

*Foreword by*  
ALISTAIR BEGG

W H Y

W E

P R A Y

WILLIAM PHILIP

“Prayer is a particular kind of relationship to God, not a technique. By examining the fundamentals of that relationship—who he is and who we are—with straightforward Bible exposition, William Philip helps you understand and enter into it.”

**Timothy J. Keller**, Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,  
New York City; best-selling author, *The Reason for God*

“There are not many books on prayer, and there are fewer good books on prayer. Here is a handbook on the subject that combines clarity and brevity and provides us with a thoroughly biblical and understandable framework for prayer. I commend it enthusiastically.”

**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

“Philip grounds prayer in the nature of the triune God, thus avoiding the modern evangelical tendency to make ‘the experience of prayer’ central. When divine Sonship and not feelings define you, then you have real prayer with a real God. This book will bless you.”

**Paul E. Miller**, Director, see Jesus; author, *A Praying Life* and  
*A Loving Life*

“This book made me want to pray! It shows us what God is like—a Father who speaks, and whose adopted children are able to speak to him, by his Spirit. It is thoroughly biblical, honest, and entertaining. Philip takes our eyes off ourselves and our performance and onto God—Father, Son, and Spirit.”

**Caz Dodds**, Scotland Assistant Team Leader, UCCF

“Wonderfully refreshing, biblically realistic, and personally motivational—this book cuts through the stereotypes and guilt about prayer and presents us with our amazing privileges. It will do your heart good!”

**David Jackman**, Former President, Proclamation Trust,  
London

“To speak freshly about prayer is neither easy nor common. Philip has done it here. In answering so well the big question he has set himself, he has enriched my thinking and practice.”

**Dick Lucas**, Rector Emeritus, St. Helen’s Church, Bishopsgate, United Kingdom; Founder, Proclamation Trust

“In this wonderful book I find that my prayer life needs a reality check. The heart of prayer is not only talking *to* God but knowing I pray because God is a speaking God.”

**Karen Loritts**, author; conference speaker; blogger, *MomLife Today*; mother of four and grandmother of eight

“In this fine book on prayer you will find no super-spiritual hype nor dry detachment, but robust and sensitive exposition. Philip has put us all in his debt by this little book, which can be read with enjoyment in one sitting but will reward repeated study and will give both challenge and encouragement.”

**Bob Fyall**, Senior Tutor, The Cornhill Training Course, Scotland

“I found my heart and will deeply moved by the key premise of this book: that we learn about prayer by learning about God. He speaks—are we listening to him? He sends his Son—are we responding to him? He is sovereign—do we trust him and think his thoughts after him? He sends his Spirit—do we realize we’re empowered to pray? Internalize these great Bible truths, and your prayer life will come alive.”

**Rico Tice**, evangelist; author, *Christianity Explored*

“It’s refreshing not to have another Christian how-to book. Philip takes us right in by the front door and down the stairs to examine the very foundation of prayer. As he presses us to face the *why*, we also find help with the *what* and the *how*. I found these studies an essential exercise in thinking, a welcome source of relief, and a gentle lure to repentance.”

**Dale Ralph Davis**, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

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Foreword by Alistair Begg

 **CROSSWAY**  
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To the memory of my father, James Philip

His prayers, especially those from the  
pulpit of Holyrood Abbey Church,  
Edinburgh, were an enriching benediction  
for which I and countless others will  
give thanks all the days of our lives.

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# Foreword

In the pregnant pause between the ascension and Pentecost there is a prayer meeting in Jerusalem. Jesus had instructed his followers to wait for the promised Holy Spirit in order that they might take the gospel to the end of the earth. Luke records the gathering of the eleven apostles in the upper room. "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). It is no exaggeration to say that the church was born in prayer and that the subsequent growth of the Word and of the church cannot be explained apart from their prayers. Jesus had made it clear to them that apart from him they could do nothing (John 15:5), and he had also taught them that if they knew how to give good gifts to their children, to a far greater extent the Father would give good gifts to them that asked him (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13). Throughout Acts we find the church at prayer.

In seeking a replacement for Judas they prayed for guidance (Acts 1:24). When Peter and John were confronted by

opposition and threats, they lifted their voices together to the sovereign Lord and prayed that they might continue to speak the Word with all boldness (Acts 4:29). When the practical demands of a growing church became the occasion of discord, the apostles made it clear that nothing must divert them from the priority of prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4).

This thread of earnest, united, believing prayer is woven throughout the fabric of the early church. When Herod had killed James, and it looked as though Peter was next, “earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5). The commissioning of Barnabas and Saul took place in the context of worship and prayer (Acts 13:3). As Derek Thomas observes, “The New Testament Church had grasped the essential truth that the God who ordains the end of all things has also ordained the means of its accomplishment.”<sup>1</sup>

This should not surprise us because this pattern of prevailing prayer was one that the disciples had learned from spending time with the Lord Jesus. It becomes clear from reading the Gospels that prayer was established in Jesus’s life as a holy habit. After an intense evening when Jesus healed the sick and dealt with the demons, the disciples searched for Jesus. He wasn’t where they expected because, “rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Similarly, before the selection of the

twelve disciples, “he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12).

On the Mount of Olives, as he faced the grim reality of the crucifixion, “he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed” (Luke 22:41). It is no wonder that on one such occasion one of the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). Presumably the reality and intensity of his prayers caused those closest to him to want to learn the secret of real prayer. We might all be grateful for the man’s request, for it is surely one with which we find ourselves identifying. In our Christian lives nothing is more important and nothing more difficult to maintain than a meaningful prayer life. Having warned against heaping up empty phrases (Matt. 6:7), Jesus provided his followers with a prayer that may be used as it stands. Although all the pronouns are plural and so fit worship that is corporate and public, the prayer may also be employed to our benefit in private. Although it is routinely referred to as the “Lord’s Prayer,” we might better think of it as the Disciple’s Prayer in that he gave it to his followers to employ as they approach their heavenly Father.

The one hundredth question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What does the preface of the Lord’s Prayer teach us?” and provides the answer: “It teaches us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father; able and ready to help us, and that

we should pray with and for others.” Every time we repeat this prayer we are reminded that our fellowship with God, through his son Jesus Christ, finds its principal expression in prayer. Our ability to call God “Father” is on account of his grace. “In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:4–5). It is true that God has a kind of fatherhood of all by creation, but this is a prayer for those who are his by redemption, who have received the spirit of sonship, enabling them to cry, “Abba, Father.” When we come to trust in Christ we receive the right to become God’s children. By grace we are welcomed into a family to which we do not belong by nature. Martin Luther referred to this prayer as “the greatest martyr on earth,” because it was used so frequently without thought or feeling, without reverence or faith. In the pages that follow, Dr. Philip helps to ensure that this will not be true of us, not just in terms of the Lord’s Prayer, but also in every expression of prayer. As one of the author’s mentors helpfully observed:

Prayer for the Christian is a matter of believing that God is, and that he does respond to those who believe in him. Prayer then, instead of being a matter of times and seasons and special or routine occasions, becomes a life, or it becomes such a vital part of life that it re-focuses one’s whole outlook. We become interested in God, his

ways, his doings, his words and we find ourselves agreeing with him about perhaps a great many things we were tempted not to agree about before. And the very humility which unself-consciously comes with such an attitude is one of sheer delight.

John Bunyan testified to such delight during the twelve years he spent in prison for unlawful preaching of the Bible. In communion with God he was enabled to write most of his literary and theological works, including in 1662, *A Discourse Touching Prayer*, in which he provides a wonderful definition of prayer:

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised, or according to His Word, for the good of the church, with submission in faith to the will of God.

My earliest awareness of this kind of believing prayer was in hearing my parents pray for me when they thought I was already asleep. Along with that, I was always intrigued by the mats stored in one of the halls in our church building. When I enquired about them, I learned that they were used for kneeling during the Friday night prayer. It occurred to me that those adults must really believe that God answers prayer. Since then I have realized the various hindrances we meet when coming to God in prayer. Reminding myself of a number of useful observations has helped me:

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If our prayer is meager, it is because we regard it as supplemental and not fundamental.

We can do more than pray after we have prayed but not until we have prayed.

We do not pray for the work. Prayer is the work and preaching is gathering up the results.

God does not delay to hear our prayers because he has no mind to give; but that by enlarging our desires, he may give us the more largely.

So then it is my prayer that the pages of this book will encourage each of us to “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2).

Alistair Begg  
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# Introduction

As a pastor, I had often felt I ought to preach a series on prayer. But I have to confess that I had always been put off doing so because so many of the sermons I have heard about prayer have made me feel rather depressed.

You know the kind of thing: somebody will tell you, with fervent emotion, about a great preacher getting up at four o'clock every morning and praying for six hours before breakfast, and if only you would do the same, it will be the secret to unlocking the spiritual blessing in your life. I'm afraid I just find that sort of thing really disheartening. I find I'm doing very well indeed if I can manage to pry myself out of bed at all before breakfast, never mind have hours of prayer. That kind of pious exhortation, which no doubt is genuinely intended to make me determined to go on praying and not give up, well, it just makes me want to give up altogether even before I've begun.

I may well simply be more perverse than you are, but that's the effect that kind of sermon has on me. It wouldn't surprise me to find that many Christians feel the same.

Some time ago, however, as I was thinking about how I could encourage my Christian brothers and sisters in prayer rather than discouraging and depressing them, I was reading a book that I found to be one of the most helpful I can recall ever reading on this subject. It was not a light book; it was a substantial biblical theology of prayer, with plenty to excite the neurons and tax the gray matter.<sup>2</sup> But the reason I found it so helpful was that in looking at what the whole Bible teaches about prayer, it reminded me of something very important: that we learn most about *prayer* simply by learning about *God*. That is a great thing to be reminded of, because the real truth about God is never discouraging. The Lord himself is never depressing as some very well-meaning and over-pious Christians often are, or can make you feel.

So after reading that book on prayer, which really turned out to be a book about knowing God, I found for the first time that I really did want to preach about prayer, because I thought I could prepare for it without getting depressed, and I could perhaps preach on it without depressing and discouraging others. (There can surely be no worse crime for any preacher than to depress and discourage the people of God.) I discovered that as I focused the congregation on God himself, asking the most basic question of all—Why do we pray?—we found immense encouragement in our relationship with the Lord and real help in the chief expression of that relationship, which is prayer.

As a church fellowship, made up of Christian people of

all ages and stages, as well as those still exploring the faith, we found these studies together to be a real blessing. They are offered here in the hope that others too may find the Bible's *explanation* of the nature of prayer, rather than mere *exhortation* about our need to pray, similarly liberating.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.  
The earth was without form and void, and darkness was  
over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was  
hovering over the face of the waters. And God said . . .

**Genesis 1:1-3a**

# We Pray Because God Is a Speaking God

The most important question to ask first about prayer is—Why? Why do we pray? Not, Why *should* we pray? We begin not with an exhortation but with an explanation: why prayer exists at all, as it were. Why is there such a thing as prayer? Prayer is speaking to God, but—just think about it for a moment—why should there be any such thing as speaking to God? Why would God want us to speak to him? Why would God *need* us to speak to him if he controls all things, as he does? Why would we need to speak to God just because he’s there? We have a queen in the United Kingdom, but I don’t speak to the queen, and I don’t suppose you do either—not very often, anyway. Why should we speak to *God* just because he is a powerful being and our sovereign ruler and Lord?

At its most basic and fundamental level, we pray because

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God is a speaking God. Prayer derives from who and what God is, and the great feature of the God of the Bible, the God of the Christian faith, is that he is a speaking God. That is evident from the very first chapter of the Bible.

### **God Spoke the Whole Creation into Being**

Creation begins with the voice of God, with God speaking: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). And so it goes on. “And God said” is the refrain of the whole chapter. Then we come to these crucial words:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

(Gen. 1:26–27)

Here is the first thing to think about: all the way through the opening chapter of the Bible, creation happens as God *speaks* the whole of the created order into being. He didn’t just imagine it into existence, as no doubt he could have done. He didn’t wave a magic wand and bring it out of his hat. According to Scripture he spoke it into being. “Let there be light,” and light was. “Let there be creatures,” and

creatures were, including man. He spoke into existence everything we see.<sup>3</sup>

Now, why so? Well, because (and we'll think more about this presently) the creator God is, as the Bible tells us, the *covenant* God, which means he is not a distant deity; he is not aloof, disinterested, and far off but a God who is involved intimately and totally with everything he makes, from the sparrows that fall to the ground that Jesus tells us about (Matt. 10:29), to the very hairs of our heads, to the hills, to the valleys, to the rivers, to everything. God is a God of committed, covenant relationship.

When you think about it, this is what speech does; speech creates relationship. In fact, speech requires relationship. You can't speak to someone without creating a relationship. It might be a very short and cursory relationship, like the one you have with the bus driver when you get on and say, "Does this bus go to Buchanan Street?" and he says, "Yes—hop on!" You've created a relationship. It's rather shallow, but it's a relationship. At the other end of the spectrum are relationships that are lifelong and deep. I suppose the most obvious of those is marriage. But whatever the nature of the relationship, you can't create or sustain an ongoing relationship without speech (or at least some form of surrogate for the spoken word).

Genesis 1 tells us of a God who created the world in perfect relationship with himself and of a creation that, as it were, speaks back its praise to God its creator. God saw

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everything he had made, we are told, and it was very good. That was creation's speech back to God. The whole of the created order was telling God, by everything in its very nature, "This is very good!"

Many parts of the Bible echo this truth. Psalm 19 reminds us of it when it tells us, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (v. 1). Psalm 96 calls on the whole of creation to speak forth praise to God: "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it!" (v. 11). Psalm 98, likewise, speaks of the seas, the rivers, and the hills—of all creation—speaking back to the God who spoke them into being. So you could say that the whole of the created order, in a sense, prays; it speaks back its praise to God the creator, to the one to whom it owes everything, even its existence. Because God spoke everything into being, he spoke all creation, therefore, into a relationship with himself.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, these verses also tell us about God's speaking humans into being. He did that as the crowning glory of creation in a unique way. In Genesis 1:26 we find an astonishing thing; we hear God speaking to himself: "Let us make man," he says, "in our image." Don't you think that is an extraordinary statement? The passage is recorded by Moses, the great leader and teacher of Israel, the Moses whose constant message was that Israel must be devoted always and only to the *one* God. All through their wilder-

ness journeyings, and at Sinai, and in his final exhortations on the plains of Moab as Moses prepared Israel for their life in the land, he repeatedly emphasized that their God, the true God, is *one*. The Lord is not like the many gods and idols of the pagans who lived in the lands round about. He is the *one* God and the *only* God. Moses also teaches the famous Shema, the great prayer of the Israelite people: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*" (Deut. 6:4). This is the very essence of the biblical faith: God is *one*, not many. Yet here in the first chapter of the Bible, we have the one God speaking to himself, using the *plural* terms "us" and "our": "Let us make man in our image."

Of course, we who have the fullness of the revelation of God through his ultimate word to us in Jesus Christ can understand this (at least, as far as it is possible for finite beings to understand the infinite God). We know that the one God is also three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We know God as the Holy Trinity, indivisible, inseparable; one God, but nevertheless, as the Scripture testifies, a God who speaks within himself and who is in perfect relationship with himself. So we should not be too surprised to see that perfect relationship in evidence here, way back at the dawn of creation, any more than we should be surprised that much later in history, John's Gospel records Jesus, the incarnate Son of God on earth, speaking in the Spirit to his heavenly Father. (Indeed, as part of that very prayer, in John 17:5, Jesus speaks explicitly of the glory he shared

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with the Father before the world existed.) The one God has always been, from all eternity, before all creation, the triune God, the relational, covenant God, the speaking God.

Here is the vital point for us in all this. According to the Bible, it is uniquely in the image of this God, this God of relationship, this speaking God, that we are made. “Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness.” And that is why, fundamentally, we human beings speak. That is why we human beings are relational, covenantal beings; it is because we image the relational, covenant, speaking God.

Just consider for a moment the way speech, communication, is intrinsic to our human nature. We can hardly imagine what it would be like to be denied any communication. That would be for us to become subhuman. In fact, we use that very language, such as when we talk about people who have lost all communicative capacity as being in a persistent vegetative state. They are totally unable to communicate with others. When we refer to people as being in a “vegetative state,” we are saying that they are not really like human beings anymore. They are, tragically, more like vegetables.

We also know that to deny real relational interaction will ultimately dehumanize people. That’s why sensory deprivation can be used so horribly in torture; when people are denied all communication, it unhinges them. You might remember years ago when the Eastern Bloc of Europe was for the first time exposed to the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Awful pictures appeared on our television screens

of some of the orphanages in Romania where children had been abandoned and treated so horrifically. No one ever spoke to those babies and young children. There had been no speech, no communication, no warmth of human relationship, no belonging—none of these essential aspects that comprise normal humanity. As a result, not only their emotions but also their intellect and even their physical growth were stunted.

We human beings are made *as* human beings for *relationship*. By our nature, we are covenantal beings, because fundamental to our creation is the purpose that we should image the covenant, relational God. The most intimate reflection of this image in the created order is marriage. Marriage is a living illustration, in the flesh, of our relational nature, because in marriage two become one flesh. That is why to marriage, and to marriage alone, according to the Scriptures, belongs that deepest and most intimate relational communication, the physical, fleshly “speech” of sexual intercourse.

Above all, of course, we are spoken into being for a relationship not just with one another but with God himself. Man was created for that perfect, harmonious relationship with the God of creation *and* to be in perfect relationship with the whole of that creation over which God had placed human beings. Genesis 1:28 tells us, “God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over . . . the earth.’”

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There's not a hint there, as some have tried to claim, of exploitation of the earth; this verse is not the root of all the problems in ecology in our world today. Far from it. Pictured here is rather a perfectly ordered relationship between human beings and their world. It's a picture of man imaging God's gracious relationship over his creation, in his place, because it flows out of a perfect relationship between human beings and their God.

The whole of Genesis 1 and 2 paints a picture of that perfect relationship. God commands man as his vice-regent to rule over the earth. He sets him to work in the garden of Eden. Genesis 2:15 tells us that the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and keep it. By the way, the Hebrew word translated "put him" is literally "gave him rest." God gave him *rest* in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. Perfect rest for man is doing the work of God. We should remember that. In fact, all the way through the Old Testament God lays before his people the promise of the future of *rest* in his land, and that is what God lays before us too; a glorious Sabbath rest still awaits the people of God (Heb. 4:9). Sometimes we think that when we go to heaven (or, more properly, when God's eternal kingdom fully comes), we're going to sit about doing nothing, but that's not true. The perfect rest of God is doing the work of God, and that is the eternal calling that awaits his people.

We see that glorious situation here, right in the beginning, in Genesis 1 and 2. God puts man in the garden, at

perfect rest, in perfect harmony, to work under his direction. He speaks his gracious words of command to human beings, and the man and the woman respond obediently to God's direction. That's the visible form, if you like, of their trust in God, the *visible* form of expressing that right relationship with God, which they were created for. The New Testament calls it the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5). But the *audible* form of that right relationship with God, of that trust, is their speech with God, their *verbal communion* with him. Apparently, God had the habit of taking an evening stroll in the garden of Eden to have a chat with Adam and Eve all about the goings-on of the day, because when we come to Genesis 3:9, God comes looking for them and asks, "Where are you?" He wanted to talk. The Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

That was the problem. God had spoken the whole creation into being and created man as a speaking being in his likeness so that above all he might enjoy relationship with man, calling out to him and receiving a joyful answer that would nurture ongoing fellowship and friendship. But something happened.

## **Man Stopped Answering God**

Man stopped answering God. Adam hid. The Lord God called, "Where are you?" and Adam said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:9). He hid because the

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human beings had cheated on that exclusive relationship with God, which they were created for. As we all know, when the communion of an exclusive relationship is broken, communication breaks down.

The newspaper columnists love to talk nowadays about the “special relationship” that Britain used to have with the United States. Remember Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan? We were led to believe they were always on the phone together. If poor old Ronald Reagan stepped out of line, Maggie was on the phone putting him right, just like that. But they had, it seemed, a great relationship. It seemed to be similar with Tony Blair and George Bush, although they are very different characters. But it appears things are different now. Barack Obama and Gordon Brown didn’t hit it off, and David Cameron has not fared a lot better, because all kinds of things have happened to put a strain on whatever had made the relationship special. The freeing of the Lockerbie bomber by the Scottish government dented transatlantic harmony, and the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico hardly helped. You certainly don’t get the impression that the special red phone on the desk at 10 Downing Street is ringing nearly so often these days with a request from the incumbent of the White House for a congenial evening yarn. No special relationship, no communication.

Or think about a marriage. When a marriage is in trouble, what is the first sign? Husband and wife are not *talking* anymore. Perhaps first that deeper intimacy of sexual inter-

course tails off and is gradually lost, but ultimately it is all kinds of communication. “We don’t talk anymore!” as Cliff Richard put it. And when you don’t talk, you live increasingly separate lives, because *speech is the audible form of a real and living relationship*. If there’s no speaking happening, there’s no relationship.

If you shout to somebody in the street, “Hello John!” and he doesn’t answer but just continues walking, well, you know it’s not John. He doesn’t *know* you; that’s why he doesn’t answer. Recently I was walking down the street in the center of Glasgow, when I saw one of our students from the Cornhill Training Course, a girl with a long pigtail, on her bicycle at the traffic lights in front of me. I was just about to yank on her pigtail (since I’ve always thought that to be the purpose of pigtails), when the person on the bike turned around, and I saw it was somebody quite different; in fact it was a rather wild-looking man. It would have been very embarrassing to yank on the pigtail and discover an angry man thinking, “Who on earth are you?” Pigtail pulling just isn’t a form of communication that can take place outside a good relationship with someone you know very well.

Meaningful speech, communication, and healthy relationship go together. Conversely, when communication is cut off completely, there can’t be an ongoing relationship. Alas, that is where Genesis 3 leaves humanity:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he

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reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever”—therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (vv. 22–24)

So, tragically, early in his story, man is shut out of the garden of God. He is shut out from hearing God’s voice. He is barred from talking to God. There are no more strolls in the cool of the day. There is just total silence. Man has refused to respond to God’s gracious words; he has taken his own way, and, therefore, with great sadness, God has to say, “Okay, you won’t listen. I’ll stop the conversation. I’ll back off.” So man, created as human for communion with God, became, well, subhuman, not talking anymore to God, who made him. That’s pretty much the way the world has been ever since. Man won’t listen to God; he puts his fingers in his ears and says, “I don’t need to listen to this! I reject God, if there is a God. I don’t need God. I’ll live as my own God. I’m not listening.” It’s a bit like a cross teenager who storms into the bedroom, slams the door, and turns up the music so that he can’t hear his parents’ voices if they’re calling him, and he hopes because the music is so awful his parents will stay away.

Anyone with teenage children knows all about that, just as they also know that such behavior doesn’t, in fact, solve

teenage angst. Hiding away and refusing to listen to reason doesn't bring happiness and peace and fulfillment. Nor has it done so for our world or the lives of the people of our world, and that is the tragedy of the human condition. That's why we are as we are, and that's why the world is as it is. God created us for speech, for communion, for relationship with him, and yet we have broken that relationship because we have refused to respond. As a result, we can't relate to God, even if we want to. We don't talk anymore, and we can't talk anymore. There's nothing to say. Our relationship is in irretrievable breakdown.

### **But God Would Not Stop Speaking to Man**

The Bible is plain about both the cause and the consequences of this catastrophe (read, for example, Rom. 1:18–2:5). Yet it tells us equally plainly something more, something barely believable but deeply wonderful. It tells us that despite all this, the God of the Bible has not stopped speaking to us.

We know that when a relationship is destroyed by unfaithfulness, it is impossible for the guilty party simply to reinitiate that relationship. The guilty one doesn't have the power or the right to do that. Far too much has been forfeited, so much that a huge price must be paid before reconciliation can happen, the immeasurably costly price of forgiveness. The truth is that only the wronged party is in a position to invite the guilty party back in. That's because the wronged party alone must bear the cost of that forgive-

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ness. It's desperately costly to forgive, to be able to say to one's abuser, "Yes, you can come back into this relationship."

We see that all the time in the news these days, sadly, with our sporting stars, the top golfers and football players and their infidelities. Only if the wronged party—in these notorious cases, the men's wives—condescends to initiate that communication is there any possibility whatsoever of the relationship being repaired and coming back into being in any real and meaningful way. No matter how rich you are, when you are the unfaithful one who has messed it all up, all you can do is respond; you cannot initiate anything. All you have power to say is, "Yes, please, I do want back into this marriage," and you can only say that *in answer to an invitation from the person whom you've wronged*.

So it is with God.

But the whole story of the Bible, the whole story of the gospel, is of a God who, from the very beginning, determined that he would say those words, "I want you to come back in. Yes, the rift is terrible; yes, the pain has been absolutely unspeakable; yes, the cost to me will be infinite. *But I will bear that cost* so that once again you will be truly human, creatures made for me, to be with me, to know me, to be able to converse with me and commune with me intimately, so that you will be able to answer me again, and we shall be able to talk together as friends."

That is what God did. He called out in grace to human beings on the basis of a great promise: "Yes, one day I *will*

deal forever with all the pain, vast disappointment, and righteous anger in my heart brought about by what you have done. *I will deal with that; I will bear the cost because I want you to know me again. I want you to hear my voice. I want you to rejoice in speaking to me again and coming to tell me all the things you want to tell me, to have that relationship of a son with a father once again.*"

So it was. God called out to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and to countless others after them, and they were able to answer him. They spoke to each other. Exodus 33:11 tells us that God spoke to Moses face-to-face, just as a man speaks to his friend. All these spoke with God because they knew God again. They had a real relationship with God because they had responded to his call, to his voice calling out to trust him, to believe in him, to obey him. In other words, they had what the Bible calls "faith."

How do we know Abraham had faith? Well, Hebrews 11:8 is plain. We know he had faith because he obeyed God when God called him. When God spoke to him and told him to go out to a place that he never knew, he responded and obeyed: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called." We might say that Abraham's obedience was the *visible* form of his faith. But the *audible* form of his faith, of his real and living relationship with God, was that he talked with God. God spoke to Abraham that word of great promise, and Abraham responded. "Abraham called upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 12:8). In other words, *Abraham prayed.*

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Prayer was the audible form of Abraham's faith, as it is of all faith. Speaking to God in prayer is simply the audible response to God's call to us, just as following him in obedience is the visible response to the call that marks out real faith and is the evidence of a real and living knowledge of God. Prayer is responding to God's gracious word of salvation in his wonderful promise of his saving gospel. And if Hebrews 1 tells us that God spoke his ultimate word in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, then that means fundamentally that prayer is simply *responding in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ*.

Prayer is answering God's call to human beings in Jesus, answering it with all that we are and all that we have, not just with our lips but with our lives, so that our words, in that sense, are simply vocalizing what's on the inside. It's the inside reality coming out in an audible form. I remember my father explaining it to me this way: "It's not so much *what* we pray but *what we are* when we pray that matters." That's true, because real prayer is anything that comes from a heart truly responding to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the multitude of responses that come from a life that has found Christ.

In Acts 9, when we read of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the Lord tells Ananias where to find Saul and says, "Behold, he is praying" (v. 11). Why is that so significant? Saul of Tarsus had said his prayers all the days of his life as a pious Pharisee. But for all his prayers, he had never

really prayed before, because as yet he had never truly answered God's call. But when he met God personally, in Jesus Christ the risen Lord, he truly prayed. He communicated with God.

You can't respond until God has called out to you to respond. You can't say, "I do," until somebody has asked, "Will you marry me?" But in Jesus, God has broken that heavenly silence. He has called out. He has said, "I *do* want you back. Will you *have* me?" And he wants you to say yes. Saying yes to that call of Jesus is the essence, and the beginning, of all real prayer.

So let me ask you this: Are you a praying person?

I'm not asking whether you *say* your prayers—anybody can fool himself into thinking he's praying because he's saying his prayers. But are you a praying person? Are you responding from the very bottom of your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ, to God's call to you in the gospel of Christ? Are you answering audibly and visibly the God who has called out to you in Jesus his Son? Are you doing *that*?

If you are doing that, you are praying.

But until you do that, well, you can say all the prayers you like, but you have never really prayed at all. Because praying is answering that wonderful call of God.

It's never too late to start really praying, and you *can* pray, because *God is a speaking God*. He has called out to us, wonderfully, in the message of his Son, the Lord Jesus. He wants us to be answering people.

## Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. In the foreword Alistair Begg wrote, “In our Christian lives nothing is more important and nothing more difficult to maintain than a meaningful prayer life.” Have you found this to be true in your life? In what ways is prayer difficult for you? What are the obstacles to maintaining a vibrant prayer life?

2. We learn most about prayer simply by learning about God. What truths have you learned about God that have impacted your prayer life? What spiritual disciplines do you practice that help your prayer life?

3. How does the fact that God is a covenant God impact your prayer life? Is this idea new to you, and if so, how do you hope it will change your prayer life?

4. Whatever the nature of the relationship, you can't create, or sustain, an ongoing relationship without speech (or at least some form of surrogate for the spoken word). What types of communication might be substituted for full-fledged words? How might this play out in person-to-person communication when someone lacks the capacity for true speech? What are the implications of these ideas for our prayers during times of extreme emotional stress or deep sorrow, when words don't come easily?

5. Philip differentiates between visible relationship (obedience) and audible relationship (words). What does it look like

to have visible relationship without verbal communion, and what are the effects of having one but not the other? Is it possible to truly have one without the other when it comes to humans relating to God?

6. The chapter concludes that “prayer is simply responding in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.” How have you found this to be true in your own life? If you truly believed and lived out the truth that we pray because God is a speaking God, what would change about your prayer life? Given this definition of prayer, are you a praying person? Or do you just say prayers without truly relating to God?

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are *my beloved Son*; with you I am well pleased."

**Luke 3:21-22**

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**DAVID JACKMAN**, Former President, Proclamation Trust, London, England

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