

WHEN GOD IS SILENT

...

Let the Bible Teach You to Pray

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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Welcome

MOST who try to pray sometimes find that it is harder than they anticipated. Prayer is conversation but not like most of the conversations with which we are familiar. Not only do the dynamics of prayer differ from ordinary conversation, the aim of prayer goes beyond speaking our mind or getting what we want from God. There is no conversation quite like the conversation of prayer.

The aim of these studies is to help you explore the exciting, mysterious, and often frustrating world of prayer. You can work through these questions alone. But why not gather with a few friends and discuss these matters together? These studies are designed to be used in conjunction with my book *When God is Silent* published by Lexham Press.

John Koessler

Discussion Topics

1

Introduction

Is prayer easy or difficult? Perhaps it is both. What are some of the challenges you face in prayer?

2

Awkward Conversations with God

Prayer often feels like a one-sided conversation. How do we talk to a God we cannot see or hear?

3

Praying and Getting What You Want . . . Or Not

Prayer is not a blank check. What if we don't get what we want?

4

The Art of Praying for Others

Much of our praying is not for ourselves. How do we pray for others?

5

Managing Our Angry Prayers

Sometimes we are angry when we pray. We cannot hide it from God. How should we handle our angry prayers?

6

Praying in the Words of Another

When a student uses the words of another it's plagiarism. How legitimate is it to pray the words of another?

7

How to Stay Focused in Prayer

It can be hard to pay attention during prayer. What should we do when we get bored or our thoughts drift?

8

Jesus on Prayer

Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer. How should we pray it?

9

Prayers Without Words

How do we pray when we are at a loss for words. Can silence also be a mode of prayer?

10

Faith, Hope, and Prayer

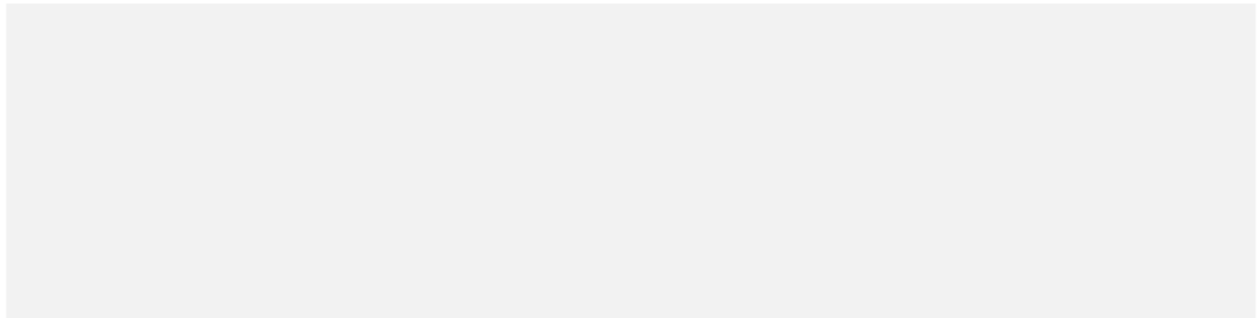
Faith and hope are important in prayer. But how much faith is enough?

Discussion #1

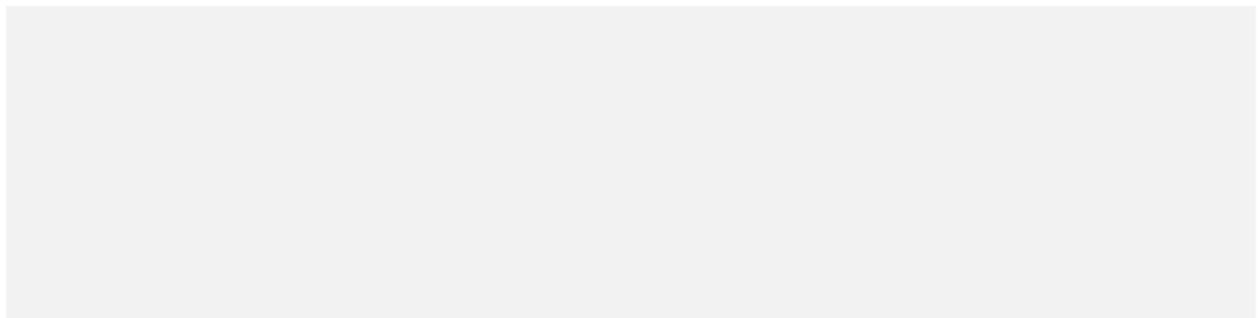
Is Prayer Hard or Easy?

You would think that prayer would be easy. After all, what is prayer besides talking to God? Many books on prayer seem to assume that our basic problem is either motivational or methodological. They assume that we don't want to pray or don't know how. But neither is necessarily the case. What is it about prayer that makes it challenging for us? Is prayer hard or easy? Perhaps the answer is that it is both.

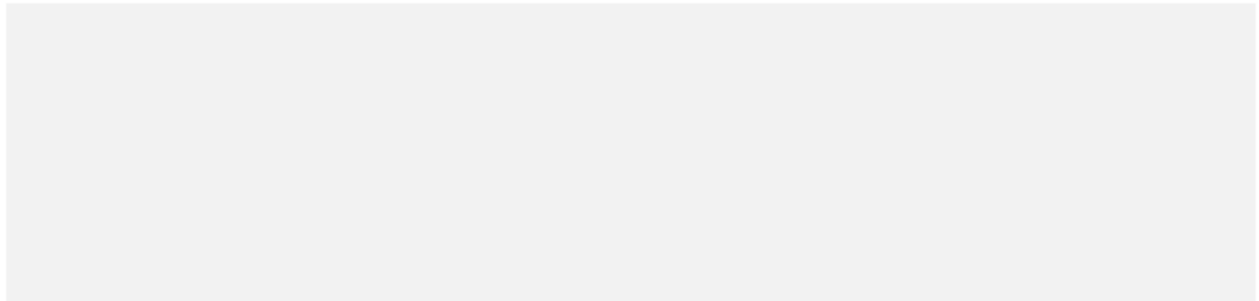
1. Do you find prayer easy or hard? Why?



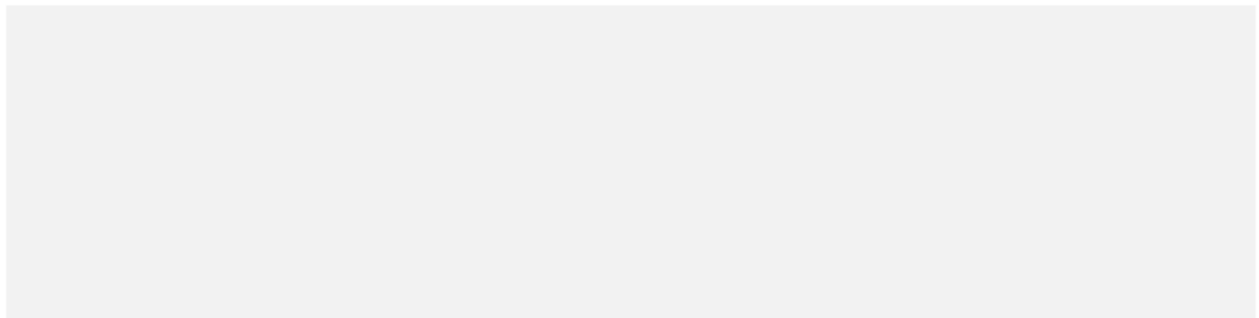
2. Which is more challenging for you, praying for others or praying for yourself?



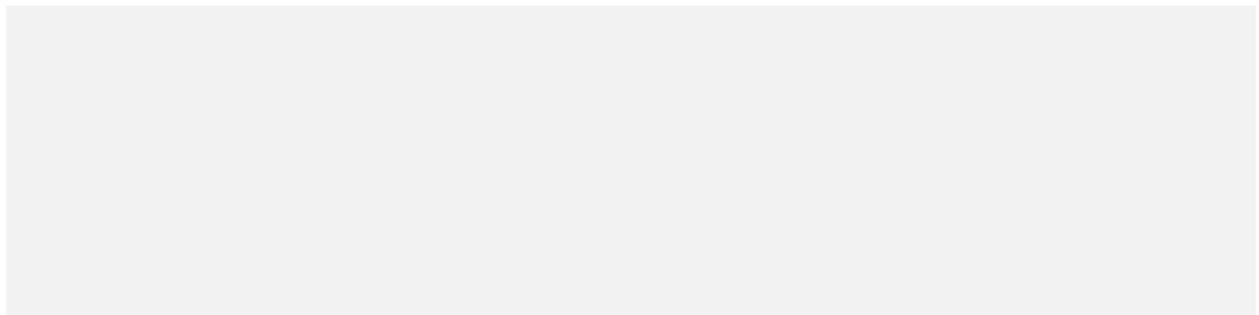
3. Acts 2:42 says that the first Christians “devoted” themselves to prayer. The Greek term is a word that means to persevere or persist in something. What does persistence in prayer look like to you?



4. What factors can make it most difficult for you to persist? Are these things you can change? If so, how?



5. In ordinary speech, facial expressions and body language aid understanding. In John 6:46, Jesus said, “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.” Do you feel that the invisibility of God makes it easier or more challenging for you to talk to him? Why or why not?



**6. Which do you find easier to do, praying in private or praying in a group?
What is the difference between the two?**

**7. Many people learn how to pray by listening to the prayers of others.
How did you learn to pray?**

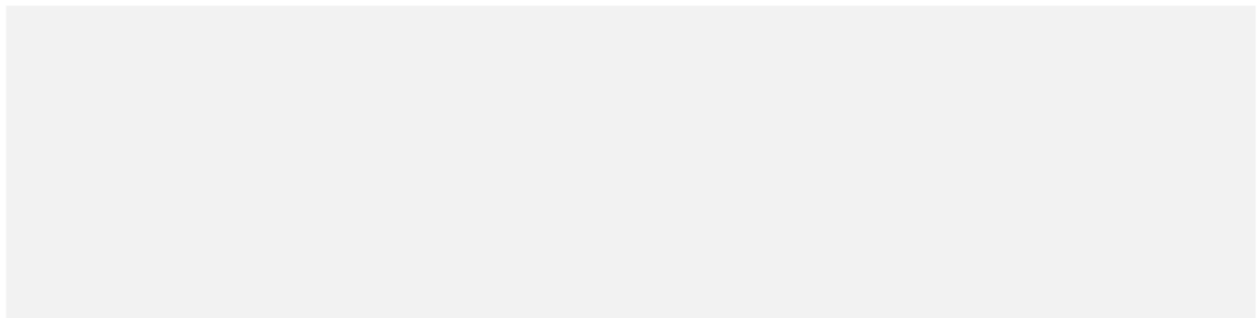


Discussion #2

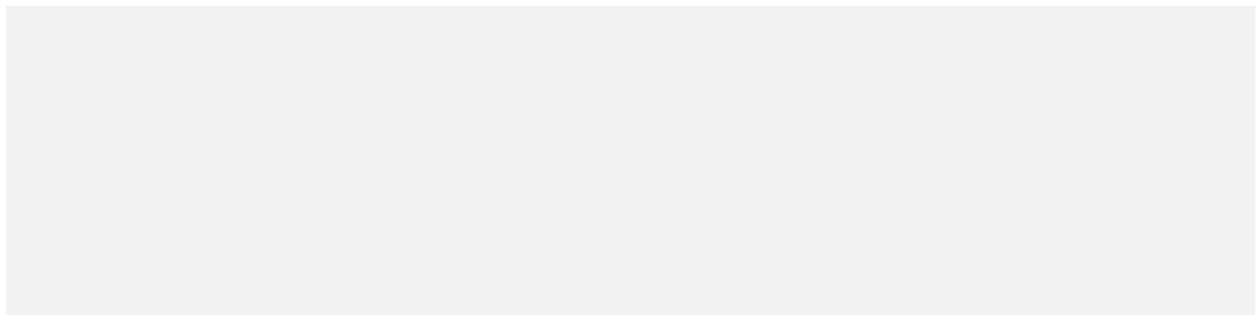
Awkward Conversations with God

Some conversations are difficult because of the nature of their subject matter. Others are awkward because we feel uncomfortable with those to whom we are talking. Although the God of Scripture is a language speaking God, he does not often choose to speak directly to us. This can make prayer feel like it is a one-sided conversation where we do all the talking.

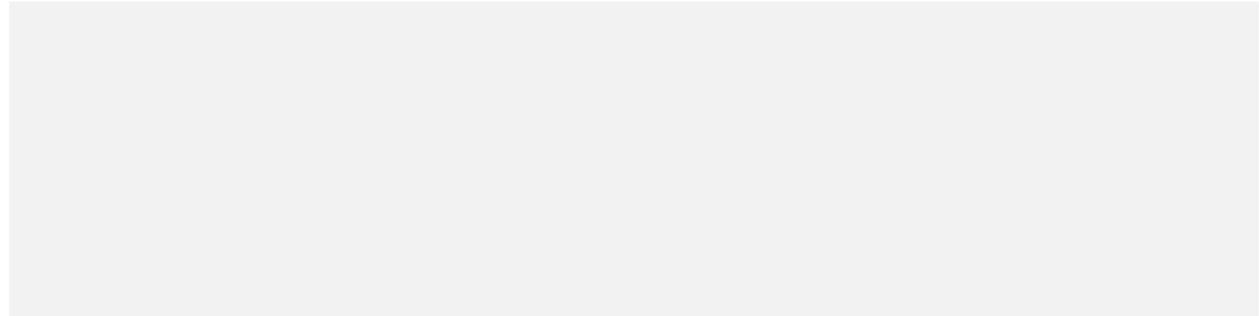
1. What does prayer have in common with ordinary conversation? How does it differ?



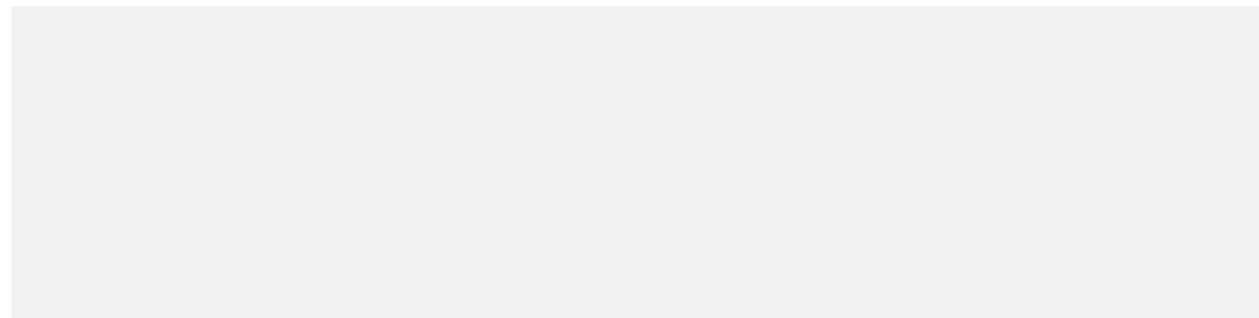
2. In what sense is prayer a one-directional conversation? Is it ever two-directional? Explain your answer.



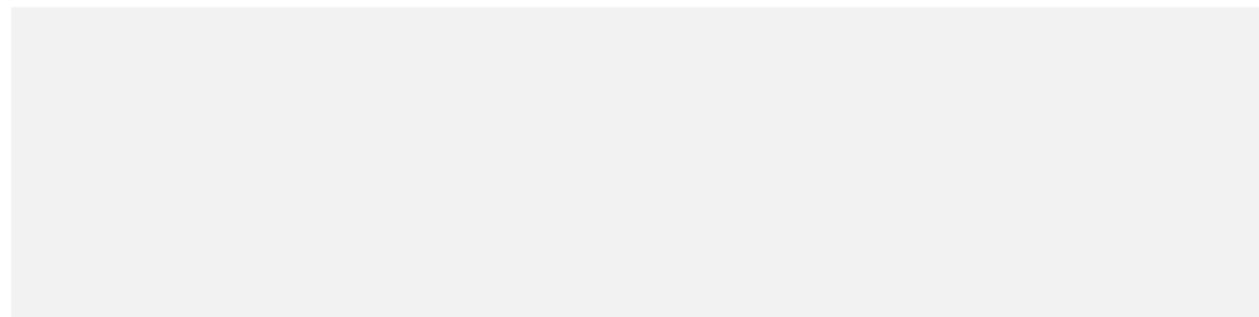
3. We assume that it would be a comfort for God to speak directly to us. How did Israel respond to God's voice in Deuteronomy 5:23-27? Why do you think they reacted this way? Do you think they were wrong to react this way (cf. v. 28)?



4. God does not usually speak directly to us but through the Scriptures. What does 2 Peter 1:21 tell us about the origin of Scripture? Why can we trust them?

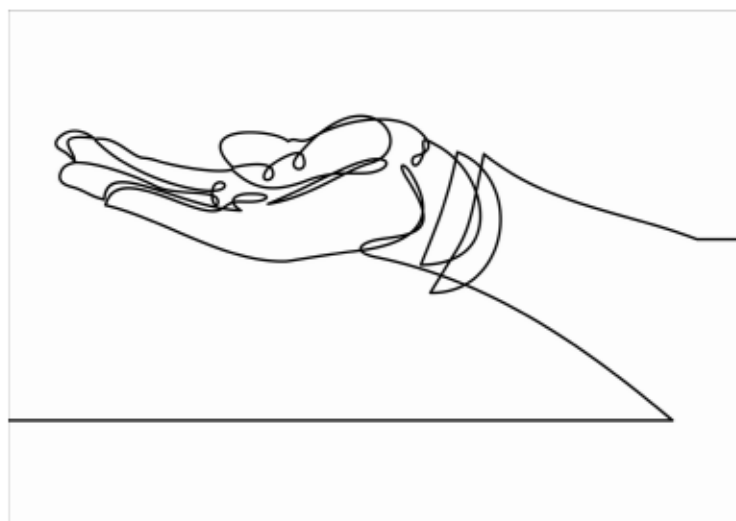


5. Theologians refer to Scripture as a form of "special" revelation. What makes it *special* according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17? What does Paul indicate about Scripture when he says that it is "God-breathed"?



6. Psalm 42 is a prayer (cf. verses 1-4, 9-10). Who else does the writer address in this Psalm? In what sense might we say the prayer is also a form of self-talk as well as speech addressed to God?

7. What does Psalm 139:1-4 reveal about how God responds to our words? Why might help us to think of prayer as communion rather than conversation with God?

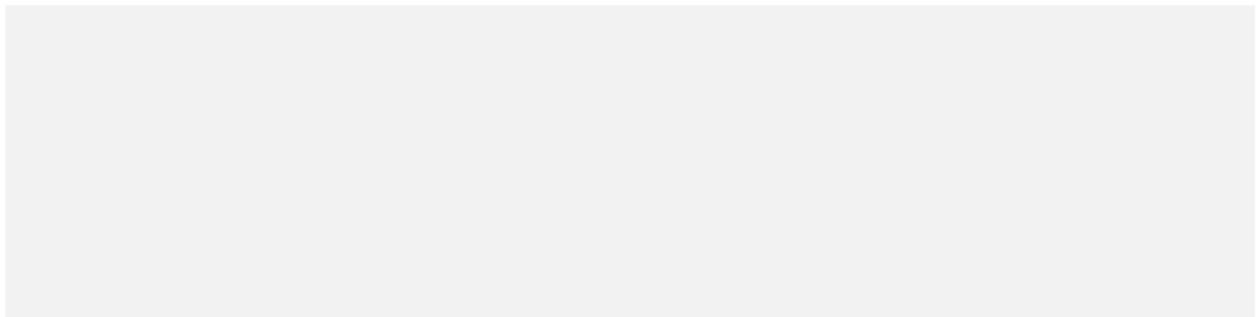


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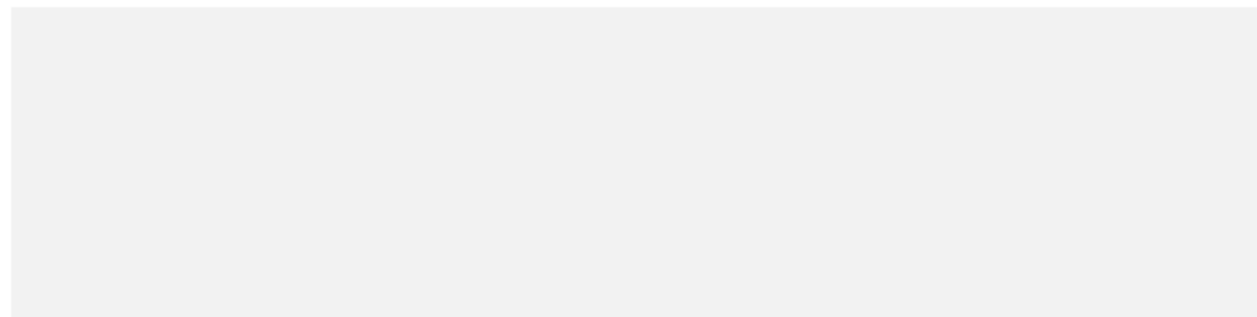
Praying and Getting What You Want ... Or Not

Most prayers include an “ask” of some kind. We aren’t praying just to hear ourselves talk. We want something from God. Although we may sometimes feel embarrassed by this, Jesus urges us to be persistent in bringing our requests to the Father. But getting what we want isn’t always our experience in prayer. It may not even be the main thing. Whether we get what we want or not, God always hears and responds to our prayers.

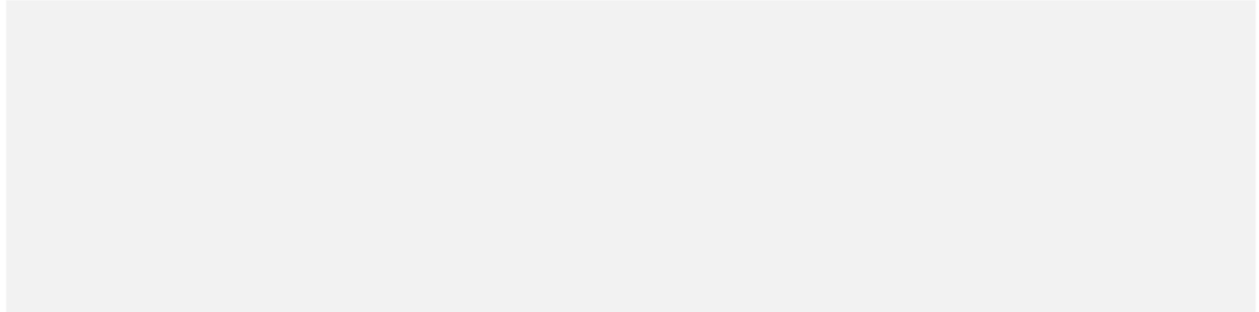
1. Can you think of a time when God’s response to your prayer surprised you?



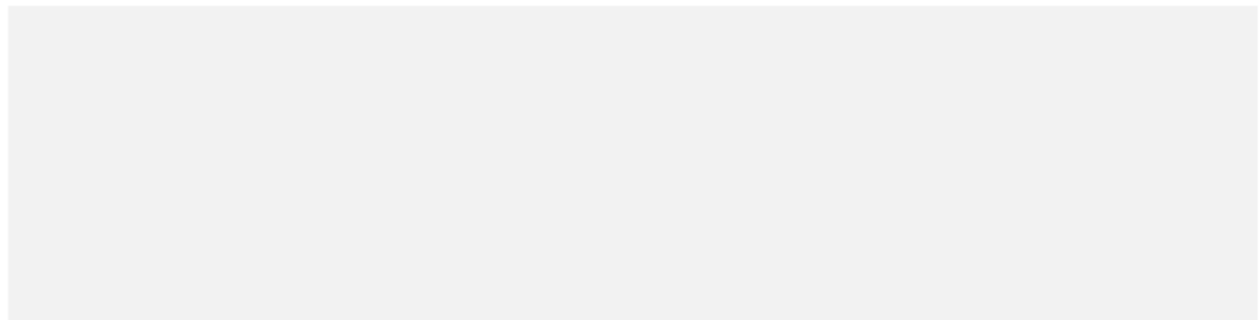
2. What were you expecting? What happened?



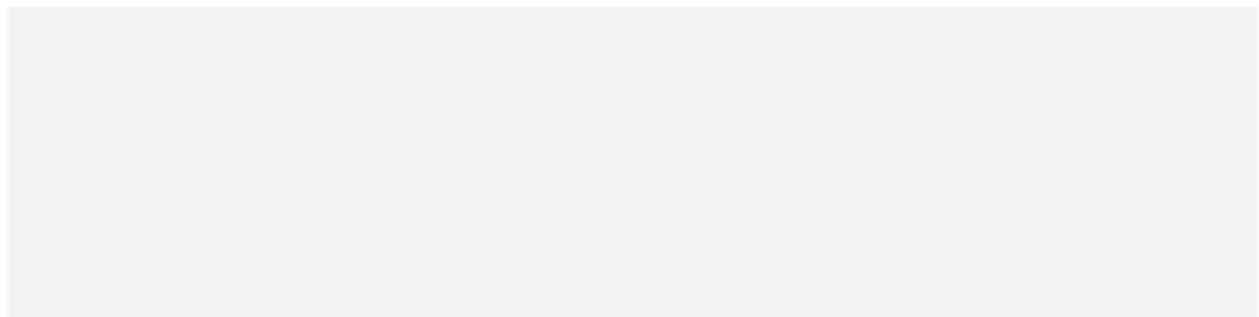
3. In Luke 11:5-8, Jesus tells a brief parable about prayer, what scenario does he describe? What does it imply about our view of God and prayer?



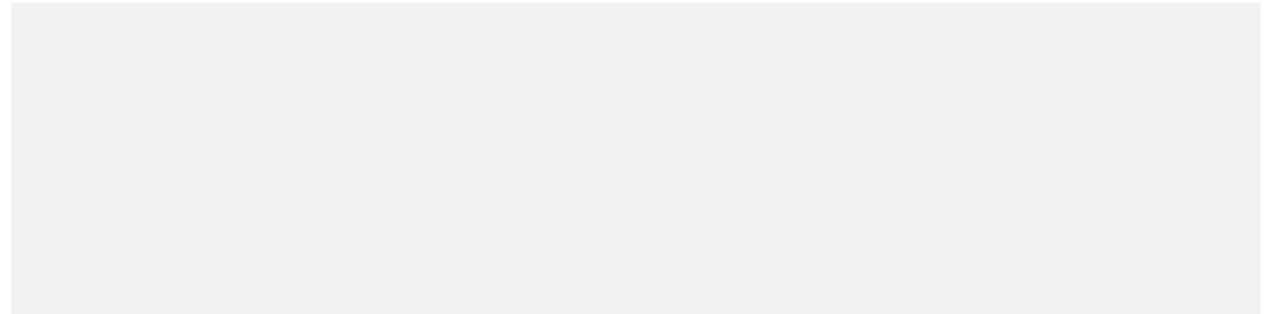
4. What counsel does Jesus give regarding prayer in Luke 11:9-13? What assurance does he offer? Does this mean we can always expect to get what we want when we pray? Explain.



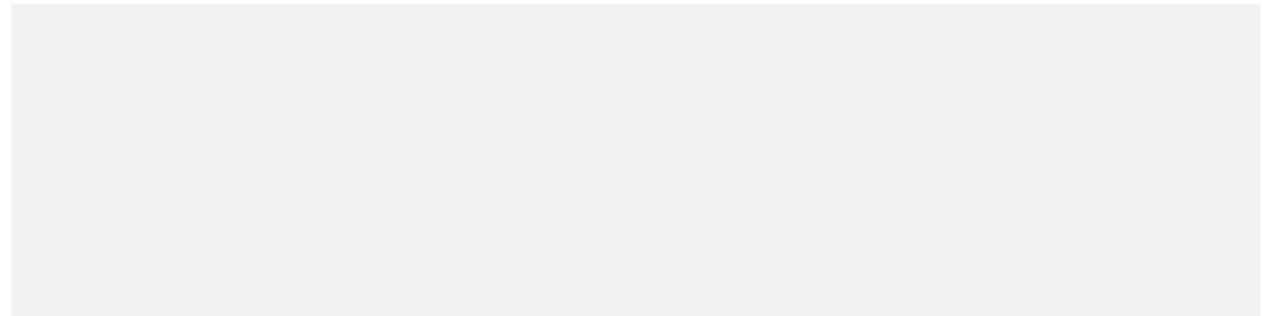
5. In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus tells a parable with a different scenario but similar point. What was his message? What do these stories have in common?



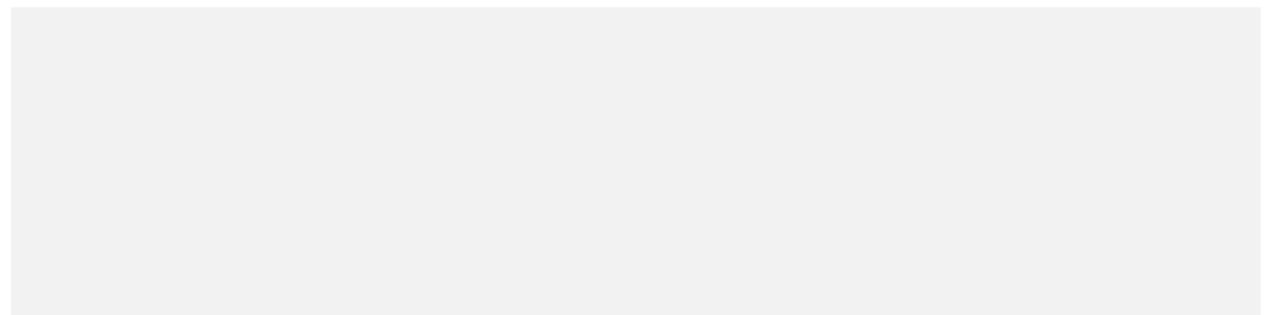
6. Is the point of these parables that God is reluctant to respond to our requests? Jesus says that God is not slow to answer our prayers. Why does it often seem to us that he is? How does God relate to time differently than we do (cf. 2 Peter 3:8-9)? What does this mean for prayer?



7. Some see Jesus' remarkable promise regarding prayer in Matthew 18:19 as a blank check. What is wrong with this view? What does it misunderstand about God? What does it fail to see about ourselves?



8. Jesus taught his disciples to ask, pray honestly, and persist. What do you think these three principles look like when they are incorporated into one's prayer life?

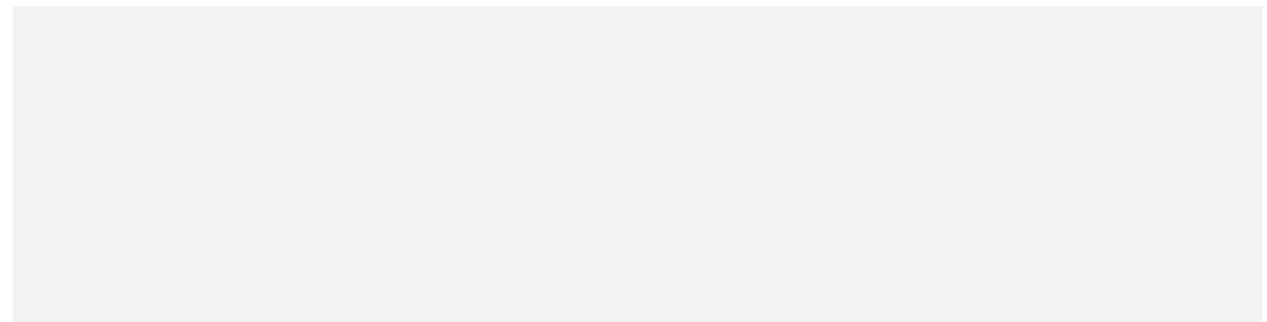


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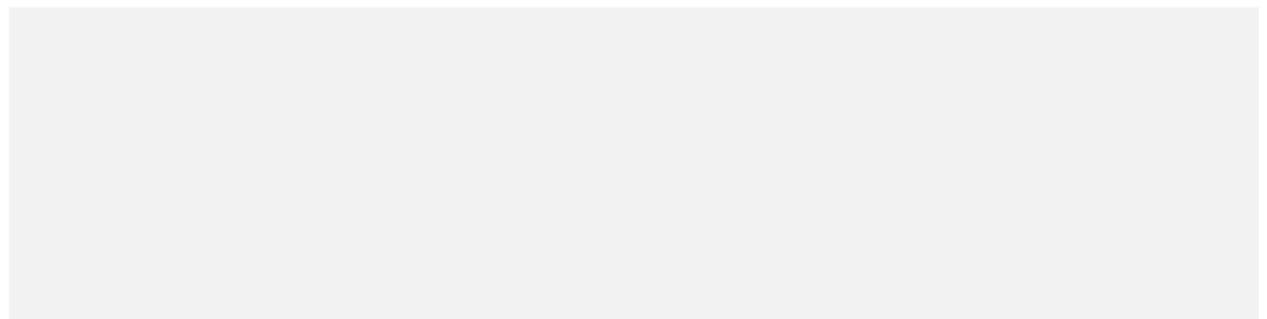
The Art of Praying for Others

Many of our prayers are not for us. We often pray for others. This is sometimes more difficult than we think it will be. We do not always know exactly how we should pray for them. It can also be frustrating when we pray and do not see immediate results. While just about everyone prays for someone else at some point, most of us do not see ourselves as intercessors. What is the art of praying for others?

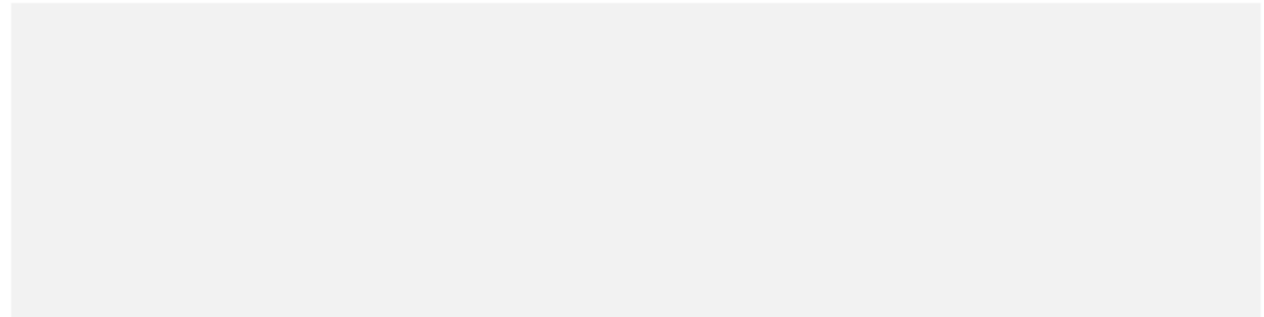
1. Abraham is the first explicit example of intercessory prayer in the Bible. For whom does Abraham pray according to Genesis 18:22-33? Why?



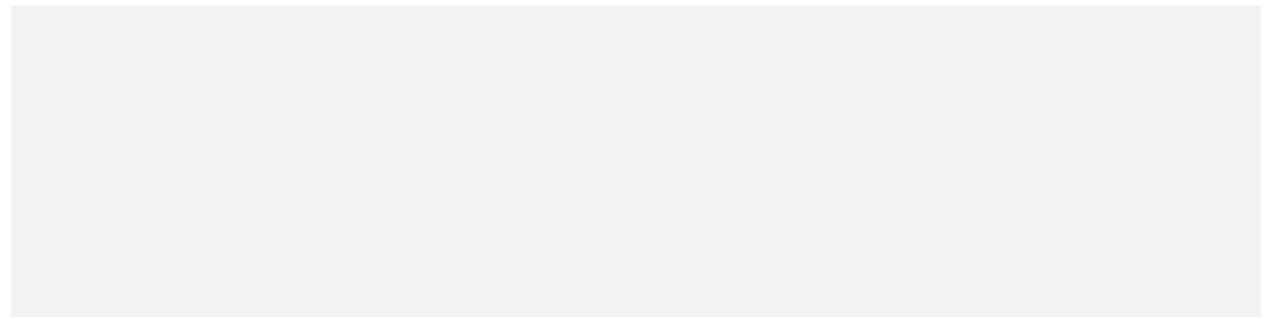
2. Did God do what Abraham requested? Why might it be said that God did more than Abraham asked?



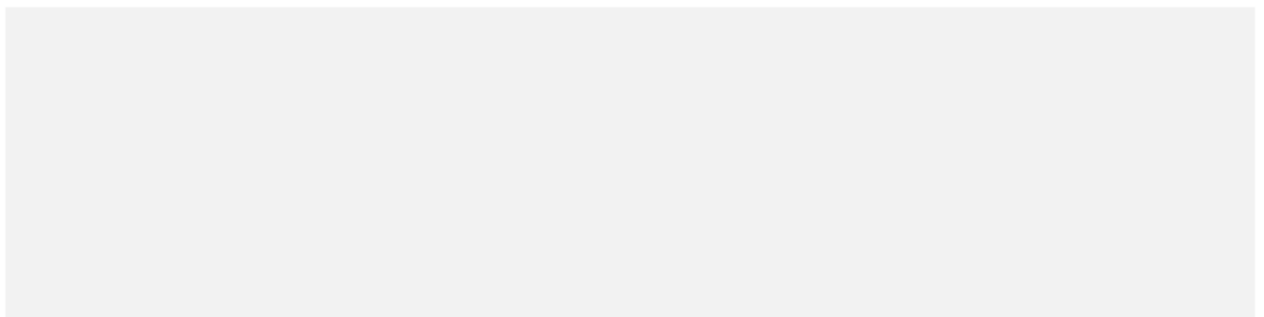
3. How does Moses intercede for Israel in Exodus 32:11-14? What does Moses ask God to do? What is the basis for his request? Did Moses talk God out of destroying his people? Explain.



4. We often think of intercessory prayer as the work of spiritual giants. What kind of people did Paul ask to pray for his ministry in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11? What did Paul believe would happen as result of their prayers?



5. Some of Paul's prayers for others are recorded in Romans 15:5-6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, Ephesians 1:17-19, 3:16-21, Philippians 1:9-11, and Colossians 1:9-12. What do these prayers have in common? Is there anything about them that surprises you? How might they serve as a model for us?



6. We tend to think of those who are good at intercessory prayer as those who spend hours praying for others. Does the brevity of Paul's prayers in his letters suggest a different model? Why might this make intercession more achievable?

7. Who do you know that might benefit from your prayers? Who do you know that might help you by praying for you?



Discussion #5

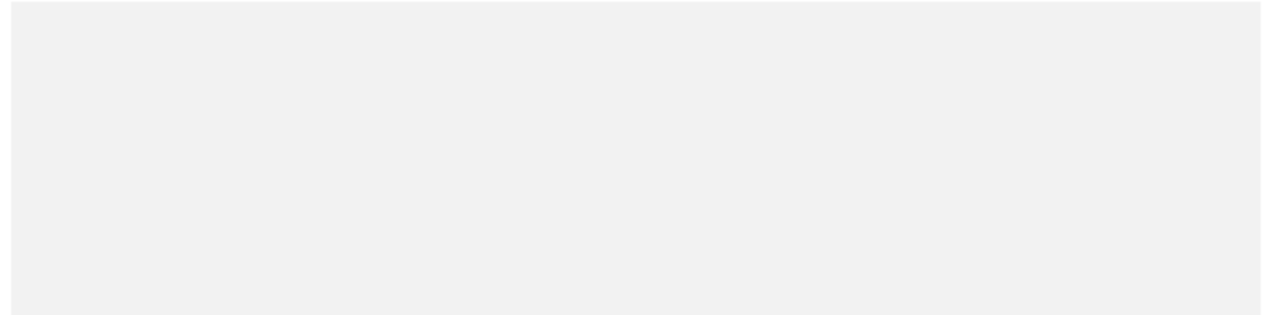
Managing Our Angry Prayers

Sometimes we must pray for people who make us angry. Jesus taught us to pray for those who persecute and mistreat us (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28). At other times when we pray we are irritated with God. Unresolved anger, towards God or others, can make us clam up altogether. How, then, should we manage our anger when it comes to prayer? It is no good denying that it exists. Can we be angry and “sin not”?

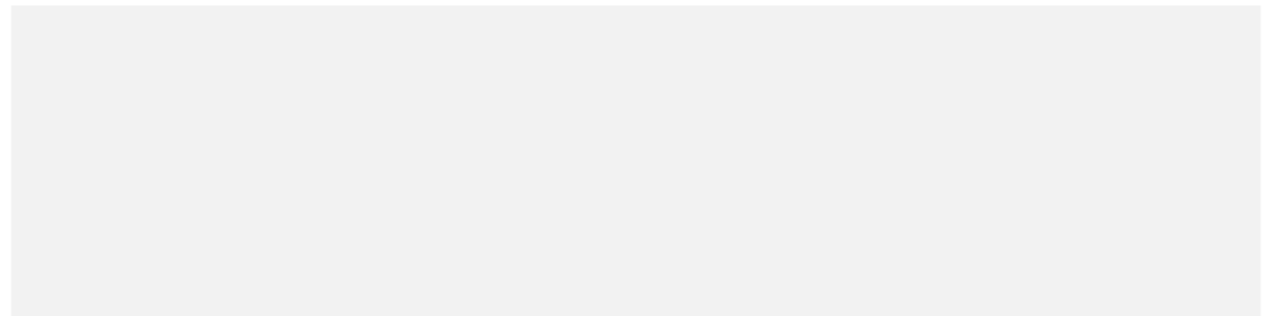
1. Can you think of a time when you were angry with God? What did you do about it? Have there been times when anger towards another made it difficult to pray for them? How did you handle the situation?

2. What question did God ask Jonah in Jonah 4:4? What is the implied answer? How did Jonah answer the question (cf. verse 9)?

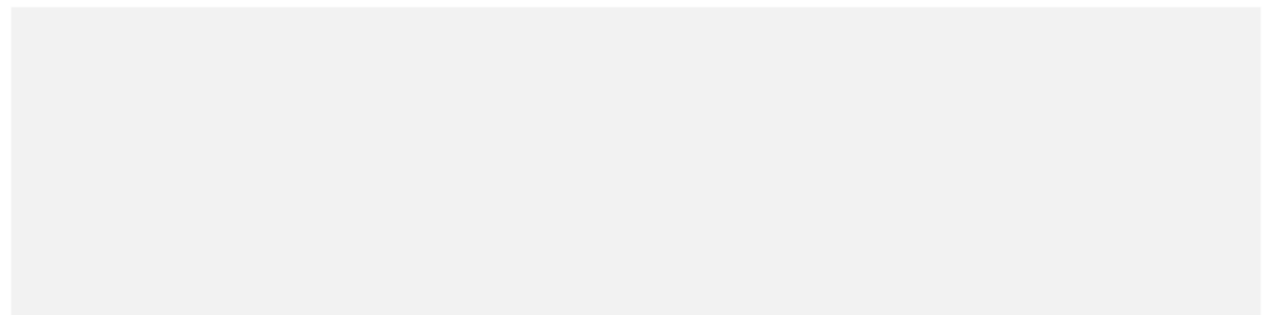
3. Psalm 69:28, 137:8-9, and Jeremiah 18:21 are examples of imprecatory prayers. These are prayers which ask God to punish the wicked. Do you find such prayers understandable or disturbing? Why?



4. How do these imprecatory prayers help us to understand the suggestion of James and John in Luke 9:51-56? How does Jesus respond?



5. What does Jesus tell us to do for those we consider to be our enemies in Matthew 5:38-48? Why? How might this motivation help us to resolve the anger we feel toward our enemies? Does this mean that we need to try and hide the anger we feel? What might we do instead?



6. How does Acts 4:23-30 say the early believers prayed when they experienced persecution? Would you consider this an imprecatory prayer? Why or why not? How does it reflect Jesus' teaching about praying for one's enemies?

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7. Often, like Jonah, the anger we feel toward God is sparked by anger we feel toward others. Which anger do you think must be acknowledged first? How might this help you to resolve both situations?

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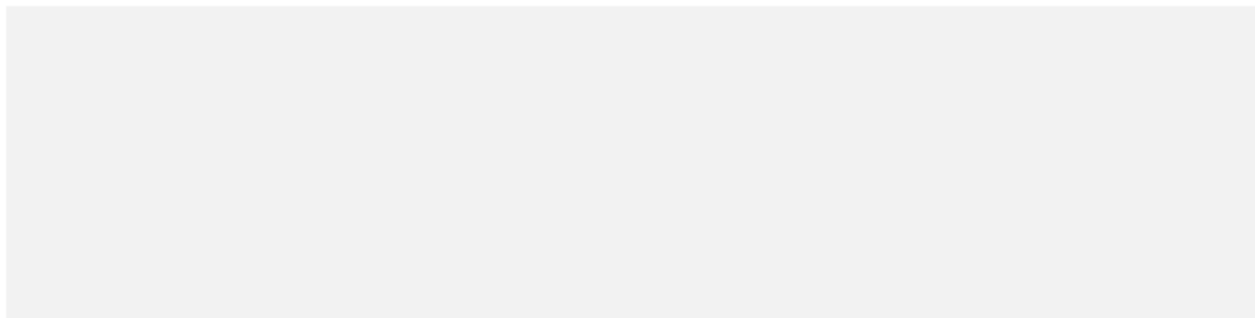


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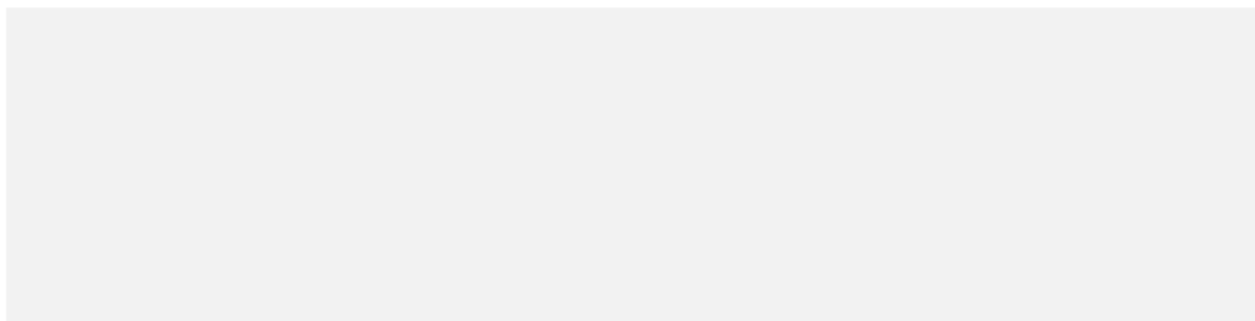
Praying in the Words of Another

If a student turns in a paper that someone else has written, it is plagiarism. Pastors who preach someone else's sermon as their own have been dismissed. But what about prayer? Many people who struggle with prayer have found it helpful to pray using the words of others. The church has a long tradition of praying in the words of another. Indeed, the church's first prayer book was the book of Psalms.

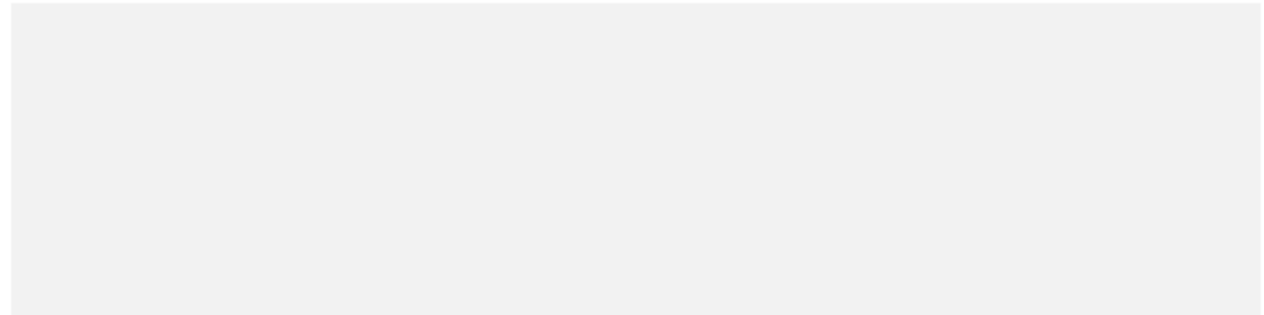
1. Most people learn to pray by listening to the prayers of others. What was the first prayer that you learned? Do you still repeat it? What made it meaningful to you? If you no longer pray it, why did you stop?



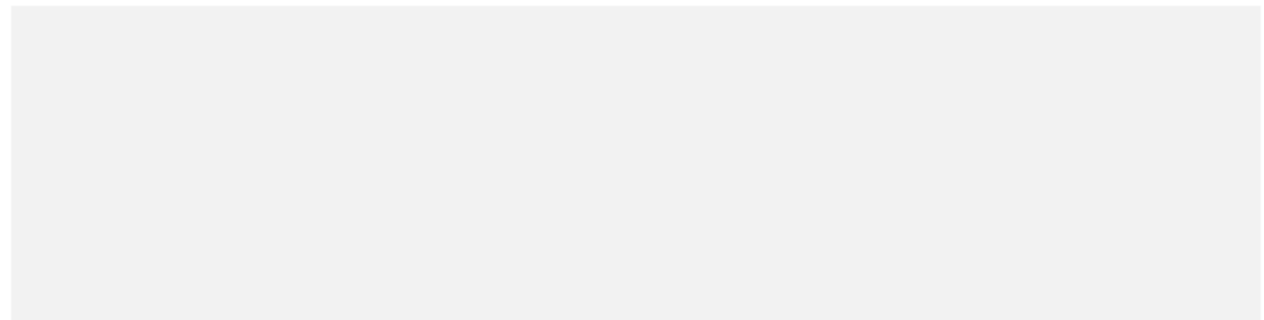
2. In Luke 11:1, Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray. What do you think motivated their request? What was the result?



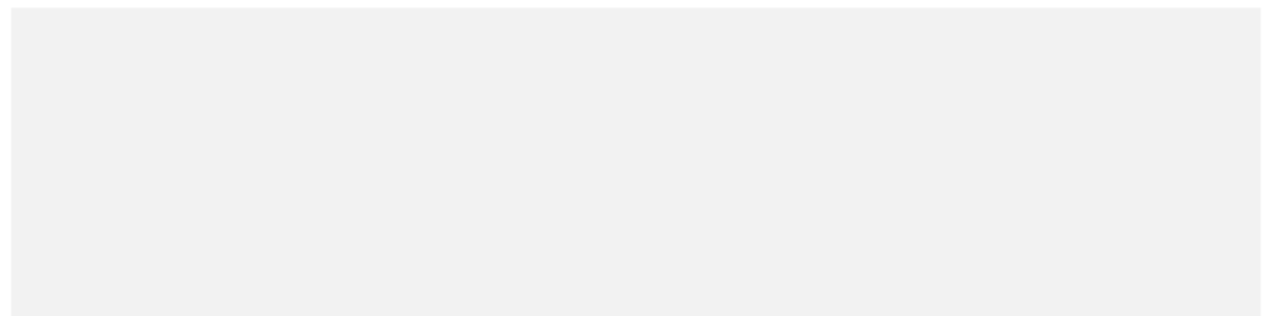
3. Do you think it is better to view the Lord's prayer as a template that we personalize in our own way or as a model of prayer that we repeat verbatim? Why?



4. How did the book of Psalms shape the prayers of the New Testament church according to Acts 4:23-31? How do the prayers of the Psalms free us from the restraints of self-consciousness and religious posturing?



5. We are used to viewing music as a mode of worship. What do Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16 and James 5:13 reveal about singing as a mode of prayer? Who, besides God, is being addressed when the church sings according to Colossians 3:16? Is this also true when the church prays?



6. If the book of Psalms is a model, what kinds of prayers can be sung? Music is often a source of contention in the church. How might we view it differently if we viewed it as a form of prayer?

7. C. S. Lewis wrote that “a good shoe is a shoe you don’t notice.” He felt the same about worship, observing that it works best when you don’t have to think about it. Would you agree that this is also true of prayer? Why or why not?

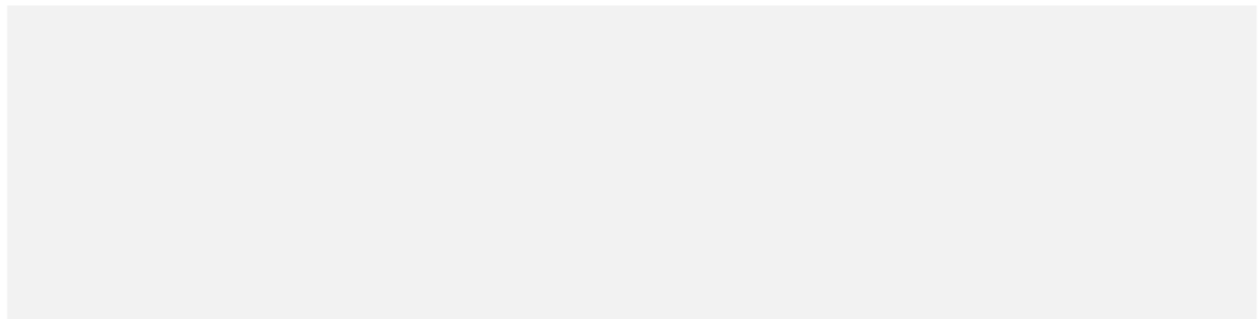


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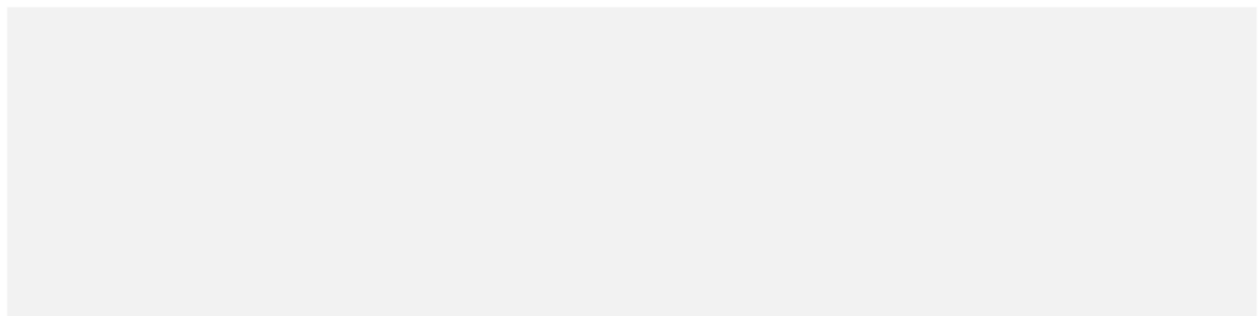
Jesus on Prayer

Perhaps the prayer that is most familiar to us is the one Jesus taught his disciples, also known as the Lord's Prayer. Luke 11:1 reveals that Jesus gave his disciples these words when they asked him, "'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'" The early church took Jesus' literally when he told them, "When you pray, say . . ." But the Lord's prayer is also a kind of template that shows what kinds of things we can bring to the Lord in prayer.

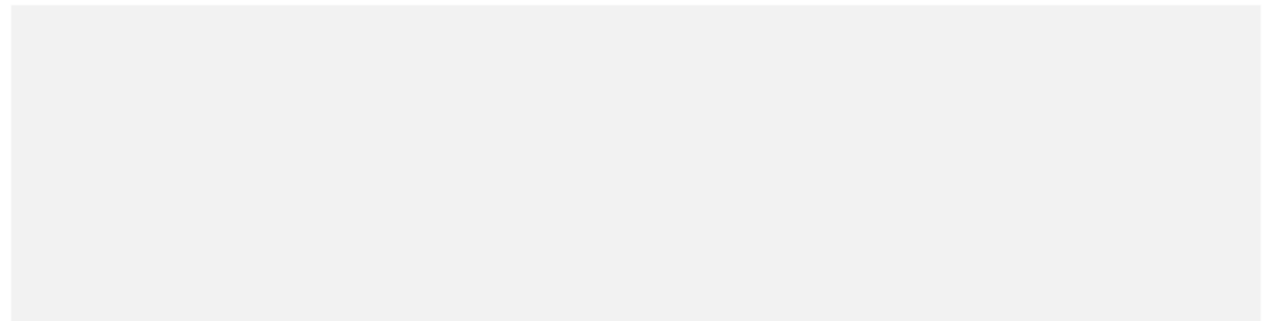
1. Do you prefer to pray the Lord's prayer word for word or use it as a guideline for your own prayers? Does it matter which way you approach this prayer? Why or why not?



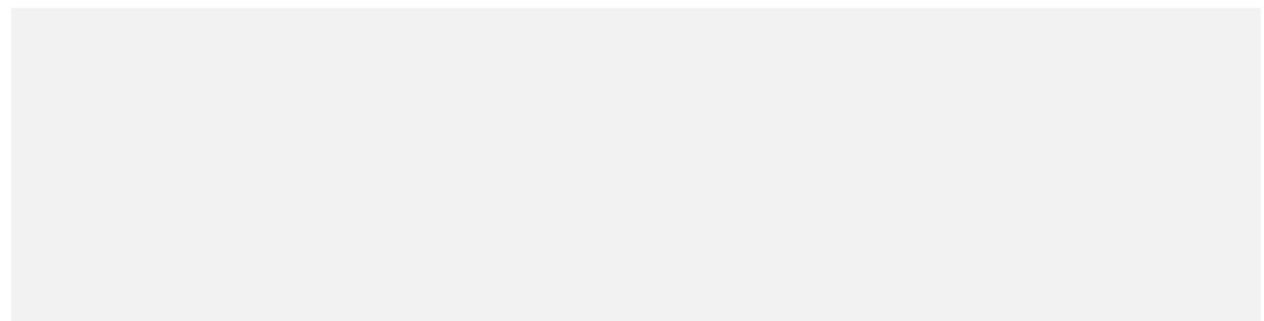
2. Where does Jesus begin with this prayer according to Matthew 6:9 and Luke 11:2? How does this set the stage for the requests that follow?



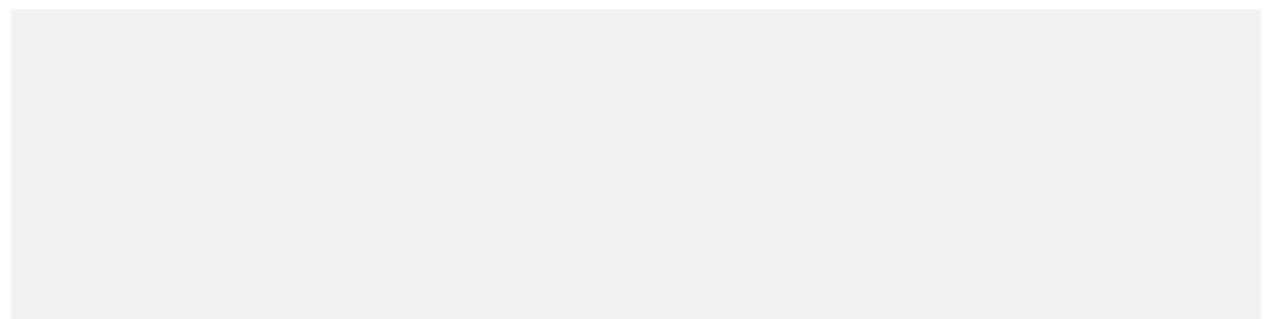
3. What do you think it means to “hallow” God’s name? When we pray this are we praying it for ourselves or for somebody else? Why do you think this is so? Hebrews 5:7 links reverence with submission. How does this fit the request?



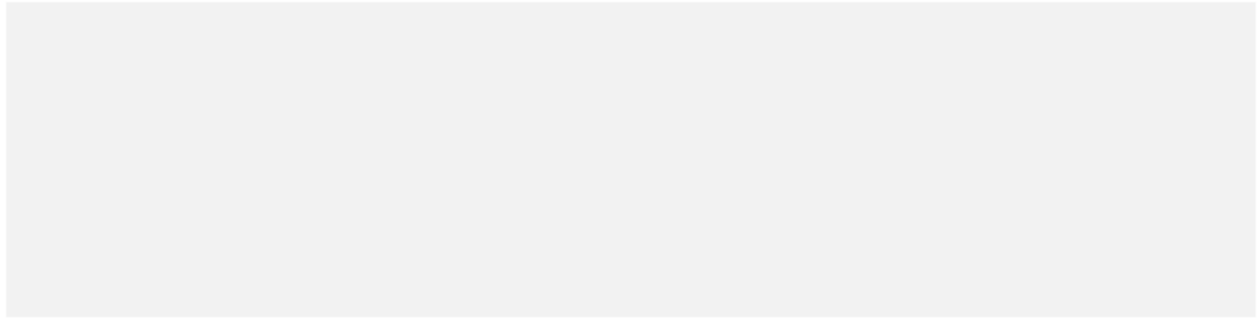
4. How does Jesus describe the nature of God’s kingdom in Matthew 6:10? What are we asking when we say this? Why is this request essential for the petitions that follow?



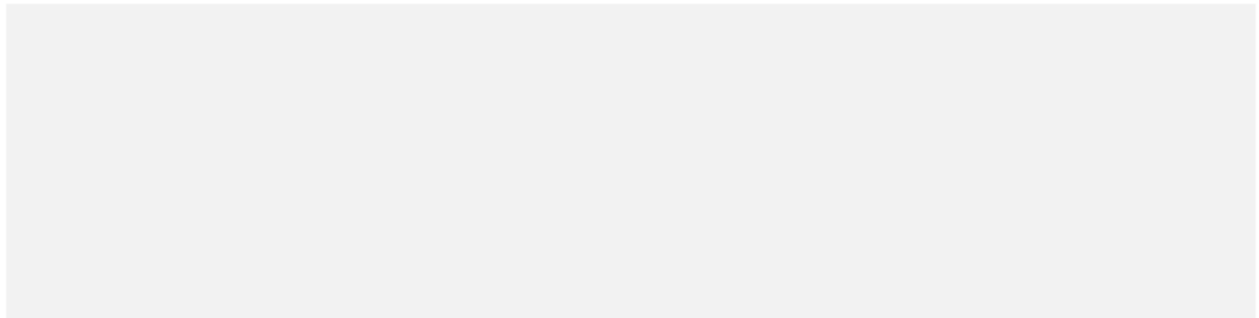
5. What does Jesus teach us to pray about in Matthew 6:11-13 and Luke 11:3-4? How would you describe these two categories of requests? What kinds of things might they include? Jesus adds important qualifiers to each of the requests for bread and forgiveness. What does each one imply?



6. How does Jesus teach us to pray about temptation? What do you think this implies about the nature of temptation? If God does not tempt anyone, as James 1:13 indicates, what do you think Jesus means by “lead”?



7. In Matthew 6:5-8, Jesus prefaced his instruction about prayer with several warnings about how we approach God. What does he say was wrong with those he calls “hypocrites”? How does Jesus describe the pagan approach to prayer? What might be some modern equivalents to these false approaches?

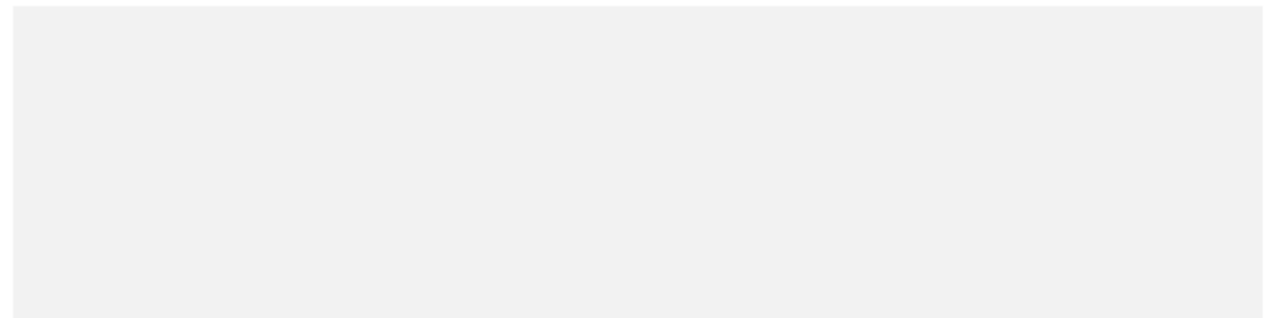


Discussion #9

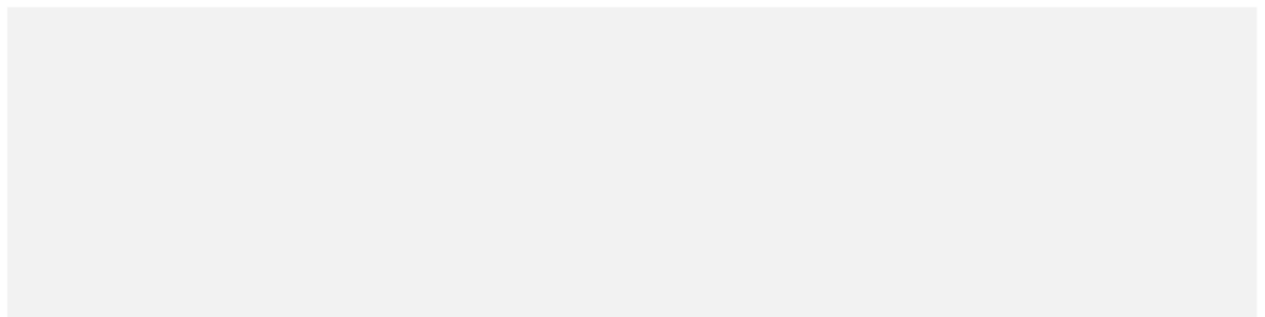
Prayers Without Words

It may seem odd to speak of prayers without words. By its nature, prayer is a form of verbal communication. Can there really be any prayer if there are no words? Perhaps it might be better to speak of prayers that go beyond words. We have all had occasions when we felt that our words were not enough. We tried to say something but felt that we did not express ourselves as well as we would like.

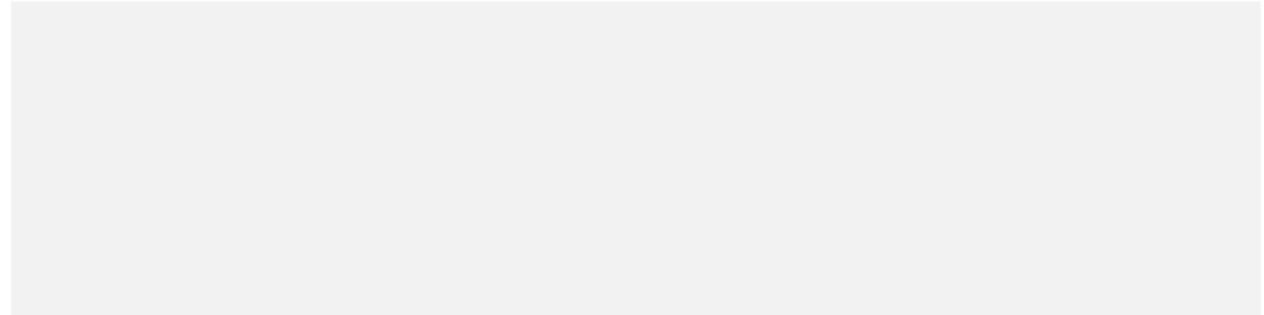
1. Can you think of a time when you could not pray? What made it so difficult? Silence can mean many things. What are some of the reasons we are silent? Do you think that silence has a place in prayer? Why or why not?



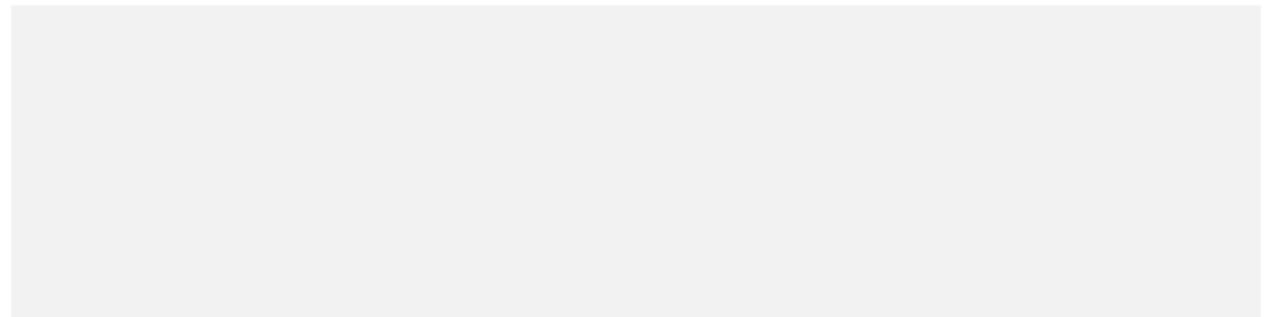
2. What role does silence have in the following passages: Deuteronomy 27:9, Nehemiah 8:11, Habakkuk 2:20, Zephaniah 1:7, Zechariah 2:13, Revelation 8:1?



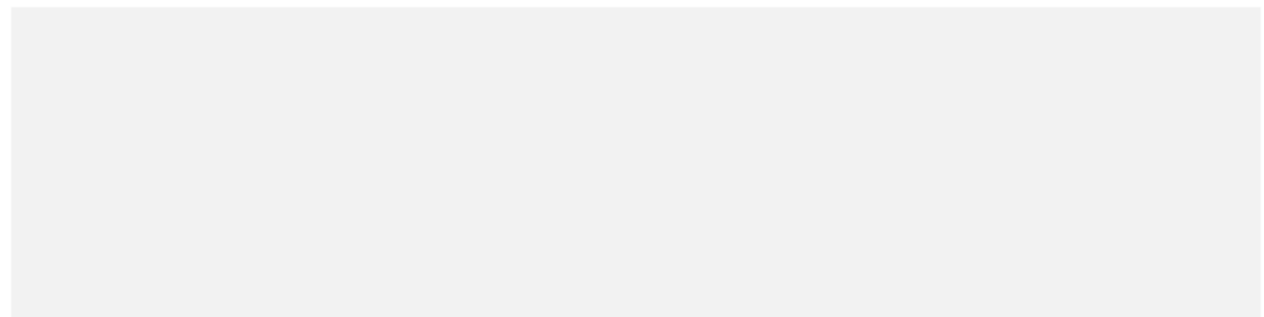
3. How would you summarize the counsel given in Ecclesiastes 5:1-2? What might it look like when applied to the practice of prayer? What connection does this counsel have to Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:7?



4. We tend to interpret silence as a lack of interest or disagreement. What does silence signify in Psalm 4:1-8 and Psalm 77:4-6? Why might we also describe silence as one of the languages of faith?



5. How does Paul describe the intercession of the Holy Spirit on our behalf in Romans 8:26-27? Although this is a form of prayer, why might we also consider it a ministry of silence? Why does Paul say the Spirit prays for us this way? Who is the Holy Spirit addressing when this happens? Why is this a comfort?



6. How would you describe the Lord's response to Moses' prayer in Exodus 14:15? What prompted Moses to pray? Why does the Lord react this way? What does this suggest about the relationship between prayer and action?

7. If there are times when action is our best prayer, how do we know when to pray and when to act? Describe a time when you have seen prayer used as an excuse for procrastination. What are some things that we don't need to pray about?

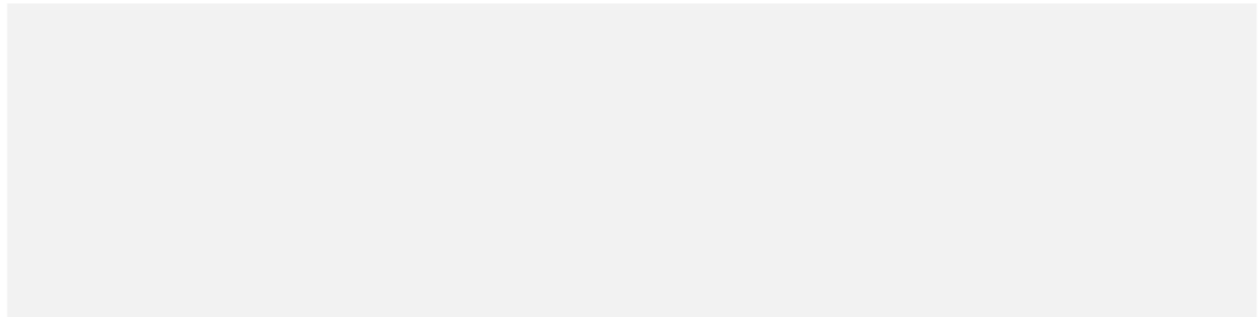


Discussion #10

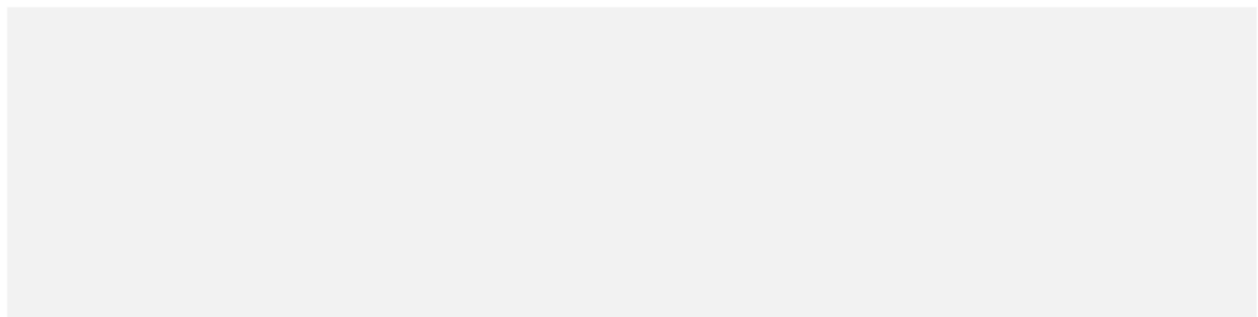
Faith, Hope, and Prayer

James 5:15 speaks of “the prayer offered in faith.” We are not surprised to find that faith is associated with prayer. But the mention of faith raises the issue of doubt. How do we know if we have enough faith to receive answers to our prayers? Is it possible to struggle with doubt and still pray in faith? Faith can seem like an intangible necessity for spiritual success. We aren’t sure what it is. Is faith an emotion? Is it merely a conviction? How do I know if I have enough?

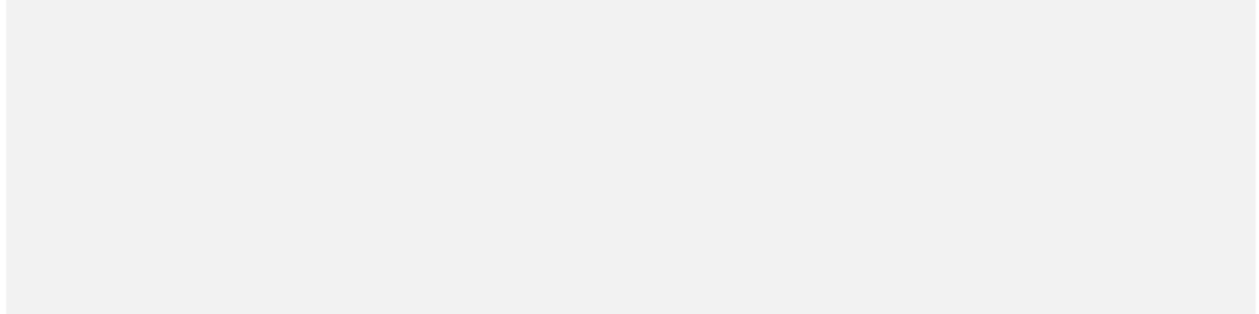
1. Hebrews 11:6 warns, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” How would you define faith?



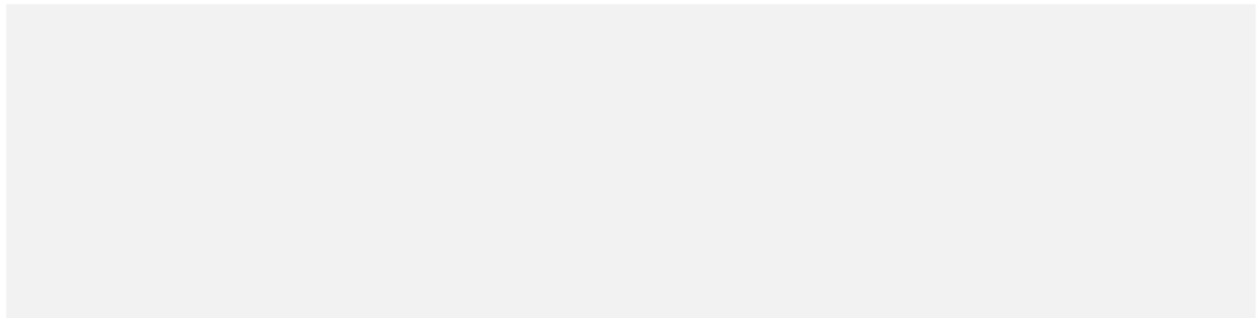
2. Is faith an emotion, an understanding, or something else altogether? Where does faith come from and how does it grow?



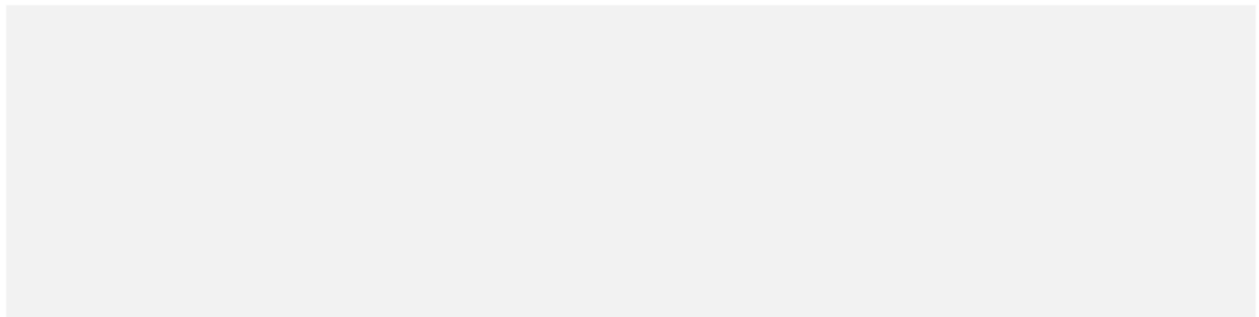
3. Compare Mark 11:22-23 with James 1:6-7. Are Jesus and James saying essentially the same thing? What differences do you see in these two statements?



4. How would you explain the difference between trusting in faith and having faith in God? How does confidence that God will answer prayer differ from certainty about the way he will answer it?



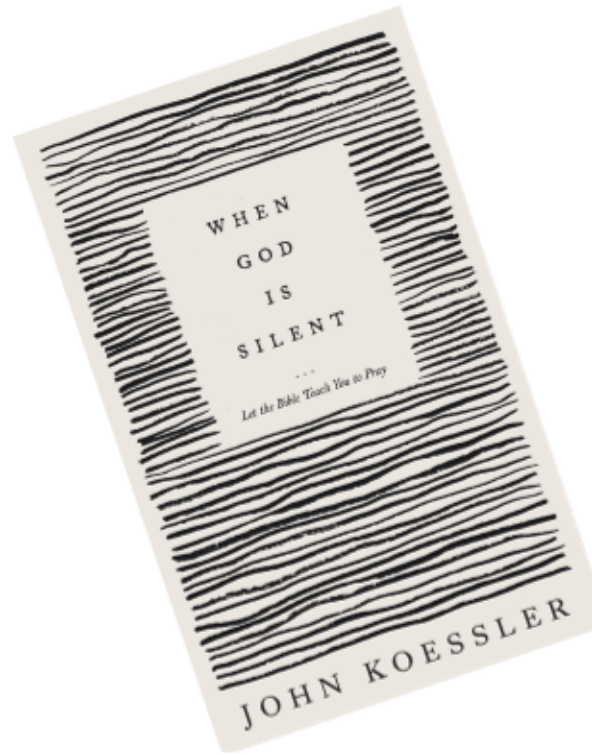
5. Would you say that the father in Mark 9:14-29 had faith or doubt? What about the disciples? What does Jesus say was the father's problem? What about the disciples? In view of verse 24, can doubt and faith coexist? Explain your answer.



6. What nickname does Jesus give his disciples in Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, Luke 12:28? How much faith is required before we will see remarkable results from our prayers according to Luke 17:6? In what way are the disciples proof that miracles do not necessarily produce faith?

7. Does Jesus do more for some people than he does for others because they trust him more? What do you think Jesus meant when he told the two blind men in Matthew 9:29, "According to your faith let it be done to you." Why shouldn't we let our questions, fears, or even our doubts keep us from approaching God in prayer?

8. How much faith is required to pray? Why shouldn't we be intimidated by the size of our request? What is the real relationship between the size of our request and the size of our faith?



When God is Silent: Let the Bible Teach You to Pray
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