

The Jesus Prayer

The so-called Jesus Prayer is very short: 'Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.' But its influence has been out of all proportion to its length.

St Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 'Pray without ceasing.' The real question is, 'How?' One of the best ways is to use the so-called Jesus Prayer.

In practice, the Jesus Prayer is prayed repeatedly—anything up to a thousand times in a day. A useful aid is a rosary or prayer rope (usually of wool and tied with many knots). The person repeats the prayer once per bead or knot. It may be accompanied by prostrations and the sign of the cross, signalled by beads strung along the prayer rope at intervals.

The Jesus Prayer has been widely used, taught and discussed, particularly in Eastern Christianity. The prayer probably originated in the Egyptian desert, which was settled by the monastic Desert Fathers in the fifth century.

**Lord Jesus Christ,
only Son of the Living God,
have mercy on me, a sinner**

For Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholics, the Jesus Prayer is one of the most profound and mystical of prayers. Its continual repetition forms a part of personal ascetic practice. The exact words vary from the most simple possible involving the name 'Jesus' to 'Lord have mercy,' to the more common extended form, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Sometimes the Jesus Prayer is alternated with an invocation to the Virgin Mary. In such a case, the practitioner repeats the Jesus Prayer, say, 400 times and then 100 invocations to one of the saints.

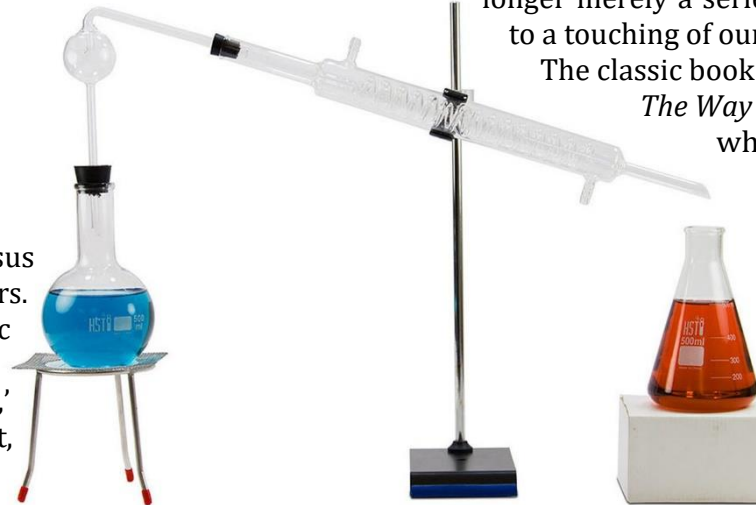
Monks will also pray this prayer many hundreds of times each night as part of their private cell vigil. Under the guidance of a suitable teacher, the monk aims to 'internalise' the prayer, so that

unconscious mind is indeed praying unceasingly. By 'internalise' is meant the way the words of the prayer become a part of the personality, and spring to mind un-bidden. People who say the Jesus Prayer as part of their meditation often synchronise each repetition of it with their breathing: breathing in while calling out 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God' and breathing out while begging for mercy, 'have mercy on me, a sinner.' Other people pray the Jesus Prayer in sync with their walking, a word or phrase with each footstep. When the Jesus prayer is recited in sync with the human heart-beat, it is sometimes called the 'Prayer of the Heart'.

Anyone wanting to pray this prayer should simply repeat it over and over again. An analogy used often is distillation: by repetition, the Jesus Prayer purifies the soul. They will discover three levels of prayer:

1. The prayer begins as words—they say the prayer.
2. Next, after reciting it further, the soul moves onto *praying* the prayer, owning the thoughts and expression of the prayer.
3. Finally, the heart takes over the prayer. Here, the prayer is no longer merely a series of words and concepts, but gives way to a touching of our spirit by the Holy Spirit of God.

The classic book about the Jesus Prayer is the anonymous *The Way of the Pilgrim* (translated by R M French) which was probably written by a Russian Orthodox believer—he was probably an itinerant monk.



Exercise

In an attitude of prayer, repeat the Jesus Prayer 20 times. Repeat it the same number of times perhaps 3 or 4 times during the day. Next day, repeat the Jesus prayer 30 times, and again throughout the day. After about a week, the number will have increased to about 100 times a day.

At the end of the week, look back at the experience: are you looking forward to your time spent reciting the Jesus prayer? Are such times associated with peace and inner tranquillity?