

Twenty-five Ways To Use Prayer Boxes

Dear Friend,

I hope these pages will inspire you to think about keeping a prayer box of your own and maybe giving one to someone else. Prayer boxes can be life changing. I know that to be true, and that's why I chose to write about prayer boxes changing a life in my novel, *The Prayer Box*.

For years, I'd heard of prayer boxes, and I knew what they were for. They're either keeping places for favorite scriptures, or they're similar to a prayer journal, only more flexible. Any scrap of paper will do, anywhere, any time of the day or night. The important part, in a world of fractured thoughts, hurried moments, and scattershot prayers, is to take the time to think through, to write down, to clarify in your own mind the things you're asking for, the things you're grateful for, the things you're troubled about, the hopes you've been nurturing.

And then?
Put them in the box and...
Let. Them. Go.

That's what *trust* is. It's letting go of the worry. It's the way of peace and also the way of God.

Closing the lid on a prayer box is so beautifully symbolic of so many things, that I'm surprised we don't use them more often. Prayer boxes have a long-standing tradition, both among early Christians and among Jewish families. Jews and early Christians often wore small leather or carved bone boxes on the body. These phylacteries or tefillin were a means of keeping scripture close to the wearer. Large boxes, called mezusah cases are still affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes today.

It's a beautiful tradition, when you think about it, to surround our coming in and going out with a brush with God. It's also a reminder, as family members pass by, to pray and to trust that our prayers are being heard. That's one of my favorite reasons for keeping a prayer box inside the home as well, or for giving one as a gift. When you see the box, you're reminded that things are *supposed* to go *in* it. In other words, the prayer box isn't meant to gather dust; it's meant to inspire a habit. That's the real idea behind making a prayer box attractive.

I hope the information below will help you start off on your prayer boxing journey. What better way to bind a family, help a friend struggle through an illness, help a just-married couple start off right, celebrate a tiny new life just born, send a graduate off into the world, form connections with church family, than to share a prayer box with an explanation of what it's for?

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Blessings to you and to all those affected by your prayers -- *Lisa Wingate*

Creating Prayer Boxes for Families

1. The Family Box. Want to increase family unity and communication? Having trouble talking to your kids about difficult subjects? Wondering if there are things they are worried about, but not talking about? Want to create an environment of teamwork, support, and prayer in your house? Get the family together to build a family prayer box. Keep your box in an accessible place, with slips of paper nearby. Decide how, when, and whether prayers will be shared out loud, and how often. At the dinner table? In the last few minutes before bed? During a few quiet minutes reserved amid the morning rush? Even in the car on the way to school. Let your kids know that every request doesn't have to be spelled out. Even unspoken requests can be prayed for. They know and God knows. Sometimes, just realizing that a family member is struggling is enough to build empathy and unity.

2. The Blessings Box. Ever feel that your family is suffering from that thoroughly modern disease, the *wantsies*? Ever feel like entitlement is stealing the joy of the ordinary things? Create a blessings box for your house. Ask each person to commit three gratitudes per day to the blessings box. Either share these regularly, or open your box at the end of the week, month, or year and count your blessings. Sometimes just hearing the things others count as blessings can make family members appreciate each other more and can be a great way of affirming the positive traits and talents of each person in the family.

3. The Transitions Box. Going through a difficult transition within your family? A family move? The step from middle school to high school, or high school to college? A divorce? An emptying nest? Create a box specifically for family members to share their feelings about these events and turn the uncertainties about the future over to God's hands. Pray for all aspects of the transition and all who are involved. It will help to create a climate of solidarity and caring for one another as "we" see this through.

4. The Holiday Advent Box. As a meaningful twist to the advent calendar, create a prayer box as a family time capsule during the holidays. Have family members recount struggles and joys of the past year, and include prayers for the next year. Pack the box away with the Christmas decorations. The following year when it's time to decorate for the season, plan a special night to open the advent box from last year. Talk about which prayers were answered and which might have been answered in unexpected ways. Think about which prayers should be continued during the next year. An advent box is a wonderful way to bring home the fact that sometimes the things we intensely want in the moment, we don't end up caring about in the long run. It's also a fabulous opportunity to see that, when one door is closed to us, another is often opened.

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5. The Forgiveness Box. Are old hurts festering beneath the surface within your family? Why not use a prayer box as a place for giving those feelings over to God and letting them go? Put a slot in the lid, and glue, tape, or seal it securely so that family members will feel safe in writing down their feelings. Jealousies, competitiveness, and old wounds might have affected the past, but they don't have to affect the future. Plan to turn these negative feelings into ashes at a time when all of you can pray together and watch the issues go up in smoke. Encourage family members to realize that love can be a fire more potent than hate and selfishness. As you watch the fire, talk about the issues discussed in the box, the attitudes that need to change, the effects of careless words or selfish behaviors. Ask each family member to pray for forgiveness for poor choices of the past and a changed heart toward the future. Take a poll on whether the issues are resolved or whether a new box should be started.

6. The Affirmations Box. Is the family struggling with sibling rivalry and competition and putdowns? Create an affirmations box, specifically for thanking God for the people in our lives, just as they are. Affirmations should include the person's name and honest recognition of some habit, trait, talent, accomplishment or even just a favor. Each family member should write one for every other family member. Take turns sorting these each week and tucking them into backpacks, briefcases, sneakers, or lunch boxes. If you notice one child having difficulty affirming someone specific in the family, take time to talk and pray together about the issue.

7. A Graduation Box. Have someone in the family graduating, or know someone who is? Consider creating a graduation box, or a pair of them, early in the year. Jot down your memories, worries, thoughts, and prayers throughout that all-important senior year. Give your graduate the box as a graduation present and encourage the graduate to develop a prayer box habit. What a gift to know that you have been, and will continue to be, actively praying for that fledgling adult as he or she leaves the nest. Why not start another box for that first year of college, or on-the-job life?

8. The Storm Shelter Box. Is someone in the family struggling through a difficult event, or the after effects of one? Why not create a private prayer box where just the two of you can share and pray together? If the prayer box is to be kept private, between the two of you, be sure to respect that confidence and not share details with anyone else without permission.

9. The Traveling Prayer Box. Having trouble staying close to family members across the miles? Wishing you could be more connected to other families in your church? Create a traveling prayer box that is kept by each family one week at a time, then given or mailed to the next family. Unpack the prayer requests when you receive the box, commit to praying for needs, and add prayer needs of your own while the box is in your possession. What better way to support one another and grow deeper connections than to know one another's needs, hopes, and dreams, and to share in praying for those things. Families can pray privately and individually and also take turns praying aloud for the

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requests at the dinner table or family meetings.

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Using Prayer Boxes as Gifts

10. Wedding Shower Box. Going to a wedding shower? How about providing a beautiful box as a prayer box for the young couple? Guests can include notes and prayers for the bride and groom, sharing encouragement, advice, and favorite scriptures. Include a note with the prayer box, encouraging the young couple to write down their thoughts, and prayers, as well as the things they're grateful for about each other and the blessings of their first year of marriage. Forming a new household and family can be filled with financial and emotional challenges. Teaching a young couple to contemplatively pray together and to actively seek to remember the things they love about each other will help them though these life-changing hurdles.

11. The Wedding Box. A gift similar to the shower box, but for use at the wedding. The couple can include prayer cards in wedding invitations, or put them by the guestbook, or by the box, or at each place if a meal is served. Ask guests to share a special prayer or word of advice for the couple and put it in the wedding prayer box.

12. Baby's First Box. Want to have one of the most unique gifts at the next baby shower you attend? Create baby's first prayer box. Decorate with photos of Mom and Dad, sonogram pictures, photos of nursery selections, even historic pictures of family members (HINT: you can often grab these from Facebook pages or get them from family members without spoiling the surprise). Make or bring some cards or stationary and encourage attendees at the shower to jot down a prayer for the baby. Explain the use of the prayer box to Mom and encourage her and Dad to document prayers for the baby before birth and during that all-important first year. Seal and save the box to be given when the baby is all grown up, at graduation or as a wedding gift. What a treasure to unearth that time capsule and share the hopes and prayers that were held from before birth and during that first year.

13. Best Friends Traveling Box. Can't see your best friend every day? Best friend moving away? For a birthday (or anytime) create a traveling prayer box to send back and forth between the two of you. Include ongoing prayers for your friend and your own prayer needs. This is also a wonderful way for grandparents, godparents, or divorced parents to be there for bedtime prayers with a younger child. What better gift than to let that child know you are actively praying for his or her future?

14. Around the World Box. Looking for a way to create world citizens in your home or in your Sunday school class? Consider building an Around the World box and keeping it on your table. Each week, choose a different country. Study the culture and the challenges faced by people there. Identify missionaries or missions at work in that country. Each day as you gather at the table, talk about the needs and difficulties of the people there, and how their lives differ from yours. Write down specific prayers and

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commit them to your Around The World Box.

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Employing Prayer Boxes In Ministry

15. The Way We Were Box. Working with older high schoolers who may be butting heads with their parents? Are those parents grieving the life transition as a member of their brood leaves the nest? Consider doing a prayer box as a Sunday school craft project. Older kids love crafts too, and after years of receiving paper towel tube treasures and lopsided clay Christmas ornaments, this may be the last Sunday school craft their parents receive from them. Have the kids begin each Sunday school session by writing down memories of their parents that they treasure, things they have learned from watching their parents and guardians, and special affirmations for the time and effort that went into raising them. Be sensitive to the fact that some kids may have only one active parent, a grandparent, or several parents in blended households. Some kids may need to create more than one box, but what a great gift to those parents during the all-important graduation festivities. Consider wrapping these and placing an "Open Me First" message on top for extra fun.

16. The Illness Box. Is a friend, family member, church member, or office mate going through an illness or dealing with health problems in the family? Why not create a box that shows you are squarely on the prayer team. Keep this on your family table, or at church, or in the office. Encourage others to participate with you in sharing prayers, cards, and messages that will bring you alongside the person who is suffering, even when you can't be there. Collect the prayers weekly and deliver or mail them on. Studies show that those who are being prayed for and surrounded by a supportive community heal faster and suffer less stress. What more tangible way to lift up a friend than to send a regular package of prayers!

17. The Not Forgotten Box. So many senior citizens feel forgotten after moving to a nursing home, care center, or even during long hospital stays. Create a prayer box decorated with photos of the senior citizen. Label it clearly and leave a note pad by it. Encourage those passing in and out of the room to stop and leave a prayer for the senior or a prayer request. It's important to remember that active prayer is a gift older folks can still give to others at a time when feelings of useless or irrelevance may be overwhelming. Why not consider creating prayer boxes for each family of kids and grandkids and encouraging the senior citizen to commit prayers for each family each day? What a great routine-maker in a new place and a source of purpose when life can seem to be without purpose!

18. The Communal Exchange Box. Looking for ways to bond your church members together, or your youth group members, or those in a prayer group at an office or school? Think about creating a pair of prayer exchange boxes. One communal box for prayer needs (pray for me because...), and one communal box for responses from members of the group. If prayers are not for sharing with the group at large, they can be labeled as

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such by folding them and securing them with tape, stickers, or envelope. Prayers and responses (ones that are not secret) can be shared at the beginning of group sessions. Discuss the need and encourage others to pray for the need, as well.

19. Military of Missionary Prayer Box. Do you know someone with a family member serving in the military or as a foreign missionary? Create a prayer box for that person and keep it at your home, at your office, at an appropriate place in your church, or give it to the military family. If you're keeping the prayer box, periodically send the prayers on, either by retyping them on email, or by sending them through the mail. Or, just take pictures of the prayer notes and send the pictures via email or snail mail. What a fantastic mail call for those who are far from home, as well as a witness to others they may be serving with.

20. Fundraiser Boxes. Need a silent auction item, festival activity, or a youth group fundraiser? Do some prayer box crafting! Purchase decorative papier-mâché boxes, or gather gift boxes, shoeboxes, and any sort of box with a removable lid. HINT: after the holidays, fancy Christmas gift boxes can often be purchased for pennies on the dollar. Gather craft materials of all sorts, anything from beautiful wrapping papers, laces and other notions, free graphics printed from the Internet, printed scriptures, and whatever else you can think of. Have kids create beautiful boxes and then offer them for sale at a church or community function. Be sure to have your artisans sign their one-of-a-kind creations on the bottom of the box.

21. Vacation Bible School Project Box. What could be better than to send your vacation Bible school attendees home with a handmade prayer box of their very own? Either decorate it to match the theme of your VBS, or perhaps take pictures of each child and let that child adorn the box with drawings to match his or her family or interests. Explain to the child how a prayer box is used, and send a child home with a supply of small slips of paper and encouragement to use the prayer box at home with family.

22. Neighborhood Prayer Box. Wondering about ways to reach out to the neighborhood as a church? Consider creating a durable, outdoor wooden or metal neighborhood prayer box to keep in front of your church. Prayer boxes can also be placed on counters in local businesses, with permission. Include a short explanation on the outside to let passersby know that this box is for everyone, and the prayer is free. There are no strings attached. If desired, include blanks for those who would like to be contacted to receive a free Bible, a visit, or phone call from your church.

23. Fleamarket Prayer Box - Rent a small space at a local craft mall or fleamarket. Display a neighborhood prayer box where passersby can add their prayer need or a prayer for someone. Consider offering for sale some decorated boxes for various occasions and some more general prayer boxes. Wedding boxes, shower boxes, graduation boxes, family prayer boxes, traveling prayer boxes are good ideas and might not cost much more than a greeting card. Consider offering other things that might have value to passersby,

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such as bible story coloring sheets, informational tracts from your church, or even free Bibles. Why not make a project of gathering up all the extra, unused Bibles in households within your church, and including them in your booth for anyone to take home and keep? Bibles that are extras in one home may change lives in another.

24. The Heartbreak Box. Suffering through a difficult time or know someone who is? Create a special prayer box for sharing the needs of a broken heart. Having a place to pour out hurts can help in the transition from disappointment to understanding, to acceptance. Journaling about hurts is an effective strategy for healing and the box is an alternative that some may enjoy and use even use more frequently. When life doesn't happen the way we want it to, sometimes just having a place to go with our troubles can make all the difference. Consider adding a slot in the lid, and securing the lid permanently, as a symbol of sharing the pain with a pen, and releasing it in prayer.

25. The Memorial Box. Know someone who has suffered the loss of a loved one? Consider creating a memorial box decorated with pictures, mementos, or other items celebrating the life of the person who is gone. Encourage those who are grieving not only to pray over their grief, but to fill the box with gratitude for the times spent together, the memories made, and the lessons learned. Love never fails to leave great beauty in our lives, and while this box can be a place for pouring out crippling grief, it can also be a place for sharing the joy and thankfulness for a life that has touched ours. Saving a favorite picture, small treasured items like a keychain or tie tack, a piece of a favorite T-shirt, a hobby item, a blurb about a favorite movie or TV show, etc. can be the comfort needed to be able to clean out the closets and move on.

***Bonus idea* The Retreat Prayer Box.** Hosting a women's or couples retreat at your church? How about including a small prayer box in the gift bag, or making the creation of a prayer box a craft project? Encourage participants to make the prayer box personal with their own decorations or favorite scriptures. Participants can begin their commitment while at the retreat by jotting down their first prayer for the box. For a bonding activity, ask for volunteers to “show and tell” their prayer box. We’re often praying for or worrying about many of the same things, but mistakenly think we are alone in our needs.

Decorating Your Prayer Boxes

Prayer boxes can be created from literally anything, like those eighty-one prayer boxes that Tandi discovers in Iola's closet in *The Prayer Box* novel. The container isn't the issue. Iola's boxes were fashioned with everything from decorated shoeboxes to glass containers and wooden cigar boxes used exactly as they are. Fashioning prayer boxes can be fun and inspire us to fill the box with prayers. A well-decorated and beautiful prayer box is more likely to be kept out on a table or desk. If it is visible, inviting, and easy to use, the box is a reminder to actively commit needs, gratitudes, and thoughts to prayer.

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Here are a few things you or your group might start with:

- Small sturdy gift boxes (often sold for pennies after some holidays.)
- Undecorated wooden boxes that can be purchased online or at a craft store
- Cigar boxes, cardboard or wood. You can often find these very cheaply at cigar stores and smoke shops.
- Designer boxes from a craft store or discount outlet store. Don't forget the bargain outlets that deal in department store leftovers. Beautiful items can often be found there.
- Import houses. Check your favorite imports store for gorgeous boxes fully decorated. These can be given at an event with a quick explanation of the intended use, or embellished and personalized.
- Food containers. Consider finding common food containers that will work, artificial sweetener containers, or anything else that has a sturdy construction and a nice size and shape can become a prayer box. Why waste packaging? Recycle. Paint or cover with paper, then decorate.
- File boxes. Visit your container store or office-supply outlet for a wonderful selection of file boxes. An index card size makes a lovely small prayer box, or go larger and use a full-scale file box.

Ideas & Materials for Decorating Prayer Boxes

The ideas for decorating a prayer box are as plentiful as the imagination. Here are a few of my favorites:

- Faux finish using spray paint, dimensional wallpaper, painting dabs on with sponges, decoupage medium, tea staining, antiquing finishes, brown shoe polish, and anything else you can think of. For a great pinboard of various finishes and details check out this link (link to be inserted here).
- Wallpapers, greeting cards, napkins, party plates, stationary sets, scrapbook papers, and other papers. Be creative! Chances are, if you look around, you'll find any number of beautiful bits from packaging, cards you have received, and other items in your house. If not, check out your local hobby store, dollar store, or craft store for a myriad of possibilities. If you'd like a quick and easy theme for your

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- boxes, find a beautiful greeting card with a sentiment or scripture that fits the situation, cut it up and use it to decorate the top and sides of your box. Ask friends to save their old greeting cards for you if you want to go into prayer box production. An easy group prayer box making session can begin with spray painted containers and cards for trimming.
- Sewing notions. Iola's boxes were decorated with rickrack, lace, glitter, buttons, and ribbons. Gather up sewing notions of various types including lace, ribbon, cording, and appliques. Ask friends or church members if they have things that they would like to donate. Craft glue or hot glue will secure most things to a box.
 - Jewelry items. Why not decorate a box with jewelry items you are not using, or items found cheaply at discount stores, yard sales, or flea markets? Think about pearls, beads, shells, pendants, and anything else that seems to fit the design of your box. In the case of a memorial box, consider using sentimental items that might be tucked in a drawer and never used otherwise.
 - Photographs. Building a family box, graduation box, holiday box, or other box for a specific person or purpose? Consider decorating the box with a baby picture, photos from past Christmases, or photos of major life events. Think about decorating a girlfriends' travel prayer box with photos from your last get together. Photos of those friends across the miles and of your own family are great for a traveling prayer box. Also remember that it's easy to edit color on photos for a box to get sepia tones or faded tones for an antique look. The possibilities are endless!
 - Stickers, scrapbooking kits, and paper cutouts. Check out your nearest scrapbooking aisle for all sorts of specialized decorating media, or consider creating your own. Why not have kids cut out snowflakes for your Yuletide box, or have them draw pictures for an Around-the-World Box?
 - Found items and natural items. Don't forget to go out into the yard and see what's there. Chances are you'll find a plethora of leaves, seeds, pebbles, flowers that could be pressed and dried. Mementos from recent vacations are also great reminders of God's blessings. Don't know what to do with those shells you collected at the seashore? Use them on this year's family prayer box. A coating of découpage medium or spray varnish can help to secure things into place. When using spray, use several very light coats to prevent soaking in and discoloring.
 - Look at everything you might throw out with a new eye. Flowers can be made from all kinds of paper, cloth, and thread. Photos can be snipped and the good parts used. Boxes, cans, and containers of all kinds could become prayer boxes. Origami items can add interest and dimension. Old crayons can be melted and dripped on for special effects, old garlands can be snipped and special parts saved

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for embellishments. Old jewelry items can be salvaged to a higher purpose. Items and cards tucked way back in drawers can be treasures on a prayer box.

Remember, the box is the inspiration for the written prayer, but it's the prayers inside, the heart that prayed them, and the God who answers them that matter most.

-- Lisa