

# Prayer

*Conversation and communion with God*

## REALITY OF PRAYER

### Global voice

Prayer is clearly the most widely shared of all human spiritual activities. At any given moment around the globe, thousands and probably millions of people are praying. There is solitary personal prayer and large gatherings of corporate prayer:

- There are calls to prayer, prayer flags, prayer wheels, prayer beads (rosary), prayer mats, prayer walks, prayer huts, prayer triplets, prayer and fasting, plus so very much more;
- There is everything from silent prayer to ritual chanting, from intimate conversations with God to the scream of a broken heart;
- There are the beautiful prayers of carefully crafted liturgies to the delightful innocence of a child talking to God; from words handed down the generations to broken sentences uttered in the face of wonder or despair;
- There is the secret prayer of the atheist in a crisis, to the most frequent of un-prayed prayers whenever someone exclaims, 'Oh my God! ...'

The earth is alive with voices at prayer. What is their significance? How should Christians respond to this reality?

### Christians and prayer

Church history gives clear evidence of the Christian contribution to the human experience of prayer:

- Orthodox and Catholic churches have long-established traditions of prayer;
- Monastic life was built upon daily cycles of prayer, with individual monks and nuns giving lifetimes to the practice and teaching of prayer;
- Charles Simeon prayed from 4 to 8 a.m. each day;
- John Wesley prayed from 4 to 6 a.m. each day;
- Martin Luther said, 'I'm so busy I cannot manage without three hours prayer each day';
- George Fox was said 'above all to excel in prayer'.

Nevertheless, for many Christians it is an area of difficulty. In the words of Henri Nouwen:

'There is great support for the idea of prayer,  
there is a lack of support for the practice of it.'



In many churches few issues in personal Christian life are calculated to generate more feelings of guilt, doubt and frustration than the subject of prayer. It has been insightfully observed that within any local church there are a few 'prayer warriors', but many 'prayer worriers'!

## EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER

### The myth

One of the reasons why many Christians struggle in their experience of prayer is that they have been taken hostage to a long-standing myth, which declares, 'The key to prayer is technique.' – the belief that if only we can get the technique right the experience of prayer will simply fall into place. This simply is not true.

Look at the bookshelves of many Christians and you will see a row of publications on prayer; perhaps as many as one for every three or four years since they made their faith commitment. You can almost number the years they have been Christians by the books they have on the subject of prayer – the way you would calculate the age of a tree by the rings that make up wood in the trunk!

The key to prayer is *not* technique, it is relationship. How we pray will be to do with temperament; different people find quite different ways of praying helpful. Some prefer silence and solitude; others liturgy; still others spontaneity. Some prefer group intercession; while others prefer rhythms of prayer that flow through key points and mark the stages of the day.

There is much to learn from everyone's experience of prayer, both contemporary and historical, but there is equally need to express creativity and discover difference in the way we individually pray.

### The path

The vast variety in the human experience of prayer is because it is first and foremost about relationship; the reciprocal relationship between God and ourselves, and how that is influenced by our relationship with individuals, communities and creation. This being so, the essential nature of prayer is threefold:

- **Prayer is 'being'**: it is embracing the reality of who God is and who we are. In prayer we stand at the frontiers of spiritual life. It is to do with our relationship with God as with the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1-17). It is the child with the parent. It is to do with that deep, and often unspoken, sense of identity and security from which everything else is sourced. Prayer is like a 'root' that grows, giving both security and nourishment.
- **Prayer is 'breathing'**: it is the energizing of spiritual and human life, expressing itself in intimate and moment-by-moment



relationship with God. It is a state of being that is possible only through the continual in-breathing of the Spirit. We attune ourselves with divine breathing; only so can we 'pray without ceasing' (1Th 5:17). Prayer is literally 'conspiracy', it is breathing together with God. 'We are collaborators together with God' (1Cor 3:9). Prayer is like a 'river' that flows: washing and watering everything that crosses its path.

- **Prayer is 'battling'**: it is engaging with God in the midst of all the challenges and obstacles life presents. It is actively struggling for change in particular life circumstances. It is wrestling with issues about the development of our character. In prayer we struggle and wrestle with God and ourselves as Jacob did at Jabbok (Gen 32:24-32). We challenge the structures and powers of this world (Eph 6:12). This is the 'Lamb's war' (Rev 17:14). Prayer influences the mind of God (cf. Ex 32:14); it changes things and it changes people. Prayer is like a 'rock' that challenges and with which we struggle: maturing, growing stronger and advancing God's cause.

### The guide

The primary biblical example for prayer is Jesus. What was it about the way he prayed that prompted the disciples to ask, 'Lord, teach us to pray'? What does his teaching and example in prayer make clear to us? (See Appendix 3)

### The variety

Many Christian traditions have developed aids to spiritual focus in prayer. For example: silent meditation, praying with icons, using a rosary, prayer walking, or labyrinth.

### Questions

1. What practical difficulties do people face in prayer?  
(see Appendix 1)

What theological difficulties do people face in prayer?  
(see Appendix 2)

2. What do you understand by Paul's encouragement to 'pray without ceasing' (1Th 5:17), and the medieval maxim that 'work is prayer'?

3. Why do you think we need to pray when God is all-knowing and all-powerful? What do you think this teaches us about our relationship with God, God's relationship with us, and both our relationships with the world?

4. Imagine someone confiding with you that they simply do not know where to begin when it comes to prayer, and they ask you for some help and advice. How would you begin your response? What *practical* advice would you give them? What Christian or other spiritual traditions might you draw on in giving



them suggestions? What *theological* principles do you think it would be important for them to understand, and why?

### Reading and Resources

- R Foster, ***Celebration of Discipline***, Hodder & Stoughton, 1980  
R Foster, ***Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home***, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990  
O Hallesby, ***Prayer***, IVP, 1948  
A Murray, ***With Christ in the School of Prayer***, Spire, 1965  
C Pinnock (*et al.*), ***The Openness of God***, IVP, 1994  
A Redpath (*et al.*), ***Prayer: Its Deeper Dimensions***, Marshalls, 1963  
R Rinker, ***Prayer: Conversing with God***, Zondervan, 1969  
R Rinker, ***Communicating Love through Prayer***, Zondervan, 1969  
A Wallis, ***God's Chosen Fast***, CLC, 1968



## APPENDIX 1: PRACTICAL PROBLEMS AND PRAYER

### □ Environment

- Distractions
- Concentration
- Pressures of family life
- Chores
- Children
- Housework
- Interruptions
- Finding a quiet place
- Lack of place / privacy
- Pressures of work
- Weather
- Too cold
- TV programmes
- Church meetings
- Telephone
- Noise

### □ Physical

- Not getting up
- Tiredness
- Falling asleep
- Staying awake
- Physical position in prayer
- Difficult to keep still
- Physical discomfort
- Lack of concentration
- Pain and sickness
- Stress
- Inertia
- Mental exhaustion
- Daydreaming
- Wandering thoughts
- Easily distracted
- Mental illness and prayer
- Someone with disability
  - Cerebral palsy
  - Deaf and dumb

### □ Organisation

- Lack of organisation
- Managing time
- Lack of discipline
- Getting side-tracked
- Lack of discipline
- Lack of patience
- Remembering to pray
- Suitable time
- No routine
- Using time effectively
- Too busy
- Saying 'No' to things
- Erratic schedule
- Procrastination
- Getting groups together
- Simply forgetting to pray
- Personal preparation

### □ Personal / Spiritual

- Doubt
- Overwhelmed
- Preoccupations
- Lack of desire / motivation
- Other relationship demands
- Angry with God and others
- Sin / unforgiveness
- Embarrassment
  - Praying with others
  - Praying out loud
- Guilt about irregular prayer
- Feeling inadequate
- Worry
- Discouragement
- Disappointment
- Prayer not answered
- Boredom
- Lack of encouragement
- Emotion not faith
- Wandering thoughts
- Lack of perseverance
- Hard going / hard work
- Anxiety
- Rebellion
- Not enough faith / unbelief
- Too anxious
- Not anxious enough!
- Unwillingness to change
- Depression
- Apathy
- Taking answers for granted
- Indifferent
- Fear
- Forgetting relationship
- Impatient
- Sin
- Stubborn
- Secular culture
- Stale / dryness
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Emotionally draining
- Hurt
- Mood swings
- Not wanting to be disappointed

### □ Prayer

- Too many issues for prayer
- Overwhelming need
- Not knowing how to pray

- Not knowing what to say
- Not believing I'm heard
- Wrong expectations
- Wrong image of prayer
- Monologue not dialogue
- Over-religious attitudes
- Legalism
- No focus for prayer
- How to start praying
- Barrier of silence
- False obligation
- How to pray in complexity
- Wrong perspective on God
- Trying to do it by the book
- God is invisible
- Is God really listening?
- Too repetitive
- Avoiding 'shopping lists'
- Not enjoying it
- Is my prayer selfish?
- Not knowing God's will
- Will I get a different answer?
- No answers
- Others pray so well!
- Overawed by 'prayer giants'
- Remembering what to pray for
- Must I conform to a pattern?
- Feeling inadequate
- Everything is OK – why pray?
- It is not a priority
- Spiritual obstacles
- Feels like a brick wall
- No answers
- Unable to put in words
- Phrases and words to use
- Fear of insulting God
- How long to pray for?
- Lack of teaching
- Lack of creative prayer
- Does God exist?
- Not God-focused
- Not knowing God
- Repetition
- Silent prayer or vocal prayer?
- Blankness
- Is God as bored as I am?!

*There are 141 practical problems with prayer listed*



## APPENDIX 2: THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND PRAYER

### □ God's person and prayer

- Who do we pray to – Father, Son or Spirit?
- What does 'the intercession of the Spirit' mean?
- What does 'praying in Jesus' name' mean?
- How can I speak to the creator of the universe?
- How can God hear everyone at once?

### □ God's character and prayer

- If God knows everything why do I need to pray?
- God has a plan. Will prayer change it?
- God knows my heart; do I have to voice prayer?
- Is prayer 'God-bothering'?
- Why does God want us to pray?
- Does God rely on our prayers?
- Can we change the will / mind of God?
- Is prayer trying to manipulate God?
- If it's God's will why pray?
- Will it happen even if I don't pray?
- Will God not act if we don't pray?
- Will God hear my prayer and change things?
- How do prayers actually influence things?
- Does prayer for conversion affect free will?
- Does predestination cancel out need for prayer?
- What does the 'unjust judge' parable teach about prayer?
- Why does God seem to need to be persuaded?
- What is the link between prayer, time and eternity?

### □ God's will and prayer

- How do we know God's will?
- Specific requests and God's perfect will
- What are the links faith, determination and God's will?
- What's the difference between 'wants' and 'needs' in prayer?
- Is a response really an answer or just chance?
- Must we accept the answer – whatever?
- What about unanswered prayer?
- How do I know the answer is actually from God?
- How do we know if God says 'No'?
- Why are there inconsistencies in answered prayer?
- What is the link between faith and unanswered prayer?
- What happens if two people are praying for exactly opposite things / contrary prayers?
- Should we pray for something more than once; or ask, believe and just wait?
- Why does God seem to make prayer so hard?
- Is prayer like lobbying God, louder, the more often the better?
- How long do we have to pray for? How do we know when to stop?

What does 'pray without ceasing' mean?

### □ Prayer and faith

- Should I pray if I have no faith?
- What does 'praying in faith' mean?
- How do we generate faith in prayer?
- How often, long and how intensely should I pray?
- Is there divinely required quantity / quality of prayer?
- What does 'Whatever you ask in my name ...' mean?
- What does praying 'believing you have received' mean?
- What does 'You don't receive because you don't ask' mean?
- When is doubt helpful and when is it unhelpful?
- Name it and claim it?

### □ Prayer and praying

- Is a special praying technique important?
- Can we use ready-written prayers?
- Any difference between private and public prayer?
- Any difference between articulate and inarticulate prayers?
- What about different styles of praying?
- What is the significance of praying in tongues?

### □ Prayer and spirituality

- Is sin an obstacle to answered prayer?
- Are my prayers worthy?
- Is 'righteousness' a requirement for prayer?
- What about unconfessed sin and my prayer?
- How does an unforgiving attitude influence prayer?
- How often should we ask for forgiveness?
- Why pray for forgiveness if already forgiven?

### □ Prayer and spiritual warfare

- What is spiritual warfare?
- Does Satan oppose prayer [Daniel]?
- What is involved in 'binding spirits'?
- What is 'binding and loosing'?
- How do we pray for physical healing?
- How do we apply the Lord's Prayer?
- Can physical activity be classed as prayer?
- Should we pray for the dead?
- What is the significance of praying the rosary?
- Is fasting important in prayer?
- How important is correct theology in prayer?
- How do we focus on the political in prayer?

*There are 75 theological problems with prayer listed*



## APPENDIX 3: JESUS AND PRAYER

### Jesus' understanding of prayer

Jesus was always praying and speaking about prayer:

- Persistence in prayer (Lk 11:5-8): the friend at midnight;
- Confidence in prayer (Lk 18:1-8): unjust judge ('How much more ...');  
Matt 7:7-11: 'Ask ... seek ... knock', the Father's generosity;
- Penitence in prayer (Lk 18:10-14): Pharisee and tax collector (humility);
- Simplicity in prayer (Matt 6:5) : not on the street corner;
- Privacy in prayer (Matt 6:6) : in your inner closet;
- Intensity in prayer (Mk 14:38): 'Keep watch, not to fall into temptation';
- Unity in prayer (Matt 18:19): where two are agreed it will be done;
- Expectancy in prayer (Matt 11:24): 'When you ask believe you will receive';
- Necessity in prayer (Mark 9:28-29): 'This kind (spirits) only come out with prayer'.
- Prayer is to be offered to Jesus (Matt 8:2; 9:18);
- Prayer is to be offered in his name: 'Messiah' (Jn 14:13; 15:16; 16:23-24)  
– through him we have access to the Father –

The NT pattern is : 'as the Spirit prays in us, so Jesus prays for us'  
(Jn 17:9, 20-21; Heb 7:23-25; Rm 8:26, 33-34)

### Jesus' practice in prayer

- In secret ..... Lk 5:15-16 (away from the crowds);
- In conflict ..... Jn 12:27-28 (anticipating his death);
- In thanksgiving ..... Lk 10:21 (return of the 72);
- In intercession ..... Jn 17:6-19 (for the disciples);
- In communion ..... Lk 9:28 (at the transfiguration);
- In choices ..... Lk 6:12-16 (choosing disciples).

### Jesus' teaching on prayer

#### Matthew 6

We see both the simplicity and significance of prayer in Jesus' teaching on the subject in this chapter:

- **vv5-6** ..... SECRETLY ... personal and private
- **vv7-8** ..... SIMPLY ..... pointed and peaceful
- **vv9-15** .... SERIOUSLY... cf. with the Psalms

The Lord's Prayer is the central message of Jesus about the kingdom of God summarised in prayer form.

'This is how you should pray'



- **Read** the Lord's Prayer: Matthew 6:7-13; Luke 11:2-4
- **Listen** to the Lord's Prayer sung by Mahalia Jackson
- **Think** about the Lord's Prayer
- **v9            Person / character**  
     'Our Father in heaven, may your name be honoured'
- **v10          Petition / cry**  
     'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'
- **v11          Provision / concern**  
     'Give us today the bread that we need'
- **v12          Pardon / confession**  
     'Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive others' wrongs'
- **v13          Protection / conflict**  
     'Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the evil one'

**Invocation**    'Abba'

1. God's name
2. God's kingdom
3. God's will

**Petitions to God**

1. Need for bread
2. Need for forgiveness
3. Need for victory

**Petitions for people**

**Doxology**    [not in best manuscripts]



## **APPENDIX 4: FASTING AND PRAYER**

### **Definition**

- To go without food and drink for a time (Esther 4:16);
- To eat minimally (bread and water) or avoid certain foods;
- To go without some luxury (e.g. TV, reading books, etc).

### **Reasons for fasting**

- Expression of grief [cf. 1Sam 31:13];
- Expression of penitence (cf. 1Sam 7:6);
- Expression of humility (cf. Ezra 8:21);
- Seeking guidance or help (cf. Ex 34:28);
- Choosing missionaries (cf. Acts 13:2-3);
- Choosing elders (cf. Acts 14:23).

Fasting has proved very powerful in breaking the power of demons.

Jesus fasts during his temptations (Matt 4:1-4) focusing his ministry (40 days); both Moses (Ex 34:38) and Elijah (1Kg 19:8) fasted for 40 days. Jesus assumed that his disciples would fast (Matt 6:16-18), but it was to be unobserved by others; yet not while the 'bridegroom' was there (Matt 9:14-17; Mk 2:18-22; Lk 5:33-39).

### **Fasting is towards God**

- It is an expression of the heart; there is no 'merit' in fasting. It helps you to focus yourself, express your seriousness, become open to God;
- It is made clear by the prophets that without right spirituality fasting is in vain (cf. Isa 58:5-12; Jer 14:11-12; Zech 7).

Fasting is the concentration of the whole person towards God.

