Praying With a Squirrel Mind: 5 Blockades and 20 Ways

I have a confession: I have the attention span of a caffeinated squirrel. And when it comes to prayer, my mind tends to hop from branch to branch faster than you can say "Hey Siri." I'm guessing I'm not the only one? If your prayer life sometimes feels like trying to meditate in the middle of a carnival, you're in good company.

Over years of spiritual trial and error (mostly error), I've experienced five major blockades that keep me from connecting with God and discovered some practical hacks that have helped me overcome my distracted mind.

The 5 Blockades to Prayer (Or: Why My Prayer Time Could Look Like a Three-Ring Circus if I'm Not Careful)

1. Distraction and Busyness

- my phone vibrates.
- my to-do list screams.
- wife and my family need things
- another email from a frustrated church member
- a video editing project
- an interim pastorate
- a financial puzzle
- an expense report
- and just for good measure I get on twitter long enough for my head to ache.

Meanwhile, I'm trying to have a heart-to-heart with the Creator of the universe. Good luck with that, right? When my mind is racing through notifications, deadlines, and

responsibilities, meaningful conversation with God feels nearly impossible.

“Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

Apparently, God knew about our distraction problems long before smartphones. Being still is practically a superpower these days.

2. Guilt and Unworthiness

The moment—and I mean the *exact* moment—I enter my prayer time, a highlight reel of my failures starts playing in my head. It’s like my brain says, “Oh, you want to talk to your all-seeing Savior? Let’s first review all the reasons you’re not worthy!” This sense of unworthiness muffles my voice faster than a thick blanket.

“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

The enemy wants me feeling too ashamed to pray because he knows that shame keeps me out of the throne room. As long as I feel unworthy, I’ll never boldly approach God.

3. Unanswered Prayers and Disappointment

I've been praying for some things for so long that I'm pretty sure my prayers have frequent flyer miles. When years pass without the answer I want, it's tempting to think God isn't listening, doesn't exist, or (bringing us back to blockade #2) I'm just not worthy of an answer.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. (Isaiah 55:8)

It's hard to remember that God isn't a cosmic vending machine where I insert my quarters of faith and select which blessing I'd like dispensed. That's just not how He operates.

4. Rigid Expectations About "Correct" Prayer

Sometimes I get so caught up in using the right words, praying at the right time, in the right position, with the right level of emotion that I forget God just wants me to talk to Him. When my ADD collides with my perfectionism, my prayer life is basically doomed.

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." (Romans 8:26)

Thank goodness the Holy Spirit can translate my jumbled thoughts because sometimes even I don't know what I'm trying to say.

5. Spiritual Dryness and Doubt

There are seasons when my spiritual life feels like crossing the Sahara with a thimble of water. I lose my passion, feel unmoved by things that once broke my heart, and find myself more excited about the new season of my favorite show than about spending time with Jesus.

"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42:11)

Even David, a man after God's own heart, experienced spiritual dryness. Those desert seasons can drive us further from the throne room if we let them.

20 Prayer Strategies for the Spiritually ADD

Now for the good part—what actually helps! Here are 20 different ideas and approaches that have strengthened my prayer life:

1. Create a Dedicated Prayer Space

I need a place where I can shut out the world and focus on God—a clean canvas for prayer. Nothing fancy, just a space that signals to my brain: "It's God time now."

"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen." (Matthew 6:6)

2. Start a Spiritual Journal

For the past five years, I've been writing down my prayers. It keeps my squirrel mind focused when I'm physically involved in the process. Plus, I can search back through old prayers and see how God has been working (which is great for those doubtful seasons).

"Write down the reve

lation and make it plain on tablets." (Habakkuk 2:2)

3. Practice Silence Before and After Prayer

Turns out, God wasn't in the earthquake or fire for Elijah—He was in the "still small voice." Finding silence takes effort in our noise-polluted world, but it's worth it.

"After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper." (1 Kings 19:12)

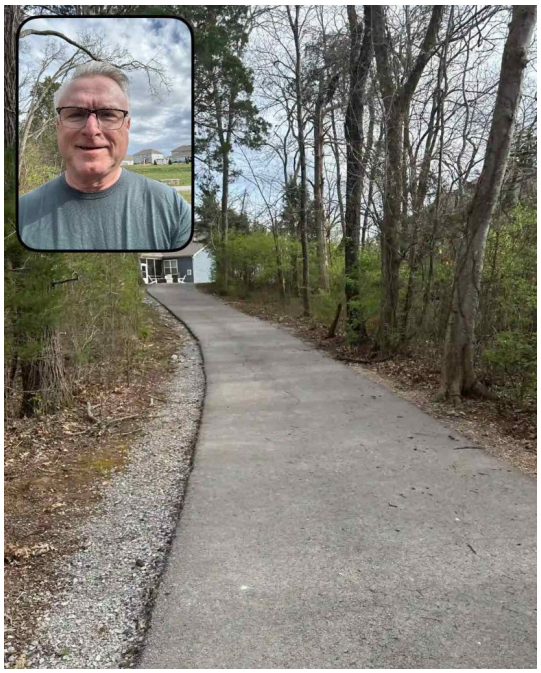
4. Use a Prayer Calendar

Strategic prayer helps when I feel spiritually lost. Having

different people and concerns assigned to different days gives my prayer life structure and keeps me from forgetting important people and needs.

“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.” (1 Timothy 2:1)

5. Incorporate Physical Movement



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“I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.” (Psalm 63:4)

6. Explore Ancient Prayer Traditions

Lectio Divina, Ignatian Examen, or praying the hours—these aren’t New Age practices; they’re ancient Christian

traditions. They provide a roadmap for prayer when I can't find my own way.

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16)

7. Join a Prayer Group

Having at least one other person to pray with keeps me accountable. If you don't have that person, your mission is to find them!

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20)

8. Pray Through Scripture

I find it nearly impossible to pray meaningfully without the Bible. Scripture provides guardrails for my prayers so I don't end up in the ditch with selfish or misguided requests.

"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." (Psalm 119:105)

9. Use Technology for Prayer Reminders

My phone might be a distraction, but it can also be a tool. I set prayer reminders throughout my day to pause and refocus on God.

"Pray continually." (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

10. Try Fasting

Some of my most powerful spiritual moments have come during times of fasting—whether from food, media, or other comforts. There's something about denying yourself that creates space for God to work.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do."

(Matthew 6:16)

11. Use Guided Prayers

When I can't find my own words, I borrow someone else's! YouTube has countless guided prayer videos, and devotional books like "Prayers That Avail Much" provide excellent scriptural frameworks.

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for…" (Romans 8:26)

12. Incorporate Music

Music prepares my heart for prayer like nothing else. Sometimes singing is my prayer when I can't find the right words.

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord." (Ephesians 5:19)

13. Practice Gratitude Prayers

I try to start every prayer time by thanking God—even for small things. Like Brother Lawrence scrambling eggs "to the glory of God," gratitude transforms mundane moments into sacred ones.

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

14. Use Visual Aids

Great religious art, nature photographs, or even a simple cross can focus my wandering mind during prayer. I have a cross that my son, Isaac, gave me a few years ago. It sits on my prayer table and has different names of Jesus on it. Often as I begin I thank God for each of the names carved on it.

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come

from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2)

15. Pray Out Loud

With my ADD and dyslexia, praying out loud is practically essential. It reminds my brain what I'm doing and keeps me from mentally wandering off to my grocery list. Corrie ten Boom, a Holocaust survivor and Christian missionary, often spoke about the importance of praying aloud.

When Darlene and I were first married, we lived in a broken-down fourplex with paper thin walls. Our apartment's closet was located sharing a wall with another single seminary student. I can't remember his name. It's been a minute since 1985, but I remember his prayers! It inspired me to make my quiet times not so quiet. Speak those prayers! Send them out audibly. For me, praying aloud is a way to get my mind engaged. It reminds me that I am speaking to **someOne** rather just thinking about some thing.

"My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD." (Psalm 145:21)

16. Learn Prayers from Different Christian Traditions

Whether it's Church of God, Lutheran, or Episcopal prayers, exploring how other Christians talk to Jesus expands my prayer vocabulary. We might differ on theological details, but we can learn from each other's conversations with God.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

17. Keep Prayer Consistent

Building prayer into my daily routines—walking, eating, commuting, waking up, going to sleep—helps it become a habit rather than an occasional event.

“Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.” (Psalm 55:17)

18. Engage in Intercessory Prayer

Praying for others’ needs—my family, friends, church, ministers, missionaries, and the spiritually lost—takes the focus off my problems and reminds me I’m part of something bigger.

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” (Ephesians 6:18)

19. Experiment with Different Times of Day

If you’re not a morning person, try praying at 5am. If you’re not a night owl, set your alarm for midnight and pray for those on the other side of the world. You might discover when your spirit is most attuned to God’s voice. I have a friend who says God speaks to him by waking him up at 3 AM. Usually, if I am awakened at 3 AM, it’s my bladder, but I’ve started listening during my pilgrimage to the bathroom and Oh My! I, too sensed a message from God about aspects of my life.

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35)

20. Practice Breath Prayers

When all else fails, I fall back on the ancient Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy.” Aligning simple phrases with my breathing rhythm helps me pray when I’m spiritually dry.

“The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” (Psalm 145:18)

The Bottom Line

None of these practices are about perfection. Like any relationship, our connection with God deepens when we give it regular attention, honesty, and a willingness to both speak and listen. Prayer is the most important thing we'll ever do. It's how we access God's power for God-sized things. Every time I've tried to navigate life without prayer, I've face-planted spectacularly (trust me, I've collected quite a few spiritual bruises along the way). So my constant prayer is simply for more prayer. I want to find new ways to connect with God because He's waiting for me to stop scrolling, stop worrying, and stop listening to the noise of the world long enough to enter into divine conversation. It truly is the road less traveled, but it's the only road where the real adventure begins.

I'm still working on my prayer life, and I hope you are too. I'm curious. What prayer hacks have worked for you? I'd love to hear them in the comments below!