

# *PRAY & SING*

## *Prayers & Songs in the New Testament*

*Doug Rowston*

Praying and singing went together for followers of Jesus in the first century. The New Testament includes fine examples of profound prayers and sacred songs. This book opens the pages of the New Testament and looks at nine prayers, seven songs and an eighth set of songs to God and Christ in the power of the Spirit.

The examination of these prayers and songs will encourage twenty-first century seekers after truth to pray to the Lord and to sing his praises. Indeed, taking seriously the New Testament prayers and songs will enable readers to be followers of Jesus who practise what they preach.

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Cover photographs

Front: Queensland sunrise

Back: Canadian sunset

*This book is dedicated  
to Colin and Sarah  
my son and daughter  
who were very young  
when their mother died.  
She would be proud of  
what they have done  
in the succeeding years  
and who they have become.*

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## Introduction

At times we may find it hard to pray. Personal and public prayers can be a mixture of written prayers, prayers with or without notes, on the spur of the moment prayers. They can be as basic as ‘Thank you, Lord!’ and ‘Help us, Lord!’ or as intricate as the General Confession and the General Thanksgiving. As we read the Bible and meditate upon its message this can move us into prayer of different kinds.

Paul urges us to *pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and to *persevere in prayer* (Romans 12:12). This is probably because it’s a valuable way of relating to God in every aspect of life. As James Montgomery wrote, ‘Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed.’

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Prayer can include:

**praising** God for his creating, preserving, saving presence,  
**confessing** our sins to God,  
**thanking** God for his good gifts in life and faith,  
**asking** God for general and specific requests,  
**giving** to God what we are and what we have to his service.

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With good reason Christians usually offer these different kinds of prayer to God through Jesus the Lord and Saviour. He prayed and he taught his disciples to pray. As we shall see, his followers prayed and set a fine example of how to pray in the pages of the New Testament.

Some of us may also admit that we find it hard to sing ... in tune! I certainly enjoy singing traditional hymns and praise songs in unison at church. However, please do not ask me to sing in a group with different parts! Our musical tastes can be many and varied, sacred and secular, instrumental and vocal.

Paul also encourages us to *sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God (Colossians 3:16)* and to *be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves (Ephesians 5:18b-19a)*.

The Bible's sacred songs include the Psalms in the Old Testament. The New Testament also has sacred songs. Luke's narrative about the young church mentions an incident at Philippi involving two jailed believers. *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.(Acts 16:25)* Praying and singing went together for followers of Jesus.

In the early second century the governor of Pontus and Bithynia (in northern Turkey today) wrote a letter to the emperor in Rome. Pliny asked Trajan about certain believers who 'were in the habit of meeting before dawn on a stated day and singing alternately a hymn to Christ as to a god'.

Pliny told Trajan that these Christians took an oath not to commit sins or crimes and held a common meal. Singing sacred songs to God through Christ, commitment to a new lifestyle, and sharing a common meal in memory of Christ had parallels in the worship of the earliest believers.



According to Luke, believers met regularly in homes and *devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*(Acts 2:42)

Their worship consisted of the apostles' teaching, the offering of gifts to help the needy, the breaking of bread and drinking of wine to remember the Lord until he comes, and the offering of prayer to praise, confess, thank, ask, and surrender to God.

Against this background the first section of the book seeks to deepen our understanding of prayers in the New Testament.

We begin with the Lord's Prayer. I call it the Model Prayer. It covers God's glory and human needs. Of course, it was given to us by Jesus, in whom God comes to us and through whom we go to God. We look at two other prayers of Jesus as well. Then we examine Paul's theology of prayer in his finest letter before discussing two more prayers of the apostle. The last selected prayers come from Hebrews, First Peter, and Jude.

When we turn to consider some songs in the New Testament, we meet a wealth of elevated language and deep devotion to God through Christ. The elevated language includes the use of parallelism. Modern English translations of the New Testament sometimes reproduce this linguistic feature in poetry. The deep devotion to God through Christ apparently took place in early Christian worship.

In this context the second section of the book seeks to deepen our appreciation of songs in the New Testament. Of course, these songs were sung prayerfully by believers.

We commence with three songs in Luke's record of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Then we negotiate the heights and depths of the song at the beginning of John's Gospel. After this we look at two songs in Paul's letters to the Christians at Philippi and Colossae. Next we examine a truly memorable song at the beginning of Hebrews. Finally, we discuss songs in Revelation about the Lord and the Lamb.

The examination of these prayers and songs will encourage twenty-first century seekers after truth to pray to the Lord and to sing his praises. Indeed, taking seriously the New Testament prayers and songs will enable us all to be followers of Jesus who live the Christian life.