KYLE DIROBERTS

SECRET

TO

THE

PRAYER

31 DAYS TO A MORE INTIMATE

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

"I want to pray, but I don't know how or what to say." I've both said and heard this said about prayer countless times throughout the years. In *The Secret to Prayer*, Kyle DiRoberts addresses the qualms, hesitations, and misunderstandings Christians have regarding prayer with biblical truth. Through witty and concise writing, Kyle makes the theology of prayer accessible to everyday life while stirring a deep desire in the reader to pray with humility. I cannot recommend this book enough!

> **Gretchen Saffles**, author of *The Well-Watered Woman:* Rooted in Truth, Growing in Grace, Flourishing in Faith and founder of Well-Watered Women

Most of us struggle with prayer. I struggle with prayer. What's the secret to overcoming our struggles and learning to love prayer? In *The Secret to Prayer*, Kyle DiRoberts reminds us that it's simpler than we think. This practical, biblical, joyfully written book is a wonderful resource for anyone who struggles to pray. Read it over the course of a month. Read it with friends. Read it, and relax. Prayer shouldn't be a burden, but a blessing. This book will show you that.

Brett McCracken, senior editor, The Gospel Coalition and author of The Wisdom Pyramid: Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World and Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community

This book is a wise, practical, insightful, biblically-based, and often delightful discussion of many dimensions of prayer that will certainly be helpful to everyone who reads it.

> Wayne Grudem, distinguished research professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

Christians pray. That is not a controversial statement. But not all Christians practice prayer in the same way or understand it in the same manner. Kyle encourages people of faith to understand and practice prayer as an expression of love and humility in relationship with the sovereign of the universe. That God, who is fully and completely self-sufficient, would humble Himself to interact with His creatures is an amazing thought. And that thought really is what should drive our interaction with God in prayer. Using stories from his own life and others throughout history, Kyle draws the reader into the presence of God. This is an engaging book, written in a conversational style. The book models what it encourages the readers to adopt in their walk of faith and prayer.

Glenn R. Kreider, editor in chief, *Bibliotheca Sacra* and professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

In *The Secret to Prayer*, Kyle DiRoberts offers keen insights into developing and truly enjoying prayer as a way of life. His reflections on God and our relationship to Him reveal prayer for what it is—a wonderful responsibility befitting a life changed by His grace. But make no mistake, this is not a detached academic manual about prayer but rather an invitation *to chase after a life of prayer*. With wit and relevance, DiRoberts helps us see anew how effective and essential this identity-shaping practice is at cultivating deeper fellowship with and affection for our triune God. Thankfully, some secrets are not meant to be kept.

Mark Yarbrough, president, Dallas Theological Seminary

If prayer seems like a secret language you haven't quite learned, then spend thirty-one days with Kyle DiRoberts as he decodes talking to God. Here is a kind and trustworthy teacher willing to open up his own prayer practices to show us why and how to take God up on His wild and wonderful invitation into conversation. Lisa-Jo Baker, bestselling author of Never Unfriended and cohost of Out of the Ordinary

We have no substitutes for prayer, and there are no shortcuts. But for those of us who would like them, Kyle DiRoberts has written a wise and practical guide to the relational core of this spiritual foundation. For the distracted, the discouraged, the confused, and all us other stumbling misfits of prayer, this is a book of joyful medicine.

> Paul J. Pastor, author of The Face of the Deep, The Listening Day, and Bower Lodge

Prayer—talking to and listening to God—is something that most people do, but also something most people have tons of anxiety about. This unease can plant seeds of confusion and doubt that grow into thorny weeds in your faith over time. With *The Secret to Prayer*, my friend Kyle welcomes you into an honest conversation where confusion is cleared up and important truths are shared. Incredibly approachable, this is an easy-to-read, quick-to-embrace book that you'll read and re-read, highlight and underline.

Jamie Rasmussen, senior pastor, Scottsdale Bible Church

The disciples once asked Jesus: "Teach us to pray." In the heart of any follower of Jesus is a similar longing: we want to live in radical intimacy with our humble Teacher: knowing him, hearing his voice, living out his will for our lives. This book is a beautiful guide to a life of prayer. It masterfully unpacks what prayer looks like, and how to do it; but more importantly, it deepens your thirst for more of the presence of God.

Dominic Done, founder of Pursuing Faith and author of When Faith Fails: Finding God in the Shadow of Doubt

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978-1-0877-4045-4

Published by B&H Publishing Group Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 248.3 Subject Heading: GOD / PRAYER / MEDITATIONS

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Cover design by Micah Kandros; illustration by Softulka/ shutterstock. Author photo by Austin Kehmeier.

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The secret of secrets: humility is the soul of true prayer. —ANDREW MURRAY

To Kaden, Oliver, and Carson

My first dream for this book was to write something for you boys. This is your book. Thank you for letting me share it with others too. May your humble hearts continue to grow toward the Lord. I love you.

To Lolly

You are my example of what is means to have a humble heart. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

riting a book is a humbling experience. Why? Because no book worthy to be read was written alone. These are some of the people that helped me along the way.

Randy "Goz" Walters, thank you for taking the time to invest in me as a young kid trying to figure out what it means to have a relationship with God. Thank you for walking with me (literally!) toward Jesus on those hot summer days around the church and for introducing me to E. M. Bounds' work on prayer early on.

Bobby Brewer, thank you for always being there, always ready to pray for me with a simple, "I'm on it."

Wes Roberts, I am thankful for our time together each week. You have been a key source of encouragement through the years and have helped me discover and embrace God's calling upon my life. I know you and Judy pray for our family often.

Henry Holloman, I quickly realized in your class at TALBOT that you had been praying longer than I've been alive. You were first to introduce me to prayer not just as a spiritual discipline, but also as an academic pursuit. Also, thank you for being so humble and gracious to pass along your lecture notes on prayer to this young professor years later. I can only hope to carry on the tradition, and maybe, hand the notes over to another young professor one day.

Glenn Kreider, I miss not being able to grab poached eggs whenever we want. I miss not being able to stop by your office and trying to find a seat among all the books. But thanks for still making time for me, even from afar. Your writings on Jonathan Edwards and prayer helped shape so much of my thinking on this subject. You are my example of what it means to be a theologian. You and Jan have always been quick to pray for Lolly and I—for that we are thankful.

Paul Pastor, I'm sure it seemed like simple words of encouragement, but you actually pushed me along throughout the writing process. You have meant more than you know.

Susan Tjaden, I'm so thankful for your friendship. I always love when we get to talk and laugh. Thank you for always looking out for me. It was your suggestion that I include a discussion on unanswered prayer in this book.

Taylor Combs, thank you for believing in me. Let's be honest, it was the opening story about Justin Thomas and golf that had you. Throughout this process you have offered such wise counsel, and I couldn't have asked for a better editor and guide.

I want to thank my students, both new and old. Long before this book appeared on paper, it was with you that I would share through lectures and discussions, "The Secret to Prayer." You were the ones helping early on to sharpen my words.

I want to thank Scottsdale Bible Church for your encouragement and support. You shared Jesus with me when I was lost. Instilled the faith in me when I was young. And now

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have empowered me to exercise my spiritual gifts. I'm so thankful that I get to serve alongside the pastors at SBC.

Teresa Evenson, thank you for taking a chance on me. Having you by my side throughout this process has been an answer to prayer. I'm so thankful Susan introduced us. You get me and my writing. As an agent, you truly care about your authors and I'm thankful to be one of them. You are a great advocate and I've learned so much already just following your lead.

Mom and Dad, thank you for loving and encouraging me. No matter how crazy the dream is, your first response has never been "That's crazy!" or "No way!" Rather, your response has always been to help figure out how to make it a reality. I love you both so much.

Lolly, you are my favorite person. You are wise, smart, supportive, and beautiful. I would have never written this book without your encouragement. I still remember driving home from Show Low and you pushing me to finally embrace God's call to be an author. Your love for the Lord continues to encourage me and the boys more than you know. Thank you for loving me—I love you so much!

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INTRODUCTION THE ILLNESS OF PRAYER

y oldest son, Kaden, loves golf. And for only four years old, he's actually pretty good.

Proud dad speaking here. Or as my wife affectionately calls me, "Dance mom." Jokingly. *Lovingly*.

Kaden's two favorite players are Jordan Spieth and Justin Thomas.

Last year at the Waste Management Phoenix Open, Spieth and Thomas were paired together.

We were able to go to the tournament and, when we arrived, made our way to the tenth hole. From there, we planned to follow them for the rest of their round.

Kaden and I talk about these guys all the time. We *try* to recreate the shots we see them hit on TV. A lot of times we end up having more fun imitating their reactions to good shots and then adding a few moves of our own.

Typically, to win the Masters.

There was this moment out on the course at the Phoenix Open when Justin Thomas walked over and said hello to Kaden as we followed him down the fairway. Kaden froze.

He could not speak.

Thomas waved and asked Kaden if he was having fun.

Still no response.

Of course, after Thomas walked away, Kaden started talking again. He was amazed and confused as to why he couldn't speak. Inside he wanted to say something, but outside, he couldn't. Kaden kept asking if Thomas would come back so that he could try again.

Kaden's reaction captures how we often feel about prayer.

We've spoken about God with others.

We've heard some of the stories of the things He has done because someone prayed.

Maybe we've even heard people teach about prayer in a sermon or Bible study.

And then the moment arrives when it's time to talk to Him.

For everyone this moment is different. This is what makes each person's relationship with God so unique, and amazing, and beautiful, and without excuse, and terrifying. He has the ability to meet us right where we are.

But we all have this in common: we want to talk to God. We might not even know why we desire this so much, but we do. Even if we aren't entirely sure about how to pray or what to pray for, something in us desires His help. We might not even be too sure He exists, yet we still pray: "God, I don't know if You're real, but . . ."

Introduction

So you seek Him, not as a spoiled child, demanding something from God. Rather, there is no one else you'd want to go to.

Then you pray, but questions and distractions flood your mind.

What do you mean, I'm talking to God?

Wait, can I talk to God about this? Are you sure?

You really think He cares about what I have to say or a need I have?

Do I talk to God like He's a friend or the Creator? Or both? How do you do that?

When I'm praying with someone else, I often get distracted because I'm listening to the words they say.

Why did they say it like that?

I never thought to say that.

Wait, am I still praying?

Is that okay to pray about that?

Is he preaching to me right now or praying?

It sounds like he's talking to me, but I thought he was talking to God.

I'm confused.

Or I get distracted because I'm watching people pray.

Yes, when a pastor says, "Bow your heads and close your eyes," I can't help but peek. It's so weird because I hear, "Pick your head up and open your eyes."

I remember feeling justified as a pastor, because then I had some kind of spiritual authority to look around during prayer. You know, in case someone raised their hand, I needed to be ready.

This book is about prayer. It's about all of that craziness I just shared that we all feel, to some degree, whenever we pray.

But this book is not about prayer as an action, as though it is something you do.

I'm not sure I care about that right now.

In other words, this book won't teach you words to repeat. It won't teach you how you should kneel. Or how you should hold your hands. Or which direction you should look.

How's my sales pitch so far? You excited to read this book? Wait, don't answer that yet.

Imagine going to the doctor with a horrible cough. It has lingered for weeks. Finally, you make the appointment, show up twenty minutes early, fill everything out, and then wait because the doctor is running late.

I'm clearly not bitter.

You finally see the doctor, and she prescribes cough medicine. You go and purchase the cough medicine and begin immediately. But the cough doesn't go away.

So you go back to the same doctor. Her treatment plan is more of the same.

Wouldn't you stop going to that doctor? Perhaps see another doctor?

Why, though? Probably because you want someone to figure out why you are coughing and not just treat the symptom.

That's why I'm not going to discuss in detail the various methods of prayer, like what words to pray or the correct posture of prayer. Those are symptoms of prayer. Instead, I'd like to discuss a treatment plan that focuses on the illness, which is your heart. And my heart.

If we treat the heart, the symptoms will begin to take care of themselves over time. Maybe once the heart is aligned correctly, we'll settle into a new reality that God has given us

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great freedom in prayer. God has created us to pray, and our methods might look a little different or sound a little different than someone else's.

Maybe, for too long, we have been trying to get everyone to pray in a particular way (whatever that is) as if God only responds to certain types of prayers, so we conform our actions in prayer to mirror someone else's. Yet all along, God has cared more about the heart that was producing the prayers than He did about the mechanics employed.

So what's the treatment plan?

Humility.

Not just any dose of humility.

A humble heart.

Let me explain what that means. A humble heart is like a child who just wants her mom or dad and doesn't care what it takes to get their attention. Little children don't care if you are talking to someone else; interrupting you isn't a problem. They don't care if they have asked fifteen times; they'll probably ask another fifteen times. They don't care if the question makes sense; they assume you'll figure it out. They don't care if you've said no; they just ask again and again and again.

It's one thing for a child to talk to a parent this way, but it's a whole different story when an adult behaves like a child. No matter how old, wise, or experienced you are, a humble heart always maintains this childlike posture before the Lord.

This book explores prayer long before it ever forms into a group of words. Long before it unlocks all the things we desire or want from God. Long before we think about praying.

What does prayer look like?

Well, I don't know.

I can visibly see you with your eyes closed, seemingly talking to someone else. I can hear you talking to God and the words you are speaking to Him. Yet it's the heart that is the wordsmith, working diligently from within to produce the words spoken to God. God hears the words you pray because He hears your heart.

This presents a great difficulty for us when it comes to prayer, because it is really hard for us to know with certainty the content of our own heart.

In other words, we say the words. We hear the words, but we don't always *know* if our hearts are humble.

It's scary. I can produce good words from an evil heart. I can fool you, make you think I'm praying this super spiritual prayer, maybe even make you jealous of the prayer I just prayed, and yet have the worst of intentions.

What's also scary is that I can produce an awful-sounding prayer, maybe even sound like I don't know what I'm doing (maybe I don't!), mix up and mess up words all over, but these words I'm attempting to string together in prayer are coming from a humble heart.

Can you guess who most Christians would model their prayers after?

What about who God would recommend we mimic?

Once we begin to dwell upon the kind of heart we have, the intimate prayer life we've longed for will appear. I don't mean magically appear. But it will come to life. Words from a humble heart flow like a rushing river. We will experience great freedom because we will realize that all along God does not care about the words so much as He cares about the heart producing the words. My fear is that people have been teaching you merely the mechanics of prayer all this time, or maybe these are the only types of questions you've been asking. This isn't necessarily wrong, especially when we have a long history of prayer in the

church. People have written extensively about how great men and women from many different Christian traditions have prayed.

You might have achieved what you perceive to be success in prayer because God answered you. I hope that by the end of God does not care about the words so much as He cares about the heart producing the words.

this book, you will measure success a little differently. Perhaps success in prayer is measured not by God answering our prayers, but by our ability to know if the prayers produced are from a humble heart, regardless of the answer.

Pursuing a humble heart has the potential to affect many areas in your life, not just prayer. You might be thinking, "That's great! I'd love that." But we can't avoid that we, as Americans, pride ourselves (see what I did there?) in our own abilities. If you give America a bunch of steel, we build towers and bridges and walls. We find all the natural resources in our country so that we can be self-sufficient. We build a military that the world fears so that we never have to worry, and maybe we even force other countries and leaders to rely on us in times of need.

Individually, we strive for the American dream, which means we never have to rely on someone else. If you've "made it," that means your family doesn't have to worry about money, food, shelter, or clothing. You are able to provide these things by yourself.

But this attitude won't work when you try to pray. I'm going to try to persuade you to believe that what's most important when you pray is that your heart is humble before the Lord, that you are dependent on God for everything, and that you are never spiritually self-sufficient. Instead, you are poor, hungry, desperate, naked, and in need of help.

This book contends that somewhere between the humble heart of man and God resides the beauty, mystery, conversation, and intimacy we so desperately desire in prayer.

If I'm honest, looking inward at the heart can be really scary stuff because of what it might reveal.

It's okay, I'm not going to leave you throughout this adventure. There are no shortcuts. We won't be able to go around it or over it; we're going to have to go through it. Together. And I've seen my heart (still looking, actually), and I won't have any room to judge along the way.

PART I THEO-TALK

There can be no substitute for prayer. Here we speak not merely of times set apart when we fold hands and bow heads, but also of a way of being. —KELLY KAPIC

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

w do we pray from a humble heart? Good question. It's hard.

It would be far easier to write about what humble prayers sound like or look like because, then, they could be copied or adapted by each person. But correct words are not necessarily indicators of a humble heart. That just means you know how to sound humble. Proper posture does not indicate a humble heart either. It simply means you know how to look the part.

In order to embrace a humble heart in prayer, we have to believe some specific theological truths about God. That's what we are going to explore in this part of the book.

Unfortunately, I can't present humility in a systematized way. Humility isn't that easy. Humility isn't that structured. It's more of an art.

I'd rather us envision these humble truths about the divinehuman relationship in prayer as a mosaic, with the hope that in the end we will see individually and collectively something beautiful.

As this part of the book ("Theo-Talk") draws upon God's conversational relationship with us, an important relationship of mine continues to resurface over and over again. Unique to "Theo-Talk" are various stories about my two boys. Hidden in them are images of some of the ways we comprehend our relationship with God. In a way, my sons pray to me all the time.

CHAPTER 1 SWING YOUR SWING

uman beings are created in the image of God (*imago dei*), which means you are not just something, but someone. A unique someone.

With a unique language.

Our mind, our emotions, our heritage, our experiences all help shape who we are long before the words we choose to speak take form.

It would be boring if we all expressed ourselves the same way.

The beauty (and difficulty) of a relationship is that we have to know who we are talking to if we really want to understand what the other person is saying. The words we choose to employ in a conversation could be the same words another might use, but what sets words apart is that they come from a certain person with a unique personality, heart, and mind.

Dictionaries are helpful in that they provide the meaning of a word, but dictionaries are useless when it comes to understanding the person using those words. To have a relationship with another person is a humbling experience, because each person can't participate in that relationship with the assumption that he or she knows everything. Or even a little. The pitfall of assumptions is that the one assuming is self-reliant in the relationship and not dependent on the other person.

It is also difficult to maintain a relationship with a person who thinks he or she knows everything. To be a friend, one must observe, listen, be present, and ask questions.

When you first meet someone, you have no shared vocabulary. Even when you're on friendly terms, you might not grasp the meaning of his or her words because you haven't spent the time or effort to get to know him or her. Once you begin to understand another person, his or her words begin to make more sense. In other words, the more I get to know someone, the more he or she makes sense to me.

This means we need to listen to our friends, family, and neighbors as though we have never heard the words they're speaking before. Because we haven't, and who knows if we will ever hear them spoken like that again?

God knows us this way.

He not only knows the words we are choosing to communicate, He also knows the experiences causing us to choose those specific words. God celebrates our uniqueness, yet often in prayer, we desire to fit in to some common mold as if there is just one way to pray. It's as though we think we have to have a prayer language that is totally different from how we speak to anyone else.

At first glance, this makes sense. In prayer, we aren't talking to just anyone. We are talking to *God*.

But what if our prayer language came from the same words we speak on a daily basis?

The same words we speak to our children. Our spouse. Our friends. Our coworkers. Our baristas. Our . . .

What if it isn't necessary to use a whole new set of words that we only use when we speak to God?

Instead, why not use the words we are most familiar with? If I'm honest, if you really want me to "pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17), it would be much easier for me to attempt this if I could just use the words I speak most often.

Part of what makes prayer so uncomfortable is that we are so accustomed to speaking to our friends without any concern about the content of our heart. Then, in prayer, it's hard to make the transition to communicating to God, even to the point that something doesn't feel right as we speak to God.

I wonder if that discomfort is due to a heartfelt reality that we know we can't speak to God with the same words we use when speaking to others.

Maybe we avoid the internal dilemma, and we just dodge speaking to God altogether. Or we get creative, and we speak to God with humble words but from a prideful heart.

So what do we do? Maybe we need to address the root of the problem and not the symptom. Maybe we need to treat the illness rather than the cough. Maybe we need God to change our hearts.

Psalm 139 describes what God knows about you.

He knows when you sit down. When you stand up. When you lie down. Thoughts before you think them. All this led the

psalmist to proclaim: "I have been remarkably and wondrously made" (Ps. 139:14).

The psalmist did add one other aspect of God's knowledge: "Before a word is on my tongue, you know all about it, LORD" (Ps. 139:4).

This means there is diversity and creativity in the way you and I speak to God. He knows my words, your words, her words, his words. God knows our words altogether. Even though we all speak different words. That is what amazed the psalmist—that God would have that kind of knowledge about us.

Moreover, in Psalm 139, God's knowledge is such that He knows thoughts before we speak them. This is beautiful on a number of levels, but one reason is that God knows our personalities, experiences, presuppositions, and biases long before we get to the point of speaking.

Jesus picked up on this in the stories we read about Him in the Gospels. He didn't praise someone for the words they spoke and then model those words over and over again to the

God receives prayer from a humble heart.

disciples, as if the words were the rubric to effective prayer. Rather, he puts before us a diverse range of individuals to learn from—like a widow, a tax collector, a fishermen, and

a doctor. What is common to them all? They have a humble heart.

God receives prayer from a humble heart.

If God creates us in His image, and that image is reflected in the diverse and different words humans speak, then His ability to understand us must be matched by His ability to understand the personalities and experiences that produce those words. How many people refrain from praying because they don't have the perfect words put together in their mind?

Or how many hold off on praying because they don't sound as "put together" as someone else?

These are bad reasons not to pray.

God is fully capable of walking with us and absorbing our prayers whether we are new Christians or have been praying for a century.

One of my favorite golfers is Arnold Palmer. (I promise this is my last golf story.) You may be more familiar with his signature logo: the rainbow-colored umbrella. Or maybe his famous drink, which was half lemonade, half iced tea. But he is most famous for injecting the game of golf into pop culture.

Arnie made it cool to be a golfer.

There is a quote from Palmer, and if you have the time, go look it up; it's even cooler *hearing* him say it.

Palmer says this:

Swing your swing. Not some idea of a swing. Not a swing you saw on TV. Not that swing you wish you had. No, swing your swing. Capable of greatness. Prized only by you. Perfect in its imperfection. Swing your swing. I know, I did.¹

And he did. He had a very unique swing. I love this quote, and I often think of prayer when I read it.

Don't pray like me. Or your friend.

¹ https://golf.com/instruction/arnold-palmer-quote-swing-your-swing/

Or your pastor. Or your favorite theologian. Or anyone else for that matter.

Your humble prayers are perfect in their imperfections. Speak your language, pray *your* prayer, from a humble heart.

IS THERE A SECRET TO TALKING WITH GOD?

EVERYONE wants to know how to talk to God and get answers to their prayers. Yet most people are skeptical of prayer, or convinced they're doing it wrong.

The Secret to Prayer will take readers on a 31-day journey, examining the heart and actions of biblical characters whose prayers were answered. On the other side of the journey, readers will have a more vibrant prayer life, and a more intimate relationship with the God to whom we pray.



Kyle DiRoberts (PhD) is department chair and associate professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Arizona Christian University in Glendale, Arizona, adjunct professor at Phoenix Seminary, and director of the minister in residence and internship programs at Scottsdale Bible Church. He is married to Lolly and the father of Kaden, Oliver, and Carson. With any free time, he enjoys hanging

out with his wife and kids—his favorite people—and going to Michael Bublé concerts, cooking, traveling, eating good food, and getting to coach his kids in golf and baseball.



