

M E G A N H I L L

Prayer
T O G E T H E R
Living

THE PRIORITY AND PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER
IN OUR HOMES, COMMUNITIES, AND CHURCHES

“Megan Hill has given us a primer on prayer that is both useful and eloquent. Many of us, myself included, are prone to entertain an untruth about prayer: that it should always be easy and spontaneous, free of any hint of discipline or forethought. Megan empathetically and expressively lifts our eyes toward a higher vision, grounded in the truth of Scripture, of prayer as a delightful duty to be practiced, savored, and shared.”

Jen Wilkin, author, *Women of the Word*; Bible study teacher

“Megan Hill moves us to pray together in our homes, communities, and churches, offering us encouragement, experience, and counsel—all richly biblical and theological. If you and your brothers and sisters in Christ pray together with more hope, delight, and expectancy because of reading it, I am sure that Megan will feel her aim is realized.”

J. Ligon Duncan, III, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

“When Megan Hill prays, one feels the force of an entire life spent communing with the triune God. Now, Hill provides both the theology and practical guidance to usher others into a rich life of prayer among fellow Christians and in corporate worship. This book will remind you of how good and pleasant it is when God’s people dwell—and pray—together in unity.”

Katelyn Beaty, Managing Editor, *Christianity Today* magazine

“Another book on prayer? Yes, and no. Yes, the focus of this book is about urgent, corporate, sustained prayer of the kind that Scripture urges and Jesus extols as necessary if we are to endure in the battle that faces the Christian church. And no, for this is not just a book about prayer. Megan Hill is an accomplished author and godly pastor’s wife and mother. What she has to say comes from a sharp and discerning mind but also from the treasury of rich pastoral experience. Could it be that this book is God’s instrument in reviving among us a healthy, vigorous, infectious prayer life—prayer partnerships—that will redirect the course of this world? I think it possible. I pray that it is.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“*Praying Together* wasn’t written as a guide to improving your prayer life, but it’s impossible to read without feeling compelled to pray more often, more sincerely, and with more people. Megan Hill’s reverence for prayer and her personal stories of devotion made me grateful for the gift of prayer and for a God who uses prayer to bring us to him and to each other. *Praying Together* offers vital encouragement.”

Kate Shellnutt, Associate Editor, *Christianity Today* magazine,
Hermeneutics

“Come let us pray! A covenant child of God who learned to pray in Word and deed calls Christ’s church to devoted, fervent prayer. Megan has given us a standard for kingdom praying that will bring growth and grace personally and corporately. Come, fill and disciple your hearts in remembering together who God is and what he has done. Brothers and sisters, are you ready?”

Jane Patete, Former Coordinator of Women’s Ministry, the Presbyterian Church of America

“Reading this beautiful book on prayer is like enjoying a meal with a friend. Our hostess, Megan Hill, serves the wisdom of the Word, well-baked with centuries of godly Reformed and Puritan writers and seasoned with many personal experiences. Her reflections on prayer are gentle and practical, and by God’s grace I would expect you to be eager to take her recipe and use it often in your home and church.”

Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“*Praying Together* made me want to grab a friend and pray. Megan Hill reminds us of the privilege, duty, and delight that await us as we join one another in communion with God. Weaving together the Bible’s testimony about prayer and the blessing it has been to the church through the ages, this book will drive you to your knees in the anticipation of the great things God will do.”

Melissa Kruger, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Uptown Church; author, *The Envy of Eve*

“Megan Hill helps us to see, with admirable clarity and practical insight, how the triune God invites believers to gather together in prayer—in the church, in our families, and in a host of other settings. She points us to the rich promises and the remarkable blessings attending corporate prayer in Scripture. Her examples and illustrations stir us to pray with others. Read this book and join the chorus of saints lifting their voices to heaven.”

Guy Prentiss Waters, James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS

“Megan Hill offers a biblical foundation as well as practical instruction for joining together to pursue an ever-deeper relationship with the Father, through the work of the Son, by the power of the Spirit. We will always find reasons not to pray together. But if we hope to live as conduits of the power of God—if we hope to feed the hungry, unbind the prisoner, comfort the grieving, and shine light in the world’s dark corners—Hill encourages us to begin, together, on our knees.”

Martha Manikas-Foster, Producer and Host, *Inside Out*, Family Life

“Megan Hill learned to pray as a small child in the company of her parents and members of her local church. Now she’s written a rich resource on corporate prayer, helpful for families, small groups, and churches. I look forward to gathering friends and reading *Praying Together*. Better yet, I look forward to praying with them.”

Jen Pollock Michel, author, *Teach Us to Want*

PRAYING TOGETHER

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The Priority and Privilege of Prayer:
In Our Homes, Communities, and Churches

Megan Hill

*Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer:
In Our Homes, Communities, and Churches*

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To the saints
of the Presbyterian Church of Coventry,
Hillcrest Presbyterian Church,
First Presbyterian Church, Pinehaven Presbyterian Church,
and West Springfield Covenant Community Church.
Praying together with you has been my
privilege, my duty, and my delight.

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Introduction

Let's pray.

How many times have you been privileged to say or hear those words? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is in fact the most normal thing in the common Christian life to pray together."¹ That has been my experience. Maybe that's your story too. Like many people who grew up in a Christian home and in a gospel-proclaiming church, I learned from childhood the practice and importance of praying together in the ordinary places: our dinner table, my bedside, the church sanctuary. Early on, I internalized the Westminster Shorter Catechism's memorable definition of prayer: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies."²

At the age of ten, I asked my father (a pastor) if I could join him at our church's small Wednesday night prayer meeting. On dark New England winter evenings, he and I would set out through the snow to find a group of three or five or, just maybe, seven faithful saints warming themselves in the light and heat of the church library. Mrs. Gray was always enthroned in the lone arm chair, eighty years old and occasionally nodding off, cane by her side. The rest of us sat on avocado-green vinyl chairs, dragged in from other parts of the church, cold to the touch and prone to squeaking when I wiggled.

For years I was the only child there, listening to the pre-prayer

moments of discussion—Who was sick? Who was better?—and occasionally joining the subsequent hour of intercession with a feeble sentence prayer of my own. Eventually I got the idea (fresh from the pristine order of my elementary school classroom) to keep track of the requests and their divine answers. Weekly filled with a sense of responsibility, I brought my notebook and pen and studiously recorded our list of needs, sometimes going back to a previous page and gravely prompting the adults for an update. Obvious answers to our requests were few, and yet these believers were undeterred. Without a doubt, I knew by their faithful prayers that God seriously and lovingly received each petition in heaven, as I noted them in my book.

Sitting among the ordinary saints, year after year, those evenings of prayer knit my heart to Christ's church and to my God. In that church library I learned to call upon the name of the Lord in the company of his people.

Since then, praying together has become a delightful priority of first my single and then my married life. I have prayed in the church prayer meetings of five different churches, and I have prayed among the gathered church nearly every Lord's Day. Outside of the church, I've prayed with others in various parts of the world, in hospital rooms and at deathbeds, with houseguests and strangers, and as a member of the mothers' prayer group at my children's school. And—coming full circle to my own childhood—every morning and every evening my husband and I gather before the throne with our three sons.

For the past nine years, I have also prayed at ten o'clock on Tuesday mornings with Carol, an older woman in my church. The two of us—sometimes joined by others—pray not only for the temporal and spiritual needs of our own church but especially for the concerns of the church throughout the world. On the last day, Carol and I will finally meet the redeemed from Peru and Thailand and Iran and Turkey and Sierra Leone, the brothers and sisters for whom we prayed.

These are my stories, but this book is a call to each one of us to consider the praying together we have done and are doing and hope to do: the childhood dinner-time prayers, the youth-group prayer vigils, the spontaneous prayer in dorm rooms and parking lots and at the back of the church, the planned prayer during Bible studies and prayer meetings and in the Lord's Day worship service. Here, too, you'll find reminders of our collective past. Adam's grandchildren and Daniel's friends and the apostles. The men on Fulton Street in 1858 whose prayer meeting set New York on fire. Those stories belong to all of us who belong to Christ. This book is a call to pray together and to keep praying together with renewed energy.

This book is not an exhaustive theology of prayer. Many and better minds than my own have written that book several times over. (As my husband gently reminded me when I first discussed this project with him, "But, Megan, *J. I. Packer* wrote a book on prayer."³ When my girlfriend heard that, she added with a grin, "And you ain't no Packer, babe." So true. Which of us is?)

It's not an exhaustive theology, but it does contain theology. As Packer himself wrote, "True praying is an activity built on a theology."⁴ You'll notice this book is divided into three parts. In the first part, *The Foundations of Praying Together*, we'll examine *why* we pray together. It might seem easier or more useful to jump straight to practical how-tos, but praying together is not an easy kind of task, and if we are not first constrained and encouraged by the testimony of Scripture, we will quickly give up. The second part, *The Fruits of Praying Together*, is a different kind of *why*. This section is a vision for what God says he does when we pray together and what he has done in the past when his people gathered together before his throne. Both are glorious motivations for the work. Finally, the third part, *The Practice of Praying Together*, explores *how*. Here, we'll consider what praying together can and does look like in our churches, communities, and homes. It is my own prayer that the people of Christ's church would again be like

those saints of old who “devoted themselves to . . . the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

There is a vital work for us to do—for the love of Christ, for the exaltation of his name, for the glory of God. For the good of Christ’s church for whom he died. For the good of our neighbors both local and global. For the good of our own souls.

This is a work for all of us. This great kingdom work that we have been given is open to all—to all who have been lost and found. Pastors and elders, yes, and the people in the pews too. We can start together this morning, or over lunch, or anytime tomorrow. This is work for those who travel the world and those who spend their days in a wheelchair. We can do this work anywhere. A church building is great, but that third-world street corner or this suburban living room will do just fine too.

There is work for all of us to do together. This is a work for mature believers—those for whom trends in Christianity are on their third or fourth replay—alongside the newly reborn. This is work for all those whose sins are big and whose Savior is bigger. It’s for the academic and the mechanic and the mother of five. There is an important place in this work for the ill, the weak, the old, the tired. There is a place for the strong.

All who belong to Jesus, come and join us. You who are male and female, come. You adults and children, come. Invite the millennials—and the amillennials and premillennials too. Come, you who struggle to buy gas for your car, and you whose car uses no gas at all. Come, you who oversee charities and fund ministries, come sit beside this one whose mind and body are passing away but whose soul never will. Come together to this great privilege, this heavenly gathering, this means of grace, this vital task. Come.

Brothers and sisters, let us pray.

PART 1

**THE FOUNDATIONS
OF PRAYING
TOGETHER**

Relationship

A Christian never prays alone.

Thinking about prayer, we might first call to mind a picture of a lone man on his knees behind closed doors. We might think of him as solitary and his activity as private. But prayer is never solitary. It is communication from one to another. And so this book about praying together must begin with the foundational reality that *prayer is an activity of relationship*: God and us, God and God, all of us and our God.

God and Us

In 2012, when my husband and I walked through the gates of an orphanage in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, we were immediately stampeded by twenty-five children. They grabbed at our backpacks, jabbed exploring fingers into our pockets, and repeatedly demanded our attention with the only English words they knew: “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy!” and “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!”

Those little ones knew the language of family and the gestures of asking, but twenty-four of the children had no right to use them. And though we gave candy and balloons to every child, there was only one little boy whose cries to us of “Mommy” and

“Daddy” were absolutely compelling. This was the child with whom we had a relationship—having just appeared before a judge in a courtroom to secure his adoption—and this child alone could reach into our pockets with every assurance that he’d be granted whatever treat he could find there.

So, too, prayer is an activity of relationship. God placed the newly created Adam and Eve in the garden, and he spoke with them (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:2–3). Relationship is an essential part of our created nature (though now corrupted by sin), and communication is a crucial element of that relationship. In the introduction I defined prayer, in part, as “an offering up of our desires unto God.”¹ Immediately, this tells us that prayer requires at least two participants: someone with desires and God. And Christ taught his disciples to pray “Our Father” (Matt. 6:9), establishing our prayers as the confident communication of a child with his parent.

Many people don’t understand that prayer is intimately relational. Sociologist Christian Smith exhaustively studied the religious life of American teens and young adults and then famously described their attitude toward God as “moralistic therapeutic deism.” By this Smith meant, in part, that “God is treated as something like a cosmic therapist or counselor, a ready and competent helper who responds in times of trouble but who does not particularly ask for devotion or obedience.”²

An example of this kind of no-relationship-necessary perspective on prayer comes at the beginning of a recent best seller: Prayer is “communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let’s say it is communication from one’s heart to God. Or if that is too triggering or ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, the force that is beyond our comprehension but that in our pain or supplication or relief we don’t need to define or have proof of or any established contact with.”³

And even 450 years ago, John Calvin lamented that people in his day were practically praying: “O Lord, I am in doubt whether

thou wilt to hear me, but because I am pressed by anxiety, I flee to thee, that, if I am worthy, thou mayest help me.”⁴

In these ways of thinking, prayer can never be an activity of relationship because this kind of God is not particularly interested in relationship, and our prayers to him don’t depend on it. Prayer becomes merely the submission of a list of desires and complaints with scant hope of personal engagement on the receiving end. Unloading my concerns might make me feel lighter, but it doesn’t make me less lonely. I can pray, but God might not pay any attention.

For a Christian, prayer always expresses a relationship: with the Father, through the work of the Son, by the power of the Spirit. However, even those of us who understand the relational foundation of prayer rightly pause at the audacity of shrieking, “Daddy! Daddy!” and grabbing at God’s backpack. Prayer is an activity of relationship, but it is not a relationship of equals. For one thing, God is the high and holy Creator, and man is the creature. The foundation of what we know about God and about mankind is this statement: “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). Before Adam was a person, he was dirt. God, on the other hand, is the one who sits above the circle of the earth and the one who is beyond comparison (Isa. 40:22, 25). It is not merely old-fashioned convention or literary metaphor that calls God “King” and “Lord” and “Judge” and “Ruler.”

Therefore, we dust-people approach God—relate to God—only on his terms. Like Queen Esther, we must wait for the king to extend his royal scepter toward us. It’s amazing that he does. In the garden, the Creator of the world condescended to his creation, and they had a conversation. But then sin entered the world, and since Adam’s fall, mankind has been estranged by his own willful wickedness from the holy God, who “cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). The very words God uses to describe sinful people

are anti-relational: enemies, strangers, aliens, separated. God may speak to us, but we dare not speak to him. Like Isaiah, we need a burning coal to purify our lips.

To know what effect our sin has on our right to pray, we must go to the cross. Here at Golgotha, the God-man shoulders the wrath of God in our place, and here we find a prayer that is the most horrific to ever be uttered. Here, our condemned Savior cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). And there is no answer.

Forsaken by God, cut off from relationship to the Father, Jesus’s prayer as the accursed sin bearer was met only with silence. Seminary professor Edmund Clowney used to tell his students, “You haven’t heard the cry of the Son until you’ve heard the Father who didn’t answer.”⁵ What do our prayers justly deserve? Silence. And yet the God who rejected the prayer of the wrath-bearing Son accepts our prayers because of him. In the glorious words of the book of Hebrews:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19–22)

The Bible repeatedly describes our entry into the Christian life in terms of relationship.⁶ We who were once far off have been brought near to God (Eph. 2:13). The familial words used in Scripture—God the Father, Christ the elder brother—are indicators that a life of faith is a life of relationship. When we trust in Christ for our salvation, we begin a relationship with the triune God. By our adoption and our union with Christ, we become part of God’s family, with all the privileges of children in their father’s house. As J. Todd Billings explains, “We . . . enter into the playful,

joyous world of *living as children of a gracious Father, as persons united to Christ and empowered by the Spirit.*"⁷ Cleansed from sin, covered in Christ's righteousness, and adopted by the Father, we who could never before presume to pray are welcomed into conversation with God.

But it would be only half the story to say that our new relationship with God through Christ simply *enables* us to pray. It is perfectly correct (and even necessary) to say that Christ's blood and righteousness secure our *right* to pray, but that legal term—*right*—doesn't begin to describe the emotional intensity of a believer's longing to pray. In truth, our new relationship with our God *compels* us to pray.

"People who know their God are before anything else people who pray,"⁸ writes J. I. Packer. And the kind of knowing Packer has in view is nothing less than the intimate, mutual, self-revealing, other-embracing knowledge of relationship. A relationship with our God not only enables us to pray but presses us toward it. God opens his hands, reveals unimagined treats, and tells us to ask for them. For our part, delighted by our God, overwhelmed by his love, governed by his commands, and thankful for his condescension toward us, we overflow in prayer.

Like the lover in Song of Solomon, we can't stop talking about our beloved. What is praise but telling God who he is? What is thanksgiving but savoring aloud the things he has done? What is confession but lamenting to God that we have sinned against him and how far short we fall of being like him—he who is awesome in holiness? And what is supplication but requesting that God would do those things he most delights to do? What joy! We who know our God, we who belong to him just like children belong to a father, love to pray.

God and God

And when we pray, we approach not only a God who has a relationship with us but a God who has a relationship with himself.

Our relationship with the God who is three-in-one assures us that all three will involve themselves in our praying—making the prayers of a Christian part of a grand, heavenly conversation.

The doctrine of the Trinity is sometimes viewed askance, more mind-teaser than encouragement to a life of faith. But the fact that God is Father, Son, and Spirit is essential to our faith, as Michael Reeves explains:

This God will simply not fit into the mold of any other. For the Trinity is not some inessential add-on to God, some optional software that can be plugged into him. At bottom, this God is different, for at bottom . . . he is the Father, loving and giving life to his Son in the fellowship of the Spirit. A God who is in himself love, who before all things could “never be anything but love.” Having such a God happily changes everything.⁹

Relating to a Trinitarian God who himself is love changes everything about prayer too. Nowhere is this clearer in Scripture than in Romans 8:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” . . . Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. . . . Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (vv. 14–15, 26–27, 33–34)

In prayer, we approach a loving, listening Father, and we are helped by the intercession of the Son and the groaning of the

Spirit. I have never forgotten my pastor-father declaring: “When we pray, God talks to God.”¹⁰

Romans 8 reveals the Father to be the one who hears our cry of “Abba!” His “hearing” is much more than merely taking in information. When the Father promises to hear prayer, it is an assurance of his loving inclination to receive our prayer as acceptable and to answer it in his kindness.

The Father’s desire to hear the prayers of his children is so radical that he says, “Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear” (Isa. 65:24). By the time we clear our throats, the Father is already listening. This is especially evident in the words of Jesus to his disciples: “In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God” (John 16:26–27). Without denying his own intercessory prayers, Jesus’s focus here is a bold assurance that redeemed people have no barriers to approaching the Father. We who belong to the eternal Son have every confidence that we, too, will receive the Father’s listening love.¹¹

For his part, the Son is our mediator and intercessor. The sinless life and death of Christ are the basis of our freedom from condemnation before a holy God and are the means by which we receive the spirit of adoption and the right to approach God in prayer (Rom. 8:1, 15, 31–34). It is for this reason that we conclude our prayers “in Jesus’s name.” People who pray are entirely dependent on the mediating work of Christ, who appears on our behalf, bears us on his shoulders, binds us on his breast, and allows us to be heard in his person.¹²

Furthermore, Romans 8 also talks of the risen Christ, “who indeed is interceding for us” (v. 34). Savor this explanation from James Montgomery Boice:

What does intercession mean here? In this context it must refer to Jesus’ prayers for his people, much like his great prayer

of John 17, in which he prays for and receives all possible benefits of his death for them for the living of their Christian lives. It means there is no need you can possibly have to which the Lord Jesus Christ is indifferent. It means that there is no problem to which he will turn a deaf ear or for which he will refuse to entreat his Father on your behalf.¹³

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is praying to the Father for you! Just as he prayed for Job in the midst of suffering (Job 16:20–21),¹⁴ just as he prayed for Peter before Satan sifted him (Luke 22:31–32), and just as he prayed for all of his disciples—including us—before they became his witnesses in the world (John 17), he continues to pray for his beloved ones in heaven, adding our concerns to the divine conversation. And the thought that Jesus is praying for us is one of our greatest encouragements to faithfulness in prayer. Several times while he was on the earth, Jesus practically took his disciples by the hand and led them to the place of prayer (Luke 9:28; 11:1; 22:39–46). Sit here, he said. Pray while I pray, he said. And so he says to us too. Our Jesus is always praying. Sit here and pray alongside him.

And there is another divine participant in this conversation. The Spirit, who is teacher and comforter, is also prayer partner who “intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” and “intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26, 27).

The Spirit does three things related to our prayer. First, the Spirit unites us to Christ; this is how we gain the right to pray in the first place. In Romans 8, he is the “Spirit of adoption as sons,”¹⁵ by whom we cry ‘Abba! Father!’” (v.15). Second, the Spirit prompts us to pray. The Spirit moves our hearts toward prayer by convicting us of our sin, stirring up our affections for God, and rightly ordering our desires by the means of his Word. Finally, the Spirit helps us when we pray by praying those things we ought to pray: “He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:27).

When we pray, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reveal themselves to be the perfectly unified, triune God who is always of the same mind. It is correct to think of all God's answers to our prayers as either "Yes" or "Let me give you something better" ¹⁶ because of the intercession of the Spirit, who takes our prayers and molds them to match the will of God.

This knowledge that God talks to God motivates our praying in two remarkable ways. First, Trinitarian participation in prayer frees us from trusting in our prayers themselves. Prayer is not a magic incantation, dependent on us getting our abracadabras pronounced correctly, asking for exactly the right thing in exactly the right way at exactly the right time. The God who is love is not bound by faulty prayers, nor does he ignore the imperfect prayers of his beloved children. Instead, the one-in-three in whom we trust lovingly takes all our prayers, cleanses them of sin, and reorients them to match his holy will.

Secondly, when God talks to God, it encourages us to pray by assuring us that prayer is not merely happy thoughts (or desperate thoughts) tossed into a void. Our prayers are not pennies tossed into a fountain or wishes gone up in the smoke of birthday candles blown out. No. Prayer is the occasion of a divine conversation—a confident request for the loving persons of the Trinity to discuss and to act.¹⁷ Listen to Reeves again: "And so the Spirit supports us, the Son brings us, and the Father—who always delights to hear the prayers of his Son—hears us with joy."¹⁸

Brothers and sisters, a Christian never—never!—prays alone.

All of Us and Our God

We pray as people who have a relationship with a God who has a relationship with himself. We also pray as people who, therefore, have a relationship with all the others who belong to him. Recently I heard a certain man described as "human Velcro." One of this man's greatest joys is to introduce his friends to each other and then encourage them to form a friendship together. This is exactly

what our Lord does. Having first attached us firmly to himself by the bonds of his grace, he then introduces us to his other friends so that we might all stick together.

In order to embrace the practice of praying together, we first have to understand that Christians are, in fact, together. The church in Scripture is called a plant (John 15:1–17), a building (Eph. 2:18–22), and a body (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–27; Eph. 4:15–16).¹⁹ These three images emphasize our connectedness to one another through our essential relationship to Christ our Savior. In the plant image, Christ is the central vine and his people are the branches, dependent on him for nourishment and growth. In the building, we are the parts of the structure resting on the teaching of the apostles and prophets as our foundation and leaning into Christ as the cornerstone who holds us all together. Finally, in the image of the church as a body, we are diverse and interdependent parts that are “to grow up in every way into him [Christ] who is the head” (Eph. 4:15).

This necessary and organic interconnectedness in the church goes against the individualism of our day. One of Smith’s other findings was that people think “each individual is uniquely distinct from all others and deserves a faith that fits his or her singular self . . . [and] that religion need not be practiced in and by a community.”²⁰ Actually, believers can’t opt out of community any more than a branch can separate itself from connection to other branches on the same tree. Our union to Christ necessarily joins us to everyone else who is united to him. Throughout the New Testament, the church is described as those who are “in Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:22; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:14). And Jesus prayed for his disciples in all times and places “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one” (John 17:21, 23). Jesus sticks us all together.

Christ secures our relationship with other believers, and the

Spirit applies his guarantee, but we, too, must work on it. We ought to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Our unity is completely dependent on the Spirit, who dwells in us, and we also take steps to maintain that unity: we come together for public Lord’s Day worship, we serve one another, we encourage and exhort one another. And one of our primary expressions of relationship with people who are in Christ is gathering together at God’s throne in prayer.

In praying together, we nurture our relationship with other Christians, uniting our hearts even as we unite our voices (Acts 4:24), together exalting our common Savior and together bearing one another’s burdens. Nineteenth-century churches often called their weekday prayer meeting “the social prayer meeting” or “the social meeting.”²¹ This is apt. The church is a society under Christ, and we are right to think of praying together as the highest and most blessed kind of social event.

At dinnertime when my children stare at their plates and point out that their green beans are touching their chicken, I remind them: “It’s all going to end up in the same place.” Our prayers are like that too. John’s vision in Revelation pulls back the curtain of heaven: “Another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with *the prayers of all the saints* on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with *the prayers of the saints*, rose before God from the hand of the angel” (Rev. 8:3–4). Our prayers are all going to end up in the same place. Every time we pray together, letting our prayers mingle with the prayers of other saints, we mirror the collection in heaven.

And praying together foreshadows our heavenly future when we will join that “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and

to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10). Jonathan Edwards called heaven “a world of love,”²² because there we will perfectly love—and be loved by—our God and his saints forever. In heaven we will exist in glorious togetherness: together dressed in the righteousness of Christ and together praising him with one loud voice.

Praying is an activity of relationship. Calvin said prayer is “an intimate conversation of the pious with God”;²³ it is also the intimate conversation of God with God and is a precious opportunity for the intimate conversation of the people who are bound together in relationship to him. By praying together, we nurture our relationship with our triune God and with his people—a relationship that will never end.



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The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

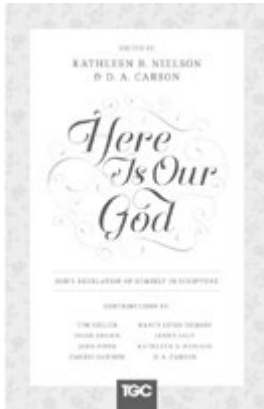
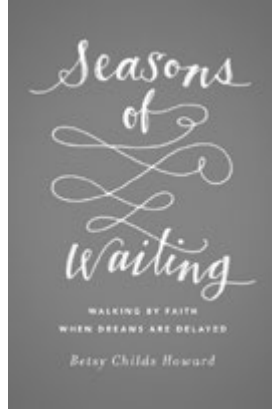
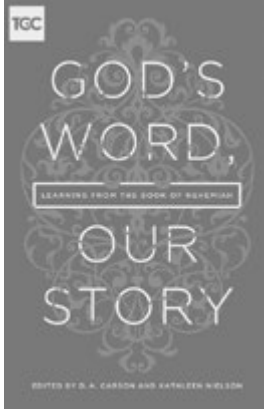
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