



"I'll pray  
for you."

I imagine someone has said this to you recently—most likely the person who gave you this leaflet. How did you feel about that?

Hopefully you were at least able to appreciate it as an expression of their care and concern for you. But how else you react might depend on what you think it means to be 'prayed for', and who you think is being prayed to. If the person who said they'd pray for you has also given you this to read, it's no doubt because they'd love to give you a little glimpse into a very important dimension of their own life and to help you understand what prayer means to them.

## What is prayer?

'Prayer' means different things to different people, doesn't it?

For some it's just a way of saying "I'll be thinking of you", or "I'm sending positive thoughts to you", or "Wishing you all the best". Political leaders often trot the word out after a terrible tragedy: "Our thoughts *and prayers* are with those involved and their families".

In some religions, a 'prayer wheel' is used in combination with a mantra to earn merit and good karma. In others,

prayer is a ritualistic repetition of religious words multiple times a day.

But Christians, who gain their understanding from the Bible, mean something quite simple by the idea of prayer.

Prayer is just speaking to God about something.

When I say “speaking”, I don’t necessarily mean saying words aloud. Sometimes we do pray aloud, especially if we are praying with other people, but sometimes we pray just using our mind’s internal voice. Either way, prayer is about **saying words**: plain, intelligible, not-particularly-religious words in whatever language we happen to speak. Quite often the words are a request for help of some sort, but not always.

So the speaking side of prayer is quite simple.

But prayer is not just speaking; prayer is speaking to *someone*. And who we speak to... well, that’s where it gets profound and extraordinary.

## Who do we pray to?

The Bible teaches that there is only *one* true God (although there are plenty of pretenders). And the one true God is the God who made us and indeed made the whole universe.

So above all he is obviously very powerful. (Making humans, let alone universes, is generally regarded as a pretty complex and difficult thing to do.)

But God is not only a God who *creates*; he also *relates* to what he has made in a personal way. He reveals himself to us, particularly by *speaking* and telling us things about his character and his purpose for us and for our world.

The two key takeaways when it comes to thinking about

prayer are that God is **powerful** and God is **personal**.

In fact, God is remarkably personal—so personal that in an amazing act of humility, he *became human*. He came to earth as a man, Jesus of Nazareth. And so God, at that point in human history, revealed himself and his love for us in marvellous new detail. One part of the Bible puts it like this: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (1 John chapter 4, verse 9).

So now we have three takeaways about the God we pray to: he is powerful, he is personal, and he **loves** us.

## Who can pray?

When Jesus’ followers asked him to teach them to pray, he taught them a prayer that has come to be known as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, and told them they should start their prayers by calling God “Our Father” (see Matthew chapter 6, verse 9).

But can anyone call God “Father”? Does everyone have the privilege of praying with the confidence of being a son or daughter of God?

The Bible’s answer is very frank. None of us deserves to be treated as God’s child when we are in fact rebels against God, all of us being guilty of rejecting God or ignoring him.

In his kindness, though, God sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our rebellion by laying down his life for us and being crucified on a cross. When we trust what Jesus has done for us, God forgives us and brings us into his family. It’s that step of trusting that makes it possible

for us to become one of his children. In fact, the Bible calls the process 'adoption'.

When Jesus knew he was soon to be crucified, the Bible records him being "deeply distressed and troubled" about what was about to happen to him. And so he prays to his Father in heaven, beginning as the Lord's Prayer does but adding a word for emphasis: "Abba, Father," says Jesus (Mark chapter 14, verse 36). The additional word 'Abba' is an Aramaic term that experts find hard to translate into English. It conveys a sense of greater familiarity; a less formal form of address towards a father. I suppose you could say it is the address used by someone with special privileges.

But here's the thing: when God adopts us as his children—a process enabled by what Jesus has done for us—we become adopted children of God not only in some formal, legal sense, but also with all the privileges of a true child (the same privileges of *the* true child, Jesus). So, like Jesus, we also can call God "Abba, Father" (see Romans chapter 8, verse 15).

It is those who are adopted by God who have the special privilege of being able to pray to God as his children.

Does this mean God is deaf toward those who are not his children, if they should happen to pray to him?

Well, the Bible certainly makes clear that God is compassionate, and so he may in his kindness hear such prayers. So I would certainly encourage anyone to pray and seek his help, even as those who understand they are not yet adopted as children of God through Jesus.

But those with the privilege of being adopted are urged in the Bible to “approach God’s throne of grace *with confidence*, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews chapter 4, verse 16).

It’s not that such people are more special or deserving. They just have a privilege they didn’t earn, but which Jesus has given them—the confidence to pray to God as their **Father**, not just as their Creator. And it’s a privilege that is given to all who put their trust in Jesus.

## What can we pray for?

Having explored the profound answer to the question of who can pray, we now turn to a sweetly simple question: What can we pray for?

The simple answer is: **anything**. Everything! Big things, small things. Major sickness, minor anxieties. God loves us so much that he cares about all aspects of our lives. Jesus put it this way:

**“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew chapter 10, verses 29 to 31)**

The person who has said "I'll pray for you" knows this. Yes, they've said it because they care about you. But they've also said it because they know that God cares about you, and that he is powerful and able to help. So it's their undeserved privilege to pray for you and ask God to help in whatever ways you need help.

Does God always give his children what they ask for? No, because even the most privileged children don't always get what they request from their father—especially when those children don't really understand the whole picture. God is a father, not a genie.

But we can be absolutely sure that God is a good Father who wants to do good toward us. Jesus put it very comfortingly:

**"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew chapter 7, verses 9 to 11)**

I hope this explanation has been helpful. And I hope God answers the prayers spoken to him on your behalf.

But do remember this: the privileges of being adopted by God as one of his children are privileges you can have too. Maybe that's something worth asking your praying friend about at some point soon.

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For a concise summary of what it means to be a Christian, you might like to read the presentation at [twowaystolive.com](http://twowaystolive.com).

If you'd like to pray to God yourself, here are some plain words you could use (better still, use your own words and simply talk to him honestly):

**Dear God,**

**I know I haven't treated you as I should, and I know I need to think carefully about what to do about that. But I really need your help at the moment with this really tough situation. Please help. Thank you for your compassion and love.**

**Amen.**

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