

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO

before
amen



THE POWER OF A
SIMPLE PRAYER

before
amen

ALSO BY MAX LUCADO

INSPIRATIONAL

3:16

A Gentle Thunder

A Love Worth Giving

And the Angels Were Silent

Come Thirsty

Cure for the Common Life

Facing Your Giants

Fearless

God Came Near

God's Story, Your Story

Grace

Great Day Every Day

He Chose the Nails

He Still Moves Stones

In the Eye of the Storm

In the Grip of Grace

It's Not About Me

Just Like Jesus

Max on Life

Next Door Savior

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior

On the Anvil

Outlive Your Life

Six Hours One Friday

The Applause of Heaven

The Great House of God

Traveling Light

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When God Whispers Your Name

You'll Get Through This

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3:16

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Grace for the Moment

*Grace for the Moment Morning
and Evening*

Grace Happens Here

His Name Is Jesus

Let the Journey Begin

Live Loved

Mocha with Max

One Incredible Moment

Safe in the Shepherd's Arms

This Is Love

You Changed My Life

before amen

The Power of a Simple Prayer

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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*To Mark Tidwell,
dear friend,
able coworker,
soldier in the faith*

*He does what's best for those who fear him—
hears them call out, and saves them.*

PSALM 145:19 MSG

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one

The Pocket Prayer

Hello, my name is Max. I'm a recovering prayer wimp. I doze off when I pray. My thoughts zig, then zag, then zig again. Distractions swarm like gnats on a summer night. If attention deficit disorder applies to prayer, I am afflicted. When I pray, I think of a thousand things I need to do. I forget the one thing I set out to do: pray.

Some people excel in prayer. They inhale heaven and exhale God. They are the SEAL Team Six of intercession. They would rather pray than sleep. Why is it that I sleep when I pray? They belong to the PGA: Prayer Giants Association. I am a card-carrying member of the PWA: Prayer Wimps Anonymous.

Can you relate? It's not that we don't pray at all. We all pray some.

On tearstained pillows we pray.

In grand liturgies we pray.

At the sight of geese in flight, we pray.

Quoting ancient devotions, we pray.

This week more of us will pray than will exercise, go to work, or have sex.¹ Surveys indicate that one in five unbelievers prays daily.² Just in case?

We pray to stay sober, centered, or solvent. We pray when the lump is deemed malignant. When the money runs out before the month does. When the unborn baby hasn't kicked in a while. We all pray . . . some.

But wouldn't we all like to pray . . .

More?

Better?

Deeper?

Stronger?

With more fire, faith, or fervency?

Yet we have kids to feed, bills to pay, deadlines to meet. The calendar pounces on our good intentions like a tiger on a rabbit. We want to pray, but *when*?

We want to pray, but *why*? We might as well admit it. Prayer is odd, peculiar. Speaking into space. Lifting words into the sky. We can't even get the cable company

to answer us, yet God will? The doctor is too busy, but God isn't? We have our doubts about prayer.

And we have our checkered history with prayer: unmet expectations, unanswered requests. We can barely genuflect for the scar tissue on our knees. God, to some, is the ultimate heartbreaker. Why keep tossing the coins of our longings into a silent pool? He jilted me once . . . but not twice.

Oh, the peculiar puzzle of prayer.

We aren't the first to struggle. The sign-up sheet for Prayer 101 contains some familiar names: the apostles John, James, Andrew, and Peter. When one of Jesus' disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1 NIV), none of the others objected. No one walked away saying, "Hey, I have prayer figured out." The first followers of Jesus needed prayer guidance.

In fact, the only tutorial they ever requested was on prayer. They could have asked for instructions on many topics: bread multiplying, speech making, storm stilling. Jesus raised people from the dead. But a "How to Vacate the Cemetery"

The first followers of Jesus needed prayer guidance. In fact, the only tutorial they ever requested was on prayer.

seminar? His followers never called for one. But they did want him to do this: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Might their interest have had something to do with the jaw-dropping, eye-popping promises Jesus attached to prayer? “Ask and it will be given to you” (Matt. 7:7 NIV). “If you believe, you will get anything you ask for in prayer” (Matt. 21:22 NCV). Jesus never attached such power to other endeavors. “*Plan* and it will be given to you.” “You will get anything you *work* for.” Those words are not in the Bible. But these are—“If you remain in me and follow my teachings, you can ask anything you want, and it will be given to you” (John 15:7 NCV).

Jesus gave stunning prayer promises.

And he set a compelling prayer example. Jesus prayed before he ate. He prayed for children. He prayed for the sick. He prayed with thanks. He prayed with tears. He had made the planets and shaped the stars, yet he prayed. He is the Lord of angels and Commander of heavenly hosts, yet he prayed. He is coequal with God, the exact representation of the Holy One, and yet he devoted himself to prayer. He prayed in the desert, cemetery, and garden. “He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed” (Mark 1:35).

This dialogue must have been common among his friends:

“Has anyone seen Jesus?”

“Oh, you know. He’s up to the same thing.”

“Praying *again*?”

“Yep. He’s been gone since sunrise.”

Jesus would even disappear for an entire night of prayer. I’m thinking of one occasion in particular. He’d just experienced one of the most stressful days of his ministry. The day began with the news of the death of his relative John the Baptist. Jesus sought to retreat with his disciples, yet a throng of thousands followed him. Though grief-stricken, he spent the day teaching and healing people. When it was discovered that the host of people had no food to eat, Jesus multiplied bread out of a basket and fed the entire multitude. In the span of a few hours, he battled sorrow, stress, demands, and needs. He deserved a good night’s rest. Yet when evening finally came, he told the crowd to leave and the disciples to board their boat, and “he went up into the hills by himself to pray” (Mark 6:46 NLT).

Apparently it was the correct choice. A storm exploded over the Sea of Galilee, leaving the disciples “in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o’clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water” (Matt. 14:24–25 NLT). Jesus ascended the

mountain depleted. He reappeared invigorated. When he reached the water, he never broke his stride. You'd have thought the water was a park lawn and the storm a spring breeze.

Do you think the disciples made the prayer–power connection? “Lord, teach us to pray *like that*. Teach us

When the
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to find strength in prayer.
To banish fear in prayer. To
defy storms in prayer. To
come off the mountain of
prayer with the authority
of a prince.”

What about you? The
disciples faced angry waves
and a watery grave. You
face angry clients, a turbu-
lent economy, raging seas of
stress and sorrow.

“Lord,” we still request,
“teach us to pray.”

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he gave them a prayer. Not a lecture on prayer. Not the doctrine of prayer. He gave them a quotable, repeatable, portable prayer (Luke 11:1–4).

Could you use the same? It seems to me that the

prayers of the Bible can be distilled into one. The result is a simple, easy-to-remember, pocket-size prayer:

Father,

you are good.

I need help. Heal me and forgive me.

They need help.

Thank you.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Let this prayer punctuate your day. As you begin your morning, *Father, you are good*. As you commute to work or walk the hallways at school, *I need help*. As you wait in the grocery line, *They need help*.

Keep this prayer in your pocket as you pass through the day.

Prayer, for most of us, is not a matter of a month-long retreat or even an hour of meditation. Prayer is conversation with God while driving to work or awaiting an appointment or before interacting with a client. Prayer can be the internal voice that directs the external action.

Prayer is conversation with God while driving to work or awaiting an appointment or before interacting with a client.

This much is sure: God will teach you to pray.

Don't think for a minute that he is glaring at you from a distance with crossed arms and a scowl, waiting for

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you to get your prayer life together. Just the opposite. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with

you, and you will eat with me" (Rev. 3:20 NCV).

Jesus waits on the porch. He stands on the threshold. He taps . . . and calls. He waits for you to open the door. To pray is to open it. Prayer is the hand of faith on the door handle of your heart. The willing pull. The happy welcome to Jesus: "Come in, O King. Come in." "The kitchen is messy, but come in." "I didn't clean up, but come in." "I'm not much of a conversationalist, but come in."

We speak. He listens. He speaks. We listen. This is prayer in its purest form. God changes his people through such moments.

He is changing me! Yes, I am a prayer wimp, but a *recovering* prayer wimp. Not where I long to be, but not where I was. My time in prayer has become my time of power. The Pocket Prayer has become a cherished friend. Its phrases linger in my thoughts like a favorite melody.

Father,

you are good.

I need help. Heal me and forgive me.

They need help.

Thank you.

In Jesus' name, amen.

When we invite God into our world, he walks in. He brings a host of gifts: joy, patience, resilience. Anxieties come, but they don't stick. Fears surface and then depart. Regrets land on the windshield, but then comes the wiper of prayer. The devil still hands me stones of guilt, but I turn and give them to Christ. I'm completing my sixth decade, yet I'm wired with energy. I am happier, healthier, and more hopeful than I have ever been. Struggles come, for sure. But so does God.

Prayer is not a privilege for the pious, not the art of a chosen few. Prayer is simply a heartfelt conversation between God and his child. My friend, he wants to talk with you. Even now, as you read these words, he taps at the door. Open it. Welcome him in. Let the conversation begin.

We speak. He listens. He speaks. We listen. This is prayer in its purest form. God changes his people through such moments.

two

Father . . . Daddy

When my eldest daughter was thirteen years old, she flubbed her piano piece at a recital. Jenna went on to become a fine pianist and a wonderful singer. But everyone has an off day. She just happened to have hers in front of an auditorium crowded with family, friends, and onlookers. The performance started well. Her fingers flowed up and down the keyboard like Billy Joel's. But midway through the piece, her musical train jumped the track.

I can still see her staring straight ahead, fingers stuck as if in superglue. She backed up a few measures and took another run at it. No luck. For the life of her

she couldn't remember the next part. The silence in the auditorium was broken only by the pounding of her parents' hearts.

Come on, honey, you can do it.

Keep trying.

Don't give up. It will come.

Finally it did. Jenna's mental block broke, and she completed the piece. But the damage had been done. She stood up from the piano bench, chin quivering, and curtsied. The audience offered compassionate applause. She hurried off the stage. Denalyn and I scurried out of our seats and met her at the side of the auditorium. She

threw her arms around me and buried her face in my shirt.

"Oh, Daddy."

That was enough for me.

Denalyn and I sandwiched her with affection. If a hug

could extract embarrassment, that one would have. At that moment I would have given her the moon. All she said was, "Oh, Daddy."

Prayer starts here. Prayer begins with an honest, heartfelt "Oh, Daddy."

Jesus taught us to begin our prayers by saying, "Our

Prayer begins
with an honest,
heartfelt "Oh,
Daddy."

Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). More specifically, our “*Abba* in heaven.” *Abba* is an intimate, tender, folksy, pedestrian term, the warmest of the Aramaic words for “father.”¹

Formality stripped away.

Proximity promised. Jesus invites us to approach God the way a child approaches his or her daddy.

And how do children approach their daddies? I went to a school playground

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to find out. I found a spot on the bench under the awning, flipped open a notebook, and took notes. Most of the children were picked up by their mothers. Yet enough dads had car-pool duty for me to complete my research. When a five-year-old spots his father in the parking lot, how does he react?

“Yippee!” (screamed by a redheaded boy wearing a Batman backpack).

“Ice cream!” (apparently referring to a promise made by the fellow to the freckle-faced girl).

“Pop! Over here! Push me!” (yelled by a boy wearing a Boston Red Sox cap who scooted straight to the swings).

I heard requests: “Daddy, can Tommy come home

with me? His mom is on a business trip, and he doesn't want to hang out with his big sister because she won't let him watch TV and makes him eat . . . ” (The boy's mouth was an uncapped hydrant. The words never stopped.)

I heard questions: “Are we going home?” And I heard excitement: “Daddy! Look what I did!”

Here's what I didn't hear: “Father, it is most gracious of thee to drive thy car to my place of education and provide me with domestic transportation. Please know of my deep gratitude for your benevolence. For thou art splendid in thy attentive care and diligent in thy dedication.”

I didn't hear formality or impressive vocabulary. I heard kids who were happy to see their dads and eager to speak.

God invites us to approach him in the same manner. What a relief! We prayer wimps fear “mis-praying.” What are the expected etiquette and dress code of prayer? What if we kneel instead of stand? What if we say the wrong words or use the wrong tone? Am I apostate if I say “prostate” instead of “prostrate”?

Jesus' answer? “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). *Become as little children.*

Carefree. Joy filled. Playful. Trusting. Curious. Excited. Forget greatness; seek littleness. Trust more; strut less. Make lots of requests, and accept all the gifts. Come to God the way a child comes to Daddy.

Daddy. The term takes aim at our pride. Other salutations permit an air of sophistication. As a pastor I know this well. Deepen the tone of voice, and pause for dramatic effect. “O holy Lord . . .” I allow the words to reverberate throughout the universe as I, the pontiff of petition, pontificate my prayer.

“God, you are my King, and I am your prince.”

“God, you are the Maestro, and I am your minstrel.”

“God, you are the President, and I am your ambassador.”

But God prefers this greeting: “God, you are my Daddy, and I am your child.”

Here’s why: it’s hard to show off and call God “Daddy” at the same time. Impossible, in fact. Perhaps

Forget greatness;
seek littleness.
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this is the point. Elsewhere, Jesus gives this instruction: “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites. They love

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off and call
God “Daddy” at
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Impossible, in
fact. Perhaps this
is the point.

to stand in the synagogues
and on the street corners
and pray so people will see
them. I tell you the truth,
they already have their full
reward” (Matt. 6:5 NCV).

Religious leaders loved
(and still love) to make
theater out of their prayers.
They perched themselves

at intersections and practiced public piety. The show
nauseated Jesus. “When you pray, you should go into
your room and close the door and pray to your Father
who cannot be seen. Your Father can see what is done in
secret, and he will reward you” (Matt. 6:6 NCV).

The words surely stunned Jesus’ audience. Prayer,
they likely assumed, was reserved for special people in
a special place. God met with the priest in the temple,
behind the curtain, in the Holy of Holies. The people
were simple farmers and stonemasons. Folks of the land
and earth. They couldn’t enter the temple. But they
could enter their closets.

“Go into your room and close the door . . . ” In the

Palestinian culture the room most likely to have a door was the storage closet. It held tools, seed, and farming supplies. A chicken might even wander in. There was nothing holy in it. Nothing holy about it. It was the day-to-day workroom.²

It still is. My closet has no fancy fixtures or impressive furniture. It has a shoe rack, a dirty-clothes hamper, hangers, and drawers for socks and underwear.

I don't entertain guests in my closet. You'll never hear me tell visitors after dinner, "Why don't we step into the closet for a chat?" Denalyn and I prefer the living room or the den. God apparently likes to chat in the closet.

The point? He's low on fancy, high on accessibility. To pray at the Vatican can be meaningful. But prayers offered at home carry as much weight as prayers offered in Rome. Travel to the Wailing Wall if you want. But prayer at your backyard fence is just as effective. The One who hears your prayers is your Daddy. You needn't woo him with location.

God apparently likes to chat in the closet. The point? He's low on fancy, high on accessibility.

Or wow him with eloquence. Jesus continued, "And

when you pray, don't be like those people who don't know God. They continue saying things that mean nothing, thinking that God will hear them because of their many words. Don't be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:7–8 NCV).

Jesus downplayed the importance of words in prayers. We tend to do the opposite. The more words the better. The *better* words the better. Muslim prayers, however impressive, must be properly recited at each of the five appointed times during the day. Hindu and

Just as a happy
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cannot mis-pray.

Buddhist prayers, however profound, depend upon the repetition of mantras, words, and syllables. Even branches of the Christian faith emphasize the appropriate prayer language, the latest prayer trend, the holi-

est prayer terminology. Against all this emphasis on syllables and rituals, Jesus says, "Don't ramble like heathens who . . . talk a lot" (Matt. 6:7 GOD'S WORD).

Vocabulary and geography might impress people but not God. There is no panel of angelic judges with numbered cards. "Wow, Lucado, that prayer was a ten.

God will certainly hear you!” “Oh, Lucado, you scored a two this morning. Go home and practice.” Prayers aren’t graded according to style.

Just as a happy child cannot mis-hug, the sincere heart cannot mis-pray. Heaven knows, life has enough burdens without the burden of praying correctly. If prayer depends on how I pray, I’m sunk. But if the power of prayer depends on the One who hears the prayer, and if the One who hears the prayer is my Daddy, then I have hope.

Prayer really is that simple. Resist the urge to complicate it. Don’t take pride in well-crafted prayers. Don’t apologize for incoherent prayers. No games. No cover-ups. Just be honest—honest to God. Climb into his lap. Tell him everything that is on your heart. Or tell him nothing at all. Just lift your heart to heaven and declare, *Father . . . Daddy . . .*

And sometimes “Daddy” is all we can muster. Stress.

If prayer
depends on
how I pray, I’m
sunk. But if the
power of prayer
depends on the
One who hears
the prayer, and
if the One who
hears the prayer
is my Daddy,
then I have hope.

Before Amen

Fear. Guilt. Grief. Demands on all sides. All we can summon is a plaintive “Oh, Father.” If so, that’s enough. It was for my young daughter. Jenna uttered only two words, and I wrapped her in my arms. Your heavenly Father will do the same.

