

# Teach Us to Pray

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House of David  
MINISTRIES

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Yeshua:

We read, *"Now it came to pass, as [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples'"* (Luke 11:1, NKJV).<sup>i</sup> Jesus's response has come to be known as "the Lord's prayer." A beautiful declaration that begins with the joy of our heavenly Father, praying for God's soon-coming Kingdom, asking Him for our daily provision and protection, and closing with an acknowledgment of God's sovereign Kingdom, His power, and glory. Matthew gives a more extended version of this prayer that Jesus gave as part of the Sermon on the Mount, traditionally believed to be a hill (called the Mount of Beatitudes) near Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.<sup>ii</sup>

*"In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen"* (Matthew 6:9-13).

The Lord's prayer has been memorized by millions and is incorporated into liturgical formats in nearly every denomination. But I do not believe that when the disciple asked Jesus to *teach* them to pray, His response would be for them to memorize another scripted prayer along with the hundreds of written prayers compiled over the centuries. The Psalms are equally beautiful in their own right, exulting our Heavenly Father and seeking His protection and provision. For example, we read:

*"O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth, Who have set Your glory above the heavens!"* (Psalm 8:1).

*"You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation"* (Psalm 89:26).

*Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom"* (Psalm 45:6).

*"Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have relieved me in my distress; Have mercy on me, and hear my prayer"* (Psalm 4:1). Amen and amen!

No, Jesus wanted to *teach* His disciples to pray, as the disciple asked: *“Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.”* And since we do not have any prayers scribed by the Apostle John, we surmise that John taught his disciples to pray differently.

In Judaism, prayer is God’s way of telling His people, “speak to Me, and I will listen.” The Hebrew word for prayer is *tefillah* (תְּפִלָּה) which comes from the verb *palal* (פָּלַל), which means “to mediate or judge,” *heetpalel* (הִתְפַּלֵּל) meaning to “intercede and to pray.”<sup>iii</sup> And *leheetpalel* (לְהִתְפַּלֵּל) meaning “to judge oneself.”<sup>iv</sup> Thus, prayer is more than wishful expectation. We know *“there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus”* (1 Timothy 2:5). *“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered”* (Romans 8:26). As such, we also rightly judge ourselves to pray in faith, believing God hears our prayers and answers them even before we ask; speak to Him, and He *will* listen.

The Torah refers to prayer as “the service of the heart,” an act imbued with love and reverence. It is our primary way of connecting our soul to the divine, a *Kiros* moment when our spirits soar into the heavenly realm.<sup>v</sup> It is the most elevating and powerful manifestation of the divine radiance that we can experience in our hearts and minds.<sup>vi</sup> We read about Jesus the night before His crucifixion, *“Being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground”* (Luke 22:44).

From His example, we understand that true prayer must always come from deep within the heart, a “service of the heart,” and even more, a “sacrifice of one’s very soul.” King David prayed: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psalm 139:23-24); *“Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God”* (Romans 8:27).

Therefore, prayer is not about us convincing God of our expectations. Instead, we approach God to connect with our heavenly Father, seeking His conviction so that we desire and choose to do His will, not ours. Rather than praying, “God, do all these things for me.” Let us pray, “God, change my heart so that I may accept and follow Your will.” Jesus said, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21).

The sages tell us this type of prayer “is a form of divine service which works in the heart and on the heart. It is prayed with a loud voice, plainly and simply, whereby we strengthen ourselves as with a strong hand, vigorously with all our might and power against any internal or external obstacle.”<sup>vii</sup> This service of the heart is called *Kavanah* (כַּוְנָה) and means “the intention or sincere feeling and direction of the heart.”<sup>viii</sup> *Kavanah* is a theological concept in Judaism about a worshiper’s state of mind and heart, sincerity, devotion, and emotional absorption during prayers. It has been told that prayer, or any other blessing, said without *Kavanah*, is like a body

without a soul.<sup>ix</sup> Jesus said, *"A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things"* (Matthew 12:35).

Jesus prefaced the Lord's prayer with these words: *"But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."* (Matthew 6:6-8). We are assured that God knows what we need even before we ask, but we must ask. He said, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full"* (John 16:23-24).

The Lord's prayer is not a memorized list of our expectations; instead, it is a guide for how we pray, as Jesus said, *"In this manner, therefore, pray."* We choose to come to the Lord, surrendering and offering a grateful heart filled with adoration and exultation. But in this closeness, we also find that God wants us to communicate with Him, even asking for our basic needs. Therefore, prayer requires physical action. Hence the rabbis say that "the movement of one's lips [in speech] is regarded as an act, and meditation [contemplating in our mind] does not count as speech; thus, one does not discharge his duty by meditation alone.<sup>x</sup> The same applies to prayer; here, too, one must articulate the words. Although prayer is a service of the heart, it cannot be confined to the heart but must be articulated orally."<sup>xi</sup>

King David wrote: *"All my bones shall say, 'Lord, who is like You, Delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, Yes, the poor and the needy from him who plunders him?'"* (Psalm 35:10). Based on this verse, we do not only pray in our hearts, although God hears every thought, and we do not only pray with our lips, but we pray and praise God with our whole being, body, and soul. The Talmud acknowledged that God created our physical body to serve Him. The sages tell us:

*"Although our prayers are expressed verbally, tefilla (prayer) is meant to be more than a mere recitation of words. Chazal (the sages) created a structure that mandates us to speak our prayers and utilize sight, hearing, and movement as we pray. Prayer is meant to be a full-body experience and a complete immersion into the encounter. When Rabbi Akiva prayed alone, he moved from one corner of the room to another due to his many bows and prostrations (Berachot 31a). Other stories recount how rabbis were so engrossed in prayer that they were unaware of things happening around them. Let us recognize the gift we have in being able to approach the Almighty in prayer. Let us focus on the words we are saying, the sights and sounds of prayer, and the movements we engage to come closer to Hakadosh Baruch Hu (the Almighty blessed be He). Let us ask Hashem (God) to open our mouths in prayer and allow our bodies and souls to come close to Him."<sup>xii</sup>*

In the Hebrew vernacular, the action of prayer (*leheetpalel*) is akin to one adorning himself in prayer, the same as we put on clothing (*lehitchabesh*). And it is akin to one joined in a marriage where the two have become one (*lehitchaten*). Paul said, *"Let us put on the armor of light... Put on the Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 13:12-14). We do not just pray to God; we put Him on our whole being. We also, *"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil"* (Ephesians 6:11). I assure you that no armor of God can effectively be worn without prayer, for in prayer God transforms the nature of our heart.

While Jesus often prayed alone to His heavenly Father, instructing us to go into our rooms, close the door, and pray to our Father, who is in the secret place.<sup>xiii</sup> We also read that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together and to encourage one another.<sup>xiv</sup> We read, *"When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place"* (Acts 2:1). There is something precious to God about His people coming together as one family; a public display of our prayers and worship of God.

The rabbis teach, *"All the men of Israel associated together like one man."*<sup>xv</sup> They say: *"Just as one man is composed of many limbs, and when they become separated, this affects the heart, for from it, there issues life. Therefore, by genuinely being all like one man, the service [of God] in the heart, i.e., prayer, will be firmly established."*<sup>xvi</sup> The primary service in the period just preceding the coming of Messiah is prayer, as Rabbi Chayim Vital (of blessed memory) writes in *Etz Chayim* [tree of life] and *Pri Etz Chayim* [fruit of the tree of life].<sup>xvii</sup> Paul said, *"But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'"* (1 Corinthians 12:20-21). When unity is lacking, the service of prayer is likewise imperfect.

In the Jewish prayers, we say: *"Bless us, our Father, all as one with the light of Your countenance,"* indicating that *"the light of God's countenance"* can be revealed only when we are *"all united as one."*<sup>xviii</sup> This means that divisiveness among God's people affects the divine presence, the *"heart"* of the Jewish people, and, subsequently, the church. Hence, we read, *"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered"* (1 Peter 3:7).

The task of prayer is to connect our souls with their source in the divine realm, cultivating a real sense of unity within God's family, connecting all souls with the *Shechinah*, God's manifest presence in the creation. This unity enhances the divine service of prayer.<sup>xix</sup> Paul said, *"I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting"* (1 Timothy 2:8). And when King Solomon dedicated God's Temple, *"Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven [and prayed]"* (1 Kings 8:22).

God's house was unified in prayer, and, with one accord, all Israel worshiped Him. Then, *"Indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in*

*praising and thanking the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying: 'For He is good, For His mercy endures forever,' that the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God" (2 Chronicles 5:13-14).*

Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

<sup>ii</sup> Wikipedia. Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>iii</sup> Sefaria. *Pallal* (פָּלַל).

<sup>iv</sup> Goetz, Bracha. *I Don't Know How to Pray!?* Chabad.org.

<sup>v</sup> Zaklikowski, Dovid. *What Is Jewish Prayer?* Chabad.org.

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Genesis 49:3.

<sup>vii</sup> The *Shemoneh Esreh*, of course, is always recited in a whisper, except on the Days of Awe; see Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch* 101:2-3.

<sup>viii</sup> Wikipedia. Kavanah.

<sup>ix</sup> *Shnei Luchot HaBerit*, Vol. I, p. 249b.

<sup>x</sup> Sanhedrin 65a. The Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch*, Hilchot Talmud Torah 2:12; see also Eruvin 54b. Berachot 20b.

<sup>xi</sup> The Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch* 62:3 and 185:3.

<sup>xii</sup> Eliyahu Berlowitz, Adam. *Pray to God... With Your Body*. The Israel Bible. <https://theisraelbible.com/pray-to-god-with-your-body/>

<sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 6:6.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hebrews 10:25.

<sup>xv</sup> Judges 20:11.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Tanya of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, elucidated by Rabbi Yosef Wineberg. Translated from Yiddish by Rabbi Levy Wineberg and Rabbi Sholom B. Wineberg. Edited by Uri Kaploun. Published and copyrighted by Kehot Publication Society. Chabad. Org.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Pri Etz Chayim*, Shaar HaTefillah, ch. 7.

<sup>xviii</sup> Liturgy, final blessing in the *Amidah*.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid*. The Tanya. See Epistle XXXI.