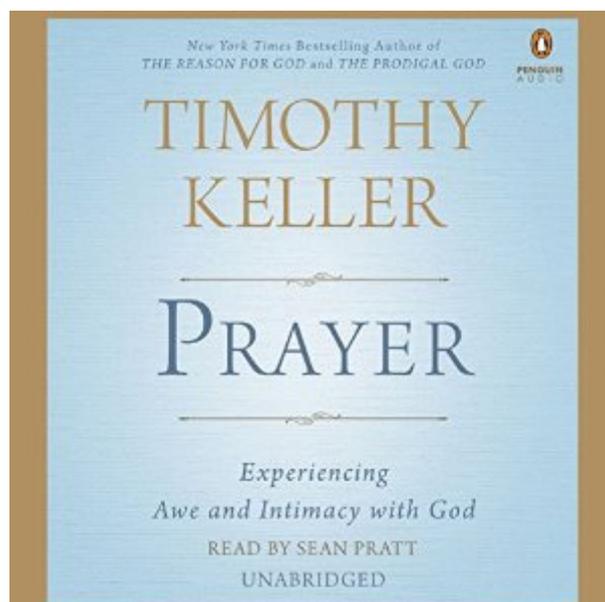


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Prayer: Experiencing Awe And Intimacy With God



Synopsis

New York Times best-selling author and renowned pastor Timothy Keller explores the power of prayer. Christians are taught in their churches and schools that prayer is the most powerful way to experience God. But aside from learning prayers by rote, few receive instruction or guidance in how to make the most of this essential Christian act - how to make prayer genuinely meaningful. In *Prayer*, renowned pastor Timothy Keller delves into the many facets of this everyday act. With his trademark insights and energy, Keller offers brilliant and inspirational biblical guidance, as well as specific prayers for certain situations, such as dealing with grief, loss, love, and forgiveness. He discusses ways to make prayers more personal and powerful, and how to establish a practice of prayer that works for each listener. Dr. Keller's previous books have sold more than one million copies. His Redeemer Presbyterian Church is not only a major presence in his home base of New York, it has also helped to launch more than 250 other churches in 48 cities around the world. His teachings have already helped millions, the majority of whom pray regularly. And with *Prayer*, he'll show them how to find a deeper connection with God.

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Customer Reviews

There are two topics I try to read books on regularly: the gospel and prayer. I read on the gospel because I need it to grow me, to humble me, to sanctify me, and to help me remember what God has done in Christ to save me. I read on prayer because my prayer life needs encouragement and guidance to strengthen my desire and skills at communicating with God. Naturally, when I heard one

of my favorite authors, Timothy Keller, was coming out with a book on prayer, I was eager to get my hands on a copy and dig in. Prayer: Experiencing Prayer and Intimacy with God is a book that was birthed out of Keller's realization of his own shortcomings in prayer. Both he and his wife were diagnosed with diseases during a certain season of their lives (his was thyroid cancer and hers was Crohn's disease). This coupled with pastoring in Manhattan around the time of the September 11th terrorist attacks forced Keller to his knees and really begin to practice and wrestle with the concept of prayer. Readers will sense within the first five pages just how well-read and well-thought-out Keller is in dealing with prayer. Keller sought to write on the essentials of prayer from a "theological, experiential, and methodological" perspective, and thus do something most books on prayer seldom do (1).

A Brief Summary

This book is divided into five parts, each comprising from two to five chapters. Part one is called "Desiring Prayer," which answers the "why?" question about prayer and digs into its necessity, mapping out the terrain for the rest of the book. Part two, "Understanding Prayer," describes the many differing views of prayer from many vantage points including world religions, the non-religious, and various Christian traditions. He then moves to discuss how prayer is our response to God's Word and share how the Trinity is essential to true prayer. Part three, "Learning Prayer," interacts with great theologians from church history (Augustin, Luther, and Calvin), sharing their instruction and methods in prayer. (I was especially helped by Keller's interaction with Luther's teaching on meditation on Scripture and the Holy Spirit "preaching to us" in prayer.) Keller then moves on to prescribe modeling our prayers along the Lord's Prayer before laying out a biblical and balanced grid of what prayer is, what it requires, what it gives, and where it takes us. Part four, "Deepening Prayer," dives deeper into meditation and the experiential aspect of prayer, interacting with theologians like John Owen, J.I. Packer, Jonathan Edwards, and C.S. Lewis along gleaning truth and offering critique of medieval and Catholic practices of mystical prayer. Part five, "Doing Prayer," practically teaches just that: the place of praise in prayer, the role of the gospel in prayer, and our ability to ask for help in prayer. The last chapter offers a guide for daily prayer, sharing sample devotions and methods to practice.

My Experience

Simply put, I was floored by Prayer. There is much that he mentioned that will change my life and practice of prayer. Here are a few things that have been echoing in my head the past several days:--We are to pray in Jesus name, not our own. This means that our basis for approaching God is the finished work of Christ and that we shouldn't think our good works or performance earns us access to God.--We are to always have the gospel in focus during prayer to keep us humble, fuel our praise, and provide us so many reasons to give thanks to God in prayer. If we are in Christ, it also grounds our prayer in reality and not circumstances around us.--Meditating on Scripture is a bridge that moves from

Scripture reading to heartfelt prayer.--Prayer-lists can be unhelpful if they are merely rattled off to God like a grocery list. They should be accompanied with theological reasoning and self-examination.--I also greatly valued interacting with people from church history and their experience in prayer.

What Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City did for equipping and encouraging gospel-centered ministers, Prayer does for equipping and encouraging gospel-centered pray-ers. The rich theology of Prayer grounded me in biblical truth and motivated me for prayer; the experiential aspect guided me in understanding more of what prayer is like while pushing me to dig deeper; and the methodological section equipped me to develop my own practical and sustainable life of prayer that makes a difference. I feel like I've just gone through a masters-level class on prayer.

Keller interacts with a variety of authors and theologians and puts together a scholarly--but not overly-scholarly--treatment on prayer that may be the most well-rounded book on prayer there is.

Who This Is For Prayer is a book for people who want biblical grounding in prayer, a gospel motivation to pray, and practical methods for prayer. This book might be hard for some due to its somewhat scholarly nature (Keller writes for a well-educated congregation in Manhattan), but shouldn't scare people away who are serious about maturing in their understanding and experience of prayer. I could see this book being widely read by a variety of people. Christians looking to deepen their understanding and practice of prayer will find it invaluable. Small groups will value its practical instruction, gospel-grounding, and prescribed methods, while Bible school and seminary students will value the depth of citations and additional resources in the appendix and learning from different Christian traditions they might not otherwise have exposure to. The true value of this book will not lie in having read and understood it, but from having it change your daily life and practice. I am greatly challenged to more intentionally pursue a richer, deeper, more faithful and more God-honoring time in prayer. I hope it does the same for you.

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"Writing a book in your 50s will go twice as fast and be twice as good as if you try the same book in your 30s. It's just good stewardship to wait." That was Tim Keller's advice to pastors who desire to write. And he would know, since by my count, Keller has written nine books in the last two and half years. Talk about prolific writing!

Keller's latest work is simply entitled "Prayer." As he explains in the introduction, his aim is to combine the theological, experiential, and methodological in one book (1). He wants to drive home that prayer "is both conversation and encounter with God" (5). We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his

help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence. Prayer, then, is both awe and intimacy, struggle and reality. These will not happen every time we pray, but each should be a major component of our prayer over the course of our lives. (5) Keller begins by acknowledging that he "discovered" prayer in the second half of his life with a series of moments: his teaching through the Psalms, the events of 9/11 (his wife implored him to pray together every night), and after his treatment for thyroid cancer (9ff.). This book, then, is the fruit of what he learned and what over the years, in both reading and in practice, he has discovered. Rather than giving a thorough review of this work, I will simply offer a couple of points that landed powerfully on me.

WARMTH AND LIGHT

Keller repeatedly emphasizes the need for both sound doctrine and vibrant devotion--or what John Murray called "an intelligent mysticism" that steers clear of cold assent to truth on the one hand and passion devoid of truth on the other. Keller writes, "That means an encounter with God that involves not only the affections of the heart but also the convictions of the mind. We are not called to choose between a Christian life based on truth and doctrine or a life filled with spiritual power and experience. They go together. I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch for 'something more,' for experience. Rather, I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology. (17) Prayer, according to Keller, is a way to experience one's theology. Using the thought of John Owen, Keller writes that "we must be able to existentially access our doctrinal convictions. If doctrinal soundness is not accompanied by heart experience, it will lead eventually to nominal Christianity ... and eventually to nonbelief" (180). Of course, there is also a danger in other direction where affections "outrun" light. Despite this caution, both Owen and Keller agree that it is better to have more light than truth. I was surprised by this point and suspicious at first. If we are going to be imbalanced, better that we be doctrinally weak and have a vital prayer life and real sense of God on the heart than that we get all our doctrine straight and be cold and spiritually hard. (182) Perhaps it was the inner Pharisee in me or the instinctive Protestant rejection of my childhood Roman Catholicism, but I squirmed at this notion, especially when Keller encourages us to read "the medieval mystics with appreciation but also plenty of caution" (184). But after reflection, I came to understand what he is saying. He quotes Carl Trueman: "If the theology [of the medieval mystics] often leaves much to be desired, it would seem that the answer is not to reject the ambition of the mystics but to combine this ambition with appropriate theology" (184).

AUGUSTINE, LUTHER, AND CALVIN

After constructing a theology of prayer in the first five chapters, Keller tackles the more practical components of prayer. For this he enlists three seminal figures--three "master teachers of prayer" (108). In chapter 6 he looks at the the letters of Augustine and Martin Luther on prayer and in chapter 7 he highlights Calvin's 5 rules for prayer. These two chapters distill a treasure trove of

historical wisdom regarding the practice of prayer. But perhaps most illuminating is chapter 8 wherein Keller focuses on each line of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. Like before, he incorporates insights from all three theologians. I will highlight one insight. Calvin, in his concluding remarks on the Lord's Prayer, notes that the prayer as a whole was given to us in the plural form--"Us." As such, "the prayers of Christians ought to be public ... to the advancement of the believer's fellowship" (118). According to Michael Horton, Calvin believed "public ministry shapes private devotion, not vice versa" (118). Keller underscores this well: "Prayer is ... not a strictly private thing. As much as we can, we should pray with others both formally in gathered worship and informally. . . . C. S. Lewis argues that it takes a community of people to get to know an individual person. Reflecting on his own friendships, he observed that some aspects of one of his friend's personality were brought out only through interaction with a second friend. That meant if he lost the second friend, he lost the part of his first friend that was otherwise invisible. 'By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets.' If it takes a community to know an ordinary human being, how much more necessary would it be to get to know Jesus alongside others? By praying with friends, you will be able to hear and see facets of Jesus that you have not yet perceived.... Knowing the Lord is communal and cumulative, we must pray and praise together." (118-119) This is a timely word in our individualistic age. Private prayers are to be shaped by the corporate worship of God's people. Each Lord's Day as we gather with the church, we are learning how better to seek the Lord in secret.

CONCLUSION It is a disservice to leave the review here. Keller's discussion on the "touchstones of prayer" (ch. 9) merit more attention. His final section on "doing prayer" (chs. 12-14) are chock-full of wisdom. His concluding chapter on daily prayer provides some helpful and varied patterns of prayer that all readers can incorporate into their lives. Even his endnotes deserve mention. In almost all cases I prefer footnotes over endnotes, yet in this work I appreciated how the endnotes allowed for an uncluttered and undistracted reading. But I made it a point to read all 386 of the endnotes afterward and I learned several things: (1) Keller has thought about prayer for many, many years (hence there's wisdom when he says to wait until your 50s to write books); (2) Keller has done extensive, eclectic reading on the topic of prayer and has gained wisdom from many streams; and (3) Keller is extremely thorough in his presentation without being cumbersome (some endnotes can be articles unto themselves). I devoured this book in a matter of days. It is the kind of book that invites multiple re-readings since we never master prayer. Keller showed me how cold I often am before the Lord (seen in an impoverished and anemic prayer life), but he also pastorally pointed to a better way to truly experience "awe and intimacy" with God. Frequently I was compelled to close the book, apply

its rich truths, and seek the Lord in secret--and with God's people. If it has the same effect on others, I think Keller--and the Lord--will be pleased.

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