

It was while I was in year 12. Upstairs, at the far end of the boarding house was a large study room dedicated for seniors. I was there, hunched over my maths books, focussed on preparing for the next exam. The question stunned me. But it wasn't the question on the page that came as a shock. It was the question from Scott, a classmate and the only other person in the room.

"What is prayer?" Scott suddenly asked, "And how do people pray?"

I'd love to tell you how eloquently and succinctly I explained it to him. I'd love to tell you that as we prayed together Scott trusted in Jesus Christ and all his anxiety, fear and worries went away. But I can't.

That's because I was gobsmacked. Firstly, I was stunned because I had just assumed most people knew what prayer was and how to pray. Secondly, this was the first time I'd ever heard Scott talk about faith.

As well as being stunned, I was so excited. Finally I had an opportunity to talk about my faith. My brain went into overdrive. In that dazed, excited state, I didn't stop to think. I just started talking. I just blurted out whatever came to mind. I ended up dumping so much stuff onto him that the majority of it didn't relate to his question and I'm sure most of it made no sense.

As I look back on that situation, I see a young man, already drowning in exam pressure, desperately wanting help from a higher power to get him through. And all I did was drown him further in a mammoth of information, most of which didn't even address his question.

Now let's imagine for a moment that Scott had turned to you and asked you, **[Slide 1]** "What is prayer? How do people pray?" How would you respond? What do you think would be the key things to say or do? Take a moment to discuss this with someone near you. [After some time, invite responses from the congregation.]

There's a lot that can be said about prayer. [Slide 2] For example, we can ask when, where, who, how, what and why. *[The following will be on a slide so won't need to be read out.]*

1. When? – (Anytime, whenever)
2. Where? – (Anywhere, wherever)
3. Who? - The relationship of prayer
4. How? - The mechanics of prayer
5. What? - The content of prayer (Anything, whatever)
6. Why? – The purpose of prayer.

### **When and Where**

I think for most of you, the when and where are fairly self-explanatory. But just in case you need a reminder - we can pray anytime anywhere about anything. And I mean ANY where. ANY time. ANY thing. Wherever, whenever, about whatever. It does not matter when and where! God promises to always hear.

Sometimes it might not feel like he is listening. But that's where faith comes in. Trusting that he does hear, and that he does care, no matter what is happening in our lives. For God says in his Word, [Slide 3]

“When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen.” (Jeremiah 29:12, MSG)

God's there, listening for all who pray, for all who pray and mean it. (Psalm 145:18, MSG)

He will listen to the prayers of the destitute. He will not reject their pleas. (Psalm 102:17, NLT)

Because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath! (Psalm 116:2, NLT)

Today I want to focus on [Slide 4] the who – who do we pray to and what does that relationship look like. We'll look at some of the other aspects over the coming weeks. Along the way we will touch on some of the why, rather than a dedicated sermon.

**[Slide 5] The Relationship of Prayer**

So let's talk about the prayer relationship. In summary, the prayer relationship is:

- (a) like a two-way conversation with a close friend,
- (b) initiated by God.

I'm sure you've heard it said before that prayer is a relationship. We can talk with God just like we talk with our closest friend. Jesus tells us to keep our prayers simple, keep them honest, and keep them real. Let's listen to what he says about prayer, from *The Message* paraphrase. **[Slide 6]**

<sup>6</sup>“Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

<sup>7-8</sup>“The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. (Matthew 6:6-8, MSG)

Good friends share with each other and listen to each other. They are honest with each other. They are there for each other.

On the other hand, some relationships are a bit one sided. For example, do you know anyone who spends lots of time talking, but never really listens to you? Have you ever had someone say, “It was so great to catch up.” but you are left there thinking, “Umm, ... we actually didn't catch up! I haven't had a chance to share what's happening for me? You haven't caught up on my news!” I know I've felt like that at times with certain people.

True friendships go both ways. If one party never shares their own story, it's not a truly close friendship. It's some other kind of relationship, but not true friendship.

**[Slide 7]** Prayer with God is meant to be a lot like talking with your closest friend. That means prayer is also meant to be a two way conversation.

Now, we probably already know that. But let me ask you, if someone were to look at our prayer life, would they get that impression? Does our prayer life look like a two-way conversation? Would they see us taking the time to listen to what God wants to say to us? Or do we do all the talking in the relationship? Do we ever end our prayer time saying to God, "It was so great to catch up, we should do it more often", but he is left thinking, "but we haven't caught up. You haven't heard what I want to say yet. You haven't heard me say how much I love you. You haven't heard me say how much I care about you. You haven't received from me the strength that you'll need to get through the day, because I know that today, you'll need it."

Sadly, too often we pray and then get straight into our next activity. We may get up in the morning, have our dedicated prayer time and then go straight into our day. We say our prayers before meals and then immediately get stuck into the meal and start eating.

I'm not saying we should necessarily spend five minutes watching our meal getting cold as we wait and listen to God. But there should be at least some time each day that we deliberately invest the time to listen to God.

In fact really good friends don't actually have to say a lot. They can just hang out together. Whether it's sitting on the front veranda watching the world go by, or holding a fishing rod in their hands, they don't have to speak a lot of words. Friendship can be

just about being in each other's company – something that is hard to do with digital communication.

Likewise, when it comes to prayer, we don't have to say a lot of words. It can simply be about sitting in silence and being aware of the presence of God with you. Taking note of his creative hand around you. It can be going about our day, aware of the presence of God with us. That is how we can take up Paul's challenge in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray constantly, continually and without ceasing.

### **[Slide 8] So how do we listen to God?**

The best way to do that is to invest time to read his word. God promises to speak to us by the power of the Holy Spirit through his living word.

Many Christians in our culture pray at various points throughout their day. But too many are doing it without ever taking time to read his word. We talk and never listen.

What's more, transforming our prayer life starts by changing the focus of our devotion times. There needs to be a shift in the way we view our bible reading. Do we read the bible to **know about God**? Or do we read to get **to know God**? That's a really important difference. For example, I can know a whole lot about someone through Wikipedia. I can learn a lot about someone from reading a biography. That's not the same as knowing someone, learning their likes and dislikes, their sense of humour, and their favourite colour.

God wants us to know him personally, not just know about him philosophically.

No matter what it feels like at times, God does care about you. Today's theme verse says, **[Slide 9]**

what are mere mortals that you should think about them,  
human beings that you should care for them? (Psalm 8:4,  
NLT)

This reminds us that we shouldn't take the gift of prayer for granted. We don't deserve to have God listen to our prayers. But he does. The Psalmist asks, who are we that God should care about us? But he does care. He cares so much that Jesus came into this world for you. He even went to the cross for you.

It's been said, **[Slide 10]**

“if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.” (Matthew 17:20, NIV)

That's because it doesn't depend on the size of our faith, but the size of the God we trust in.

How well do we know God? Not just about him, but actually know him?

### **[Slide 11] Prayer is initiated by God**

The second sub-point is that this two-way relationship and conversation are both *initiated by God*.

Have you ever noticed how devotion books start with a scripture reading and end with prayer?

Ultimately, we don't initiate prayer. Prayer is actually our response to God. He speaks first, not us. He initiates the relationship, not us. He is the one who sends the invite to come and spend time with him. He is the one who makes it possible to pray to him. He is the one who has provided a beautiful flower, an amazing sunset or an intriguing child that we want to thank him for.

So what does this mean?

When we meet with a close friend, we might greet them by saying, “Hello, how are you?” and then allow them to share what's happening for them before we respond.

Likewise, we might start our devotion time with a short prayer, asking God to open our hearts and mind to hear what he wants to say. But then it's time to listen. We open his word and listen.

What we traditionally think of as praying, that is with our words, then becomes our response. God speaks first and prayer is our response.

Too often [Slide 12] we can view our devotion times as a chore that a Christian *should* do. But what if we viewed our devotion times simply as an invitation to spend time in relationship with the Father? What if we focused on the relationship more than we focussed on the activity?

A few years ago, I made this shift. I started viewing my quiet times as simply spending time with the Father. It helped this time become something I wanted to do, rather than something I had to do. I also found it removed some of the guilt I feel on the days when I overlook my devotion time. Rather than feeling guilty for something I should be doing but didn't, I started feeling like I was missing out on an important time with a close friend.

In conclusion, [Slide 13] why should we pray? Because God our heavenly Father loves you dearly, cares about you immensely and longs for us to spend time with him. He wants to impart to us his view of our world. He wants to grow us in his strength and his love before we try and give love and strength to others. Otherwise we'll become exhausted.

It does not depend on the size of your faith, but on the size of the God you put your faith in. May we invest time each day getting to know him better and being aware of his continual presence with us.