

“A GUIDE TO PRAYER”: PRACTICAL HELP FROM ISAAC WATTS

Most of us know Isaac Watts as the great 18th Century hymn writer who gave us songs like, “I Sing the Mighty Power of God,” “Joy to the World,” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” But he was also more than a hymn writer. He was a pastor who led the congregation of Mark Lane Chapel in London for 46 years (1702–1748, the year of his death). And, he was the author of more than ten books. One of these books, called *A Guide to Prayer*, offers some of the most helpful advice on the subject that I have ever encountered. What follows is a partial summary of this work.¹

I. Introduction: What is Prayer?

Prayer is “the address of a creature on earth to God in heaven about everything that concerns his God, his neighbour or himself, in this world or in the world to come. It is the conversation which God allows us to maintain with himself above, while we are here below. It is that language in which a creature communicates with his Creator and in which the soul of a saint often gets near to God, experiences great delight and, as it were, dwells with his heavenly Father for a short time before he comes to heaven.”

“Prayer is a part of divine worship that is required of all men, and is to be performed either with the voice or only in the heart...It is commanded to individuals in their private lives...and in the midst of the business of life...It belongs also to communities, whether they be natural, as families; or civil, as corporations, parliaments, courts, or societies for trade and business; and to religious communities...It is required of the churches especially, for the house of God is the house of prayer.

II. The Parts of Prayer

Prayer is an act of worship. To understand the truth of this more fully, it will be helpful to consider each of the different parts of prayer. (NOTE: Each of these parts can be found in the various prayers of the Bible, but we shouldn't think that every prayer we offer must contain every one of these parts!)

- A. Invocation.** In the invocation we begin our address to God. It may include these three things:

¹ I am utilizing Isaac Watts, *A Guide to Prayer*, reprint ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001). The original work, available online, was published in 1715.

1. Mention of one or more of the names or titles of God. (“Our Father who art in heaven...”) In this way we indicate and acknowledge the person to whom we pray.
2. A declaration of our desire and design to worship him (“hallowed by your name...”)
3. A desire for his assistance and acceptance (Cf. Ps 5:2—“harken to the voice of my cry...”)

B. Adoration. In adoration we give honor to God. It may include these four things...

1. A mention of his nature as God
2. A mention of his many attributes
3. A mention of his many works
4. A mention of his relation to us

C. Confession. Our confession may include these four things...

1. A humble confession of the lowliness of our nature
2. A confession of our sins
3. A confession that we are worthy of punishment
4. A confession of our needs and sorrows

D. Petition. This is where we offer our specific prayer requests / intercessions

1. A request for deliverance from evil
2. A request for good things to be bestowed on us
 - a. On us as individuals
 - b. On our church and on the Church
 - c. On our nation and on the world

E. Pleading. This is where we “argue our case with him in a fervent yet humble manner”

1. Plead from the greatness of our needs, dangers, and sorrows
2. Plead on the basis of God’s nature and character
3. Plead on the basis of our relationship to God
4. Plead on the basis of God’s promises to us as his children
5. Plead on the basis of our desire to see God glorified
6. Plead on the basis of his past answers to prayer

7. Plead in the name of Jesus (Cf. John 16:23-24)

F. Self-Dedication.

1. A profession of our relationship to God
2. A profession of our former transactions with God
3. A present surrender of ourselves to God
4. A profession of our humble and holy resolutions to be the Lord's forever

G. Thanksgiving. To give thanks is to acknowledge the bounty of that hand from which we receive our blessings

1. Those benefits which God has bestowed on us without our asking
2. Those benefits we have received as answers to prayer

H. Blessing. Expressions of our joy in God

1. Mentioning the many attributes and glories of God with inward joy, satisfaction, and pleasure
2. Wishing that the glories of God may forever continue, and rejoicing at the assurance that they will

I. Amen. This is the conclusion of our prayer

1. Expressing belief in all that we have said about God
2. A wishing and desiring to obtain all that we have prayed for
3. A confirmation of all the pledges we have made to God
4. A hope and sure expectation that God has heard us and will answer in a manner that is "agreeable to our truest interest and the designs of his own glory."

III. The Extremes to Avoid in Prayer

A. Confining ourselves entirely to pre-composed forms of prayer

1. It much hinders the free exercise of our own thoughts and desires, which is the chief work and business of prayer.
2. Truly pious thoughts and affections of the heart are wrought in us by the Spirit of God.
3. It promotes, and results in, spiritual sloth

4. It leads us into the danger of hypocrisy and mere lip-service
5. It is very apt to make our spirits cold and flat, formal and indifferent in our devotion. In other words, the frequent repetition of the same words does not always awaken the same affections in our hearts as extemporaneous prayers.
6. The duty of prayer is very useful to reveal to us the frame of our own spirits

B. Neglecting entirely preparation for prayer and relying only upon sudden motions

1. A matter as important as prayer cannot be done well without some forethought
2. The heart should be prepared before the tongue addresses God
3. There can be no such thing as learning to pray in a regular way without it
4. Due preparation for prayer is the way to serve God with our best

IV. The Expression of Prayer

- A. Choose manners of expression that exactly answer the ideas of your mind, and that are fitted to your sense and apprehension of things.** The design of prayer is to tell God the inward thoughts of your heart. So speak the words of your heart. Aim for honesty, not eloquence.
- B. Choose a natural way of speaking.** Avoid foreign and uncommon words, expressions which are too philosophical, and avoid long trains of unclear metaphors. Avoid wordiness and obscurity of expression. Don't adopt a special prayer language.
- C. Let your language be grave and decent.** Avoid speaking with undue familiarity, while also avoiding glittering language and affected style. Speak in a manner that is appropriate to the person you are addressing.
- D. Remember that prayers are offered to God, not to the people around you.** Don't preach or teach in your prayers. Just express your heart to God.

V. The Graces of Prayer

There are spiritual graces which are both prerequisite to prayer, and which are cultivated by the act of prayer.

- A. **Faith** (Cf. Heb. 11:6)
- B. **Solemnity**
- C. **Heavenly-mindedness**
- D. **Sincerity** (in our expressions of praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition, etc)
- E. **Watchfulness.** Our thoughts must not be allowed to wander among the creatures and rove to the ends of the earth when we come to converse with the high and holy God.
- F. **Pleasure / Delight**

VI. The Spirit of Prayer

Prayer is a serious matter and a solemn responsibility. But we can take heart in the fact that the Spirit of God is ever-present to assist us in our times of prayer (Rom. 8:26, Gal 4:6, Eph. 6:18). Here are some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit assists us:

- A. **He bestows upon us our natural capacities**, which enable us to pray (James 1:17)
- B. **He blesses our diligence in reading, hearing, meditating, and studying the Scriptures**, which greatly informs and affects our prayers
- C. **He inclines our hearts to pray**
- D. **He often, though his work in our lives, supplies us with the content for prayer** (Rom. 8:26)
- E. **He enlivens those graces in us which are suited to the duty of prayer**

V. The Motives for Prayer

- A. **There is such a thing as correspondence with heaven, and prayer is a great part of it while we dwell on earth**
- B. **The Scriptures tell us to pray.** Shall we neglect this sacred duty and delight?

- C. The prayers of his saints bring pleasure to God**
- D. The prayers of his saints bring honor to God**
- E. God is pleased to use the prayers of his saints to accomplish his purposes in the world.**