

How and when and why to pray: what the New Testament says

By Bob Young

Many Christians would like to enrich their prayer life. Many would like to find more richness and meaning in prayer. We seek a better understanding of prayer; we seek guidance to understand better how and when and why to pray?

With the goal of enriching my own prayers, I recently sat down to make a short list of what the New Testament says about prayer. Here are some of things I noted about prayer, why we pray and the content of our prayers.

We pray....

- Regularly and habitually, constantly (Matt. 6; Luke 5:16; 18:1-10; 22:39ff, 1 Thess. 5:17)
- To give honor and glory to God, to glorify God (adoration is often mentioned as a part of prayer, the ACTS model is an example, Adoration-Confession-Thanksgiving-Supplication)
- To confess. In addition to various NT passages, one can think of Daniel in the OT, crying and confessing sin on behalf of his people. (Confession is included in the ACTS model.)
- With gratitude. The OT, especially the Psalms, frequently mentions thanksgiving as a part of prayer. (Thanksgiving is also frequently cited in prayer checklists.)
- Because our hearts hurt and we want to share our hearts, emotions, and feelings with God. To seek and establish continued relationship with God.
- When we have or experience difficult days (and for others in such times)
- For others, to intercede on behalf of others (James 5:14-20). Another word for this is supplication. In some cases, we are told not to pray for others (1 John 5:15ff).
- To ask God to supply our needs (“daily bread” in the model prayer of Matthew 6), even if the reception or presence of those blessings seems automatic. In prayer, we give God credit for daily blessings.
- To ask forgiveness or pardon (Daniel’s prayer again comes to mind.)
- For wisdom, James 1:5. This could easily be related to prayers for guidance, when we want to understand the best thing to do in a certain circumstance.
- Before making choices. Jesus prayed before selecting apostles (Luke 6). I think also of various texts in Acts.
- For success, Eph. 6:18-19; for the progress of church, for ministers and those who proclaim the word, for boldness. (I do not understand this to include supernatural assistance.)
- To be able to accept God’s will (Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer is an example)
- For help with various things in our lives
 - One example is prayer during commissioning (Acts 13), that is, during times of naming or sending servants to certain tasks.

This is not a complete list, but having some of these ideas in mind as we pray will enrich our prayer time.