

WHY PRAY?

Why pray?

I'm desperate and there are a lot of things I need.

It's a thing good people do, so I guess I better if I want to be good.

Praying makes me feel close to God. It helps calm me and lets me get in touch with my inner self.

Might as well; what do I have to lose?

You might wonder which, if any, of the answers above is the right one. After all, why do people pray?

Many people pray when they want something. Their football team isn't doing too well on the field and they pray for a boost in the form of a win. They pray they might win the lottery because their current financial situation isn't very reassuring. They might even pray for something noble like a cure for their ailing mother or a new job for a long-suffering friend. "Oh, God, please answer me...I'll do anything if only you let me have this....I'm hoping against hope, but please!"

Then there are those who pray because they think they ought to. They identify prayer with following the rules and being good and faithful. Maybe God will cut them some slack if they kneel long enough for their knees to start hurting or say the right words enough times. They admire the people who pray a lot and believe them to be very holy, but can't quite figure out how a person could pray for very long. Gee, it must be heroic for somebody to pray an hour every day or to praise God in prayer while he's feeling bad.

Next come the radiant people, the people who feel at peace while praying. A soft mantle of bliss descends on them while they pray. Oh, how soothing and joyful it is to know for sure that the Lord is near and loves me and is my friend. What a great blessing and a treat it is to experience that comfort. How kind is God to come to me and bless me. When I pray all the wonder of the Lord rises up in me and I am lifted to His heart. I know He is guiding me, always at my side and reassuring me that all will be well.

For some people prayer is an inward conversation. The self-talk helps them sort through the labyrinth of various internal conflicts and contradictions and produces a welcome sense of stillness. This kind of meditation brings an emptying of the nonessential bustle and stress of worry about everyday problems and

settles their minds. Prayer is a way of rest and extricating yourself from the mundane world. Ah, finally, some time to myself!

All these reasons for prayer have their merits. They all make some kind of sense. Maybe a few of them encapsulate the images we have of why we pray. But none of these reasons is the whole story.

Maybe the closest answer to the question: "why pray?" is, strangely, the last response. "Oh, now, wait a minute," you might say. "What kind of evasive, nutty game are you playing? Are you saying that there's not much point to praying and it's just a casual gambit, a risk, a nebulous hope that something good might come out of prayer, but you can't imagine what?"

No. But the question of what you have to lose is an essential one. There is much you risk saying goodbye to through prayer. If you pray, you might well find that you start losing attachments to worldly things. Your yearning for the upscale house might diminish. You might find that the luxurious clothes start to lose their appeal. The slot machines may not sound as mellifluous to your ears. You might not care as much about your reputation at the office. Your experience of living might become ever so slightly altered. Perhaps that quick temper will begin to abate. You might lose that self-centeredness, the ache of thinking that every dreadful that happens on earth happens to you. You might even become a new person, reborn in the Spirit of God!

From another perspective, you might lose a hellish destination. One saint said, when asked who would be saved, replied: "Those who pray will be saved; those who do not pray will not be saved." Think about it. Is that an unjust statement, maybe a scary one? Why? Doesn't it make sense that you would not want to spend eternity with someone you wouldn't give the time of day, for even a few moments of your existence?

One way of looking at prayer is to think of it as a gift of yourself to your Maker, to the One to whom you owe all, the One who loves you above all. We have a duty to pray, but it is a glorious duty. It is the treasure of time with the One who knows us more than we know ourselves. It is also an opportunity to offer not only ourselves to the Lord, but also the needs of our friends, family, enemies, acquaintances, all of us caught up in this mysterious, gritty, soaring adventure of the quagmire and delight of life.