

Prayer

Where to start

& how to keep going



What is prayer and how do I start?

So, what's the secret of prayer?

The American monk and activist Thomas Merton once wrote: "The secret of prayer is hunger for God. The will to pray is the essence of prayer."

I don't feel I've ever got much beyond this.

Most of my prayer seems to be taking up with my longing for God and my longing to pray. Most books I've read about prayer don't tell you this. They tend to describe the benefits of prayer, but gloss over the mechanics of getting there.

Here you will find some practical advice and encouragement to actually start praying.

Your wanting to pray is the beginning of a relationship with God that can grow and grow. And it can start anywhere.

Don't worry if you find it difficult. It doesn't depend on you nearly as much as you think. "I cannot pray," the great Dutch spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said, "but God can pray in me." It took me a long while to learn this, and even so it is a truth I often forget. I imagine prayer to be somehow dependent on my effort, or worse, my eloquence.

God calls out to every human heart and longs to make a home in every human heart. But God waits for us to respond.

There is a paradox to prayer. It is all about the gift of God, and God praying in us, but it also has to be an act of human will. God calls out to every human heart and longs to make a home in every human heart. But God waits for us to respond. When we do, it is God's delight to come to us and sing his song within us. Our voice – however faint and unsure of the tune – is joined to the song of the Spirit.

My own working definition of prayer is this: Prayer is the lover coming into the presence of the beloved and saying, "I love you."

This is an entirely different way of thinking about prayer. It is not about what we "put in" or "get out", but focuses entirely on God.

God is the great lover. We are God's beloved. God is constantly coming into our presence to say that he loves us. Most of the time, we probably won't be aware of this.

But that doesn't mean God isn't there. We aren't usually aware of the air we breathe. But we keep on breathing.

Prayer is the most natural thing in the world. It has been said that prayer is as natural as a flower opening its petals to the sun.

But it can also be the hardest.

There will be dark and difficult times when prayer feels impossible. It requires discipline as well as desire. Because it is relationship, it is about letting go and allowing someone else to be at the centre of your life.

I am not a Christian because I know lots of things about God, but because I know God. This relationship, which God has initiated through his love, is one we enter freely. God will never force his way into our lives. But the great paradox of this relationship is that when we put Jesus at the centre of our life, he puts us at the centre of his.

Like all relationships, it needs to be worked at. And it is through prayer that our relationship with God is nurtured and sustained.

"You learn to pray by praying."

Elizabeth Obbard, *To Live is to Pray*

There is no right way, or place or posture for praying. Just the way that is right for you. Feeling comfortable is vital. You don't, for instance, have to kneel down. Sitting in an easy chair, or lying on the floor is just

as good.

Using set prayers is one of the best ways to get started. If you use your own words, do not worry that they won't be good enough. Even if you find you find you have no words, offer God your thoughts, even your distractions and anxieties. Give him the time you have set aside.

Prayer

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(A prayer of preparation (The Collect for Purity) from Common Worship)
Invite your friends and family to join in
