



PRAYER

WHAT?, WHY? and HOW?

Some notes for those who are new to prayer – and for those who are not so new

(and perhaps even for those who are MAD at God!)



PRAYER – WHAT?, WHY? and HOW?



A cross designed for holding (see page 16)

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If you rarely pray, or have never prayed by yourself before, these notes are particularly for you. Hopefully, they will also have something for everyone!

Paragraphs in smaller type/italics contain additional notes – mainly Bible references. It may be best to miss these out on a first reading and then follow them up later.

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1. What is prayer?

Talking with God – though not always with words!

What is prayer?

The Bible doesn't answer that question directly. The nearest it comes to that is probably in Jesus' teaching on prayer in Luke 11:2, when he says "When you pray, say 'Father...'".

According to Jesus, praying can mean saying something. More important – **what is said is said to God** (our Father). Prayer is, or, at least, involves, talking with God.

The Bible often tells us about people who pray – people who talk with God – though it doesn't always use the word 'pray'. Right from the beginning, the Bible describes God and human beings 'in conversation'. People seemed to want to pray, or thought they needed to pray, or maybe even thought they had to pray. And God evidently wanted them to pray – he responded (for example, Genesis 18:23-33) or, quite often, started the 'conversation' (for example, Exodus 3:4). You can find some more examples in the paragraphs in smaller italic type at the end of this section.

(If you are unfamiliar with the Bible and Bible references, take a look at Appendix 1 – What is the Bible?.)

Thinking of prayer as '**Talking with God**' is probably the simplest way to begin to discover what prayer is, and many people understand it that way. But prayer is a lot more than that.

Perhaps the first thing to realise is that to pray doesn't mean we have to say words out loud. God doesn't just hear what we say – he knows our every thought as well (see, for example Psalm 139:1-4). So **a silent thought, or words 'spoken' inwardly, or a time of**

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meditation can be just as much a prayer as words spoken out loud. And 'spoken' prayers do not always have to be intelligible words. A cry of pain – or a shriek of joy – can be prayer. We'll be discovering more of what prayer is as we go on.

The Bible tells us about many different people praying, or talking with God. Usually, the 'conversation' is just between God and one person, for example Jesus in Matthew 26:36-46, Moses in Deuteronomy 9:26, Stephen in Acts 7:59 and Hannah, who prayed both silently (1 Samuel 1:9-18) and aloud (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Sometimes more are involved, for example we read of the whole church praying in Acts 4:23-31.

Most of the psalms are prayers, prayed by people in a variety of situations. Their names sometimes appear at the start of the psalm. They obviously thought it was worth writing their prayers down, perhaps to pray again or so that other people could pray them. Many of the psalms would also be used by the whole community in worship.

Talking and listening

It's important to remember that prayer is not 'one-way'. It's not just people speaking to God; **God speaks to us**. As we've already seen, in the Bible it was often God who started the 'conversation'.

God's 'words' are rarely spoken audibly; when God speaks to us it's usually through our thoughts. It may happen while we are thinking about God, perhaps while we meditate on a Bible story or on a piece of Christian art or music. It may happen when we think about some matter that concerns us, perhaps one for which we need God's guidance or help. But there are no restrictions on when God will choose to speak; it can happen at any time or place.

God may also speak to us through events, or through the words of other people, perhaps when we think about those events or words afterwards. But, however it happens, prayer is two-way

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communication. Prayer is not just talking to God - it's listening to him as well, although the 'listening' is not so much peeling our ears back to catch the sound as being ready to discern what may be from God amongst the many ideas that come into our minds and the many experiences we have.

God spoke to Abram (Abraham) in Genesis 12:1-3. The prophets heard 'the word of the Lord' – for example Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1 and Jonah 1:1. God spoke to Peter as he prayed on the rooftop in Joppa in Acts 10:9-16.

Prayer is...a lot more than talking

Talking, listening, thinking, meditation, silence, cries of joy or of pain – we have already seen that prayer is much more than just talking with God. We will discover more as we go on. Prayer can be an exciting and joyful adventure – even if, at times, it can be frustrating and difficult.

We will think mainly about talking, because it's a good place to start, but feel free to try other ways of praying if you think God is leading you that way.

You may like to look at the meditation in Appendix 3 and the hymn "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire" in Appendix 4; both contain many statements beginning "Prayer is..." and may help you discover something more of the riches of prayer. But don't rush it – leave them for later if you want to move more slowly at first.



2. Why should I pray?

God loves you - he wants your prayers

Prayer involves talking and listening to God and much more besides, but why do it? Some people will have a simple ready answer – they want to ask God for something, or thank him for something. Like the folk in the Bible mentioned above, they want or feel they need to pray.

Wanting to pray is a very good reason to pray, but it isn't the most important reason. The most important reason to pray is that **God wants your prayers**. He loves you, and he wants to hear from you, like a friend who would like a call from you or a father who wants to hear from his child. And he may have something to say to you.

So don't wait until you have something to say to God – just call, even if it's only to do the equivalent of saying 'hello'! Besides, good friends - and lovers - may sometimes just spend time together in silence; spending time in silence with God is actually a very valid way to pray. You don't have speak to each other all the time!

God's love is mentioned many times in the Bible - probably the best known place is John 3:16. But you'll find it, for example, in the Psalms (for example Psalm 100:5) and Paul's letters (for example Romans 5:8 and Romans 8:38-39). Proverbs 15:8 tells us 'the prayer of the upright is his [God's] delight' and Paul tells us to pray in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, and that it's God's will for us to do so ('Rejoice...Pray...Give thanks...for that is the will of God...'). Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer ('Our Father') in Matthew 6:7-13 is virtually a command to pray.

Examples of spending time in silence with God are rarely explicit in the Bible, but the 'sound of sheer silence' in which God spoke to Elijah (1 Kings 19:12) is probably one. Others are Psalm 4:4 ('When you are disturbed...ponder it on your beds, and be silent') and Psalm 131:2 ('I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.').

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And, when Jesus spent the night in prayer (Luke 6:12) it seems unlikely he and the Father spent every moment in animated conversation!

God is your friend - take time to enjoy his company

But the other reason – we want to pray – is almost as important, and not just because we may have something we want to say to God or ask of him.

Being a Christian isn't just a matter of believing certain things or doing certain things. Being a Christian is knowing God, indeed, it's loving God. It's a relationship rather than a religion, and Jesus told us to call God 'Father' (Luke 11:2). God is our loving, caring father, or, if that's not a helpful idea for you, he's our '**best friend**' - Jesus also called his disciples 'friends' (John 15:12-15).

A friend is someone whose company you enjoy – someone you like talking to, listening to, spending time with and sharing activities with. If someone is your friend you both enjoy talking, listening, sharing and just being together. It's what friendship is about, and it's what makes the relationship flourish and grow.

We have that wonderful offer from Jesus to be our friend. What a privilege and a joy! Hopefully, you do think of God, or of Jesus, as your friend. It's what being a Christian is about first and foremost – beliefs and rules come after.

So it's not just that God will want to hear from you, If God is your friend, you'll want to hear from him – and talk to him, share with him and spend time with him. You'll want to spend time enjoying God's company, as you would with any other good friend.

And, of course, that's prayer. You'll want to pray – you'll want to build up and enjoy your friendship with God. If thinking of God as

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your friend seems a little odd at first, praying should soon change that as your relationship builds. And you'll want to pray yourself, not just leave it to someone who leads the prayers at church on Sunday. Besides, you'll want to do it more often than that.

The disciples obviously wanted to pray – they asked Jesus to teach them (Luke 11:1-4) – and in so doing he told them to address God as 'Father'. Jesus often wanted to get away to pray – for example Mark 1:35 (when he made an effort to get up early for it), Matthew 14:23, Luke 5:16, 6:12.

Do you love to sing the hymn 'What a friend we have in Jesus'? It was written back in the 19th century, so for over a hundred years Christians have celebrated the wonderful friendship of Jesus with it. When you sing it, do you really mean it? (The words are reproduced in Appendix 4.)

The purpose of prayer – and more on what prayer is

Building up and enjoying your friendship with God – that's the real purpose of prayer. Not to ask for things or get God to do things, but for you and God to enjoy and grow your relationship with each other. Praying is not something just you do; it's something you and God do together. It's worth remembering that, if God is your friend, you are God's friend. God is someone you love and who loves you, and prayer is the way to enjoy and build up the relationship. That's what prayer is all about – that's what it's **for**.

That's not to say asking plays no part. Asking each other for things or for help is part of any good relationship. Jesus told us to ask (Matthew 7:7) even though he also said that God knows what we want before we ask (Matthew 6:8). Never mind it's saying things God already knows about – telling God about your needs and desires is part of the sharing that builds up the love between you. It's rather like saying 'I love you' to someone; it's good to say it again and again even though they already know it's true. So share your dreams with

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God – and keep on doing it. Also, hopefully, with time, your dreams and God's will align. And God will share some of his dreams with you – he may well ask you for something!

That's a better way to understand what prayer is – not just talking with God but **spending time enjoying God's company** – talking, listening, maybe just spending time in silence together and growing closer together in love. Prayer is spending time with someone who loves you - and doing some of the things lovers do! Why should you pray? The reasons can be summed up by saying you pray because you and God enjoy one another's company.

If you feel God isn't your friend, perhaps it's time he was.

Perhaps you have never thought of prayer as 'enjoying God's company'.

Either way, you could be missing out. Why not go on to the 'How do I start?' section on page 16 and start to build that relationship.

*...Take it to the Lord in prayer;
In his arms he'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.*

(From "What a friend we have in Jesus" – J Scriven)

Or – perhaps there's a problem. If so, the next section may help.

Hang on! I'm not so sure about all this. God doesn't seem very loving or friendly to me!

You're not alone! Some people seem to have a bad experience of God, or an experience which makes them doubt if God loves them – or indeed if he even exists. If this is how you feel, read on.

Perhaps you believe he has dumped on you more than your fair share of problems – sickness, maybe, the untimely death of someone close to you, or the breakup of your family or other relationships. Perhaps you have suffered as a result of some natural catastrophe. Why, you wonder, has God allowed this to happen to you?

Perhaps you feel God has failed to help when you needed him. Perhaps it's something else that's made you angry with God. **But angry or upset with God you are** - if, indeed, he exists. You may well doubt the existence of the loving God the Christian faith teaches – and if he does exist, you want to have a blazing row with him!

If this is you, then feel free to miss out the 'How do I start?' section! Go instead to 'What if I'm MAD at God?' on page 23 - and then have your blazing row!

Or perhaps it's not what God has done or not done that is the problem – it's just that this loving, friendly God is not the one you recognise. Maybe in your understanding God is more of a tyrant – a sort of over-zealous policeman or schoolteacher, watching your every move and looking for an excuse to get you - or send you to hell!

Unfortunately, some people get that impression of God. It's probably the result of some well meant but quite misleading teaching – perhaps by an over-zealous teacher! But, while it is true that God is concerned about our behaviour, and there are passages in the Bible that seem to bear the 'tyrant' image out, overall that tyrant figure is

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not the God portrayed in the Bible or taught by the church. In fact, **God is working very hard to keep you out of hell!** Try going on to the next section, 'How do I start?', and hopefully you will soon get to know God as someone who loves and cares about you.



3. How do I start?

Just say what you want to say...

When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray he didn't give them any special things to do. He didn't say 'Kneel down' or 'Stand up' or 'Put your hands together', or 'Hold your hands in the air'. He didn't tell them it had to be done at any special time or place.

All he said was, 'When you pray, say ...' and then gave them some words to say.

You can read the story in Luke 11:1-4. The words he gave them are a shortened version of what we now know as 'the Lord's Prayer', or the 'Our Father'.

Praying can be done at any time, in any place, and in any position! All you have to do is say what you want to say – or think the thought, or cry out, or whatever. The only difference between a prayer and anything else you might say (or think, or cry out) is that it **really is what you want to say to God** - and that **you believe he hears**.

Some tips...

However, there are some points that may help. Although prayer doesn't have to be spoken, Jesus told his disciples to say some words. Jesus knew it would be easier to start with a spoken prayer. So, if you are starting to pray for the first time, or fairly new to praying, try using some words. They can be spoken out loud, or in a tiny whisper, which only you and God can hear, or spoken inwardly – imagining yourself saying them without actually making a sound. Remember that God doesn't just hear what we say – he knows what is going on in our minds and hearts.

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Again, praying doesn't have to be done in a particular place, but Jesus did suggest it should be done in a room privately (Matthew 6:6). He was thinking about people who made a show of prayer – not something we are likely to do – but it's a good idea anyway to get away alone somewhere quiet. Other people and other things will be less of a distraction, and you will probably prefer it particularly if you are going to pray out loud. But, if you can't get away, don't worry – you can pray anywhere.

It's not a bad idea to pray out loud when you begin, but you may well find that, even if you do that, once you get used to praying you prefer to pray by 'speaking inwardly', or even just by holding what you want to pray about in your mind before God. But stick with praying out loud if you prefer.

It may help to close your eyes to reduce distractions, or you may prefer to look at something such as a cross or crucifix, a candle, an icon, or a picture. And, although you don't have to kneel, or stand, or hold your hands together or in the air, if you find it helps, do it! Holding a cross may also help – you can get crosses that are made for holding. See the pictures on pages 2 and 46.

Another thing that will probably help, at least when you begin, is to clearly address your prayers to God. There's nothing complicated in that – just a matter of saying, for example, 'God, please do such and such,' rather than just 'Please do such and such'. If you prefer, you can address your prayer to Jesus ('Jesus, please do...') or use another title such as 'Father' – Jesus told his disciples to use that. You can say something like 'Loving God', or 'Lord Jesus', or 'Almighty God' ('almighty' means 'all-powerful'). All this doesn't mean that God will be more likely to hear – but it does help you to be clearer that you are not just making a wish list but actually praying, and indeed seeking to build up your relationship with God.

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Using titles like 'Lord' and 'Almighty God' will help to remind you that having God as your friend is an enormous privilege as well as a joy. Having God as your friend doesn't make him any less God. When you pray you are indeed spending time with a friend, but the friend is no less than Almighty God. Recognising that – recognising the privilege – is part of the joy of the friendship.

When Jesus taught his disciples to call God 'Father' (Luke 11:2) he added 'Hallowed [holy, greatly respected, revered] be your name. Your kingdom come.' The intimate relationship is with one who is holy, revered, a king.

But what shall I say?

You may already know what you want to say to God, but here are a few suggestions. We have already seen that you can ask God to do something, or you can ask God for something, perhaps something you need or that you think will help you. As has already been suggested, share your dreams!

If you are facing a difficult task or a big decision, try asking God for help or guidance. If you are unwell, try asking God for healing. You can always ask God for help and guidance anyway - even in the small things of life. And you can always ask to be reminded constantly of his love and presence; you can enjoy God's company all day, not just when you make a special effort to pray.

It's as well to remember, however, that when Jesus encouraged his disciples to ask for things in prayer he usually told them to ask 'in his name' (see, for example, John 16:23-24). In simple terms that means we should ask for things that we believe Jesus would ask for, or would want us to have, not for just anything that takes our fancy!

You can also ask for things for other people. Praying for or on behalf of others is known as intercession. You can pray for members of your

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family, friends, people in some kind of need, church and community leaders – the list could be endless. Don't try to do too much – pray for whoever and whatever really matters or seems important to you at the time. You don't have to pray for everyone and everything every time!

But praying is more than just putting 'God please give me...' in front of a wish list, however well-meaning that wish list may be. For example, you may want to say 'Thank you' to God for something that has happened, or that he has already done for you. You may want to say 'Sorry' for something that you have done and now regret – and ask him to forgive you. And you may want to say something like, 'God, I love you' or 'God, you're wonderful'. Hopefully you will want to say all of these at some time. But **don't say things you don't really mean**. God knows what you really think! Remember the main reason why it is you pray – not to tell God things he already knows and cares about (and that's, well, everything!), but to enjoy his company, for him to enjoy yours and to build up the love between you!

You can, of course, say the Lord's Prayer ('Our Father'), which is what Jesus taught the disciples to say. If you're new to praying and find it a bit difficult to follow, ask someone for help. You may also find it helpful to say prayers other people have written. There are many books of prayers published, and you might find the 'official' service books of the Church of England or other churches useful, such as the Church of England's 'Common Worship' and 'Common Prayer'. You may also find some of the Psalms in the Bible helpful.

If you have never prayed by yourself before...

If you have never prayed by yourself before, or hardly ever, you might like to use these words:

Lord Jesus,

I want to learn to pray.

I want to discover what it's like having you as a friend.

Please help me to do this.

Thank you for wanting to be my friend.

There's nothing 'magic' or sacred about those words, so if you want to change them to make them more personal, to say exactly what **you** think, do so. The important thing is that you really mean what you say. And you can say them more than once - if you said them today, be persistent, say them again tomorrow!

It's not that repeating them will make it more likely that God will hear or respond. Repeating a prayer which is our heartfelt desire is a sign of our earnestness and makes **us** more ready to receive God's response. So carry on saying it but, as you go on, try adding some new words of your own. Perhaps you could thank God for something. Or, if you have a problem, ask for his help.

I want to pray, but words fail me...

You may have a problem you want to bring to God, but just can't find words to express how you feel, or don't know what to ask for. Or perhaps you just find words or speaking difficult, or the whole idea of talking to God seems odd or embarrassing.

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The first thing is to remember that, as has been said before, you don't have to use words. For many people words are helpful, but not you – at least not now. But God knows your deepest thoughts and if you really want to pray just hold what concerns you in your mind in whatever way you can and God will know about it. More than that – St Paul tells us that God himself, by the Holy Spirit working within you, actually prays on your behalf! Paul says, '...we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.' (Romans 8:26) 'Intercedes' here just means 'prays'. You may find that difficult to understand, but rest assured, God hears you even if you can't speak or don't know what to say! Remember, we saw earlier that sitting in silence with God is actually a very valid way to pray. In fact, as you get more used to prayer, you will probably find that holding whatever concerns you in your mind before God is the best or the only way to pray about a lot of things.

Then what?

Whether you have prayed out loud, in a tiny whisper, in the silence of your thoughts or through the 'sighings of the Spirit', believe God has heard you! Believe he will respond! But remember that 'answers to prayer' are not always what we expect or even think we need. 'No', 'Wait' and 'I've got something else planned which is even better!' are answers we may get. And not all prayers need 'answers' in the ordinary sense of the word. Saying 'Thank you, God, you're wonderful' doesn't call for an 'answer'. But if we really mean it when we say it we are already enjoying God's company more and getting closer to him in our love!

And don't stop there! Praying is building a relationship and you have to keep on doing it! A 'best friend' isn't likely to be someone you have only ever spoken to once or twice! Pray again, perhaps the next day, and again the next. Get to know God better each time! Get to

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love God better each time! In practice, a regular daily habit of prayer has much to recommend it - and you can do it more often if you wish!



4. What if I'm MAD at God?

You aren't the first or the only person to be mad at God! And some of the people who got upset with him were in the Bible!

How about the person who wrote Psalm 44, who said, 'Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? **Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?**' (Psalm 44:23-24). Or Psalm 13 - 'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? ... How long must I bear pain in my soul...' (Psalm 13:1-2). And there are quite a few other examples.

If you want to look, try Psalm 10, Psalm 22, Psalm 74, Psalm 88 and the second part of Psalm 89. Jeremiah the prophet had a moan too (Jeremiah 20:7-18), and Moses got a bit exasperated (Exodus 33:12-17.)

These guys weren't afraid to confront God with what they regarded as his shortcomings! Their language may sound a bit quaint, but there is no mistaking that they were fed up with him – and they said so.

But the point is, it was to God that they said it. If prayer is talking with God, **talking can include having a row!** They knew that what God wants to hear is not pious clichés or bogus claims of undying love but the honest truth. And if the honest truth was that they felt bad, mad or fed up they said so.

If you're mad at God - give it a try! Even if your approach up to now is to say you want nothing to do with God, or even doubt if he exists, try making an exception and see what happens. You can even say something like, '**God, if you do actually exist, why have you done this to me?**' Try it a few times – and give God a chance to make some response. If he exists, and if he loves you, he will – though the response might come in a way you don't expect!

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Even **Jesus got mad at God**. Hanging there on the cross, which must have been enough to put anyone off, he said, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) Actually he was quoting from one of the psalms, Psalm 22. It probably summed up what he thought pretty well. He must have said those words with feeling! But his saying them didn't stop God raising him from the dead!

God didn't respond by sending the angel Gabriel to take Jesus down from the cross and nurse him back to health. He had something better planned – resurrection – and that entailed letting Jesus suffer and die. God's response to our getting mad at him may not be to do what might seem to us to be the obvious like providing immediate relief. But give it a try – tell God how you really feel about him!



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A Crucifix.

Jesus' suffering and death are central to our understanding of God and of the message of the Christian faith. Many churches have a crucifix or other depiction of Jesus' death in a prominent place such as on the altar. This one is in St James, Riddlesdown, Purley, Surrey, UK

5.And finally...

These notes don't tell you everything there is to know about prayer. They just give you a few hints - and, hopefully, help you to get started if you haven't already. If you want to think about prayer some more, you may like to read Appendix 2 - 'Prayer - A Reflection', Appendix 3 - 'Prayer - A Meditation' and the hymns in Appendix 4. Some of these have already been mentioned and they say more about prayer, including saying some of what is in these notes a little differently.



Appendices 1-4 follow

APPENDIX 1 - What is the Bible?

Are you unfamiliar with the Bible? Can't find your way around? Want to know what it's about? Here are some brief notes that may help.

Basically...

The Bible is a collection of documents, or **books**, which is **at the heart** of both the Christian and Jewish faiths. It is sometimes called 'Scripture' or 'The Scriptures'.

What's in the books?

Many of the books contain **history** or similar accounts of events, but it is always history told against a background of faith. It is not just the story of certain events or characters, but the story of **God in action** both in history and in the lives of people.

As well as history the Bible contains many other sorts of writing, including **songs, prayers, poetry, biography, letters** and **prophecy**. Contrary to the popular view, **prophecy** is not primarily about foretelling the future. It is the teachings or writings of people called prophets, who declared **God's message** to the people of their day.

God's message, as declared by the prophets, was sometimes **encouragement** or **promise**. At other times it could be some **instruction**, or even a **judgement** or a **warning**. The prophets did not usually set out to foretell the future, but often the message had

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relevance beyond the time when they spoke or wrote. Promises and warnings, obviously, often referred to future events or possible future events, and the prophecy was said to be fulfilled when these events took place.

The books are divided up into chapters, and the chapters into verses. These divisions were not in the original writings and are often somewhat arbitrary and even occasionally misleading. However, they provide a convenient 'reference' system which enables us to find or refer to particular passages. Here are a couple of 'references' as examples – if you have a Bible see if you can find them;. The actual texts they refer to are quoted in the paragraphs below so you can check what you find.

'Exodus 19:5-6' means the book of Exodus chapter 19 verses 5 and 6.

'John 3:16' means the book (or Gospel) of John chapter 3 verse 16.

The Christian and Jewish Bibles

The Old Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures.

Most editions of the Christian Bible contain two sections. The first section, usually called the **Old Testament**, is the larger of the two. It is also the Bible of the Jewish faith and is shared by both religions. It is often referred to as the Hebrew (or Jewish) Scriptures.

The Old Testament tells the story of the people of Israel up to about 400 years before the time of Jesus, including how they got their **Law**, which includes the **Ten Commandments**. It also contains a lot of prophecy, including **promises** that Christians believe were fulfilled by the coming of **Jesus**.

There is a list of the books of the Old Testament on pages 33-34, with a brief note of what they are.

The New Testament.

The second, smaller, section, called the **New Testament**, contains the books which are special to the Christian faith. It includes the **Gospels**, the accounts of the **life of Jesus**.

Most of the other books in the New Testament are actually **letters**, written by St Paul and other early church leaders. Many of them were addressed to some of the new Christian communities which grew up in the first century AD (CE) after Jesus' death and resurrection. Some were addressed to other Christian leaders. The letters were written to **explain the faith** and deal with various problems that arose. With the Gospels they are the prime source of our understanding of the Christian message.

In the **New Testament** there are sometimes references to '**Scripture**' or '**the Scriptures**'. These mean the **Old Testament**, which was the Bible, or Scripture, already in existence when the New Testament books were being written and the events they describe were happening.

There is a list of the books of the New Testament on pages 35-36, with a brief note of what they are.

The Apocrypha.

Some editions of the Bible contain a third section - the **Apocrypha**, also known as **the Deuterocanonical Books**. This is a further collection of books which are regarded as part of the Old Testament by many parts of the Church. Sometimes they are simply included with the rest of the Old Testament, but usually they appear in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments. They include additions to some of the other Old Testament books and writings dating from, or describing events in, the 400 years immediately

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before the time of Jesus. Most editions of the Bible do not have them and they are not included in the lists below.

Testament, Apocrypha, Deuterocanonical, Gospel? What do these words mean?

The word '**testament**' comes from a Latin word meaning 'covenant' or 'promise' or 'will'. The **Old Testament** is so called because it tells the story of the Old Covenant, the covenant made between God and the Israelites when they got the Law, and it involved keeping the Law:

'...if you obey my [God's] voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession...a priestly kingdom and a holy nation...' (Exodus 19:5-6).

The **New Testament** tells us about the New Covenant, which God made through Jesus and which is based, not on keeping the Law, but on his grace, his freely given love, effective through faith in Jesus: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son [Jesus] so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

'**Apocrypha**' means 'hidden' or 'secret' and is not a particularly good name for these books – they were well known even in the time of Jesus! But they are not accepted as part of the '**canon**' of Scripture (ie fully authentic and agreed) by either Jews or many Protestants (that does not mean they are regarded as of no value). They are accepted by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and so are a 'second canon', which is what '**Deuterocanonical**' means – 'deutero' comes from the Greek meaning 'second'.

'**Gospel**' is an Old English word meaning 'good news'. The coming of Jesus was and is regarded as good news, and the accounts of Jesus' life are called 'good news' or 'Gospels'. Mark even begins his Gospel

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with the words ‘The beginning of the good news [Gospel] of Jesus Christ...’ (Mark 1:1)

The Word of God

Christians believe that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is not just a collection of writings about the faith but the inspired **Word of God**, and that God speaks to us, and reveals himself to us, in and through it. That doesn't mean all Christians believe every word is literally true. After all, God can speak to us through stories as well as history - as Jesus did in his parables. But it is all true in the sense that it reveals the truth about God and what he does - and our relationship with him.

‘Versions’ of the Bible

The books of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew, and those of the New Testament in Greek. For us to have Bibles in English they have had to be translated. The translators have had to work from manuscript copies made in the ancient world as none of the original manuscripts has survived.

There are a number of translations, or versions, available, for example, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV), formerly called the Authorised Version (AV). When the Bible is quoted the version used is sometimes identified by the abbreviated title such as NRSV in brackets after the quotation. All the quotations in these notes are from the NRSV.

The King James Version was made at the behest of King James 1st of England (6th of Scotland) and was the only version in regular use for nearly 300 years. It is renowned for its beautiful but archaic language. More recently, other versions have appeared, modernising

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the language and taking advantage of the latest research into the manuscripts.

Although the versions differ in their wording and readability, there is very little difference in the meaning and message.

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The Books of the Old Testament

The **Old Testament** is the 'Bible' that people had in the time of Jesus – the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the first (and bigger) part of most copies of the Bible.

Book Name	Notes
Genesis	The books of the Jewish Law – including the early history of Israel c. 2000-1200 BC (BCE) Genesis includes accounts from 'prehistory' such as Creation, the Garden of Eden and the Great Flood.
Exodus	
Leviticus	
Numbers	
Deuteronomy	
Joshua	Books which tell the later history of Israel and stories from the same time c. 1200-400 BC (BCE)
Judges	
Ruth	
1 Samuel	
2 Samuel	
1 Kings	
2 Kings	
1 Chronicles	
2 Chronicles	
Ezra	
Nehemiah	
Esther	
Job	
Psalms	
Proverbs	
Ecclesiastes	
Song of Solomon	

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The Books of the Old Testament - continued

Book Name	Notes
Isaiah	Books containing the writings, sayings and/or stories of the Prophets , whose names form the short titles of the books shown here. (Lamentations contains further writings of Jeremiah.)
Jeremiah	
Lamentations	
Ezekiel	
Daniel	
Hosea	
Joel	
Amos	
Obadiah	
Jonah	
Micah	
Nahum	
Habakkuk	
Zephaniah	
Haggai	
Zechariah	
Malachi	

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The Books of the New Testament

The **New Testament** contains the writings special to the Christian faith. It is the second (and smaller) part of most copies of the Bible.

Most books have a 'short' title by which they are known (for example 'Matthew'), which appears first. The full title follows in brackets, ('The Gospel according to St. Matthew').

Book Name	Notes
Matthew (The Gospel according to St. Matthew)	The Gospels – accounts of the life of Jesus, written by, or attributed to, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John respectively.
Mark (The Gospel according to St. Mark)	
Luke (The Gospel according to St. Luke)	
John (The Gospel according to St. John)	
Acts (The Acts of the Apostles)	An account (by St Luke) of the growth of the early church after Jesus' death and resurrection
Romans (The letter to the Romans)	Letters from or attributed to St Paul either to churches (in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, etc.) or to other church leaders (Timothy, Titus and Philemon). (See also next page.)
1 Corinthians (The 1st letter to the Corinthians)	
2 Corinthians (The 2nd letter to the Corinthians)	
Galatians (The letter to the Galatians)	
Ephesians (The letter to the Ephesians)	
Philippians (The letter to the Philippians)	
Colossians (The letter to the Colossians)	

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1 Thessalonians (The 1st
letter to the
Thessalonians)

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The Books of the New Testament – continued

Book Name	Notes
2 Thessalonians (The 2nd letter to the Thessalonians)	Further letters from or attributed to St Paul
1 Timothy (The 1st letter to Timothy)	
2 Timothy (The 2nd letter to Timothy)	
Titus (The letter to Titus)	
Philemon (The letter to Philemon)	
Hebrews (The letter to the Hebrews)	Letters from other early Christian leaders
James (The letter of James)	
1 Peter (The 1st letter of Peter)	
2 Peter (The 2nd letter of Peter)	
1 John (The 1st letter of John)	
2 John (The 2nd letter of John)	
3 John (The 3rd letter of John)	
Jude (The letter of Jude)	
Revelation (The Revelation to John)	

APPENDIX 2 – Prayer: A Reflection

Gerard Hughes, in his book "God of Surprises", says, "Training in prayer should be the main preoccupation and service given by the bishops and clergy to the adult members of the Church."

That's a pretty amazing statement. According to Gerard Hughes, it seems, we should hear more sermons and get more teaching about prayer and how to do it than, say, about understanding scripture, or living the Christian life, or understanding and applying Christian teaching.

Now, I'm not sure that I would go quite as far as to say that, but I certainly agree that **prayer is very, very important**. I'm also inclined to think that most churches give too little time to teaching their members about it. We need to learn how to do it – and to keep on learning so that we do it better. We also need to develop the practice of regular prayer or, at least, frequent prayer, not just as a church but as individuals.

But perhaps the most important thing to discover is **what prayer is and why it's so important**. The Bible doesn't give us a "definition" of prayer. What it does is tell us about people who pray, and **what people do when they pray is talk with God**.

The "talking" doesn't have to be out loud. God certainly "heard" the prayer of Hannah, in 1 Samuel chapter 1 verses 10-11, and gave her the son she asked for (v 20) even though she made no sound (v 13). Basically, **prayer is communicating with God** – whether out loud, silently within us or just by an inner "sighing of the Spirit" (Romans chapter 8 v 26).

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And the communication isn't only one way, Not only can we speak to God - God speaks to us as well. In the early chapters of the Bible in particular it is often God who initiates the "conversation" – for example, God calling Abram (Abraham), in Genesis chapter 12 v 1, or Moses, in Exodus chapter 3 v 4. But it is often when we approach God to pray or worship – perhaps during a time of silence – that God speaks to us. God spoke to Peter while he was at prayer (Acts chapter 10 verses 9-16), and to the church in Antioch while they were at worship (Acts chapter 13 v 2).

If we are Christians we need to communicate with God – and he with us. The essential thing about being a Christian is that we know God. It's not just about believing certain things or obeying a set of rules – **we have a relationship** with Jesus. As Jesus said at one point, "You are my friends.." (John chapter 15 v 14).

If we have friends we need to keep in touch with them. If we don't, the friendship will not grow and may even die away altogether. Not only that, the whole point of a friendship is to have common experiences and share parts of our lives. What kind of friendship would it be if we never talked together or did things together, or kept in contact in some way?

In the same way **we need to keep in touch** with God. Prayer is how we do this. God needs to be like a "best friend", with whom we share our most intimate thoughts, our deepest needs, our heart's desires, our greatest fears. We can tell him we love him. We can tell him what a great guy he is. And we can say sorry when we make mistakes, and know he will forgive us. Prayer isn't just about asking God for things. There will even be times when we feel God has let us down, and we can complain to him about that too – because a true friendship relies on honesty and can survive a row or a time of pain.

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And, of course, **God wants to hear from us!** After all, **he loves us,** and wants to hear from his friends. He may also have something to say to us!

So we need to pray. Prayer is, I believe, what makes a Christian – in the sense that it is the Christian's one essential practical activity – because it is how he or she develops his or her relationship with God. It's not for nothing that Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 17). Perhaps we need help with prayer, or training. But the most important thing is to do it – often.

I hope this brief reflection will help by stimulating some thought about prayer. It was originally written some time before the main notes in 'Prayer - What?, Why? and How?' and provided some of the material for them, but there are one or two additional ideas here which I hope will provide 'food for thought'.

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APPENDIX 3 – Prayer: A Meditation

Prayer may begin as a quick word,
A simple request,
A sudden impulse,
A cry of pain,
An arrow shot, hoping it will pierce the heart of God.

All these are prayers,
God hears the briefest word, the quietest whisper.
But prayer does not have to stop there.
Prayer is more,
So much more.

Prayer is not like sending for the fire brigade – only called in
emergency.

Prayer is not a chore – something you have to do and get out of the
way each day.

Prayer is not a job to do, or a box to tick.

Prayer is not something to achieve or complete, been there, done
that.

Prayer is not merely a good habit, like brushing your teeth or getting
regular exercise – though it certainly is that!

Prayer is a holding, a longing, a wrestling.

Prayer is an intensity, an involvement, an obsession

Prayer is banging on the counter! Thump the altar!

Prayer is not much saying, but still persistent;

Not the many words babbled by the pagan, but the widow's
incessant pleading.

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Prayer is knowing – and getting to know better.
Prayer is loving, caring, adoring.
Prayer is closeness, with the intimacy of bride and groom.
Prayer is not a crutch for life but the stuff of it,
The very heart, the reason for living

Prayer is love in action, even when there is nothing to do.
Prayer is volume, encompassing.
Prayer is continual, unceasing.
Prayer does not rest,
Save to rest in the goodness and love of God.

God's heart does not need piercing,
His love flows unending, embracing, without limit.
At times we glimpse his love.
At times his love touches us.
At times it seizes us!

But there is only one way truly to know that love:
To eat, sleep, live, breathe and be with the lover.
That is prayer.

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APPENDIX 4 – Some hymns about prayer.

You may find these helpful for reflection and meditation

James Montgomery (1771-1854), the author of the first two of these hymns, wrote several hymns including “Angels from the realms of glory” and “Hail to the Lord’s anointed”. Montgomery called the hymn “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire”, which he wrote for a book about prayer written by a colleague, the most attractive hymn he ever wrote. It certainly sums up prayer very beautifully.

“What a friend we have in Jesus”, written by Joseph Scriven (1819-1886,) is a firm favourite of many and is referred to on pages 12 and 13.

Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire

Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try;
Prayer, the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty on high.

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Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters Heaven with prayer.

Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
Returning from his ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice
And cry, "Behold, he prays!"

The saints in prayer appear as one
In word, in deed, and mind,
While with the Father and the Son
Sweet fellowship they find.

No prayer is made by man alone
The Holy Spirit pleads,
And Jesus, on the eternal throne,
For sinners intercedes.

O Thou by Whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod:
Lord, teach us how to pray.

Lord, teach us how to pray aright

Lord, teach us how to pray aright,
With reverence and with fear;
Though dust and ashes in Thy sight,
We may, we must draw near.

We perish if we cease from prayer;
O grant us power to pray;
And when to meet Thee we prepare,
Lord, meet us by the way.

God of all grace, we come to Thee
With broken, contrite hearts;
Give what Thine eye delights to see,
Truth in the inward parts.

Faith in the only sacrifice
That can for sin atone;
To cast our hopes, to fix our eyes,
On Christ, on Christ alone.

Patience to watch, and wait, and weep,
Though mercy long delay;
Courage our fainting souls to keep,
And trust Thee though Thou slay.

Give these, and then Thy will be done,
Thus, strengthened with all might,
We, through Thy Spirit and Thy Son,
Shall pray, and pray aright.

What a friend we have in Jesus

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit!
O what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.

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A small crucifix like this one could be held in your hand or placed on a desk or table in front of you when you pray. Having a cross, crucifix, candle, icon or picture to look at while praying may help – see page 16. They can usually be obtained from Christian bookshops or online.

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