

PERSPECTIVE

A close-up photograph of a person's hands clasped together in a prayerful gesture, resting on an open Bible. The hands are positioned in the upper right quadrant of the frame, with fingers interlaced. The Bible is open, showing text on both pages, and is positioned horizontally across the lower half of the image. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the hands and the book. The overall mood is solemn and reflective.

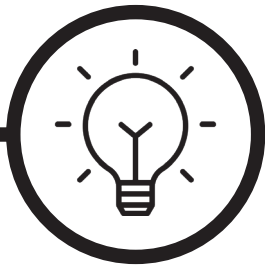
JANUARY 2022

ARE WE A
**PRAYING
CHURCH?**

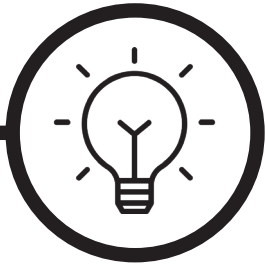
CONTENTS



ARTICLE 1
Are We a Praying Church?
Aaron Menikoff



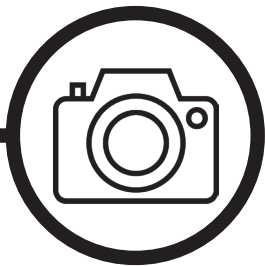
BOOK HIGHLIGHT 4
Do You Pray? A Question for Everybody
by J.C. Ryle
Recommended by Dustin Butts



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 5
Enjoy Your Prayer Life
by Michael Reeves
Recommended by Rachel Chandler



BIBLE READING PLAN 6
Take Up & Read
January



NEW MEMBERS 7
Chris & Hope Arbery, Jerry & Helma Clark

Are We a Praying Church?

One of the most amazing passages in the book of Acts is when the Lord rescues Peter from prison. The apostle is bound by two chains, sleeping between two soldiers, and guarded by several watchmen. None of that matters because God wants him out of prison. The Lord turns on a light where there is no light, unlocks the chains without a key, distracts all the guards, and opens a heavy iron gate. Peter walks out a free man. When it's all said and done, Peter blurts out, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting" (Acts 12:11). They expected Peter to be put to death, but God had other plans.

As amazing as this passage is, the verse directly preceding it may be even more consequential: "So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (Acts 12:5). While Peter's wrists chafed under the iron shackles, the young church in Jerusalem prayed. While Peter pondered his future, the church prayed. These believers in the church in Jerusalem who were new to the faith, facing persecution on all sides, mindful of the stoning of Stephen and now wondering what might happen to their beloved Peter—the church decided prayer was the best way to serve their brother. Luke agreed, and he presented the Lord's intervention in Peter's life as the direct result of the church's prayer.

A SIMPLE QUESTION

This leads me to ask a simple but important question, *Are we a praying church?* I know we pray together. All of our gatherings begin and end with prayer. Our Sunday morning service has many prayers. Visitors often comment to me on both the number and the length of the Sunday morning prayers. We've been meeting almost every Sunday evening to pray for over thirteen years. Long short, I know that we pray together as a church.

But I'm asking something a little different. *Are we a praying church?*

I like chicken wings, especially with honey barbecue sauce or a lemon pepper rub. I like wings a lot. However, the truth of the matter is I really don't eat them very much. When they are around, I really enjoy them (unless they're in buffalo sauce, I don't like that!). Nonetheless, I won't go out of my way to eat them. I'm just not a wings guy.

It seems possible to like prayer when it's served up to you, to participate in prayer when it's convenient, and maybe even occasionally to take a deep dive into a session

or season of prayer. But this doesn't make you a *prayer warrior*, nor does it make us a *praying church*.

What if we had a visitor from another country who started attending Mount Vernon in January of 2022. This guest knew she'd be here for just a year. She decided to spend the year engaging in the life of the church—membership, faithful attendance, personal hospitality, the whole nine yards. Twelve months later, she returns home, and someone asks her what the church was like. How would she size us up?

My guess is she'd find a lot of really great things to say about us. For example, we place a high emphasis on church membership. That's a good thing! She might draw attention to our corporate worship as both joyful and sober-minded. Amen to that! Perhaps she'd communicate to her friends back home that she found a congregation that really took disciple-making seriously. People helped her grow in Christlikeness personally, regularly, and deliberately. Yes, praise God!

But would she say we're a praying church? I'm not sure.

A PERSONAL STRUGGLE

To the best of my knowledge, God saved me in 1990, the same year I graduated from high school. In these three decades, I've done a fair amount of schooling, I've married, I've had four children, I've pastored in three churches, and I've faced down some sin patterns in my life.

Throughout all these years, I've seen God's faithfulness in my life in different ways. The fact that I'm still a Christian hugely encourages me, especially since I've seen men and women I thought to be godly walk away from the Lord. God has preserved my faith. Furthermore, he's given me a deeper love for his Word. The more I get to know my Savior in the pages of Scripture, the more I resonate with Peter, who, when asked if he'd keep following Jesus, replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). I believe that more deeply than I did in 1990.

I've seen God grow me in my marriage too. He's rooted out much selfishness. As a young husband, I led the way in trivial arguments. I allowed the tiniest disagreement to turn into the biggest fight. To this day, Deana and I laugh at how long ago the simple act of loading the dishwasher could be the source of serious marital conflict for the Menikoffs. By God's grace, I've grown as a husband.

Likewise, my teaching and preaching have improved. The many opportunities MVBC has given me to practice, coupled with my own spiritual growth, have

made me a better preacher. To those of you who have been at Mount Vernon the entirety of my tenure—thank you for joining me in this particular journey.

However, I'm convinced my prayerfulness has not kept pace with the spiritual growth I've seen in other parts of my life. I pray; I pray regularly; I even pray daily. But the depth of my prayer life, the consistency of my prayer life, the length of my prayer life, and the specificity of my prayer life leaves room for improvement. In short, I want the quality of my prayer life to improve. Don Carson's words about prayer hit home to me:

Where is our delight in praying? Where is our sense that we are meeting with the living God, that we are doing business with God, that we are interceding with genuine unction before the throne of grace? When was the last time we came away from a period of intercession feeling that, like Jacob or Moses, we had prevailed with God? How much of our praying is largely formulaic, liberally larded with clichés that remind us, uncomfortably, of the hypocrites Jesus excoriated? ⁱ

I want to do business with God each and every day. When the apostles urged the congregation to attend to the neglected widows in the church, they did so to be freed to be devoted “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). This is a template for every pastor. Though elders must teach the Bible, counsel the struggling, visit the shut-in, and oversee the flock, they must also pray. They must be *praying men*. I need to grow in this area.

A CORPORATE STRUGGLE

To be clear, you may have a wonderful prayer life! I have no doubt that many of you reading this enjoy very sweet communion with God. In fact, I know quite a few prayer warriors at Mount Vernon. Thank you! Thank you for wrestling with God in prayer like King David, who asked God, “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears” (Psa. 39:12). God listened to David as he listens to you, “I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure” (Psa. 40:1–2). In other words, I know many of you have a warm, fruitful, faithful prayer life.

However, I'm convinced we could all grow in prayer. None of us is a finished product. We all have room for improvement. The process of sanctification is just that—it's a process. No one can say he has arrived when it comes to his prayer life. Each of us would benefit by thinking

more about how we can wrestle with the Lord in prayer.

From conversations with many Christians over the years, I also know that prayer can be a regular struggle. People often tell me they find it easier to dig into Scripture or a good, Christian book than pray. They complain of their mind drifting, their prayers feeling rote, or a sense of God's distance while they are in prayer. It's good we come together to pray, but our public times of prayer should really be a reflection of what's going on in private, at home. We have room to grow here.

Do you struggle with prayer? On the one hand, I don't suppose the struggle will ever completely go away. We aren't in heaven yet. Indwelling sin persists in every human heart, even the hearts of the redeemed. The world, the flesh, and the devil will consistently and powerfully seek to keep us distracted from one-on-one time with God and even times of corporate prayer with the body. But just because the struggle persists doesn't mean we can't fight to pray better; it doesn't mean we can't grow in prayer. We can. But we need God's help.

DIVINE AID IN PRAYER

The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts, penned *A Guide to Prayer*. In relatively few words, he explained the nature, gift, grace, and spirit of prayer. Perhaps more than anything, he wanted his readers to understand we need God's help to pray better. As you begin your new year resolved to spend more time with the Lord, please remember you need the Lord's aid. Watts put it well:

All the rules and directions that have been laid down in order to teach us to pray will be ineffectual if we have no divine aids. We are not sufficient in ourselves to think one thought, and all that is good comes from God. If we wish to attain the gift or grace of prayer, we must seek both from heaven. And since the mercies of God of this kind that are bestowed on men are usually attributed to the Holy Spirit, he may very properly be called the Spirit of prayer; as such his assistance is to be sought with diligence and importunity [i.e., persistence].” ⁱⁱ

Not only does God want us to pray better, but he is committed to helping us pray better. When challenging his disciples to pray, Jesus encourages them with the reminder God is eager to give. “What father among you,” says Jesus, “if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?” (Luke 11:11–12).

Jesus goes on to promise the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those that ask—the Holy Spirit of prayer. You can be sure that if you are eager to pray more and better,

if you are eager to enjoy more intimate time with the Lord in prayer if you want to experience his presence and enjoy his grace more deeply—you need only ask. Your Father in heaven wants you to be a prayer warrior. He wants your time with him in prayer to be God-glorifying, soul-satisfying, and hell-shattering.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

In a very real sense, we are a praying church. God has blessed us with the desire to lean into him. We believe in him, we trust him, we know we are dependent on him for everything. We are deliberate on Sunday mornings to confess our sin to him, to thank and praise him, and to go to him with many requests—our prayers on Sunday morning are not short, either! Not only that, we come back on Sunday nights and offer still more prayers to God. In that sense, we are a praying church.

More than that, I hear so many stories of members of Mount Vernon getting up early to pray, leading their families to pray, joining in concerts of prayer during small groups or in 1-1 meetings. I'm grateful for all the prayer taking place in our church body, and I think you should be grateful, too.

However, we can grow. So my word of encouragement to you is to assess your prayer life at the beginning of 2022. I agree with David Mathis, who made the following charge in his book, *Habits of Grace*:

Now is the time to take a fresh look at your private prayer life. Perhaps you'll find a tweak or two that you could make in the coming days. Typically the best way to grow and make headway is not a total overhaul, but identifying one or a couple small changes that will pay dividends over time. ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course, you may need more than a tweak! Mathis continues: "Or maybe you have little-to-no-real private prayer life (which might be as common today among professing Christians as it's ever been), and you really need to start from scratch." ^{iv}

Is that you? Are you someone who has shelved prayer this past few weeks, months, or even years? If it is you, take heart... you've reached the end of this article, which means you have an interest in praying better. That's a great place to start. Don't grow discouraged, and don't give up. God is a Father who wants to give good gifts to his children, and perhaps the best gift he could ever give his child is the gift of prayer.

The first Christian book I ever purchased was on the topic of prayer. As a young Christian, I knew it was an awesome thing to be able to come into the presence of God. I marveled at the fact that though God has so much other important

work to do, he could bend his ear and listen to me. Today, having been a Christian for so long, I understand why. It's because God already came to me. He came, and he bled, and he died for me. Because of all that Christ has done, I can, as the author of Hebrews put it, "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

That's good news, really good news. 2022 is upon us. By God's grace, let's make this the year of drawing near to the throne of grace—moment by moment, trial by trial, joy by joy.

– Aaron Menikoff

ⁱ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Baker, 1992), 17.

ⁱⁱ Isaac Watts, *A Guide to Prayer* (Banner of Truth, 2001), 124. First published 1715.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Mathis, *Habits of Grace* (Crossway, 2016), 99.

^{iv} Ibid.

Do You Pray? A Question for Everybody

Written by J.C. Ryle

Do you pray? If you are a Christian, the answer is yes. “God does not have any silent children” (13). But, as J. C. Ryle explains, “We all know that it is one thing to say your prayers, and another thing entirely to ‘pray’” (8). If you want to say your prayers less and ‘pray’ more in 2022, I highly recommend starting the year by reading Ryle’s *Do You Pray?*

With clarity and conviction, Ryle provides readers with seven reasons for asking the question, “Do you pray?” He asks because he’s convinced: (1) prayer is absolutely necessary for a person’s salvation, (2) a habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian, (3) private prayer is the most neglected Christian discipline, (4) the Bible is full of encouragement for all who want to pray, (5) faithfulness in prayer is the secret of true holiness, (6) neglecting prayer is one of the greatest causes of backsliding, and (7) prayer is the best recipe for happiness and contentment. Ryle spends the majority of the book unpacking these ideas. I was greatly helped by his walk through the Bible’s encouragements to pray, especially his reflections on Christ as our advocate who “mingles our feeble prayers with his own almighty prayers and, together they go as a sweet aroma to the throne of God” (24).

Ryle uses the final three chapters of the book to address three different groups of readers: those who do not pray, those who don’t know where to start, and those who pray. To the third group, he offers twelve very practical words of encouragement, advocating for humility, regularity, persistence, earnestness, faith, boldness, and watchfulness in our prayers.

I read *Do You Pray?* last year over the course of a couple of weeks, working through a chapter or two each morning as part of my devotions. It challenged me to pray more, to pray better, to pray in faith, and to labor to ensure I’m not just saying my prayers but truly praying. I trust it will do the same for you.

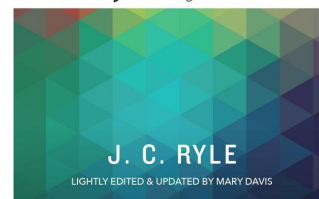
— RECOMMENDED BY DUSTIN BUTTS



DO YOU PRAY?

A question for everybody

J.C. Ryle



J. C. RYLE

LIGHTLY EDITED & UPDATED BY MARY DAVIS

Excerpts From the Book

1

“When it comes to human friendships, you cannot know a person unless you talk to them. Similarly, you cannot know God in Christ unless you speak to him in prayer. If you want to be with God in heaven, you must be one of his friends on earth. If you want to be one of his friends on earth, you must pray.”

— Prayer is Absolutely Necessary
for a Person’s Salvation, p.11

2

“Prayer is the most effective remedy against the Devil and against persistent sins. The Devil will not be able to keep dominion over us when we beg the Lord to banish him. Those sins will never stand up to heartfelt prayer.”

— Faithfulness in Prayer is the Secret
of True Holiness, p.32

3

“Do you realize that the way to show true love for someone is to pray for them? Praying for others is the best thing for our souls: it enlarges our hearts and deepens our concern for others. Praying for others is the best thing for the church: it is the fuel for spreading the gospel.”

— To Those Who Pray – Some
Brotherly Advice, p.64

Enjoy Your Prayer Life

Written by Michael Reeves

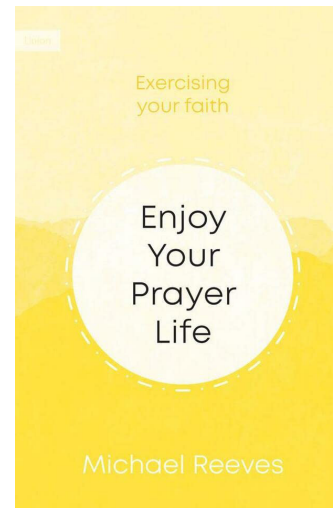
Unfortunately, in a culture that prizes individuality and self-sufficiency, lack of prayer is common among Christians. I, for one, know my prayer life is not what it ought to be. Many brothers and sisters would agree. Why is that? What does it say about the posture of our heart? John Calvin defined prayer as “the chief exercise of faith.” A Christian expresses their faith through prayer. In *Enjoy Your Prayer Life*, Michael Reeves seeks to explain why we often struggle with prayer and provides helpful insight into how prayer is a gift to be enjoyed by Christians.

Enjoy Your Prayer Life begins with answering a simple question: what is prayer? The answer to this question is fundamental. “Prayer is the primary way true faith expresses itself...your prayer life reveals how much you *really* want communion with God and how much you *really* depend on him” (4–5). Reeves reminds us we are sinners, dead in our sin, and inclined away from faith and prayer. But in God’s kindness, he has saved us, and our relationship with him has been reconciled by the work of the cross. Therefore, the gospel should motivate us to exercise our faith through prayer.

When we come to Jesus, prayer changes. Reeves spends a few chapters clearly defining the roles of the Trinity and their involvement in prayer. Better understanding who the Father, Son, and Spirit are, allows us to persevere in our prayers and enjoy communion with God.

I was both convicted and encouraged by *Enjoy Your Prayer Life*. The book is helpful to all Christians—regardless of where you are in your walk with Christ. Each of us should be striving to know the Lord more through prayer. This book provides the appropriate means to stop, reflect on your own prayer life, repent, and seek to know God and his goodness more.

— RECOMMENDED BY RACHEL CHANDLER



Excerpts From the Book

1

“Prayer doesn’t make you more accepted. Instead, prayer is growing in the appreciation of what you *have been given*.”

— Praying to God as Our Father, p.17

2

“Prayer, then, is enjoying the care of a powerful Father, instead of being left to a frightening loneliness where everything is all down to you. Prayer is the antithesis of self-dependence. It is our ‘no’ to independence and our ‘no’ to personal ambition.”

— Depending on God, p.25

3

“The Son gives us the right to come boldly in his name as accepted children. Then our Father and the Son give us their Spirit precisely to help us enjoy what it is to be children, that is to enjoy the loving, outgoing life of this God.”

— Enjoying the Life of God, p.38

JANUARY

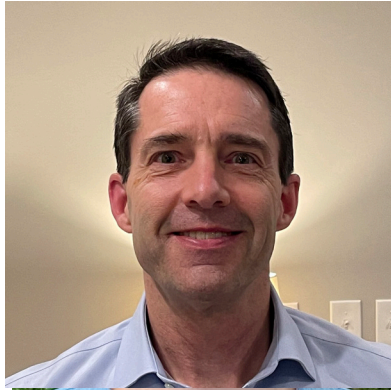
These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the
Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

January 1	Matthew 19:1-15	January 17	2 Kings 5:1-19
January 2	Matthew 19:16-30	January 18	2 Kings 1-2
January 3	1 John 5:13-21	January 19	2 Kings 3
January 4	Exodus 32:1-14	January 20	2 Kings 4
January 5	Luke 11:1-13	January 21	Matthew 9:9-13
January 6	Mark 1:21-45	January 22	2 Kings 5
January 7	Psalms 66	January 23	2 Kings 5:1-19
January 8	Mark 11:15-25	January 24	Matthew 6:1-15
January 9	1 John 5:13-21	January 25	Luke 11:1-23
January 10	Matthew 20:1-16	January 26	Romans 8:18-30
January 11	Matthew 20:17-34	January 27	Psalms 18
January 12	Matthew 21:1-22	January 28	Ecclesiastes 5
January 13	Matthew 21:23-32	January 29	Matthew 6:16-34
January 14	Psalms 145	January 30	Matthew 6:5-15
January 15	Matthew 19:16-30	January 31	Jeremiah 1
January 16	Matthew 20:1-16		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



Chris Arbery



Hope Arbery



Jerry Clark



Helma Clark



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH