

Lesson

10

PRAYER ... Simple, Intimate Communion with God

PRAYER - Communion with God

Mention prayer to people who have only been trained by church tradition and religious liturgy, and the effect will be instantaneous. Noses turn up, faces wrinkle, and the subject quickly changes into something more interesting. Yet what could be more interesting than communicating with the living God, the creator of heaven and earth? The problem is that for most people a real spiritual connection has never been made.

Prior to becoming a Christian your own experience of prayer was probably confined to periods of desperation, when there was simply no other option available. In this situation various promises are usually made in the hope that they will “appease” the God who has allowed adverse circumstances to come upon us, and when things change, and the pressure is off, the promises are quickly forgotten - until the next time!

This is a sad indictment of the shallowness of our spiritual awareness prior to becoming a Christian, and is not a pattern that we should emulate now that we have found ourselves in a place of commitment to the things of God.

As a Christian, coming into relationship with Jesus Christ through the born-again experience is like having dead batteries brought back to life, fully charged to capacity. We are suddenly off and running, feeling good and knowing God is with us. Nothing can stop us - until the batteries run low and we start to feel that God has deserted us.

Prayer is not complicated. It is one of the simplest biblical commands, and everyone, even a little child, can pray effectively. To pray is to enter into an intimate communion with the Lord.

Intimate fellowship and communion with God has got to be the highest possible achievement a man or woman can aspire to. To be intimate with God means to be at one with Him, to share deeply, and to communicate with Him in a fashion which indicates that the relationship is one based on love, honour and respect.

We enter into this communion through prayer. Prayer is not one-way, but rather two-way communication. Those who are serious about prayer will usually wait around long enough to hear what God has to say. Our lives need to be steeped in prayer, our thoughts and decisions filtered through and covered in prayer. We cannot be a Christ-like people unless we are also a praying people.

This is not always as easy to practise as it is to discuss. The fact is, everyday life does not naturally lend itself to prayer. Time is often against us. Situations that shouldn't have such prominence overshadow our thinking and often eat away at the time we had planned to spend with the Lord.

Magnificent in Simplicity Powerful in Effect

Prayer is magnificent in its simplicity, but its effect is extraordinarily powerful. Nothing on this earth can touch the power of positive, faith-inspired prayer:

“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up ... The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:14-16)

Nothing in this world, or the next, can stand against someone who bathes themselves in the anointing oil of God’s Holy Spirit through prayer. Prayer that touches God’s heart and releases His power on earth is one of the most necessary parts of our Christian walk. Yet we neglect it with such easy abandon, then wonder why the power is missing from our lives!

Men and Women of Prayer

The course of nations can be affected by one man’s prayer. The prophet Elijah was a man like ourselves, with similar passions (James 5:17,18). He prayed that it would not rain in Israel except by his word, and for three and a half years it didn’t rain (1 Kings 17:1).

David was a man of prayer who meditated regularly on God’s law (Psalm 1). The Bible says that he was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). There are constant references in the Psalms which highlight the quality of David’s heart attitude towards prayer and worship.

The list goes on and on. The Bible is full of miraculous stories - such as barren women bearing children; parents having their dead children raised back to life; and God providing miraculously when everything looked lost and hopeless.

Healing the sick and casting out demonic spirits occur largely as a result of our exercising our God-ordained authority over the works of the enemy (Mark 16:17,18), along with prayer in the name of Jesus. There is nothing that can’t be accomplished by a person who faithfully builds up their most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost (Jude 1:20).

Jesus is our Example

If it were possible for man to get by with only a minimum of prayer, and still accomplish God’s purposes for their life, then Jesus would have been the person to do it. He was God’s Son, a perfect man, without the natural tendency towards sin that we are born with, yet even in His case He needed communion, through prayer, with the Father.

Jesus’ life before He was baptised by John in the Jordan is largely a mystery. We do know, however, that by the time He embarked on His chosen ministry of preaching the gospel to the poor, meeting their needs, healing wounds and releasing captives (Luke 4:18,19), He was a person well-disciplined in prayer, and well-versed in the Scriptures.

Jesus would often stay out all evening just charging His spiritual batteries, staying in touch with His Father and tapping into the Holy Spirit, who was the source of His power during His earthly ministry. Sometimes He was even ministered to by angels (Mark 1:12,13). Frequently He arose before dawn and went to a lonely place to pray and seek the Father.

Jesus set an example we are to follow as closely as possible. We are told that, ***“greater works shall we do than He did”*** (John 14:12), but this won’t happen unless we know how to use some of the biblical keys that He used to obtain, and maintain, this anointing of power from on high (Acts 1:8).

God is Spirit (John 4:24), and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and truth. This is an important principle - which we ignore at our peril. Prayer is a requirement of our Christian walk. If we consistently fail to be obedient to what God asks of us, or pretend to hold down a pious relationship with the Lord when in fact we are out of fellowship with God, He will probably ignore our prayers altogether (Isaiah 1:10-20).

When this happens we get upset and complain, and wonder why God isn’t with us anymore. Although He promises never to leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5), He is quite capable of ignoring our pleas until a more appropriate moment, usually after we have repented of sin which may have tripped us up or adjusted a wrong attitude we are carrying. God loves us too much to let us get away with what our corrupt, former flesh-nature still desires.

Prayer is not an Option

Prayer is not an option - it is a command! In what is commonly referred to as ***“The Lord’s Prayer”*** (Matthew 6:9-13), Jesus gave us a format, or a basic design, from which we may structure our prayers for maximum effect. We could do worse than to follow it!

The Bible clearly teaches that we are to come to God in prayer:

- ◆ “Seek His face continually” (1 Chron 16:11).
- ◆ “Ask ... Seek ... Knock” (Matt 7:7).
- ◆ “Watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation” (Matt 26:41).
- ◆ “Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).
- ◆ “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Eph 6:18).
- ◆ “Pray continually” (1 Thess 5:17).

Key to Effective Prayer

The key to effective prayer is obedience. From the very beginning prayer has been closely associated with sacrifice which, in the Old Testament, was often the only way of coming into the presence of God without being destroyed. It was also considered an appropriate way to get God’s attention when making some intercessory request in times of great need.

However, God has always been far more interested in obedience than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22,23), and although we need to maintain a clean and repentant heart towards God, prayer is a command, not an option. If it requires a sacrifice of our time, or our priorities then so be it (Heb 13:15), because to fail to make this sacrifice is to disobey God, and when we know what is right to do, and fail to do it, God considers that sin (James 4:17).

Prayer is Intercessory

From the time of Moses, to the time of the Kings and beyond, one of the main emphases of prayer was intercession. For example:

- Genesis 18:22-33** Abraham's intercession for Lot, and his family, when God had decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Exodus 32:11-14** Moses' entreaty to restrain God from destroying Israel over the golden calf incident.
- 1 Samuel 7:5-9** Samuel's entreaty to the Lord for Israel's deliverance from the Philistines.
- 1 Kings 8:22-61** Solomon's prayer of intercession for His people at the dedication service of the Temple of the Lord.
- 2 Kings 19:14-20** Hezekiah's prayer of deliverance when he laid Sennacherib's defiant letter before the Lord.

To intercede means to stand in the gap. Jesus intercedes for us before the Father (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25), and the Spirit intercedes for us, when we are not sure what to say, in "sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26-27). When we pray to God in an intercessory way, we are choosing to "stand in the gap" for someone, or for a particular situation. This type of praying is challenging and pleases God, who seems to enjoy having his people "press through the barriers" in this way. Not only does it develop our character, but it also requires a certain selflessness and sacrifice.

Sometimes God says 'No'!

Throughout the Bible, prayer was usually effective (Genesis 19:17-22), but not always (Exodus 32:30-35). Jeremiah was even forbidden to pray for a rebellious people (Jeremiah 7:16). Presumably, if he had prayed, he would have been answered in the negative.

Through prayer prophets of old heard from God (Dan 9:20-23; Is 6:1-8), although sometimes they had to wait a long time (Hab 2:1). For Jeremiah, at least, it was often an agonising experience (Jer 20:7-18).

Jesus encouraged persistence in prayer (Luke 11:5-13), taught that prayer should be humble and penitent (Luke 18:10-14), simple (Matthew 6:5-15), forgiving (Matthew 18:21-35), and expectant (Mark 11:24). Jesus himself needed time alone with His Father (Luke 5:15,16), especially in times of spiritual conflict (John 12:27-32). He offered thanks (Luke 10:21,22), sought guidance (Luke 6:12), and interceded for His disciples (John 17:6-26).

Seven Keys to Powerful Prayer

1. Dealing with Unforgiveness

Forgiveness is critical to opening a pathway to communicating with God. Coming with unforgiveness in our heart will hinder our prayers and even contaminate our relationship with Him (Matt 6:14-15). Forgiveness is a choice we need to make in order to access the throne room in prayer. It is less about how we might feel and more about being obedient to clear biblical instruction.

"And when you pray, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25)

2. Faith must be present

Without faith we cannot please God (Heb 11:6), so it is an important commodity of prayer. Faith is not believing that God **Can** do something, because we all believe that He can do **Anything**. Faith is believing that God **Will** do something specific, for you, according to His Word. Without faith we are largely wasting our time and energy because we pray in **Unbelief**, hoping that God hears us and that, if He hears us, then hoping He will answer. Faith **Knows** that He hears us, and we are therefore **Confident** we will obtain our petition according to His Word.

“Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (Matt 21:22)

3. Be single-minded

There is no room for double-mindedness in our prayer life. When we pray we must believe that God is there, and that He hears us. Do not doubt or fear, which is unbelief. Such things have the opposite effect on God to the one we are seeking. Strive at all times to be a person of single-minded focus and avoid double-mindedness when it comes to prayer (James 1:6-8) Expect an answer and expect it to be good (Matt 7: 9-11). Mark these words carefully - you will get exactly what you expect and more besides. This principle is spiritual and works equally well in the negative as it does in the positive (Job 3:25).

“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6-8)

4. Pray according to His Word

As important as faith is, it must be subjected to God’s Word, and His revealed will for our lives. Faith is so powerful that it can have a tendency to twist the arm of God into granting us petitions that are not in our best interest. If we are unwise, we will pray according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit. This type of faith is a corruption of true faith and does not please God. When we are not sure what to pray we should find out before we pray, or ask God to show us, so that we can direct our prayers positively, and in the direction He wants us to go.

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” (John 5:14-15)

5. Maintain a good confession

Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-16;

What we believe in our heart, we will often speak out, as Jesus said:

***“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”
(Matt 12:34; Luke 6:45)***

We must ensure that we are not undoing all the good we have prayed into existence by our negative and contrary confession. By all means think negative thoughts - we all have them at times, but we must overcome them if we are to succeed at any worthwhile endeavour in life. Don't give the devil a foothold by telling him, and anyone else who listens, that you agree with his version of truth. Prove your faith by holding on to a good confession that agrees with God's word and His purposes for your life.

6. Be persistent

When we have done all we can to ensure that we are operating in faith, with a positive confession according to God's Word for our lives, then we should wait expectantly on God for His answer. This is often the final test we must go through before God releases His abundance into our lives.

It can also be a difficult time to experience because we must hold onto something intangible such as a desire, a vision, a promise, or a goal. Yet hold onto it we must - until it comes to pass.

Sometimes God tests our perseverance, other times the enemy is resisting us (Dan 10:10-21). No matter what the reason for any delay, trust God to bring the answer to your prayer, according to His time scale, and necessarily ours.

"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matt 7:7-8)

7. Pray at all times in the Spirit

The Bible indicates strongly that "praying in the Spirit is an important part of any healthy and effective prayer life.

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom 8:26)

Praying in the Spirit is a term that can refer to spiritual warfare, and we will speak to that point shortly. Essentially it means being in harmony with the will of God. The Spirit knows God's will and can interpret this to us if we allow Him to do so. This requires us to develop and close and intimate prayer life.

"Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph 6:18a)

Listen to God

So the challenge for believers is to hook into what the Holy Spirit is wanting us to focus on. This means not just petitioning Him with our needs or requests for others, which are valid prayers at times, but also spending time listening to what He has to say. Real, effective prayer is about spending time building an intimate relationship with our Lord and Saviour via the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Warfare

Psalm 46:10 asks us to ***“Be still and know that I am God”***. Spending time in His presence waiting on Him and being open to what he wants to share with us. This is often hard to do in our busy world with all its distractions, but it is very necessary. Our Christian walk requires us to be in relationship with God, and to be sensitive to what He might want to say or do through us at any given time.

Spiritual Warfare is a topic on its own, and an important aspect of a healthy prayer life. The Bible says we do not war against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces arrayed against us and will do everything in their power to frustrate both the will of God and His plan for our lives.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12)

When we pray in the Spirit we access the authority Jesus now has following His death and resurrection. All authority now rests in the head of the Church, who is Jesus our Lord.

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (Matt 28:18)

Although these spiritual forces are powerful, they are as nothing when we use the authority God has provided us with, as you will discover when you read further into Eph 6:10-18. There are three distinct pieces of artillery in our spiritual arsenal that will empower us to victory in spiritual warfare:

- ♦ **The Word of God:** Building a strong foundation in the Word of God is essential, praying according to His Word and always aligning ourselves with what it teaches.
- ♦ **The Blood of Jesus:** Understanding the power we have through the blood of Jesus, who didn't just die that we might live, but that we would walk in the victory He won at the cross through His shed blood.
- ♦ **The Name of Jesus:** He has a name that is above every name, and one day every knee will bow to it, and every tongue will confess He is Lord.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11)

Understanding the authority we have been given to wield in the name of Jesus is essential, as the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish High Priest, learned the hard way in Acts 19:13-16. It is sobering reading. They clearly had no born-again relationship with Jesus, so their use of His name was not recognised by the demons who they were seeking to cast out!

Praying in Tongues

We cannot close this section on praying in the Spirit without a brief mention of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, and of the ability to pray in new tongues which flows from this experience. Praying in tongues often defies logical explanation because it is a gift which is spiritually discerned and cannot easily be explained naturally. Once we receive our new prayer language we must not neglect it, but use it each day to develop a closer relationship with the Lord.

The ability to pray in new tongues (“glossolalia” in Greek), is given to us as a sign and referred to frequently in the early church records of the book of Acts.

Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4; Acts 10:1 48; Acts 19:1-6

In 1 Corinthians (chs 12-14) there is good reading for the interested student on the various gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul mentions in these passages that he wants everyone to speak in tongues (1 Cor 4:5), and that he (Paul) speaks in tongues more than all of the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:18). It is clear from these passages that speaking in tongues is for today and should be an integral part of every believer’s prayer life.

The wonderful thing about the gift of tongues is that it doesn’t make any sense to our minds. We can be occupied in other activities such as driving, working around the house or garden, walking or, in fact, doing almost anything and still pray in tongues either out loud or quietly. This has a direct effect on our spirit and will cause us to be renewed and refreshed as we persevere and discipline ourselves to honour God in this simple but profound way.

As human beings we are designed to operate spiritually, and as Christians we cannot be overcomers and walk in victory on a daily basis unless we avail ourselves of this power from on high.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8)

Praying in tongues allows us to access this power direct from the Holy Spirit, and as we pray regularly and consistently in this way God will reward us for our faithfulness.

In Acts 19:1-7 Paul inquired of the small band of new Christians at Ephesus (about twelve in all) as to whether or not they had “received the Holy Spirit when they believed ...” It’s a question we should ask today as we watch some churches use organisation and tradition as a substitute for the lack of spiritual power in their experience. Paul then proceeded to lead the Ephesian Christians into a new and thrilling experience which we call the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. They prayed in tongues and prophesied, and we know they then started to move in the power of the Holy Spirit because history tells us that many people were subsequently saved and a very large church was established in what was a key provincial city of the Roman Empire, in Asia, at that time.

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**Give God One
Hour A Day
Barbara Bartocci**

The following article has been in my files for several decades and been shared with countless people. I know the author is Barbara Bartocci. I copied her name when the original article disintegrated from overuse. The magazine was probably Readers Digest, which I subscribed to for many years. It is not a new article, but a challenging and moving story, almost a parable of sorts, and highly recommended reading. I trust I have given the correct credit for it in this brochure and the posted article on prayer.

One Hour That Can Change Your Life

It was my birthday, that wintry morning all those years ago, and I felt harried as I grabbed my briefcase and headed for a business breakfast. Life had been good to me overall. My small advertising agency was thriving. My husband and children were well. Yet something seemed to be missing - something that did not even have a name. I felt it only as a small emptiness inside me.

At the restaurant I joined Don Campbell, a tall, lantern-jawed man of 60-odd years. He was a successful marketing consultant with an unusual empathy for people. I was always struck by his calm, peaceful manner.

Over the meal we discussed our advertising project and then, business behind us, I mentioned my birthday and confessed to my nagging feelings of emptiness.

"Want to fill it?" Don asked. "Sure," I replied.

"Start your day with an hour of prayer."

"I don't have time for that!" I gasped.

"Exactly what I said twenty years ago. I was head of an advertising agency, running every which-way just to keep up. I believed in daily prayer but couldn't find the time for it. I had the distinct feeling my life was getting out of control. Then a friend told me I was going about things backwards."

"'You're trying to fit God into your life', he said. 'Five minutes here, ten minutes there. You need to fit your life around God, and you do that with a commitment. An hour a day - now that's commitment.' The idea is to take a chunk of time big enough to mean something to you - and then give that chunk to God."

Don's eyes twinkled. "I thought my friend was off his rocker. To find an extra hour for God I'd have to get up an hour earlier. I'd lose valuable sleep and ruin my health." The twinkle turned into a grin. "But I haven't been sick in twenty years."

Twenty years! I left the restaurant in turmoil. An hour of prayer? Preposterous! Yet I couldn't get the idea out of my mind.

Saying nothing to our three teenagers or my husband I set my alarm for 5:00am. Where we live it's cold and dark at five o'clock on a winter morning. I wanted to curl back under the blanket, but forced myself to

get up. The house wrapped around me, dark and gloomy. I tip-toed into the lounge room, ignoring Burt, our Labrador Retriever, and settled on the couch. It was peculiar being alone with God. No church rituals. Just me, and God, for an hour.

I glanced at my watch and cleared my throat. "Well, God, here I am. Now what?"

A Warm Presence

I would like to report that God replied immediately, but there was only quiet. As I watched the first tinges of sunrise, I tried to pray, but thought instead of my son, Andy, and the fight we'd had the day before. I thought about a client whose business had hit a rough spot. I thought of inconsequential things. Yet gradually my erratic thoughts slowed down. My breathing slowed, too. I began to sense a stillness within me. I grew aware of small sounds - the refrigerator hum, Burt's tail slapping the floor, a branch brushing a window. Then I felt the warm presence of Love. I know no other way to describe it. The air, the very place in which I sat, seemed to change, as the ambience of a house will change when someone you love comes home.

I had been sitting for 50 minutes, but only then did I really begin to pray. And I discovered that I wasn't praying with my usual hurried words or my list of demands. All my life I'd been told that God loved me. On that day I experienced His love, and the immensity of it was so overwhelming that I sat in quiet thanksgiving for nearly fifteen minutes. Then Andy's alarm went off, and Burt gave a small 'woof'. The ordinary day had begun. But all through the rest of the day I felt warmed by the memory of that love.

One More Day

The next morning the house seemed even darker and colder than before. But, shivering, I did get up. 'One more day', I thought. And the next day, one more day.

Day by single day, many years have now passed. There have been plenty of crises in those years: - difficulty with one of our teenagers, marital turbulence, a big financial loss. Through every crisis, I have found a quietness of soul in that hour with God. It gives me time to put things into perspective, to find God in every circumstance. Once I find Him, there seems to be no problem that cannot be resolved.

God's Waiting Room

On some mornings I am quickly filled with the wonder and glory of God. But on other mornings I feel nothing. That's when I remember something else Don Campbell said. "There will be times when your mind just won't go into God's sanctuary. That's when you spend your hour in God's waiting-room. Still, you're there, and God appreciates that you came. What's important is the commitment."

Because of that commitment, my life is better. Starting my day with an hour of prayer has filled the empty space - to overflowing.