

Bold I Approach

The Why and How of Prayer



**6 TOPICAL BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

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The Why and How of Prayer

by Tony Payne



matthiasmedia

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How to make the most of these studies

1. What is a Topical Bible Study?

These ‘topical’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through what the Bible teaches about prayer, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sightseeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall halfway between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read. Interspersed throughout the text are three types of ‘interaction’, each with their own symbol:



For starters

Questions to break the ice and get you thinking.



Investigate

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



Think it through

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

3. Suggestions for individual study

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in his Word and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

4. Suggestions for group study

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of what the Bible says about prayer, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.
- See 'Tips for leaders' on page 71.

1

God and us

Most humans on this planet pray at least some time in their lives, usually without giving it much thought, or considering it difficult. Children pray, often with a disarming simplicity and ease. When difficulty or danger threatens, the immediate response of many is to pray. At one level, it seems to be the most natural and spontaneous thing in the world.

Yet for Christians, prayer can often seem anything like the easiest thing in the world. We know we ought to pray. We feel, almost instinctively, that prayer should be at the centre of our lives. Yet few areas of our Christian walk cause such a sense of failure and guilt. Few things are so agonizingly difficult as consistent prayer. Few things make us *feel* less like a Christian as when we have gone long periods without prayer.

Few things too, it must be said, are the cause of such misunderstanding. While prayer is an almost universal human activity, what is meant by ‘prayer’ is far from universal. Even among Christians, misleading views and practices of prayer are widespread. And because prayer is a problem area for many of us, we are always ready to listen to anyone offering a new perspective, a missing dimension, or a fail-safe technique.

This set of studies will provide no new secret or technique for solving the ‘prayer problem’. There are many such books on the market, their very number indicating that the ‘problem’ remains unsolved, or at least that the techniques do not work.

Instead, we will follow what should always be our first reflex—to turn to God and listen to him, as he speaks to us in the Bible. We will hear what he has to say about himself, and about us, and about how we can talk to him.

That will be the focus of these studies. We will put our own questions and struggles aside (at least to begin with) to see what God has to say about prayer: what it is, why we should do it, how we should do it, and so on. Having done so, we can come back to our questions and problems, finding perhaps that many of them have been solved by what we have learnt.

1. The God we pray to

It hardly needs to be said that prayer is an interaction between us and God. It takes place between two parties who have some sort of relationship, and if we are going to understand the first thing about prayer, we must first discover what this relationship is like. Or more importantly, we must first discover what God is like.

When the Buddhist spins his prayer wheel, or the Hindu sits in mystic silence, both are reflecting the nature of the 'god' to whom they are praying. Prayer takes its shape from the deity to whom we pray. Prayer is only possible if the 'god' is willing to accept our prayers; prayer will only be effective if the 'god' is willing and able to answer our prayers.

What sort of God do you pray to? Let us pause and think further about this.



For starters

1. How do you think of God as you pray to him? Do you visualize anything? Do you imagine him listening to you?
2. Can you think of any good reason why God should listen to your prayers, or respond to them?
3. What would 'prayer' be like if 'God' was:
 - a life-force or energy?
 - a fierce moral policeman?

Throughout the Scriptures, the Bible-writers are quite insistent that the true and living God is much different from the idols and pagan gods of the nations.

What sort of God is he? What is it about him that makes prayer possible? And what sort of prayer will he demand or accept?



Investigate

1. Read Psalm 104:24-30.

What is God's basic relationship to the created world?

2. Skim through the following verses. How far does God's power and control extend in the world? What is he able to do?

Jeremiah 32:17, 26-27

Proverbs 21:1

Matthew 10:29

Acts 2:22-24

Romans 8:28-30

3. What characteristics of God suggest he might be willing to listen to our prayers?

Mark 1:40-41

Psalm 145:10-21

4. What characteristics of God suggest that we might have some difficulty approaching him in prayer?

Leviticus 11:44-45

Psalm 11:4-7

Psalm 130:1-3

1 John 1:5

1 Timothy 6:15-16

2. How to approach an unapproachable God

From what we have looked at so far, prayer seems both an exciting possibility and a practical impossibility! God is the all-powerful creator and ruler of the world, who delights to show kindness to those who call upon him. And yet he is the blindingly holy, righteous God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, and does not leave the guilty unpunished.

How can we have any relationship with a God such as this, when we are the sinful and imperfect people that we are? How can we approach the one who dwells in unapproachable light? And if we cannot approach him with any confidence, how can we hope to speak with him, to make requests and expect him to answer? *How can sinners pray to a holy God?*

The answer to this question is found in the unfolding story of the Bible. It begins with the account of how God created mankind, along with the world and everything in it. It tells how mankind rebelled against God and was ejected from his holy presence, and how a powerful angel with a flaming sword was stationed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden to make any return impossible.

In many ways, the angel with the flaming sword is a symbol of the problem all mankind faces. The way to God is blocked, and we have no way through. As the story of the Bible unfolds, God himself sets about to remedy the situation. He takes the initiative to re-establish a relationship with his rebel creation.

It is very important that we understand how this new relationship with God comes about, what it's like, and where it's heading. If we can grasp these simple but crucial things, we will already be well on the way to understanding prayer.



Investigate

Romans 8 is an awesome chapter, and we cannot mine all its riches in this study. For our purposes, let us see what it says about the new relationship that God establishes with mankind.

1. Read Romans 8:1-17.

In this passage, two ways of life are contrasted—what we once were, and what we now are.

- a. What were we once captive to?
- b. What used to be our attitude to God?
- c. What is our new relationship with God like (see esp. vv. 1, 6, 10, 15-16)?
- d. What role does Christ have in establishing this new relationship (see esp. vv. 1-3)?
- e. Looking mainly at verses 9-16, what role does the Spirit have:
 - in making us one with Christ?
 - in our relationship with the Father?
 - in our daily lives?

2. Read Romans 8:12-25.

a. What belongs to the Christian now, and what is yet to come?

b. What is the nature of the Christian life now, from these verses?

3. Try to write a brief summary of what it means to be a Christian from all that you have studied in Romans 8.

3. Bold I approach

When we look at God, at how high and holy he is, and how low and sinful we are, the possibility of successful prayer seems remote indeed. And yet, because of the saving work of Jesus, we are raised up from our low position, and granted free access to God the Father Almighty. As Charles Wesley so beautifully put it:

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne
and claim the crown through Christ my own.*

If we can grasp the truth of this, and let it penetrate our minds, then we are already well on the way to understanding prayer. For the new relationship Christians have with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, is the beginning and end of true prayer.

4. We have thought about how God's character makes prayer possible. Is there anything about God that *demands* prayer, that makes it a necessity?