

Learning to pray

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[0 : 00] We have two short Bible readings tonight. The first one is found in Romans chapter 8 and we're reading verses 14 to 16. It's on page 1135 of the church Bibles. Romans chapter 8 verse 14. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again.

Rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship and by him we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

The next reading is found in Galatians chapter 4 and that's on page 1170 of the church Bibles. Galatians chapter 4, starting at verse 4.

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

[1 : 07] Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. This is the word of the Lord.

Good evening. My name's Darren. Tonight we're going to be looking at the subject of prayer. You might think, how do we get from those verses to prayer?

But it will be pretty self-explanatory by the end, I hope. That's because when we think of a topic like prayer, it is one of those words which I'm pretty sure every single person, probably on the planet, when they hear it, they have connotations of it.

Something comes to mind. They understand something of what it means to pray. Yet actually, whilst everybody understands something of the words, the reality of what it means to be people of prayer, to be individuals and a community who engage in something which is inherently given to us as a gift, yet is also unknown in many other levels, can be quite confusing and quite complicating. And so we have to always look to the source of where that comes from. And these passages that we'll look at tonight, I hope, will pull out the source of the God who doesn't just give us prayer but calls us to pray to him.

[2 : 17] And I don't know what you think when you think of the word prayer or the way you were raised to use the word prayer. The way I was raised, I was raised in the Catholic Church.

So prayer was a very formal thing we did every day. We did it in school. We did it at home. We did it in everywhere. And it was very ritualistic. Yeah, I went to see Avengers this week and they used the word prayer. Goodness knows how many times when catastrophe was hitting them, prayer.

We better pray because it better work. Who are they praying to? I don't know who Captain America believes in or Iron Man. But they pray all the time. Yet equally, I think there's a cynicism to prayer in our culture. A disaster happens or somebody dies.

Twitter is a flood with thoughts and prayers. And I don't know if you follow any of the kind of media coverage when that happens of this kind of negative, who cares about thoughts and prayers, actually do something.

And the kind of very kind of toxic environment when a simple sentiment is put out, when somebody doesn't even really know what the words they mean are, is reacted against with, well, what use is thoughts and prayers?

[3 : 16] So hopefully, as we look to the God who not just invented prayer, but calls us to do it back, it'll become a bit clearer, I hope, what we mean when we use that word. So I'm going to quickly pray and then we'll look at these passages in Romans and Galatians.

Father, I thank you that while you have power, you have might, you have created all things that we see in us and around us, that we come to you as a personal God who knows and sees our hearts, our minds.

Scripture tells us that you know every hair on our head. And that the privilege of being welcomed into your presence is not something we should take lightly, yet equally is something we should celebrate.

And so I pray tonight as we discuss, discussing things with you, that you would not allow that just to remain as a thought, but actually something that spurs us on to engage with you as a father.

For that is the way you have created us to live. I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. So prayer, as I said, for me was something I grew up with, then abandoned.

[4 : 26] I only used to pray when I was a non-Christian. I don't know, again, if you have people who are mates who aren't Christians, yet they pray. Ask them. I've asked a few of my mates. They've all said they've all prayed at some point in their lives, even though they fundamentally disagree with the concept of who God is.

That actually, it permeates a lot of our culture still. And for me, I think I thought, as I became a Christian, prayer was just talking to God. When things were wrong, you had to talk to God.

And actually, prayer the rest of the time, I'm not really sure what I thought about it. I guess you had to do it, even though it seemed a little boring a lot of the time. It was just something you did in case of emergencies. And I remember in 2013, 14, sorry, I was in Seattle for a month, and I was really quite challenged by the way people prayed there, not necessarily in a positive way.

So my father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer at the time, and he'd only been given six months to live. And I was with Christians who were, like, praying for car parking spaces. And we'd be driving along, and we'd be like, let's pray for a car parking space.

I'm like, what is God doing handing out car parking spaces to Christians, yet these other prayers I'm really wrestling with aren't getting answered? And it carried a bit of a crisis in me, and what on earth is this thing that I think I'm doing?

[5 : 39] This kind of emergency lever I pull when things are outwith my control. And it reintroduced me into the language of prayer in a way that I didn't realize I had to do.

Probably if you'd asked me a month before that, I'd have said, not only was my prayer life fine, I thought it was probably quite good. It was actually quite empty and quite lifeless at the same time. And when we look at these passages, see even the Romans 8 one, this kind of language of being caught up in the Father, Son, and Spirit, adopted into something new, brought into a place where it is not just something I do when the panic hits my life, but it's part of the life of who we are called to be.

I think that starts to not just, it won't answer some of the questions we have about prayer, and that is not the point of this talk tonight. It is not to go, when this happens, we do this. It's to look at what do we mean when we use the words prayer.

So when we talk about prayer, we're going to look at two different things tonight. We're going to look at what prayer is and how we do it.

So if we don't actually address the idea that sometimes in life we'll be thrown up with different problems and different scenarios, that life is challenging in and of itself and a quick prayer doesn't seem to make it go away, then, well, that's pretty obvious.

[7 : 04] And if you've not lived life long enough, I'm pretty sure that thing will prove itself to be obvious. But when we don't express and engage with God when that happens, I know what happens to me is it leads to a kind of quiet dullness and a quiet cynicism.

Essentially, I stop praying altogether. The amount of times I've said to people, I'll pray for you, then don't actually do it, is quite humiliating to me. But it shows something that's going on in my heart that moment of, well, I'll pray for you.

It's almost like shorthand for saying, I wish you luck. I hope this turns out well. But as opposed to when you look at the way Jesus uses prayer through the Scriptures, and we're not going to go into loads of different examples of that, he says he cannot do whatever he does not have his Father tell him to do.

He has this communication and engagement with God, which is part of what prayer is, where it fuels the whole of who he is. And in that, we have this tension I'd like us to talk about, that prayer is both a mystery, but prayer is also not vague.

It is something that God has given us. So we have been designed, when we look at the biblical narrative, we look at something like Genesis 1, we see a picture of what humanity can and was and will be again.

[8 : 15] And in that, we see Adam walking in the fullness of relationship with God. He talks to him in the coolness of night. And I've heard people express that that's simply what prayer is.

It's just talking to God. Now, in one respect, I think it is that, but I don't think it is just that. I think that his most basic prayer is talking to God.

Whereas when the Scripture uses the word prayer, or this idea of communicating with God, it uses, particularly in the Psalms, it uses language of crying out, calling upon, pouring out your soul, praising, thanksgiving, rich, full language that encodes upon all of who we are, thought, heart, soul, body.

It is rich language that includes all aspects of creation. The writer Thomas Brooke said of prayer, prayer is nothing but the turning of a man's inside outward before the Lord.

And if our language of prayer is simply just talking to God, then actually most world religions could get on board and go, yeah, that's exactly what prayer is.

[9 : 19] And Christian prayer becomes, therefore, no different in its tone as to what prayer is. Anybody could agree with that idea of prayer. It's just you pray to your deity. You pray to something far off in the hope that you can somehow tip the cosmic balances if you do it hard enough or right enough, if you get the equation right or you do it in the right place.

And if that's all we ever understand prayer to mean, if I talk to God in the right way, then certain things might happen. Then I think we miss the real heart of the mystery of prayer that we are invited into this thing that Romans 8 describes.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are now children of God. The Spirit you receive does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again. Rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.

By Him we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Whenever you hear or see that language, it is both truth yet in and of itself a truth that is, and when I use the word mystery, I don't mean something unknown. God makes the mystery of who He is known to us, but it never takes away from the idea that He is above our rational mind.

[10 : 39] He is above just under everything we can package Him into. And so prayer, when we do it, when we talk about it, when we engage with it, we are talking about something profoundly mysterious and given to us from God, but then in God's generosity and mercy, shows us how to do it and invites us into something bigger than ourselves.

In Romans 8, Paul tells us how the Spirit assures us of God's love. First, the Spirit enables us to approach and cry to this great God, and He then tells us that the Spirit then kind of comes alongside our spirit and adds a more direct testimony.

That is mysterious stuff, that somehow there's something in our spirit that God's Spirit comes alongside and affirms. Tim Keller says of these passages, I have found that most biblical commentators generally agreed that these verses describe a religious experience that is ineffable because the assurance of secure love in God is mystical in the very best sense of the word. We must not under-emphasize the emotional ground of experience. Some may veer away from this idea because of its subjectivity or because of the abuse of the subject in certain circles, but we cannot exclude the mystical and emotional dimensions of the Christian experience.

Now, that is all to say that when we engage with prayer, we are not engaging in a purely mental, mathematic formula. If I do this, then this happens. At the heart of prayer is an engagement with the Almighty, the Divine, the Creator of all things.

[12 : 15] And for us to lose aspect or kind of lose the sense that that is somehow not mysterious, we lose something of what we are entering into when we talk about the reality of prayer.

Yet prayer isn't just some sort of vague mysticism where we lose ourself in a cloud of feelingness and if we feel the right things, then we pop out having had successful prayer.

Maybe that will happen. I remember for me, my boss challenged me to spend an hour a day in prayer. I thought, fine, excellent, I'll do that. Within 10 minutes, I was either asleep, annoyed, or distracted.

Generally, all three at the same time. And it's because I couldn't master it. I couldn't get it right. Whatever it was to get it right, I couldn't do that thing. And actually, that experience made me realize I had all these kind of ideas of what it meant to get prayer right.

I thought I was supposed to enter into some sort of God cloud. That's not the wrong language you would use, but that's essentially what it was. I'd kind of call God in. And he'd come, zap me with

some sort of spiritual experience. And I'd leave with some sort of Zen-like peace and a new understanding of myself and the world, as opposed to leaving a bit annoyed and disappointed with myself.

[13 : 24] But my whole premise for prayer was I had to kind of conjure something up, as opposed to the reality that I'm entering into a relationship, which in and of itself is mysterious, but true.

It is not nothing. And that is a tension we hold in the Christian faith. Because Western society, I believe, is absolutely obsessed with spiritualism in a way it has never been.

You turn on the news and see some celebrity disappear off to India on a retreat to find themselves. We do not blink an eye out of that. We think, oh yeah, that makes sense. That's the kind of thing rich people might do.

They might go and find themselves. Or I was reading about how Rupert Murdoch has started to kind of get transcendental meditation into his companies because he believes it will help him as a better person, and it seems to work for everyone else.

We're obsessed in our culture with this idea of reaching to somewhere different that will help us kind of deal with the here and now. And that is one of those places where I think our understanding of the word prayer could just get mixed up in that.

[14 : 26] One of the women I work with, she is a... I'll tell her after I was talking about it. The off chance she listens to this is unlikely. She does Reiki.

And Reiki is the kind of Eastern idea of the moving of energies in your body to help healing. As far as I can gather from what she's explained to me. And I was expressing to her in this conversation about prayer, and she was like, oh, it's the same thing.

Exact same thing, isn't it? You just call your God to do something, whereas I harness the energies around about me to do my thing. Just we're approaching the same thing. And at first I was like, hold on.

I actually didn't know what to say. But another person in the room who's an atheist seemed to think what she was talking about was the most rational thing in the world ever. Whereas when I said, well, I pray to God, that was stupid and idiotic.

And it made me aware of the tension in my culture, our culture, that actually we talk about this stuff everywhere, and it always seemed to be the same until you start to define something about what it is.

[15 : 29] And actually, I think for all of us, that's a tension when we talk about prayer. It is deeply mysterious, yet at the same time, it is not nothing. It is to someone and enabled by something which we'll look into.

And just like when you, our words, maybe a bit of a tangent, when we hear words like meditation, though, I think we can then jump the other way and go, well, we should have nothing to do with that. But actually, Scripture commands us to meditate, to meditate on the principles of God, on his character, what he is like. David said that meditating on the law, which is the first five books of the Old Testament, so Leviticus, Deuteronomy, were sweeter than honey to him.

Now, how is David looking? I mean, there's a lot of good stuff in there, but I'm not sure how you might meditate on those books and think, wow, that's the best thing in the world ever. But he had this principle of how he understood how he was engaging with this.

It wasn't just, well, I'll read this and get this thing. I will enter into a relationship with God, which is mysterious, yet it will give me something that is beyond what I can experience in the moment. And so when we look at these words of prayer and meditation, we shouldn't be scared of them, yet we shouldn't just say, it's the same as everything else.

[16 : 41] It is actually something true because God has given it. God has given it as ways in which we can engage with him and ways in which we can engage with his word. And I guess meditation is something like, it's the idea of looking at the principles of God or looking at some of his law or something he has commanded and it's a bit like a web and we see where does it hit us in our lives and what's going on in our situations.

But I don't think you see meditation anywhere in the scriptures that isn't have prayer on either side. And that's because prayer isn't just what we happen to feel in the moment.

It's this dialogue with God. As we dialogue with him, he dialogues with us with what we see through what he is like and what his word is. And that's why prayer has to be true.

It has to be rational. It has to be thought through. It is not just one thing either, the kind of mysterious side either. And that's because, left to our own devices, if we don't have something to balance it with, we would just make up whatever we want.

In the Arcade Fire song Reflector, there's this refrain that David Bowie sings on the track. It says, you thought you were praying to the Resurrector and it turns out it was just a reflector and that you had made a God based on what you wanted to have to speak back to you in this kind of closed loop system.

[18:01] It's a pretty damning picture that they sing about in this song. But I guess I've done it myself. The way I use the phrase, well, I've prayed about it, therefore I will do it.

That's kind of shorthand for the ultimate authority. I feel this. I've prayed about it. Turns out my feelings are matched with what I've prayed. There's the clays closed.

God, therefore, must want me to do it. I've done it. I've heard it said to me when things are clearly said in opposition to completely what the Scriptures say. But that is this kind of embracing the mystery of prayer without balancing it with the truth of who God reveals himself to do and to be and calls us to be.

And therefore, when prayer is both these things, it is attention. It is engaging into the mystery, but with the truth. John tells us to test things. Paul tells us to constantly, in 1 Thessalonians, test everything.

John 4, 1-3 is all about test the spirits. We enter into prayer not just then throwing ourselves into some spiritual void, but doing it with the truth of who God has revealed himself to be in his word.

[19:15] We hold these two things together when we pray. This is why the Scriptures are central to prayer. They're not the only way we pray, but they are the way that we know who this God is that we are praying to.

Because again, I don't know what you're like, but there's many times I've prayed for things and think, yep, well, I feel that. But that there is me just becoming the God in the situation. So what do we do with this?

How do we take some of these concepts of prayer and look into the reality of who it is that calls us to pray? And that's where we'll look at these Romans verses in more detail.

So Galatians 4, 1 says, But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. Now, there's hundreds of places we could have gone to in the Scriptures to talk about prayer.

[20:22] We could have looked at the Lord's Prayer. We could have looked at the prayers of Paul. We could have looked at some of the prayers in the Old Testament. But for me, with these Romans verses, this gets right to the heart of what prayer is.

It is a reality of which we've been called into. Because of what Jesus has come to do and what he has done for each and every single one of us, it gives us the Spirit, which enables us to speak to God, but not just to speak to him in any old way, but to speak to him in the most intimate of terms. So these verses show us, I think, that the way we pray is through this process. It first and foremost is in the Spirit. So as adopted children, we are now people of the Spirit, and we live in the Spirit. The Spirit of God has made its home in us. Now, if that's not mysterious, then I don't know what is. But it is true at the same time. It is a tension there that God has made his home in us by giving us his Spirit.

It means, when I go over there, it's not like the Holy Spirit stays there and catches up with me. It is present in who we are because of who Jesus said we are and what he's done for each and every single one of us.

[21:31] And in some ways, we are called to learn, as I think I am as well, all of us are, is to understand and engage and follow both Jesus, God, and the Spirit.

We are called to a triune relationship. And in the way that when we look at the Trinity, this kind of relationship between three, that is also one, we're seeing something of the heart of who God is and what he is like, and invites his people, his children, into that.

And part of prayer is that process, is that being invited into the Godhead, in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. And the Spirit is God's agent of change.

It is the thing that put inside us, which dwells in our hearts and our minds. It changes our desires. It changes the way we think. It is the agent of change who God has given as a gift.

It is the very thing that Jesus promised. In fact, there's times where I think it wouldn't be far better if physical Jesus was still wandering around. That would be a far better situation. Well, Jesus disagreed with that.

[22 : 37] Jesus said, this is the better thing. This is the better setup. That I go, and that the Spirit of the Father will dwell in every single one of you. It is the starting point. It is the place we come to God.

We don't come, so when we use language like, I don't come in our own strength, or if you use Christians saying, I'm doing things in my own strength, I should be doing it in God's strength. Again, that could be a whole other talk.

But this idea that when I go to pray, if it's just me in my best moment, how motivated I am to do this today, and maybe something personal is happening in life, so I'm a bit more emotionally involved to do it.

But most days, that is not the way I start my days. It is kind of like, come on, come on, come on. But starting with the reality that God has put his Spirit in me, and I don't need to conjure God up.

I don't need to invent a little place for him to come. He is present. Those are moments where prayer might feel like I'm talking to a wall, or I'm speaking to the ceiling. Where is God? We return to the truth of prayer, that God has made his home in us.

[23 : 39] I don't know if you, and maybe that's just a mental leap for some people, but for me, if I realize that's a starting point, I'm not starting with God over there, and I'm working my way to him, but his Spirit has made his home here.

It starts to change the way I think about how I begin to engage with God. I have to remember it. I have to remind myself of it. I have to have others who remind me of it too. The Spirit of God then starts to, in that moment, change how I see things.

And ultimately, one of the things it says in this passage that it changes is not just me, but the way I can engage with God. It says I can cry, Abba, Father. The very same words that Jesus told his disciples how to pray, and the very same language he used of God.

Very intimate, Aramaic term of like daddy. Very childlike language to engage with the creator of all things.

Very beautiful language, very intimate language. It is not just, God, you're up here. It is, God, you're up here, and at the same time, you relate to me in this way. The Spirit of God is the thing that enables us to do that.

[24 : 49] In fact, the Spirit of God is the same thing that if I read the Scriptures, and I read something, and I think, wow, isn't Jesus amazing? And it changes my heart, even in the slightest way, to love God a bit more. I have two options there as to what has happened.

One, I just self-congratulate and think, oh, I'm a bit smarter today than I was yesterday, or I'm a bit more insightful than I was. Or, that is the work of the Spirit of God taking something that actually, the Scriptures tell me, in my unregenerate state, I cannot do, and highlight something of the beauty of who God is.

And I wonder if actually, there's lots of places in life where we're seeing the small working of the Spirit doing things like that, but we don't call it that. And if we were to call out the language, we'd go, ah, this is the Spirit highlighting who God is and how I respond in a different way that we would be more engaged with walking in the Spirit.

The way we have the Spirit is because of the Son, and it is through the Son we are commanded to pray. So our prayers, like anything in life, are only as powerful or as effective as the authority to which we carry it.

It would be like, I couldn't actually think of an example, it would be like waltzing into some rich person's home and talking to them in a very overly familiar way like they're your mate and then starting to make outlandish requests with this person.

[26 : 11] That person probably would be like, who the heck are you? Get out of my house. But actually, the way that this talks of how we now engage with God is that the Spirit enables us to say something of who God is to us as Abba, but because we do it not on our own best self-will or our best efforts, but because we do it through the Son.

We carry His life and His Spirit within us. Sorry. So to pray in the name of Christ isn't supposed to be some sort of formality or equation, so when you pray you need to better tag on in Jesus' name in the end.

It is the reality of which we approach God. It's the reality that when, again, in the mystery of that, that when we pray in the Spirit through the Son, we are doing it through the reputation of the Son. Everything of who Jesus is, His beauty, His best works, His character, that somehow in that moment we do that, we pray in the same reputation as God's beloved Son.

And all the things that would have kept us previously from engaging with God in this way are now not only swept away and taken up by Christ, but they're replaced by Christ Himself. And this really jars with my heart in this one because often my default is just kind of want to do things by myself.

[27 : 34] I'm good enough to do it. But actually doing it in Christ, one tells me there's literally nothing I could do to kind of tip the scales here with God or to make myself worthy to be in His presence.

But actually it's a gift. The kind of, the image of Christ is put on me, the person of Christ is in me. And that is the way God chooses to relate. It dismantles the kind of notion I could come thinking, well I've had a great week, now I can pray to God.

Yeah, at the same time where I think there's these moments, I don't know if you have these moments, you think, well this has been a bit of a disaster this week, I kind of have to work my way back up to how I speak to God. It dismantles that too because at the same time you know you come in the Spirit through the Son.

And actually I wonder how often when we pray we have these kind of little games that we play. It's interesting coming, this is not a critique of the Catholic Church, but it's interesting coming from a Catholic background where we had things like penance and doing a certain of things and finding that some of that stuff is alive and well in different forms of the church.

That actually, before I can pray to God about this, I really need to clean this up or I need to do this first or I need to go to a certain amount of church services first or once I've done these things, then I can speak to God.

[28 : 49] This is not the way the Trinity is expressed in the way we relate to it. In the Spirit, I come through the Son because the Son has done all for me and therefore allows me to speak to God as Father.

And just as a few other kind of side notes and you can go look at this your own time, Romans 8.34 tells us that Jesus actually prays on our behalf. If you want to read one of those prayers, you can go and look at John 17.

John 17, Jesus says, I prays for the disciples and then I say, I pray for all who will come who will follow me. Look at prayers that Jesus prays for us here now today. Now that's not a mystery, but it's not a mystery that kind of changes the way we think about prayer.

It kind of invites us into who Christ is. Same with the Spirit. Romans 8 tells us that the Spirit groans for us when we do not have words. I don't know if you've found yourself in those moments where a life is actually really painful and you don't know what to pray yet, there's something going on inside. Paul tells us sometimes that it's the Spirit interceding in our behalf. The generosity of the Son, He prays for us still. He's the one who represents us. The Spirit, it does it also.

[29 : 59] And that's because of who we pray to. If we pray in the Spirit, the gift of God through the Son, the life giver, the one who died and resurrected, so we may have a relationship to the Father.

Yet deep down we think the Father still hates us. Then it's pretty pointless doing all this stuff. Who do we pray to? Do we pray to do all this to some sort of distant God who just happens to be wandering around in the cosmos and if you shout loud enough, He might hear you?

It's not the way the Scriptures describe God. They describe Him as one who hears, one who is true, one who is generous. What is the ultimate act of generosity?

The giving of yourself. God gives the Spirit and He gives the Son so that we may connect. Not just connect so that we can feel good, but connect because God is the source of life.

The source of authority. In the moments where you think, even the most basic question, who am I? Well, the authority of the Creator Himself to say something different in your moment to who you are comes, not just because we conjure up, but because we have a God who speaks into our reality.

[31 : 13] So we can pray confidently to this God. Part of praying is reflecting on who is this God to be prayed to. The object of prayer is to meet the Father, to be adopted as children and in that relationship.

Our hearts start to change, our desires start to change, the things we ask for start to change. Jesus says some pretty outrageous things. ask whatever you want and it will be given to you.

I can think of at least 25 examples off the top of my head where that is not true in the moment for me. But ask whatever in my name is actually what Jesus tells us to do.

And those are the kind of verses that are actually abused quite a lot. This idea we should just ask for something and boom, it should happen. And if it doesn't happen, then, well, you don't have enough faith.

Or, was God absent that day? It's not the picture of the way we look at the Trinity. It's a beautiful engagement of Father, Son, and Spirit. And when we start to engage in that, our priorities of what we even ask for starts to change.

[32 : 21] I believe God always answers prayer. A lot of the time, we probably just don't like the answer. But He invites us into something, not just so that we can start getting things out of Him, but because He is the point of prayer.

He is the aim of prayer. It is relationship with Him that as we relate with Him, He starts to change who we are and that starts to change how we engage with God. And because of that, Hebrews 4 tells us that we should boldly approach the throne of God.

A place that in the Old Testament nobody would dare go anywhere near because they were petrified that they would die. This is now because of grace we are told to boldly approach this place. To end...

You go to the next slide, thanks. No, the one back, thank you. Just some things that you can...

There's lots of different places in the Scriptures where you could look to some of this.

One we're going to use briefly here is Matthew 6. So Jesus, this is part of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus is kind of giving not just teaching on how to live but the source of life itself and what it means to be caught up in the kingdom of God.

[33 : 36] And he starts talking about prayer and he says this to the listeners. When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.

Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

And then Jesus goes on to teach the disciples the Lord's Prayer which you've probably heard in so many different forms. When we come to God in prayer, the challenge is what we do is when we're not in context like this.

So church is great, but church will force us to pray. We'll have somebody up front who will lead us in prayer. We might even pray in small groups. It depends how much time we have. I might ask you to do some of that. But the challenge is when you're away from everything and it's just you and your heart, how do you learn to pray?

[34 : 51] How do you actually do it? There's something here of the principles Jesus says it's not about making some big showy statement. It's not about having some long lofty prayers. It's about when you are by yourself, the Father actually knows your heart better than you do in that moment.

He sees everything you need. So you might ask, what's the point of prayer if he already knows then? What does he want? Is it just that we kind of ask him for things and he gives them? If that's the case then Christianity in that form is just some sort of genie-like God.

It's like Santa who is just supposed to do the right things. He's calling us into a relationship. I know what you want. Come speak to me. The Psalms are full of language of men and women through the generations engaging with the wrestling of what it means to speak to God.

Songs of praises telling them this is what we see that's amazing. Psalms of deep mourning that this is hard. Some of the language of the Psalms is I do not know where you are.

Why aren't you speaking to me? Some of the Psalms even end like that. That's never the end of the narrative of scripture. There's always this idea that God is present, God knows and he calls us to continually engage with him.

[36 : 05] Some of the ways we do that is we have to do that with one another. We do it by ourselves but we do it with one another as well at the same time. So our own individual prayer life is

something that I think we need time to invest in.

I know it's a real challenge for me but actually the only way I learned to pray was because some other people showed me. There's lots of things that I kind of blindly went through the first year or two of being a Christian thinking I thought I knew how to do it.

A quiet time is my favourite example where I used to go and sit and be quiet for ten minutes and stare at a wall and I was once at a conference and somebody said jokingly, I see you're taking the whole quiet time thing very literally and I laughed thinking oh my word what on earth does that mean?

Went out and found out that actually there was way more to a quiet time than that. Same with prayer I used to sit in a room and I was like hello nothing back. And actually it was a guy who was a final year medic he used to always invite me around to his house for lunch and we'd chat about stuff in life and then he would always ask me what can I pray for you and I always hated that question because I need to make some stuff up you could pray this and a lot of times he would tolerate whatever I was saying but what he did was he would be like well here's what you can pray for me and he would just share some things and I was like wow I wouldn't even think to pray about half this stuff stuff that he was thinking in his head about the way he was at work about some of the relationships he was in he was about to get married and then he would sit and pray with me and I would always nervously pray something that I thought he wanted to hear and then he would just demonstrate part of his relationship with God by praying in very simple ways yet meaningful ways it wasn't very clean all the time it was like this is hard God help sometimes it was thanks and actually in doing that it emboldened my own personal prayer like oh you can talk to God in these types of ways

I didn't know you could and actually that then starts to then ask the question well how often do we even given how often we talk about God how often do we talk to God together he asks us to do that one of the challenges I think of that is I don't know about you but there are a lot of times when somebody asks me how I am and I say I'm busy busy busy too busy for everything the challenge of tuning out in order to tune in to who God is is a challenge and C.S. Lewis's chapter in the Screwtape Letters The Kingdom of Noise which is a book a kind of fictional book about a demon writing to a junior demon about how to throw a Christian of course he has this quote music and silence so he talks about music as a music that kind of calls something out of the soul how I detest them both hell has been occupied by noise noise the grand dynamism the audible expression of all that is exultant ruthless and virile noise which alone defends us from silly qualms despairing scruples and impossible desires we will make the whole universe a noise in the end the melodies and silences of heaven will be shouted down in the end he's making the point that if we fill our lives full of noise the louder things get the more actually we get distracted not focused that's definitely the case for me and there's something really uncomfortable about choosing to stop and be present with God

[39 : 26] I don't know for you it feels for me it could be like as soon as I do the to-do lists I suddenly become the most efficient person on the planet I can think of a hundred things I could be doing well I could be doing this I could be doing this and as soon as that lie creeps into my heart that this is an inefficient use of my time I could be doing something better something changes and I'm already gone at that point but to be re-invited back into actually I need to stop and not because of some sort of mindful practice there's nothing wrong with mindfulness this is more than just I need to somehow be present and empty my mind Christian meditation Christian prayer is stopping to acknowledge the fullness of who God is to enter into that place as we're talking about in the spirit through the sun I receive and engage with the God of the universe it fills me it gives me truth it doesn't just empty everything at the same time and we use the scriptures I'm in the moment trying to pray through the songs of ascent it's just these 15 psalms

I choose one a week and I sit with it first 10 minutes I'm like well I don't really relate to this but actually as I sit with it and look at some of the stuff that Paul prays even after this maybe go along and look at just google the prayers of Paul see what Paul prays for people see how that might affect the way you think and pray for others I know there's loads of times where I just don't have a clue what to pray for people partly because their situations are really complex I pray that God loves them and I pray that his will would be done one of the core prayers you see of Jesus when he's at the garden about to be arrested he says take this cup away from me it's a prayer it's a request to God yet let your will be done something in the rawness and honesty of prayer there of Christ here's

morality here's what I want but here's ultimately what I need is for your will to be done here so the Psalms the prayers of Paul there's loads of them that you could look up and just lastly this is a little thing that I've used before it's a little acronym

ACTS different ways in which we can think about praying and if that just becomes more words to you I'd encourage you to think about so adoration so it's based on the Lord's Prayer what are the things you most naturally look to in life and are amazed by what kind of things and feelings come up when you think of so for me when it's like watching planet earth there is something in me it's like absolutely wow what do it look like to take some of that language some of that thought process and channel that at the nature of who God is what is there about God that makes you go oof I might not get it but it's amazing isn't it the feelings I think like until I was like okay I adore God was some sort of I don't know again I don't really know it was like he was over there somewhere and this might sound like a ridiculous thing for you but the first time it clicked from my head was I was going to Celtic Man United in the Champions League where we beat them 1-0 and Shinsuke Nakamura scored an amazing free kick you'll not see a better one you should google it when you go home and the awe I was like wow I feel like I've observed some spectacle here and I was with a Christian and he did say imagine we could communicate something like that to God and I was like oh and I was like oh God that's very serious but actually there's something about the person of God that if we reflect in his character it causes us to bring out awe of who he is to celebrate that there's a God that calls us to confess not just to confess for the sake of it because he sees all of who we are and therefore prayer is about bringing that part of who we are before him and saying look here it is the bits I'm ashamed of the bits I'm hidden

I remember being really confused when I was first among Christians when they'd say things like I can't pray about that you just told me God knows everything what do you mean you can't tell him about something he already knows about it didn't make sense to me but the longer I've gone in I'm like oh yeah there's bits of me I want to just cover away but confession is an invitation to be honest and then to thank him there's so much in my life that I experience I do not thank or are thankful for and supplication is the asking for things and for me that's the easy bit I could sit and ask God for things all day long but to come to God having gone through this adoration of who he is a confession of who I am a thanksgiving for the things I have when I come to then start to ask God for things it changes how I what I want and what I want and I ask of him at the same time so that's where we're going to end Jesus tells us in John 14 18 I have not left you as orphans if we do not pray it's not just because prayer is a good idea it actually is the invitation to claim our sonship that's what these verses are talking about come into the trinity come in and be rightful heirs if we do not pray we're walking in the opposite way we're choosing to live and live as orphans again choosing to live so God isn't our father and actually prayer is the way we connect with the heart of God because it's who he is and it's who he calls us to be in reflection with the spirit in us through a son who stands for us and intercedes and a God who doesn't just reject but calls us to be like children that's the way Jesus tells us to be to be like children trusting a father because that father is good he's generous and he is true to his word if we approach prayer with that kind of mindset which I know takes time and for me it's still not some sort of art form I ever find but it's a process of engaging with the life of God that changes my heart and actually raises my hope of the kind of things

I will ask him for with the fullness of knowing I'm not in control here there's a mystery to prayer but it's not vague it is true it is something concrete because it is rooted in the person of Christ I'm going to pray and then do you want to come on Father we know that when we pray to you there's something in that moment where we're recognizing we're not choosing to live independent from you and I know I apologize for the times where I just blatantly bundle on through life living independently and then suddenly call upon you in a state of emergency and I know that you allow us to do that but you call us to be people who pray because it is the act of children before their father to talk to them to talk to their father about what is happening in their lives and who he is to celebrate that to adore that to praise that to give thanks for that and to walk as people in the world who don't just use prayer as some sort of vague platitude when bad things happen but because we have a connection with something that in and of ourselves we would never be able to connect with you invite us into that help us not to reject that invitation but to walk fully in it each day

[46 : 32] I ask that in Jesus name Amen