

A Beginner's Guide to Evening Prayer

Using *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer: International Edition*

Introduction

Morning and Evening Prayer help you read God's word and pray with the universal church every day. But when you try them for the first time, they may be confusing. This guide will show you how to get started with Evening Prayer, but once you learn this, it's easy to add Morning Prayer.

Evening Prayer lasts about half an hour. But if you can't read it all, don't worry. It's fine to just say part of Evening Prayer. For example, you could start out with just the psalms or lessons, the creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

Overview

Evening Prayer has a simple structure. It has four parts: confessing, praising, hearing, praying.

1. At the beginning you confess your sins and receive God's forgiveness. That follows a biblical pattern of cleansing first, worship second.
2. Then you praise God, using the words of the Psalms. Since the time of Jesus, the Psalms have been central to Christian worship.
3. You're now ready to listen. This is the time for two readings, called 'lessons.'
4. Finally, you pray — for the needs of your body and soul, and for the needs of others.

Get ready

Before you start, you need to find the evening's psalms and lessons. For the psalms, turn to page 362 of the prayer book, and keep turning until you find the day of the month. On day 12, for example, the evening psalms begin on page 441. Use the ribbon to mark where the psalms begin.

To find the lessons, turn to the table that starts on page xxxiv. Find the month, and look at the right hand page ('Evensong' = Evening Prayer).

Find the day, and run your finger to the right to find the first and second lessons. Mark the lessons in your Bible.¹ If there's a red dash in the table, it means it's a special day and you need to find the lessons in the table on page xxxii-xxxiii.

Step by step

1. Sentences and exhortation. First, select and read two or three of the short paragraphs on pages 17-18. These 'sentences' are meant to prompt you to confess your sins. Then read the exhortation — the paragraph at the bottom of page 18. It calls you to confession and previews the major actions in Evening Prayer: thanksgiving, praise, hearing the Scriptures, and prayer.

2. Confession. Read the prayer at the top of page 19. 'There is no health in us' means our souls are sick and we cannot be our own physician — we need God to heal us. Here 'miserable' has an older meaning: 'in need of mercy.' The word 'Jesu' is a variant of 'Jesus,' a kind of intimate form of address (compare Charles Wesley's hymn 'Jesu, lover of my soul').

3. Absolution. Next is the prayer that starts at the bottom of page 19. It declares that God forgives all who repent and believe.²

4. The Lord's Prayer. Then say the Lord's Prayer on page 20. The absolution called you to 'true repentance,' and the Lord's Prayer expresses that repentance and prepares you for praise.

5. Versicles. As you say the short lines that begin 'O Lord, open thou our lips,' they prepare you for praise. The two lines that begin 'Glory be to the Father' are an ancient Christian hymn called the *Gloria Patri*.

6. Psalms. Here you read the psalms that you marked before starting Evening Prayer. At the

end of each psalm, say or sing the *Gloria Patri*. The instruction to do this is actually found in Morning Prayer (page 6).

7. *Lessons and canticles*. Here you read the first lesson from your Bible, and then say the ‘Magnificat’ on page 21. Then repeat the pattern: read the second lesson, and then say the ‘Nunc dimittis’ on page 22. These two ‘canticles,’ or songs of praise — one is the song of Mary, the other the song of Simeon — teach us to think about the lessons in terms of God’s purposes of salvation. It’s great to sing the canticles if you have a recording or a hymnal with an Anglican chant setting.

8. *Apostles’ Creed*. In response to hearing God’s word, say the ancient creed on page 22. It wasn’t written by the apostles, but it summarizes their teaching. In saying these words, you express your own faith (‘I believe in God’) and the faith of the universal or ‘catholic’ church, the church throughout all times and places.

9. *Salutation*. Say the short lines at the top of page 23. These are modeled on several passages of Scripture (such as Luke 18:13).

10. *The Lord’s Prayer*. Again say the Lord’s Prayer. Now the emphasis is on God providing for our daily needs — bread, forgiveness, deliverance.

11. *Suffrages*. Say the short prayers on pages 23-24 (beginning ‘O Lord, show thy mercy upon us’). These prayers are from Scripture and are almost all from the Psalms. They cover the needs of the individual and community, the church and state, the clergy and laity.

12. *Collects*. Evening Prayer now concludes with three short prayers called ‘collects.’ The first is the ‘collect of the day’; it’s how you keep in step with the church year. If you know which collect to read (usually the one from last Sunday in church), then find it in pages 49-240. But that’s a big range! If you don’t know the collect, just skip it for now. The second collect is for peace, and the third is for divine protection.

13. *Other prayers?* Evening Prayer may end with the third collect. But you can continue with

the prayers on pages 25-26 (or with the Litany on pages 31-38). You can also add prayers from the collections starting on pages 39 and 670, or extemporaneous prayers. But that’s up to you.

If you’re saying Evening Prayer in a group, some parts are said by the minister (sentences and exhortation, absolution, collects), some parts are said by everyone (confession, Lord’s Prayer both times, canticles, creed), and other parts are said alternating back and forth between the minister and everyone else (versicles, psalms, salutation, suffrages). The lessons can be read by the minister or by other individuals.

Keep going

Morning and Evening Prayer take a slow and steady approach to the Christian life. They give you a path of prayer and Scripture reading — a path to walk with the church, a path that leads you through almost the whole Bible each year.

But the benefits of Morning and Evening Prayer take time. The Scriptures often speak of spiritual growth in agricultural metaphors: a tree planted by a river, a tree that brings forth good fruit, seeds that fall on good ground, seeds that need to be planted and watered, branches pruned, hard-working farmers, the fruit of the Spirit. So keep going.



1. Some lessons are from the Apocrypha. The canonical status of these books has long been disputed, but since ancient times it has been the practice of the church to read them in worship. Like other Protestants, Anglicans do not base doctrine on these books, but we do recognize them as wise and edifying (see Article VI on page 630).
2. In the Anglican tradition there are two views about who should say the absolution. One is that only a priest should say it. The other is that when no priest is present, whoever is leading the service should say it.