pray with thanksgiving as a constant accompaniment to your requests. That's not toxic positivity. It's a deliberate act of remembering who you're talking to. You're not petitioning a distant official. You're talking to the God who rescued you, who transferred you out of darkness, who knows your name. Gratitude isn't the condition for prayer; it's the context that keeps prayer from turning into a complaint session.

And then the promise: *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:7) That peace isn't the result of your circumstances improving. It comes before the circumstances change. It shows up in the act of bringing the real thing to God and trusting him with it.

DISCUSSION: *What's the thing you've been most reluctant to bring to God in prayer — too small, too messy, too angry, too uncertain? What would it look like to just say it?*

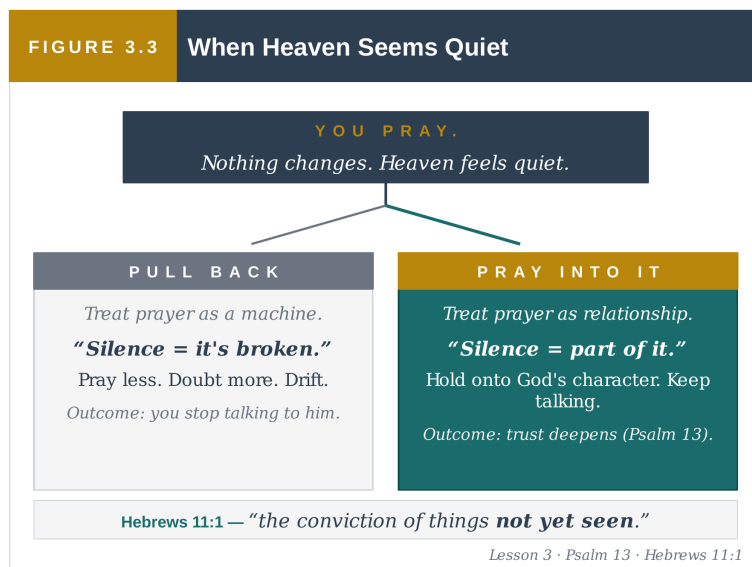
What Happens When Nothing Seems to Happen

This is the part most books on prayer skip, which is exactly why some feel so blindsided by it.

You pray. And nothing happens. Not the dramatic nothing of a crisis with no answer, just the quiet, accumulating nothing of prayers that seem to go up and not come back. You ask. You wait. The situation stays the same. The feeling doesn't change. And after enough of that, you start to wonder whether anyone is listening.

The Psalms don't pretend this isn't a real experience. Psalm 13 opens with four straight questions: *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?* That's not a lack of faith. That's someone who believes God is there and is genuinely confused about why he's quiet.

David doesn't resolve that confusion by the end of Psalm 13. He doesn't get an explanation. What he does is hold onto what he knows about God. *I have trusted in your steadfast love*, despite what he feels. That's a model worth taking seriously. He doesn't stop praying because God seems silent. He prays *into* the silence.



Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen*. That word *yet* is doing quiet but important work. Faith isn't certainty that things are fine. It's confidence that what God has promised is real, even when you can't see it from where you're standing. Prayer in the silence is an act of faith, not performing a belief you don't have, but choosing to keep talking to someone you trust, even when the conversation feels one-sided.

Here's the honest thing about unanswered prayer: it reveals what you think prayer is for. If prayer is primarily a mechanism for getting outcomes, silence feels like a broken machine. But if prayer is primarily a relationship, staying in honest contact with God, then silence doesn't mean the relationship is broken. It means you're in the part of the relationship where you have to trust without feeling it.

That's not easy. It's some of the hardest spiritual work there is. But it's not evidence that prayer doesn't work. It's evidence that faith is real.

DISCUSSION: *Have you experienced a period of praying and feeling like nothing was happening? What did you do with that? Did you pull back, push through, or something else? What does the Psalm 13 model suggest about what to do with the silence?*

Learning the Language

Here's the most encouraging thing in the entire New Testament about prayer, and it's easy to miss.

In Luke 11:1, one of Jesus' disciples, someone who had been following him closely, watching him, learning from him, came to him and said: *Lord, teach us to pray.*

Not a brand-new convert. Someone who had been around long enough to see what prayer looked like in Jesus' life. And he still had to ask.

They didn't know how. Jesus didn't rebuke them for not knowing. He taught them. Which means prayer is something you learn, and the learning takes time, and starting from a place of not knowing is completely normal.

Paul says something similar in Romans 8:15 that reframes everything. *You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'* The word *Abba* is about as informal as Aramaic gets. It's what a child calls their father, not a formal title, something closer to *Dad* or *Papa*. And Paul says that word, that intimate, unguarded word, is what the Spirit gives us when we pray. Not theological vocabulary. Not formal address. The language of a child talking to a parent.

That's the relationship you're actually in. Not a subject addressing a king from a distance, choosing every word carefully so as not to give offense. A child talking to a Father who is glad they came.

So, here's how you learn the language. You show up. Badly, at first. With the wrong words and the distracted mind, and the three-sentence prayer that felt completely insufficient. You show up again. You try things. You read the Psalms out loud and let someone else's words become your words on the days you don't have any. You tell God what's really happening instead of what you think you should be reporting. You sit quietly sometimes and don't say anything and let that count as prayer too.

Over time, and it does take time, something shifts. Not because you got better at the performance. Because you stopped performing. Because you got used to talking to someone who was always listening, who already knew, who didn't need you to get it right before he would show up.

That's what prayer is. Not a discipline you master. A relationship you grow into.

DISCUSSION: *The disciples had to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. If you could ask him one thing about how to pray — one specific thing you want to understand — what would it be?*

DON'T FORGET



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