

PRESIDENTIAL PRAYERS

Editor's note: Tomorrow is the National Day of Prayer in the United States, which occurs annually on the first Thursday of May. The modern law instituting this time to "turn to God in prayer and meditation" began in 1952, although many similar observances were held by earlier presidents. Today, we are sharing several prayers by America's presidents throughout history, as featured in The Book of Man: Readings on the Path to Manhood by William J. Bennett. Using profiles, stories, letters, poems, essays, historical vignettes, and more, Bennett looks to define what a man should be, how he should live, and to what he should aspire in several key areas of life: war, work, leisure, and more. Enjoy today's excerpt.

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The first pilgrims to the shores of America began their life in the New World with a bended knee and prayer. Since the landing of the *Mayflower*, the leaders of the country have been lifting the nation up in prayer. In both public addresses and private journals, many presidents of the United States have prayed for guidance, strength, and comfort for the people of the nation. The next several prayers — from George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush — reflect the reverent perspective that is unique to our country. This first selection is an undated prayer from Washington's prayer journal at Mount Vernon.

A Prayer for Guidance

George Washington

O eternal and everlasting God, I presume to present myself this morning before Thy Divine majesty, beseeching Thee to accept of my humble and hearty thanks, that it hath pleased Thy great goodness to keep and preserve me the night past from all the dangers poor mortals are subject to, and has given me sweet and pleasant sleep, whereby I find my body refreshed and comforted for performing the duties of this day, in which I beseech Thee to defend me from all perils of body and soul...

Increase my faith in the sweet promises of the gospel; give me repentance from dead works; pardon my wanderings, and direct my thoughts unto Thyself, the God of my salvation; teach me how to live in Thy fear, labor in Thy service, and ever to run in the ways of Thy commandments; make me always watchful over my heart, that neither the terrors of conscience, the loathing of holy duties, the love of sin, nor an unwillingness to depart this life, may cast me into a spiritual slumber, but daily frame me more and more into the likeness of Thy son Jesus Christ, that living in Thy fear, and dying in Thy favor, I may in Thy appointed time attain the resurrection of the just unto eternal life... bless my family, friends, and kindred.

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A Prayer for Peace

Abraham Lincoln

From the second inaugural address, March 4, 1865, by the nation's "poet president," as great a man as ever seen.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continues... until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid another drawn with the sword... so still it must be said that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and for his orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

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A Prayer in Dark Times

Franklin D. Roosevelt

This prayer was offered on D-day, June 6, 1944. It is manly to pray, and it is manly for a leader to lead us in prayer.

Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity...

Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith. They will need Thy blessings. Their road will be long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. Success may not come with rushing speed, but we shall return again and again; and we know by Thy grace, and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph...

Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy kingdom. And for us at home—fathers, mothers, children, wives, sisters, and brothers of brave men overseas, whose thoughts and prayers are ever with them—help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice... Give us strength, too — strength in our daily tasks, to redouble the contributions we make in the physical and the material support of our armed forces.

With Thy blessing, we shall prevail over the unholy forces of our enemy. Help us to conquer the apostles of greed and racial arrogances. Lead us to the saving of our country, and with our sister nations into a world unity that will spell a sure peace — a peace invulnerable to the schemings of unworthy men. And a peace that will let all men live in freedom, reaping the just rewards of their honest toil.

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A Prayer of Gratitude

John F. Kennedy

A prayer offered Thanksgiving Day 1963.

Let us therefore proclaim our gratitude to Providence for manifold blessings — let us be humbly thankful for inherited ideals — and let us resolve to share those blessings and those ideals with our fellow human beings throughout the world.

On that day let us gather in sanctuaries dedicated to worship and in homes blessed by family affection to express our gratitude for the glorious gifts of God; and let us earnestly and humbly pray that He will continue to guide and sustain us in the great unfinished tasks of achieving peace, justice, and understanding among all men and nations and of ending misery and suffering wherever they exist.

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A Prayer for a Meaningful Life

Jimmy Carter

The following are two separate prayers: a prayer from Carter's inaugural address, January 20, 1977, and a prayer from his Thanksgiving speech to the nation, November 27, 1980.

January 20, 1977

I would like to have my frequent prayer answered that God let my life be meaningful in the enhancement of His kingdom and that my life might be meaningful in the enhancement of the lives of my fellow human beings.

November 27, 1980

I call upon all the people of our Nation to give thanks on that day for the blessings Almighty God has bestowed upon us, and to join the fervent prayer of George Washington who as President asked God to “impart all the blessings we possess, or ask for ourselves to the whole family of mankind.”

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A Prayer for Healing

Ronald Reagan

From a speech to the American people, February 6, 1986.

To preserve our blessed land we must look to God... It is time to realize that we need God more than He needs us... We also have His promise that we could take to heart with regard to our country, that "If my people, which are called by my name shall humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

Let us, young and old, join together, as did the First Continental Congress, in the first step, in humble heartfelt prayer. Let us do so for the love of God and His great goodness, in search of His guidance and the grace of repentance, in seeking His blessings, His peace, and the resting of His kind and holy hands on ourselves, our nation, our friends in the defense of freedom, and all mankind, now and always.

The time has come to turn to God and reassert our trust in Him for the healing of America... Our country is in need of and ready for a spiritual renewal. Today, we utter no prayer more fervently than the ancient prayer for peace on Earth.

If I had a prayer for you today, among those that have all been uttered, it is that one we're so familiar with: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace..." And God bless you all.

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A Prayer to Help Others

George H. W. Bush

A prayer offered in George H. W. Bush's inaugural address, January 20, 1989.

Heavenly Father, we bow our heads and thank You for Your love. Accept our thanks for the peace that yields this day and the shared faith that makes its continuance likely. Make us strong to do Your work, willing to heed and hear Your will, and write on our hearts these words: "Use power to help people."

For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us to remember it, Lord.

The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us; so that He may incline our hearts to Him, to walk in all His ways... that all peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other.

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A Prayer for the Departed

George W. Bush

*From George W. Bush's address to the nation after the World Trade Center attacks,
September 14, 2001.*

We come before God to pray for the missing and the dead, and for those who love them... On this national day of prayer and remembrance, we ask Almighty God to watch over our nation, and grant us patience and resolve in all that is to come. We pray that He will comfort and console those who now walk in sorrow. We thank Him for each life we now must mourn, and the promise of a life to come.

As we have been assured, neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, can separate us from God's love. May He bless the souls of the departed. May He comfort our own.

And may He always guide our country.