

# ◆ Writing Prayers for Worship

*Writing prayers for worship calls for the creativity of a poet, the sensitivity of a pastor, the insight of a theologian, and the foundation of a living relationship with God. Weaving together these concerns, this article gives advice to the worshiper who is given the task of writing prayers for public worship. It suggests an approach that will be accessible for beginners and challenging for experienced worship leaders.*

Prayer is the heartbeat of worship—our living, vital entrance into the presence of God. It is also often the part of the worship service in which most people’s minds go to sleep. Is it possible to write prayers for worship that powerfully bring people into God’s presence? Can written prayers help us to shake off the lethargy of our congregational prayers? Yes, it is possible—given some basic spiritual principles.

## A Levitical Tradition

If you are writing prayers for worship, you are part of the tradition of Levites that goes back to the time of Moses. God set apart an entire tribe to be in charge of the Israelite worship, and many of our most beautiful prayers and songs come from Asaph and the sons of Korah. Written prayers, whether [p 810](#) spoken or set to music, form the heart of the earliest Jewish and Christian worship.

Your calling, as a modern-day Asaph, is to find language and imagery that engages people’s minds and hearts in honest, worshipful, heartfelt prayer to the living God. But why written prayers?

First of all, there is nothing wrong with spontaneous prayers. These can be as eloquent, moving, and effective as written prayers. But not everyone feels comfortable making up a prayer on the spur of the moment in front of a large group of people. Sometimes the pray-er forgets things that he or she had wanted to say—or says things later regretted.

Writing your prayers allows you to think out beforehand what the congregation needs to be saying to God in prayer at that point in the service. It enables you to word your prayers so that they apply to the entire congregation (especially important in prayers of confession and repentance or commitment).

Writing down the prayer beforehand also challenges you to use fresh language, to find images that will focus the congregation’s hearts and imaginations on God. It will keep your prayers from being unnecessarily long and repetitious.

And written, responsive-type prayers allow the congregation to join you not only with their hearts and minds but with their voices as well.

## Choosing Language Wisely

Choice of language is where the creative part of your worship gifts comes into play. Language, a gift from the Creator, can be a powerful force in touching people’s spirits and bringing them to God.

It’s too easy, when praying “off the cuff,” to use prayer language that is overused and worn out. For example:

O most holy God, we come to Thee in the evening hour of this day to thank Thee for all that Thou hast done for us. We come before Thee now to ask that Thou wilt be with us, that Thou

wilt bless us and guide us in all that we do. Hear us now, we pray, in the name of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is nothing wrong with the thoughts expressed in this prayer. They are reverent and proper, and have probably been used, with some variation, in many church services down through the years.

But there's the rub. Like stones that have been rolled together for a long time, these words and phrases have tumbled through our consciousness so often that they have lost their sharpness. Even substituting "you" for the "Thees" and "Thous" does little to bring this prayer alive. There is no "edge" to the language. It has lost its ability to move us, to catch our imagination. Sadly, it will (and often has) put us to sleep.

Choose your language wisely. Use images for God that help people to picture the living Eternal One. There are many images we can use, of course; think of the one most appropriate to the service or mood or theme of that day's Scripture. (This is especially important, as the Scripture should shape and influence the whole of the worship service.)

If the focus is on God's tender care of us, for example, images like shepherd, father, mother, brother, and comforter come to mind. If it is on God's sovereign power, work with images such as wind and fire, the Creator who stretched out the heavens, or the "Lord who will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior."

Don't be afraid to use concrete, specific images for God: rock, water, fire, shepherd, friend, shield, mother hen, lamb, bread, and so on. God, knowing that we are unable to comprehend fully his nature, gives us these images in Scripture so we can at least understand him on the simplest of levels. And the wealth of scriptural images reminds us of the many facets of God's nature and his dealings with us. Focusing on one of these in prayer and using Scripture's own language to make it come alive is one of the most helpful things you can do in writing prayers.

Using visual imagery in language helps to touch people's imaginations and hearts, making them more aware of God's presence. But you have only a brief time—a few minutes at the most—to do this. So use only one picture or several related ones in each prayer. Make the picture as clear and sharp as it can be; avoid general, cliched language (without going overboard in poetic extremes).

Once you've chosen a scriptural word picture to use, work at making it a unifying theme of your prayer. For example:

Lord Jesus, you are our living Head. Teach us to be your body here on earth—your hands, your feet, your eyes and compassionate heart. Lord, send the impulses of your love into the sinews of this church. May your will and thoughts direct us. Let your hands, through our hands, supply food [p 811](#) for our neighbors' hunger. Let them hear your voice as we visit and talk with them. Let the children come to us and sit in our laps, as they sat in yours. Without you as our Head, Lord, we are lifeless. We wait for your power, your word, your instruction. Fill us with your life and love, Jesus. Amen.

One other consideration in your choice of language is your congregation's preference for formal or informal liturgy. There are some beautiful prayers taken from the language of "high church" liturgy in the traditional responsive mode. Here is one example that can be used as a call to worship at Pentecost, taken from *Praise God: Common Prayer at Taizé*:

**L:** Blessed be our God at all times, now and always and forever and ever.  
**P:** Amen.

- L: Glory to you, our God! Glory to you! Holy Spirit, Lord and Comforter, Spirit of truth everywhere present, filling all that exists, Treasury of good gifts and Source of life, come and dwell in us, cleanse us from all sin and in your love bring us to salvation:
- P: God, holy; God, strong and holy; God, holy and immortal; have pity on us.

But if you prefer a more “low church” informality, you might use this Pentecost prayer instead:

- L: Holy Spirit, you are the fire of holiness that surrounds the throne of God. You burn away our sin and blindness; you fill us with the beauty and purity of Jesus, our Lord.
- P: Come to us, Holy Spirit!
- L: Burn in us this morning, Holy Spirit. We give you the places of our hearts that have been choked by the cares of this world. We give you our tiredness, our sin, our struggles with apathy. We wait your fiery cleansing.
- P: Come to us, Holy Spirit!
- L: May the Word of God this morning burn in our minds, our wills, our feelings. May we sense the light and heat of your presence in that Word. Speak to us, O burning power of God!
- P: Come to us, Holy Spirit!

## Praying the Scriptures

Much of Scripture is prayer: the Psalms, portions of the prophets, David’s beautiful prayer in 1 Chronicles 29, the simple prayers of our Lord, the magnificent prayers of Paul’s epistles. Use them as part of your written prayers; combine them, reword them, find the best places to break them into a back-and-forth echo between leader and congregation. For example, consider this adaptation of Psalm 84 as a responsive prayer to open worship:

- P: This sanctuary is lovely to us, O God—O living, powerful Lord almighty! Deep within our spirits we long to be near you, to stay here in your courts and to worship you.
- P: Our heart and our flesh cry out to you, O living God.
- L: Even the sparrow is welcome here, to build her nest by your altars, O Lord of all the worlds!
- P: It would be our greatest joy to live in your house and to praise you forever!
- L: Those who find their strength in you will find this place full of living water, even if they pass through the valley of weeping.
- P: To spend one day here in worship is better than a thousand elsewhere!

## Pastoral Considerations

**Appropriateness.** If you are writing a prayer for your congregation, be sure that it applies to them. Do not make the congregation say something they are not ready or willing to say about themselves. Do not say, “We confess that we ignore our neighbors and fail to pray for them,” for example, when it might be true of you but not true of 10 or 20 percent of the people participating in the prayer with you. A safer way is to say, “Forgive us *when* we ignore our neighbors ... ”

**Brevity.** Keep prayers as brief and as honest as possible. Take as your example the prayer of the publican: “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Say what you need and want to say—no more than that. Avoid the length, flowery language, and self-congratulation of the Pharisee.

As Jesus said, “When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

**Honesty.** Make honesty the hallmark of your prayers. People want and need honesty in religion—plainspoken honesty that gets past the nice words and speaks the truth with God’s love. If your prayers lack an honest, direct grasp of the truth—by avoiding mention of divisions in your congregation, for example, or by smoothing over your lack of effectiveness in outreach or your struggle to make ends [p 812](#) meet financially—then the congregation will get the message that prayer is just for “nice” things and not for the difficult, specific problems facing your church.

**Audience.** Do not use prayer as an opportunity to preach to anyone. You are not making points to remind your listeners of certain truths; your listener is God himself. Always be aware of this and say to God what you would if you were directly in his presence.

Here’s a good thing to do as you are starting to write a prayer for worship: Before anything else, use your God-given imagination to place yourself in the court of heaven. See the God of Isaiah, who is high and lifted up, and whose train fills the temple. Smell the smoke and incense of the God of Revelation, and see the blinding white throne and the unbearable majesty that radiates from God’s holiness. Hear the angels cry around the throne, “Holy, Holy, Holy is he who is and who was and who is to come!”

Hear also the gentle invitation to “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that you may receive mercy and find grace to help you in your time of need.” See with the eyes of your heart the figure of Jesus, our high priest and brother, standing and pleading before the throne for the needs of you and your congregation.

*Then* write your prayer, conscious that this is no ploy or trick of the imagination but rather the highest glimpse of reality that you will see. Do not write your prayers first of all with the people in mind; write them with the presence of God in your mind and heart. Then your prayers will speak; they will also lift people to the throne and presence of God. Your language will be reverent, humble, holy, full of praise, calling participants to join you in the Holy of Holies.

## A Final Word

To write for worship is, in a sense, to be an Old Testament Levite. The Levites’ calling required spiritual preparation: ritual cleansing, donning white linen garments, and so on. Before you begin to write for worship, make sure that you have put on the white linen of forgiveness and righteousness, having confessed your sins and asked God’s Spirit to cleanse and fill you.

Does this sound pretentious or unnecessary? Not if you take God’s holiness and his call to worship seriously. Even the most beautifully written prayer or litany is lifeless without the quiet presence of God’s power. And that power can make the simplest prayer come alive for those who listen and participate.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Webber, [Music and the Arts in Christian Worship](#), 1st ed., vol. 4, The Complete Library of Christian Worship (Nashville, TN: Star Song Pub. Group, 1994), 812.