



Talk 5 – Why and How Do I Pray?

Duration 46 Minutes
HTB Transcripts

Key:

Personal Story / Testimony that Nicky Gumbel tells in the classic Alpha talk. These may be replaced with a live speaker's personal story or the speaker may tell the story about Nicky in the same way Nicky tells stories about others.

Story that Nicky tells about someone else (about a friend or a story he heard or read about).

Quotes are key to the talk to emphasise a point and to enable guests to engage and relate to a point made. There is now a way that people can seek permission to omit or replace quotes used in the original talks. A quote should be replaced with something equally effective to maintain the balance of teaching, story, and references to other information sources.

Key Quotes will need approval to change (these will be identified by a comment in the left column). Please email publications@alpha.org with your request.

Key Bible Passages are identified and you may wish to display these visually for your guests.

Red type identifies a part of the key teaching text that may be removed or altered for contextualisation.

Text left untouched is the standard key message content of the Alpha talk.

NOTE: Key elements of this script are: personal stories, humour and reference to media / popular culture to draw the guests in to engage with the talk.

Parts of the talk may need to be contextualised for other contexts or cultures but make sure you maintain the key elements of humour and personal testimony. Notice how quotes, and stories are used throughout to add emphasis to the main points of the talk (theology and testimony).

NOTE: The strength of this talk is the use of personal testimony and stories to illustrate biblical/theological points. You may tell stories about Nicky (in the same way he tells stories about others) or you may think of your own effective examples of answered prayer / waiting on God in prayer.

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[You may replace the text in red with a similar local statistic or fact]

It's an interesting fact to me that in Britain, which is a predominantly secular society, and rather sceptical at that, surveys have shown that 75 per cent of the people pray at least once a week. I don't know what sort of prayers those are, but I know the kind of prayers that I prayed before I was a Christian. There were basically two types of prayer. One was the kind of formula prayer.

My grandmother taught me a little prayer, although she wasn't a churchgoer, when I was a child. It went something like this: 'God bless Mummy and Daddy and Granny' and one or two others, and it ended 'Make me a good boy. Amen.' And I prayed that right into my teens — it's rather sad, actually! But it was really a superstition — it was, 'I don't think I might sleep if I don't pray this prayer tonight.'

The other type of prayer that I prayed was a kind of 'emergency' prayer — prayer in a crisis. If everything else had failed, then I would cry out to God. I heard about an atheist, a total unbeliever, who fell over a cliff. And as he fell over a cliff he managed to grab hold of a tuft of grass.

And he was just literally dangling 250 foot above rocks. And although he was an unbeliever, an atheist, he cried out to God. He said, 'Oh God — if you're up there — help me!' and to his amazement he heard this voice saying, 'I am here. Let go of the tuft of grass and trust me.' And he thought about it for a moment, he looked down, and then he said, 'Is there anybody else up there?'



Talk Point 1

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN PRAYER?

Now, those were the kinds of prayers that I prayed before I was a Christian.

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And the question I want to ask tonight is: What is Christian prayer? Christian prayer is the most important activity of our lives. It's the very purpose for which you and I were created: that is, to be in a relationship with the God who made us.

Would you like to turn to Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 18. St Paul writes this:

'For through him' — that is, Jesus Christ — 'we both' — that's Jews and Gentiles, the whole known world — 'have access to the Father by one Spirit'.

First of all, Christian prayer is to the Father. Jesus taught us to pray 'Our Father in heaven'. And in that expression we have this extraordinary combination of what the theologians would call the 'transcendence and the immanence of God'.

First of all, the transcendence. 'In heaven' — the greatness of God. When we pray, we are speaking to the Creator of this entire universe. Do you know that our sun (S-U-N) is one of 100,000 million stars in our galaxy. And our galaxy is one of 100,000 million galaxies. I read somewhere that for every grain of sand on the beach there are a million stars. And in a throwaway line in the book of Genesis the writer says: 'he made the stars also' — 'just like that!' — billions and billions of stars. That's the transcendence of God in heaven.

But — this is the amazing thing — he's also 'Our Father'. He's immanent, he's right here now. And the extraordinary thing is that we can have a relationship with him which is like a parent with a child. And Jesus called God '*Abba*', which is an Aramaic word, which is left in its original form because it's virtually untranslatable. It means something like 'Daddy' or 'dear Father'. And Jesus said we could have the same kind of relationship with him that Jesus had — that intimacy, that closeness. So Christian prayer is to the Father, who loves us intimately.

Second thing is it's through the Son - Jesus.

I read of something that happened during the American Civil War. As a result of a family tragedy, a soldier had been given permission to have a hearing with the President, because he wanted to request exemption from military service. But when he arrived at the White House, he was refused entry and he was sent away, and he went to sit in a nearby park. And as he was sitting in this park, a young boy came across to him and just

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remarked about how unhappy he looked. And the soldier found himself pouring out his heart to this young guy.

And eventually the boy said, 'Look, come with me,' and the dejected soldier went back to the White House, they went round the back. None of the guards seemed to stop them — even the generals and the high-ranking government officials stood to attention and let them pass through — and the soldier was amazed.

Finally they came to the presidential office. Without knocking they went into the west wing, the young boy opened the door of the Oval Office, walked straight in, and there was Abraham Lincoln, standing there in conversation with the Secretary of State. And the moment they walked in, Abraham Lincoln turned to the boy and he said, 'Todd, what can I do for you?' And Todd said, 'Dad, this soldier needs to talk to you.' He had access, through the son.

And that's what Paul says, is we have access to God through the Son, through Jesus. Jesus takes us into the presence of Almighty God. And although we have no right of ourselves to go into God's presence, through Jesus, through what he's done for us on the cross, through the blood of Jesus, we have access to the Father.

So Christian prayer is to the Father, through the Son, by one Spirit. Sometimes people say, 'I really wouldn't know how to pray.' And that's what Paul says, St Paul says. He says: 'We don't know how to pray ... but the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.'

And that's why the weekend is always so exciting: because the weekend is all about the Holy Spirit, who comes to live within us. And when the Holy Spirit is living within us, he helps us to pray.

So when we pray, the whole Trinity is involved: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That's why it's so exciting.

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Talk Point 2

WHY PRAY?

So why should we pray? Would you like to turn to Matthew 6:6? Jesus says this:

'But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.'

Why should we pray? First of all, because Jesus prayed. And he taught us to do the same. He doesn't start here by saying 'If you pray' but he says When you pray — he assumes that we will pray. In a way it's very natural for human beings to pray. We were created for this relationship.

And then, because it's how we develop a relationship with God. All relationships are based on communication. Many marriages break down because of lack of communication; families sometimes break down through lack of communication. But with good communication, the relationship grows and flourishes.

And it's this relationship with God for which we are created. And in this relationship we find the very meaning and purpose of our lives.

And then Jesus says when we pray God will reward us. Sometimes people say, 'Well, isn't that inappropriate, to be looking for a reward?' Well, of course there are inappropriate rewards: money for sex is an inappropriate reward. But there are also appropriate rewards. If somebody's working hard for their exams, passing them, getting a qualification, is an appropriate reward. If two people are in love, marriage is a kind of fulfilment and reward for love.

C. S. Lewis put it like this: 'The proper rewards are not simply tacked onto the activity for which they're given; but are the activity itself in consummation.'

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So what are the rewards of prayer? When we pray, we begin to experience God's love for us, his presence with us. We begin to experience joy. So many people are looking for joy in all kinds of areas, and often when they get there it doesn't satisfy, it leaves people feeling empty. But the psalmist says: 'In his presence', in the presence of God, 'there is fullness of joy.'

So often we go around carrying guilt and anxiety and fear, and Paul says: 'Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' As we pray, this thirst that we all have, spiritual thirst, is satisfied. The spiritual hunger is met.

But prayer not only changes us; it also changes situations. I don't think it's possible to prove to a cynic or a sceptic that there is a God through giving lots and lots of illustrations of answered prayer. But I have found it amazing to see the way in which God answers prayer.

[Try to think of your own personal example of when you tried praying and how you learned that God listens.]

I remember when I had first come to faith in Christ, I thought, 'This prayer thing, maybe I'll give it a go.' So it just so happened that I needed — I was at university and I needed to get a lift to London. I had a party I was going to, and I think there was a train strike or something. And so I thought, 'I'll try it.' So I just prayed a very quick prayer. I said, 'Lord, please could I have a lift to London.' A few minutes later there was a knock at the door: someone said, 'Oh, hello, Nicky. Do you want a lift to London?' I thought, 'That's funny! Must be a coincidence.'

But I thought, 'Well, I'll try something else.' These are all just trivial things, but the next thing I tried, I thought, 'Well, I'll try something a little less trivial. I'll try praying for my mother.' I knew that she had a problem sleeping, and she'd suffered from insomnia for a very long time. And so I started to pray for her. I didn't tell her I was praying, but I started to pray. For a week I prayed for her to sleep well. And at the end of the week I said, 'How are you sleeping?' She said, 'Do you know, it's amazing — I've slept so well for the last week.' I thought, 'That's funny!'

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And as I've gone through now, I guess it's over three decades, of praying and writing down prayers in a kind of prayer diary, and going back over them and ticking them when they're answered, the cumulative effect of all those answered prayers leads me to believe that prayer does actually change situations.



Talk Point 3

DOES GOD ALWAYS ANSWER PRAYER?

So does God always answer prayer? I believe the answer is yes, but we don't always get what we want. For a start, God can't act in a way that's inconsistent with his nature. In other words, you can't pray that $2 + 2$ will equal anything other than 4, because it can't — that's a mathematical system that is set up, and that's how it works.

We all have sympathy, I think, with the small boy's desperate and doomed prayer emerging from the geography exam, praying: 'Oh dear God, please make Paris the capital of Turkey!' It can't work.

But also the New Testament tells us that there are some things that can stop our prayers being effective. For example, unconfessed sin — things that are wrong in our life can cause a barrier between us and God. Don't misunderstand me: of course, Jesus is the friend of sinners. All of us have things that are wrong in our life, and if that stopped us praying, none of us would be able to pray. But Jesus on the cross died for us so that we could be totally forgiven. But if we choose to reject that and wander off, like the prodigal son, away from the Father's house, then we're no longer in that relationship.

Or if we plan to set out on a course of rebellion against God. The psalmist said: 'If I cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have heard me.'

Or if we have totally wrong motives for what we're asking for. The apostle James says: 'You don't have, because you don't ask God. And when you ask you don't receive, because you

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ask with wrong motives — that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.’ So in other words, if we’re praying, ‘Oh Lord, I want to win the Lottery!’ there’s no guarantee that that prayer will be answered!

Also there may be things that we just get wrong — we misunderstand what God’s will is for us. When we pray, God promises to answer; but he says — and it’s just over the page — ‘how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!’

So sometimes God will say — the answer to the prayer will be ‘No’, just like with a parent. If a couple of two-year-olds pick up carving knives because they want to have a sword-fight, the parent might say ‘No!’ In fact, you’d hope that the parent would say ‘No!’ Not because they don’t love the child; it’s just because they do love the child, that they know a little bit more than the two-year-old knows, and they know that’s not a good idea.

And God sometimes says ‘Wait’, but sometimes he says ‘No’ if, as John Stott puts it, ‘the things are not good in themselves, or not good for us or for others, directly or indirectly, immediately or ultimately.’

[Use personal examples here]

Sometimes, certainly in my own experience, we do understand later why he said ‘No’. I can think of a couple of things in my life where I have prayed desperately, I’ve just prayed and prayed and prayed, mainly to do with a job, my work. You know, I can think of times when I’ve prayed and prayed and prayed for a particular job or a particular place at university to enable me to do something.

And both those times God shut the door. And now when I look back, I am so glad that he did shut those doors. Because if he hadn’t shut those doors, I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing now. Now, you may wish he hadn’t shut those doors! But I personally love what I’m doing now, and I’m so thankful to him for shutting those doors.

I think sometimes in terms of relationships, as well, he shuts doors. I heard about Billy Graham’s wife, Ruth Graham, who’s been happily married to Billy Graham now for over

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fifty years — she told an audience in Minneapolis, she said: ‘God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man, several times!’

So sometimes we look back and realise, understand, why God didn’t answer that particular prayer in the way that we had hoped he would. But I think sometimes we’re never going to know in this life why he didn’t answer the prayer in the way that we’d hoped.

[Try using personal examples here]

I think of an occasion a few years ago when one of my very closest friends, Mick Hawkins, aged 42. We were playing squash together, he played a fantastic forehand shot, he turned to play the backhand and he just dropped dead of a heart attack. And he was one of my closest friends; he had six children — one of whom actually is helping on Alpha tonight. And at that moment, I have never cried out to God more than I cried out at that moment, that God would heal him, bring him back to life; that he would not die. But he did. And I don’t know why.

I remember five o’clock the following morning. Obviously, I couldn’t sleep. I went out on the beach and I was walking along the beach, and I was crying out to the Lord, saying, ‘Lord, you know, I just cannot understand why you allowed this to happen. But,’ I said, ‘I’m not going to stop praying. I’m going to carry on trusting you for the rest of my life, even though I don’t understand.’

And as I look back in my prayer diary over the years, there are some prayers that are still unticked, unanswered. But there are loads more that have been answered.



Talk Point 4

HOW DO WE PRAY?

So how do we pray? Prayer is a relationship. There’s no set of rules in a relationship — all relationships are different. I suppose one key thing is honesty — God wants us to be honest

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with him, to say what really is on our heart. Not to come with kind of religious jargon and stuff, but he really wants to know what's on our hearts. He wants us to be real with him.

So there's no set pattern. But sometimes it's helped, just sometimes like in a meeting it's good to have an agenda. And in a meeting with God sometimes it's good to have a kind of agenda. Not that you always stick to that; but a kind of pattern.

[This acronym to spell ACTS may not translate into other languages. If you are translating, you may leave out the text in red]

When I started to pray I used to use the acronym ACTS: that stands for:

A for Adoration — just worshipping God, expressing our love, our praise to God.

C is for Confession — asking forgiveness for the things that maybe we've done wrong and things that we need cleansing for.

T is for Thanksgiving — thanking God for all his blessings, all the good things that he's given us; maybe looking back through the day before and thanking him for answered prayer.

And then Supplication — which is asking for things for ourselves and for others. If you want to know more about that, there's a little bit about that in the little booklet *Why Jesus?*

But now, most commonly I use the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. If you'd like to turn just across the page to Matthew 6:9, this is what Jesus said. He gave us a model. He said:

'This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven" —that's, for me, normally just a question of basking in the presence of God, enjoying his love, thanking him. I look back the day before and all the blessings of life. His goodness, his grace, his forgiveness, his kindness, his love.

'... hallowed be your name' — that's praying that God's name will be honoured again in our society. As you look around at our society, so often the name of Jesus is a swear word. And it's a prayer that once again Jesus' name would be honoured in our lives, in our families, in our workplace, in our society.

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'... your kingdom come' — God's kingdom is God's rule and reign. And that's a prayer that God's kingdom would come in our own lives, in the lives of our families.

[Try to replace this with your own story about someone who was perseverant in prayer. If you don't have your own example you may use this story]

I read of one youngish mother called Monica who was a Christian woman, and she was having real problems with her rebellious teenage son. He was lazy, he was bad-tempered, a cheat, a liar, a thief. And later on, though outwardly he became very respectable as a lawyer, his life was dominated by worldly ambition and a desire to make money. His morals were loose; he lived with several different women and had a son by one of them. And at one stage he joined some weird religious sort of cult and adopted all kinds of strange practices.

And throughout this time this mother just continued to pray for him: 'your kingdom come' in his life. And one day the Lord gave her a vision, and she just wept as she prayed, because she saw the light of Jesus Christ on him, and his face was just smiling at her with great joy. And that encouraged her to keep on praying. But it was nine years before her son finally gave his life to Christ, at the age of 28.

That man's name was Augustine, Saint Augustine, converted in 386 AD, ordained in 391, bishop in 396, perhaps the greatest theologian of the church. And St Augustine always attributed his conversion to the prayers of his mother. His mother's prayers literally changed the course of history.

'... your kingdom come, your will be done' — that's not resignation but a desire to see God's will in our lives, God's will which is 'good and pleasing and perfect'.

'... Give us this day our daily bread' — I love to go through the day that's coming up and just ask God's help in all the different things that I'm involved in. 'Give us this day our daily bread.' God is interested in all of our lives. God loves you. He's interested in the things that you're concerned about, just like any parent would be concerned about the things that their children were concerned about.

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'... Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors' — forgive the things that we've done wrong, in other words, as we forgive others. There's this kind of virtuous circle in the teaching of Jesus that the more we understand that we are forgiven, the more that we want to forgive. When we know that Jesus has died for us, as we were looking at on the second week, that all our sins have been forgiven, we can't hold anything against anybody else any more. And so forgiving people is not a way to earn forgiveness, but it's a sign that we have been forgiven. Because if we really experience God's forgiveness, we will want to forgive everybody, however hard it may be —and sometimes it is hard.

Sometimes people say, 'Well, why did Jesus teach us to pray "Forgive us our sins", or debts or whatever word it is in the translation, when we're already forgiven through the cross?' That's what we were looking at on Week 3, wasn't it, that God totally forgives us because of the cross. Why do we need to carry on asking for forgiveness? Well, Jesus enacted a kind of parable, which I think is very relevant to this.

At the Last Supper what happened was that Jesus was washing the disciples' feet. And he came to wash Peter's feet. And Peter said, 'No, no, no, Lord! You must never wash my feet!' And Jesus said, 'Unless I wash your feet, you have no part of me.' So Peter said, in effect, 'Well, in that case, why don't you wash my whole body!' And Jesus said, 'A person who's had a bath needs only to wash his feet. His whole body is clean.'

When you come to Christ, your whole body is clean, you're totally forgiven. But as we go through the world, just as in the ancient world they picked up dirt on their feet, we, spiritually speaking, pick up dirt on our feet. And we need that sort of daily cleansing: 'Lord, forgive the stuff, the bad stuff in my life. Cleanse me.'

'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one' — God doesn't tempt us, but he is in control of how much we're exposed to temptation. And all of us have weak areas, whether it's fear, or selfish ambition, greed, pride, lust, gossiping, cynicism etc. And if we know our weakness, we can pray for protection against it, as well as taking practical steps to avoid unnecessary temptation. We'll look at that in much more detail when we look at the whole subject of resisting evil.

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Talk Point 5

WHEN SHOULD WE PRAY?

So when should we pray? Well, the New Testament encourages us to pray always. 'Pray in the Spirit', Paul says, 'on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests'. **You don't have to be in a special building like this to pray.** You can pray as you walk down the street, you can pray on your bike, **you can pray on the tube. You don't have to pray out loud — in fact, if you're praying on the tube it might be a help not to pray out loud!** But you can pray in your heart.

[Give a similar personal example of how you pray]

But I think it's a help, certainly I've found it a help, to have set times also. I love to start the day. I always think that whatever you start the day with, whatever those thoughts are, the mind tends to grind on them all the way through the day! And to start the day with maybe reading the Bible, which we'll look at, and praying, is a wonderful way to start, I find.

And then with others. Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.' In other words, he says there's a special power when we get together and pray together. And that's one of the things, hopefully, which will happen gradually in the small groups during the course. As you get to know one another and trust one another — it may not happen tonight, but it may happen later on in the course that you start to pray together.

If you're anything like me, the first time you do it can be a very daunting experience. I remember the very first time that I prayed with somebody else. I had been a Christian for about, I think, maybe, I don't know, two or three weeks. And we went on — I think we were on a skiing holiday, actually, with my two closest friends, Nicky and Sila Lee. There were just three of us in the room, and I think it was Sila who suggested praying together. And we'd never done it before, but we thought we'd have a go. And we prayed for about two minutes — probably quite long gaps also in that two minutes! And at the end of it I took off

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my shirt and it was wringing wet, I was so nervous just praying out loud for the first time!
But it was a wonderful experience.

The heart of Christianity is this relationship with the God who made us.

[Finish the talk with an uplifting, moving and encouraging testimony of answered prayer.]

May we pray.

Father, thank you so much that you are a God who answers prayer. And Lord, I pray that you would help each one of us here to grow in our relationship with you. In Jesus' name, amen.

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Prepared by:
Alpha International, HTB Brompton Road, London SW7 1JA.
Email: publications@alpha.org
Website: alpha.org

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