

“Of all the spiritual disciplines, prayer is often the most neglected. Yet when you look at the Scripture page after page and verse after verse exhorts us to seek the face of God through prayer! What are we missing? What has gone wrong? In this book, J.D. Greear not only provides the answers but gives us a powerful and beautiful path forward to what has become one of the most neglected but desperately needed aspects of our walks with Christ.”

Dr. Matt Carter, Lead Pastor, Sagemont Church, Houston, Texas

“If you’re like me, when you noticed this book on prayer, you might have thought, ‘Oh no! Not prayer again!’ Why is that? Why do we groan about prayer? Maybe it’s because we’re all too familiar with our prayerlessness, our guilt, and our failure. I get that... and the great news is that so does my friend J.D. With a pastor’s heart, a firm grasp on Scripture, and a winsome, down-to-earth way of writing, he will draw you into the exciting world of joyful, bold, patient prayer. Pick up this book, read it, and then start talking to your Father who loves to hear your voice.”

Elyse Fitzpatrick, Author, *Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women*

“This book is for people like me: prayer weaklings. We’ve all heard about prayer warriors. Perhaps we even know a few. But it’s the prayer weaklings that need help, and this book bent my wobbly knees and helped me cry out to my Father. I hope it helps you too.”

Rebecca McLaughlin, Author, *Confronting Christianity*

“I met J.D. in the late 1990s, and back then he was talking about planting thousands upon thousands of churches around the world so that the gospel could be heard by everyone. And even then, at the foundation of this audacious goal was a deep dependence upon prayer. J.D. is going to teach you how to pray and why we pray, and as you learn to pray, your life will be transformed.”

Dr. Derwin L. Gray, Lead Pastor, Transformation Church, Indian Land, South Carolina; Author, *God, Do You Hear Me?*

“This book is biblical, realistic, and above all hopeful. As a lifelong struggler when it comes to praying, I’m always on the lookout for books and resources that remind me of the privilege and possibility of a healthy prayer life. Short and punchy without losing theological depth, Just Ask just might be the devotional game-changer you’ve been looking for.”

Dave Gobbett, Lead Minister, Highfields Church, Cardiff, Wales

JUST

J . D . G R E E A R

ASK

The logo features a stylized, light gray bird-like shape above the text. The text 'thegoodbook' is in a lowercase, sans-serif font, and 'COMPANY' is in a smaller, uppercase, sans-serif font below it.
thegoodbook
COMPANY

*To my mother, Carol, who taught me to pray
by praying for me, over me, and in front of me
for as long as I can remember.*

Just Ask

© J.D. Greear, 2021

Published by:

The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk

thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

J.D. Greear has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

Cover Design by Faceout Studio, Spencer Fuller

Design and Art Direction by André Parker

ISBN: 9781784986360 | Printed in the USA

CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by Paul E. Miller</i>	9
Introduction	13
Part One: <i>Why We Don't Pray</i>	
Chapter 1: Honestly, Does Prayer Really Do Any Good?	23
Chapter 2: But Seriously, Why Isn't God Answering Me?	43
Chapter 3: Do My Prayers Change God's Mind?	61
Part Two: <i>How to Pray</i>	
Chapter 4: How <i>Not</i> to Pray	77
Chapter 5: Amazed by God	91
Chapter 6: Ask Your Father	107
Chapter 7: On Praying For Guidance	125
Conclusion	143
Bibliography	149
Acknowledgments	151

FOREWORD

At a recent Christmas, I gave one of my teenage grandsons the bestselling book *Make Your Bed*. Written by Admiral McRaven, the former leader of the Navy Seals, this book gets down to the basics of life. Confused about your purpose in life? Make your bed! Not sure what direction to go in? Make your bed! The logic is delightful. Don't get lost in mind games—do something specific, concrete and helpful first thing in the morning. Make your bed!

J.D. Greear does the same thing with *Just Ask!* Don't get all twisted up into theological knots as to whether prayer changes things—Just Ask! Don't give into despair over something really hard and painful in your life—Just Ask! That's the wisdom of J.D.'s book. It's a simple primer of the basics of getting started with a life of prayer.

I added the exclamation mark to the title. Why? Because the “!” conveys the simplicity of asking. “Just Ask!” That's all you have to do. It's not that complicated. It also conveys the urgency. Do it today! Don't wait!

I often encourage people who are at ground zero in their prayer life to begin with just five minutes a day. Just give me five. With a couple of young men I was discipling, even five minutes proved to be daunting, so I dropped

it down to one minute! And yes, once they got a taste of praying, of seeing that their Father really does hear them, that time slowly expanded. Don't overthink prayer.

Just ask.

Don't let the book's simplicity fool you. Dr. Greear does tackle and answer some of the hard questions about prayer, but he doesn't get stuck in a morass. He channels the simplicity of Jesus telling his disciples to become like little children. Little children know how to ask.

Nowhere in Scripture has the simplicity of asking struck me more than in Isaiah's great lament over the destruction of the temple in Isaiah 63 – 64. At the very center of this lament, Isaiah opens up his heart and shares why it is broken:

*From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him. (Isaiah 64:4)*

That last line is the heart of a praying life. It's the simple knowledge that our Father acts for those who wait for him. There's no magic in prayer in and of itself. The "magic" is in my Father, who loves me, is for me, and acts on my behalf.

It's easy, especially as we "mature" as Christians, to miss the simplicity of just asking. Recently, my assistant, Donna, with a few deft strokes, solved an IT problem with my computer that had been bedeviling me. I was so surprised at her quickness that I asked her, "How did you do that?" She said, "I prayed." I started laughing. You wouldn't know that I'd written a book on prayer from the way I handled my IT problem. I hadn't prayed. She had. I so easily lose the childlike simplicity of "just ask."

My grandson started making his bed. You can get down on your knees at your bedside and become like a little child and just ask. It's that simple. This book will help you bend your knees and hold them in position for five minutes. If you endure, you'll be amazed at what your Father does!

Paul E. Miller, Author of "*A Praying Life*" and "*J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*"

INTRODUCTION

Let's be honest: most of us do not have a healthy, happy prayer life.

I'm not saying that to judge you. (I don't even know you.) I'm saying that because it's my experience, both personally and as a pastor. We struggle with prayer. The theologian D.A. Carson once said that if you really want to embarrass the average Christian, just ask them to tell you the details of their personal prayer life.

I wish he were wrong. But he's not.

"Mature" Christians often have an excellent grasp of Scripture. Many have wonderful stories of how they shared the gospel with others. More still can point to their sacrificial commitment to ministry or their faithful, consistent giving. But our prayer lives? Not so impressive.

One survey done at a major seminary found that only six percent of the students asked would set aside a time to pray each day.

Six.

And here's why our lackluster prayer lives should concern us: Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The only way to be connected to him, he said, is

through abiding (15:1), and abiding implies praying. Apart from prayer, nothing happens.

“Nothing” is a pretty all-encompassing word, and Jesus chose it deliberately. Those who don’t know how to pray will see little of lasting significance remain from their lives. The great 18th-century English evangelist John Wesley famously said, “I am convinced God does nothing on earth except in answer to prayer.”

Jesus told his followers, “When you pray...” because he saw it as an expectation, not an optional extra for super-Christians (Luke 11:1). His half-brother James declared to a struggling church that the reason they did not have was because they did not ask (James 4:2).

If we’re not asking, we’re missing something big. We might, in fact, be missing everything.

JESUS’ MOST IMPORTANT DISCIPLINE

You might think that if there were ever one person who didn’t need to pray, it would be Jesus. I mean, when you’re God the Son, shouldn’t that give you sufficient self-confidence to go through the day? Yet the Gospels show us that Jesus’ life was saturated with prayer. As a man, Jesus depended on communion with the Father for his strength and the fullness of the Spirit for his power. Prayer wasn’t an optional add-on—some “best practice” that he wanted to model for us. It was a non-negotiable daily staple in his life: more essential to him, it seems, than eating or sleeping.

I know that’s a big statement, so walk with me through Luke’s Gospel for a minute and let me show this to you. Before Jesus was baptized, he prayed (Luke 3:21). As his

ministry and his popularity grew, Luke records him more frequently withdrawing to pray (5:16). Before he chose his disciples, he spent the whole night in prayer (6:12). Before he presented those disciples with the ultimate question—“Who do you say that I am?”—he bathed the experience in prayer (9:18-20). After they had confessed him to be the Christ, the Son of God, he headed up a mountain with three of them to—you guessed it—pray (9:28). As he drew near to his death and experienced the agony of its anticipation, he prayed (22:39-46). In the hours before his arrest, he prayed for Peter because he knew that while he was walking towards his death for Peter, Peter would be busy denying knowing him (22:31-34). While he was nailed to the cross, he prayed for the men holding the hammers (23:33-34). And what did he do with his very last breath? He prayed: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (23:46).

When the disciples wanted to be taught by Jesus, they asked him to “teach us to *pray*” (Luke 11:1, my emphasis). Think about that. They had heard him preach great sermons. They had seen him perform great miracles. But they didn’t say to him, *Lord, teach us to preach like you or Lord, teach us to perform miracles like you*. Instead, they said, *Lord, teach us to pray like you*. Evidently they saw that as the key—as the source of his power. If they could pray like he did, they could expect the power he had.

The point Luke is making throughout his Gospel is this: if Jesus—the divine Son of God, dwelling as a man in human flesh—felt like he could do nothing on his own and knew he needed his Father’s help, strength, and guidance, why would we think we are any different? If Jesus—who had a world to save and a church to build—took time to ask his Father to give him what he needed, why would we think

we are too busy to pray or too strong to need to? Why would we go through our lives with so little prayer?

Do we honestly think of ourselves as more capable than Jesus?

FOLLOWING HIS EXAMPLE

The early church were fully aware of their insufficiency for their task, which is why we see them follow the example of their Lord's devotion to prayer. Jesus had taught the apostles: "A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (John 13:16). Thus, the early church prayed, just as their Master had. They weren't greater than the Master. He sought the Father desperately in prayer, an example the early church imitated closely. Just as in the book of Luke the author wants to show us that Jesus depended on God in prayer, in his second volume—the book of Acts—he seeks to show us that the foundation of the early church's ministry was prayer. It was the secret behind all the explosive growth of the church in that first generation.

Let's quickly track that now through Acts. As the disciples waited for the coming of the Spirit, all the believers devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:14). When they chose a new apostle to replace Judas, they prayed (1:24-25). After the Spirit added 3,000 to the church on the day of Pentecost, they devoted themselves to praying—again, all of them (2:42). When they faced persecution, they responded in prayer (4:24-30). The apostles, when the church grew quickly and they realized that they were struggling with the extent of their ministry, declared they must prioritize "prayer and ...

the ministry of the word” (6:4). By the way, don’t miss that the apostles saw praying as being as central to their leadership calling as preaching! In the original language, “prayer” and “ministry of the word” are written to show two equal things. Prayer, for them, was not merely a preparation for ministry; it was ministry. It was what Jesus had sent them into the world to do.

So, we see these Christians praying for the sick (9:40). They prayed for people to be released from prison (12:5). They prayed as God raised up missionaries (13:2-3). They prayed before they appointed elders (14:23).

I could go on. The point is that just as it was for Jesus, so it was for the disciples: prayer was fundamental to everything they did. Everything.

So here is my concern for our churches and our individual Christian lives today: what was fundamental for the early church has become supplemental in the 21st-century church.

Is it any wonder, then, that we are often strangers to the power that the early church enjoyed? Should it be a surprise that we lack the joy that the early Christians experienced?

We wonder why God does not do great things through us like we see in the early days of the church. But we don’t ask him for those great things like they did.

We wonder why our lives don’t brim with the exuberance and joy we see in Jesus and the apostles. But we don’t spend time with the Father like they did.

We need, all over again, to ask Jesus to teach us to pray. That is the very simple aim of this book: that as you look

at what God says about speaking to him (and hearing from him), the privilege and joy of prayer would be rekindled in you.

Here's my one driving conviction behind this book: we can enjoy the same source of power that our Lord and the early church did when we learn to depend on the Father like they did. The prophet Isaiah tells us that his arm is not shortened that it cannot save, nor his ear dull that he cannot hear (Isaiah 59:1). And he has not changed.

We just need to ask.