

PRAY LIKE THIS

How to Be with God for 15 Minutes A Day

by Rich Villodas

Inspired by *The Narrow Path*

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INTRODUCTION



In March of 2020 I discovered that lots of people don't know how to pray. It was a surprising revelation. We were a few weeks into the Covid pandemic. As a pastor, I wanted to keep our congregation connected since our ministry model become exclusively virtual. So, I decided to guide our congregants every midday for fifteen minutes of prayer on Instagram and Facebook live.

A few days into this new rhythm, people from all over the country were joining this prayer moment. And this is when I discovered that many people don't pray in a way that helps them grow.

My wife, Rosie, and I hosted a midday prayer for five months. For fifteen minutes we would lead others through various aspects of prayer. We would stay on for an additional ten to fifteen minutes to take questions and hear stories of how prayer was impacting people.

Over and over, we heard stories from people of faith who were finally understanding how to pray. For some, they realized that praying with others was an anchor to fuel their lives with God. For many, they realized that no one had ever modeled prayer for them.

In this way, the struggle many have regarding prayer is consistent with Jesus's early disciples.

When the disciples observed Jesus, they came to a powerful conclusion: the power and character of Jesus had to be connected to his prayer life and communion with God. This is perhaps why the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1).

This request would come as a surprise because they grew up in homes that prayed all the time. And yet, they realized there was still more to grasp. I wonder if you feel the same.

Have you ever tried to pray and found yourself at a loss for words? Or maybe you tried to get settled to talk to God but couldn't shake all the thoughts that swirled in your mind. Or perhaps you sat down to pay attention to God but made the mistake of taking out your phone, leading you down a path of distraction.

If prayer is hard for you, you're in good company.

Prayer is hard for everyone.

And yet, prayer is one of the great necessities for a life rooted in Jesus. But mercifully, prayer doesn't have to be complicated.

In fact, simple prayers are all it takes to grow spiritually.

That's what I want to teach you here.

MY PRAYER JOURNEY



My prayer life is one of the most frustrating parts of my life. I know I need to do it, but everything inside me (and around me) persuades me not to. However, when I finally say yes to this practice, I'm consistently glad I did.

When my children were younger, getting them to take a bath was a battle every time. They would complain, run away, or give reasons why they didn't need to wash up. But when they got in the water, they actually enjoyed it. And afterwards they would tell me how fresh they felt.

I find myself responding to God's invitations to pray in this way.

I complain, run away, or try to persuade myself and God that I can do it later. Yet, when I decide to pray, I emerge spiritually fresh.

I wish I could tell you my struggle with prayer only existed when I first became a Christian as a nineteen-year-old. But no. This has been my story every day of every year.

I share this with you because we will rarely feel like praying. But this need not deter you.

My earliest memory of prayer is watching my grandmother, Carmen, practice it. She lived one block

from our home, so we were at her house multiple times a week. When I was in kindergarten I would head over to her house with a few cousins before our parents picked us up. While the cousins would be doing homework, wrestling, or eating, grandma would sneak away to her bedroom for ten to fifteen minutes.

She would kneel at the side of her bed praying in Spanish. Her prayers were filled with words from the psalms, as well as pleas for God's mercy for her children. When I observed her, I had a deep realization that prayer was an "unburdening."

Where could she go with all her concerns? To the throne room of God at the side of her bed.

Another early memory of prayer happened in the same room, but on the other side of the bed where my grandfather, Marcos, sat. He would kneel to pray, but I also observed him sitting at the edge of his bed in silence. From him I learned that prayer was like sitting with a friend.

One more early memory comes to mind. On many occasions in elementary school, I met my cousins at my aunt Lydia's home. She lived down the block from us as well. Lydia, and her sister, Minerva, would teach us a prayer that was recited every day before we left the house. This is how it went:

Heavenly Father,
We thank you for this day,
And we pray,
That you give us a new heart and a new mind.
Heal the sick.
Help the needy.
Uplift the fallen.

OBSTACLES TO PRAYER



The first obstacle to prayer is that it can be, well... boring. The sooner we acknowledge this, the better for all of us. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is when Jesus tells his disciples to pray with him as he's in the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus tells his guys to stay in one spot while he prays in another. A few moments later, he turns around and his team is knocked out cold. I find great comfort in this because I'm prone to the same weakness. Subconsciously, we believe that because prayer is not the most riveting thing imaginable, it's hard to muster up the energy to stay with it.

This is one of the greatest mistakes we make, because some of the deepest work God does in us happens in the simple silence of prayer.

Now, don't get me wrong. I love a good riveting moment. I've been in church services where there was a palpable sense of God's presence in the room. I'll take that any day of the week. But to expect this every day leads to disappointment.

Think about human relationships for a moment. The more you get to know someone, the deeper your communion becomes with that person. To expect riveting moments of conversation everyday misses the deeper truth that intimacy is forged in largely uneventful moments.

That's what I mean when I say prayer can be "boring". Especially prayer when it's just you and God.

But please, hear me out, dear friend. Just because you can't feel it,

If we can begin to confess this to God and to ourselves, we can start receiving grace to courageously make some importance shifts.

And remember, our objective is not praying endless hours a day. We are aiming at fifteen minutes, dear friend. Fifteen minutes out of 1,440 minutes we are each allotted in each day. To take it further, if you divide those hours into fifteen-minute blocks, this means you have 96 opportunities to pray.

When you do the math, doesn't that sound achievable? Ironically, this is one of the subtle obstacles that gets in the way. We struggle to pray because we forget the mustard seed principle.

The mustard seed principle is the simple truth that a little bit in Jesus's hands goes a long way.

Fifteen minutes of prayer, in relation to almost fifteen hundred minutes a day can feel like a waste of time, especially for people whose lives are full. But prayer entrusted into Jesus's hands will feed your soul.

When Jesus wanted to encourage his disciples to believe, he didn't tell them to have faith the size of a mountain. He said all they needed was mustard seed-sized prayer. This kind of prayer can move a mountain.

Similarly, when Jesus fed thousands of hungry women, men, and children, he didn't have a Costco membership or access to their bakery. All he needed was a few pieces of bread from a young boy who was willing to share.

Don't miss the connection, friend.

Attentive prayer offered to Jesus can yield great fruit if we persist in it.

A SIMPLE STRUCTURE FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES OF PRAYER



Let's walk through seven simple steps together:

1. Intention: Clarify your focus.
2. Attention: Pay attention to your breath.
3. Anchor: Select a word to ground you.
4. Scripture: Slowly pray scripture.
5. Examination: Practice interior examination.
6. Intercession: Speak to God on behalf of others.
7. Commission: Ask to be sent by God into the world.

First, clarify your intention.

What are you hoping for in this moment? Relief for stress? Help for a loved one? Provision for an urgent need? Courage for a hard conversation?

All of these are meaningful reasons to come to God in prayer. And as we will see a bit later, bringing the entirety of our lives and situations to God is always wise. Prayer is, in many ways, the simple act of inviting God into the realities of our lives.

But a question remains: Is there more? I think so.

Clarifying our intention is important because it helps us to pray mindfully. We are not just showing up because we have to, but because there's a particular burden or joy on your heart and mind. And the focus needed is around two areas: presence and surrender.

To pray is an act of presence.

To pray is a call to surrender.

I contend that this is to be the primary intention of our hearts.

Second, pay attention to your breath.

To pay attention to your breath is not a nod to new age spirituality. It's an act of practicing presence and gratitude.

When I sit down for a fifteen-minute prayer session, I focus on my breath. I'll take a few deep breaths in and out. In Hebrew, the word "spirit" and "breath" are the same. Our breath reminds us that God has given us life. The moment we are in is a gift. This simple acknowledgment is to lead to gratitude.

Your breath reminds you that you are still here.
Your life is a gift.
God is not done with you.

When I breath in and out, my mind tends to focus on a few stories in scripture.

For one, I think of Ezekiel 37. It's a story about a valley of dry bones that come back together again. After the bones reunite and the ligament and flesh return, God sends the wind of the Spirit to fill the lungs of this group of people. This breath is an act of redeeming love, reminding the people of God that their lives are filled with the purposes of God.

As you breath in and out, for a few seconds or a minute, remember that the breath you have is God's declaration that your life is filled with divine purpose.

Third, choose an anchoring prayer-word to keep you attentive to Jesus.

After I pay attention to my breath, I set my timer on my phone for a few minutes. For a fifteen-minute session, I recommend starting with two to three minutes.

tends to wander off into all kinds of territory. I start having imaginary conversations with people I'm in conflict with. I start wondering about my New York sports teams. I suddenly remember that I forgot to email someone back.

Whenever these distracting thoughts surface, very gently come back to your anchor word or phrase (Jesus...Jesus, here I am).

And here's the good news as I've written before: A thousand distractions simply means a thousand opportunities to come back to Jesus.

Okay, by this time, you're already five minutes into your time of prayer. And let me remind you that much is happening beneath the surface.

The fourth step is to slowly pray scripture.

People frequently ask me is what words they should offer when praying. I have two ways to answer this question: we can offer words from our hearts, or words from scripture.

Prayerfully reading Holy Scripture is an important part in learning to pray. Whether we are praying the Psalms, or reading a Gospel narrative, scripture immerses us in God's life and action. Slowly reading through a portion of scripture during a time of prayer helps to renew our minds (Romans 12:2).

I love to prayerfully read scripture because I often need the words of others to help me articulate my words. In this way, reading scripture functions like Hallmark cards. (Disclaimer: I know many Hallmark cards are cheesy. Stay with me here. I promise this is going somewhere).

When birthdays and anniversaries come around most of us search out cards to give to our friends and family.

the text. At the most basic level, ask: What is going on in this passage? Read it a four to five times, slowly.

2. Meditation (Meditatio): At this point you're asking, "What is God saying to me through the text?" At this point, ask whether there is something that God might want to reveal to you through this passage. Often, it might connect with something in your life (your work, relationships, etc.) Spend a few minutes processing what you sense God speaking to you in this moment.

3. Prayer (Oratio): What do I want to say to God about the text? This is your opportunity to offer words to God in response to what God might have spoken to you in meditation.

4. Contemplation (Contemplatio): At this point, no more words are needed. God has spoken to you through scripture; you have spoken to God in return. Now, take 1-2 minutes to sit in silence, enjoying the presence of God.

Moving on, the fifth step is to practice interior examination.

After reading scripture, or through the time of silence I've done, I usually take out my journal to capture a few reflections. I've been writing in my journals for over twenty-five years. In a fifteen-minute session, taking five minutes to capture some pressing thoughts before God can bring about much fruit.

Journaling has been an invaluable practice that has allowed me to make my words more exact. It helps me to love God with my mind. Additionally, journaling has enabled me to see God's action in my life through my questions, concerns, struggles, and celebrations.

I've been able to recall prayers that God answered, prayers that I thank God were not answered, and answers to prayers I never asked for.

The sixth step is to speak to God on behalf of others.

Prayer is an act of love. It seeks to ground us in the love of God, while also burdening our hearts for the world we live in. Intercession—speaking to God about the wellbeing of others—is an essential element of prayer.

On several occasions, Moses interceded for the people of Israel. Jesus prayed to the Father for his disciples. Paul prayed for the church in his epistles. Intercession emerges out of a deep conviction that the God of the Bible revealed in Jesus is the God of history.

In other words, God is active right here, right now, and through the mystery of prayer, God acts. (It's important to note that one of the puzzling mysteries about intercession is when and where God acts. I've prayed many prayers that were not answered in the way I had hoped. I'm positive you have had the same experience. But I've also prayed for many people and situations and have seen the provision and grace of God at work.)

The mere practice of intercession is spiritually necessary because it reminds us not to preoccupy ourselves with our needs alone. This kind of prayer invites us to consider the larger world we inhabit and our role in joining God's project of renewing it. When I pray, I often have a list of people that I sense God wants me to pray for. Sometimes I pray for a handful of people on my list, but other times, God brings to mind someone I had not thought about. In these moments I have a deep sense that God is calling me not only to pray for them, but to reach out to them with a word of encouragement.

This brings me to the final step for our fifteen minutes with God. It's easy to pray for others without going a step further. Prayer is not handing over problems to God so we go about having a good

A FINAL WORD

Throughout this reflection I've emphasized that the model I'm offering is great for a fifteen-minute encounter with God. However, as you give yourself to this, something will happen in you. You will realize that fifteen minutes is a great start, but your soul longs for more. This is one of the ways you can tell God is at work in your soul. You will start to ache for just a bit more time.

So don't be surprised if you need twenty minutes a day. Or maybe you'll start making room for this kind of prayer thirty minutes a few times a week.

Here's what I know: to be with God in prayer tends to produce a longing for more time.

So, the time allotted here is not meant to be restrictive but to simply get you started.

To bring all of this to a close, let me summarize. What can fifteen minutes of prayer look like?

Here's a summary of everything I've said:

Step 1: Intention: Clarify your focus (30 seconds)

Step 2: Attention: Pay attention to your breath (30 seconds)

Step 3: Anchor: Select a word to ground you (2 minutes)

Step 4: Scripture: Slowly pray scripture (5 minutes)

Step 5: Examination: Practice interior examination (4 minutes)

Step 6: Intercession: Speak to God on behalf of others (2 minutes)

Step 7: Commission: Ask to be sent by God into the world
(1 minute)

FIFTEEN SCRIPTURES TO SLOWLY READ



Mark 6:50

“Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Mark 4:39-41

Quiet! Be still. Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?

Matthew 11:28-30 (The Message)

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. [Take my yoke upon you and we'll pull the plow across the field together.] Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace [that go with my easy yoke]. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Psalms 37:7

Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.

Psalm 23 (Dallas Willard adaptation)

1 The Lord is my Shepherd, I have life without lack.

2 In his green pastures I've eaten my fill so I lie down. At his still waters my thirst is satisfied.

3 He heals and reintegrates my broken depths in his eternal life so I can walk in paths of righteousness on his behalf.

4 Even though I go through loss, hunger, disease, aging, and death I will fear no evil because you Jesus are with me. Your strong rod and protective staff put me at liberty.

5 Your abundant provision is a feast for me so I'm happy to share with my enemies. You give me hot showers and warm fluffy towels, joyful experiences and deep relationships, to make me feel clean, special, and powerful. My cup runs over so I can be generous without ever running out.

6 Surely this world is a perfectly safe place for me to be Because I dwell and abide with God in the fullness of his life in the Kingdom of the Heavens forever.

Isaiah 43:1

"I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

Psalm 46:10

"Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."

Romans 5:8

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh^[a]; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

Ephesians 3:4-5

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Ephesians 4:2

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.



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Thank You

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