

Prayer ideas

Creative ideas to bring outward focus to personal devotions

These ideas have all come out of seeking to consistently intercede for others – often first happening spontaneously during a time of worship or prayer.

Many of us drift into praying (or simply worrying) about our own needs and desires, even as we seek for others... or find that we are running out of time to pray for others because our own situations have taken so long. These creative tools are all designed to reduce distraction, remind us to pray for others or help us apportion time differently whilst praying, or stimulate deeper engagement. (They can be adapted easily for use in small groups, and many are also suitable as individual prayer stations.)

Section 1 – Reducing distractions or overcoming barriers to praying for others

1.1 See through truth

Feeling distracted or anxious and struggling to focus beyond your own situation?

Take an A4 piece of paper and write down all the things that you are worrying about.

Take a piece of greaseproof or tracing paper a bit bigger than your sheet and fold it round your sheet so it is contained in a see-through pocket.

Now write Bible verses, worship song lyrics, and truths you know about God's faithfulness, trustworthiness and peace all over the see through layer so you can no longer really see what's beneath. Use this symbol you have created, and the words of truth in front of you, to help you start to pray the truth.

Keep the see through truth sheet next to you as you pray. Any time you feel distracted or worried again, look back at it and re-focus on the truth.

1.2 Putting on an attitude of gratitude

Struggling from compassion fatigue and preoccupied with your own needs and disappointments?

Put on a worship track if it helps you and get a pen and piece of paper. Spend a few minutes writing down everything you can think of that you are grateful to God for today, and in your life. Start with things, but move on to people, situations, places, health, experiences, answered prayers, testimonies and everything that comes to mind.

Spend some time thanking God for all of these things.

Now look down the list and pick some things that it would be hard to survive without, people that would be heartbreaking to lose etc and use these to increase your compassion and empathy to pray for people who are poor, bereaved, ill or dying, persecuted etc

1.3 See God in them

There may be people you want to pray for but you are finding it difficult because you are struggling to love them and/or the relationship is complicated. Or perhaps their situation simply feels alien to you.

Meditate on scriptures such as Psalm 139 and consider that it is as true for the person/people you are praying for as it is for you. And ask God to show you what he sees when he looks at that person. What aspects of their life reveal his character?

1.4 Promise keeper

Are you struggling to have faith as you pray for seemingly impossible situations – whether they are amongst broken families in your community, or long-term crisis situations in nations which seem impossible to reconcile?

One way to build faith is to look at answered prayer and praise God for it before you start.

Begin to compile some lists of answered prayer and God's faithfulness to keep the promises he makes. Use

- scripture —try especially Noah (Genesis 5-9), Joseph (Genesis 30-45), Moses and the Exodus (Exodus 2-15), Jesus and the Messianic prophecies (look at the Gospels and how they confirm prophets such as Isaiah) and Acts and the early church's many experiences of answered prayer;
- testimonies of Christians you know, or have read about;
- your own experience of answered prayer.

Use these testimonies of answered promises, and impossible situations turned around to hope, and believe for the impossible. Bring the difficult situations before God confident that he is and will be working to bring transformation.

You might also find it useful to use, or recreate, your own recounting prayer, praising God for his work today and throughout history, to preface your intercessions with. (You will find one at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer)

Section 2 – Reminding us to pray for others regularly

2.1 A wall of people

Are there people, countries or situations you want to remember to pray for daily?

Designate a space in your home, or office, where you can put up pictures of them – ideally somewhere you go repeatedly during the day, such as the kitchen.

This is your prayer wall. Put up and take down pictures as needs and situations arise. Use the visual representations to help you connect more with people, and remind you to pray for them.

(You'll probably also find that as you pray for them more, and have them visually come to mind more, you will spill over into action for these people as your love for, and consciousness of, them grows.)

2.2 Nations on the hearts

Are there particular nations on your heart? They may be places you have been to, or countries that are/have been in the news as a result of violence, political unrest, poverty or natural disasters.

Take an A4 sheet of paper and draw (or use a template to draw) a number of heart shapes on it depending on how many countries you want to pray for over the coming days and weeks. Write a country name on each heart and then cut them out so that you have a stack of hearts. (If you find visual prompts helpful, you might want to cut up an old

atlas or print maps or images off from the internet so that you can stick the map of each nation on to its heart and/or photos of people there.

Keep the heart cards somewhere visible and/or with your Bible, and use them to remind you to pray for these nations. You can lay them all out and pray short prayers for them all, or lift them up all together, or spend longer on one heart at a time, perhaps alternating different nations over different days.

As you pray, jot down anything you want to remember, or scriptures of blessing, on the card.

2.3 Pray the headlines

Before you start your prayer time each day, take a few moments to look at the headlines in a newspaper, online or on TV or radio... if a story particularly jumps out at you, read it in more detail.

Now worship and pray, incorporating this context, and how you feel about it, into your praise and intercession. Are there any scriptures you can proclaim over these situations that speak of God's heart for the people involved, his plans, and his sovereignty? Use these to pray into the situations further, and ask God for his perspective on them. Is there anything he is asking you to do?

Section 3 – Helping us to connect with who we are praying for and God's heart for them

3.1 Mapping it out

Praying for places, countries and situations can be hard as they can feel quite abstract. Maps are incredibly useful for this. Whether you have a big map you can put on the floor and kneel or stand on, or hang on the wall, a globe you can hold... or a whiteboard one you can write your prayers on... seeing places, and putting your hands on them while you pray is hugely helpful for focus and connection.

Have one of these tools visually prominent and easily to hand, and use it in your prayer times to spend some of your time praying for nations in crisis, or particularly on your heart. You might want to consider having this part of your prayer time near the beginning of your session some days to ensure it gets the emphasis that you want it to.

3.2 Hands on the walls

Wherever you are praying, go to one wall of the room at a time and place your hands on it to help you focus. Pray for your neighbours and community in that direction each time.

(N.B. You will also find using photos of people – see 2.1 'A wall of people' – is helpful.)

3.3 Imagine it

Sometimes it is hard to know where to start with praying for people whose lives are so beyond our experience. Ask God to open your eyes, and take a few moments to imagine what life might be like if you were in the country or situation of the person or nation you are praying for.

Use a piece of paper to jot down what your fears, suffering, and needs would be. Then speak the opposite through the promises of God, declaring his love, peace, comfort and transformation over these different issues. Pray through them one at a time, or all together.

You could also spend some time meditating on the cross, thinking about how Jesus suffered and the resurrection life that he won. Does Jesus understand what these people are going through? Does he have the power to intervene? Pray into these things too.

3.4 Picture it

If you are struggling to find the words for a prayer, maybe put on some worship music, and then take a pen and some colouring pencils. Write and decorate single words you want to pray over a situation – such as comfort, joy or hope; or draw symbolic pictures of whatever you are praying for such as peace, water etc.

If you really want to meditate on a scripture, or prayer, creating a piece of art which contains it is really helpful – and will often help you to learn it off by heart. You can use the time it takes you to create the item, praying as you draw, paint, sew or make. And then you can put it up, and every time you see it be moved to pray or praise.

Don't worry if you're not artistic. It's not about creating a masterpiece. You can simply paint specific words, sew verses on fabric, or tear up pieces of photos you like to stick onto paper. Just find something you enjoy that helps you spend time creating, and praying.

3.5 Great big God

Sometimes we struggle to really press in when we are praying for others because we simply run out of things to pray for.

We came across something Bill Hybels said he did to help expand his prayer life, and have found adapting it really helpful. It begins with the idea that to expand your prayer life you have to expand your view of God, your understanding of his character, and your vocabulary about him and his kingdom.

Take a piece of paper and jot down the letters A-Z down the left hand side. Spend some time writing down next to each letter all the names or attributes you can think of which describe God – Father, Son and Spirit. Use biblical words, but also modern terms which help you personally understand more of big concepts (e.g. when thinking about God's faithfulness, you might also want to consider the fact he is future-proof.) You'll probably need to write small as you'll think of lots of things, and probably want to add things in that come to you later.

(Making your own list is the most helpful thing to do. But you can also use ours which is available at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer)

When you are praying for a particular situation, glance down your list and see which names and attributes of God's amazing and huge person, particularly resonate with it. Jot these down and use them one by one to pray for the people, country or issue you are lifting up to God.

Section 4 – Helping us to apportion time differently when we pray

4.1 Laying out the pieces of your life

Take an A4 piece of paper and divide it into nine sections. On each one write different areas that you want to pray about from things that personally affect you such as work, church, family etc right through to nations and situations on your heart. (You can have 12 sections if you have too many to fit on!)

Now get some scissors and cut up all the pieces – you can cut them with straight lines, or make them into jigsaw pieces that fit together if you are feeling a bit more ambitious.

Use these pieces in your next few prayer times to help you remember what's on your heart and pray about it in a balanced way, rather than getting distracted by what's on your mind that day. You can hold them like a stack of cards and pray for them one at a time (jotting down on them any specifics that come to mind), lay them all out on the floor, and offer them all up more generally, or focus on different pieces on different days.

4.2 Playlist led prayers

Playing worship music can be really helpful as background to praying to help you focus, and keep your heart open to God. And as worship songs are mostly prayers set to music, they can also be very helpful to meditate on and use to shape prayer. And of course you can do this on the move too.

Go one step further and make yourself a playlist or CD which matches the length of time you want to pray and worship for. Pick worship and intercession songs to form a set which takes you from praise and personal adoration, confession and petition through to prayer for those you know, those in need, and the nations, and ending with committing to take action yourself.

Use the set you have created to guide your prayers, relaxing into the time. You don't need to watch the clock – simply move from type of topic to type of topic as the lyrics change from praise and thanksgiving, through confession, to intercession etc.

(If you are stuck finding songs with an outward focus, visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-songs for more ideas, or if you are struggling with thinking of songs full stop, try talking to a sung worship leader at church and/or working on this with a friend – then you can both benefit.)

Section 5 – Next steps: creating a personal culture of prayer

5.1 Prayer corner

Many of us live and work in open plan environments, and space that is ours only might be limited just to our bedroom, or not even that.

If you have a room which you can make a prayer room that is an incredible blessing, but if not, consider finding a corner, notice board, table or even a cupboard which you can make your prayer corner. It's not about creating a special place, but about designating a permanent space, however small, that reminds you to pray.

It also enables you to put up photos, names, maps, scriptures or anything else you have been using in your prayer times – keeping them all together and available for use easily.

5.2 Pray without ceasing

In Ephesians 6: 18-20, Paul writes that we should 'pray without ceasing'. If there are particular situations on your heart that you want to really press into prayer for – whether in a friend or family member's life, amongst those in need in your community, or over issues that have touched you in the news, or from your experiences... make yourself a small card with the name of the situation and any scripture or visual elements you find helpful to associate with it.

Place this card in your wallet, your pocket, by the kettle, or somewhere where you will carry it with you, or return to it multiple times through the day. Each time you see it, offer up a quick prayer for that situation.

5.3 Using the Psalms as our school

The book of psalms is full of prayer and worship, helping us find language to express every emotion and experience we face in our own lives, and as we encounter humanity on a wider scale.

Work through the Psalms (you might find 12, 14, 20, and 82 particularly helpful starting places for praying for those affected by poverty and injustice) and use them to pray your prayers. Some days you will find you are led to rejoice in all that God has done for you, and on some to praise him for creation and his saving work and to recognise his sovereignty over the earth. On other days you will be interceding for God to rescue the poor and the broken...

Ask God to bring contemporary situations to mind, or pray into what is already close to your heart, as you read, and pray, these psalms.

5.4 Scriptural prayers

It's not just the Psalms that are helpful for guiding us in the subject matter, and language, of our prayers. Working through other parts of scripture, and using them as meditations, or to inspire you to pray for a wide-range of subjects and situations, can also be really helpful, and can also be a helpful way of exploring, and remembering, the Bible passages and books that you are reading through.

Praying the truth is powerful!

This method works particularly naturally with some of the New Testament epistles and/or passages from the prophets or psalms – read a section, ideally out loud, and then pause before continuing – who or what does it bring to mind? Does it cause you to consider individuals you know; relationships in your life; the work and mission of your church; church unity; or any groups in society that are suffering or marginalised? If so, pray for these issues and people as they come up. You might also like to try using some of the truth and language expressed in that passage to frame and guide your prayers.

You will find that as you work through a book such as Philippians or Galatians – perhaps over several prayer times – you will be led to intercede for a wide-range of people and circumstances beyond your own.

You might also like to keep a journal to jot down shorter verses and passages that you come across as you are reading your Bible that you think might be helpful to remember, and to use in prayer, generally – especially short prayers of praise, or blessing, or truths about trusting God, that you can remember on the go.

Another helpful way of using scripture to pray, is to meditate on, and pray around it by exploring different pronouns, and specific applications to your situation. For example, in a famous psalm such as 23, you might like to use words and phrases as you pray for other people who the Lord is a shepherd to, or to unpack what specifically in your life (or others') feels like a green pasture provided by God, or a shadow of death that he is giving you the strength not to fear evil from. Try also looking at different versions to expand your vocabulary, your depth of understanding, and your heart to praise, and seek more of, God.

5.5 Prayer cake

Ephesians 6:18 tells us to pray without ceasing. One way we can learn to do this, is to find ways of integrating prayer into simple tasks that we are doing – particularly those which involve our hands, leaving our mind and heart free to focus on God.

One way to integrate this with prayer for others (which is a large part of the context of the Ephesians reference) is to make or bake food for others, and to pray for them whilst we are doing this. This kind of approach is particularly helpful if you are doing something as an act of service because it helps you focus on love rather than duty, and to do everything for others in the context of God's grace, and your worship of him.

Make up sandwiches, meals or cakes for friends, neighbours, people in need in your church, or homeless people on the street. Spend the time whilst you are making the food focussing on praying for the people it is for, and offering their needs to God. Give the food to the people, and if appropriate, tell them that you prayed for them whilst making it.

(You can also apply this approach to any practical act of service, such as washing someone's car, or helping with their DIY.)

5.6 Exercising mind, body, soul and spirit

Many of us have times of exercise built in to our daily routine already. And this can be a great time to incorporate prayer. If you are out running you could pray for the community you are running through, and any schools, churches or other public buildings you run past. Or you could listen to an outward-focussed play-list to help focus your prayers during this time. (See 4.2 'Playlist led prayers' for more details on this.)

You could also try using the different sections or machines contained within your gym work-out, lengths you swim in the pool, or sections on your run, to pray in turn for different people and situation.

Section 6 - Summing up

All of us are individuals, and find different types of prayer more helpful than others. And that's ok. Use as many or as few of the ideas we've explored here, and if there is something you don't find helpful, don't worry about doing it again. Use the ideas you find helpful, and ask God to show you more, that will help you specifically to engage with his heart for the people and situations around you.