



Labyrinth Prayer: An Ancient Yet “New” Way To Pray

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Introduction

A labyrinth is defined as a single pathway that turns back on itself before passing through a center and returning to the single opening in its perimeter. Labyrinths, with only one meandering path, are distinguished from mazes that have multiple paths as well as dead ends. Most labyrinths are built level with the ground, while architectural mazes are traditionally built using hedges or other materials that add a third dimension.

There are many different labyrinth patterns and Christians have made use of a great variety of these. Many contemporary Christians and churches have chosen to use the eleven-circuit (twelve circle) Chartres-style labyrinth pattern pictured above. It is a mathematical symbol with deep Christian theological meaning. It was developed from the sixth to the twelfth centuries in Europe as a symbol of the Christian faith.¹ Its flowering center and 113 rays were added to the pattern in 1201 when it was installed in the floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France using limestone and marble.

The History of Labyrinths

¹ Saward, Jeff. www.labyrinthos.net/center.htm. See also Robert Ferré.

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Labyrinths are ancient symbols, the oldest of which have been found in prehistoric ruins. Labyrinths have been discovered on every inhabited continent and have been used for a variety of different purposes. Some ancient labyrinths were large enough to be walked or danced; others were created for literary or visual purposes.

In A.D. 324 a labyrinth inside a church in Algiers, North Africa.² Although Christians must have been using the labyrinth earlier, this is the first historical record we have of the Christian use of the labyrinth. Since that time labyrinths have been prayed, studied, danced, traced, and drawn as Christians have sought to use this spiritual tool to connect and draw closer to God.

Seven historic periods of intense interest in and use of labyrinths have been identified by Jeff Saward, leading world historian on labyrinths³. These “flowerings” of the labyrinth, as Saward calls them, have usually lasted for about one hundred years and seem to have occurred during periods of rapid change. We are currently in a period of historic labyrinth revival that began in the 1970s. Approximately 4,000 labyrinths are now listed publically on the worldwide labyrinth locator.⁴

Theology and Labyrinths

The word “labyrinth” is not found in the Bible, but themes of following God’s path, journeying in faith, and enjoying God’s presence—all central to labyrinth experiences—are found throughout Scripture. Contemporary authors link Christian concepts of pilgrimage,⁵ resurrection,⁶ Jesus as the Way,⁷ and Christ’s call to follow⁸ with labyrinth experience. Biblical themes of love, joy, peace, truth, comfort, guidance, service, and wisdom are commonly cited in reference to labyrinth use.

Labyrinths are spiritual tools that facilitate the many varied types of prayer mentioned and illustrated in the Hebrew and Christian

² Kern, Hermann. (2000). *Through the Labyrinth. Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years*. New York, Prestel. Page 88.

³ See Jeff Saward, www.labyrinthos.net.

⁴ www.labyrinthlocator.org

⁵ Commonly defined as an outer journey with an inner spiritual purpose.

⁶ Candolini, Gernot. *Labyrinths: Walking Toward the Center*. New York: Crossroad Book, 2003. Page 59.

⁷ John 14:6

⁸ Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 10:38, 16:24, 19:21; Mark 1:17; 2:14, 8:34, 10:21; Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 14:27; John 1:43, 10:27, John 12:26, 13:36, 21:19, 21:22.

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Scriptures, including, but not limited to, thanksgiving, intercession, praise, meditation, confession, and free-flowing conversation.

Labyrinth Usage

Across the globe churches, retreat centers, seminaries, and Christian camps are installing labyrinths indoors and outside as extensions of their ministries. Using a wide variety of materials, individual Christians all over the world are placing labyrinths in their yards and gardens for personal prayer. Many are using the labyrinths as a ministry tool, bringing portable versions to prisons, regional and national denominational conferences, and other church related meetings.

When used with a faith perspective, labyrinths are spiritual tools that help people to perceive and connect with God's presence. A "typical" labyrinth experience involves preparing oneself at the threshold, following the single path to the center, spending time in the center, following the same pathway out from the center back to the threshold, and responding to the experience.

Many speak of labyrinth practice as a form of walking meditation that naturally quiets the mind, brings focus, and often results in insight. Feelings of calm and peacefulness are often reported by those using labyrinths. Researchers are working to understand the testimonies of physical and other forms of healing that labyrinth users describe.

Some find it helpful to think of labyrinth walks as having three distinct stages.

1. Releasing and shedding while moving towards the center
2. Resting with God in the center
3. Reimagining of one's life in light of what has been experienced as one moves away from the center.

Others have suggested seven steps for labyrinth prayer.⁹

1. Preparation: Becoming clear about the focus on the labyrinth prayer
2. Invocation: Asking God's help as one begins

⁹ Schaper, Donna. and Carole. A. Camp (2000). *Labyrinths from the Outside In*. Woodstock, VT, Skylight Paths Publishing.

3. Going in: Moving on the path from the threshold to the center
4. Staying in the center: Resting for as long as one likes
5. Returning to the world: Moving on the path from the center to the threshold
6. Thanksgiving: Giving thanks for what has been experienced
7. Reflection: Taking time to understand the deeper meanings of the labyrinth prayer

As with any spiritual tool, over time and given different contexts, one discovers a great variety of ways to use the labyrinth to deepen spiritually.¹⁰

Suggestions for a labyrinth experience:

- * Pray any way that you usually pray.
- * As you move on the labyrinth repeat your favorite Bible verse, sing your favorite spiritually-oriented songs, or pray a favorite prayer such as The Lord's Prayer.
- * Some like to identify a question to ponder as they walk with God.
- * You may prefer to repeat a simple prayer phrase such as, "Jesus" or "Thy will be done" as move on the labyrinth.
- * On the way in: pray for the needs of others.
In the center: rest in God's presence.
On the way out: pray for yourself.
- * On the way in: consider/explore how Jesus is the Way.
In the center: consider/explore how Jesus is the Life.

¹⁰ See: Geoffrion, Jill Kimberly Hartwell. (2000). *Living the Labyrinth: 101 Paths to a Deeper Connection with the Sacred*. Cleveland, OH, Pilgrim Press. Jill's other books on the labyrinth include: *Praying the Labyrinth: A Journal for Spiritual Creativity*; *The Labyrinth and the Enneagram: Circling into Prayer*; *Labyrinth & Song of Songs*; *Pondering the Labyrinth: Questions to Pray on the Path*, *Christian Prayer and Labyrinths & Praying the Chartres Labyrinth: A Pilgrim's Guidebook*. They are all published by Pilgrim Press.

On the way out: consider/explore how Jesus is the Truth.
See John 14:6

- * At the threshold: What am I leaving?
On the way in: What am I taking?
In the center: What am I celebrating?
On the way out: What will I offer?
- * On the way in: listen.
In the center: rest.
On the way out: commit.
- * At the threshold: pay attention to your breath.
On the way in: pay attention to your body.
In the center: pay attention to your spirit.
On the way out: pay attention to your mind.
- * Feel free to pray the labyrinth in any way that feels natural and supports your spiritual journey.

Since praying the labyrinth is a kinesthetic experience, the best way to understand more is to use a labyrinth and discover more about this ancient and “new” form of prayer for yourself.

Selected Works Relating to Christian Uses of Labyrinths

Artress, Lauren. (1995). *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*. New York, Riverhead Books.

Burton-Christie, D. (July/August 1997). "Into the Labyrinth: Walking the Way of Wisdom." *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* XII(4): 20-28.

Canota, Judy. (2003). "The Labyrinth: Praying Psalm 139." *Weavings* XVII(3).

Ferré, Robert. (2001). *Church Labyrinths. Questions and Answers Regarding the History, Relevance, and Use of Labyrinths in Churches*. St. Louis, MO, One Way Press.

Field, Robert. (1999). "Christian Pathways." *Mazes: Ancient and Modern*. Norfolk, England, Tarquin Publications: 32-41.

Geoffrion, Jill K. H. See resources listed in footnote 10.

Jones, Tony. (2004). "The Labyrinth." *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*. Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan: 126-133.

Kautz, Richard. (2005). *Labyrinth Year: Walking the Seasons of the Church*, Nashville, TN: Morehouse Publishing.

Kern, Hermann. (2000). *Through the Labyrinth. Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years*. New York, Prestel.

Saward, J. (1997). *Ancient Labyrinths of the World*. Thundersley, England, Caerdroia. (Includes a chapter on Christian labyrinths.)

Useful Websites on Labyrinths:

Christian Labyrinth Prayer

www.jillgeoffrion.com

Finding a labyrinth near you (worldwide)

www.labyrinthlocator.com

Labyrinth construction

www.labyrinth-enterprises.com

International Labyrinth Society

www.labyrinthociety.org

Labyrinthos: Academic Journal

www.labyrinthos.net

Labyrinth Photo Gallery (Professional)

www.sacred-land-photography.com/Labyrinths.html

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